

Rhetorical Structures in the Language of Vietnamese Advertisements

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Abstract

Understanding the structure and function of rhetorical figures in advertising requires a text- and reader-aware approach. In the absence of appropriate text-centered terminology (e.g., scheme, trope), and without access to the necessary conceptual tools (e.g., deviation), the longstanding and widespread use of rhetorical figures in advertising has simply been overlooked in consumer research. This article builds a framework for categorizing rhetorical figures that distinguishes between figurative and non-figurative text, between two types of figures (schemes and tropes), and among three rhetorical operations that underlie individual figures (repetition, reversal, and substitution) in Vietnamese advertisements.

Keywords: Rhetorical figure, Scheme, Trope, Repetition, Reversal, Substitution, Vietnamese advertisements

1. Introduction

Realizing that a key aim of advertising is not purely to inform, but to persuade as well, it is not astounding that advertising is sprinkled with rhetorical devices (Leigh, 1994). For instance, the current Benson & Hedges Cigarette campaign uses the rhetorical figure, personification (Pullack, 1997), and was preceded with campaigns using other rhetorical figures, puns, and resonance. The long-running Absolute Vodka advertising campaigns are well known for their use of rhetorical figures.

From Aristotle up until the advent of modern social psychology, the discipline of rhetoric was the primary repository of Western thinking about persuasion (Barthes 1970/1988). The central concern of rhetoric has been method and manner: how to discover the most effective way to express a thought in a given context, and then how to alter its expression to suit different contexts. The many techniques catalogued by rhetoricians since antiquity (e.g., rhyme, antimetabole, pun, hyperbole) have remained largely unacknowledged, undifferentiated, and uninfluential in advertising theory. This article endeavours to adjust that neglect.

There are two reasons why consumer research needs to address the topic of rhetorical figures (also known as 'figures of speech'). First, newly available content analyses have demonstrated the pervasiveness of figuration in the language of advertising (Leigh 1994). Second, the paradigmatic ferment associated with the advent of postmodern (Sherry 1991), semiotic (Mick 1986), and text-based perspectives (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992) is conducive to a focus on rhetorical phenomena in advertising. Perhaps only now, when consumer researchers have at last permitted themselves to talk about meaning as well as information, interpretation as well as stimulation, can rhetorical phenomena be grasped and integrated into consumer research (McCracken 1987; Scott 1994).

The main aim of this article is to contribute a richer and more systematic conceptual understanding of rhetorical structure in advertising language. In contrast to previous analyses of rhetorical figures in consumer research that focused on isolated cases (e.g., rhetorical questions, Swasy and Munch 1985; puns, McQuarrie and Mick 1992), we provide a framework that integrates a wide range of figures appearing in advertisements.

2. Rhetorical structures in advertisements

Rhetoricians maintain that any proposition can be expressed in a variety of ways, and that in any given context one of these ways will be the most effective in swaying an audience. Therefore, when persuasion is the overriding goal, the rhetorical perspective suggests that the manner in which a statement is expressed may be more important than its propositional content. The promise of rhetoric is that there exists a system for discerning the most effective form of expression in any given situation. Hence, a rhetorical approach to advertising language will rest on three premises: 1) that variations in the style of advertising language, in particular the presence of rhetorical figures, can be expected to have crucial consequences for how the ad is processed; 2) that these consequences can in turn be

derived from the formal properties of the rhetorical figures themselves; and 3) that these formal properties are systematically interrelated.

2.1 Categorization of figures

Rhetorical figures were first identified and discussed over two thousand years ago in classical antiquity (Todorov 1982). Attempts to systematize the wealth of available figures are almost as old (Wenzel 1990). Modern attempts at systematization begin with Jakobson and Halle (1956) and Burke (1950), and culminate in the elaborate typologies of Dubois et al. (1970) and Durand (1987). Following are some of the ways to categorize figures:

Genres of rhetoric (Aristotle):

(Dixon 1971)

judicial rhetoric: oratory of the law courts; rhetoric of legal prosecution and defence

deliberative rhetoric: the audience is asked to judge an action in the future

epideictic rhetoric: praise or denunciation of an individual or institution

The parts of a speech:

(Götttert 1991)

exordium: introduction

narratio: description of circumstances

argumentatio: argumentative part, justification

peroratio: conclusion

Stages of Composition:

(Götttert 1991)

inventio: invention of ideas

dispositio: structuring of ideas

memoria: memorizing of speech

elocutio: verbal presentation of ideas

pronuntiatio: delivery of speech

Artistic modes of persuasion:

(Kennedy 1991)

Ethos: persuasion derived from the character of the speaker

Pathos: persuasion derived from the emotion awakened by a speaker in an audience

Logos: persuasion derived from true or probable argument

Functions of speech:

(Götttert 1991)

Movere: move the passions

Docere: teach

Delectare: delight

The styles of speech:

(Vickers 1988)

plain style: commonplace matters are to be discussed simply

grand style: lofty subjects are to be discussed impressively

middle style: topics between plain and grand style are to be discussed in a tempered style

From the perspective of advertising theory, previous attempts to systematize the set of rhetorical figures have all been handicapped by one or more of the following shortcomings: either the taxonomic categories are vague or too

coarse grained, or the categories are not linked to consumer responses, or the focus is on outcomes other than persuasion.

To overcome these limitations, McQuarrie and Mick (1996) proceeded on a dual front, on the one hand reading the literature on classical rhetoric, drawing on Corbett (1990), Leech (1969), and Vickers (1988) in particular, while on the other, immersing ourselves in a large sample of contemporary magazine ads.

2.2 *What is a rhetorical figure?*

A rhetorical figure has traditionally been defined as an artful deviation (Corbett 1990). A rhetorical figure occurs when an expression deviates from expectation, the expression is not rejected as nonsensical or faulty, the deviation occurs at the level of form rather than content, and the deviation conforms to a template that is invariant across a variety of content and contexts. This definition supplies the standard against which deviation is to be measured (i.e., expectations), sets a limit on the amount and kind of deviation (i.e., short of a mistake), locates the deviation at the level of the formal structure of a text, and imposes a grouping requirement (i.e., there are a limited number of templates, each with distinct characteristics).

In terms of speech act theory, every communication encounter sets up expectations as it proceeds, and more general expectations that hold across encounters function as conventions or constraints (Grice 1989). With respect to metaphor, for instance, listeners are aware of conventions with respect to the use of words, one of which might be formulated as, words are generally used to convey one of the lead meanings given in their dictionary entry. A metaphor violates that convention, as in this headline for Johnson & Johnson band-aids, "Say hello to your child's new bodyguards," accompanied by a picture of band-aids emblazoned with cartoon characters. In the dictionary, a bodyguard is a large, strong individual, often assigned to a celebrity or political figure for protection against violent assault; but in this context the ad is describing a band-aid decorated with imaginary beings. Sperber and Wilson (1986) contend that listeners know exactly what to do when a speaker violates a convention: they search for a context that will render the violation intelligible. If context permits an inference that the band-aid is particularly strong, or that the world inhabited by children is particularly threatening, then the consumer will achieve an understanding of the advertiser's statement. If the ad had said, "Say hello to your child's new Teddy bear," nonetheless, most consumers would have considerable difficulty. Nonsensical or anomalous statements represent a double violation or deviation of the second degree. In other words, consumers have available conventions about how to deal with violations of convention. If a search for context restores understanding, the consumer assumes a figurative usage and responds accordingly. Else, the consumer assumes some failure of communication.

As a deviation with respect to specific or general expectations, any figure carries at least one additional meaning beyond its immediate meaning (Genette 1982). When told that the band-aid is a bodyguard, the consumer both finds a translation supported by context - this band-aid is particularly strong, provides a greater degree of protection, will treat your child like a celebrity, etc. - and understands that the advertiser was unwilling to simply say "the band-aid is strong," or "the band-aid provides extra protection," or "your child is important." The implication is that none of these three paraphrases just given quite suffices to capture the advertiser's intent; in fact, that no single, univocal predication applied to the band-aid appears adequate to capture the advertiser's thought. Thus, the resort to a figure provokes the consumer to consider a variety of predications concerning the band-aid that will be consistent with the use of "bodyguard" and render it comprehensible in context (see Sperber and Wilson 1986: 231-237). In Genette's (1982) terms, every figure represents a gap. The figure both points to a translation (the impossibility in this context of translating "Say hello to your child's new Teddy bear" is the key to its incomprehensibility), and denies the adequacy of that translation, thus encouraging further interpretation.

Likewise, the advertisement "Thiên thần sắc đẹp của bạn" ("Your angel of beauty") from Angel beauty salon links the audience's cognition to the image of "angel", a symbol of beauty, and you will walk out of this beauty salon with the beauty of an angel. The image of "angel" also generates an imagination of an eternal beauty. The image of "magic" is metaphorized in the word "angel", implying that Angel beauty salon will magically "transform" you into a beauty as in fairy tales.

On the contrary, the ad of soya milk "Vfresh" does not refer to another object like "bodyguard" or "angel", but to the product itself: "Trái tim ơi, để chắc ai đó thật sự quan tâm đến bạn, hãy tìm tôi!" ("The heart, to ensure that person's care of you, please reach me!"). "I - Vfresh" is metaphorized as a guru of love, a friend who can share experience of love with you, a psychologist, or even a nutritionist or a cardiologist who brings your heart healthy beats, so that your sublimated soul and emotions can attract that person.

Deviation is used here in the neutral sense of a swerve or departure-a way of marking the text (Mukarovsky 1964; van Peer 1986). Like aesthetic objects generally (Berlyne 1971), a rhetorical figure provides a means for making

the familiar strange. Deviation, then, is a matter of creating what consumer researchers might call incongruity. A key contribution of rhetoric is to explain how certain kinds of text structure, i.e., rhetorical figures, can produce incongruity in advertising texts.

It is important to acknowledge that any particular figurative expression can deviate to a greater or lesser extent and thus be more or less incongruous (Leech 1969). This corollary applies at two levels: that of any individual figure (a particular occurrence of rhyme or metaphor, for instance), and at the aggregate level (some figures, such as puns, may in general involve a greater degree of deviation than others, such as alliteration). Moreover, if the deviation drops below some threshold then there is no longer a figure. This occurs, for example, in the case of metaphors that have become frozen or conventional: e.g., “Cho vẻ đẹp thăng hoa” (“Sublimating your beauty”) (Thai Tuan Textile Company). Since deviation may be temporally situated, what once was a figure need not always remain one. This example, together with the bodyguard metaphor, serves also as a reminder that rhetorical structure resides and operates within a complex web of sociocultural signs and meanings (Eco 1979; Mick 1986; Scott 1994a). Thus, frozen metaphors should be limited and fresh metaphors should be invented as in the ad of Yomost, “Hãy để cánh bướm Yomost nối nhịp yêu thương” (“Let the butterfly “Yomost” connect rhythms of love”), in which Yomost is metaphorized as a butterfly.

2.3 Figuration modes

These modes correspond to the classical distinction between schemes and tropes (Leech 1969). A figure in the schematic mode occurs when a text contains excessive order or regularity, while a figure in the tropic mode occurs when a text contains a deficiency of order or irregularities. Schemes and tropes thus encompass two distinct modes of formal deviation. Familiar examples of schematic figures would include rhyme and alliteration, while metaphors and puns would be familiar examples of tropic figures.

The deviations that constitute schemes and tropes respectively can be understood in part in terms of the linguistic distinction between combination and selection constraints (Leech 1969). A combination constraint limits how signs can be combined into sentences, while a selection constraint limits which signs can fill certain positions (subject, object, verb, etc.) in a sentence. Schemes can be understood as deviant combinations, as in the ad of Biti’s shoes:

<u>Bước chân</u> Long Quân xuống biển	Long Quan’s strides headed for the sea
<u>Bước chân</u> Âu Cơ lên non	Au Co’s strides headed for the mountain
<u>Bước chân</u> Tây Sơn thần tốc	Tay Son warriors made expeditious strides
<u>Bước chân</u> vượt dãy Trường Sơn	Vietnamese soldiers strode across the Truong Son range
<u>Bước chân</u> tiến vào thiên niên kỷ mới	Vietnamese folks have been striding in the new millenium
Biti’s – Nâng niu bàn chân Việt	Biti’s – Cherishes Vietnamese feet.

This ad is excessively regular due to its repetition of sounds and words. It violates the convention that sounds are generally irrelevant to the sense of an utterance, i.e., the expectation held by receivers that the distribution of sounds through an utterance will be essentially unordered except by the grammatical and semantic constraints required to make a well-formed sentence. Soundplay can be used to build up meaning in a wide variety of ways (Ross 1989; van Peer 1986).

Many tropes, particularly metaphors and puns effected in a single word, can be understood as deviant selections. Thus, in the advertisement of Thien Long fountain pen, “Viết nên cuộc sống” (“Write the life”), there is a figurative metaphor, because “viết” (write) does not belong to the set of verbs which can take as their object an abstract collective endeavor such as “cuộc sống” (the life). However, not all tropes are effected in a single word, so that tropes such as rhetorical question or paradox have to be explained with the aid of the more general semiotic distinction between under- and over-coded texts (Eco 1979). In overcoding there are more possible organizations of information than are necessary for message reception, while in undercoding, the readily available organizations of information are insufficient. Schemes thus fit a model of over-coding while tropes fit a model of under-coding.

Figuration modes and consumer response

Both the qualitative and quantitative distinctions between figuration modes have implications for consumer response. Taking up the qualitative distinction first, although both schematic ad language and tropic ad language should be more memorable than literal ad language, *ceteris paribus*, the underlying process will differ as follows. Because they are over-coded, schemes add internal redundancy to advertising messages. Repetition within a text can be expected to enhance recall just as repetition of the entire text does. For instance, a rhyme forges extra

phonemic links among the advertisement elements. When reading that "Max nhưng không mắc" ("Max, however, is not costly") (the advertisement of the detergent "Max"), the consumer has several encoding possibilities available, including the propositional content, the phonemic equivalence (Max = mắc). In terms of a spreading activation model these multiple encoding possibilities lead to multiple opportunities for subsequent retrieval of the headline (Mitchell 1983).

The memorability of tropes rests on a different mechanism. Because they are under-coded, tropes are incomplete in the sense of lacking closure. Tropes thus invite elaboration by the reader. For instance, consider the OMO ad with the headline "Thách thức mọi vết bẩn" ("Challenge all the stains"). "Stain" is unexpected as a selection from the set of things to challenge. Via reinterpretation, the first meaning, to challenge, takes on a more surgent quality, namely that OMO will help the consumer to defeat the stubborn stains. The second meaning, to enjoy, is also given an edge, so that it takes on the more triumphant quality of an achievement against obstacles. This tropic headline, whose resolution sets in motion a rich network of associations, may lead to multiple encodings and/or the strengthening of existing conceptual linkages in memory (involving, for example, OMO, washing pleasures, washing challenges, and personal needs for achievement). Thus, the additional cognitive activity expended in the reinterpretation increases the number of associative pathways stored in memory (Mitchell 1983).

2.4 Rhetorical operations

This level of the framework distinguishes simple from complex schemes and tropes to yield four rhetorical operations—repetition, reversal, substitution, destabilization.

Repetition

The rhetorical operation of repetition combines multiple instances of some element of the expression without changing the meaning of that element. In advertising we find repetition applied to sounds so as to create the figures of rhyme, chime, and alliteration or assonance. Repetition applied to words creates the figures known as anaphora (beginning words),

Mọi lúc, mọi nơi (Mobiphone)

(Everytime, everywhere)

epistrophe (ending words),

Môi xinh, hé nụ cười xinh (LipIce of Rohto-Mentholatum (Vietnam))

(Cute lips, giving cute smiles)

Repetition of the words in the middle of the phrases,

Hợp cho mẹ, tốt cho con (Dielac Mama powder milk of Vinamilk)

(Suitable for the mother, good for the child)

epanalepsis (beginning and ending),

Vì trí tuệ Việt, vì tương lai Việt (Nutifood)

(For Vietnamese intelligence, for Vietnamese future)

and anadiplosis (ending and beginning):

Xi măng Hà Tiên 1, một triết lý sống (Ha Tien Cement Company No. 1)

(Xi măng Hà Tiên 1, a unique philosophy of life)

Hãy luôn là 100%

Always 100%

100% sức sống

100% of vitality

100% thư giãn

100% of relaxation

100% minh mẫn

100% of intelligence (Vinamilk fresh milk)

Repetition applied to *phrase structure* yields the figure of parison, as in the subsequent advertisements:

Cho ngày nay, cho ngày mai, cho muôn đời sau (LiOA voltage stabilizer)

(For today, for tomorrow, forever)

Ở đâu có điện, ở đó có Điện Quang

(Where there is electricity, there is Dien Quang) (Dien Quang's light bulb)

A limiting condition is that repeated words not shift their meaning with each repetition (such a shift would create the trope known as antanaclasis, as in the ad of Ha Tien Cement Company No. 1:

Xi măng Hà Tiên 1, một triết lý sống

(Xi măng Hà Tiên 1, a unique philosophy of life)

In Le and Pham (2008)'s view, the above ad displays an impressive pun. The word "một" (one) is repeated, but "một" at the end of the first phrase is a quantifier combined with the phrase "Xi măng Hà Tiên" to constitute the firm name – a proper noun, whereas "một" in the remaining phrase has the implication of "unique": A "unique" philosophy of life comes from Ha Tien Cement Company No. 1 and its cement.

Reversal

The rhetorical operation of reversal combines within an expression elements that are mirror images of one another. A characteristic of a mirror image, of course, is that it repeats the original but in reverse. Consider this tagline for Bounce Fabric Softener: "Stops static before static stops you." In the first part, the noun "static" is the object of the verb "stops," while in the second part the noun "static" functions as a subject for the verb "stops." The classical literature applied the term antimetabole to figures of this type.

The Vietnamese language permits semantic as well as syntactic reversals, in the form of binary pairs where one term may be thought of as the reverse or opposite of the other: i.e., small/big, high/low, inside/outside. When a message structure includes both members of such a pair, the figure known as antithesis results, as in the subsequent advertisements:

Trong khỏe khoắn, ngoài tươi xinh

Health inside, Beauty outside (Vinamilk Probi yoghurt)

Từ những cú nhảy nhỏ, cậu bé đã chuẩn bị vươn tới thành tích lớn

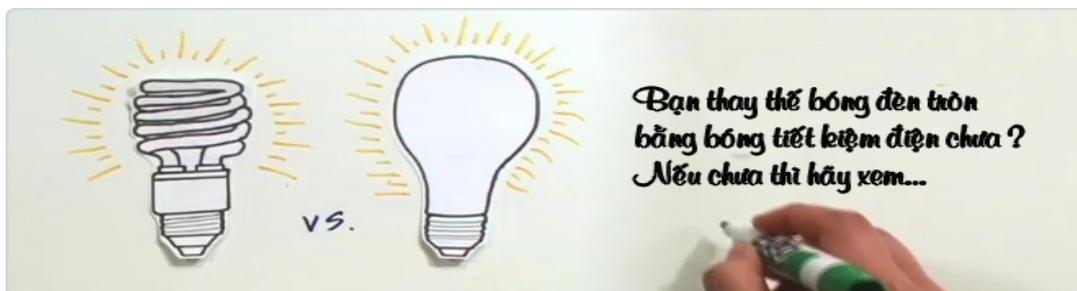
With the small jumps, the little boy gets ready for the big achievements (Dutch Lady)

Substitution

The rhetorical operation of substitution selects an expression that requires an adjustment by the message recipient in order to grasp the intended content. Both of the tropic operations involve a turn such that an expression takes on an unexpected or unconventional meaning. Simple tropes produced by substitution have a tightly constrained resolution, while complex tropes produced by destabilization have a loosely constrained resolution. Because tropes of substitution have a single resolution, we can speak of the recipient applying a correction to what the communicator offers (Fogelin 1988). The adjustments required by tropes of substitution always take place along a dimension, or more generally within some kind of preestablished relationship. Three dimensions were pertinent to the analysis of our sample of advertisements: exaggerated/understated claims (e.g., hyperbole); absence/plenitude of expression elements (e.g., ellipsis); and strong/weak assertive force (e.g., rhetorical question).

Hyperbole results when a statement makes a claim that strictly speaking is impossible. Consider this ad for EGF technology: "Trở lại làn da tuổi 20" ("Bring your skin back to the age of 20"). Bringing the skin of old women back to the age of 20 is an exaggeration, and what the message recipient has to do in response to this hyperbole is perform a correction of the following sort: "Yes, EGF technology will make us become much younger than Collagen technology does since EGF has 53 peptides for the cell rejuvenating process whereas Collagen has merely three 3 peptides". Note that a requirement for hyperbole is that the claim made must be literally impossible.

The figure of ellipsis occurs when one substitutes a gap or lacuna for an explicit or complete statement, i.e., an empty place which the recipient corrects by filling in the blank (Garnham and Oakhill 1992). An example would be the advertisement "Bạn thay thế bóng đèn tròn bằng bóng tiết kiệm điện chưa? Nếu chưa thì hãy xem ...". ("Have you replaced light bulb with energy saving light? If not, please have a glance at ...").



“If not, please have a glance at ...”, so have a glance at what? Here the recipient has to fill in the blank with such a phrase as “please have a glance at the energy saving effect of Dien Quang light.”

Substitution can also occur along the dimension of strong or weak assertive force, by altering the manner in which a claim is asserted. Consider the rhetorical question in this ad for Friso Gold milk of Dutch Lady, “Bạn đã bảo vệ bé tốt chưa?” (“Have you protected your baby well?”). Instead of asserting a claim straight out, one supplies an interrogative phrasing, thus treating the claim as open to doubt, whereas the intent is for it to be taken as certain.

3. Conclusion

Understanding the structure and function of rhetorical figures in advertising requires a text- and reader-aware approach. In the absence of appropriate text-centered terminology (e.g., scheme, trope), and without access to the necessary conceptual tools (e.g., deviation), the longstanding and widespread use of rhetorical figures in advertising has simply been overlooked in consumer research. Text-centered approaches to advertising help to direct attention to the causal power that text structure may possess. The underlying assumption is that a rhetorical figure performs a function that makes a difference to how an ad is received. In fact, from the standpoint of text-centered approaches, a notable omission in historical models of advertising response is precisely the lack of a sophisticated system of categories for theorizing about executional aspects of advertising.

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