

## **Discourse Features and Marketing Strategy in American Magazine Advertising**

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### **1. Introduction**

The institution of advertising provides a wealth of opportunities for the linguist to study “language in use” and to explore discourse strategies that are used for persuasion. Although various scholars (such as Cook, 1992; Simpson, 2001) have speculated or anecdotally commented that different advertising tactics may be used for promoting different types of products, there have not been studies that systematically identify the discourse features of a given set of advertising strategies and investigate whether the use of these features vary according to specific product types.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) To study discourse variation among print advertisements by describing and analyzing the influence of product type (and related societal factors such as consumer attitudes and behavior) on advertising language; and (2) to explore the notion that there are two main persuasive tactics in advertising discourse: “reason” or hard-sell advertising and “tickle” or soft-sell advertising (see Cook, 1992; Simpson, 2001).

### **2. Advertising Strategy**

According to Simpson (2001), variation in advertising discourse can be described using the marketing goals and tactics outlined by a particular advertising copywriter, Bernstein (1974), and explored through the distinction he draws between two principal copywriting strategies: “reason” and “tickle.”

- Reason (or hard-sell) advertising attempts to persuade the consumer by providing direct and easily decipherable reasons for the purchase.
- Tickle (or soft-sell) advertising takes a more indirect approach by appealing to humor, memories, and feelings.

Simpson further notes that the tactic preferred by the advertiser may depend on the particular nature of the commodity being advertised. He adds that health-promoting

products that offer obvious benefits such as pain killers and diapers lend themselves readily to reason advertisements, whereas commodities such as tobacco and alcohol, which are luxury or non-essential commodities (even harmful to health), are advertised through tickle strategies because it is difficult to rationally highlight the merits of these products.

To operationalize reason advertising, two discourse characteristics are chosen for the present study as representative of this advertising strategy: the presence of conjunctive adjuncts and the presence of the problem-solution information structure in the discourse of print advertisements. Because tickle advertising tends to use more “indirect” strategies (such as implicature, humor and metaphor) and thereby more difficult to describe or operationalize via discourse characteristics, this paper will not focus on the tickle advertising strategy.

### 2.1. *Conjunctive Adjuncts*

According to Simpson (2001), conjunctive adjuncts may characterize the discourse of reason advertising because they function to draw attention to the reasons for a purchase and explain the benefits of buying the advertised product. The following set of conjunctive adjuncts is based on the systemic-functional analytic model of M.A.K. Halliday (1994), which is founded on the assumption that the language system takes its shape from the function(s) language serves.

#### (1) Conjunctive adjuncts (Simpson, 2001, p. 595)

- a. Conditional: [positive] *if... then, in the event of, when*  
[negative] *otherwise, if not*
- b. Causal: *so, then, because, as a result, that's why*  
Purposive: *in order to, so that you can...; to*  
[verb]...; *for...*
- c. Purposive: *in order to, so that you can...; to [verb]...; for...*

According to Simpson, there are other conjunctive adjuncts, such as the additive and the adversative, that are commonly used in advertising, but it is the conditional, causal, and purposive conjunctive adjuncts that characterize reason advertisements.

Some examples of the reason advertising strategy using conjunctive adjuncts include the following.

#### (2) Conjunctive adjunct examples (Simpson, 2001, pp. 595-597)

- a. Conditional: *If pain strikes, then hit back with Solpadeine.*  
(Solpadeine pain killers)
- b. Causal: *Flash does all the hard work so you don't have to.*  
(Flash floor cleaner)

- c. Purposive: *In order to reveal younger looking skin, I've found Plenitude Excell A3 with triple AHA fruit acids.*  
(Plenitude skin care product)

## 2.2. Problem-Solution Information Structure

Another discourse feature that signals the reason strategy in advertising is the problem-solution information structure, which is commonly found in journalism texts and expository writing (Delin, 2000). In advertisements that rely on this reason-why style of argumentation, a rational case is made for consumers to buy the particular product. The advertisement leads the consumers to accept that some situation presents a problem in their lives. A solution is then presented and justified in the form of the product. The problem-solution information structure may have two logical parts (problem and solution), or three (situation, problem, and solution), as suggested by Carter and Nash (1990).

The following text for an Aricept advertisement illustrates the problem-solution information structure.

### (3) Aricept advertisement (in the *National Geographic*, July 2003)

Mom's forgetfulness turned out to be Alzheimer's. But we didn't just sit here and do nothing. I got her to a doctor right away and he put her on Aricept. Now she's doing better. If a person forgets names, places or facts -- and has trouble with everyday things like reading or shopping -- it may not be normal aging. It could be Alzheimer's disease. So it's important to see a doctor as soon as you can. There is no cure for Alzheimer's. But a prescription drug called Aricept has been used by millions of people to help their symptoms.

In studies, Aricept has been proven to work for mild to moderate Alzheimer's. It has helped people improve their memory over time. It has also helped them to keep doing everyday things on their own, longer. Ask your doctor if Aricept is right for you or your loved one. It is the #1 prescribed drug for Alzheimer's in the world.

The sooner you know it's Alzheimer's, the sooner Aricept can help.

The problem identified in the ad is "My mother has Alzheimer's" and the solution that Aricept provides is the following: "The doctor put her on Aricept, and she is much better."

## 2.3. Product Categories

To find a systematic and valid way to define the categories of commodities for the present study, we look to the field of advertising and marketing, for insights into how advertising strategies may be contingent upon how the products are perceived by both

advertisers and consumers. According to many researchers in the advertising/marketing field, product categories may be defined in terms of consumer “involvement”: high- and low-involvement. High-involvement goods are those which generally tend to be higher in price, are purchased relatively infrequently, and require some research and reflection on the part of the consumer before making a purchase. Low-involvement goods tend to be packaged goods of a relatively low price, which are purchased frequently by the consumer in supermarkets and convenience stores. Product categories that represent high-involvement goods would include items such as automobiles, kitchen appliances, and jewelry, and low-involvement products include hair-care and low-cost packaged food products (Mueller, 1992). In terms of the products chosen for the present study, prescription medication represents a high-involvement product, whereas snack foods and candy can be categorized as low-involvement goods. Prescription medications are also health-promoting products that would rely on the reason strategy in advertising. These products were chosen because they represent a large portion of advertising and appear in the magazines chosen for the study.

### 3. Advertising Data

The data for this study consist of advertisements collected from a year’s publication of two widely-read magazines that differ in terms of the targeted readership—*Better Homes and Gardens* (BHG) and the *National Geographic* (NG). All advertisements in the 12 monthly issues of 2003 were included, and any repeated advertisements appearing in the same magazine (in a later issue) or in the other magazine were not included in the analysis. A total of 134 unique advertisements representing two types of commodities—prescription medication and snack foods/candy—were collected and analyzed. As shown in (4), most of the advertisements in the data set were found in BHG (111 out of 134), and some advertisements (i.e., 13 prescription medication advertisements) appeared in both BHG and NG.

(4) Distribution of advertisements by product type and magazine category

	BHG	NG	Both BHG & NG	Total number of advertisements
<b>Prescription medication</b>	53	8	13	74
<b>Snack foods and candy</b>	58	2	0	60
<b>Total number of advertisements</b>	111	10	13	134

All the advertisements in the data set were analyzed for discourse characteristics that may differentiate between reason and tickle advertising—a set of conjunctive adjuncts and

the problem-solution information structure. For the prescription medication product category, only the first part of each advertisement, which resembles the print advertising discourse of other types of products, was analyzed because the second part (the small print drug-label information, usually on a separate page) represents a different institutional discourse.

The advertisements collected for analysis were all more than one-third page in length, in order to keep the copy length consistent with the data used in other print-advertising studies conducted in the field of advertising and mass communication.

#### 4. Analysis of Advertising Data

As shown in (5), 67% of all the advertisements ( $N = 134$ ) had at least one conjunctive adjunct. All prescription medication advertisements (at 100%) had at least one conjunctive adjunct, whereas only 27% of the snack foods/candy category ( $N = 60$ ) showed conjunctive adjuncts. These results seem to indicate that advertisers are less likely to use a reason-oriented strategy for advertising snack foods/candy than for promoting prescription medication. Prescription medication is a high-involvement product that offers obvious and rational benefits and therefore lends itself easily to a reason-oriented strategy in advertising, and the snack foods/candy product category represents a low-involvement product which seems to warrant a more tickle-oriented strategy.

- (5) Number and percentage of advertisements with conjunctive adjuncts along product categories

	Total number of advertisements with conjunctive adjuncts	Total number of advertisements for the product category	Percentage of advertisements with conjunctive adjuncts
<b>Prescription medication</b>	74	74	100%
<b>Snack foods and candy</b>	16	60	27%
<b>TOTAL</b>	90	134	67%

Some examples of the use of conjunctive adjuncts are as follows (bolded for emphasis):

- (6) Allegra, Prescription Medication (*Better Homes and Gardens*, September 2003)

Can't take the congestion?  
 Take Allegra-D. Finally, D-Congested Allegra-D relieves your most frustrating allergy symptom: congestion.  
 And it doesn't cause drowsiness like many other allergy medicines can. **Because only Allegra-D has the unique allergy-fighting combination of fexofenadine and**

**pseudoephedrine.** Ask your doctor about Allegra-D. And don't let allergy congestion frustrate you another day.

- (7) Celebrex, Prescription Medication (*National Geographic*, December 2003)

**If the joint pain of osteoarthritis is holding you back, ask your doctor about Celebrex.** Just one Celebrex provides up to 24 hours of relief from the pain of osteoarthritis. And it's proven strength. In fact, over 23 million people have turned to Celebrex-the #1 doctor-prescribed brand.

As for the problem-solution information structure, results indicate that prescription medication advertisements show a much stronger tendency for reason advertising than snack foods and candy advertisements. As shown in (8), 78% of prescription medication advertisements showed the problem-solution structure, in stark contrast to only 5% of snack foods and candy advertisements. These results indicate that, because of the obvious health benefits that this category of products offers, prescription medication advertisements tend to use a more reason-oriented discourse strategy (as represented by the problem-solution information structure) than those for the snack foods and candy category of products.

- (8) Percentage of advertisements with the problem-solution structure along product categories

	<b>Total number of advertisements with problem-solution structure</b>	<b>Total number of advertisements for the product category</b>	<b>Percentage of advertisements with problem-solution structure</b>
<b>Prescription medication</b>	58	74	78%
<b>Snack foods and candy</b>	3	60	5%
<b>TOTAL</b>	69	134	51%

The following example (9) demonstrates the problem-solution structure, as used in one of the snack foods/candy advertisements.

- (9) Problem-Solution information structure

Product	<b>Rold Gold</b>
Magazine	<i>Better Homes and Gardens</i> , July and August 2003
Description	A brown pantry shelf full of food items. There

	is a Rold Gold bag prominently displayed in front.
Text	Are you craving something... A. Slightly sweet? B. Slightly salty? C. Wholesome? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> D. All of the above?
	Presenting Rold Gold Honey Wheat Braided Twists!
	With only 1 gram of fat per serving and the irresistible taste of honey baked right in, Rold Gold Honey Wheat Braided Twists are the smartest answer to your craving!

The problem identified in the advertisement is that “there are times when the advertisement reader may crave something slightly sweet, salty, and wholesome” and the solution that the snack food item provides is the following: “Rold Gold Wheat Braided Twists are the answer to those cravings.”

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to provide a description and analysis of discourse strategies as they occur in a selected sample of print advertisements. It examined the discourse of print advertising from popular American magazines and attempted to determine whether a set of discourse strategies used by advertisers to effect persuasion differ according to the commodity being advertised. The rationale for the study is to fill a gap in advertising discourse research: In general, studies in the fields of advertising, marketing, journalism, and communication tend to focus on the content of the advertised message and analyze the ideology of the consumer culture or explain the manipulative dangers of advertising, whereas research conducted in the field of linguistics generally provides surveys and descriptions of linguistic features in various types of advertisements. The present research, however, was conducted with a unique sociolinguistic agenda: to use the tools of linguistics (i.e., the analysis of linguistic features and discourse structure) for describing the social influences—such as consumer attitudes and advertiser perceptions about marketed commodities as indicated by the level of involvement (high versus low) associated with product choice and purchase—on advertising language.

In addition, although many researchers in linguistics and other disciplines have investigated persuasive strategies used for marketing various categories of products and services, the present study is a novel attempt to identify possible discourse features of a given advertising tactic (that is, reason versus tickle) and investigate systematically whether the use of these linguistic features vary according to the socio-economic variable of the advertised product category.

With reference to the issue of reason versus tickle advertising as outlined by Simpson (2001), the results indicate a strong tendency for the use of conjunctive adjuncts in prescription medication advertisements and less use among the snack foods and candy

advertisements. As one of the linguistic device categories in the functional grammar system of Halliday (1994), conjunctive adjuncts function to highlight the reasons for a purchase and clearly explain the benefits of buying the advertised product (or the drawbacks of failing to purchase the item). As such, the use of conjunctive adjuncts signals the reason advertising tactic, and the results of this study lend support to the notion that “healthful” products that offer obvious benefits, such as prescription medication, lend themselves readily to reason advertisements.

Most prescription medication advertisements also showed a problem-solution information structure, whereas this structure was found in very few of the snack foods and candy advertisements. This result further indicates that prescription medication, a healthful and high-involvement product, lends itself to reason advertising, whereas snack foods and candy, a low-involvement category of products that cannot generally lay claim to rational health benefits, may tend toward a more tickle-oriented advertising strategy.

These results lend support to the notion that advertising discourse strategy (reason versus tickle) correlates with the commodity being advertised. The present investigation invites and offers implications for further interdisciplinary research on advertising language that uses the tools of linguistics for describing and analyzing the influences of such societal factors as consumer attitudes and behavior on advertising language.

### References

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