

The Language of Advertising

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and
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Editor's Preface

Advertising is something that we are all exposed to. It is also something that is likely to affect most of us in a number of different spheres of our lives. Advertising takes many forms, but in most of them language is of crucial importance. The wording of advertisements is, in most cases, carefully crafted to meet particular ends. Sometimes it is intended to inform, but more often, and more importantly, to persuade and influence. Advertising, moreover, not only influences any human society in which it is widespread but also reflects certain aspects of that society's values and that society's structure. The *Language in Society* series is therefore an ideal location for the publication of the present volume. The book is a pioneering and excellent example of that sort of applied sociolinguistics which can perhaps be best described as the study of language use. More often than not, linguists are concerned to investigate the properties of language as such — language as a code. The authors of this book, though, have turned their analytical ability and linguistic expertise to an examination not only of the linguistic forms used in advertising but also of their content. They are, it is true, interested in the linguistic characteristics of the language of advertisements, but they are also vitally concerned with what advertisements do and (crucially) don't say. Since they are also clearly interested in the societal impetuses that lie behind particular types of advertising, and in advertising's social repercussions, we can say that this book is truly an investigation into the role of language in society.

Peter Trudgill

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Torben Vestergaard
Kim Schrøder

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Advertising and Society

WHAT IS ADVERTISING?

At first sight this question might seem a bit superfluous. After all, advertising is with us all the time: whenever we open a newspaper or a magazine, turn on the TV, or look at the hoardings in tube stations or on buildings, we are confronted with advertisements. Most of these will be of the type which Leech (1966: 25) describes as 'commercial consumer advertising'. This is indeed the most frequent type, the type on which most money and skill is spent, and the type which affects us most deeply, but there are others.

In the first place it is possible to distinguish between non-commercial and commercial advertising. As examples of non-commercial advertising one may mention communication from government agencies to citizens like the British metrication campaign, or appeals from various associations and societies, whether their purposes are charity or political propaganda.

Commercial advertising covers first the so-called prestige or goodwill advertising, where firms advertise not a commodity or a service, but rather a name or an image. This type of advertising aims at creating long-term goodwill with the public rather than at an immediate increase in sales. Examples are particularly frequent in the business pages of the Sunday papers where large firms often publish extracts of their reports and accounts. Since shareholders will receive this information by post anyway, the only purpose of these advertisements must be to remind people of the existence of the firm and to leave a generally favourable impression. In some cases prestige advertising contains a more or less explicit element of political propaganda. Consider the following extract from a

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two-page advertisement for Exxon (in Europe: Esso) which appeared in the American *Ms Magazine* in September 1976:

Who's really qualified to tackle America's energy needs?

Experienced companies who can take the technology they've developed in one area and make it work in another.

Exxon has been doing it — for years.

In addition to boosting the prestige of the particular firm behind the advert, this advert is intended to make the public adopt the same attitude as the industry towards what is regarded as undue government interference.

The second type of commercial advertising is known as industrial or trade advertising. Here a firm advertises its products or services to other firms. Industrial advertising is most likely to be found in specialized trade journals or, again, in the business pages of newspapers. This type of advertising differs from both prestige advertising and consumer advertising in that it can be regarded as communication between equals (see pp. 7-8), that is, both the advertiser and the prospective reader have a special interest in and a particular knowledge about the product or service advertised. For this reason industrial advertising typically lays greater emphasis on factual information than prestige and consumer advertising, and, inversely, less emphasis on the persuasive elements.

Harris and Seldon (1962: 40) define advertising as a public notice 'designed to spread information with a view to promoting the sales of marketable goods and services'. This definition will be seen to cover both industrial advertising and commercial consumer advertising, where the advertiser is a firm appealing to individual private consumers rather than to other firms. The two participants in the communication situation (see further chapter 2) defined by consumer advertising are thus *unequal* as far as interest in and knowledge about the product advertised are concerned (cf. Wight 1972: 9, 'amateur buyers facing a professional seller'), and the central concern of this book will be to investigate how the use of language is affected by the function it has to serve in this particular situation. For this reason — and because it *is* the most important type — we shall deal almost exclusively with consumer advertising; some comments will be made on prestige advertising, but industrial advertising will not be dealt with.

Yet another distinction can be made between classified and display advertising. In newspapers and magazines, display advertisements are placed in prominent places amongst the editorial material in order to attract the attention of readers whose main interest in the publication is not this or that particular advert. Classified advertisements, on the other hand, are placed on special pages and ordered (classified) according to subject. Normally, classified adverts will be read only by readers with a special interest in some particular product or service. Moreover, the display advertisement is typically inserted by a large firm or association — normally through the mediation of a professional advertising agency — whereas the advertiser behind a classified advert is normally a smaller local firm or private individual who will have drafted it himself. Classified advertising thus lacks two of the characteristics of other advertising. First, although classified adverts are of course inserted 'with a view to promoting the sales', persuasive elements are often virtually absent and, at any rate, nothing or very little is done to persuade prospective buyers to *read* the advert. A classified advert thus comes very close to being merely a notice informing interested segments of the public that something is available at a certain price. Second, because of the shared interest in the thing advertised, classified advertising is also quite close to being communication between equals. This is, of course, most clearly the case when the advertiser is a private individual, in which case the product cannot even be considered a commodity (for the distinction between product and commodity, see p. 8).

IS ADVERTISING NECESSARY?

But why is there such a thing as advertising, and why does it have to be persuasive? Why cannot advertisers merely inform consumers of the availability and price of a commodity and leave them to decide for themselves whether to buy or not? The answer to both questions is to be found in the social conditions which make advertising possible and in which our consumption takes place.

As long as the productive apparatus of a society is not sufficiently developed to satisfy more than the barest material needs of its population, there is of course no scope for advertising. For

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advertising to make sense at all, at least a segment of the population must live above subsistence level; and the very moment this situation occurs it also becomes necessary for the producers of materially 'unnecessary' goods to do something to make people want to acquire their commodities. However, advertising is not just any sales-promoting activity — door-to-door salesmanship is not, for instance, and this points to the second precondition for advertising: the existence of a (relatively) mass market and media through which it can be reached. In Britain the emergence of a relatively large, literate middle class in the early eighteenth century created the preconditions for advertising in its modern sense. Advertisements from that period were directed at frequenters of coffee houses, where magazines and newspapers were read (Turner 1965: 23), and, significantly, the products advertised were such 'luxuries' as coffee, tea, books, wigs, patent medicines, cosmetics, plays and concerts, and lottery tickets.

However, the great breakthrough for advertising only came in the late nineteenth century. Technology and mass-production techniques were now sufficiently developed for more firms to be able to turn out products of roughly the same quality and at roughly the same price. This was accompanied by overproduction and underdemand (Turner 1965: 132-4) which meant that the market had to be stimulated, so advertising technique changed from proclamation to persuasion. At the same time literacy had spread to ever larger segments of the population, and the first newspaper to rely on advertising for a significant part of its revenue, the *Daily Mail*, began publication in this period (in 1896; see *British Press* 1976: 3). Finally, the late nineteenth century was the period in which advertising became a profession of its own with the establishment of the first advertising agencies.

The social and institutional setting in which advertising exists today has thus been present since the beginning of this century: mass-produced goods, a mass market reached through mass publications whose single most important source of revenue is advertising,¹ and a professional advertising trade handling all major advertising accounts.

The most important new development in this century is without any doubt the advent of a new advertising medium, television, coinciding — in Europe — with the post-war economic boom which

began in the 1950s. These two factors triggered off, and may in turn have been accelerated by, an increase in advertising activity: advertising expenditure in Britain rose from 0.9 per cent of gross national product in 1952 to 1.4 per cent in 1960, or from 1.2 to 1.9 per cent of total consumers' expenditure (Reekie 1974: 7-8). Reekie (*ibid.*) points out that this collection of circumstances may well have been one of the causes behind the increasing public interest in and disapproval of the methods of advertising in the late fifties and early sixties. Consumerists such as Packard (1957) called for more truthful, that is to say more informative and less persuasive, advertising, while apologists of advertising answered that advertising was frankly and legitimately persuasive, but that it persuaded by being informative (Harris and Seldon 1962: 74). Let us look at the conception underlying the consumerists' demand for less persuasive and more informative advertising. This will provide the answer to the second 'why' asked at the beginning of this section.

In its extreme form the consumerist position seems to rest on an incomplete understanding of the needs which people satisfy through the consumption of goods. We all need food and drink enough to keep us alive, clothes to keep us warm and dry, and, under most climatic conditions, shelter against the weather; except under the most favourable conditions people may also need some means of transport to get from their dwelling to their sources of good. These are examples of *material needs*.

But people do not exist in isolation. We also need love and friendship and recognition from our fellows; we need to belong to groups and to feel that we belong, and we need to be aware of ourselves as persons in relation to surrounding social groups. These are *social needs*.

It is hard to tell which are the most important. If our material needs are not satisfied, we die from hunger or exposure; if our social needs are not satisfied, we are liable to suffer psychological problems. Now the crucial point is that in our consumption of goods we satisfy both material and social needs. Various social groups identify themselves through shared attitudes, manners, accents and habits of consumption — for instance through the clothes they wear. In this way the objects that we use and consume cease to be mere objects of use; they become carriers of information about what kind of people we are, or would like to be. In Barthes's words (1967: 41),

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the objects are *semanticized* (see further pp. 152-6). And this makes it possible for advertisers to exploit people's needs for group membership, self-identification, and so on. Whereas it is relatively easy to provide exact information about the material value of an article of clothing (as a function of its price and quality), any indication on the part of the advertiser that a particular article is associated with a particular social group is bound to be, if not untruthful, then at least unverifiable. This play on social values is obvious in the following example:

The fast-moving world of
JOCKEY ®

When the pace warms up, Jockey shirts
stay cool. Cotton cool. Beautifully co-ordinated
with Jockey briefs. Whatever you're getting into,
and out of, it'll feel better — and look better —
when it's Jockey.

Underwear from 99p

Tops from £2.25

JOCKEY ® by Lyle & Scott

(*Reader's Digest*, April 1977)

The advert is illustrated with pictures of young men and women enjoying the good life on the Riviera: boating, horse-riding, playing tennis, drinking.

The only factual information we get is the price of the product and, partly, its ability to stay cool. Otherwise, the rest of the text suggests to the reader only that if he would like to belong in the fast-moving world, he should wear Jockey underwear and tops.

Clothing is a product group which satisfies both material and social needs, but we use lots of things which satisfy no material needs whatsoever. Reekie (1974: 22) observes about perfume that if our consumption was motivated solely by material needs, women would stop using perfume altogether. One social need satisfied by perfume could be satisfied equally well by the cheapest and most efficient deodorant, or by a wash. But women still use perfume — and one brand rather than another — because of the symbolic value of their particular brand. They define themselves, and are encouraged to define themselves, as persons through the brand of perfume which they use:

Rapport. They've got it. She wears it.

(*She*, October 1977)

In fact it is hard to see how commodities like perfume could be advertised at all in a purely informative and unpersuasive way.

THE FUNCTION OF ADVERTISING

In the preceding section we have argued that once a society has reached a stage where a reasonably large part of its population lives above subsistence level, advertising is inevitable, and that it is inevitably persuasive. This is true only with an important qualification, namely that the system with which we are dealing is a capitalist one.

A capitalist economy is divided into two parts: a sphere of production where commodities are produced, and a sphere or circulation where commodities and money are exchanged. In the sphere of production men are fundamentally unequal; there are those who own the means of production, capitalists, and those who do not, workers; in principle only the capitalists (majority shareholders) have any influence on what and how much is to be produced, although more often than not they may act on the advice of employees. In the sphere of circulation men are in principle free and equal; the commodity owner is free to decide whether to sell or not, to whom and at what price, and the potential buyer is free to buy or not. This is true even when the commodity is labour power; the worker is free to accept employment or not at the wage offered, and the industrialist is free to employ a worker or not. As advertising obviously has its place within the sphere of circulation, we shall discuss this sphere in somewhat greater detail.²

In a pre-capitalist system of direct exchange, or barter, individual producers, a farmer and a weaver perhaps, meet in the market-place; the farmer has been able to produce more corn than he needs, the weaver has been able to produce more linen than he needs, and by an act of mutual consent they exchange a certain amount of corn for a certain amount of linen.

There are two important points to notice about this transaction. First, the complete equality of the two parties in the transaction: