Lexical Ambiguity in Ads

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ABSTRACT

Advertising language, together with other types of language, such as journalism or religious oratory, can be classified under the heading of «discourse of persuasion». This characteristic will permit us to distinguish them sharply from ordinary conversation. Nevertheless, because of its very specific aim in wanting to change the consumer's mind and attitude towards the product on offer, advertising can be regarded as a separate member within the category of discourse of persuasion. Advertisers use various methods to achieve this goal, but the one I want to concentrate on is lexical ambiguity. This type of ambiguity depends on the several possible readings of a single word. In the paper I explore two mechanisms used to activate or inhibit them, namely *semantic priming and garden-path.* These enhancers and inhibitors of meaning are studied within the psycholinguistic framework of scripts.

1. PERSUASIVE DISCOURSE

Advertising language often looks and sounds like ordinary, natural conversation; this is, nevertheless, a disguise that it chooses in order to hide its purpose.

Most advertising language comes under the heading of «loaded language», that is, it aims to change the will, opinions or attitudes of its audience

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(whether in the interests of the audience or not is a separate matter). It is precisely this feature that will permit us to draw the distinction between persuasive discourse and ordinary conversation, which can be said to be based on the following characteristics:

i) *Deliberateness*: ordinary conversation is conventionally spontaneous. We distrust it if we have reason to suspect that any of the participants is working from a script or has planned it significantly in advance. But the language used in advertising is not supposed to be spontaneous, it responds to careful planning that is usually the result of weeks or even months of intense work.

ii) Another characteristic of persuasive discourse is *novelty*. This is manifested on the lexical level, in the form of slogans and neologisms; syntactically and semantically, in that new concepts are continually being introduced and talked about; and pragmatically, in the way in which persuasive discourse addresses hearers, its register, its directness or indirectness, and many other factors.

iii) But perhaps most important of all is *unidirectionality*. Ordinary conversation, for example, is normally fully reciprocal: any participant has the same conversational options as any others, and if one can ask a question and expect an answer, so can the others.

This is not the case, however, in persuasive discourse, where one participant selects the topics, does most or all of the speaking, and determines the start and finish of the discourse. At the other end there is not an addressee, but rather an audience. The audience is a hearer or group of hearers that do not take the active role of speaker. The role of an audience is much more passive than that of an addressee. This is why the relationship that holds between speaker and audience in persuasive discourse is termed by Fairclough (1991) as a «power relation».

It can be argued that the audience for commercials also exert their own power, since they can decide whether to buy the sponsor's product or not. Still, while this may in some general sense be power, we can distinguish it from within the discourse; that is, from the power to motivate the discourse in a certain direction and to begin or terminate it explicitly.

Up to this point I have pointed out the differences between ordinary conversation and persuasive discourse. However, this does not imply that the registers that can be classified as «persuasive» all share the same features. In fact, advertising, which is our main concern in this paper, differs from other types of loaded language (such as political journalism and religious oratory) in having a very precise material goal.

Changing the mental disposition of the audience is only important in so far as it leads to the desired kind of behavior-buying a particular kind of product, and in normal competitive conditions this means buying brand A rat-

her than equivalent brands B, C or D. The goal could scarcely be more specific.

Time has wrought many changes in the language of advertising-partly necessitated by the requirement of novelty, but also in part by the increasing sophistication of the consumer and the need to present products as reasonable ones to purchase.

If we take this quest for novelty to be an intrinsic aim of advertising, we can perhaps understand better why advertisers cling to certain formulas. One of them is the use of ambiguity. How to deal with it and how to control it is what will be shown in what follows.

2. THE USE OF AMBIGUITY

The advertiser must quickly claim the fleeting attention of the reader who may already be disappearing over the horizon of the following page. To influence people you have never met, to convince them to do what you want them to do requires «magic», and writers of advertising copy for print media use the magic of language to capture interest, to influence and to motivate readers to buy their goods and services.

This is especially true for brief linguistic encounters, as the quickly passing pages of a magazine rarely allow for lengthy dwelling on a given page or point.

The advertiser must not only quickly call attention to his product, but also establish some positive affiliation with or affinity to it. How to achieve this is obviously one of the headaches of an extremely large advertising industry, and apparently, one of the methods that has been successfully settled upon is the practice of ambiguity in advertising lay-outs.

The ambiguities employed in advertising are usually pleasantly humorous, with one reading also typically suggesting the product or its virtues. The obvious goal of such conscious productive pleasantries is to have the reader identify with the product in some positive fashion.

The use of this gambit automatically puts the reader into an assumed relationship of solidarity with the advertiser, thus making him more apt to be influenced by the message of the advertisement.

Ambiguity draws the reader into a situation where the two meanings are possible, where both interpretations are meant to be immediately obvious. It can be triggered off either by non-linguistic means, namely pragmatic information, or by linguistic ones.

I will focus on the latter, which are responsible for the dichotomy of structural versus lexical ambiguity. According to Marcus (1980: 26), they are defined as follows: «An ambiguity is structural when two different structures can be built up out of smaller constituents of the same given structure and

type; an ambiguity is lexical when one word can serve as various parts of speech.»

The following sentence

(1) He ran the race for London.

has two distinct interpretations, according to whether the verb run is taken to mean «to take part in (a race)» or to denote «to be in charge of the organisation». This case illustrates lexical ambiguity.

On the other hand, the example

(2) He hit the woman with a stick.

can be interpreted in two different ways depending not on the meaning of the constituent words but on how they are grouped. Thus, one possible grouping for the Prepositional Phrase is to be embedded in the larger constituent «the woman». Substitution by a pronoun would give as a result:

(3) He hit her.

An alternative ordering would yield a verb with two complements, one indicating the object, the other the instrument. The scope of the pronominal is smaller this time, as replacement shows:

(4) He hit her with a stick.

Ambiguities in advertising, however, are primarily lexical in nature, probably because this category is the most accessible to the reader. It depends on homonymy and polysemy.

At the beginning of this section I referred to the use of ambiguity as *magic*. In fact, this compares perfectly to a magic show, because just as the magician uses some tricks in his performances, so does the advertiser who creates a slogan. It will be argued that among his main devices there are *priming and garden-path* phenomena. The point will be made clear in a moment.

3. ACTIVATION AND INHIBITION OF AMBIGUITY

Although in the daily use of language there is a high percentage of ambiguous words and structures, speakers are not conscious of them. To a large extent, this is due to the fact that the context is such that it does away with irrelevant or impossible readings of an ambiguous word.

As I have already pointed out, this situation is turned upside down in advertising. In this domain, ambiguity sets the rules of the game, picking up an

ambiguous word around which all the other items in the sentence will move. But the question is: how is ambiguity brought about onto the stage? Which are the tricks handled by copywriters?

Meyer and Schvaneveldt (1971) were the first to study in detail the effect of the lexical context in the identification of words. In spite of the fact that their findings were widely argued about in the 80's, they did really shed some light on the relation that exists between the words of a given context. As a consequence the concept of *semantic priming* was put forward.

Roughly speaking, semantic priming is based on the belief that the presence of a word in a sentence influences the meaning of another that appears later on in the same sentence, and with which it has a semantic-associative relation.

In their experiments, Meyer & Schvaneveldt used pairs of words such as «doctor-nurse, rat-cheese». The underlying idea is that when «doctor» is presented, its conceptual representation is activated. Shortly afterwards, the word «nurse» comes in. Since «doctor» and «nurse» share many of the same conceptual nodes, part of the conceptual representation of «nurse» will have been partially activated by «doctor». As a result, the cognitive system will be faster at retrieving a conceptual representation for «nurse».

In other words, the lexical context will determine, or to use a more technical term, will *activate,* other possible meanings of the word.

Thus, priming is the result of the precedence relation that holds among the words of a sentence. But this only explains one of the two mechanisms previously referred to.

Garden-path effects have traditionally been associated with a different type of linguistic ambiguity, that is, with structural ambiguity. Marcus (1980: 202) explains that can be found in «sentences which have perfectly acceptable syntactic structures, yet which many readers initially attempt to analyze as some sort of construction, i.e. sentences which lead the reader "down the garden-path"».

The often quoted example to exemplify it is the one taken from Bever (1970):

(5) The horse raced past the barn fell.

It seems that initially the human parsers systematically fail in the analysis, splitting up the string into an NP «the horse», and a VP «raced past the barn». Only when the reader comes to «fell» does he realise that the assigned structure is erroneous. This second time, he includes «the horse» and «raced past the barn» in the NP, whereas «fell» on its own forms the VP. The trick is that «raced» does not function as the lexical verb in the past tense, but its nature is that of a past participle.

Nevertheless, I will take the garden-path effect in a wider sense, and will apply it to the object of study: lexical ambiguity. Garden-path comes, thus, as

the opposite side of the coin or what is the same, as the counter-mechanism of priming. If the latter is related to what comes first, garden-path is linked to what comes last.

And so once the reader has made his interpretation and has established some associations, the presence of a last word will make him alter the whole scheme. In fact, it is not necessarily the last word the one responsible for this change, the only necessary condition is that it comes after the word that will undergo a new interpretation.

I have entitled this part of the paper activation and inhibition because not only semantic priming, but also the garden-path device conform to both characteristics. On the one hand they may activate a new meaning in an ambiguous word of a given sentence, on the other they may work in such a way that the new interpretation prevails over the reading we had thought of when we first read the word.

In the last instance mentioned these phenomena function as disambiguating devices.

In order to understand how these devices work in human sentence comprehension, it is advisable to look for a psychological theory that accounts for them. As it happens, psychologists have always shown a great interest in the puzzle-solving activity that takes place in the reader's brain when he processes the various interpretations of an ambiguous sentence.

This is what we will consider in what follows.

4. A PSYCHOLOGICAL MODEL OF COMPREHENSION

It is a well-admitted fact that the reader's degree of comprehension of a given topic largely depends on the information concerning it that the subject has already stored in his mind.

Given this, the question we must ask is: how does previous knowledge exert its influence? A possible answer has it that our knowledge is organised in *scripts.*

A script can be defined as an abstract knowledge structure in which the integral concepts are related to one another, together with a specification of the different functions that they can fulfil.

If the reader is able to activate any of such scripts, either because a title or any other kind of additional and pertinent information is provided, comprehension is made easier.

Despite all this, the possession of a relevant script is not a sufficient condition to ensure comprehension. It is also necessary that this script be activated during the comprehension process. To put it somewhat paradoxically, it is necessary that the reader realises that a given script is relevant; this to a certain extent implies that comprehension is only possible when the subject has understood what it is all about.

This is in a very simplified way what has been called the «script conception of memory».

Sanford & Garrod (1981), Rumelhart & Ortony (1977), Schank & Abelson (1977), to quote simply some theorists, are among those who defend this approach. They believe that as soon as the text suggests a given script, by means for instance of a partial description, it will be activated as a whole.

Within this general context, processing can be defined as follows: «for any input, look for the data's structure (script) with which it has the strongest relationship, in such a way that what comes next is interpreted from this point of view, until a new structure is required».

This quest for the appropriate script and its ultimate identification is effected as soon as possible, which really means immediately. The script will remain activated in the reader's memory as long as there is no change of focus.

Once the theory has been explained, the next step is to see how it behaves in practice. To do that I have chosen several advertisements that have appeared in British magazines in the period 1990-1992. The definitions of the ambiguous words have been taken from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.*

5. THE THEORY PUT INTO PRACTICE

5.1. *Semantic Priming*

I have already mentioned that this device is used to activate meanings in a word. Let's take the following advertising slogan:

(6) «As lunch approached it wasn't just me that was browning nicely...» ‹CookElectric› *Marie Claire,* Dec. 1991.

The activated word is *browning* and the activators are *lunch* and *me* respectively. Each of these words provokes in the verb a different reading, both equally possible. *Lunch* activates the sense of «cooking», whereas me links it to «to get a tan». There is a comparison between browning by the sun and browning when cooking.

Something similar happens in our next example:

(7) We have over 9 million investors. That's a lot of trust to live up to. ‹Unit Trust of India› *The Economist,* 4th May 1991.

Again, there is a word, *trust,* with double reading due to, on the one hand, 9 *million,* and on the other, *investors.* The figure is responsible for re-

ading *trust* as «a property or sum of money held and controlled by someone or a group of people for the advantage of someone else». But at the same time the presence of *investors* activates the option of «firm belief in the honesty, good news, worth, justice, power, etc.».

The next example is slightly different from those above. The difference lies in the fact that there is an element that approaches metaphor. Let's go into it:

(8) I'm a mum, a wife, a niece and a sister.
This Christmas they'll think I'm an angel. ‹Interflora› *Marie Claire,* Dec. 1991.

The ambiguous word here is *angel,* and the possible meanings attributed to it are:

i) A messenger and servant of God, usually represented as a person with large wings and dressed in white clothes.
ii) A person, especially a woman, who is very kind, good, beautiful, etc.

Obviously, the person this slogan refers to is clearly a woman. She tells us about the various roles she performs in daily life, all of them belonging to family relations. All these words taken as a whole invite us to choose the meaning of *angel* we considered in second place.

But how is it that we can maintain that the first meaning is somehow present in the word *angel?* Its activation is made possible thanks to the word *Christmas.* During this period of the year we commemorate Jesus' birth, an event that was proclaimed by angels (in the first sense of the word) and that is thus associated to good news. Going back to our metaphor, the protagonist of the slogan becomes also an angel in this sense, she becomes the messenger of whatever good news tend to be associated with a bouquet of flowers.

Other slogans present a repetition of the ambiguous word, in each occasion with a different reading brought about by the preceding terms.

(9) Love may hurt. Making love shouldn't. ‹Johnson & Johnson› *Marie Claire,* March 1992.
(10) Night must fall. Your standards of customer service don't have to. ‹Siemens. Nixdorf› *The Economist,* 14th March 1992.
(11) Wherever your business takes you, the Gulfstream IV can take you there. ‹Gulfstream Aerospace› *The Economist,* 19th Oct. 1991.

The first two examples present a case of deletion, that is, the verbal lexical item has been omitted, although we know which place it should be in and so the meaning is latent. But it changes from its first occurrence to the second.

Love imposes upon *hurt* a figurative meaning, i.e. «to cause pain to the feelings of a person». But *making love* reduces the verb to its physical sense: «to cause pain to a part of the body».

In the case of fall the argument goes as follows: *night* generates the interpretation of «to come or happen, as if by descending»; whereas *standards of customer service* implies that the meaning of fall is «to become lower in level, degree or quantity».

What about the third example? In this sentence there is no deletion, both items are realised; but ambiguity is enacted by *take* due to its first subject *your business* which implies the meaning of «need», and its second subject *Gulfstream IV* that, being a carrier, accounts for the reading of take as «carry from one place to another».

Finally, priming can also work as inhibitor of meaning. In this case the presence of a previous word would activate a not so common reading of the word in question, and in doing so suppresses the most usual reading altogether.

The examples are these:

(12) A mild perfume. With a shattering effect. ‹Sfera› *Marie Claire,* Nov. 1990.

(13) Cocoa butter and cream. It's hardly surprising your skin feels delicious. ‹Pond's› *Company, August 1991.*

(14) Northern Telecom helps shift billions of dollars a day.
But we also help if it's peanuts. ‹Northern Telecom› *The Economist,* 9th March 1991.

Here the thing is that words such as *perfume, skin* and *dollars* guide the interpretation of *shattering, delicious* and *peanuts* in a very strict sense according to the context, namely: «psychological effect», «pleasing and delightful» and «a sum of money so small that it is not worth considering».

We'll turn now to garden-path analysis.

5.2. *Garden-path*

As already explained, this phenomenon consists of a new interpretation of a word enhanced by the presence of another word that follows it.

Usually this mechanism does not generate ambiguity; that is, it will be often impossible to stick to both readings. How is it then that we classify it within ambiguity?

The psycholinguistic framework of the scripts presented above maintains that the receiver of a message builds up a mental script of comprehension as soon as the elements of the sequence allow him to do so. But sometimes he gets under the wrong track. This is what we have called garden-path.

In this study I try to explain my point of view on this phenomenon, taking into account the lexical context. That is, the reader will activate a mental script that will lead him to a certain interpretation, but at a given point in the sentence he will come across a word that will make him go backwards and change the interpretation.

This is why I think that the word is ambiguous, since the first reading is rejected in favour of the second, more suitable one.

Let's see how it works with examples:

(15) Face the world.
Time waits for no man (but it can for a woman). ‹N.º 7› *Marie Claire,* March 1992.

The reader immediately relates this sentence with the well-known English expression «Time and tide wait for no man», where *man* is understood as «mankind». The same would happen here because of association on the one hand, and contextual information on the other: *man* without article is taken in a general sense. However, the presence of *woman* is so significative that reduces *man* to its opposite, that is, «male» against «female». And as it happens it is only on this last reading that the advertisement focus.

Something similar happens in:

(16) How do people find life in London docklands?
They step out of their front door. ‹London Docklands› *The Economist,* 26th May 1990.

The first reading of *find* has to do with *think*; it could replace it without change of meaning. This is the most usual one and is supported by the reader's background knowledge on the controversy that brought about the refurbishing of this part of London.

But the presence of *step out* bars this possibility, indicating that *find* should be read as «discover by searching». We have been teased and proved to have reached too far in our interpretation.

Another example:

(17) Good taste is the most important ingredient. ‹Heineken› *The Economist,* 16th June 1990.

In a general sense, *taste* would mean «ability to choose and use the best manners, behaviour, fashions, etc.». But as *ingredient* appears later in the sequence there is no other alternative than the restriction of its meaning to «the sensation that is produced when food or drink is put in the mouth and that makes it different from other foods or drinks by its saltiness, sweetness, bitterness, etc.».

The same argument holds good for:

(18) If it's noisy in a Peugeot 106 turn the volume down. ‹Peugeot› *Marie Claire*, May 1992.
(19) The Italians judged Dante to be their finest olive oil.
Now you can judge it for yourself. ‹Dante› *Marie Claire*, May 1990.

Again we are pushed into an interpretation that in the case of *noisy car* refers to the noise made by the car engine, and which comes as a rather upsetting quality for the passengers. The word *volume*, however, makes us realise that *noisy* has nothing to do with that, but, rather on the contrary as Napoleon once pointed out, with «the least disturbing of noises», that is, music.

In the second example, if asked about Dante, we would be quick to answer that he is one of the finest Italian poets. Taking advantage of this world-wide fame, certain producers have decided to consider this name as a brand name to manufacture olive oil; another well-known ingredient of Italian culture.

Leaving aside the importance of the knowledge of the world or the state of affairs that we all have stored in our minds, and that, as it has just been proved, advertisers skilfully use to tease our brains, we cannot forget that in many occasions priming works hand in glove with garden-path to elicit ambiguity.

5.3. *Semantic priming and garden-path*

A high number of slogans contain priming and garden-path devices at the same time. It is in these sentences that the garden-path effect sometimes shows its lenient nature, and far from imposing a single reading upon the ambiguous word allows its two meanings to coexist.

Let's move on to the practical demonstration:

(20) «Why reserve upper deck for intercontinental Business Class?»
«To offer the highest standards in every sense». ‹KLM› *The Economist*, 14th Dec. 1991.

The ambiguous word we focus on is *highest*, it is influenced by the effect of priming *by upper deck* meaning «at a point above the ground»; but at the same time the word *standards* implements it with the meaning of «above the usual level».

(21) Cool wool helps you stay cool. However warm your feelings may be. ‹Cool Wool› *Marie Claire*, May 1990.

The constituent cool *wool* causes *cool* to be read as «helping to keep one from feeling too warm». But *your feelings* makes us think of *cool* as «calm, unexcited». This last interpretation is supported by a picture presenting a young couple in a very romantic attitude.

Nevertheless, in spite of the peaceful coexistence of several possible meanings, the garden-path effect is usually to blame for the one-way interpretation that it places on ambiguous words.

The example that follows is a lovely illustration of the matter under discussion, this is why, in spite of being out of the scope of this survey, primarily concerned with the period 1990-1992, I've permitted myself the liberty of including it here.

(22) Before your pressing engagement we've arranged one for your suit. ‹Intercontinental Hotels› The Economist, 24th June 1989.

First of all, *engagement* is modified by the adjective *pressing* meaning «demanding or needing attention, action, etc. now». However, the pro-form one is in place of the whole constituent, that is, the NP *pressing engagement* expanded as AdjP+N, and that is connected to the word suit which, by means of the garden-path device, provokes the interpretation of *pressing* as «ironing».

Or again in this other headline:

(23) In nature moisturiser comes free.
With Sensiq at least you get a discount. ‹Sensiq› *Marie Claire,* April 1991.

Nature influences *free* triggering off its interpretation as «not combined with any type of matter; pure». But the word *discount* implies «without payment of any kind; costing nothing». Only the last reading is compatible with the purpose of this commercial, because these manufacturers want the consumers to take for granted the natural quality of their product.

(24) Water shares available still.
Or carbonated. ‹Brecon Carreg› *Marie Claire,* Oct. 1990.

This is a case in point, since the presence of *carbonated* imposes on *still* the reading of «not containing gas», doing away with the priming effect caused by *water shares,* under which it would be understood as «at this moment». But if this were not enough, *carbonated* elicits a new reading of *water shares* turning it into a synonym of *water sheds*; i.e., «the high land separating two river systems, from which each has its origin in many little streams».

The brand of the advertised product can also be the reason for the garden-path reading; as it happens in our last example:

(25) To relieve stress, take a luxury cruise. ‹Chrysler› *The Economist,* 5th Dec. 1992.

Stress opens up the possibility of *cruise* as «a sea voyage for pleasure». But being Chrysler a car manufacturer, it takes the more down-to-earth meaning of «driving for pleasure».

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, we have seen that the short span of consumer time spent in browsing through contemporary magazines requires that attention-getting devices be employed to forcibly grab the reader's interest.

One way of doing this is by adopting a specific language style; among the many possible ones I have explored the use of ambiguity. Like true magic, it is in the power of illusion or allusion that the artistry rests. Lexical ambiguity is thus based mainly on semantic priming and garden-path phenomena, which contribute to establish a participant cooperation with the reader.

There is also an element of brain-teasing arousal with the ambiguity that keeps the reader's benevolent attention, at the same time that it is designed to enhance his positive appreciation of the product by association.

Advertising seems to be one of the few consciously productive uses of ambiguity in natural languages. We have seen how the ambiguous term is manipulated by the words it is in contact with, sometimes opening up new meanings, others retrieving them. Readers are actively solicited to participate in the multiple-reading interpretation of ambiguity, or in its inhibition.

The challenge inherent in solving these lexical puzzles is powerful enough for readers to react in the desired way- otherwise, advertisers, all too aware of success/failure ratios in the highly competitive world we live in, would certainly have given up this particular magic show long ago.

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