

Presupposition and Its Persuasive Function in Advertising Language

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Abstract

Presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance, or a message precondition for the processing of any communication. It possesses some unique properties such as being one-sided, subjective, deceptive and misleading, and has a great deal of importance in persuasive language. This paper attempts to explore the persuasive function of presupposition in advertising language. It may help advertising practitioners obtain a better understanding of how presuppositions work and thus consciously employ such a linguistic strategy.

Keywords

Presupposition; persuasive; advertising language.

1. Introduction

Presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance, or a message precondition for the processing of any communication (Yule, 1996, p.25). It possesses some unique properties such as being one-sided, subjective, deceptive and misleading (Chen, 1998, p.54, 55). Peccei points out that presupposition has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, particularly in the courtroom and in advertising (2000, p.21). Therefore, presupposition is frequently employed in communication events in order to enhance the effects of persuasion in persuasive language.

Advertisements are designed to attract consumers' attention, arouse their interests, stimulate their desires, create conviction and finally persuade them to take purchase action. In order to convey their intentions of persuasion by performing such activities as suggesting, advising, inviting, and tickling, the advertisers often try to transfer heavily-loaded information with fewer words and less space. Hence various linguistic means are employed to communicate messages as much as possible to potential consumers with economy. Taking advantage of presupposition is an effective way among different language devices employing linguistic means to create successful advertisement texts.

2. Properties of Presupposition

Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions (Yule, 1996, p.25). Therefore, presupposition possesses some unique properties as being one-sided and subjective. Presupposition is the common ground, background information or mutual knowledge between communicators. Peccei treats presuppositions as inferences that are very closely linked to the words and grammatical structures actually used in the utterance, but they come from our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret these words and structures and, because of this, presuppositions can be quite “sneaky” (2000, p.19).

Another interesting property of presupposition is that the presupposition of a statement will remain constant (i.e. still true) even when that statement is negated. This is called constancy under negation, or the survival of negation. For example:

a. I heard that the National Team was defeated.

>> The National Team was defeated.

b. I didn't hear that the National Team was defeated.

>> The National Team was defeated.

There is a funny example given by Peccei that might well illustrate this property of presupposition:

In the USA, an accused mugger rather foolishly chose to defend himself at the trial. The following is one of the questions he put to his victim: Did you get a good look at my face when I took your purse? (2000, p.17)

This mugger was sentenced to 10 years in prison, because the presupposition “I took your purse” in the mugger's question would still hold whether or not the victim said she got a good look at his face. Such a property of presupposition is sometimes used as a “test” for a presupposition, and it also highlights how a presupposition can take on the appearance of “established truth.” One other peculiar property of presupposition that should not be ignored here is the defeasibility. Defeasibility means that presuppositions are liable to evaporate in certain contexts, or in circumstances where contrary assumptions are made (Levinson, 1997, p.186). For example, A and B are talking about another person C:

A: Look, C is coming.

B: Her husband is an engineer. (>> She has a husband.)

A: No, she hasn't married yet.

In B's utterance the possessive construction her presupposes that C has a husband or she is married. However, A's utterance negates what B has asserted and thus the presupposition of B's utterance vanishes. Verschueren points out that the defeasibility of presupposition is just another term for context-sensitivity (2000, p.29). The cancellation of a presupposition depends on the speaker's attitude, belief and intention. The speaker can add some information into the utterances or make some changes to the utterance, to make the presupposition clash with the changed contents, hence to cancel the previous presupposition.

From the above analysis, a conclusion might be drawn that presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case according to his attitude, belief or intention before he makes an utterance. Presupposition can survive the negation of the main sentence, and can also be

cancelled according to the speaker's purpose and intention. All these properties make presupposition be subjective, sneaky, deceptive and misleading. That is why it is often employed in the courtroom and in advertising to enhance the persuasion of the language.

3. Presupposition-triggers

Presuppositions are described as inferences closely linked to the words and grammatical structures used in the utterance. Such words and grammatical structures have been isolated by linguists as sources of presuppositions, called presupposition-triggers. Karttunen has collected thirty-one kinds of such triggers. In the following part, some important presupposition-triggers and their examples would be selected and analyzed according to the introduction given by Levinson (1997, p.181-185).

(1) Definite description

Definite descriptions are words or phrases that indicate definite meaning. Proper names, definite article, possessive constructions, and names with modifiers all fall in this category. Presuppositions triggered by definite descriptions are existential presuppositions:

John saw/didn't see the man with two head.

>> There exists a man with two heads.

(2) Factive verbs

Factive verbs are verbs that can indicate facts that have already happened, such as know, realize, and regret. Sometimes certain adjective predicates that possess factive function also fall in this category: be aware that, be glad that, be indifferent that, be odd that, be proud that, be sorry that, etc.:

Martha regrets/doesn't regret drinking John's home brew.

>> Martha drank John's home brew.

(3) Implicative verbs

Implicative verbs are defined as the verbs that imply something but do not say it directly. Examples of this category are happen, forget, manage, and avoid. In such a category, manage implies that one has tried to do; forget implies that one should have done or ought to do something; while happen means that one has not expected something, etc.

John forgot/didn't forget to lock the door.

>> John ought to have locked, or intended to lock, the door.

(4) Change of state verbs

This category refers to the verbs that indicate changes in action like arrive, begin, carry on, cease, continue, finish, go, leave, stop, transform, turn and so on:

John stopped/didn't stop beating his wife.

>> John had been beating his wife.

(5) Iterative

Words that indicate repetition such as again, anymore, return, repeat, and back fall in this category. Further examples are another time, to come back, restore, for the -th time:

The flying saucer came/didn't come again.

>> The flying saucer came before.

(6) Verbs of judging

These are the verbs that can help to form judgment. However, "unlike other presuppositions, the implications are not attributed to the speaker, so much as to the subject of the verb of judging." (Levinson, 1997, p.182) Some examples are accuse, charge, criticize, and repudiate:

Agatha accused/didn't accuse Ian of plagiarism.

>> (Agatha thinks) plagiarism is bad.

(7) Temporal clauses

The temporal clauses contain presuppositions, such as the clauses introduced by before, while, since, after, during, whenever and as:

Before Strawson was even born, Freg noticed/didn't notice presupposition.

>> Strawson was born.

(8) Cleft sentences

Cleft constructions and pseudo-cleft constructions can emphasize certain components of a sentence and they are frequently employed in advertising language to convey various emphasized information:

It was/wasn't Henry that kissed Rosie.

>> Someone kissed Rosie.

(9) Implicit clefts with stressed constituents

Implicit cleft with stressed constituents is a kind of stress constitution that is not shown in sentence structures but in some other stress forms like bold type, underlined type, italic, uppercase in written copies. Particular presuppositions can be triggered by the heavy stresses on certain constituents:

John did/didn't compete in the OLYMPICS.

>> John did compete somewhere.

(10) Comparisons and contrasts

Usually, comparisons and contrasts are marked by particles like too, back, in return, or by comparative constructions:

Carol is/isn't a better linguist than Barbara.

>> Barbara is a linguist.

(11) Non-restrictive relative clauses

Non-restrictive relative clauses usually provide additional parenthetical information and are not affected by the negation of the main verb outside the relative clause and thus gives rise to

presuppositions (Levinson, 1997, p.184).

The Proto-Harrappans, who flourished 2800-2650 B.C., were/were not great temple builders.

>> The Proto-Harrappans flourished 2800-2650 B.C.

(12) Counterfactual conditionals

A presupposition triggered by adverbial clause of counterfactual conditions is a counterfactual presupposition, which means that what is presupposed is not true, but is the opposite of what is true, or contrary to the fact. A conditional structure of this type is generally introduced by if and unless. They presuppose that the information in the clause is not true at the time of utterance:

If Hannibal had only had twelve more elephants, the Romance Languages would/would not this day exist.

>> Hannibal didn't have twelve more elephants.

(13) Questions

Levinson says that questions will generally share the presuppositions of their assertive counterparts. However, interrogative forms themselves introduce further presuppositions. Normally, yes/no questions have vacuous presupposition, being the disjunction of their possible answers while wh- word by the appropriate existentially quantified variable, e.g. who by someone, where by somewhere, how by somehow, etc.:

Is there a professor of linguistics at MIT?

>> Either there is a professor of linguistics at MIT or there isn't.

Who is the professor of linguistics at MIT?

>> Someone is the professor of linguistics at MIT.

4. Presupposition and Speech Acts in Advertising Language

Advertisers do not only produce utterances containing grammatical structures and words but also perform action via those utterances in their advertisements.

Actions performed via utterances are generally called speech acts and, in English, are commonly given more specific labels, such as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise, or request (Yule, 1996, p.48). On any occasion, the action performed by producing an utterance will consist of three related acts: locution, illocution, and perlocution. Advertising language is a kind of persuasive language. The goal of advertisements is to inform the consumers of the advertised products or services, and persuade them to take purchase action. How can the advertisers be sure to make the potential readers understand their advertisements correctly and make their advertisements perform the illocutionary and perlocutionary act? The answer to this question goes to pragmatic presuppositions. In designing the advertisement, advertisers have made some presuppositions beforehand. They tactfully employ presuppositions to help their advertisements to perform the illocutionary and perlocutionary act. The advertisers assume something to be case prior to making the utterance, which makes background information and language context for the advertisement.

Presuppositions relate to the linguistic items that make up the sentence of the advertisements, to the content of situation, to the cultural knowledge and to the discourse elements. Therefore, presuppositions make the readers to think more about the intended meanings than the linguistic item. For example, the advertisers often presuppose that they know the customers' needs and wants, therefore, such sentence structures as "Why not... (do something)" or "Try...(something)" occur in high frequency. Such utterances offer some suggestions or invite the advertisement recipients to do something (the illocutionary act). Once the recipients accept the advertised information and follow their words, the perlocutionary effects are realized.

5. The Persuasive Function of Presupposition

The persuasive power of the advertising language is crucial in determining whether the advertisement is successful.

5.1. Persuasion through Presupposed-problem-solving

Advertisers presuppose that their potential customers have certain troubles or un-desirable problems and they are trying to help them find out "why" and then solve or reduce the existed problems. Such "reason-why" and "problem-reducing" or "problem-solving" methods possess much persuasive power in advertising language. For example:

Example 1

University challenged?

Select an ISA manager with more up top.

You want to give your children a head start in life. But the rising cost of higher education makes it vital to find a fund manager whose experience you can count on. Fidelity stands up to examination. We've enjoyed over 50 years of successful investing through good times as well as bad. And today we're the world's largest independent fund manager entrusted with the savings of over 17 million people worldwide. So call now, go online or speak to your IFA and find out about funds that are better by degree (Fidelity Investments, from The Times).

The advertiser presupposes that the potential customers are challenged by their children's rising cost of higher education. To solve this problem, he offers the solution, which is the advertised service the advertiser intends to convey – the consumers-funds management. With such "problem-solving" method, the advertisers first put forward the troubles and problems that obsess the consumers, thus to arouse their interest and curiosity to continue reading the whole copy; the advertisers will then analyze the problems and bring the final solution naturally, which is just the information the advertisers intend to convey. Such "problem-reducing" or "problem-solving" method makes the advertised information more convincing and reliable, and hence enhances persuasion.

5.2. Persuasion through Targeting Consumers

Certain products or services can never be sold to every consumer on the market, because each product or service has its own market share and group of customers. So does an advertisement. An advertisement does not necessarily sell a product or service to everyone. It may target the most likely group of customers for its product or service. On the other hand,

when the advertisement recipients are engaged in a reading process, they may not consider themselves to be addressed by all the advertisements they read, so s/he can be in or out of the position of the “targeted readers” presumed by the advertisers. In order to create insider feelings so as to arouse their interest and persuade them to purchase, the advertisers usually target their potential consumers beforehand. Sometimes the advertisers target their potential consumers directly, but most often they employ presuppositions.

Example 2

Isaac Mizrahi at Target. Luxury for every woman everywhere (Fashion, from People).

The advertisers presuppose “women “as their targeted consumers beforehand in the above advertisement. With the attractive and motivating advertising language, the female readers who love luxury and fashion are most likely interested in the advertised product, and hence become the potential consumers.

Example 3

One place everyone should lose weight before their holiday. Their luggage (Bags, from The Times).

The targeted consumers are not stated out directly in this advertisement. However, with presupposition-trigger “ their holiday ”, the readers can easily figure out whom this advertisement is intended to: holiday-makers.

Sometimes, the advertisers presume their targeted customers before designing the advertisements. They claim that their products or services are particularly designed or accustomed for certain group of consumers, who usually enjoy high prestige and admirable life or lead the fashion in society. The purpose of such strategy is to allure the readers to follow: if you are such kind of people, please try/ buy/ choose it. For example:

Example 4

For your red-carpet moments. When all eyes are on you (Revlon® lipstick, from People).

The advertisers presuppose those people who are in the spotlight as their targeted consumers. These people are usually admired by others, their life style, way of thinking and even behaviors have most attraction to others. Possibly, some readers will be allured to follow their idols and hence become the potential consumers.

5.3. Persuasion through Speech Act

Advertisers assume something to be the case prior to communicating certain information to advertisement readers, which is background information and language context for the advertisements. Presuppositions are closely linked to the words and grammatical structures actually used in the utterance. Moreover, they make the readers perceive the implicit meanings in advertisements rather than the linguistic items. In other words, with the assistance of presuppositions, some advertisements can have not only the locutionary act, but also the illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. With various presuppositions, the advertisements meet the consumers’ psychological needs and wants, hence persuade them to purchase the advertised products and services, and thus the perlocutionary effect of the advertisements is realized.

Example 5

Step your way to Nicotine Free™!

New Quest®

Now you can enjoy smoking without all of the Nicotine. Introducing Quest 1, 2 & 3. The first cigarette brand that gradually steps you to Nicotine Free smoking. Real cigarettes, real premium tobacco, real smoking enjoyment (Cigarette, from Newsweek).

There is a belief presupposition contained in this advertisement. Moreover, a behavior presupposition arises from it – “You couldn’t enjoy smoking without all of the nicotine before. “ Here the advertiser declares that a new kind of cigarette without nicotine is introduced onto the market and that is good news for smokers and will meet their needs. Hereby, the advertiser has performed locutionary and illocutionary acts. The advertised product, Nicotine Free™ cigarette, is so attractive, if many smokers are willingly to purchase it, then the perlocutionary force of the advertisement can be realized.

6. Conclusions

In this paper, 5 advertisements culled from English newspapers and magazines are examined to see how presuppositions serve the persuasive functions in advertising language. Presupposition possesses some unique properties such as being one-sided, subjective, deceptive and misleading, and has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, it can persuade consumers to take purchase action effectively. It may help advertising practitioners obtain a better understanding of how presuppositions work and thus consciously employ such a linguistic strategy.

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