

Flexibility of the Language of Billboard Advertisements in Nigeria

Ojo George Adekunle

Ph.D, Department of English and Literary Studies, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract: - This study is on the pliability of language as it is being used in advertisement in Nigeria. The paper has explored what may be regarded as the style of English Language through manipulation to achieve its usage in advertisement. Data for the study were collected from five bill boards positioned at strategic places on highways in Nigeria. The analysis of the data showed generally that language of advertisement is not restricted to the novel sentences we use alone but evident in lexical formation. It also revealed that manufacturers invest more in advertisement as one of the best marketing strategies.

Key Words: Billboard, Advertisement, Language, Communication, Consumers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is one of the important features of human life. Language is used as a means of communication between individuals. Language is seen as a typical attribute of human beings only. Indeed it has a primary role in communication is indisputable in the affairs of man. From societal viewpoint, communication is a social interaction: this cannot be ruled out as part of human culture. Therefore, James et al (2004:2) describe communication “as any means by which a thought is transferred from one person to another”. The world we live is so complex; hence, civilization remains impracticable without communication. Eyre (1997:4) says “communication is the transfer of thought or a message to another party, so that it can be understood and acted upon”.

Advertisement as a form of communication, is one of the oldest professions in the world, in fact, it is as old as humanity. This is because it has its origin with buying and selling of products. Advertisement could be traced to 3200BC; this was when the Egyptians cut-out inscriptions of the names of languages written on the temples built. They later wrote run-away slaves announcements on Papyrus. Sign boards were placed outside doors in Greece and Egypt around 1500BC (Elliot 1962). Perhaps, the most important event in history of advertisement was the printing of the Gutenberg Bible; about 1450 to 1455 A.D. (Berg 1980). Advertisement is a vital instrument used by advertisers to influence the behaviour of the consumer at the point of purchase. Daniyan (2005:3) opines that “advertisement is about communication, it is not about using grammatical correct statements, but statements that quickly and easily makes meaning to the consumer”.

Mass media, billboard and sky writing constitute the media through which advertisements messages are passed on to the target audience, while consumers response to the messages are monitored through the quality or volume of the advertised products sold (Eyre 1974).

Advertisement researcher has its roots in the behavioural science consisting of Psychology, Sociology, and Social-Psychology, hence, its central theme is people, and that is why the underlying purpose of advertisement is increased awareness of the consumers about a product (Sampson 1930). In the early sixties the popular question was “why should we advertise?” But since the eighties, the question has changed to, “How best do we advertise?” (Elliot 1962). The process of advertisement has gone through rapid change. It has come a long way and its importance is tremendously increasing. The industrial revolution has changed all the old forms of advertisement. New machinery made it easier to manufacture more products and the supply exceeded the demand of the immediate locality. To dispose of extra inventory they produce, the manufacturers had to look beyond their village, which means that they had to become more concerned about marketing and advertisement. This made it possible for them to have access to mass media (Adefemi 2006).

Advertisement in Nigeria has changed drastically and it has expanded its horizon in such a way that is unexpected of in the population, urbanization and industrialization. The trend in production and daily increase in the population of buyers has necessitated the need to advertise in order to make consumers aware of the existence of the products in the market; advertisement must reach each user as well as top level decision-maker who rates the products on different basis (Akalugbo 2001).

In fact, some people consider advertisement as necessary evil, when a new product is introduced to inform the prospective buyers of the existence because different hands of the same product (goods and services) may already be competing for sale in the market and new products are trying to catch the consumers attention, thus, manufacturers invest more on advertisement as one of the best marketing strategies (Narayan 1998).

Advertisement can make or mar a product in the market depending on the effectiveness of the advertisers’ message and the atmosphere surrounding it. It cannot turn a poor product or service into a good one. What it can do is to create

awareness about both old and new products and services. It stimulates wants, indicates the differences among various products and services and shows how various needs and wants can be satisfied (Leech 1966). Increasingly, advertisement performs one of the functions of a salesman by providing some advanced information about products and services to consumers before they reach the place of purchase. Consumers do not often change suddenly from one product to another, in many cases; they go through several steps before buying a product. In general, they move from unawareness to knowledge, to liking, to preference, to acceptance (or conviction) and then to the purchase of the product or service. About 80% of products manufactured have the likelihood of having another substitute (Adefemi 2006; Clarke 1976).

There is the fear that the substitute that is “established” in the market sector needs to retain the leadership position; this makes it very important for manufacturers to advertise their products. The advertisers, however, make sure that the value and the quality of the product developed continuously to meet consumers’ changing need and standards (Aaker and Day 1974).

Advertisement messages are always regarded as communication designed by the sender to produce certain form of reaction, behaviour or attitude from the receiver of the message. The message has to get to the consumer. The consumer is an indispensable individual without whom advertisement will be a needless effort, because the consumer is a king to what he does with his money, he is free to save or spend his money in any way he wishes (Comanor and Wilson 1974). Since concerns over the economic, social, moral and ethic issues of advertisement has become one of the most important economic and social forces in the society (Chunnawalla 2002). Partly because of its influences, most people have learnt to want better products and services, to take better care of their health and improve their living conditions. Communication tasks is the main goals of advertising and these goals according to the New Encyclopedia Britannica (1981:105) are “to teach a definite audience, to a given extent and given period, to produce awareness and knowledge about the products and services, to produce awareness and knowledge about the products and services, and to point out the qualities of the product or services to the person the advertisers wishes to influence”. In advertisement, the advertiser endeavours to achieve a link between the sender and the receiver. This link is a form of communication Fletcher (1978:13) describes this as “bridging the gap between the sender and the receiver”

II. LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISEMENT

This study deals with the phenomenon of language of advertisement. In advertisement, the advertisers endeavour to achieve a link between the sender and the receiver. To buy a whole page in the newspaper and leave it absolutely blank is not to advertise. There must, in other words, be a message as well as a medium (Fletcher 1978). The main body of

advertisement is notable for its information and explanatory value. For the message of advertisement to be effective and successful, the language must be right and the vocabulary appropriate to the consumer it hopes to influence (Crystal 1991). Therefore, advertisement language must be translated into the consumer language. A primary problem in advertising is translating about the product from the language of the advertiser into the language of the consumer. Since consumers’ experience with the product is likely to be inversely related to advertisement effectiveness, we expect to find newer products with a high volume of advertisement and with the effective use of language. When a man speaks, he is supposed as a rational being to have something in mind, either to inform or to amuse or to persuade or in one way or the other act upon his fellow creature. In speaking, there is always an end proposed or some effects which the speaker intends to produce to the hearer (Gumperz 1982).

In print adverts, the headline plays a powerful part in getting attention and making the readers wants to see and learn from them. There are no headlines on the television but only the opening shot and because commercial starts with one and half seconds of silence, the advertiser depends on the picture alone. There is of course, importance in the quality of the product itself and the copywriter must certainly know all about it and use it knowledge. First he must associate the product with some perfectly natural desire in his mind of the person to whom the advert is being addressed. The creation of an advert should start from brief synopsis, the main idea and development. Suppose for example, the subject of a commercial is a new light-weight electrical iron-the main selling and emphasis on the language being its lightness and speed with which it heats up.

There is the fact that advertisement language has to concentrate on the key points and the emphasis of some words over others to catch the attention of the audience. It is for this reason that the language of advertisement is short, simple and clear. It tailored to perform a specific job with the fewest words possible. Each sentence is associated with a class of pairs ‘F’, ‘P’, where ‘F’ is *focus* and ‘P’ is *presupposition*, each pair corresponding to one possible interpretation, (Chomsky 1972). The copywriter’s mission is to communicate enthusiastically his message but his problem as stated above is how to convert this speech. There are two important rules involved in writing a commercial; the copywriter should not miss the important bit of self-criticism and he should use the “alone method” in the room or tape recorder, frequently and honestly, he should try and do away with stereotypes in writing. (Ingram 1965). This accompanied by a general loosening of the phrase used. For instance, a print advertisement might use the phrase “amazing value,” the television advertisement might say there is amazing value; isn’t it?” or indeed, almost anything that takes away from the trained copywriter might perhaps shrink from writing meaningless and lengthening statement in order to prevent misunderstanding, misconception or vagueness, the idea

should be stated briefly and design for audience acceptance. It is to be purposive.

The second issue is that the copywriter should use phrase; that are generally “loose” than written phrases. He should use spoken contractions like “don’t” or “here” rather than “do not” or “here is”. These two facts will go several steps towards helping the copywriter turn a scriptwriter. He should conceive of the script as series of pictures illustrated with spoken words (Clarke 1976). The copywriter is more constrained by time, money and fear of losing the attention of his audience. It is for this reason that he employs linguistic elements that will most effectively carry his message across within the shortest possible time (Vaughn 1986).

One of the strategies of advertising is not only to pack maximum information into the fewest possible words, but also to evoke the maximum possible response with few words, (Osundare 1981).

III. METHODOLOGY AND FRAMEWORK

Data for this study were collected from different five bill boards positioned at strategic places on highways in Nigeria. These billboards contained advertisements boldly written on them with images showing the relevant products and their benefits to final consumers. The data collected were presented in the Table 1 below. These data were analysed based on the stylistics function they are meant to perform.

Table 1: Summary of Data Collection

DATA NO	ADVERT	SIZE OF BILLBOARD	TYPE OF HEADLINE
1	GUARANTEED EASY TO COOK Golden Penny FIDEO	5 Ft X 20 Ft	A strong statement of sales
2	MAGGI CRAYFISH for that great crayfish flavour	5 Ft X 20 Ft	A strong statement for sales
3	CLOSE UP 3-in-1 stronger, Fresher, Whiter	10 Ft X 40 Ft	Declaration/Affirmative
4	U B UNIVERSAL BASIC A New Generation is born	10 Ft X 40 Ft	Declarative/Affirmative
5	DANSA FRUIT JUICES Juice it up!	10 Ft X 40 Ft	Exclamatory

Theoretical Framework is mainly concerned with the theory to be applied and used in a study. For the purpose of this paper, the theoretical framework to be considered is Stylistics.

Style and Stylistics are almost synonymous. Style differs from one writer to another. It is crucial that every writer writes in a way that he/she is familiar with. Style is covered by such terms *formal*, *colloquial*, *pedantic* etc and gives rise to Stylistics. The concept of style is very important in the study of language and communication. One easily defines Stylistics as the study of style.

Crystal and Davy (1969:90) states that: “Stylistics is the description of linguistics characteristics of all situational uses of language”. From this definition, one could see that if there is no style, there will definitely be no Stylistics. According to Bamisaye, (1997:125) Style is favoured by literary critics while stylistics is favoured by the linguists. This is to say that the linguist perceives it as formal structures in function. More importantly, the purpose of style is to explicate the correction between language use and function; expression and information.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Data No 1: This billboard advertises GOLDEN PENNY FIDEO, and it is strategically located on her highways in Nigeria. The style used in this advert is ellipsis, which can be defined as the act of leaving out a word or words from sentences deliberately. Here we use ellipsis to analyse this data.

These words, “GUARANTEED EASY TO COOK” are used to express the major quality of the product which is, it cooks easily. The sign on the product is that of a stamp which is usually placed on products especially electronics, a symbol of guarantee for certain years. Most times, you will find 1 YEAR GUARANTEE on most electronics. In this case, the same stamp is used to guarantee the easy cooking of GOLDEN PENNY FIDEO. There is also the picture of a child of eight years old, dressed as a cook with a pot filled with GOLDEN PENNY FIDEO. This is to show that this product is so easy to cook that even a child would not have problems in cooking it. The choice of words perfects the effect they were meant to create. “GUARANTEED” a word that creates a sense of assurance and “EASY TO COOK”, which makes you think it is good when you want to make a fast meal and with the picture of the child, it shows you can even let your child do the cooking while you supervise.

4.2 Data No.2: There is no doubt that language manipulation considers sounds patterns in its lexical section. This is because sounds at times suggest meaning. In some situations, lexical items are deliberately associated to give phonological parallelism. This advert is a very good example of this style. This billboard is position properly by the roadside and it real “MAGGI AND ME THE SECRET OF GOODNESS”. There is a picture of a woman, probably, a mother who points to be a beautiful dish behind her. This is to show that it takes Maggi and the expertise of the cook to produce a sumptuous dish. Also we find that there is a play on word through the use of alliteration in the words “MAGGI” and “ME”. There is the

use of “ME” to represent the cook, instead of “I”, simply because there is a consonant coherence of both words starting with the letter “M”. The word ‘Maggi’ needs no introduction in Nigeria as it is a household name when it comes to food seasoning, but the word “me” now adds a whole new semantic concept to the use of maggi as it means that maggi has been prominently written, also needs the skills, expertise and experience of the cook to create the sense of goodness a maggi spiced meal can give.

4.3 Data No 3: In the advert, there is a picture of the product advertised which is “close up” toothpaste being spread and the benefits which it gives, that is, 3-in-1 strong, fresher, whiter. Then there is also a picture of two models, a man and a woman. The man is eating apple which is quite a strong fruit, and it will take strong teeth to bite and chew it. The woman on the other hand, is smiling to show another benefits of the product that, it gives white teeth and the picture also shows fresh breath coming from her smile and finally, the paste creates a semi-circle around them to show that the products is behind their confidence. There is also the use of emphasis here. Rather than stating the benefits derived in using close up, the advert just highlight them with just three words, 3-in-1, “stronger”, “fresher” and “whiter”. These benefits are those that will easily catch the consumers’ attention. They appeal to the consumers’ desire for the teeth and mouth.

4.4 Data No 4. These data advertiser UNIVERSAL BASIC hair products, with the headline: “A NEW GENERATION IS BORN”. There is a picture of a young model’s head and shoulder, but what is obvious is her beautiful hair, which portrays the effect of the product advertises. This advert equally shows the use of ellipsis, this is obvious through the punctuation (...), this shows that something has been subtracted and it could be anything but the most important part of the sentences is what is written and this helps the advertiser to make the message short and sharp.

4.5 Data No 5: There have been enormous changes in what man communicates and patterns of sounds he uses. This language flux is as a result of technological advancement and social changes. Research has also made man to amass knowledge in various fields. Through this, he discovers new things and improves upon existing ones. If he feels the existing lexical items cannot serve him adequately, he coins or fashions out another one. This is what happened in this “DANSA FRUIT JUICES” advert. This style is common with slogan adverts where another advertiser usually tries to express much with few words. DANSA FRUIT JUICES JUICE IT UP.

This advert is strategically situated beside a main road for easy accessibility. It is made of three words that form an imperative statement. Deeply, one might wonder, juice what up? But the rationale behind this use of words becomes clearer when the pragmasociolinguistics concept is borrowed. This adverts was created in a situation where Nigeria has placed a ban on important goods, like snacks and drinks (juice especially) and there has been a lack of fruit juice for Nigerian

consumers, unless you will just make do with soft drinks like Coca-cola and Fanta. Then, came Dansa fruit juice to market telling you not just juice up the meal, but to further appeal to the thirst of the consumer, there is the picture of a cup of Dansa juice with ice to even psychologically include a thirst for the drink.

V. CONCLUSION

Human Language, as we know, has an unlimited capacity in communication, in that, it is used to send and receive an unlimited number of messages. The reason for this is creativity. This is evident in normal communication since we create the sentence we use afresh.

The creativity, however, is not restricted to the novel sentences we use alone, but also evident in lexical formation. Linguistics innovators create some lexical items to suit the emotion they wish to express or arouse when they think the existing lexis cannot do their biddings to their satisfaction. This has been our study, how this creativity has been extended to advertisement. We have discussed this comprehensively with the presentation and analysis of data which have helped us achieving our aim.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Aaker, D. and Day, G. (1974). *A dynamic model of relationships among advertising, consumer awareness, attitudes and behaviour*. Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 59, pp. 281-286
- [2]. Adefemi, A. (2006). A stylistic analysis of billboard advertisements in Nigeria. An Unpublished B.A. Long Essay, University of Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria.
- [3]. Akalugbo, B. N. (2001). History of Nigerian mass media. Ado-Ekiti: Comfort Ahabamaka Memorial Publishing.
- [4]. Bamiaye, T.O. (Ed) (1997). Studies in language and linguistics: An introductory text. Lagos: Montein Press Ltd.
- [5]. Berg, F. B. (1980). The history and development of advertisement. New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc.
- [6]. Chomsky, Noam (1972). Language and mind. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc.
- [7]. Chunnawalla, S. A. (2002). Advertising, sales and promotion management. New Delhi: Himalaya Publishing House.
- [8]. Clarke, D. G. (1976). *Econometric measurement of the duration of advertising effects on sales*. Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 13, pp. 345-357
- [9]. Comanor, W. S. and Wilson, T. A. (1974). Advertising and market power. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- [10]. Crystal, D. (1991). Language A to Z. London: Longman
- [11]. Crystal, D. and Davy, D. (1969). Investigating English style. London: Longman Group.
- [12]. Daniyan, Akpan (2005). I have an idea. Lagos: Buzzbooks.
- [13]. Elliot, B. B. (1962). A history of English advertising. London: Business Publications Ltd.
- [14]. Eyre, C. (1974). Effective communication made simple. London: W.H. Allen
- [15]. Fletcher, P. (1978). A child’s learning of English. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [16]. Gumperz, J. J. (1982). Language and social identity. Cambridge: Cambridge
- [17]. Ingram, D. (1965). First language acquisition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [18]. James, et al (2004). Introduction to communication for business and organization. Abuja: Spectrum Books Ltd.
- [19]. Leech, G. N. (1966). English advertising. Hong Kong: Longman
- [20]. Narayan, B. (1988). Advertising management. New Delhi: Corporation Publishers.

- [21]. Osundare, Niyi (1981). Poems for Sale: Stylistic Features of Yoruba Ipolowo Poetry in African Notes, vol. 15, No 1&2
- [22]. Sampson, H. (1930). History of advertising. London: Chatto and Windus.
- [23]. Tellis, G. J. (1988). *Advertising exposure, loyalty and brand purchase: A two-stage model*. Journal of Marketing Research, Vol. 25, pp. 134-144
- [24]. Vaughn, R. (1986). *How advertising works: A planning model revisited* in Journal of Advertising Research Vol. 26, pp. 57-66