What is useful about presupposition in advertisements and what does it reflect?

A sociolinguistic study of Hong Kong culture

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This paper investigates the functions of presupposition in advertising and the ways in which cultural aspects are reflected in advertising by examining how the Hong Kong culture is reflected in food advertisements. The paper states that presupposition is used in advertisements for three main purposes, namely i) implicit competition, ii) causing readers to consider the existence of a product or service, iii) and making the advertisement short and memorable. The paper argues that advertising reflects cultural aspects and suggests that understanding of cultural differences is essential in producing a successful advertisement.
1. Introduction

There are times when I have the feeling that advertisements are everywhere. Even if you do not go outdoors, you still see them in magazines, hear them on television, they are part of our lives, they influence our behavior and they reveal our cultural traditions and values.

With the development of technology, diversity of mass media and the growing market, advertisements have become increasingly common nowadays. The visual content of an advertisement may have a great influence on the readers, yet, it is usually the text that makes the readers identify a product or service, remember it and purchase and use it (Bolter, 2003). Text or language as an important part of any advertisement provides information about the product or service, and most importantly delivers messages. Advertisement as a general form of communication delivers messages to the public almost every single day.

An important aspect of any communication involves the presuppositions that are present (Sells and Gonzalez, 2002). Presupposition is a necessary precondition for the processing of any communication, and it is often found in advertisements to convey ideas indirectly rather than asserting them directly. The readers of advertisements may not be aware of presuppositions in advertisement, but, it is an important component of messages, as meaning only exists within the context of what is in the person’s mind that provides the meaning. For instance, an advertisement slogan taken from Geis (1982) goes, “What’s great about Chuck Wagon dog food?” Although what exactly is great about the product is left open, the statement still presupposes that there is something great about this brand of dog food. This paper explores the discourse of advertising from a linguistic as well as a socio-cultural perspective and investigates Hong Kong advertisements, focusing mainly on the following features: (1) the functions of presupposition in advertising; (2) the ways in which food advertisements in Hong Kong reflect traditions and values of Hong Kong culture.

2. Literature review

As to the importance and specialties of advertising language, much research has been carried out on the topic of presupposition and the employment of presupposition in advertising discourses.
2.1 Advertising, language and culture

Most definitions of advertisement focus on the function of advertisement as a public announcement, such as Harris and Seldon (1962) who describe an advertisement as “a public notice designed to spread information with a view to promoting the sales of marketable services”. Geis’ (1982) study not only focuses on the advertising language but also on how the public responds to a particular advertisement. He suggests that the use of different linguistic features might be misleading and that proper manipulation of these features is needed (Geis, 1982). Tanaka’s (1994) work discusses how the language of advertising is used to persuade the readers and it implies that advertising penetrates cultural insights. Sandage and Fryburger (1960: 149) suggest that “modern society emphasizes the right of every person to be employed. To achieve this high-level consumption is essential...This will require persuasion. This is the function of advertising”. Vestergaard and Schröder (1985) also maintain that persuasion lies in advertisement by the use of linguistic devices. They note that

“advertising doesn’t simply reflect the real world as we experience it; the world portrayed in advertisement is more on a day-dream level, which implies a dissatisfaction with the real world expressed through imaginary representations of the future as it might be a Utopia”.

Advertising is also related to culture: Pollay (1986: 18) describes advertising as a “distorted mirror” of cultural values, only reflecting certain lifestyles and values that serve sellers’ interests. Cultural values are “governing ideas and guiding principles for thought and action” (Srikandath, 1991: 166) that “permeate a culture” (Chan and Cheng, 2002: 388).

2.2 What is presupposition?

Presupposition is “an assumption by a speaker or writer about what is true or already known by the listener or reader” (Yule, 2007: 117). It deals with the necessary preconditions for statements to be true, such as an example from Gazdar (1979: 106), “John says that the king of France is bald”. The statement assumes as a necessity the truth of There is someone called John and There is a king of France. However,
presupposition can have a much broader function than that, because presuppositions allow us the freedom not to make everything explicit in our communications (Finch 2003). Presupposition is part of an utterance meaning which remains truthful when the sentence is transformed into a negative form. The presence of presupposition in a sentence can be identified by applying the “constancy under negation” test: “To check for the presupposition underlying sentences by the test involves negating a sentence with a particular presupposition and checking if the presupposition remains true” (Yule, 2007: 117). For instance, an example from Apple Computer: “I used to think it was my fault that Windows didn’t work properly” (Sells and Gonzalez, 2002). By using the “constancy under negation” test, I used to think it was my fault that Windows didn’t work properly and the negation version I used to think that it was not my fault that Windows didn’t work properly, the underlying presupposition Windows does not work properly remains constant.

Another example from (Nilsen, 1974: 418) is the sentence The King of Transylvania is a schmuck, and the negation version The King of Transylvania isn’t a schmuck, the underlying presupposition remains true. Both the sentence and its negation version still assume that there is a place called Transylvania, and that this is a kingdom, and that it has only one king, and that he is alive (Nilsen, 1974: 418). A further example is taken from Ford Motor advertisement in the US. The advertising slogan of Ford Motor is “Have you driven a Ford lately?” By using the “constancy under negation” test, Have you driven a Ford today and the negation version Have you not driven a Ford today, the statements still presuppose that you have to drive a Ford.

Presupposition is sometimes triggered by certain words, which are called presupposition triggers. They are factive verbs, such as regret and realize, which presuppose the truth of the complement clause. An example is taken from Levinson (1983: 179 – 180), “John regrets that he stopped doing linguistics before he left Cambridge”, this statement presupposes that there is someone called John, John stopped doing linguistics before he left Cambridge, John was doing linguistics before he left Cambridge, John left Cambridge and John has been at Cambridge. Non-factive words do not carry implicit presupposition, such as think and wish. Sentences like Andrew thinks that it is snowing and Andrew wishes that it is snowing, do not presuppose it is snowing.
3. Data and methods

In order to reveal the functions of presupposition and how certain cultural traditions and values can be expressed in the advertisement with the use of presupposition, a study of Hong Kong advertisements was conducted. Food advertisements from Hong Kong were analyzed in a detailed manner within a discourse analytic and cultural perspective as mentioned above. A total of eight TV advertisements from the discourse of food advertising were examined. The selection was made after watching all the Hong Kong TV food advertisements on youtube.com from 2004 to 2008, and considering whether presuppositions exist and whether they are fair representatives of the other advertisements available.

4. Discussion and analysis

4.1 Functions of presupposition

The main purpose of advertising is to “advance the sale of any particular product or service or to promote interests of any organization, commercial concern or individual” (Generic code). However, advertising is very common nowadays and competitors advertise too. The key of advertising is to emphasize why one product stands out in comparison with others. There are certain methods and ways to achieve this purpose, for instance, advertisement can be competitive and state how different and better one product is compared with other brands of the same products of the same type. Also, advertisement can be persuasive and promote some kinds of ideology that can relate to cultural values. Moreover, advertisements can state what is good about a product and service thus arouses the interest of the public.

However, according to the advertising regulation, comparisons should be clear and fair, meaning advertisers are not allowed to attack unfairly or discredit other businesses or their products (Consumer Council). Also, advertising can be persuasive “but not coercive” (A practical guide to advertising), meaning advertisement cannot force the public to do what they do not want to. Moreover, a lengthy advertisement illustrating the facts about one’s product and service may not attract the public. Instead, a lengthy advertisement might bore them. Therefore, in order to make an advertisement persuasive and comparative without breaking the regulations, as well as,
short but memorable, the language of advertising is important. The message of the advertisement has to be delivered clearly but implicitly, hence presupposition is often used for the ease of delivering messages. Presupposition is used for similar purposes all over the world; this paper will use Hong Kong food advertisements as an example to illustrate the purposes of presupposition.

4.11 Implicit competition

Presupposition is often employed in the discourse of advertising, and one important function of it is to make an advertisement comparative and most importantly, avoid breaking the law. An example of such use of presupposition is evident in this text from Maxims’ moon cake television commercial: “Give the best to the best”. The statement presupposes that Maxims’ moon cake is the best when compared to the other brands of the same product type. As required by the law, the advertisements cannot directly assert that their product is better than other brands of the same product types, so they presuppose the message. Regarding the Maxims text above, the advertisement cannot directly assert, “Maxims is better than Kee Wah”, otherwise Maxims would probably get into legal disputes. Therefore, the advertisement presupposing Maxims is better than other brands by simply stating it is the best without explicitly comparing it with others. Presupposition is used in this particular advertisement to indirectly compare Maxims with its competitors and to state that Maxims is the best, thus to persuade potential consumers to buy its products rather than those of its competitors.

4.12 Causing readers to consider the existence of the products or service

Presupposition is also used in advertisements in another function: it may cause “the reader to consider the existence of objects, propositions, and culturally defined behavioral properties” (Sells and Gonzalez, 2002). Such use of presupposition is found in the Yakult TV advertisement in Hong Kong. The famous quote in the Yakult advertisement is “Have you drunk today?” The statement presupposes that you drink or need Yakult every day, thereby bringing about the idea that the behavior of drinking Yakult is part of our culture. To bring out this idea, the advertisement cannot directly assert, “You have to drink Yakult everyday”, as there are restrictions by law. Therefore the advertisement presupposes instead of directly asserts that the behavior of drinking Yakult is part of our culture by stating: “Have you drunk today?” This particular Yakult advertisement illustrates that one important function of presupposition is to create and perpetuate a kind of ideology that the behavior of daily drinking Yakult is
part of everybody’s normal everyday practice and perhaps even of our culture. Thus the public should be persuaded to consume the product, and to increase its sale.

Apart from promoting the ideology that the behavior of using a particular product or service is part of our culture, presupposition may also cause readers to “consider the existence of objects” (Sells and Gonzalez, 2002). An example of such use of presupposition is evident in an advertisement from 7-11 convenience stores in Hong Kong. The advertisement slogan is “Where is your 7-11?” This statement presupposes that you have a 7-11 somewhere in your neighborhood and that everyone has his or her own 7-11 shop. The aim of this advertisement is to make the readers consider and realize the presence due to many 7-11 shops in Hong Kong. There are so many branches that everybody has one of their own. This presupposition helps building up a connection and relationship between the brand and the public, emphasizing the commonness of 7-11 stores in Hong Kong. Thus, it portrays the shop as being so close to the public that it is “yours”, so that people would visit it every day. Hence, the advertisement persuades the readers to go to their 7-11 shops.

4.13 Making the advertisement short and memorable

A further function of applying presupposition in advertisements is to make sure an advertisement delivers the message in a short and memorable way. By using presupposition, information can be shared between the reader and advertiser without explanation or a need for convincing (Nilsen, 1974). One example of such use of presupposition in advertisement is taken from the CALCI-PLUS Soya Collagen television commercial in Hong Kong, “More than just calcium”. Instead of making a long statement listing what exactly is in the soya drink, like “CALCI-PLUS is a calcium enriched healthy soya drink with 0% cholesterol, lactose-free, low fat low sugar and…” The statement presupposes that the soya drink contains different quality health elements, though what exactly is left open for the audience to think about and to find out by buying the product. Presupposition also helps to shorten the message that CALCI-PLUS is nutritional. However, listing all the nutrients would be lengthy and dull, therefore, in order to deliver the message presupposition is used.

4.2 Hong Kong cultural traditions and values reflected in food advertisements

Apart from being an aid to marketing and selling goods, advertising is also a carrier of cultural values, a form of social and cultural communication (Pollay, 1986). Cultural
traditions can be revealed in an advertisement through the use of presupposition, examples of such TV advertisements are taken from the Danish cookie brand Kjeldsens and the Hong Kong local brand Saint Honore’s. Both advertisements are launched during the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2008. In the Kjeldsens TV advertisement, the slogan is “Want to make people happy? Send Kjeldsens as a gift!” The statement presupposes that sending Kjeldsens as a gift will make people happy. In the Saint Honore’s moon cake Television Commercial, the Saint Honore’s moon cake is a form of happiness. Both advertisements relate their products to happiness in order to persuade people to purchase them.

Apart from presupposing that these products can make people happy, there is also a common implicit presupposition underlying the two advertisements. This presupposition is indicated by the word “send”, both television commercials presuppose the action of “sending”. The implicit presupposition reveals that there is a cultural practice of sending a gift to relatives and friends during Chinese festivals in Hong Kong. Advertisers make use of this cultural tradition of gift-giving to promote their products and boost selling of their goods. Moreover, this particular type of advertisement is not shown all year round on the television. It is only launched in time to capture the gift-giving market during the Chinese festivals, such as the Chinese New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival. Indeed, gift giving is important in the Hong Kong culture, because of the significance of interpersonal relationships in the culture (James, 1995). For the Mid-Autumn Festival in particular, this is the day for reunion, people would sit down with family and friends to celebrate and watch the full moon together. Thus, giving moon cakes or food to each other is a tradition to enhance interpersonal relationships during the festival. The above advertisements illustrate that presupposition not only functions to promote sales, but may also reveal cultural traditions and practices.

Cultural values are “governing ideas and guiding principles for thought and action” (Srikandath, 1991: 166) that “permeate a culture” (Chan and Cheng, 2002: 388). As cultural values are the governing ideas and guiding principles for action, some commercials advertise based on the cultural values. For instance, it is part of our cultural values that having a slender figure is the ideal that people should strive for. Cultural values may thus lead us to further action, and people would consider purchasing products that claimed to bring about slimming effects. Advertising as a “distorted mirror of cultural values, only reflecting certain lifestyles and values that serve sellers’ interests” (Pollay, 1986: 18). Therefore, advertisers often make use of cultural values and embed them in the advertisement to guide people to purchase their
goods. Thus, cultural values could also be revealed in commercials. Examples of such advertisements are taken from Quaker and Carnation’s television commercials in Hong Kong. Quaker in Hong Kong has the slogan is “Quaker everyday to keep soul and body fit”. The slogan presupposes that Quaker makes people fit and healthy. Another advertisement is taken from Carnation in Hong Kong which states that “Keep fit and Carnation side by side”. This statement presupposes consuming Carnation brings about fitness and health. Both slogans presuppose that the products make people healthy. There is also another common implicit presupposition underlying the two commercials which assumes that people in Hong Kong are concerned about their health. Therefore, health and fitness are used as a major selling point of the products. This reflects that health is important to Hong Kong people and it is part of the cultural values of Hong Kong nowadays.

5. Conclusion

Advertising is primarily persuasive in nature. It aims at getting the public to respond and to buy the advertised product. At times, advertising seeks to achieve an impact by appealing to the public’s interest. The messages delivered by various advertisements might be different but they often use presupposition. Presupposition is a crucial part of the discourse of advertising for different strategic reasons: some use it to attack other brands of the same product types, some persuade the public to consume their products by shaping attitudes and lifestyles, and others shorten their messages and grab the audience’s attention. Apart from delivering messages to us every day, advertisements also reveal cultural traditions and values. Very often, advertisers make use of the cultural traditions and values and embed them in commercials to promote sales. Cultural traditions and values are seldom brought up explicitly but presupposed in the advertisements. However, not everyone can respond to such advertising message that are congruent with their cultures, as readers grow up in different cultures and become accustomed to different culture’s value systems. In order to produce successful advertising, advertisers have to understand cultural differences and tailor them to reflect their values (Zhang and Gelb, 1996). Presupposition is multi-functional in commercials and is perhaps one of the most important functions as it ensures effective communication between the public and the advertisers.
References and acknowledgements


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Assess to advertisement

CALCI-PLUS Retrieved on 18 January 2009 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjRFsKW2vxA


