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ENGLISH FOR SALE:
A STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE OF ADVERTISING

Lars Hermeren, Lund University Press, 1999

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At a time when it is no longer clear that applied linguistics is simply linguistics applied (Widdowson 2000), Lars Hermeren's *English for Sale* is very much a case of good-old linguistics applied. The concepts and principles of linguistics, along with its allies rhetoric, psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, are called up to help us make sense of the verbal component of that most ubiquitous of modern linguistic genres, advertising. For many people, advertising copy is most of what they will read over the course of a year, a trend that will only increase as new media find new nooks and crannies to insert themselves into — or, new doors to get their feet into. We clearly need to understand more about how advertising works if we are to protect ourselves from its wiles and yet make use of the information it offers and moreover enjoy the creativity and playfulness of a genre that clearly attracts some of our most inventive wordsmiths.

The “we” who need this information is of course everybody, and that is who Hermeren's book is written for. An educated reader with no background in language study can easily make sense of the study, and yet that is not because the analysis is watered down. Nor need the reader have any particular axe to grind with advertising to enjoy the book. The author's tone throughout is critical but non-judgmental. He writes, for instance, that “advertisers normally make the strongest claim possible (they would be stupid if they did not!)” (p. 156). The social critic and the ad man will both find much to enjoy in this treatment, and indeed Hermeren has enjoyed the cooperation of several big agencies who have contributed more than 50 copyrighted reproductions.

The analytic tools of language study that the author brings to bear on advertising include these:

- genre analysis (Is advertising a genre in Swales 1990, sense?);
- the speech vs. writing distinction (Advertising is written language but with skilled use of punctuation simulates the intimacy of conversation);
- Gricean maxims (Advertising achieves its effects by systematically derailing our normal expectations about language);
- communications theory (Advertising is a one-to-many mode of communication, but advertisers find ways to simulate one-to-one interactivity);
- semantic theory (Proper names have “reference but no sense,” but advertisers effectively create a middle ground for their brand names);
- historical linguistics (Since English has lost most of its inflections, it is a treasure chest of puns for advertisers to help themselves to — “on lead, we lead”);
- rhetorical structure (People respond in predictable ways to certain discourse schemas, such as problem and solution — “your hair, our shampoo”);
- chunking theory (The psychologically real unit of language is the phrase, not the word or the sentence)...

You read this book, you go out into the world, and you see evidence of its insights on every pillar and post. You may not be convinced by all its arguments (the book relies more on quasi-literary interpretation than on empirical procedures to make its claims), but most readers will have a framework they did not have before for thinking about this most pervasive of discourse modes.

As an educator and student of language acquisition, I was particularly interested to see that advertisers rely on cognitive psychology and related learning theory for effective delivery of their messages. If I had previously assumed anything about psychology and advertising, it was that advertisers worked within a crude version of behaviorism in an effort to build links in male minds between expensive cars and attractive young women. But it turns out that, like everyone else, the advertisers have undergone the cognitive revolution and are no longer limited to such simple tricks. Advertisers deploy research showing that new information “is not just written into memory pure and simple but is substantially altered to fit pre-existing structures of knowledge” (p. 35); that people’s beliefs strongly influence their perceptions (p. 37); that people are more likely to remember a message if they have had to perform some physical activity in relation to it (p. 44), or some mental activity, such as double-taking a pun (“If you want your business to pick up, pick up the phone”, p. 136); that people remember implicit claims as having been explicit (“Get through the winter without a cold — take Eradicold”, p. 163, is remembered as “If you take Eradicold, then...”); that people are likely to assume that neologisms

("the drink that's being schnapped up by the millions," p. 137) betoken new concepts and hence new realities.

However, Hermeren often accepts too uncritically the relevance of experimental research that has never been tested in the domain of advertising. He relies on studies that were undertaken in the context of normal or educational messages to speculate about how advertising works, assuming that the findings must automatically apply to advertising messages in the same way. But people know when they are being advertised to and resist advertising messages to varying degrees, so that advertising communications cannot be assumed to follow the rules of normal communication. For example, the author speculates on the role of a riddle or quiz-question format to involve the reader:

The language of advertising provides us from time to time with questions in the form of riddles. Here is one:

What does an eclipse have in common with coffee beans?

This sounds like a game or a competition in which someone tests your knowledge by asking you questions for the purposes of entertainment, perhaps before an audience. In other words, the question looks very much like a quiz question. But it is not. It is the headline of an advertisement promoting a brand of Colombian coffee. That no answer is provided to the question in the headline is no accident. An intriguing question tempts the mystified reader to examine the advertisement for an answer. The fact that there is no answer results in the question sticking in the mind of the reader, as unresolved problems tend to do. What is more, the unexpected parallel between a natural phenomenon and the product might prompt the reader's imagination towards finding a personal answer to the quiz-like question in the headline, which in turn would lead to the reader being more actively engaged in the advertisement. (p. 63)

The author supports this reasoning with some findings from educational research (p. 67) showing that school children remember material better if they have answered questions about it. However, we do not see any specifically advertising research to support the claim. The consumer of coffee is not a school child, and is not trying to please a teacher, displease a teacher, gain the support of peers, or achieve any of the myriad other objectives of school children, so we cannot take it as given that the educational research will automatically apply here. Advertisers are free to assume that any language research will apply to advertising, but, then, they face their bottom line in a different way from the writer of a scholarly text. For me, the Colombian coffee citation positively bristles with assertions demanding empirical verification, not vague resemblances to some educational findings. Is an ad with a question in fact better remembered? Does a personal answer in fact engage the reader more actively?

As already mentioned, the book is a fine exercise in applying linguistics and in raising consciousness about how advertising language works, and nothing can take away from that. There is further work to be done on some of the explanations. But this is only to say that Hermeren's book is a catalogue of fascinating and principled but mainly unproven ideas about the language of advertising — a trove of dissertation ideas for generations of research students to come who want to forge links between life and linguistics.

References

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