On the Semantic Realization of Fuzziness
in Advertising English

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Abstract

The choice of fuzziness to establish images of products or services is quite common in advertising English. Advertisers often employ fuzzy expressions to grab consumers' attention, realize persuasion function, and avoid lawful and ethical responsibilities. The author aims at drawing attention to the application of fuzziness in advertising and equipping consumers with better understanding of it to avoid mistakes in interpreting and help advertisers produce more successful advertisements.

Keywords: Fuzziness, Advertising English, Semantic Realization

1. Significance of advertising language

Advertising has overwhelmingly penetrated every corner of our life as a main communicative channel in the Information Age. The English advertising begins in the medieval age and thrives in the 1920s. No matter what advertisement it is and what media it is employed, language is indispensable for advertising. Creating advertisement is a complex process and involves a wide range of people like artists, painters, copywriters, etc. The final aim of producing advertisements is to persuade the potential consumers to take purchasing action. Thus advertisements are deliberately and consciously designed messages. Advertising language is a communicative vehicle of advertising and plays an important role. It can arouse the interests and emotions of the consumers in favor of the advertised products or services. What's more, it can reflect the attitudes the consumers and social values of the society. The language of advertising can help copywriters establish good images for corporations or manufacturers by various kinds of language signs, intending to build an ideal atmosphere, to attract consumers' attention, to make them believe, and eventually to make them buy. But, the most important functions of advertisement, informing and persuading, always give rise to the fact that trust and co-operation between the advertisers and the consumers are limited or lacking. Advertisers are more concerned about the way in which advertising language serves the function of advertisement effectively without causing the consumers' repulsion and resistance. In order to realize the persuasion function of advertisements, advertisers may employ various attention-attracting strategies that make the consumers accept the information that the advertisers want to convey.

Advertising language can be approached from a variety of perspectives. This article mainly researches on fuzziness in advertising English, attempting to expound the importance of fuzziness plays in advertising English and hoping that it will contribute to the future research on fuzziness.

2. Definition of fuzziness

Since the publication of Zadeh's work *Fuzzy Sets* in 1965, the past decades have witnessed a global upsurge of interest in "fuzziness". A series of new subjects such as fuzzy linguistics, fuzzy mathematics, fuzzy logic, fuzzy psychology came into bloom. In China, the publication of Wu Tieping's *A Tentative Exploration of Fuzzy Language* has inspired extensive research on fuzziness. Such scholars as Zadeh, Lakoff, Channell, Wu Tieping, Chen Zhian, have made great contribution to the study on fuzziness. What interests the author most is the fuzzy expressions in advertising English.

Fuzziness is hard to define because of the nature of language itself. Fuzziness can thus be defined as an indeterminacy or uncertainty of the borderline of the subject in question while fuzzy linguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies the intrinsic uncertainty or vagueness of the borderline of the linguistic units in a language (Wu and Chen, 2001, p.7).

3. Semantic realization of fuzziness in advertising English

To some extent, advertising is more a kind of art than a promoting strategy. Many copywriters turn to the choice of fuzziness, contributing to the aesthetic effect of advertising language. It is commonly believed that fuzziness is extensively employed in advertising English as an important persuading strategy. Since many advertisements are long, we only take slogans or headlines of some commercial advertisements into consideration. In this part, we will illustrate its frequency and explore its features and functions in advertising practice.

3.1 Hedges

The American linguist Lakoff proposes the definition of "hedges", words or expressions that make the meaning fuzzy. Lakoff (1972, p.195) further suggests that, "some of the most interesting questions are arisen by the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy". His idea that the function of such expressions is "to make things fuzzier" is similar to the way that particular lexical items exist to make conversation appropriately imprecise. A hedge can be categorized either as a "shield" or as an "approximator". *Maybe, probably* and *possibly* are examples of "plausibility shields", which stand outside a substantive proposition and point to something less than complete commitment to it. One of the functions of shield-hedges is to protect the speaker from accusation of being committed to a false proposition. Approximators such as *about, around* and *approximately*, as well as *sort of, kind of* and *basically*, can also have the effect of withholding commitment to a proposition. They achieve this by inserting fuzziness into the substantive proposition itself.

Sometimes hedges are regarded as words or expressions used to mislead consumers. Such hedges as *may, could, help, fight, I think, I suppose*, etc. imply a false claim without asserting it directly. But, the author holds the opinion that such hedges can protect advertisers from being too exaggerative. The use of hedges is commonly seen and exerts an unbelievable role in advertising language.

(1) *This does save you eighty **or so** pence*.

(2) *DATSUN saves about a gallon of gasoline a day*.

In the first advertisement, the words in bold letters indicate that the actual saving is not very important, and will not give readers adequate information they want to know. The advertiser ensures he is meeting the Advertising Standards Associations requirements to be "legal, honest, decent and truthful" by using an approximation. The second example is a headline of the advertisement for Datsun car. A far more common way of arousing interest is to make some claims for the product in the headline, in particular for such competing products as cars. The headline should contain the name of trademark and the characteristic of the product in order to make the audience recognize its specialty immediately. The advertiser does not state precisely in his claim: DATSUN saves 0.99 gallon or 1.02 gallon of gasoline a day. The use of approximation in this way is also for the sake of self-protection and face-saving.

(3) *Wonder Bread helps build strong bodies in eight ways*.

In this advertisement, the use of "helps" makes the advertisement more reasonable and appropriate. To what degree does "Wonder Bread help build strong bodies"? Nobody knows. If we delete "helps", the advertisement is questionable. So the use of the fuzzy word *help* greatly helps the appropriateness and acceptability of the advertisement. We can perceive that the word *help* is not a formal promise, but just a sweet hope, or a possibility, so the advertiser does not make any firm promise about the advantages of the advertised product. To keep us healthy, it is far less than adequate to only have bread, no matter how wonderful the bread may be.

3.2 Descriptive Adjectives

Descriptive adjectives are frequently employed by copywriters to make exaggerated compliments on their products to realize the function of persuasion and promotion. Most of them are fuzzy in meaning. From the viewpoint of copywriters, they are the subjective judgments, thus devoid of a standard. However, these descriptive adjectives play a vital part in advertisements in that they have great effect on the understanding and attitudes of the audience. They are short in form and easy to understand. More importantly, they tend to spark the imagination of the consumers and encourage them to purchase.

According to the statistics from Leech, the twenty most frequently used descriptive adjectives (in the order of their frequency: 1) new 2) good 3) free 4) flesh 5) delicious 6) full 7) sure 8) clean 9) wonderful 10) special 11) crisp 12) fine 13) big 14) great 15) real 16) easy 17) bright 18) extra 19) safe 20) rich.

From the above, it is obvious that almost all the 20 words are fuzzy in meaning. Other popular words include *fantastic, superb, magic, amazing excellent, sensational, revolutionary, spectacular, perfect, impeccable, unique,*

exceptional, splendid, delightful, exciting, which are invariably fuzzy words. Look at the following examples:

(4) *"How's your coffee?"*

  "Wonderful, rich, smooth and bursting with flavor…"

(5) *Sensuously smooth. Mysteriously mellow. Gloriously golden. Who can resist the magic of Camas XO Cognac.*

(6) *Enjoy clean fresh healthy air for under 1 P a day !*

It is evident that all these descriptive adjectives are subjective rather than objective. For consumers, it is very difficult to figure out how "wonderful" "rich" exactly is, the same is true to "gloriously golden". But we can draw an unclear but seemingly beautiful picture in our mind. From the psychological point of view, it meets consumers' desire for comfortable consuming and arouses their imagination. In this sense, the advertisements are effective in enticing people to make purchase.

(7) *Omega always marks significant moments in the Olympics. In the space progamme. In significant lives like yours.* (Omega watch)

The advertiser here employs the adjective "significant" to arouse the audience's excitement. He leads the audience to imagine the Olympics sports games, in which the competitors run against the time, the inspiring space programme and the cherishing of one's own life. The definition of "significant lives" is quite fuzzy, utilizing people's desire to obtain fame and gain as well as social acceptance. It stirs the audience's positive association with the commodity and their own success. With the help of the fuzzy adjective "significant", the advertiser may be able to successfully touch the audience and finally realize his promoting purpose.

3.3 Non-numerical Fuzzy Quantifiers

There are a variety of ways of being fuzzy about quantities in advertising English. This section will concentrate on the last type where lexical material is added to result in a fuzzy quantity reading. The study on non-numerical fuzzy quantifiers was initiated by Crystal and Davy (1983, p.112). Their analysis of large stretches of natural conversation data revealed the use of many non-numerical quantifiers, those they specifically mention are *oodles of, bags of, heaps of, umpteen,* and *a touch of* (1983, p.112). English has a great many ways of quantifying without using numbers of any kind. As well as those mentioned by Crystal and Davy, there are such things as *some, several, lots, a high rate of, masses of , a lower, a higher* and many others . Examples are:

(8) *The business world has few moments of uninterrupted comfort, we're clearing the way for something new.*

(9) *We applied for numerous patents on it. Fortunately, you don' t have to wait for government approval to enjoy it.*

(10) *With so many rewards, you are spoilt for choice*

(11) *Bags of fun.*

(12) *For a touch of romance. Simply add water.*

By using such non-numerical fuzzy quantifiers as "few", "numerous", "so many" "a touch of", the reader may have the choice of adding some interpretation about the product according to their own understanding. The expressions not only serve as quantifiers, but also reveal the particular features of the products advertised. They can instantly arouse interest of consumers and the advertisers' goal is achieved. What number does the word "numerous" refer to? It's difficult to figure out. No one can give a definite answer to how much "a touch of romance" mean.

3.4 Comparatives and Superlatives

(13) *Johnson's Baby Powder. Softest, silkiest, purest powder. Made completely with the finest talcum known to science.*

Softest, silkiest, purest powder among all the other powders? Can this slogan be proved and justified? Nobody knows. There is no definite standard to highlight it from the other advertisements. It can be regarded as a kind of puffery, since it is exclusive and exaggerative. Using adjective in their comparative degree can certainly avoid the paradox, leaving certain space for the consumers to imagine, thus the advertiser will not run the risk of being too exaggerative.

Adjective and adverbial comparatives and superlatives are widely used in ads. However, many comparatives do not have an indicated target, which creates a fuzzy impression upon the viewers and leaves much room for imagination. Look at some examples:

(14) *Sharper. Stronger, Easier, Faster Kemper risk management.*

(15) *We have earned one of the highest bank credit ratings in Asia.*

(16) *We do everything to protect our most prominent critics.*

(17) *There is no better way to fly.*

"Good /better/ best might appear to be another all-purpose epithet, particularly in its comparative and superlative forms." (Leech, 1966, p.152) In example (14), we cannot tell the risk management from Kemper is sharper, stronger, easier, faster than the other insurance companies. Using this kind of fuzzy expression, advertisers win the preference of consumers or even shun responsibility. In example (15), the "highest" means DBS's credit tops among its competitors. However, "one of" eliminates this clarity and assigns fuzziness to its credit standing because there may be many companies that have the highest bank credit ratings in Asia. Even without "one of" or similar modifiers preceding a superlative, the audience can hardly assume the statements as real facts though it may win their favor when the ads concern compliments on their part. In example (16), it's obvious that the "most prominent critics" refer to consumers. Although consumers may not think of themselves as "prominent" or believe that copywriters do take them as such, it is, after all, a compliment that responds to consumers' underlying status-consciousness and is thus hard to refuse.

3.5 Frequency Words

Frequency words here refer to adverbs that indicate the frequency of occurrences in advertising language. Frequency words, range from "always" to "never", with delicate shades of meaning. Other examples are *often, usually, periodically, sometimes, once in a while, infrequently, seldom*, etc. Look at the following advertisements:

(18) *Friendships are built on trust, respect and occasionally the SCOTCH.*

(19) *Wherever you are in the world, wherever you are in your life, we're always ready to hear from you.*

(20) *66% of people think ironing is the easiest way to reduce wrinkle. Home economics class will never be the same.*

(21) *Sometimes I choose to follow.*

From the above examples, it can be seen that "always" and "never" are frequently used in these advertisements. It's quite understandable since advertisers tend to make rosy promises, projecting themselves as trustworthy, loyal and reliable. However, this type of frequency word is subjective, thus fuzzy in meaning, so consumers may have different interpretations based on their own knowledge, habits and cultural background.

3.6 Use of Coinages

New words and expressions coined by means of imitation or by free compounding that are created to attract consumers' attention and to meet their needs for curiosity and novelty are invariably employed in English advertisements. Such newly made words and phrases may suggest that the advertised product or service possesses distinct qualities as well as the value of novelty. Many coined words in advertising English, especially in trade names, are words freshly coined, or deliberately misspelled and abbreviated.

(22) *Give a **Timex** to all, and to all a good time.*

(23) *Come to our **fruice**.*

(24) *The **Orangemostest** Drink in the world.*

(25) ***Kwik-Kwik** transport service.*

The words in bold part are coinages. In example (22), "Timex means" "time" plus "excellent". In advertising language, the suffix -ex is often added to show the super quality of a product. In addition, "good time" here has a double meaning: it may mean "pleasant time" or "showing time exactly". In example (23), "fruice" means "fruit" plus "juice". This newly coined word can arouse consumers' attention by its novelty in form. When reading example (24), the consumers may think "Orangemostest" is a wrong word, but actually it is deliberately created by the copywriters. In this advertisement, the word "Orangemostest" consists of three parts: "orange" plus "most" plus "est". It is commonly known that orange juice is a popular drink for its nutrition. Two superlatives most and the suffix -est are added so as to stress the best quality of this product. In example (25), the author makes a clever use of a witty and eye-catching word "Kwik-Kwik" which sounds like "quick- quick", is very attractive to customers. The reduced letters stress the quick service to the customers. Coinages of this kind can not be found in dictionaries, but they seem familiar to consumers in appearance. Customers can guess their meanings according to the context without help of dictionaries. When customers read the newly coined words, their interest is stimulated, and they want to go on reading and take purchasing action. Thus, the final goal of advertising is reached. But coinages must be well based on the implication, stressing the novelty and uniqueness

of the products, without which coinages can produce little effect and will be meaningless. Misspelling the common words is also a clever use of coinages. Look at the following examples:

(26) *We know eggsactly how to tell eggs.*

(27) *Drinka*

   Pinta

   Milka

   Day

(28) *TWOGETHER*

The Ultimate All Inclusive One Brice Sun-kissed Holiday.

In example (26), "eggsactly" not only has the similar pronunciation as "exactly", but it is related with the last word "eggs" in this sentence, thus impressing people a great deal. Example (27) is an advertisement for milk. The correct forms of these three words are "Drink, Pint, Milk". The sentence in standard grammar should be "Drink a pint of Milk a day." The pronunciation of "of " is similar to that of "a", so the advertiser misspells it as quoted above, which not only attracts consumers' attention to this advertisement, but also achieves rhythm and beauty of the advertising language. Example (28) is an advertisement to provide a holiday inn for a couple. "Twogether" and "together" are similar both in spelling and pronunciation. "To" is misspelled as "Two" by the advertiser on purpose to indicate that the couple could get the romantic feeling if they spend their holiday in this inn. Thus, emotion between lovers tends to become common and ordinary on the surface after a long period, "Twogether" here can remind them of the romantic time in the past. This advertisement is just to meet such need and psychology. It is easily seen from the above examples that newly created words can vividly express the desirable features, qualities, or functions of the products or services being advertised.

4. Conclusion

The article indicates that advertising English is fraught with fuzzy expressions and semantic fuzziness is an important means to realize the linguistic fuzziness in advertising English. Through analysis of fuzziness in advertisements, the author has found the reasons for the extensive employment of fuzziness in advertising---being attractive, purposeful and brief. The choice of fuzziness to establish images of products or services is quite common in advertising English. Advertisers often employ fuzzy expressions to grab consumers' attention, realize persuasion function, avoid lawful and ethical responsibilities. The author is to draw attention to the application of fuzziness in advertising and equip people with better understanding of it to avoid mistakes in interpreting and produce more successful advertisement.

The study concerned in the thesis is undertaken from pragmatic perspective, which not only helps to enrich the understanding of fuzziness, but also helps to promote the studies of advertising language and make the previous theoretical studies about advertising more practical ones. It also provides the indication that pragmatics does set a solid theoretical foundation for advertising studies.

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