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ANALYSIS OF HEDGES IN ENGLISH COMMERCIAL ADVERTISEMENTS UNDER THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

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ABSTRACT

The commercial advertising is one of the crucial means to compete in the increasingly fierce market. The English commercial advertisement is laconic and vivid, and its forceful persuasion can exert an influence on people's values, possessing extremely explicit material objectives. With the view of strengthening the advertiser's awareness of the accurate understanding and use of hedges and enhancing the ability of effective speech communication in advertisements, this paper, based on Grice's Cooperative principle, analyzes the use of hedges in English commercial advertisements from two aspects: abidance and violation. What is found is that advertisers are required to employ the hedges appropriately in terms of the characteristics of the products, and flexibly comply with or violate the cooperative principle to achieve their advertising purposes and highlight products 'features.

Keywords: hedges, the cooperative principle, advertisements.

INTRODUCTION

With the economy globalization and the unremitting development of society, advertising as a mode of disseminating information has penetrated people's daily life inch by inch and thus becomes an indispensable portion of people's life. The market competition at present is piled up increasingly, and the commercial advertising is one of the crucial means to compete for the market. The English commercial advertisements, featuring particularly material objectives, are succinct and picturesque, and its strong persuasion has an impact on people's values. Its paramount purpose is to publicize products, to spread the information of products, and

to guide or summon people to unconsciously engage in purchasing. Therefore, in order to achieve its purpose, advertisers are desperately meticulous in the choice of words and phrases, using unique and distinct means of expression.

There is no doubt that hedges are extensively used in commercial advertisements, insomuch as hedges are prone to precisely convey the intention of commercial advertisements, reflect their characteristics, and give advertisements a relatively strong appeal and persuasiveness. In addition, hedges enable advertisements to deliver the required information more effectively and courteously without deficiency of naturality and

flexibility. The hedges were proposed as the semantic concept at the outset, which a raft of scholars merely explored from the perspective of semantics. Accompanying researches in-depth gradually, linguists embarked on probing into hedges from the perspective of pragmatics, which is also one of the popular topics recently.

The cooperative principle is the foundation of all successful language communication activities, which is the result of joint efforts of both parties. By observance of cooperative principle, the words expressed throughout the conversation are in line with the goal of the conversation, so that communication can proceed smoothly. Consequently, there is no doubt that the cooperative principles of great benefit for analyzing the language communication behavior of certain specific genres. Nevertheless, it seems that scarce researches put a premium on the analysis of specific genres by combining the cooperative principle with hedges. Accordingly, capitalizing on the cooperative principle in Grice's conversational implicature theory, this paper analyzes the exploitation of hedges in English commercial advertisements, which can fill the gaps in this field of research, thus strengthening the advertiser's awareness of the accurate understanding and use of hedges and enhancing the ability of effective speech communication in advertisements.

HEDGES

In 1923, the celebrated British philosopher Russell once indicated in his book that "the whole language is more or less vague". Then, Zadeh, the American cybernetic expert, proposed "fuzzy sets" in 1965 and hence fuzziness has become the scientific term heretofore. The concept of hedges was primarily put forward in Lakeoff's (1972) paper, in which he defined hedges as "words or phrases whose job is to make things fuzzier". Later, Yule (1996) identified the hedges as "the cautious annotative expression of how the discourse is given." Channell (2000) asserted that the use of hedges can steer the speaker or author's recognition of the real situation into the vague, complicated one which is difficult to comprehend. A Chinese scholar's description of hedges is that they are phrases that

depict the general (or inaccurate) situation of a topic. (He Ziran, 1990)

The study of hedges made its debut in China in the 1970s, and the pioneer in China to present the term "hedges" was Wu Tieping. In 1979, he introduced the word for the first time in his paper, and he innovatively pointed out four classification approaches from syntactic and semantic angles (1999). Since then, a wealth of scholars and linguists in China has initiated to study hedges from manifold facets. For example, Dai Yidong and Cai Longquan (2002) analyzed hedges in the light of speech act theory and the cooperative principle. However, there are relatively few studies of hedges in specific genres, especially apropos of the style of advertisement whose audience is wide-ranging by a large margin. A spot of pertinent researches are as follows: an analysis of vocabulary ambiguity and its pragmatic functions in English advertisements (Guan Jialing, 2004) and how to apply hedges in advertisements (Liang Xueqiu, Hu Jiaying, 2013).

THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

The American philosopher Grice (1978) reported that for the purpose of realizing a specific goal in all language communication activities, there is a tacit agreement between the speaker and the listener. It is just the principle that both parties should abide by, namely, the cooperative principle. By this sort of collaboration, the chances are that both parties are able to ceaselessly engage in meaningful and significant communication. The cooperative principle can be shown in the following four maxims:

The Maxim of Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false.
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim of Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of Relevance

Be relevant.

The Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous.

- Avoid obscurity of expression.
- Avoid ambiguity.
- Be brief (avoid prolixity).
- Be orderly.

Strictly speaking, Grice's cooperative principle has been questioned by a number of people: "Grice portrays the ideal realm of a philosopher, and no one actually speaks like this" (Levinson, 1983). As a matter of fact, even Grice himself is aware of a myriad of cases of non-compliance with the cooperative principle, and claims that people do not follow the cooperative principle verbatim in actual communication but abide by certain maxims on the basis of given conditions and violate certain maxims concurrently. However, undoubtedly, the cooperative principle has practical value for analyzing the language communication behavior of different genres.

Furthermore, although the cooperative principle is utilized to analyze language communication in the traditional sense, commercial advertising is a peculiar language communication behavior. In an advertisement, the producer is the advertiser, while the recipient is the general public who reads the advertisement and is also a potential consumer. Therefore, the cooperative principle is applicable to the analysis of commercial advertising advertisements. So as to emphasize the characteristics of the advertising language, advertisers often take advantage of hedges within the allowable range, intending to comply with or violate the cooperative principle, so that the advertising accomplishes the optimal marketing effect.

ANALYSIS OF THE ADVERTISEMENTS

On grounds of the cooperative principle, this paper studies the hedges in English commercial advertisements through the observance or violation of the cooperative principle in advertising advertisements.

The maxim of quality

The maxim of quality demands the authenticity of advertiser's words. Inevitably and apparently, deliberate falsehood and utterances lack of sufficient evidence are unwarrantable. By the same token, in the advertisement, for the sake of being more attractive and stimulating the consumer's desire and willingness to purchase, advertisers are supposed to appropriately use some hedges to promote the commodity and reinforce considerably the persuasiveness of the advertisement.

Example 1: Probably the best beer in the world. (Carlsberg)

Carlsberg, with a history of more than 150 years, is a high-end beer that enjoys tremendous popularity all over the world. By this advertisement, the advertiser endeavors to suggest that Carlsberg is likely to be the best beer in the world, or to inform consumers that Carlsberg might be the best beer in the world, or perhaps it has been already the best beer. On no account can the advertiser straightforwardly state that Carlsberg is the best wine in the world, in case of saying what is untrue and lacks evidence. Instead, it avails of the hedge "probably" to allow a leeway in reference to the maxim of quality, evincing its authenticity in significant measure. Besides, the use of "probably" in this advertisement leaves room for consumers to explore further and verify the quality of the product, so that the product can be correspondingly condoned or excused when questioned.

With regard to effectively complying with the maxim of quality, advertisers can make reasonable use of hedges, in order to avoid the mendacious information of the product or description without adequate evidence. Resorting to some relatively vague words or hedges, advertisers can shirk responsibility because the exaggerated depiction of products is implausible. If there is a far cry between the actual quality of the product and what is described in the advertisement, it will dramatically affect the reputation of the product and the trust of the consumer; hence, some advertisers exploit gorgeous but exaggerated advertisements only to find unfavorable results.

Example 2: Get a time-based trip plan in just a few taps. (Time traveler)

This is an advertisement from the Yahoo website, introducing the Time Traveler that is a newly invented application to assist travelers in planning their journey. Conspicuously, this advertisement runs counter to the maxim of quality on account of the use of the hedge “a few”. It seems that with just a few clicks, travelers can design and manage their travel plans with ease. The advertiser does not provide the concise number of clicks needed, thus the advertisement lacks enough information or evidence. However, the real intention of the advertiser is not to tell the consumers how many times they need to hit the keyboard; on the contrary, it is only a means to attract more consumers to pay heed to the application. Most people care for an easy-to-use app that can be quickly mastered, so consumers are easily attracted to this advertisement and are interested in the product.

It is often the case that the use of hedges violates the maxim of quality, while it still can achieve the desired effect of the advertisement, seeing that for advertisers, some of the information in the advertisement is true per se, but it is relatively superfluous and cumbersome for the consumer. Undoubtedly, in order to better appeal to consumers and meet the psychological needs of consumers, advertisers can fuzz redundant information by drawing upon pertinent hedges. Irrespective of the fact that advertising advertisements will violate the maxim of quality as a result of scanty evidence by using hedges, they can achieve the purpose of promoting products and enhancing persuasiveness.

The maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity requests that the information should be detailed to reach the purpose of the conversation, but should not exceed the information required. It is not a cushy task to make a large number of audiences believe in the advertising content, whereas the predilection for hedges can greatly strengthen the persuasiveness of product performance.

Example 1: Nearly 1 million companies listed, available in 16 languages, free registration. (WAND Global Trade Directory)

The expression in this advertisement purveys sufficient information and does not exceed the information required by the consumer, adhering to the maxim of quantity. Given that the advertiser does not use the word “nearly” but barely claims “1 million companies”, the customer may not have faith in this specific number. By adding the hedge “nearly”, the accuracy of information is exalted to the hilt, conducing to the advertising advertisement as accurate as possible while observing the maxim of quantity. At the same time, the advertisement is more vague and flexible consequently. Even if the actual number of companies is 800,000 or 900,000, customers will not blame on the advertisers, because the word “nearly” demonstrates more than 1 million or less than 1 million, offering a fuzzy range and also providing advertisers with a proper excuse.

The use of hedges while observing the quantity maxim is a tough challenge for advertisers. It is rather difficult to make the advertisements fuzzy and flexible, and to comprehensively represent the features of the goods, and to leave behind no redundant information meanwhile. Given the choice of selecting the most suitable and qualified hedges to be integrated into the advertisements, advertisers should take all these three facets into consideration, which can improve the credibility of the advertisements.

Example 2: A new hood, trunk, rear bumper and tailing lights are just some of the refinements to the 2013 Civic Sedan. (Honda 2013 Civic Sedan)

The above advertisement is a typical example of intentional violation of the maxim of quantity. Generally speaking, the advertiser should comprehensively describe the information or merits of the product as much as possible; accordingly, the consumer can resolve to choose or purchase their favorite products after obtaining abundant information. What are already supplied to consumers in this advertisement are the advantages of this product, including new hoods, trunks, rear bumpers and taillights. Needless to say, it is clear from the hedge “some” that not all the merits of the

merchandise are completely presented in the advertisement, so the information of the advertisement is insufficient, which obviously violates the maxim of quantity. However, consumers will also be allured by the word "some". Provided that consumers make up their mind to buy this car, there will be more highlights to be discovered, and they look forward to exploring the potential of the product.

In social communication, two approaches can be reckoned as the violation of the maxim of quantity: the first is that the information is not sufficient, and the second is that too much information is not proper. The use of hedges in commercial advertising inevitably violates the maxim of quantity. Although it will lead to incomplete information, it will leave consumers with imagination and more expectations. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on the products' characteristics and highlights in order to better achieve the effect of advertising.

The maxim of relevance

Advertisers need to design the advertisement tactfully that the information expressed should be relevant to the core content of the advertisement. For instance:

Example 1: Just like you, we care about how your kids feel. (Johnson skincare)

This advertisement complies with the maxim of relevance. The content of the advertising advertisement is closely connected with the principal features of the baby skin care product, and the advertiser attaches importance to the experience or feeling of the product user. By using the hedge "just", the advertiser interacts with the consumer to achieve the empathy effect, which is very helpful for the consumer to understand the characteristics of the product, and can also achieve the communicative effect through the advertisement.

The maxim of relevance is reflected in many advertisements. Based on it, advertisers can adopt the pertinent description closely linked with the product, so that consumers can directly obtain information about the product from the

advertisement. In addition, the rational use of hedges can help advertisers better connect ads to products and reflect their relevance.

Example 2: It is almost too good to be true, but it is. (Ford C-Max Hybrid)

This is an advertisement for Ford C-Max Hybrid, but no information about the product can be found from the advertisement. From the advertisement itself, what type of product is hard to understand, so this advertisement distinctly goes against the maxim of relevance. In reference to the maxim of relevance, for the purpose of ensuring that consumers have access to complete product information, the information provided by advertisers should be relevant to the topic and related to the product. In this advertisement, the use of the hedge "almost" means that the content is not directly related to the newly produced car. It is through irrelevant information that this exaggerated description is a special compliment to the product, so the advertiser chooses to violate the maxim of relevance to attract consumers.

In some cases, in order to make the advertisement novel and unique and attract consumers' attention, the advertiser will deliberately violate the maxim of relevance. Advertisers use advertisements that seem to have no direct relationship, allowing readers to connect ads with products through simple associations, inspiring readers' interest and curiosity, attracting consumers' attention and achieving the desired effect of good publicity.

The maxim of manner

The maxim of manner requires clearness and intelligibility of the utterance, shunning ambiguous and obscure words. Therefore, advertisers are required to expressly unfold the manifold information of the product to avoid ambiguity. The advertisement is usually concise and explicit, with salient purpose.

Example 1: The Nokia 8850, a very personal pleasure. (Nokia)

This is an advertising advertisement for a Nokia commodity. What it displays is that everyone

selecting the Nokia 8850 will be delighted. Instead of ambiguous words in the sentence, the use of the hedge “very” avoids the possibility of the consumer’s puzzlement and, to a certain extent, also exerts the effect of emphasis. Not only does it underline the product’s characteristics, but the advertisement also follows the maxim of manner to guarantee conciseness and clearness.

In order to clearly and directly convey the features and undisguised information of the products to the consumers, advertisers should pay attention to adherence to the maxim of manner, and choose the hedges while envisioning whether the meaning is blurred and ambiguous or not, whence consumers will clearly catch on the shining points of the products.

Example 2: CPU performance and graphics performance are up to twice as fast as on the A5 ship. (I Phone 5)

It is well-known that Apple’s advertising has always been eye-catching, and this advertisement about I Phone 5 is an advertisement for one generation of Apple phones. In order to highlight the improvement of the new mobile phone, advertisers choose to compare the new mobile phone with the old version. With a more advanced processor, the new phone appears in the advertisement by radically comparing the performance and showing the number “up to twice” to emphasize its superiority. However, advertisers add the hedge “up to “before the number “twice “to restrain from being too absolute, so what is inevitable is that vague information exists in the advertisement and the language is not concise either. According to the requirements of the maxim of manner, it should be as simple and orderly as possible to avoid ambiguity and vagueness. However, in this advertisement, the maxim of manner is extremely violated because it employs ambiguous expression, which provides the uncertain information, and the language is not concise either. At any rate, this deliberate violation is conducive to achieving the purpose of the advertising, attracting consumers while shunning the conflict caused by the uncompromising advertisement.

Sometimes advertisers also deliberately violate the maxim of manner, making use of some ambiguous, vague expressions to offer some uncertain information. But from the consumer’s point of view, the use of hedges can relatively circumvent the absolutization of language. Even better, the non-absolute description is beneficial to credibility, leaving a room for getting away from being blamed when it is questioned.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing the use of hedges in specific English commercial advertisements from the compliance and violation of the four maxims of the cooperative principle, we can find that advertisers need to combine various factors based on the purpose of the advertisement and the specific characteristics of the products. Coupled with rational use of hedges, flexible compliance or intentional violation of the cooperative principle all can realize its advertising purposes, underscoring products ‘characteristics, and achieving promotional results. This will not only reveal the traits of the product, but also leave room for advertising. Therefore, research and analysis of hedges in English commercial advertisements under the cooperative principle have certain practical significance. Only by analyzing the use of English commercial advertisements, understanding the pragmatic functions of hedges, and properly using hedges in advertisements, can advertisements be both pleasing and intriguing.

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