

**LINGUISTICS  
AND  
COMMUNICATION**

## THE PRAGMATIC STRUCTURE OF WRITTEN ADVERTISEMENTS

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### 1. Introduction

In a previous paper I defined the advertisement as being "the result of the act of advertising, the latter being viewed as the construction of semiotic worlds for the rhetorical purpose of persuading purchasers to buy what is advertised" (Şimon, 2002:172) or, I would add, of persuading the public to act in a certain way (e.g. issue, self- or political advertisements) (Şimon, 2002:174).

In the present paper I shall try to identify the pragmatic structure of written advertisements from the point of view of discourse analysis. I shall also try to work out a classification of advertisements and, on this basis, to analyze their pragmatic structure and to identify recurrent features. For this analysis, I have chosen, at random, 31 advertisements; the only selection criterion was that the advertisements chosen for the study of one group covered all the characteristics of that particular class. The study was focused on newspaper and magazine advertisements with a medium-sized text. The advertised products and services cover a wide spectrum, from cheap products, like detergents, to expensive ones, like cars. Finally, I shall try to draw some conclusions from the results of my analysis.

### 2. Theoretical Preliminaries

John Searle, a philosopher who contributed greatly to the development of the Speech Act Theory, defined speech acts as "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication" (1969: 16).

It is of great importance for the present paper to make it clear that philosophy and pragmatics study speech acts in isolated sentences or fabricated utterances issued in a given context, while discourse analysis studies how speech acts are connected in context. Discourse analysis stresses that speech acts are actions by nature and consequently should be studied with the theory of actions. The most important distinction made by the theory of action is that between actions and acts. The main idea is that acts are intention-successful doings and actions are acts which require further consequences in order to be purpose-successful. From this perspective, the intention has the action itself as its scope and the purpose is defined as a mental event in which an agent represents the goals of the action (a statement of purpose answers a *Wh*-question about the action) (van Dijk, 1992:167-183):

e.g. I may intend to open the window, but the window lock is broken, so my intention is unsuccessful; if I do open the window, my intention is successful. If I open the window in order to get some fresh air and indeed this happens when I open the window, then my purpose is successful. But let us say that some children have put some garbage on fire and there is smoke and bad smell in the air (but I am not aware of this when I open the

window, because maybe the children are around the corner), then my purpose of getting some fresh air is purpose-unsuccessful, because all I get is an unpleasant smell.

T.A. van Dijk (1992: 232) distinguishes between *micro-speech acts*, i.e. the structure of individual speech acts and the linear structure of speech act sequences, and *macro-speech acts/global speech acts*, i.e. the global, overall structure of the communicative interaction. More exactly, T.A. van Dijk (1992:215) defines a macro-speech act as "the global speech act performed by the utterance of a whole discourse, and executed by a sequence of possibly different speech acts". So, the speech acts of a discourse are organized *linearly* in sequences and *hierarchically* in global speech acts. Such a distinction is particularly important for conventional types of discourse, such as advertisements or narratives, which are rather associated with global speech acts than with component speech acts (van Dijk, 1992: 233). He also classifies speech acts into *single speech acts*, *composite speech acts* and *sequences of speech acts*:

- a. *a single speech act*: an act with one intended result;
- b. *composite speech acts* may be compound and complex:
  - *a compound speech act* consists of component acts at the same level, i.e. equally important acts; the result of each act is a condition for the success of the next act;
  - *a complex speech act* consists of a number of minor and major acts, such that at least one act is embedded in one of the component major acts (e.g. an auxiliary act);
- c. *sequences of speech acts*: which may be interpreted as
  - *one action*, if they can be assigned one global intention/ plan or if this action can in turn be a condition/ consequence of other actions; or
  - *as sequences of actions*, in all the other cases.

It must be also noted that composite acts have no given purpose, while sequences of acts have a given purpose, the same agent and the acts need not be part of a definite plan.

Speech acts are also classified according to their contribution to the realization of another act:

- a. *preparatory speech act*: when its result is a necessary or probable condition for another act;
- b. *component speech act*: which counts as a necessary act represented in the global intention of the main act;
- c. *auxiliary act*: when the success of its result is a sufficient condition for the success of the main act;
- d. *consequent act*: which is derived from the performance of the main act (cf. also Superceanu, 2000: 77).

As van Dijk (1992) pointed out, describing *the pragmatic structure of a discourse* means giving an account of how the speech acts are organized linearly in sequences and hierarchically in global speech acts. Identifying the pragmatic structure of discourses is of great help for establishing the pragmatic coherence of the discourses in question. A discourse is coherent when all the utterances make their contribution to accomplishing one global speech act. Moreover, an account of

the pragmatic structure may play a role in distinctions made between genres (i.e. different genres may have different pragmatic structures).

Speech acts also imply communication between at least two participants in the speech situation. Taking into account the interpersonal relation, Brinker (1997:105-121) identified five textual categories: *information*, *appeal*, *obligation*, *contact*, *declaration*, which partly correspond to Searle's classes of illocutionary acts:

- a. A text has an *informative function* if the addresser gives the addressee to understand that s/he wants to convey information. An informative text may be descriptive, argumentative, narrative.
- b. We speak of the *appellative function* of the text if the addresser gives the addressee to understand that s/he wants the recipient to act in a certain way. Appeals take the form of a question or a direction to do something.
- c. A text contains an *obligation* if the addresser gives the addressee to understand that s/he commits himself/herself to carrying out a specific action. The function of obligation refers to promises and offers.
- d. Texts with *contact function* give the addressees to understand that the addresser wants to get into contact and set up or establish a social relationship with them.
- e. *Declarations* bring about a change of the state-of-affairs in accordance with the propositional content of the text.

Taking into account Brinker's functional categories, I have adopted a classification of advertisements on the basis of the interpersonal relation (only the last category – the declarations – is of no interest for our purpose, as advertisements have no declarative function):

- a. *Informative advertisements* give information about the product/ service advertised. They may be *descriptive* (those which name the products/ services, provide a list of characteristics of the products/ services offered, etc.), *argumentative* (those which make a claim or an appeal which is supported by the provided information) and *narrative* advertisements (those which resort to an endorser to support the advertiser and the claim (cf. also Tellis, 1998: 185)).
- b. *Appellative advertisements* try to get the addressee to act in a certain way. These may be advertisements containing a *question* (usually in the headline and the central topic of the question is the addressee) or a *direction – directive advertisements* – (especially used in titles and slogans). The directive advertisement may be aimed at raising the recipient's awareness of the product/ service (thus seeking a cognitive response) and at changing the recipient's lifestyle (thus seeking an affective response). They may refer to the consumption of the advertised product/ service or might prepare the consumption of the advertised product/ service (by offering further information, catalogues/ guides, coupons to be filled in and posted, by taking a closer look at/ trying the advertised product, mentioning the web site, etc.) (thus seeking a behavioural response) (cf. also Gieszinger, 2000: 228, Kotler, 1994: 602).
- c. *Commissive advertisements* commit the addressers to carrying out a specific action. They refer to the offers (e.g. characteristics and

advantages of the product/ service, preparation of consumption, etc.) and promises (e.g. reference to the procedure, the high quality of the advertised goods, consumer's satisfaction, specific features of product/ service, etc.) made in an advertisement which have to be kept, otherwise legal actions may be taken (White, 1988: 171).

- d. *Contact advertisements* express the addresser's wish to come into contact with the recipients and to set up or establish a social relationship with them. These advertisements may address the recipients directly (e.g. contacts made in the headline/ quasi-headline, contacts which refer only to a particular segment of population: women, men, children, house-owners, etc.) or they may illustrate the social relationship between the communication partners (e.g. reference to the recipients' desires/ wishes/ needs, which can be known only by close friends; the use of jokes or informal speech, just as between two old friends).

In the following section of this paper I shall try to identify and describe the pragmatic structure of written advertisements taking into account this classification of advertisements. Before starting this analysis, some further notions need clarification. The distinction between sentence and utterance is of great importance, namely a sentence is viewed as a grammatical entity derived from the language system and an utterance as the instance of such an entity used in a particular situation (cf. also Leech, 1995: 14). This distinction is significant, as a sentence is not always identical with an utterance. An utterance corresponds to a micro-speech act, which can be composed of one or several speech acts. In this analysis, the boundary of a speech act will be considered to be the clause (cf. also Superceanu, 2000: 79).

### 3. The Pragmatic Structure of Written Advertisements

Taking into account the classification of advertisements on the basis of the interpersonal relation, the present study focuses on 31 advertisements, taken from various magazines: seven informative, twelve appellative, six commissive and six contact advertisements, which have been analyzed as above.

Of the seven informative advertisements, three are descriptive, three argumentative and one narrative. The informative-narrative advertisements are pretty rare in magazines and newspapers (they are more frequent on television or radio) and, as far as I have noticed, they usually refer to the excellent results a person had after having used a particular weight loss formula. From the point of view of the interpersonal function, only the informative-narrative advertisement is "pure", so to speak; all three argumentative advertisements and one descriptive advertisement have also an appellative function in the end (they give website address, telephone number), which prepares consumption, and two informative-descriptive advertisements have both a commissive function in the end (they make a promise or an offer) and an appellative function (they give website address, telephone number). As micro-speech acts these advertisements contain assertions, appeals, an accusation, claims, directions, an offer and promises. With respect to the macro-speech acts, five of the seven advertisements function as acts of persuasion, one as an act of information and one as an offer. Linearly, the speech acts are organized as single speech acts (all seven advertisements contain single speech acts), composite



speech acts (not a single advertisement contains a compound speech act and three advertisements contain complex speech acts) and as sequences of speech acts (three advertisements contain sequences of speech acts).

Twelve appellative advertisements have been chosen for my analysis in order to cover all the aspects the appellative advertisements deal with: questions, raising the reader's awareness, changing his/her lifestyle, reference to consumption, preparing consumption. Five of the advertisements are 'pure', five advertisements have also a commissive function (they make an offer), one has also an informative-argumentative function and finally one advertisement has both a commissive (it makes an offer) and an informative-argumentative function. The micro-speech acts identified are: appeal, assertion, claim, request, direction, information, offer, praise, welcoming. As for the macro-speech acts, there are four offers, four appeals, two acts of persuasion and two acts of information. With respect to the linear organization of speech acts in appellative advertisements, eleven advertisements have single speech acts, two advertisements have compound speech acts, five advertisements have complex speech acts and five advertisements have sequences of speech acts.

All six commissive advertisements have an appellative function, too, which prepares consumption (telephone number, website address). As the name of the class suggests it, there are two kinds of macro-speech acts: offers (three advertisements) and promises (three advertisements). As far as the micro-speech acts are concerned, these advertisements display accusations, assertions, appeals, offers, promises and warnings. Linearly, all six advertisements display single speech acts, there are no compound acts and three advertisements have complex acts. Sequences of speech acts are to be found in four advertisements.

For the analysis of the contact advertisements I have chosen six advertisements. With respect to the advertisement class, none of the contact advertisements is 'pure', one contains also an appellative function, one an informative-descriptive, one an appellative and a commissive function (offer) and three both an appellative and an informative-descriptive function. The macro-speech acts encountered are: information (three ads), offer (one ad), appeal (one ad), persuasion (one ad) and the micro-speech acts are: appeal, assertion, claim, direction, offer. As for the linear organization, all six advertisements display single speech acts, no advertisement contains compound speech acts, four advertisements have complex speech acts and five sequences of speech acts.

In order to illustrate the way in which I have carried out my analysis, I have chosen an advertisement for an energy drink for women. This is a contact advertisement, but it also has an informative-descriptive and an appellative function, as it is aimed at raising the recipient's awareness and preparing consumption. In this case we have the macro-speech act of *persuasion*, organized as follows: appeal - claim - assertion - direction - appeal. As for the linear organization, the advertisement displays single speech acts, complex speech acts and sequences of speech acts.

"How did we come up with the first energy drink for women? (C1)  
 Nothing to it: nO calories nO fat nO carbs nO sugar. (C2)  
 Fill your life with positive energy. (C3) New energy fuel. (C4)  
 Finally, there's a drink (C5) that zeros in on just the kind of energy (C6) a woman needs.  
 (C7) New Energy Fuel. (C8) No calories, fat, carbs or sugar means (C9) it's full of energy  
 but free of guilt. (C10) So no matter how hectic your days get (C11) there's a refreshing  
 way to put the positive energy back into your life. (C12)

Find your energy in an energy & diet section near you. (C13)  
twinlab.com (C14) ("Cosmopolitan", June 2002)

Clause	Utterance	Micro-speech act	Macro-speech act
C1-C4	U1	Appeal	Persuasion
C5	U2	Claim	
C6-C12	U3	Assertion	
C13	U4	Direction	
C14	U4	Appeal	

Clause	Linear organization of speech acts
C1-C2	Single speech acts. (C2 is a predicate- elliptical sentence, the meaning is "There is nothing to it...")
C3-C4	Sequence of speech acts (the same agent, i.e. the addresser, the same purpose: persuasion). (C4 is also an elliptical sentence which means "Fill your life with new energy fuel.")
C5-C6	Complex speech act, as C6 is a component act of C5 (i.e. a necessary act represented in the global intention of the main act)
C6-C7	Complex speech act, as C7 is a component act of C6 (i.e. a necessary act represented in the global intention of the main act)
C8	Single speech act (C8 is a predicate- elliptical sentence, the meaning is "There is a new energy fuel".)
C9-C10	Complex speech act, as C10 is a component act of C9 (i.e. a necessary act represented in the global intention of the main act)
C11-C12	Complex speech act, as C11 is a preparatory act (i.e. a probable precondition for another act) of C12.
C13-C14	Single speech acts (C 12 is an elliptical sentence meaning "For further information visit twinlab.com".)

Analyzing my corpus as illustrated above, I have come to the conclusion that informative advertisements are mainly aimed at persuading recipients, appellative advertisements most frequently make an appeal or an offer, commissive advertisements an offer or a promise and contact advertisements usually inform the addressees about something. As Cook (1996:5) noticed, all advertisements have the function of persuading the addressees to buy a product or, I would like to add, to act in a certain way. But, besides this persuasive function, which may be primary or secondary, the advertisements may also accuse, warn, inform (Cook, 1996: 5), assert, make appeals, claim, give directions, offer, promise, praise, require and welcome (as the above analysis of micro- and macro-speech acts has shown).

As for the hierarchical organization of the speech acts, the appeal always contains an offer or an assertion preceded and followed by appeals; the act of information usually displays a claim followed by an assertion or an offer; the offer may be preceded and/or followed by an assertion or an appeal and may be reinforced several times; the promise is usually either preceded or followed by an accusation (i.e. negative comparison). The most versatile character is displayed by the act of persuasion, which may contain assertions, appeals, claims, directions, promises, but their hierarchical disposition differs from one advertisement to the other.

Linearly, the conclusion one can easily draw from my study is that single speech acts are most frequently used in advertisements. That is probably because most advertisements observe the KISS principle, i.e. keep it short and simple (Russel & Lane, 2003: 604), in other words the essential characteristics of the product/service must be conveyed in short sentences, even elliptical (my study shows that elliptical sentences are very frequent in advertisements), so that the reader gets the message rapidly. From the point of view of frequency, the second place is occupied by the complex speech acts and the third by the sequences of speech acts, which, although not as quick in conveying information as single speech acts, still ensure a good fluency of the message. Particularly seldom are the compound speech acts, which presuppose a more complicated organization of the utterances, thus, making the transmission of the message a little bit more difficult. They are not much preferred by the advertisers because, in an era of information boom, the reader does not have the necessary time to read and decipher complicated utterances, especially when they are made in advertisements (their reading and interpretation is not a first priority for the recipient).

#### 4. Conclusion

In the present paper I have pointed out how speech acts were approached by discourse analysts in order to study the pragmatic structure of discourses. I have studied the pragmatic structure of 31 written advertisements published in some newspapers and magazines, taking into account the classification of advertisements on the basis of their interpersonal function. The examples I have chosen tried to cover all possible linear organizations of speech acts, but not all possible hierarchical ones, as for this purpose I would have needed to write a whole book, and not a mere paper. Finally, I have tried to draw some conclusions with respect to the pragmatic structure of written advertisements.

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