

Stylistic Analysis of the Language of Billboards in Developing Nations

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Abstract

All words and sentences in any effective advertisement, whether print or electronic, must be coined in such a way that they will sufficiently influence readers and/or viewers. This study is an appraisal of how billboard authors exploit and use peculiar linguistic features to achieve specific effects. To do this, the study explores, identifies and describes certain stylistic patterns, which include the deviant patterns (i.e., foregrounding) in the language of billboards. This helps to show how billboard authors use these deviant linguistic patterns to achieve their desired goals. The study analyses some phonological, syntactic, lexical and semantic features of the language of billboards in order to ascertain the extent of linguistic exploit(s) by billboard authors. The theory of pragmatics forms our theoretical anchor pin.

Key Words: Language, stylistics, billboards, advertisement, foregrounding.

Introduction

Robert Graves insists that "every English poet should ... master the rules of grammar before he attempts to bend or break them" (*The Times*, 21 Oct 1961). Language is a phenomenon the usage of which is facilitated by contacts with sociolinguistic situation. Akwanya (1997) writes that language is the most adaptable

instrument of inter-subjectivity and of thought. It is the most important possession which distinguishes man as the highest in the class of animals. Meaning itself is the content conveyed in communication by language; it is also the message or thought in the mind of the speaker that is encoded in language, and sent to a hearer who decodes it. Akwanya (2005) again states that language is in fact the means through which human being produces himself as a spiritual and cultural being.

Jerspersen (1921) points out that language is nothing but a set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings, and especially to impact them to others. Chomsky in Akwanya writes: "Language study is the finest and most promising way to explore the essential and distinctive properties of human intelligence." Sometimes, writers intentionally spoil the effect of what they write by causing ambiguity and by deflecting the reader's attention in some trivial way. This is called foregrounding. Foregrounding, according to Yankson (2002), is the deviation from the norm – the code. Mey (2001) clarifies that "the writer intends the manipulation of ... or breaking of rules in certain structures, primarily sound, word, phrase, sentence, idiom, spelling and autographic style in order to convey different meaning." According to Crystal (1996), stylistics is concerned with *how* and *what*. The *how* is the form, and the *what* is the content. The language of billboards is meant to be brief with witty slogans. Nwodo (2008) points out that the language of advertisement is primarily designed to persuade and/or inform. This study became necessary, as a result of the importance of the language of billboards in society in general, and developing nations such as Nigeria in particular. In the study, we examined the choice of words and the structural patterns of the language of billboards.

Theoretical Background

Speech Act

Speech act is important to this work, because it reflects how language is used to transmit information. The concept of speech act may be misunderstood if taken to mean first, the act of speaking, or the act of communication through the spoken form only.

The concept was first introduced by the philosopher, John Austin in his work, *How to do Things with Words* (1962). He explored means of coping with language as a form of action. According to Austin, it is not individual words or sentences that are the basic elements of human communications, but particular speech acts that are performed in writing words or sentences. Like the language of billboards, Austin maintains that language is not just a scientific tool but more importantly a social activity. Speech acts, in his opinion, aims to do justice to the fact. Felicity, according to Austin, is performatives that are uttered in appropriate contexts and are used to be "happy" (or felicitous) as opposed to unhappy (or infelicitous). Both felicity and infelicity in Austin's opinion are concerned with *sayings* and *doings* at the same time.

Mey (1993) moved Austin's idea further by stating that speech acts are produced in actual situations of language use by people who have something in mind. Austin identified three distinct levels of action: *locutionary*, *illocutionary* and *perlocutionary* acts. *Locutionary* act is simply the content of the utterance itself; *illocutionary* act represents intended meaning by the speaker/writer, whereas *perlocutionary* act is the interpretation of the message by the one who perceives it. Speech act emphasizes the reader's relation to language. In speech acts, language is treated as something that is constructed to achieve certain effects on the reader. Similarly, the language of billboards is primarily designed to have effects on the readers; that is, it is designed to persuade and/or inform the reader through its linguistic contents (Nwodo 2008).

The Concepts of Stylistics and Language of Billboards

Stylistics, in this work, can be loosely defined as the study of style of language usage in different contexts. It concentrates on the choices available to a writer, chiefly: vocabulary, syntax, diction, and graphic effects. The language of billboards, on the other hand, is a kind of language designed to catch a person's attention; it creates a memorable impression on its reader. Such language is typically meant to appear large with witty slogans which have distinctive colour picture on the sides of buildings, and other vantage positions.

A billboard, on the other hand, is an advertising structure composed of wood, metal, paper or a variety of other durable materials positioned/mounted outdoors along roads, occasionally on buildings, and in other public places.

Linguistic Features of Billboard Texts

Siba (2000) averred that words are of course powerful drug used by mankind. The language of billboard is primarily designed to persuade and/or inform. The linguistic content contains powerful words which influence/manipulate the readers'/viewers' minds. Leech (1996) posits that most of advertising languages come under the broader heading of 'loaded languages' that is aimed to change the will, opinions or attitudes of its audience. Carston (2006) states that the language of billboard is a part of discourse, and discourse has to do with text, content, interaction and persuasion. Advertisement draws from the reader's conceptual and associative knowledge of linguistic meaning to achieve the desired result (Leech 1974). The style of billboard language comprises certain structural elements peculiar to advertising language including

"disjunctive syntax". "Disjunctive syntax" is the curious phenomenon in which written advertisement in English displays unusual or non-traditional features. Such features include the breaking of phrases with full stops as if they are sentences to produce prose or more focal elements, whereas in ordinary prose there would have been no punctuation or a comma at best. Billboard advertisements are characterized by a particular set of linguistic features (i.e., channel, code, message form, subject matter).

For this study, *channel* refers to billboard advertisement, *code* to written English language, *message form*, to the linguistic characteristics identified as billboard writing style, and *subject matter* to whatever product/service a billboard is advertising. Foregrounding is used by advertisers to provide the manipulation in advertisement. Leech (1966) refers to this general style used in billboard texts as "public colloquial". Public colloquialism is attributed to the enormous size of the audience in general that consumes the advertising discourse.

Linguistic Analysis of the Language of Billboard Texts

We analyze here the structures of the language of billboards with specific reference to the phonological, syntactic, lexical and semantic elements; we also note the manner in which these linguistic elements are perceived by readers. We opt to use library work to examine the message form; that is, the linguistic peculiarities identified as billboard writing style.

I. Phonological Analysis

Phonological analysis, in this study, is concerned with the way in which speech sounds are organized in a particular language. Rush (1998) claims that advertising "follows" a predictable stylistic

pattern of sound, word and sentence construction. Under phonological analysis, we are concerned with alliteration, repetition and rhyme.

i) Alliteration

In alliteration, certain sounds that occur in a word or sentence are repeated. These sounds are usually consonants sounds.

Examples

a. *Peak of the Pack*

b. *Harp for Happiness*

In example (a), the /p/ and /k/ which occur at the initial and final positions are aimed at drawing the attention of the reader and it enhances the authority of "agreeableness" due to the inherent melody of the speech sounds. The contrast between the vowel sounds /i:/ in /pi:k/ and /æ/ a short vowel in /pæk/ makes the advert easier to remember or chant the slogan without difficulty. In (b), the use of /h/ and /p/ in "harp" and "happiness" sharpens the alliteration and makes the advert both remarkable and memorable.

ii) Repetition (a peculiar device)

This involves the repetition of peculiar words or brand name(s) of a product(s) so as to impress it/them on the reader's mind.

Example

c. *Sharp Mind, Sharp Products.*

There is a play on the word "sharp". It suggests that "sharp" products can only come from the "Sharp Minds" that work in a "Sharp Corporation". Also, the play on "sharp" is apt for a camera which is usually measured by sharpness.

d. *Love Life, Love the City, Love Picanto.*

Here, the word "love" is repeated to buttress the logic that if one loves life and loves city life, one must necessarily love Picanto.

iii) *Rhyme (a peculiar device)*

This is the repetition of the identical or similar stressed sound or sounds (Barnet, 1985). Rhyme is used in adverts because it is pleasant to the ears as it suggests order.

e. *Welcome back Jack.*

f. *Walk the talk.*

There is a rhyme between "back" and "Jack", and it enhances remembrance through the suggestion of beauty and harmony.

In the same vein, there is a rhyme between "walk" and "talk" which suggests that with the car, you are put on the move (walk), and because the car affords you a maximum comfort, you can discuss your business (talk while on steering).

II. Syntactic Analysis

The linguistic devices that are used in this analysis are *emphatic construction*, *deixis* and *punctuation*.

i) *Emphatic Construction*

There are the constructions that highlight the qualities of the products advertised. This is usually done through the use of adjectives and adverbs to emphasize qualities claimed for the products; for example:

g. *Here at last. One skin cream that smiled and gentle to the*

family's skin

The use of the adjectives "mild" and "gentle" in these inscriptions apparently set the cream apart from other competing similar products.

h. *Virgin Nigeria: Very Nigeria, Very Nigeria.*

Apart from the intensity of the emphazier "very" in this advert, the alliterative value of "V" in the construction (Virgin...Very...Very...) makes the statement impossible to forget.

III. Deixis

This is used in advertising to appeal to the emotion and the sentiments of the potential consumer through the use of second person pronoun. This has the potential for forcing a prospective buyer to buy the product.

i. *You Know You Can Trust – TOTAL*

j. *Coca-cola... You can't Beat the Feeling.*

IV. Punctuation

Colons and dashes indicate a close connection between the clauses that come very close to each other. They are used in billboard advertisements to facilitate perception of the message form as seen in the example below:

k. *Guinness Time: After work is GUINNESS TIME, Guinness brings out the Action in You! (Guinness beer)*

l. *ZARINA Medication Antiseptic soap – kisses you all over.*

Zarina – a leading approach to beautiful skin for the family. (Zarina Medicated Antiseptic Soap)

V. Lexical Analysis

The choice of lexical items is linked to the intended meaning of products/services that the advertisers want to highlight on the billboards. For example, one finds adjectives such as: *new, ideal, first, great, best, winning, smarter, clearer*, etc., and adverbs as *truly, much* and *more*. The lexical items are selected to reflect the claims made by the advertisers that their own products surpass others. In line with this view is the careful and artistic selection of words in the structuring of the language billboards to positively predispose the consumer towards products; examples:

m. *A dead mosquito can't give you malaria. Treat your net with insecticides.*

(Future Group: DFID and Federal Ministry of Health).

n. *Mortein Insect KILLER. The power to protect. Kills instantly.*
(Mortein insecticide spray).

The lexical items: *dead* and *kills* are parts of the language register of medicine; i.e., kill germs, dead organs, and so on. However, it is also evident that advertisement for the prevention of illness uses language which is informative, direct and apt with the intention of jolting the readers into action.

VI. Semantic Analysis

Semantics is concerned with the study of the “meanings” of expressions. In advertising, this has to do with the customers’ perception of the goods or services being advertised. An analysis of meaning in the billboard text shows that the language used seems to embody a stimulus-response through words, pictures or

sounds. The devices that will be used under the semantic analysis are: pun, metaphor and clichés.

i) *Pun (a peculiar device)*

Pun is the form of witticism which involves a play upon words to achieve different meanings. This is put into remarkable use in the famous advert of the Nigeria Airline:

o. *The real Virgin has arrived.*

Here, the advertiser plays upon the word “Virgin” contrasting the original meaning of the word with its use as the name of the airline.

ii) *Metaphor (a peculiar device)*

Kaye (1989) explains metaphor as a figure of substitution based on similarity, which implies that two things being considered must be so similar as to be substituted, one for another. In this context, we see the connection between “GUINNESS Stout” and “greatness” in the advert below:

p. *Nothing tastes like Greatness.*

Here, “Guinness” is substituted for “greatness”. The advert could quite simply have read:

Nothing tastes like Guinness.

Another case of substitution can be seen in “Hyundai Elentra Car” where it claims that:

q. *Life is a beautiful ride*

Thus, substituting, “a beautiful ride” for life. The implication is

that if one desires to enjoy life, one should go for a beautiful car such as Hyundai Elenta.

Cliché (a peculiar device)

A cliché may be described as a saying which has become trite, because of over use. In advertising, it is deliberately used to create familiarity between the product being advertised and the intended consumer.

r. *Kia Rio: Welcome on Board.*

s. *First Inland Bank: At your service.*

In most cases, however, the monotony usually associated with clichés is broken into adverts through modification.

t. *Nokia Phone: All that glitters is style.*

This is an obvious deconstruction of the popular cliché: All that glitters is not gold.

To highlight the claim that Nokia Phone glitters with style.

u. *Art n Motion.*

Similarly, the clichés are used in appeal of magic: The more you look the less you see has been modified to create familiarity.

Conclusion

This study reveals the types of linguistic structures used to facilitate the perception of the messages of the billboard texts. The message form incorporates certain linguistic devices to enhance the attractiveness of the billboard texts and they include phonological,

syntactic and semantic features. The phonological devices are usually used by the authors of billboards to exploit the readers. Montgomery (1982) supports this point by writing that the sensitivity of language to any context is registered by more than the individual words themselves.

The syntactic devices reveal that the advertisers tantalize the consumers by making them part of the advert, either by posing questions to them or by the use of second person pronoun. The syntactic devices are equally used by the advertisers to tantalize the consumer by emphasizing the qualities of the products through the use of several adjectives and adverbs which are represented in form of emphatic expressions. The semantic devices are used frequently on billboards with associative meanings or with collective meaning.

Even though we have discussed the features of the language of billboards in the cities of developing nations, we do not in any way assume that the language of advertising is different in developed countries.

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