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Anaphora and Cataphora as Strategic Discursive Practices in Advertising

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Abstract: There are numerous strategic discursive practices that copywriters may use to attract consumer attention and highlight key informational content in advertising discourse. Among these, anaphora and cataphora constitute the two discursive choices examined in this study. To this end, a corpus of thirty online multimodal advertisements was compiled and analysed according to three objectives: identifying instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference, identifying the reference items that realise these relations, and examining their discursive functions. All advertisements were manually coded. Only three advertisements displayed endophoric reference, all of which were anaphoric, realised through personal pronouns and a possessive determiner. Regarding their discursive function, the anaphoric references emphasise brand solidarity, foreground product efficacy and performance, and construct or maintain a narrative frame through personification. These results show that advertisers rarely exploit anaphora or cataphora despite their considerable discursive potential, thus contradicting the initial hypothesis.

Keywords: anaphoric reference, cataphoric reference, cohesion, discursive functions, reference items

1. Introduction

Advertising is a multimodal form of communication, relying heavily on verbal and nonverbal components. Its main purpose is to present and promote products, services and ideas in a way that grabs people's attention, sustains their interest and convinces them to act in a certain way (Brierley 2002; Cook 1996; Goddard 1998; Stoian 2020;

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Șimon 2014; Vestergaard & Schrøder 1985). Although verbal and nonverbal elements combine smoothly into a unified whole, and visuals or celebrity endorsements contribute to the overall impact, it is ultimately the language used that "can make or break an ad" (Crystal 2005, 388). Consequently, the linguistic and discursive strategies employed to craft the advertising message play an essential role in the effect the advertisement has on its target audience.

Pragmatic presuppositions and implicatures, for instance, help copywriters design an intimate space where advertisers and consumers share knowledge and understand implied meaning without putting everything into words (Cook 1996; Goddard 1998; Șimon 2008; Șimon 2014; Vestergaard & Schrøder 1985). This intimacy is further reinforced through the direct form of address (i.e. 'you'), preferred by advertisers because it creates the illusion of direct communication with the consumer (Brierley 2002; Dyer 1999; Goddard 1998). Furthermore, deictic "reference terms such as 'this', 'that', 'those', 'it', 'here' and 'there'" (Goddard 1998, 41) place a product or service in the immediate context, pointing to its relevance for consumers.

The omission of words or structures is another linguistic strategy employed in the advertising discourse because it creates the characteristic telegraphic style of ads and opens interpretive gaps that the audience is invited to fill, whereas the repetition of lexical and grammatical constructions fixes the message in the consumers' minds (Cook 1996; Goddard 1998; Șimon 2014; Șimon & Stoian 2020). Besides, the discourse of advertising is highly figurative (Brierley 2002; Dyer 1999) and resorts to wordplay, linguistic sound effects (Cook 1996; Crystal 2005; Goddard 1998) as well as "words which are vivid (*new*, *bright*), concrete (*soft*, *washable*), positive (*safe*, *extra*), and unreserved (*best*, *perfect*)" (Crystal 2005, 388).

The advertising discourse may also leverage framing strategies (e.g. problem – solution, benefit-first, lifestyle-oriented) that, apart from conveying information, shape the target audience's needs, desires and lifestyles (Cook 1996). Additionally, thematic – rhematic progression (Șimon 2012, 2013) and Given – New structuring (Cook 1996; Goddard 1998) direct the audience's attention towards elements that require emphasis. Directionality is further achieved through exophoric and endophoric reference (Halliday & Hasan 1994), although the latter is only sparsely documented in advertising research (Cook 1996). This strategy tightens the discourse into a cohesive whole and guides the audience towards elements located either within the text (endophoric) or in the situational or cultural context (exophoric). Endophoric reference may point backwards (anaphora) or forwards (cataphora), helping advertisers foreground content and fix it in the consumers' mind or create tension and suspense. As such, it is a discursive practice that guides the addressee's processing of the message (Cristea & Dima 2000).

Building on these observations, particularly the role of referential directionality, we hypothesise that, in order to arouse consumers' interest and highlight informational content essential for the effectiveness of the advertising discourse, copywriters often employ anaphora and cataphora as strategic discursive practices that direct the public's attention towards specific parts of the message. To

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test this hypothesis, we compiled a corpus of thirty advertisements, which are available online, and analysed them according to the following research objectives:

RO1: Identification of the instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference

RO2: Identification of the reference items used to realise anaphoric and cataphoric relations

RO3: Analysis of the discursive functions of the instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference.

2. Anaphoric and cataphoric reference as cohesive devices

Halliday and Hasan (1994, 4) contend that cohesion is a semantic concept that "refers to relations of meaning that exist within the text, and that define it as a text". These meaning relations arise when the "INTERPRETATION of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another" (Halliday & Hasan 1994, 4). In other words, for a piece of discourse to be perceived as tightly knit, i.e. cohesive, its verbal elements must be semantically interlinked within the text. This semantic fabric is achieved through reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical cohesion (Halliday & Hasan 1994, 13).

Reference is the language property that enables the identification of people, objects, ideas, processes or states of affairs by directing the reader either to another item within the text or to something in the situational context (Halliday & Hasan 1994, 31–36; Nunan 1993, 22). In the first case, we are dealing with *textual* or *endophoric reference*; in the second, with *situational* or *exophoric reference* (Halliday & Hasan 1994, 33). Whether endophoric or exophoric, reference items, i.e. personals, demonstratives and comparatives, must be identifiable in one way or another (Halliday & Hasan 1994, 33). The relation established between the reference item and its referent constitutes a *referential tie*. Within endophoric reference, two sub-types are distinguished:

- *anaphoric reference*, when a lexical item points backwards for identification;
- *cataphoric reference*, when a lexical item points forwards for identification (Halliday & Hasan 1994, 31–36).

Cataphoric reference is often used for "dramatic effect" (Nunan 1993, 22) or "to capture the reader's attention and sometimes to hold it for quite a long stretch of text" (Superceanu 2000, 99).

One type of endophoric relations is illustrated in the excerpt from the L'Oréal advertisement below, promoting gender equity in leadership positions:

*Hire more **women** in leadership roles.*
***We**'re all worth it.*

The ad exemplifies anaphoric reference, since the pronoun 'we' refers backwards, within the text, to the noun 'women'.

If the sentences were arranged differently, other referential patterns would emerge. One possible rearrangement illustrating a different directionality of reference is:

***We**'re all worth it.*

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*Hire more **women** in leadership roles.*

In this case, 'we' refers forwards to 'women', thus realising cataphoric reference.

In a recent Maybelline campaign, the advertisement headline read *DON'T MASK **ME***; here, the pronoun 'me' refers exophorically to the woman's face presented visually in the advertisement. In other words, 'me' is interpreted through the visual context rather than through any element of the verbal text.

3. Studies on anaphora and cataphora across genres and their manifestation in advertising discourse

Anaphoric and cataphoric reference has been studied extensively across genres because of its explanatory potential for understanding how discourse constructs meaning. For instance, the ARRAU corpus is a large, multi-genre resource that annotates anaphoric relations in samples of written and spoken genres, illustrating that anaphora does not merely involve simple coreference, but also plural antecedents, abstract entities, and ambiguous links (Poesio & Artstein 2008; Poesio et al 2024). Breban et al (2011) further carry out an analysis of anaphoric and cataphoric relations in examples extracted from the COBUILD corpus, which is an ample collection of texts from different genres, e.g. journalism, fiction, academic writings, spoken English, etc. They conclude that besides simple determiners, such as *the* or *this*, complex determiners, such as *the same*, *another*, *identical*, *similar*, and *further* may be used to encode more intricate *phoric relations* (Martin 1992, 124), which is a term that encompasses both anaphoric and cataphoric relations. They also identify five types of phoric relations expressed by complex determiners and demonstrate that cataphoric determiners function as anticipatory signals for upcoming information, whereas anaphoric determiners guide the hearer back to previously introduced referents or type specifications. Thus, the authors highlight subtle ways in which cohesion may be realised through phoric relations. Additionally, Díaz Cabrera and Flores Salgado (2022) focus on the arts-section of five English and five Spanish newspaper articles. They discuss anaphoric and cataphoric reference, showing that anaphoric relations are more frequent than cataphoric relations in both languages.

In advertising, anaphoric and cataphoric reference contribute to the cohesive relations established between the discourse elements, reinforcing the links between image and text. Although Goddard (1998) does not focus specifically on linguistic phoric relations, she emphasises the role of pronouns and deixis in addressing multiple audiences in an intimate, informal manner. Moreover, she points to the persuasive mechanism that creates an advertising world that absorbs the consumers. Vestergaard and Schrøder (1985) also describe the way in which meaning relations are established between the advertising visual and verbal message. They stress the importance of cohesive relations to build shared knowledge between advertiser and consumer and to reduce ambiguity. Cook (1996) further treats pronouns as cohesive devices in the advertising discourse, noting that although certain genres prioritise the use of certain pronouns, advertisements "use all three persons" (Cook 1996, 157) to create both endophoric and exophoric relations.

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Despite the huge rhetorical potential of anaphora and cataphora in discourse in general and in advertising discourse in particular, these cohesive relations have not been studied on larger corpora of ads. Instead, they are typically mentioned only as discursive options available to the copywriters. This gap motivates the present research, which focuses on how endophoric cohesive devices are used to create meaning in advertising discourse.

4. Research methodology

The corpus used for this research consists of thirty advertisements, equally distributed across two related fields: cosmetics (15 ads) and detergents (15 ads). The selection criteria were the following:

- each advertisement contained no more than forty words;
- each advertisement included both verbal and non-verbal elements;
- all advertisements were published within the last twenty years;
- all advertisements were available online during the period of data collection.

Then, the research team established the following research objectives:

RO1: Identification of the instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference

RO2: Identification of the reference items used to realise anaphoric and cataphoric relations

RO3: Analysis of the discursive functions of the instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference.

In line with these objectives and the theoretical framework presented in this article, the team manually coded the corpus for the identification of endophoric-reference instances and of reference items, as well as for the analysis of their discursive functions. Whenever coding disagreement occurred, the two researchers discussed each case until a consensus was reached.

5. Research results and discussion

After analysing the corpus, we identified ten advertisements in the field of cosmetics and four in the field of detergents that contained pronouns. However, most of these pronouns were used either exophorically or deictically, referring to visual elements in the advertisement or to real-world participants such as the advertiser or the consumer. Only three advertisements in the cosmetics category displayed instances of endophoric reference (see Table 1), whereas none of the detergent advertisements contained such examples.

As shown in Table 1, all instances of endophoric reference identified in the corpus are anaphoric in nature, realised through personal pronouns (three cases) or a possessive determiner (one case). In all examples, the personal pronouns and the possessive determiner are resolved by nouns or noun phrases introduced earlier in the advertising discourse, such as *women*, *Father Time*, *wrinkle fighters* and *mascara creating a frenzy*. As for their discursive function, the anaphoric references emphasise brand solidarity, highlight product efficacy and performance, or create and sustain a

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narrative frame through personification. Thus, the pronoun 'we' builds a community of women empowered by the L'Oreal brand, signalling that the brand positions itself in solidarity with this group.

Advertisement excerpt	**Type of endophoric reference**	**Reference item**	**Discursive function**
Hire more **women** in leadership roles. **We**'re all worth it. (L'OREAL Paris)	Anaphoric reference	WE = personal pronoun	Emphasising brand solidarity
Father Time better watch **his** back because these three **wrinkle fighters** don't play fair. Maxed out with majorly potent ingredients, **they** regenerate, restore and plump skin full of younger looking loveliness. (SEPHORA)	Anaphoric references	HIS = possessive determiner	Creating and maintaining a narrative frame through personification
		THEY = personal pronoun	Emphasising product efficacy
It's the **mascara creating a frenzy** 1 sold every 5 seconds A game changer purchased multiple times. Makes my lashes so full. **It** gives me long lashes. (L'OREAL Paris)	Anaphoric reference	IT = personal pronoun	Emphasising product performance

Table 1. Endophoric reference in advertisements

In the Sephora advertisement, a playful yet authoritative tone is established by the narrative frame centred on 'Father Time' and 'his back' that needs protection; here, the personification (*Father Time*) is reinforced by the anaphoric 'his'. In the same ad, the pronoun 'they' refers back to the advertised products embodied by the 'three wrinkle fighters', indirectly emphasising the product power and efficacy. Finally, the anaphoric 'it' in the second L'Oreal ad stands for the 'mascara creating a frenzy', foregrounding the product and highlighting its impressive performance.

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6. Conclusion

The fascinating discourse of advertising has long attracted the interest of both the general public and language specialists because it employs numerous discursive practices designed to persuade the target audience. One such practice, central to this study, is referential directionality realised through phoric relations, in particular endophoric relations, which foreground content and fix it in the consumers' mind (anaphora) or create tension and suspense by delaying the resolution of a reference item (cataphora). On this basis, the study hypothesised that advertisers strategically guide consumers' attention towards specific parts of the message through discursive practices such as anaphora and cataphora. This hypothesis was, however, contradicted by the research results, as will be outlined below.

To test this hypothesis, thirty online advertisements, equally distributed across two related fields (cosmetics and detergents), were selected and coded manually in line with the research objectives:

RO1: Identification of the instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference

RO2: Identification of the reference items used to realise anaphoric and cataphoric relations

RO3: Analysis of the discursive functions of the instances of anaphoric and cataphoric reference.

The research results revealed no endophoric reference in the detergent advertisements, and anaphoric reference in only three cosmetics ads. Thus, merely 10% of the corpus employed anaphoric relations to construct the discourse and world of advertising, a finding consistent with research on other genres (Díaz Cabrera & Flores Salgado 2022). The anaphoric reference items identified are personal pronouns (*we*, *it*, *they*) and a possessive determiner (*his*), each resolved by previously introduced nouns or noun phrases (*women*, *Father Time*, *wrinkle fighters* and *mascara creating a frenzy*). The use of personal pronouns and possessives in the advertising discourse has also been noted by other scholars (Cook 1996; Goddard 1998). The discursive functions of these anaphoric relations construct brand solidarity, highlight product efficacy and performance, or develop a narrative frame through personification. They all contribute to creating a world of intimacy and shared knowledge between the advertisers and the consumers (Vestergaard & Schrøder 1985).

The findings show that copywriters rely predominantly on anaphoric reference, as observed in other genres. Moreover, although pronominal forms appeared in 46.66% of the corpus, they were used primarily exophorically or deictically rather than endophorically, a tendency also noted by Goddard (1998).

Consequently, though rarely examined in the literature on advertising discourse, anaphora and cataphora are not as frequently used as initially hypothesised. The findings show that copywriters rely predominantly on anaphoric reference, as observed in other genres, and that the pronominal forms identified are used primarily exophorically or deictically rather than endophorically.

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Despite the study's originality, several limitations must be acknowledged. The corpus is relatively small (thirty advertisements), restricted to two related product fields (cosmetics and detergents), and limited to English-language materials, which reflect the linguistic and cultural conventions of the English-speaking world. These limitations can be addressed by future research.

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