
PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION: A PRAGMATICAL APPROACH TO ADVERTISING

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Abstract: Throughout history, scientists have tried to delve into the explanation of the communicative act from several perspectives and disciplines, such as rhetoric, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, etc. It seems clear that the elucidation of how communication in general - and persuasive communication in particular - works is an arduous task. This is the reason why, based on the existence of the so called “universals of communication” that determine our attitude towards the message, we will try to unravel in this paper the mechanisms of persuasion which are put into practice in marketing and advertising. It is undeniable that, if we knew the mechanisms used by advertisers, we would be able to better understand the complex framework behind each commercial and, therefore, we would be able to freely decide if we want to be deceived by the messages hidden in the campaigns. In addition, it is essential to identify the mechanisms of persuasion that are set in motion through images, colors, words, etc., in order to take advantage of them and apply them to our interactions in case we need to; therefore, we will succinctly analyze in this paper what persuasive communication is and how it applies in advertising. Being the field of marketing and advertising one of the biggest and most influential industries that make our world go round nowadays, it is evident that everyone is bombarded on a daily basis with commercials that try to reach their targets and this is exactly the reason why advertising is a fascinating field of study, not only for us as native speakers but also for those who study a foreign language and are, somehow, in touch with this specific sort of language. Moreover, we, as teachers, should remember that mastering a language does not consist only in building grammatically correct sentences, not even in mastering its lexicon or its phonetics; sentences entail a semantic content, nevertheless their proper meaning and their appropriate interpretation do not merely depend on their semantic content but also require a clearly defined linguistic and extralinguistic context to be fully understood. So important it is to us as native speakers of a language to utterly and properly comprehend the whole meaning of the messages that we encounter and to be able to communicate exactly what we want by developing our competence as to not deny the vital need of those who study a foreign language to also develop their linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences. We offer in this article a complete analysis of an advertisement in press in order to illustrate the importance of entirely understanding advertising and knowing the mechanisms of persuasive communication.

Keywords: persuasive communication, universals of communication, advertising.

1. INTRODUCTION

The French journalist Robert Guérin stated: “l’air est un composé d’oxygène, d’azote et de publicité”. We clearly live besieged by advertisements; everyone is bombarded on a daily basis with commercials and both chief marketing officers and mass media directors are aware of the need to reach their target consumers in our increasingly mediated and globalized world. It is clear that advertisers have complete command of what their objectives are and how to reach them. However, both the sender and the receiver of this type of messages must know how to identify the mechanisms of persuasion set in motion in advertising since being able to recognize the strategies used by advertisers, the customers would be able to better understand the complex framework behind each commercial and, therefore, they would be able to freely decide if they want to be deceived by the messages hidden in the campaigns.

Moreover, mastering a language is not only being able to build grammatically correct sentences but also being able to decide the most appropriate way of communicating a message or to determine the utter meaning of a sentence in a given context.

2. THE “UNIVERSALS OF COMMUNICATION”

The best known model for understanding the structure of the brain in relation to its evolutionary history is probably the triune brain theory developed by Paul MacLean, whose original model distinguished three different brains that appeared successively during evolution:

1. *The reptilian* brain is the oldest of the three; it controls the body's vital functions such as heart rate, breathing, body temperature and balance.

2. *The limbic brain* emerged in the first mammals. It can record memories of behaviors that produced agreeable and disagreeable experiences, so it is responsible for what are called emotions in human beings.

3. *The neocortex* first assumed importance in primates and culminated in the human brain. Its two hemispheres are responsible for the development of human language, abstract thought, imagination, and consciousness.

These three parts of the brain do not operate independently and there are numerous interconnections through which they influence one another [1].

MacLean among other authors maintains that, due to the existence of the reptilian brain, there are several behaviors that are shared, common. In this sense, we can say that human being has a natural tendency to obsessive and routine conducts, such as always taking the same path to work. Therefore, there is a certain predictability which is common to the human being.

In the same way, we can state that there is a set of active and passive communicative signs that are shared; we use the same signs to express the same feelings, we perceive them in the same way and we have the same behavioral response to certain stimuli.

Javier de Santiago Guervós [2] enumerates the common ideas which are innate to the human being and that we will analyze in depth in following articles. These ideas are the fear of unknown, the slavery of (self-) image, the will to avoid communicative dissonance, the need for reciprocity, the tendency to gregariousness, the predictability, the submission to the authority of the sender, the channel and the code. However, there is also a set of universal and social guidelines that we are accustomed to follow, such as stereotypes or clichés that we associate to different concepts.

3. WHAT IS ADVERTISING?

The Spanish writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna stated: “De una bella espalda descotada salió la televisión”. The industries of marketing and advertising have certainly taken full advantage of this ‘low-cut back’ that gave birth to television, turning insinuation into a subtle and complex art.

The origins of advertising date back to antiquity. There is proof that Babylonian merchants used to hire heralds, men with a clear and powerful voice, to advertise their products more than 3,000 years ago; Greeks employed criers who, accompanied by musicians, announced the arrival of shipments of goods such as metals, wine and spices while in Ancient Rome one of the first advertising methods consisted on writing announcements on the walls. These graffiti were done, either in order to spread political propaganda (just like the coins picturing the emperor’s face which were minted for the people to be able to recognize him or the minted coins picturing the process of casting, as it is illustrated on a coin of P. Licinius Nerva of the late second century B.C.) or as a way to advertise taverns or stalls. Similarly, thousands of electoral messages as well as signs announcing competitions and cultural activities have been found scrawled on the walls in the facades of city blocks in Pompeii [3].

Briefly explained, although advertising is not a discovery of the contemporary world, it has been in the last decades when advertising has taken the reins of the society of consumerism. Already in the eighteenth century, advertising became one of the most effective, economical and fastest mechanisms to legitimize the capitalist project. The industry developed even more in the nineteenth century with the irruption of cinema and photography, which allowed the display of the name and the logotype of a company worldwide.

4. PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

Persuasive communication is different from any other kind of communication because it implies a series of unique and peculiar features, according to M. Brewster Smith [4]: “(...) Although all communication contains elements of influence to a greater or lesser degree and, consequently, the search for psychological effects, persuasive communication is characterized by being ‘deliberate persuasion’, aimed at achieving certain effects using communication and psychological techniques, coercive to some degree.”

Persuasive communication aims to induce the receiver of a given message to adhere to the sender’s proposals. In order to be successful as senders, it is fundamental not only to know who we are targeting but also to how to reach them and to comprehend what persuasive languages and techniques we use in order to understand persuasive communication in a global way. The knowledge of the psychology of the individual together with the ethnographic knowledge provide us with the references that indicate who we are going to talk to; this will make empathy work smoothly. The sciences such as communication, linguistics, pragmatics, rhetoric, etc., add knowledge to build an irresistible message that provokes the adherence of the receiver [5].

Persuasive communication is currently one of the main means to discover and demonstrate the relevance of our behavioral options; it is the means by which people collaborate with each other in the disposition of reality and

is based on the power of suggestion of the interlocutor and on his or her ability to induce the change of attitudes and perceptions of the receiver.

Persuasion is always a conscious activity and depends on both rational and emotional arguments. Rhetoric (the art of oratory in communication) is, in the words of Aristotle, the search for all the means of persuasion that we have at our disposal.

It is probably in advertising that the mechanisms of persuasive communication that are carried out to coax the receiver and to convince him to agree to certain arguments in favor of a specific product are more clearly appreciated. The media appeal to the emotional rather than to the rational in order to convey ideological clichés that reflect our desires and frustrations, the social signs that predispose us to the purchase of a particular article, the ultimate goal of most advertising spots.

Nonetheless, we must not forget that, in order to create an effective ad, publicists must take into account to whom a specific product is addressed so that they are able to find the most appropriate way to reach the relevant interlocutor, since society is divided into more or less well-defined groups that can be the target of different kinds of messages. Advertising works in the construction of an image, of a ‘low-cut back’, which seeks to boost desires and to appeal to emotion by connecting the message with broadly accepted social ideas. In order to do so, advertising is based on the reflection of universal behaviors in communication.

We can assert that our society is completely monopolized by a culture of consumerism and an obsession with commodities. In relation to this thought, one of the main characters in the film *Fight Club*, directed by David Fincher in 1999, states:

Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war... Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off. (Tyler Durden, Brad Pitt.)

It is evident how important and stunning advertising is in a person's life. Who can say that they have never been carried away by an ad when buying a product? Are we vulnerable to the efforts of companies and publicists? It seems like the only viable option for the consumers is to get to know the strategies that they master.

4. A COMPLETE ANALYSIS OF AN ADVERTISEMENT IN PRESS

We suggest the analysis of an advertisement that clearly reflects the amount of information that is hidden behind the work of publicists and that constitutes, in short, a functional part of the language that should know and master. The advertisement that we are looking at (see “References”) was published on page 163 of the Spanish magazine *Muy Interesante* in November 2007.

First of all, the position of the advertisement in the magazine is noteworthy, since it completely takes up the right-hand page of a spread; advertisers know about the innate tendency of readers to look first to the right when they open a paper or a magazine, this is the reason why the advertisements which are located in this place are the most expensive. They also know about the existence of the social tendency to cognitive economy, which is based on the existence of prejudices, stereotypes and factoids, which will make the interlocutor not confirm the veracity of the topic “the bigger / more expensive the better”; this topic will lead the interlocutor to connect the position, as well as the size of the ad, with the economic power of company and to allow him or herself be impressed by this fact.

In addition, we stare at a beautiful and an aesthetically striking advertisement that brings us, through the principle of cognitive economy, to the topic “if it looks good, it is good”. From the first moment we can intuit that this ad is addressed to the group that T. Álvarez and M. Caballero called “émulos realizados” (fulfilled emulous), since, at first sight, we can notice a designer image -which recalls beauty and power- and a flat TV, a symbol that back in the days acquired connotations of purchasing power, which is associated both to social success and to the possession of a certain status. All this makes us think of a receiver who has fulfilled his basic needs but who still needs to consolidate his social fulfillment. This advertisement is a call to gregariousness, to belonging to a certain group and to the consolidation of self-image as a product of imitation and integration into an elite, together with the admiration that this entails.

The image is beautiful and very impressive; the black background of the ad makes the picture stand out. This image an eye in the middle of the palm of a hand and an ear in each one of the fingertips. The image perfectly matches the message that leads the advertisement, since they both comprise hearing and sight, everything the reader needs to enjoy Pioneer products.

This image recalls of one of the main frames in the blockbuster *El Laberinto del Fauno* (*Pan's labyrinth*), a film that became very popular in the months previous to the appearance of this ad. This association reflects in the receiver of the message the idea that "if it is well known, it is good" due to the tendency to gregariousness and the "wagon tail effect" that creates a sense of security and protection under the shelter of the majority.

The way in which of the eye and the ears are arranged is equally important, since it evokes the presence of a viewer and a much evolved hearing system. This system is reminiscent of the surround sound system, commonly used in cinemas, which creates in the receiver, through the principles of cognitive economy, the idea that the same effect can be achieved at their homes when they buy this product; a factoid that the receiver is predisposed to believe blindly. We can sense the idea that this experience is something that the receiver of the message may have "at their fingertips."

Regarding the written message as such, we find that advertising appeals to the principle of cognitive economy, to the acquaintance with the familiar and to the gregarious tendency of individuals, among other factors. Therefore, we find in this advertisement the innate tendency towards submission to authority and respect for the unknown of both society in general and the receiver of this message in particular.

First, we face the manifest authority of the utterer, due to the social recognition and reputation that a well-known brand offers, which we identify with social success based on the principle of cognitive economy. This principle leads us to think that "the familiar/known it is better" or else "better the devil we know", as it triggers the universal animal reaction to fear, seeking the security that "the usual" inspires.

Secondly, we do not question the authority of the channel, in this case the written press, which, on the one hand, transmits ideological clichés that we accept as accurate and, on the other hand, contributes to the social idea of "what is written is true".

Third, this advertisement is based on the authority of the context in which the message is inserted, the details and the images that take us back to the idea of "beautiful is good", based on the social principle of cognitive economy which leads us to connect design both with singularity and with the desire to feel different.

Finally, the receiver also submits to the authority of the code used since linguistic techniques are used to lead him acceptance of an attractive and beautiful message as true.

"seeing and hearing like never before" is the leading sentence. The typography of the text is modern and delicate, the thin and slightly leaning line triggers a sense of innovation and design, features that are associated, by extension, to the product that is publicized. As we have already analyzed, this idea turns out, due to the principle of cognitive economy, to the association of this product with the quality of what is beautiful and with the status and the feeling of control that the possession of this object provides. The white color of the text provides a sense of purity and harmony as opposed to the black background. This combination of colors is associated to elegance, a feature that outspreads from the product to reach the receiver/buyer, who incarnates, thus, sophistication, and improves, therefore, his or her self-image.

On the other hand, the use of lower case letters in the entire slogan reflects both modernity and the publicist's wish upon transgression that appeals to the predictability of the interlocutor, who is probably willing to buy the advertised product in order to identify with these values and to improve his self-image. In addition, even though this advertisement is aimed at a Spanish public, the main slogan is written in English. This choice makes the receiver relate the product to the topic "things from abroad are prestigious and distinguished", a recurring topic in marketing and advertising that can likewise be connected with the high quality of the product. This quote, "hearing and seeing like never before", perfectly fits with the image since "seeing and hearing" is precisely what the hand symbolizes and "like never before" alludes to the idea of newness and trendiness which leads, by means of the principle of cognitive economy, to improve the receiver's self-image thanks to the association of the possession of this product with fashion and future.

In addition, we can see the image of the product that is being promoted in the lower right-hand side of the page: a flat screen television with speakers on both sides that the reader assumes as the Dolby Surround system; this is the technology that is used in cinemas and to which the seeing and hearing hand also refers. The product's trademark – "Pioneer" - is clearly displayed on the screen; it is a well-known brand and, therefore, this element appeals to the principle of predictability and to the topic "famous trademark equals good quality". Moreover, the lexical choice is impeccable; besides the associations to hearing and sight and to cinema at the reach of your hand, the word "pioneer" refers to the principle of authority and triggers the positive connotations of being first one doing something, these are, among others, success and reputation.

Regarding the paragraph on the bottom left side of the page, written in Spanish, we can understand that the fact that capital letters have been used suggests that this part of the message is also important, even if it takes a smaller part than the rest of the elements on the advertisement.

“LLEGA MÁS ALLÁ DE DONDE ALCANZA LA VISTA TAL Y COMO LA CONOCES. VIAJA MÁS ALLÁ DEL SONIDO HASTA DONDE NUNCA IMAGINASTE. HASTA UN LUGAR DONDE TUS MANOS ATRAPAN LAS IMÁGENES Y LA MÚSICA FLUYE POR TUS DEDOS. HASTA UN LUGAR DONDE LOS COLORES SE SIENTEN. LOS SONIDOS SE DEGUSTAN Y TODO ELLO SE CONVIERTE EN UNA VIVENCIA ÚNICA. YA ESTÁ AQUÍ **KURO**. EXPERIMENTA POR TI MISMO ESTA INCREÍBLE SENSACIÓN EN WWW.PIONER.ES”

At this time, Pioneer launched the KURO television all over the world with a quirky print campaign celebrating the body’s capacity for multi-sensory experience. All the ads presented eyes placed in hands, chests and foreheads, over a black background. The tagline, “seeing and hearing like never before”, was not modified in different countries but the additional information was slightly altered, although it still preserved the essence of the product, as we can see in the text corresponding to the same ad and image for the English-speaking customers:

“GO BEYOND SIGHT. GO BEYOND SOUND. ENTER A WORLD WHERE YOU
LOOK WITH FRESH EYES AND LISTEN WITH NEW EARS.
A WORLD WHERE YOU DON’T JUST SEE, YOU FEEL.
YOU DON’T JUST HEAR, YOU TOUCH.
YOU DON’T JUST WATCH, YOU TRULY AND FULLY EXPERIENCE.
INTRODUCING THE KURO”

We will here analyze the text as it was published in the Spanish press; however, most of the thoughts that we will point out can be extrapolated.

Once the first visual and sensory impact on the receiver has been generated, he will probably be interested in knowing more about the product and this justifies the presence of such a paragraph beneath the core image. This passage consists of simple and clear sentences; it contains verbs in imperative and indicative mood addressed to a receiver who, as we have previously explained, is young but not immature, mature but not old, and who tries to reinforce his social position.

First of all, we should point out the use of imperatives such as “travel” or “fly” that, initially, would make us think of a threat to the receiver’s self-image since they violate, at least, the tact maxim and the sympathy maxim [6]. According to these ideas, the reader would see himself as clearly inferior and subdued. However, this dissonance is appeased by the second part of each sentence, which is introduced by “más allá”, in English “beyond”; this is how the receiver will immediately feel attached to the positive ideas of future, self-improvement and success. Thanks to the mitigation of the first part of every sentence and to the exercise of the generosity maxim, which seeks the maximum benefit for the receiver, the reader will amend his self-image with the promise of a new and better world. Moreover, the use of the formula “tú” instead of “usted”, being on familiar terms, contributes to create a feeling of companionship and closeness and also a relationship of trust that responds to the human being gregarious tendency. People are willing to belong to a group because only then and there they feel secure; this feeling will shove the buyer into the “unique experience” and, therefore, he will let himself leap into the void, not fearing the fact of traveling even further beyond “as far as the eye can see.”

The lexical selection in this paragraph is undeniably flawless since it combines "sight" and "sound", echoing the scheme presented with both the tagline and the core picture. This fact returns to the cognitive economy principle that leads us to the preference for predictability, since it emphasizes such things as discipline, systemization, or consistency, as a counterpoint to the animal reaction to fear; consequently, tracing the same pattern all through the ad reduces the uncertainty. In addition, new senses, such as somatosensation (touch) and gustation (taste), are introduced in this paragraph and words that appeal directly to emotions and feelings, such as "grasp, images, flow, feel, experience, incredible" or "feeling," evidence the unquestionable appeal of publicists to emotions rather than reason.

The lexicon has been carefully chosen in order to create a current of free-flowing images and feelings in the receiver’s mind by means of a free-flowing sentence structure which evoke passions and reactions that are known to be universal; when the receiver reads this paragraph he goes deep into to the world that he had "never imagined" and is able to see himself as the hero of the movie that he will enjoy watching once he acquires this product.

We can also notice the word “**KURO**” in this paragraph. This is a term with an exotic air, since it is unknown for the reader; this word triggers the idea that the sender masters a language that he, as a mere reader, does not know. The receiver acknowledges, therefore, the superiority of the publicist and surrenders to the authority of

the sender, the channel and the code. If then the reader decides to go beyond and to do some research on the field, he will find out that the Japanese word “kuro” means “black” and so, the publicist does not leave any loose ends because the label of the new range of products is in compliance with the rest of elements shape the advertisement.

All the verbs in this paragraph are a vehicle for feelings; these verbs involve both the sender and the receiver of the message because they evoke all those things that one can only dream about -“go further, travel, knowing, imagining and experiencing”- and the way of being able to do so: with strength enough to “capture the images” but letting them softly “slip through your fingers”, always enjoying and “savoring” what you do. Neither these verbs nor the nouns -“sight, sound, images, music, colors, experience, feeling”- or the adjectives -“unique, incredible” - have been arbitrarily chosen; all these things that you could have at your fingertips create a synaesthetic universe that leads the receiver to a “unique experience”, associated with the idea of selection and magnificence that he needs to improve his self-image. There is a set of positive messages which is tangentially processed by the reader, rather sensorially than rationally; the discourteous imperatives, which are firstly perceived as a command, become a real challenge that, by the end of the paragraph and after the explosion of senses, the receiver feels ready to overcome. The customer will at this point be deeply interested and, hence, will enter the given website in order to get further information.

Mission accomplished.

The sender takes advantage of his knowledge about the human being, about his desires and frustrations, about accepted and universal clichés and stereotypes, about human beings’ inclinations and about their emotional responses towards image, fear and society. In summary, based on the idea of the existence of the so called "universals of communication", the publicist manages to unquestionably trick the brain of a naïve reader who, once again, has been carried away by his emotions before giving way to reason.

5. CONCLUSION

In this work, we have tried to delve into the idea of the so called “universals of communication” in order to better understand and succinctly analyze what persuasive communication is and how it applies in advertising. It is clear that it is essential to identify the mechanisms of persuasion that are set in motion through images, colors, words, etc., in order to take advantage of them and to apply them to our interactions in case we need to and to utterly and properly comprehend the whole meaning of the persuasive messages.

We have offered in this article a complete analysis of an advertisement in press in order to illustrate the importance of entirely understanding advertising and of knowing the mechanisms of persuasive communication.

The field of marketing and advertising one of the biggest and most influential industries nowadays and this is the reason why advertising in all its forms constitutes an adequate means and an inexhaustible source of resources. An advertisement comprises the activation of linguistic and non-linguistic aspects whose interpretation is of great interest to both senders and receivers of the message; the first ones will want to know how to trick the receiver while the others will try to find out which part of the message is explicit and which one is not in order to unravel the set of elements that contribute to the efficacy of the advertisement.

In conclusion, the field of advertising is extremely large and can be exploited in many different and useful ways. Therefore, we hope this work to be only one of many more to come.

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