DISCOVERING THE DISCOURSE OF ADVERTISING

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Abstract

The consumerist world in which we are now living abounds in advertising messages. This is reason enough to consider that their understanding contributes to business success in many ways, otherwise the discourse of advertising would not exist. Since many professionals have to deal with advertisements from various perspectives at certain stages in their careers, it is worth teaching the peculiarities of the advertising discourse at university level, in an analytical, creative and interactive way that contributes to the development of practical skills useful in job-related activities. Therefore, the present article aims at introducing the genre of advertising in order to create the premises for identifying the learning objectives and developing a sequence of five interactive classroom activities with the purpose of making students discover the advertising genre and use that knowledge to create and evaluate advertising messages. This theoretical and practical framework provides students with the necessary know-how that helps them investigate the discourse of advertising into further details.

Keywords: *activity, advertisement, genre, learning objective, students.*

1.INTRODUCTION

Advertising is one of the oldest ways of promoting businesses, being essential for their survival and development. Advertising informs consumers on products, services, or business activities, on the one hand and on the other, it directs and persuades the public to act in a certain way. Advertising stimulates competition among producers, determining the emergence of consumer markets which ultimately lower prices and increase product and service quality, thus improving people's living standard. Viewed from another perspective, advertising creates jobs both directly, in the advertising industry, and indirectly, in all the other industries, by determining an increase in sales, and consequently in production and in the jobs that are offered. However, there are voices that raise against advertising for at least three reasons. Firstly,

advertising is responsible for rising prices, because its cost is added to the total amount paid for the product/service. In other words, when we buy something, we pay not only for the product/service, but also for the advertisement promoting it. Secondly, advertising is deceptive, determining people to buy goods they do not necessarily need, which impacts both their living standard and the green society. Thirdly, advertising contributes to a change in social attitudes and values, which, as already shown, is not always for the best (BAKER, 1994; BAKER 1998; DYER, 1982; RUSSEL & LANE, 2003; ŞIMON, 2007a; ŞIMON, 2010; ŞIMON, 2014b; ŞIMON & DEJICA-CARŢIŞ, 2015a; ŞIMON & DEJICA-CARŢIŞ, 2015b; VESTERGAARD & SCHRØDER, 1985).

No matter the advantages and disadvantages, advertising is everywhere in today's society, which is living proof that it plays a crucial role in the promotion of products, services, or business activities. From short promotional announcements in the newspaper to subliminal messages, advertising resorts to a wide range of techniques in order to trigger a behavioural change in the potential customer. In this context, at university level, students, particularly communication students, should be made aware of the advertising genre as they may have the chance or the need to create advertisements on various occasions in their career.

2. DISCOVERING THE DISCOURSE OF ADVERTISING

2.1. The Genre of Advertising

The discourse of advertising interrupts other discourses, occurring within the framework established by them, e.g., magazine articles, TV or radio news broadcast, newspaper articles, etc.

Moreover, the discourse of advertising imitates other discourses, e.g., it may look like a breaking news report, a scientific experiment report, a poem, etc. That is why Cook considers the discourse of advertising a 'parasitic' one, comparing it with the parasitic organisms which "may be beneficial if not necessary to their hosts" (COOK, 1996). The question that arises then is: 'How is the addressee able to distinguish between the 'parasitic' discourse of advertising and the 'host' discourse, as we would like to name it?'. The answer to this question is given by Gieszinger who distinguishes between primary and secondary text type markers (GIESZINGER, 2001). The primary text type markers are formal and may be illustrated by typographical differences distinguishing advertisements from the surrounding texts and/or by the elements of the ads, namely headline, illustration, body copy, signature line, i.e., the identification of the product or brand, and standing details, such as the address of the company. The secondary text type markers are content indicators and refer to the discourse.

Most studies on the discourse of advertising analyse rhetorical figures of speech, grammatical features, information structure in terms of given-new, theme-rheme, focal element - non-focal element, semantic and pragmatic structure, but also the way in which cohesion and coherence are achieved (COOK, 1996; DYER, 1999; GIESZINGER, 2001; GODDARD, 1998; STOIAN, 2020; ŞIMON, 2007b; ŞIMON, 2008; ŞIMON, 2010; ŞIMON, 2012; ŞIMON, 2013; ŞIMON, 2014b; ŞIMON, 2015; ŞIMON & DEJICA-CARŢIŞ, 2015a; ŞIMON & DEJICA-CARŢIŞ, 2015b; VESTERGAARD & SCHRØDER, 1985). All these studies reveal some recurrent features of the discourse of advertising, which are perceived as genre specific. However, an analysis of the genre of advertising following a comprehensive model of analysis has been rarely performed (BEX, 1993; ŞIMON, 2002; ŞIMON, 2014a; ŞIMON, 2014B).

Reviewing some of the most relevant genre theories (BAKHTIN, 1986; BEN-AMOS, 1976; BERKENKOTTER & HUCKIN, 1995; BHATIA, 1994; CAMPBELL & JAMIESON, 1978; COUTURE, 1986; FOWLER, 1982; HALLIDAY, 1978; HALLIDAY & HASAN, 1985; HYMES, 1974; JAMIESON, 1975; KINNEAVY, 1971; MALINOWSKI, 1960; MARTIN, 1985; MARTIN & ROTHERY, 1986; MILLER, 1984; ORING, 1986; SAVILLE-TROIKE, 1982; SWALES, 1993; TODOROV, 1976), Şimon synthesises the most important issues put forth by the aforementioned research on the topic (ŞIMON, 2014b):

"1. Genre taxonomies are useful especially for didactic purposes; they represent the prototype from which actual texts may deviate.

2. The scope of genres has extended from literary genres to non-literary genres.

3. The dynamic nature of genres is proved by the fact that they change in time once the socio-cognitive and professional context changes (language, society, field of activity and the actors' perception of that particular genre).

4. The socio-cultural and professional value of genres is highlighted by the fact that genres serve social, spiritual and professional needs, thus maintaining and prolonging social and professional groups (speech communities and discourse communities).

5. Genres are communicative events, through which social and professional purposes are accomplished by verbal means.

6. Genres are achieved through registers and registers through language. Genres are achieved in completed texts, while registers may also be achieved in incomplete texts. Genres impose constraints at the level of discourse structure; registers impose constraints at the stylistic level.

7. A genre is described in terms of obligatory elements and non-discriminative strategies. The differences between the various sub-genres belonging to a genre are described in terms of optional elements and discriminative strategies, respectively. Moreover, Şimon (2014b) proposes a "condensed model" for the analysis of unfamiliar genres obtained from combining the ones described by Swales and Bhatia. (SWALES, 1993; BHATIA, 1994) The "condensed model" investigates the genre both at the extra-linguistic and at the linguistic level:

"1. The extra-linguistic level:
1.1. identifying the addressers as members of a discourse community
1.2. identifying the addressees
1.3. identifying the communicative purpose

1.4. identifying the institutional constraints (not always the case)
2. The linguistic level:
2.1. identifying the cognitive structure/ canonical structure
2.2. identifying stylistic patterns" (ŞIMON, 2014b).

In the case of advertisements (STOIAN, 2020; ŞIMON, 2002; ŞIMON, 2014b), the addressers are the advertisers who are members of a discourse community which has developed its own professional rules, means of communication and terminology. The addressees are people belonging to a specified demographic group, i.e., the target group, that shares the same values, needs, wishes, and desires. The communicative purpose of advertisements is that of determining the target group to acquire a product/service, or to act in a certain way with respect to what is advertised. It is the case of commercial, industrial, trade, political, issue advertising and so on. The advertising message is designed in accordance with the laws and regulations in force, but also with the cultural heritage of the society in which the advertising message is disseminated. As can be seen, the extra-linguistic level of analysis of unfamiliar genres describes the extra-linguistic context, i.e., the situational context, in which the discourse is used.

To describe a genre from a linguistic point of view, one must identify the regularities in terms of content organisation, i.e., cognitive structure/ canonical structure, and language use, i.e., stylistic patterns. The rhetorical moves make up the cognitive structure of standardised professional genres, e.g., news articles, scientific articles, etc., and the superstructural categories contribute to the realisation of the canonical structure of more flexible genres, e.g., advertisements, poetry, etc. The 'rhetorical moves' and the 'superstructural categories' are synonyms, as they both "reflect the strategies that members of a particular discourse or professional community typically use in the construction and understanding of that genre to achieve specific communicative purposes" (BHATIA, 1994). The same relation of synonymy is established also between the structures described by them, viz., the cognitive structure and the canonical structure, respectively. The canonical structure of written advertisements, illustrated in Table 1, is Identifying a need – Introducing the offer – Soliciting feedback, but also other superstructural categories, presented in the right and left column, may be used.

Table 1. The canonical structure of written advertisements

"Identifying a need
↓
Introducing the offer

Using pressure tactics →		← Reinforcement of the offer/ need (as slogan)
Establishing credentials →		
Offering incentive →		

↓
Soliciting feedback

Establishing credentials →		← Establishing credentials (as slogan)
		← Reinforcement of the offer (as slogan)

Footnote
Reinforcement of the offer
↓
Using pressure tactics
↓
Establishing credentials
↓
Soliciting feedback" (Şimon, 2014b, pp. 89-90)

In other words, the canonical structure of written advertisements may comprise the following six superstructural categories, thoroughly described in Table 2: Identifying a need, Introducing the offer, Establishing credentials, Offering incentives, Using pressure tactics, and Soliciting feedback (ŞIMON, 2014a; ŞIMON, 2014b).

Table 2. Description of the superstructural categories of the canonical structure of written advertisements

Superstructural category	Description
Identifying a need	• the ad implies that the product/service/issue/person can fulfil the need • the addressee's need is identified, usually in the advertisement title which is sometimes accompanied by a sub-title, or by a slogan describing the need shortly; the latter one may be placed either at the beginning or at the end of the advertisement
Introducing the offer	• positive details about the offer are given to convince the addressee to act in a certain way • the offer is sometimes reinforced by the slogan
Establishing credentials	• the extensive research and the tests done on enough persons/animals before putting the product on the market are mentioned in the advertisement • seals of approval, recommendations made by specialists or role models, the fact that the product/service is a trade mark (™), a copyright (©), or has been registered (®) and suggesting the expertise of the company are some means by which credentials may be established
Offering incentives	• a discount or a comparison (e. g. the typical negative comparison used in the detergent advertisements), an example of a model user or the claims about the exceptional qualities of the product are some means by which incentives are offered • incentives are offered to convince people to buy a product/service
Using pressure tactics	• giving a time limit for purchasing/testing a product/service is a common pressure tactic • pressure tactics are used to push the potential customer to take an immediate decision
Soliciting feedback	• feedback is indirectly solicited when the advertisement includes the name of the company, the internet address/website, the telephone numbers, and the location where the product/service may be acquired • feedback is directly solicited when the advertisement offers a test drive, a demonstration of the way in which the product functions/should be used, a piece of advice on the way in which the product/service may be used, etc.

Moreover, in order to catch attention, stir interest, stimulate desire and urge action (CLEMENTE, 2002; LAMB et al., 2012), language is exploited creatively by advertisers, going beyond the denotative meaning and breaking all the linguistic rules. Thus, semantically, advertisements refer to the addresser (i.e., producer/retailer/any other kind of company), to 'features' of the addresser (i.e., any descriptive information concerning the addresser), to the

addressee, to 'features' of the addressee (i.e., any descriptive information concerning the addressee), to the endorser (i.e., a person that supports the advertiser and the claim), to 'features' of the endorser (i.e., any descriptive information concerning the endorser), to the product/service/issue, to features of the product/service/issue (i.e., any descriptive information concerning the product/service/issue), to the gained benefits, to the price of the product/service/issue, to incentives, to credentials, to pressure tactics, and to feedback (ŞIMON, 2013; ŞIMON, 2014b). Plenty of adjectives and adverbs are used to describe the 'features' of the addresser, addressee, endorser or of the product/service/issue. Comparative and superlative forms are used to imply the superiority of the advertised product over its competitors (GODDARD, 1998). The latter are not usually named due to the regulations in force in most of the developed countries. Verbs are used in the present tense because advertisements "usually describe permanent truths or characteristics of the advertised product/service/issue. Future tense simple is also quite frequently used to make a future promise" (ŞIMON, 2014b). Besides verbs in the indicative mood, verbs in the imperative mood are employed to give directions, which "refer to the consumption of the advertised product/service or prepare consumption (the acquisition of catalogues; coupons to be filled in and posted; telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, websites which may be helpful in order to get further information about the product/ service/ issue; trial of the advertised product; availability of the product/ service in a limited period of time or in a particular shop/ geographical area)" (Şimon, 2014b, p. 38). Punctuation and syntax rules are flouted, sentences are chopped "into shorter bits by using full stops where ordinary prose would use commas or no punctuation at all" (VESTERGAARD & SCHRØDER, 1985, p. 22), a style called by Leech 'disjunctive syntax' (LEECH, 1966). The language of advertising is usually informal, abounding in rhetorical figures (DYER, 1999) and promoting "positive associations in the minds of the target audience" (GODDARD, 1998). Furthermore, the tone of the advertisements is jocular to attract the target audience.

Nevertheless, the success of the advertising message is ensured by the fantasy world it can create and less by the propositions it makes about a product:

"[…] the success of advertising depends not on its logical propositions but on the kind of fantasies it offers. The world of ads is a dream world where people and objects are taken out of their material context and given new, symbolic meanings, placed on hoardings or on the screen where they become signs. […] Advertising helps us to make sense of things. It validates consumer commodities and consumer life-style by associating goods with personal and social meanings and those aspirations and needs that are not fulfilled in real life. We come to think that consuming commodities will give us our identities" (DYER, 1999).

In other words, the closer the dream presented by the advertisement is to the dream of the target audience, the more successful the advertisement, because successful advertising fulfils the needs and the dreams of the addressees.

2.2. Interactive Classroom Activities

In order to make university students discover the subtleties of the advertising discourse, the teacher should create the framework within which "language and discourse become the object of analysis, criticism; and the resulting knowledge, insights or skills become available for practical application in language and communication projects" (VAN DIJK, 1980). Considering all this, a sequence of five activities is proposed to raise students' awareness of the discourse of advertising and to develop their practical application skills.

In this case, the learning objectives are:
1. students should be able to define advertising,
2. students should be able to name some of the effects of advertising,
3. students should be able to define a genre,
4. students should be able to identify the primary/formal text type markers of advertisements,
5. students should be able to describe the extra-linguistic features of advertisements,
6. students should be able to describe the linguistic features of advertisements,

7. students should be able to create and evaluate advertising messages.

The five-activity sequence, that aims at making students discover the discourse of advertising and at developing their practical application skills, is presented below.

- Activity 1: Topic introduction

Students are shown several advertisements and asked to guess the topic of the lesson. Then students are asked to define advertising and name some of its positive and negative effects.

- Activity 2: Introducing the concept of genre

Students are shown advertisements and asked to identify the primary/formal text type markers, i.e., to identify how the addressee can distinguish an ad from the surrounding texts. Then they are asked whether the formal text type markers are sufficient to classify the advertisement as genre. Some counterexamples may be given: a short composition or a poem may be accompanied by an image, may even have the contact details of the author mentioned at the end of the text. Students are made aware of the fact that besides the formal text type markers, further conditions need to be fulfilled for a discourse to be an advertising discourse. The teacher asks students whether an advertising message represents a communicative event, and if so, whether there are classes of communicative events of the same type, which nevertheless have a different communicative purpose and as such bear different names. The teacher writes on the whiteboard all these names and points to the fact that they form the sub-classes of advertising genre.

- Activity 3: Defining the genre of advertising

The teacher distributes handouts containing information on some of the most important characteristics of a genre, and the "condensed model" for the analysis of unfamiliar genres proposed by Şimon (2014b, p. 54). The teacher makes a short presentation of the issues detailed on the handouts. The class is then divided into groups of 4 or 5 students. Each student has to choose an advertisement from those selected in advance by the teacher. In groups, they should first discuss the extra-linguistic features of the advertisements, and then present the findings to the class.

Then the teacher distributes handouts with an exercise on the canonical structure of advertisements. The superstructural categories and their description are jumbled, the students' task is to match the superstructural categories with their description. After that, the students have to identify the superstructural categories in the ads they have chosen and to present the results to the class. The canonical structure of the advertisements is deduced and written on the whiteboard by the teacher.

The teacher distributes handouts containing a three-column table with the linguistic features described in the previous section and listed in the first column. The second column is for example and the third for comments. Students have to fill in the table with examples from the advertisements received from the teacher at the beginning of the class, discuss the findings in groups, and then share them with their colleagues.

- Activity 4: The discourse of advertising in a nutshell

The teacher discusses the main characteristics of the discourse of advertising in terms of the extra-linguistic and linguistic features discovered in the previous activities. A summary is then provided to help students remember all the essential details.

- Activity 5: Creating a short advertisement

In groups, students are asked to create a short advertisement, considering both the extra-linguistic and the linguistic features of the discourse of advertising. The advertising message is read aloud, and the extra-linguistic and the linguistic features are presented to the class. Each advertising message and presentation of the genre-specific characteristics are assessed by the other groups. In the end, the group with the best advertisement and presentation is declared the winner of the day and receives a certificate.

3. CONCLUSIONS

As we live in a society in which the ubiquitous presence of advertisements is overwhelming, understanding the way in which the discourse of advertising is constructed contributes to our understanding of the world. Professionals in

various fields of activity, but particularly communicators must understand and be able to use the linguistic strategies employed in advertisements. Taking this into account, the present article has highlighted the importance of defining the genre of advertising. The "condensed model" for the analysis of unfamiliar genres proposed by Şimon has been considered the easiest one to describe both the extra-linguistic and the linguistic genre features of advertisements (ŞIMON, 2014b). At university level, developing critical thinking is essential for the acquisition of knowledge and skills that are afterwards used to complete communication projects.

Taking all this into consideration, five activities have been presented that raise students' awareness of the advertising discourse and develop their practical application skills:

- Activity 1: Topic introduction,
- Activity 2: Introducing the concept of genre,
- Activity 3: Defining the genre of advertising,
- Activity 4: The discourse of advertising in a nutshell,
- Activity 5: Creating a short advertisement.

At the end of the proposed activities students should be able to define advertising, name some of the effects of advertising, define a genre, identify the primary/formal text type markers of advertisements, describe the extra-linguistic features of advertisements, describe the linguistic features of advertisements, create and evaluate advertising messages.

The classroom activities described above represent the first step in discovering the discourse of advertising, thus contributing to the creation of a general framework within which further activities may be designed in order to delve into the particularities of this type of discourse.

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