

The background of the cover is a photograph of a city street. A large billboard is the central focus, displaying the title 'The Language of Advertising'. To the left of the billboard, a smaller sign for '25 FARRINGTON ROAD' and 'A NEW 40,000 SQ FT OFFICE BUILDING' is visible. A white van is parked in front of the billboard. The scene is set in an urban environment with buildings in the background.

Inter text

The Language of Advertising

Written
Texts

Angela Goddard

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The Language of Advertising

Written texts

- Angela Goddard



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introduction

This book has already advertised itself to you. Here are some of its strategies:

Text: Book cover

'Advertisements are clever puzzles. Angela Goddard has cracked the code to display them to us with a clear and penetrating insight.'

Jennifer Greatrex, *Examiner, A-Level English Language*

'The overall approach is excellent, offering students the opportunity of critically engaging with the most pervasive, influential and inescapable discourse of the twentieth century – the advertising text.... Enables students to develop the necessary analytical vocabulary to understand not just what print advertising is, but HOW it does what it does so well.'

Professor David Birch, *School of Literary and Communication Studies, Deakin University, Australia*

This accessible satellite textbook in the Routledge Intertext series is unique in offering students hands-on practical experience of textual analysis focused on written advertisements. Written in a clear, user-friendly style by an experienced writer and teacher, it combines practical activities with texts, followed by commentaries to show how messages are constructed from language and suggestions for research. It can be used individually or in conjunction with the series core textbook, *Working with Texts*.

Aimed at A-Level and beginning undergraduate students, *The Language of Advertising*:

- ⊙ focuses on the interrelation of language, image and layout
- ⊙ explores the discourse between 'reader' and advertisement
- ⊙ examines advertising strategies such as hooklines, puns and connotations
- ⊙ looks at the relationship between advertising and culture
- ⊙ draws on literary and linguistic theory for analysis of texts
- ⊙ includes a wide range of advertisements from British Airways to Castlemaine XXXX
- ⊙ has a comprehensive glossary of terms

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Make no mistake : advertising works. However, as a culture, we tend to be aloof and not a little snooty about advertisements, pretending that, while they may work on *some* people, they don't work on *us*, and dismissing advertising language as trite discourse written for the uneducated.

Beyond the single example of this book's marketing strategies, there is much evidence that advertising works on a whole variety of people, and in surprisingly immediate ways. For instance, when British Telecom TV advertisements propose to us the benefits of making phone calls, we make more phone calls; when the Post Office reminds us of the enjoyment that getting a letter brings, we put pen to paper; in 1985, when a TV commercial featured a young man stripping down to his underwear in a launderette in order to wash his Levi 50ls, sales of that brand of jeans went from 80,000 to 650,000 pairs over the course of one year (Sebag-Montefiore 1987).

Product manufacturers would not invest in advertisements if they didn't work, and the sums of money invested can be enormous: for example, in 1990, British Airways launched its 'Global' TV commercial, which was filmed by Hugh Hudson (the director of *Chariots of Fire*) in the Utah desert with a cast of 4,000 extras dressed in red, white and blue, coming together with firm handshakes and friendly embraces. The sequence, set to operatic music, and finishing with an aerial shot of a winking face made up of the people involved (see Text: Saatchi advert), was planned to a budget of £14 million for production and the first year of transmission. Saatchi and Saatchi, the agency who created the advert, aimed to reach 600 million viewers during that year.

The difference between such an epic production and the local homespun written advertisement may appear to be huge, but both types of text require us, as readers, to interact with them, and this can often be a very complex process - far removed from the idea of adverts as simple texts for the simple-minded. In terms of visual codes, the reader works to create meaning from given items - for example, the visual signs of the winking face and the handshake suggest certain ideas. But meanings are not fixed for all readers: a wink and a handshake will have no meaning to a cultural group who do not have these signs in their communication system. Even within a single culture, there are likely to be different readings: for example, the hands clasped in handshake are male, and as such are likely to produce a different reading by a female reader from that produced by a male.

While any reading of image needs to consider the different perspectives that readers bring, the same level of complexity often surrounds the verbal language in a text. Advertising copywriters regularly produce texts which are as highly wrought as any piece of

Text: Saatchi advert



literature, using fully the resources of language and inviting creative and subtle readings from their users.

Although advertisements are ephemeral in that each one is short-lived, their effects are longstanding and cumulative; they leave traces of themselves behind, which combine to form a body of messages about the culture that produced them. These messages can then function both to reflect and to construct cultural values: they can reflect the values of the powerful groups in society who produced the texts, but the reflection itself can then harden to become the touchstone for everyone.

The position of this book is that advertisements are forms of discourse which make a powerful contribution to how we construct our

Text: Saatchi advert



identities. At the same time, for adverts to work, they must use our commonly shared resources of language in ways that affect us and mean something to us. These two aspects of analysis should be inextricable – part of the task of looking at the message should involve paying attention to how it is delivered. While many books have looked at advertising, fewer have paid any detailed attention to how messages are constructed from language. This is what makes this particular book different from others.

In advertising terms, this element of difference would be called the book's **Unique Selling Proposition**. If you have been persuaded, then read on...

Unit one

What is an advertisement?

Aim of this unit

Advertising is so familiar to modern readers that it may seem odd to ask what an advertisement is. Although advertising is all around us – perhaps *because* it is all around us – we don't often pause to think about its nature as a form of discourse, as a system of language use whereby, on a daily basis, huge numbers of readers have fleeting 'conversations' with the writers of countless texts.

This unit aims to examine the extent of this daily discourse, and to draw some conclusions about how we might define the act of communication we call 'advertising'.

Activity

We all recognise the type of advertising text that occurs in newspapers and magazines, where a product is being presented as desirable for us to buy; we also know the TV version of this, placed between the programmes on certain channels. But should our classification be wider than that?

Below are some examples of texts that we might see around us on a daily basis. The word 'text' here is used in its widest sense, including visual artifacts as well as verbal language. Which of these would you call 'advertisements', and which not? Justify your inclusion (and exclusion) of texts by explaining the criteria you are using in your classification. Add any further texts not mentioned here that you think ought to be part of your list.

- ⊙ A university prospectus
- ⊙ A political manifesto
- ⊙ A film trailer
- ⊙ A 'speed limit' road sign
- ⊙ A manufacturer's label sewn on the outside of clothes – e.g. on jeans or trainers
- ⊙ A shop name on a carrier bag
- ⊙ A poster in the grounds of a church, with 'Jesus Lives' written on it
- ⊙ A T-shirt with a slogan on it – e.g. 'Time to Party'

Commentary

Classifying texts in this way is more complex than it may seem at first glance, because as soon as we try to arrive at a satisfactory system we bring into play important ideas about the role texts perform in particular contexts – in other words, about how they appear and are used. Another complication is the fact that texts don't always fall neatly into categories according to purpose. Texts are hardly ever simply 'informative' or 'persuasive', for example. Information texts, such as university prospectuses, always have an individual or corporate perspective behind them; persuasive texts, such as political manifestos or film trailers, often do their job by the way they present information.

At the root of the word 'advertisement' is the Latin verb 'advertere', meaning 'to turn towards'. While it is undoubtedly true that adverts are texts that do their best to get our attention, to make us turn towards them, we wouldn't want to say that everything we pay attention to is an advert. For example, road signs such as the 'speed limit' one on the list above try to get our attention as an essential part of their function, but we don't perceive them as advertising anything. Often, though, our classifications are more a question of degree than of absolutes. For example, clothing in its broadest sense can be seen as advertising ideas about the wearer, but manufacturers' labels on our clothing are a very direct strategy for them to get themselves some free publicity, and this is no different

from the names we are forced to carry around on our plastic bags.

Central to our idea of an advert appears to be the factor of conscious intention behind the text, with the aim of benefiting the originator materially or through some other less tangible gain, such as enhancement of status or image. So, although a church poster might not be selling us anything in the material sense, it is still intentionally selling an idea – religion – in order to benefit the institution of the church by drawing converts and swelling its ranks.

Of all the texts on this list, the T-shirt is arguably the most complicated. We might decide that it is a form of advertising, but, unless we talk to the wearer, we are unlikely to be sure who is advertising what: is the manufacturer advertising itself on an unwitting subject, or is the wearer using the T-shirt to advertise some quality he or she supposedly possesses, such as party-going inclinations?

Activity

During the course of one day, log all the written texts you encounter that you would consider to be forms of advertising. Where possible, collect some of these texts. Try to arrive at a classification for the texts according to:

- 1 what is being advertised – a product, an idea, an image?
- 2 who is being addressed?

One aspect which you will have had to give some detailed thought to in your collection of advertisements is the notion of audience – item 2 above. As with literary texts, advertisements often have complex sets of addressers and addressees. For example, rather than there being one single voice in a text sending a message to a single group of people, there might be several different voices, more than one message, and a number of different audience groups. The next activity will explore this idea through some practical analysis.

Activity

Read Text: Tobacco carefully, then think about who is talking to whom. This will involve thinking about all the different elements of address relationship, as above. If it helps, draw a diagram to illustrate the different elements you identify. For example:

Addresser(s)

Message

Addressee(s)

Text: Tobacco



Tobacconists. Spot the difference and save £400.



The difference between selling cigarettes to someone over 16 and selling them to someone under 16 can be a £400 fine.

ISSUED BY THE TOBACCO ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR THE BRITISH TOBACCO INDUSTRY



Commentary

The first noticeable addresser/addressee relationship is that within the photo story. There are two conversations here, the first where the tobacconist agrees to the boy's request and the second where he doesn't. We can only make sense of these interactions – and therefore understand their overall message – if we link them to the next address relationship that occurs in the advertisement: the Tobacco Advisory Council talking to tobacconists. The wording between the visual texts addresses tobacconists directly and orders them to read the photo stories and 'spot the difference'. We understand the latter phrase to refer to a particular kind of competition, where readers win a prize if they can identify the differences between near-identical photographs or drawings. Here, however, the task seems over-simple: all tobacconist-competitors have to do is to spot that 'yes' has turned to 'no' in the tobacconist's speech-bubble.

There are other things wrong with this competition, too. For example, instead of winning something, competitors are said to save £400. As general readers within the third address relationship, that of the Tobacco Advisory Council talking to the general public, we draw certain conclusions about why the message to tobacconists appears to be breaking these rules: in making the 'spot the difference' task so easy, the Tobacco Advisory Council is saying that it doesn't require much effort and vigilance on the part of tobacconists to refuse to sell cigarettes to underage customers. This enables us (the general public) to observe the Tobacco Advisory Council as a responsible body which acts to remind tobacco outlets, in turn, of their responsibilities. (There is a possible fourth address relationship, too: the Tobacco Advisory Council reminding young people under the age of 16 that it is illegal for them to buy cigarettes.)

In using a photo story format and in making the 'spot the difference' task so easy, the advertisement conveys the Tobacco Advisory Council's message in a humorous way, presenting its voice as authoritative but not authoritarian. At the same time, it is made clear that for tobacconists not to 'spot the difference' in terms of customers' ages is a serious matter: 'The difference between selling cigarettes to someone over 16 and selling them to someone under 16 can be a £400 fine.'

This advertisement is a good example of a text that is not selling a product, but rather an idea or image: we learn, through the various levels of address, that the British tobacco industry takes its responsibilities seriously enough to spend money making sure that those who are at the retail end of the organisation do not break the law.

Summary

This unit has suggested that advertising is not just about the commercial promotion of branded products, but can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of an individual, group or organisation.

In the process, the idea of advertisements as simple texts which operate on a single level has been challenged: instead, advertising texts are seen as potentially involving complex notions of audience, where readers have to work hard to decode messages and understand different address relationships.

While these ideas will be further developed at various points throughout this book, the next unit looks specifically at a range of attention-seeking devices used in advertisements to make the reader want to start the decoding process in the first place.

Unit two

Attention-seeking devices

Aims of this unit

In Unit 1, it was pointed out that the terms 'advertisement' and 'advertising' have, at their root, a Latin word, 'advertere', meaning 'turn towards'. This unit will focus on some of the strategies used by advertising copywriters in their attempts to capture our attention.

It is not difficult to see why advertisers should want to make their texts capture our attention. The whole aim of the copywriters is to get us to register their communication either for purposes of immediate action or to make us more favourably disposed in general terms to the advertised product or service. But increasingly, written advertisements have to compete with each other and with all sorts of other texts in our richly literate culture. So copywriters have to find ways to shout at us from the page.