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TEXT TYPOLOGY OF PERSONAL ADVERTISING
(Attract. 35 yo. M, profess., with GSOH, WLTM sim.F 4 f/ship.Ldn.)

INTRODUCTION

Since their first appearance in 1695 in the English journal *Collection for Improvement of Husbandry and Trade*, personal advertisements have become an inseparable part of many serious newspapers, magazines and tabloids throughout the world. They have developed distinctive features both in contents and style, with some patterns common to all languages, and others highly specific and bound to a particular society, group or individual. They originate in people's need to find a solution to their loneliness which is today a symptom of the deprivations of urban life. In spite of their rich linguistic diversity, advertisements seem to stand on the margin of scholarly interest (cf. Trost, J., in Stolz (5)).

This paper presents a brief general analysis of 458 personal advertisements, 222 written by women and 236 written by men, in randomly chosen copies of *The Guardian* and *The Observer Preview* from June, August and November 1995. For the purpose of this study, the materials considered sex, age, ethnicity and sexual orientation of the advert-writers. Unless explicitly stated, no significant differences have been found in these groups.

Personal advertisements are texts, or rather, pieces of communication, in which the writer ('speaker') is addressing an unknown 'ideal' reader ('listener'). The main goal of the text is not to provide information but to mediate personal contact. Everything that the text 'conveys' is to serve this goal. The success of a personal advertisement is conditioned by:

1. The text is read by the 'right' person. This factor can largely be affected by the writer's choice of newspaper (or magazine).
2. The reader has a pleasant feeling of being personally addressed, which encourages him/her to →
3. Answer

In other words, the text should stimulate the reader emotionally and selectively, and motivate him/her to respond. This requirement of complexity may, however, be too high for a text which is so short.

Every text has two semantic levels: one that is literal and another that is implied. For example, 'a blond girl' may be just a description but may also carry the emotional connotation of sex appeal. A person who 'likes music' and gives a list of composers, conveys 'look how intelligent, educated, cultivated, ... I am.' Pieces of information become arguments which are to be persuasive in effect. It is important for the success of the advertisement that the meaning (the level) understood by the reader coincides with that intended by the advert-writer. The actual meaning thus depends on the reader and is constituted only in the act of communication. The text analysts cannot therefore assess the priority function of a piece of information – whether it is to convey facts or have an emotional effect.

THE STRUCTURE OF ADVERTISEMENTS

The sequence of information – 'who says what to whom' exhibits almost the same *basic pattern* in all analysed advertisements:

- a) advert-writer's introduction of self, ie self-identification and self-description (SI, SD)
- b) action (Ac)
- c) identification and description of the desired partner (PI, PD)
- d) location (L)

SD – SI – SD – Ac – PD – P – L :

'Spiritually aware M, young 38, single, slim, no ties, WLTM similar (younger) F. Lanc./Cumbria/ N.Yorks.'

SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-DESCRIPTION (SI, SD)

This is not only to give the sex (F, M) in SI but also objective information (such as, age, ethnicity, education, zodiac sign) and subjective self-evaluation.

The structure is usually SD-SI-SD: 'Impulsive, bright, cheerful, adventurous blonde F, 31, great personality ...' 'Profess., Christian widow, tall, 62, young looking, caring, fun loving & intelligent ...' 'Friendly, intellig., handsome M, 5'8, 30 ...'

SI – In spite of the fact that the newspapers have separate columns for men and women advertisers, 98% of men and 97 % of women include sex in self-introduction, with most frequently used words ‘male’ (in 26%), ‘man’ (12%), ‘woman’ (31%) , ‘lady’ (25%) in *Guardian*, or unmarked, formal abbreviations ‘M’ (in 70%) and ‘F’ (47%) in the *Observer Preview*. Other descriptions range from ‘bachelor’, ‘gent’ to ‘guy’, ‘bloke’ and ‘fella’ in men, and from ‘female’ to ‘girl’, ‘babe’ and ‘damsel’ in women.

Other forms of SI :

- **first name:** ‘Mike, 28, 5’8, medium built ...’, ‘Rocker at heart, Andrea, 37, N/S ...’
- **metaphor**, often drawn from fairy-tales, films, TV series, classics, and other popular genres: ‘Sleeping beauty needs ...’, ‘Mature Elizabeth Bennett seeks ...’
- **SI may carry the information of SD:** ‘designer’, ‘brunette’, ‘Londoner’.

RANGE OF INFORMATION PROVIDED IN SD:

- **appearance:** body height rarely specific, usually only ‘tall’, ‘petite’ or ‘short’. When body structure is mentioned, it is usually ‘slim’. Quite a large number describe themselves ‘attractive’: 24% of females and 15% of males; instead of ‘attractive’, or occasional ‘handsome’, some males tend to point at features that are valued in male appearance: ‘tall, fit ...’, ‘fit, slim, 5’ 11 ...’ Other physical features mentioned were hair, eyes, and in females, well developed forms (‘curvy’, ‘full figured’, ‘shapely’). Information that does not comply with the accepted standards of ‘beauty’ is conveyed very seldom, and if so, it is humorous: ‘Humane but overweight, sensitive, balding, literate 7 attractive to women....’
- **age :** usually only a number, sometimes complemented by ‘yo’ (=years old: ‘Tall, 28 yo M ...’), other times only approximate: ‘... M, early 40’s ...’
- **profession:** more frequent in males (22%) than females (9%). Males are more specific (‘Designer/publisher ...’, ‘Co. Director ...’) than females who usually describe themselves by general expressions, such as ‘professional’, or ‘graduate’. With one exception, this information always suggests a white-collar job.
- **political or religious orientation :** both the *Guardian* and the *Observer Preview* are left oriented. Still, some ad-writers consider it important to stress their own left political orientation, perhaps to accentuate their political interest or even activity.
Political orientation can be found both in males’ and females’ advertisements: ‘Caring, socialist F ...’, ‘Leftish, London male ...’ No party affiliation is mentioned. Similar thing can be observed in the very rare ‘Religious orientation’, where no church is specified: ‘...’Christian widow ...’

- **sexual orientation:** ‘Romantic gay male, ...’, ‘Bi F ...’, ‘Academic lesbian ...’
- **dietary orientation, smoking habits:** ‘Smoking, vegan ...’
- **marital status:** given only by 3% of advertisers. Except three cases, no parental obligations are mentioned.
- **zodiac sign:** ‘30 yo Scorpio lady ...’, ‘Leo feminist ...’
- **ethnicity:** ‘Gaelic guy, ...’, ‘... black F ...’, ‘Asian F ...’, ‘French Mediterranean woman ...’
- **character qualities:** ‘... open-minded ...’, ‘... creative ...’, ‘... romantic ...’
- **hobbies and interests:** ‘... likes books, Bach, hills, garden ...’
- **residence:** ‘Leeds woman ...’, ‘Sth East Ldn lady ...’
- **financial state,** if positive (both in males and females): ‘Independent, solvent, 50s’ ...’.

ACTION (Ac)

is an explicit (verbal) expression of the activity of looking for a partner.

The range of verbal constructions is limited to the 3rd. p. sg. ind. ‘seeks’, conditional ‘would like to meet’ (usually abbreviated to ‘WLTM’), exceptional ‘is looking for’, ‘wishes to’ and passive forms where the basic formula (see above) is reversed. In this case, not only ‘sought’ but also other verbs, such as, ‘wanted’ or ‘needed’, occur.

There is obviously no need of much variation here, as the context, provided by the newspaper, makes a sufficient background for the activity.

PARTNER’S IDENTIFICATION AND PARTNER’S DESCRIPTION (P and PD)

The words indicating the desired partners range from neutral ‘woman’, ‘female’, or ‘F’ in the *Observer Preview*, and more courteous ‘lady’ to the emphatic ‘soulmate’, emotional ‘girl’ (‘... to meet adorable 58+ girl ...’), ‘babe’, or ‘wifey’ (which also conveys information on the envisaged relationship), and metaphors that complement SI (‘Frog, ... seeks princess’, ‘Mel Gibson WLTM Sandra Bullock! ...’). The most frequent indication of a male P is more conventional: ‘man’ and ‘male’ or ‘M’ (in *O. Preview*); ‘male’ sometimes used as pre-modifier: ‘male companion’, ‘male friend’. Both the informal ‘guy’ and formal ‘gentleman’ are exceptional.

Metaphorical expressions in male P are not frequent: ‘Coloured damsel ... seeks white knight’, ‘Prue Sarn seeks Kester Woodseaves’ or ‘Sleeping beauty needs a prince to awaken him ...’ (gay ad.) Sometimes they do not complement SD: ‘Fiercely indpt., gorgeous, intellig. woman 31. Wants lively worldly devil with heart ...’

The PD may include :

- **personal qualities:** ‘... female warm, caring & loving’, ‘to meet Female ... with intelligence, humour & a sensual nature’, ‘...soulmate with GSOH ...’ (=good sense of humour). It is, perhaps, also possible to include here the ‘mental capacity’: ‘... WLTM professional male ...’, ‘WLTM free grad. man ... seeks educated, sociable man ...’
- **physical qualities:** ‘... WLTM tall, slim, attract. woman ...’, ‘... WLTM similar attract ... M’). The most frequently wished physical quality in M partners is ‘tall’.
- **political or religious orientation:** ‘... seeks vibrant, lefty woman ...’, ‘... seeks Christian M ...’
- **sexual orientation:** ‘ 33 yo ... F, seeks gay/bi F ...’
- **marital status:** ‘... WLTM intelligent single dad ...’
- **ethnicity:** ‘Asian F ... seeks white, intelligent M ...’, ‘... seeks tall M, any race ...’
- **age** (more frequent in 20+ and 30+ age groups): ‘... seeks articulate 30’s F ...’

Sometimes the partner’s wished qualities are to reflect the ad-writers’: ‘Lecturer, Male, 45, well-travelled socialist, humorous, slim, attractive WLTM similar Female ...’, ‘Music loving, slim female, 40’s, hazel eyes, slim build, into arts, seeks similar male ...’

LOCATION

Approximately 87% of advertisements give ‘location’ which stands ‘independently’ at the very end of the advertisement, separated by full stops on either end of the word from the main body of the text and the code number of the advertisement. The interpretation may be manifold, whether to suggest the ad writer’s place of residence, or the writer’s interest limited to partners from that area.

The basic pattern exhibits several modifications, the most frequent probably being the pattern with included information about envisaged relationship (RD):

SD – SI –SD – Ac – PD –P – Rd – L

ENVISAGED RELATIONSHIP (RD)

This piece of information may specify the envisaged relationship: ‘... seeks ... man for a discreet, relaxed, supportive friendship’, ‘... seeks romantic and non-smoking lady for long term relationship, possibly more’, ‘... M. to settle down & share life with.’

It may also suggest activities to be shared, thus implicitly extend the range of S qualities and those wished in the partner: ‘... seeks ... woman, for picnics, midnight walks, barndances or other nonsense’, ‘... seeks ... M ... for intellig. conversation, fun, beer, quiet nights, hugs & security’.

The space between PD (or RD) and L is sometimes occupied by a note of Restriction. This is probably motivated by a bad experience in a previous relationship. Voiced in the advertisement, it contributes to a narrower selection of potential partners. The aim of the note is to discourage undesired respondents with qualities unacceptable for the ad-writer:

- **political beliefs:** ‘B’ham F, 40’s, attract., looking for a mate, to talk, laugh with, be close to. No J. Major voters ...’
- **hobbies/interests :** ‘Warm, attractive 40’s woman, lecturer ... seeks N/S man to share life, wining & dining (No Tories, Sportsmen!)’
- **personal qualities:** ‘Honest male, mid 30’s, required for 39 year old black female for simple/mundane/normal pursuits. Users, perverts and time-wasters need not apply ...’.
- **different sex orientation:** ‘Gay F 46, recent grad. seeks F, interests many, incl. travel & laughter. No marrieds or bi’s please ...’
- Sometimes, and especially in males, **the note is expressed in a ‘must’:** ‘32yr old male seeks female ... Must like kids, poetry, wine, tents and love London.’
- **different approach to advertising:** ‘Tall, male, 37, GSOH, ... WLTM female ... for f/ship, romance. Only genuine replies please.’

The basic formula may thus be extended to:

SD – SI– SD – Ac – PD – P – PD – RD – Rs – L

Not all advertisements correspond to the formulas above. Some advertisers (app.5%) prefer a more original way of conveying information and thus attracting the reader. They ‘violate’ the standard by including an appelative element, which may be only a ‘hallo’: ‘Ahoy there. Battered by the waves of life but not quite shipwrecked. Romantic male seeks partner’, but often this means breaking the grammatical ‘rule’ of personal advertisements, which is the 3rd person sg.:

‘Romantic Christmas? Have a cottage log fire, haven’t pretty girl ...’

The writer may be directly turning to the reader, inviting and encouraging him/her to respond: ‘FUN TIMES Truly, deeply, ... male. Save me! Let’s go wild over the weekend. If that’s you, leave a message ...’ Sometimes this is accompanied by a humorous, poeticised text: ‘Make an old man very happy, buy him a pint in one of many old beamed pubs ...’

The writer’s attempt to make the advertisement attractive to the reader often results in a text that is humorous . The humour is often based on exaggeration,

should this be, for example, a cliché in self description ‘tall, dark and handsome’, ‘tall, dark and ugly’, or some other phenomenon: ‘Socialist M, veg. arty, ... seeks F comrade with SOH (sense of humour, expl.) & AK47 (type of gun, expl.), to help storm Winter Palace ...’

The typology of ad-texts considers three levels:

1. Layout, format, letter types. This is the first thing that attracts the reader’s eye. Both in the OP and the Guardian, the individual texts seldom exceed five lines, each line carrying no more than four pieces of information and thus making the text easily surveyable. The first three pieces of information are in bold print. Sometimes the advertisers make use of capital letters in the text: ‘LIVELY MIND, WARM HEART Woman ...’ Capital letters are used quite frequently for P: ‘Attractive ... woman ... seeks humorous., self-aware ... Man’; ‘... Londoner, 45, seeks seaside Lady ...’, thus expressing the genuine masculine or feminine qualities in the wished P (in the latter example even more emphasized by the stylistic quality of the P identification).

2. Literal meaning (can be deduced with the help of formulas)

3. Implied meaning

The interaction between these two is (cf. Stolz):

<i>Literal Meaning</i>	<i>Implied Meaning</i>
Appeal from the writer	→ The reader feels personally addressed
Chosen chunks of information	→ Positive/negative interpretation
Words emotionally charged	→ Emotional response, occasional ‘openness’ of interpretation complemented by personal experience
Restrictive note	→ Reader does not feel addressed and ignores the remaining information in the advertisement

LANGUAGE

The language used in personal advertising is rather compressed. Compression may sometimes cause ambiguity and it may go so far that only a regular and ‘informed’ reader is able to decipher the text and understand it without even noticing the structure.

The title of this paper gives an example:

Attr., 35 yo. M, profess., with GSOH, WLTM sim. F 4 f/ship. Ldn. (=Attractive, 35 year old man with good sense of humour, would like to meet similar female for friendship.)

Besides WLTM, it is the abbreviated description of the sense of humour which is most frequent. It appears in several modifications: GSOH, SOH, and VGSOH (= very good sense of humour). The existence of several 'levels' of 'sense of humour' testifies to the high value attributed to this personal quality by British advert-writers.

What John Sinclair (3) says about compressed English, holds true about personal advertisements:

- The text, usually in a note form, is less explicit in its structure than a fully articulated text.
- It makes full use of devices peripheral to the language, such as layout and conventions established for personal advertisements.
- There is little cohesion, the definite article, which in fully articulated text is a signal of backward reference, is missing.
- The number of finite verbs is limited.
- 'And', another common word, appears only in enumeration ('... many interests and hobbies ...').
- There is a strong tendency to abbreviation s – app.75% of texts contain some sort of abbreviation.

CONCLUSION

The material enabled establishment of a formula that reflects the arrangement of information in English personal advertisements. The structure of texts produced by different sex, age or race groups does not deviate markedly from the formula.

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SUMMARY

The article is a contribution to text typology. It deals with the information provided in personal advertisements and looks at the language of personal advertising in *The Guardian* and *The Observer Preview*.