

Vlčková, Jitka

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JITKA VLČKOVÁ

PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN A TABLOID AND A BROADSHEET

This paper aims to contribute to the analyses of personal advertising. Looking at the choice of linguistic means in 738 personal advertisements in the supplements of three successive issues of a tabloid and a broadsheet, *The Mirror* and *The Sunday Times* respectively, enables us to examine the role of the context and intertextuality and see how the texts (and writers) conform to the implied reader. The focus will be on lexical choices rather than syntactic patterns. According to the survey of 1995 the assumptions are that *The Mirror* readers are mostly the working class (about 80 per cent) and *The Times* are the middle class (more than 60 per cent) (cf. Reah 2002: 35–36). Recurrent advertisements in successive issues were excluded. The study did not include gay advertisements.

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Text and culture

Advertising in general, personal advertising included, has become part of our everyday experience. Advertisements have their own coding which invites creative and subtle reading to make the meaning. The meanings, however, are not fixed for all readers: the understanding and interpretation of suggested ideas depends on the reader's cultural background. The advertisements carry traces of and messages about the culture that produced them. The messages both reflect and construct cultural values: '...kann man sagen, dass die Kultur die Gesamtheit der jeweiligen Texte darstellt oder auch, dass die Kultur ein Text mit komplexem Aufbau ist...' (Lotman 1981: 19).

Though the newspapers under consideration come from one national culture, they address readers of different social strata. One may say that the readers of the two different kinds of newspaper constitute distinctive cultural sub-groups (i.e. sub-cultures), each of them maintaining their own attitudes and beliefs. These are continuously strengthened in the interaction with texts of their choice, as texts are 'social spaces in which two fundamental social processes simultaneously occur: cognition and representation of the world' (Fairclough 1995). As

Sapir (in Palmer 1976: 44) suggested, the world in which we live ‘is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group.’ The papers essentially operate on the assumption that their readers are a homogenous group and, in response, the readers when writing to their newspaper conform to the invisible ‘standards’ of their paper.

Context and intertextuality

Intertextuality is basically defined as texts in relation to other texts. There is a continual ‘dialogue’ between the text given and other texts that exist outside it (Wales 1997: 259). In our study, it is the relation to other texts within the immediate context, i.e. the type of newspaper. Our aim is to verify the hypotheses of uneven lexical variety in different types of newspapers

Personal advertisements appear with other advertisements of similar kind in a regular column in the newspaper and form the so-called ‘text colony’. They are self-sustained units ordered with a certain degree of arbitrariness (cf. Černá et al. 2002: 31). Their meanings do not derive from the way they are ordered. Both the writer creating the text (the advertisement) and the reader interpreting it are aware of this kind of text organisation. The language is compressed, which means that the advert is less explicit in its structure than a fully articulated text. This is manifested, among other things, by a frequent use of abbreviated forms, such as TLC (tender loving care), WLTM (would like to meet), GSOH (good sense of humour).

Writer’s strategy

Writing is a form of image-making (Goddard 2002: 13) which depends ‘on the suppression of undesirable associations and the promotion of desirable ones’ (Wales 1997: 235).

This is even more true of advertising, the main goal of which is to attract the reader and elicit his/her response. On the one hand, the writer of a personal advertisement attempts to stand out from the others, on the other hand, s/he conforms to the expected standards, both linguistic and extra-linguistic ones.

It can be presumed that these standards, though to a great extent set by the type of newspaper, are partly affected by the advertisers themselves. Not only their social backgrounds but also age and sex idiolects may be an important factor. As Wierzbicka (1991) observes, there are not only considerable differences between different languages, but cross-cultural norms also vary from one regional and social variety to another: there are considerable differences between Australian English and American English, between middle-class English and working-class English, and so on. If the reader is not familiar with these and some other cultural aspects he might misinterpret the text completely. Different social and historical conditions can produce vastly different readings of the same text. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of unique ads across the newspaper supplements.

Table 1 Number of advertisements in *The A List* and *The Style*

LIST		STYLE	
M	F	M	F
125	144	262	207

Converted into percentages, the male advertisements represent 47 per cent in the tabloid and 56 per cent in the broadsheet.

The percentile representation according to the age groups in our study suggests that the advertisers in the tabloid are mostly below the age of fifty while in the broadsheet the majority come from the age groups between thirty and fifty-nine years of age. A considerable number of advertisers in the tabloid do not mention their age (Table 2). Judging from the age required in the prospective partner (usually between 30 and 45) one may presume that the advertisers are below the age of fifty.

Table 2 Advertisements according to age groups in per cent

age	LIST		STYLE	
	M	F	M	F
20–29	11%	10%	4%	3%
30–39	14%	18%	26%	24%
40–49	39%	26%	38%	45%
50–59	6%	15%	20%	19%
60+	2%	10%	7%	5%
No age given	28%	21%	5%	4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

The 'expected' personal advertisement will be stereotypical, written in the traditional way, i.e., the third person singular to create the feeling of objectivity. Its structure may be almost invariably expressed as: SD–Ac–PD–IR–L–C

SD: self-description and self-identification—*very good-looking tall, white male*, ...sometimes in reversed order—*Male, good-looking...*

Ac: "action"—*seeks*

PD: partner's description—*a sincere slim lady*

IR: intended relationship—*for LTR/marriage*

L: location—*London, Middlesex* (in *The A List*)

C: advert code or phone number

The advertisement may also be conceived as a sort of bartering: 'I offer something in exchange for something else'. In *The A List*, 'what I offer' is frequently longer than 'what I expect'. Černá, et al., (2002) call this strategy 'self oriented'. (*SINGLE mum, cuddly size 16, happy-go-lucky likes pubs, the theatre, clubs, restaurants and nights in, seeks male for LTR. Middlesex. 337834*)

In *The Style*, the 'offer' and 'requirement' are usually more equally proportioned but still more self-oriented. 'Location' is often part of SD: *SLIM Merseyside male, 50s, semi-retired, fit and active, seeks outgoing, bright, professional female, for friendship and sunshine. Voice No 327392*.

Variations in the scheme, such as passive constructions, are rare in either newspaper.

Advertisements in some other newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Observer Preview*, and advertisements in other anglophone countries exhibit more variety in their structure and borrowings from other text types, such as poems, telephone conversations a.o., are more visible. (cf. Vlčková 1996; 2001)

It is generally recognised that tabloids require a lower level of literacy than broadsheet papers because they use simpler language, i.e. common lexis, shorter sentences and not many complex constructions. One might thus expect that the advertisements in the tabloid would be shorter. On average, however, they do not exhibit significant differences in length. The male and female advertisements in both the newspapers have between 18.3 and 20.6 words. What is different, however, is the number of unique words. The most original are the females in *The Style*—with every 2.5th word being unique, compared with every 6th (!) in *The A List*; the data in males are 3rd and 3.5th respectively. These findings support the general recognition of different stylistic standards in the newspapers.

As our aim is not to analyse the more subtle differences in the advert structures between the two kinds of newspaper, let us look at some of the lexical choices. The restricted space of this paper forces us to make a very limited choice. Concentration will therefore be on the expressions that appear in all advertisements: the words by which the writers describe themselves and their prospective partners.

Male and Female, Lady and Gentleman

Wierzbicka (1988: 471) describes the usual usage of *male* and *female* '...female or male are of entirely different order from concepts such as man, woman and child. In particular, *male* and *female* are pure 'distinguishers', which are used to distinguish members of two abstract sub-classes from one another rather than to identify certain positive kinds...' The idea of non-markedness is obviously in the subconsciousness of the writers, as *male* and *female* are the most frequent references. As words that do not carry emotional connotations, they add to the 'objectivity' of the utterance. Their 'neutrality' is strongly felt by the advertisers in *The Style*, who markedly prefer *female* over any other reference. Unlike the male advertisers in *The A List*, who frequently leave the reference without any further attribute, the male advertisers in *The Style* add several attributes to it.

If the male writers in *The A List* add an attribute, they confine themselves to a limited number of descriptions of appearance while those in *The Style* use a wide range of attributes referring to both appearance and character. The semantics of the attributes correlate with the intended relationships. References to body appearance only are usually connected with temporal relationships ('...seeks attractive white female, N/S for fun times together').

Female advertisers in both newspapers conform to the societal stereotypes and almost all of them refer to their appearance. There is a considerably greater variety in *The Style* (apart from *attractive, slim* which are also frequent in *The A List*, there are expressions such as *beautiful, voluptuous, stylish, elegant*).

Female is used by 36 per cent and 80 per cent of female advertisers and by 46 per cent and 91 per cent of male advertisers in *The A List* and *The Style*, respectively. Its usage is spread across all age groups. The corresponding data for *male* are 64 per cent and 83 per cent in female advertisements and 77 per cent and 88 per cent in male advertisements. There are seemingly different perceptions of these counterparts. *Male* is preferred in both newspapers while *female* is considerably lower in *The A List* (F 36 per cent and M 46 per cent). The lower usage in female advertisers may be explained by the use of other references to self, such as *mum* (*single mum*-18 per cent, *lady* 21 per cent, *blonde* 11 per cent). There is a question whether some of the male advertisers in *The A List* may be influenced by the rather negative collocations (and connotations) with *female* in their subconsciousness (cf. CID) and therefore prefer other expressions, such as *lady* (in 25 per cent), which is considered polite. Writers of other races, such as Asian or black also prefer *lady* to *female*. In all age groups in the broadsheet (not in the tabloid) the viewed relationship with a *lady* is always lasting (*lasting romance, long-term relationship, for a new beginning*). As a reference to self, it is mostly used by women of the age groups 40+ and women from other ethnic backgrounds in both newspapers. *Gentleman* never appears in self-reference. In female advertisements *gentleman* is the counterpart of *lady* and is more frequently found in the tabloid (12 per cent compared with 4 per cent in the broadsheet).

Guy, which is popular in everyday speech, appears only among 5 per cent of male advertisers and 1 per cent of female advertisers and only in the tabloid.

Conclusion

The advert-writers in both the tabloid and broadsheet follow the wording established in each newspaper. They recognize the formality of the situation by avoiding informal words, such as *guy*. The texts in the tabloid use abbreviated forms for some expressions that do not appear in the broadsheet (*GSOH, LTR, GSOH-good sense of humour* ranks among the ten most frequent words in the tabloid adverts). The tabloid more than the broadsheet uses expressions that are considered formal or even old-fashioned (*lady, gentleman*). The texts in *The Style* testify to more sophisticated readership by using a greater number of unique words, many of them of Romance and Latin origin. *The Style*, much more than *The A*

List, supports the traditional values of lasting relationships—no ‘viewed relationship’ in *The Style* is ‘for fun’. There are expressions that appear in personal advertisements more frequently than anywhere else (e.g. *seek*), and that can be found in both kinds of newspaper. There are also expressions that are unique to each kind of newspaper and the advert writers quite strictly observe their usage.

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Program:

TACT/tact.html