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**The Linguistics of Newspaper Advertising  
in Nigeria**

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**Introduction**

Advertising has been defined as “a powerful communication force and a vital marketing tool helping to sell goods and services, image and ideas...” (Wright 1983:8). Similarly, Roderick (1980:4) defines advertising as “a message specified by its originator, carried by a communication system and intended to influence and/or inform an unknown audience”. Advertising may also be seen as “a group of activities aiming at and including dissemination of information in any paid product or service to compel action in accordance with the intent of an identifiable sponsor.” (Doghudje 1985:8)

Advertising has a long history, with some opinions tracing its origin to the story of Adam, Eve and the Serpent in the Bible (see, for instance Okigbo 1985:10 and Klepper 1985:6). Wright (1983:4) however opines that advertising started in ancient Babylon at about 3000 BC when inscriptions for an ointment dealer, a scribe and a shoe maker were made on clay tablets. Sandage and Fryburger (1963: IV) argue that Egyptians first wrote runaway – slave announcements on papyrus at about 3200 BC.

**Situation in Africa**

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In Africa, town-crying and hawking were the earliest forms of advertising. These have survived in many Nigerian villages till date. With respect to media advertising, which is the focus of this paper, Sandage and Fryburger (cited in Okeke 2006:24) suggest that the first media advertising was done in London in 1477 when a prayer book was announced for sale while the first newspaper advertising appeared in the Boston Newsletter in 1704.

The print media came into Nigeria in 1859 with the appearance of a Yoruba language newspaper, *iwe Iroyin* published by Reverend Henry Townsend at Abeokuta. The publication carried an advert in the form of an announcement for the Anglican Church.

### **Earliest Forms of Newspaper Advertising**

It is noteworthy that the earliest forms of newspaper advertising were crude and unsophisticated. But they not only helped the local merchant to sell off his goods or services but also set a pace for the modern methods of advertising which have over a long period of time undergone tremendous changes such that today, a lot can be written on the language of advertising in Nigeria. This is possible because advertising has become more professional, involving copy-writers who exploit all the available linguistic devices to make their adverts not only persuasive but also aesthetically appealing. This paper, therefore, attempts a linguistic analysis of the language of newspaper advertising in Nigeria, highlighting the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic features that make them attractive and persuasive.

### **Language in Advertising**

Leech (1966:25) posits that “most advertising language comes under the broader heading of “loaded language” that is aimed to change the will, opinions or attitude of its audience...” Cook (in Okeke 2006:13) sees advertising as a part of discourse. In his book *The Discourse of Advertising*, Cook argues that discourse has to do with text, content, interaction and persuasion and advertising performs all these functions.

Leech (1966:74) agrees with this opinion when he asserts that any aspect of language use is an aspect of discourse. He describes the style of discourse in the language of advertising as being either “colloquial-formal; casual – ceremonial; personal-impersonal; or simple - complex, depending on the particular audience and the audience sought to reach”.

Leech refers to the general style used in advertising as public colloquial. According to him, public colloquialism has a public origin in the sense that it originated through the merging of the discourse styles mentioned above. He opines that public colloquialism can be attributed to the enormous size of the audience in general. Leech explains that formal language is difficult both because “... it is the style acquired after colloquial grammar largely through formal education and because it is the vehicle of precise and rational expression”. For these reasons, a colloquial style of language would naturally be favoured by advertisers whose aim is to make contact with the general public regardless of their levels of education.

## **A Peculiar Form**

The structure of language in advertising has a peculiar form. Many factors predispose the copywriter (i.e. one who writes advertisements) to choose his vocabulary. This, in some sense, implies that the copywriter does not have a free flow of lexical items. For example the copywriter puts into consideration language variation as regards the target audience. He also ensures that his choice of language and content meets the four basic characteristics outlined by Leech (1966:25) as necessary for successful advertising. These are:

1. *Attention value*: this refers to the unorthodox use of language to provoke the consumer's attention and curiosity by presenting something surprising and unexpected. This can be achieved by unconventional behaviour, linguistic or otherwise.
2. *Readability*: the copywriter must make his message easy to grasp and assimilate.
3. *Memorability*: an advertisement gains nothing unless the name of the product is remembered. In fact, it is desirable that part of the linguistic message should be memorized. This includes brand names, slogans, key phrases, snatches of song, etc.
4. *Selling power*: one of the most striking features of the grammar of advertising is an extreme infrequency of imperative clauses, etc.

## **Making Advertising Attractive**

The need to make newspaper adverts attractive cannot be overstated. As Okpaleke (1992:21) has noted, an advertiser must take into consideration the fact that prospective buyers are likely to read newspapers not because of its advertising material but because of its editorials, and that adverts are numerous in newspapers and are always competing for the readers' attention.

The advertiser should, therefore, ensure that the adverts are presented in such a way that they easily catch the reader's attention. From a linguistic point of view, the language of advertising must be informative, instructive, distinctive, and persuasive. By implication, it must employ a style of language that will help in attracting people's attention and at the same time passing the information across.

## **Linguistic Devices in Advertising**

On the basis of our study, some of the linguistic devices used in advertising include:

1. *Alliteration*: This involves the repetition of speech sound in a sequence of nearby words. The term applies mainly to the repetition of consonant sounds.
2. *Ideophones*: This refers to words whose meanings are derived from their sounds.

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3. *Repetition*: This is a situation in which a particular word is repeated in the same construction for either emphasis or memorability.
4. *Orthographic Modification*: This has to do with a situation whereby the conventional way or spelling a word is deliberately altered to suit a new situation.
5. *Acronyms*: This is a kind of shortening device whereby the first letter of several words are picked out and pronounced together to derive a new word.
6. *Deixis*: This refers to the use of pronouns and demonstratives to establish a direct communication between either the advertiser and the audience or between the advertised product and the potential customers.
7. *Personification*: This attributes human qualities to non-human entities.
8. *Pun*: This refers to a play upon words that are almost identical in sound but contrast sharply in meaning.

For an easier demonstration of how these linguistic devices are exploited in advertising, we shall analyse our data using the four levels of linguistic analysis, namely the phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels.

### **The Phonology of Advertising**

Phonology is concerned with the ways in which speech sounds are organized in a particular language. In advertising, the phonological patterns of languages are organized in such a way as to make the flow of words appealing and captivating to the readers or hearers. To buttress this, Jefkins (1987:28) states that:

All words and sentences in any effective advertisement whether broadcast or printed must be noted and digested to a degree and remembered sufficiently to influence readers or viewers. Such words and sentences should be such that do not deviate from their original function, which is to attract attention.

This implies that the phonological pattern of a language could influence the attractiveness of adverts in that language in order to capture the reader's imagination.

Linguists in advertising agencies employ some phonological devices to make their texts attractive, which is one of the major objectives of advertising. In the present study, the devices we are concerned with under phonological analysis are alliteration, repetition and ideophones.

## Alliteration

In alliteration, certain sounds that occur in conspicuous positions in a word or sentence are repeated. These sounds are usually consonant sounds. An example can be seen from the following milk advert:

### 1. Peak of the Pack<sup>1</sup>

It is observed that the phonemes /p/ and /k/ occur at the initial and final positions respectively in the two key words: 'peak' and 'pack'. This is aimed at drawing the attention of the reader and it enhances the auditory agreeableness due to the inherent melody of the speech sound. Also worthy of note is the contrast between the vowel sounds /i:/, a high vowel in /pi:k/ and /æ/, a low vowel in /pæk/. The contrast, coupled with the alliteration earlier discussed makes the advert such that the reader can easily remember or chant the slogan without difficulty because of the organization of the sound patterns.

Another example can be seen in the Harp beer advert:

### 2. Harp for Happiness<sup>2</sup>

This advert bears resemblance to the first one in terms of their alliterative qualities. The use of the [h] and [p] sounds which are part of the Brand name of the product as well as part of the word 'happiness' is alliterative. There is also a stylistic exploitation of the sound similarity between the word 'Harp' and the first syllable of the word 'happiness'. This sharpens the alliteration and makes the advert both remarkable and memorable.

Another good use of alliteration can be seen in the *Whirlpool* advert in which the sound /p/ is exploited for sound effects:

### 3. You and Whirlpool: *pride, passion and performance...*

## Repetition

The second feature is repetition and it involves the repetition of particular words or brand names of a product or service so that it is impressed upon the hearer's mind. An example of this can be seen in the Sharp Corporation's advert for cameras:

Sharp Mind, Sharp Products<sup>4</sup>

There is a play upon the word 'sharp' which is the brand name of the product being advertised. The logic is that 'sharp' products can only come from the sharp minds who work in the sharp corporation. Moreover, the word play on 'sharp' is also apt for a camera since the quality of a camera is usually measured by the sharpness of its pictures. We see another case of repetition in the *Kia Picanto* advert.

Love life. Love the city. Love Picanto<sup>5</sup>.

Here the word *love* is repeated to buttress the logic that if one loves life and loves city life, then one must necessarily love picanto. In other words, picanto is the car for the city if one wants to enjoy life in the city.

### Rhyme

Rhyme refers to “the repetition of the identical or similar stressed sound or sounds” (Barnet 1985:230). Rhyme is used in adverts because it is pleasant to the ears in that it suggests order. Sometimes too, it is related to meaning as it “brings two words sharply together, often implying a relationship...” (Barnet 1985:230).

A good example of rhymes is found in a ‘Kia Rio advert’.

Welcome back Jack<sup>6</sup>

Here, there is a rhyme between *back* and *Jack*. The advertiser exploits the similarity in stress and sound between the two words to enhance memorability through the suggestion of beauty and harmony. A similar device is exploited in the following *Santa Fe* car advert:

. It’s got *pace*  
And lots of *space*<sup>7</sup>

as well as the Kia Cerato advert:

*Walk* the *Talk*<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the similarity in sound between *walk* and *talk*, a relationship is also suggested in the sense that with the car, you are put on the move (walk), and because the car affords you maximum comfort, you can discuss your business (talk) while on wheels.

### Onomatopoeia

This is a poetic device which depends on the resemblance between sound and meaning for its effect. An example of this is seen in the Schweppes drink advert.

Schweppes... schhh...<sup>9</sup>

The sound *schhh*..., is laden with tantalizing suggestions. First, it suggests that the drink is ice-cold as the sound mimics the sound of gas emission as obtains when one opens a very chilled drink. Second, it indicates the exciting, refreshing and thirst assuaging qualities of the drink. The goal is to make the drink appealing to a potential consumer, especially one that is thirsty and in need of something cold and soothing.

What is more, the advert holds the reader's attention because of the resemblance between the sound *schhh...* and the first part of the brand name of the product. The use of onomatopoeia in advertising is common with food and beverages.

### **Similarities and Contrasts in Sound**

From the above discussion on the phonology of advertising, one can easily conclude that the advertiser often exploits similarities or contrasts in sounds to capture the attention of the reader. Montgomery (1982:64) must have had this in mind when he notes that:

The sensitivity of language to any context is registered by more than the individual words themselves. What seems to be more crucial is the way in which particular vocabulary is articulated together into utterances and which type of utterances can then result.

He illustrates his point by citing the Tubifast advert:

The tubular dressing retention bandage.  
No sticking, no tying,  
No pinning.

In his words, such an advert as this displays prevalent features of advertising text:

- (i) It deploys a common device of printed adverts, namely the repetition of close succession of an identical structure.
- (ii) The unusual sentence structure in which certain elements are left unstated.

### **The Morphology of Advertising**

Morphology is concerned with the study of the internal structure of words. It deals with such issues as word formation and derivation, as well as the relationship between words. Advertisers often manipulate these morphological elements through blending, acronyms, coinages and orthographic modification, among others.

#### **Blending**

Blending is a morphological process by which two words are fused into one. The following example is not just a blend; it is also a type of coinage.

Egg is the least *Eggspensive* form of nutrition<sup>10</sup>  
Obviously the word *eggspensive* does not exist in the English lexicon. It is rather a blend

from two English words *eggs* and *expensive*. The advert would have read:

Egg is the least expensive form of nutrition;

but that would not have attracted the type of attention desired by the advertiser. By coining the new word *eggspensive*, however, the advert becomes unique, thereby attracting the reader's attention.

## Acronyms

The word acronym was originally derived from a combination of the first letters of the words: Aroused Citizens Representing Oppressed New York Minorities. It has now become a part of the English lexicon and refers to a word derived from the combination of the first letters of several words together and pronounced as one. It is a kind of shortening technique which advertisers use to create attention for their products, especially in view of the fact that there are other new products competing for attention. An example of this is found in the MTN (a telephone company) advert:

BOGOF<sup>11</sup> which is an acronym for:  
Buy One, Get One Free.

Another is found in an advert for multivitamin syrup for children, MIM:

What is MIM?  
MIM means  
Multivitamins  
Iron  
Minerals<sup>12</sup>

## Autographic Modification

This refers to a deviation from the conventional way of spelling a word. The copywriter deliberately spells a regular word in a manner that deviates from the normal spelling of the word. This, like other forms of morphological modification discussed above, is usually done to attract attention for the advertised product. Let us consider the following examples:

. Bank PHB Pot of *Phortune* Promo<sup>13</sup>

Bank PHB is one of the commercial banks in Nigeria. In this advert, there is a deliberate orthographic modification, resulting in *fortune* being spelt *phortune*. Apart from attracting the reader's attention because of the peculiarity of the spelling, the first two letters of the new word – ph - coincide with the first two letters of the bank's name – PHB. Thus the 'mis-spelling' is not only memorable in itself; it also reminds the reader of the bank's name. A similar example is found in the following advert.

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*Libertie* gives you *flexibilitie*<sup>14</sup>

‘Libertie’ is obviously a deliberate deviation from the normal spelling of *liberty*, just as *flexibilitie* is from the word *flexibility*. *Libertie* is a brand name for an ECONET branded wireless phone. Its spelling distinguishes it from the dictionary word *liberty*. *Flexibilitie* is deliberately adopted to suit the brand name of *libertie*, all aimed at creating more attention for the product than would have been the case if the advert had simply said:

Liberty gives you flexibility.

Another example is seen in the MTN mobile phone advert where the key words ‘text’ and ‘love’ are deliberately mis-spelt to catch attention:

Let’s txt about luv  
can u text?  
Can u luv txt?<sup>15</sup>

There is also this telephone service advert from multi-links:

Lagos *fone*. Attractive. Trendy...<sup>16</sup>

where phone is spelt fone for the same reasons discussed above.

### **The Syntax of Advertising**

Syntactic analysis of advertising is geared towards specifying the principles that underlie the formation of sentences. In advertising, words may or may not necessarily be strung together in the conventional manner of sentence formation. But even when constructions do not follow the normal convention, they are nevertheless, couched in such a way as to adequately make the point intended by the advertiser.

In adverts that emphasize the quality of the advertised product, the syntactic structure places emphasis on adjectives (and adverbs) and some of such ‘sentences’ may not feature any verb at all. As such, they may not be amenable to analysis within the usual SVO structure.

From the foregoing, we may classify the sentence structures in newspaper advertising as follows: Emphatic sentences, interrogative sentences, deviant structures and deictic constructions. We should also point out that for the purpose of our analysis here we are using the word sentence in a very loose sense and that some of our ‘sentences’ may not be sentences after all in the strict conventional sense.

### **Emphatic Constructions**

By emphatic constructions we mean those constructions in which the qualities of the advertised product are highlighted. This is usually done through the use of series of adjectives (and in some cases, adverbs) that emphasize the qualities claimed for the product. An example can be seen in the Pears Baby range of products advert which reads:

Here at last. One skin cream that's  
*mild* and *gentle* on all the family's skin<sup>17</sup>

The use of the adjectives *mild* and *gentle* in this advert is aimed at stimulating positive responses from the readers, as these qualities apparently set the cream apart from other competing products. A similar strategy is adopted in the close-up advert below:

CLOSE UP... flashing *white* teeth and *fresh* sweet  
breath... that's close up appeal<sup>18</sup>

The line-up of four adjectives in the advert is, no doubt, aimed at ensuring that the reader is left in no doubt about the quality of the product. It reminds one of the current television advert of the same product where it (close-up) is said to be "the only tooth paste endorsed by the World Dental Federation (FDI).

This, like the newspaper advert above, is aimed at excluding every other brand of tooth paste in the market. When modifiers are lined up like that, they help the advertiser in providing more information about the product than would have been ordinarily possible. Besides, the modifiers are used in a way that they serve as reminders for the products advertised, as they are used in a way that they aid memory. This is obviously the reason behind the use of *very* in the following advert:

Virgin Nigeria: *Very* Nigerian. *Very* Virgin<sup>19</sup>

Apart from the intensity of the emphaser *very* in this advert, the alliterative value of *V* in the sentence *Virgin... Very... very Virgin*) makes the statement impossible to forget.

## **Interrogatives**

Interrogative statements are those made in the form of questions with a view to making the advert catchier and more thought-provoking. The questions are asked rhetorically in such a way that answers to them are either implied or too obvious to be supplied. By adopting this syntactic strategy, appropriate responses are stimulated in the reader, leading (hopefully) to their better appreciation of the advertised product or service. For example, the 'new' *Volkswagen Skoda Felicia* is presented as a car for special people, the elite of the society, with the rhetorical question:

Are you among the chosen...?<sup>20</sup>

The same strategy is adopted in the following ‘Guaranty Trust Bank’ advert which asks rhetorically:

... wouldn’t you rather bank with us?<sup>21</sup>,

and in the following for *Kia Cerato car*:

Are you ready to fly?<sup>22</sup>

which alludes to the car’s capacity for speed. In the advert for a brand of car significantly named ‘Escape’, the advertiser echoes the famous question credited to Shakespeare:

... what is in a name?<sup>23</sup>

By doing this, the advertiser deliberately draws the reader’s attention to the connection between the car’s name and its purported capacity for speed.

### **Deixis**

Lastly, on the syntax of advertising, the advertisers appeal to the emotion and sentiments of the potential consumer through the use of the second person pronoun. By doing this, the impression is created that the consumer is being addressed personally. This has the potential for forcing them to reach a quick favourable decision on the service being advertised:

You know you can trust TOTAL<sup>24</sup>

Coca-Cola... You can’t Beat the Feeling<sup>25</sup>

Citizens Bank... Your right to succeed<sup>26</sup>

Vmobile: It’s all about You<sup>27</sup>

On the whole, our analysis of the syntactics of advertising above reveals that the advertiser tantalizes the consumer by making them part of the advert, either by posing questions to them or by the use of the second person pronoun. The advertisers also tantalize the consumer by emphasizing the qualities of the products through the use of several adjectives and adverbs which are presented in the forms of emphatic expressions.

### **The Semantics of Advertising**

Semantics is concerned with the study of the ‘meanings’ of expressions. In advertising, this has to do with the consumers’ perception of the goods or service being advertised. Hence, the

advertiser does all that is possible to ensure that the message in every advert is catchy in a way that engages the imagination of the target audience.

Thus, in advertising, there is always a stimulus-response dimension in that the message is couched in a manner that invokes responses through words, pictures or sounds. The advertiser ensures that the meaning of each phrase or sentence evokes the desired effects on the readers. In other words, the message must be both communicative and informative.

Taking the adverts used in the present study into consideration, we observe that the advertisers make use of pun (play upon words) metaphors, clichés and epigram.

### **Pun**

Pun is a form of witticism which involves a play upon words to achieve different meanings. This is put into remarkable use in the famous advert of the *Virgin Nigeria* Airline:

The real *Virgin* has arrived<sup>28</sup>

Here, the advertiser plays upon the word *Virgin*, contrasting the original meaning of the word with its use as the name of the airline. By saying ‘the *real* Virgin has arrived’, the impression is that those who claim to be Virgins (in its original sense) are only pretenders, as they may not actually be virgins. According to the advert, the airline is the *real* Virgin because it is pure, original and new. It is akin to saying that if one was looking for a virgin, the place to look was in the direction of the advertised airline.

### **Metaphor**

This is a kind of comparison between two entities in which the attributes of one are transferred to the other by claiming that one is the other. As Lodge (1981:10) puts it, ‘metaphor is a figure of substitution based on similarity’, which implies that the two things being considered must be so similar as to be substituted, one for the other.

As we observed elsewhere, ‘metaphoric... relationships exist only because there is some connection between the two things being substituted’ (Ezejideaku 2004:52),

Metaphor is based on similarity between things that are otherwise dissimilar and separated in space and time. It is in this context that we see the connection between *Guinness Stout* and *greatness* in the advert below:

Nothing tastes like Greatness<sup>29</sup>

in which *greatness* is substituted for *Guinness*. The advert could quite simply have read:

Nothing tastes like Guinness

but the copywriter deliberately makes the substitution so as to imply that going for Guinness is equivalent to going for greatness. It is altogether like saying: ‘if you want to be great, drink Guinness’

A similar case of substitution can be seen in the following advert of the *Hyundai Elentra* car where it is claimed that:

Life is a beautiful ride<sup>30</sup>,

thus, substituting ‘a beautiful ride’ for life. The implication is that if one desires to live life (enjoy life), one should go for a beautiful car like Hyundai Elentra.

### **Clichés**

A cliché may be described as a saying which has become trite because of over-use. In the adverts under consideration, clichés are deliberately used to create familiarity between the product being advertised and the intended consumer. The idea is that when potential consumers hear a phrase they have been hearing before, they might link it with the product and think they already knew about the product. This seems to be the reason behind the following clichés:

Kia Rio: *Welcome on Board*<sup>31</sup>

First Inland Bank: At your service<sup>32</sup>

In most cases, however, the monotony usually associated with clichés are broken in the adverts through modification, such that the same aim for using the cliché is achieved while introducing some freshness into the saying, as happens in the following modified clichés:

Skoda Fabia: All that glitters is style<sup>33</sup>

This is an obvious deconstruction of the popular cliché,

All that glitters is no gold

to highlight the claim that the car *Skoda fabia* glitters with style.

‘Wind is *air in motion*’, is the cliché exploited in the Nissan Sunny advert which claims that the car is:

Art in motion<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, the cliché used in respect of magic:

The more you look, the less you see

forms the basis for another Nissan Sunny advert:

The closer you look, the more compelling  
the attraction becomes<sup>35</sup>

The copywriter of the ADIC Insurance advert draws inspiration from the cliché:

Change is a continuous process

to derive:

Change is a refining process<sup>36</sup>

used as a catchy phrase for the ADIC Insurance advert, which suggests that the company has changed from what it used to be to become refined and better.

## Epigram

An epigram is a short, witty, paradoxical remark. Often, the paradox or apparent contradiction) is deliberately introduced so as to attract special attention to the ‘truth’ hidden in the paradox. That is where the beauty of the *Ford Probe* car advert lies:

How to make a statement  
without saying a word<sup>37</sup>.

Obviously, the lexical entry for the word ‘statement’ involves human language. But in this case, the car in question purportedly speaks for itself. The import of the advert is that body language can be as loud as verbal language. In this particular case, the beauty of the car speaks for itself, and hence, makes a statement without saying a word. This calls to mind an Igbo saying:

Ahia ọma na-ere onwe ya  
market good Aux-sell self it  
(a good commodity sells itself)

which suggests that one does not need to advertise a good product, as it would advertise itself.

## Conclusion

Ajanaku (2008:26) posits that

adverts mainly play on emotions, deploying images that  
arrest the would-be buyer’s attention. In appealing to the  
senses, they make definitive attempts to sweep doubts off

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the way and... create the soft landing for the buyer's money.

To achieve their aim, the advertiser manipulates language in a way that it actually appeals to the senses and arouses the emotions of the target audience. We can thus claim that, from the data used for this study, the language of advertising in Nigerian newspapers has more to do with the aesthetics of language than with commerce. Alliteration, rhetorical questions, pun, morphological adjustment and clichés, among others, are the advertiser's favourite devices and as shown in this study, are very instrumental to the general success of advertising in Nigeria.

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