

The Rhetoric of Numbers in Print Advertisements for Cosmetics

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Abstract: Based on a corpus of print advertisements for cosmetics targeted at women, my research focuses on the use of numerals as rhetorical devices in the discourse of advertising. As this paper will show, numerals are employed recurrently in ads, under several linguistic forms, not so much to indicate precision, but to catch the attention, to enhance the credibility of the advertising message and/or to make the message more emotionally loaded, in order to persuade women to buy the advertised products.

Keywords: print advertisements, cosmetics, numeral, linguistic pattern, rhetoric of numbers

1. Introduction

Although the discourse of print advertisements has been the object of extensive research in the last four decades following Leech's (1966) pioneering study, the present paper investigates an aspect that has been largely neglected in linguistic and semiotic-oriented studies of advertising discourse, namely, the recurrent use of numerical quantification, as manifest in a corpus of print advertisements for beauty products targeted at women. More precisely, the purpose of the paper is to identify and analyze the way in which copywriters employ numbers as rhetorical devices to make the advertising message more persuasive. To that end, I will examine the way in which the numerical formulations present in advertising headlines and body-copy are organized in various linguistic patterns, in an attempt to produce a range of rhetorical effects.

My research is based on a corpus of approximately 500 print advertisements for beauty products, which I have collected for my doctoral research. These adverts were

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published in the British and US editions of three successful, well-known monthly women's glossy magazines between the years 2007-2010: *Cosmopolitan* – 17 issues, *Glamour* – 7 issues, and *Instyle* – 4 issues.

The focus of the next section is on the rhetorical power of numbers, as discussed by several discourse analysts in the field of journalism. Then, in section 3, I turn my attention to the various linguistic patterns containing numbers that I have identified in my corpus. Finally, in the last section of the paper, I provide a short summary of the main findings and I formulate a general conclusion with regard to the recurrent use of numbers in print adverts for beauty products.

2. On the Rhetoric of Numbers

Whereas the use of numbers in advertising discourse has not generated much scholarly interest, several linguists (e.g. Roeh & Feldman 1984, van Dijk 1988, Bell 1991, Campbell 2000) have instead highlighted the recurrent use of numbers in news articles and have concluded that numerical quantification is exploited in this particular text type not so much for its information potential but for its rhetorical power. For Bell (1991: 203), for instance, numbers not only “undergird the objective, empirical claims of news”, but they also “express and enhance the news value of the story”.

It is Roeh and Feldman who, back in the mid-80s, coined the term “the rhetoric of numbers”, stating that numbers in news discourse contribute “to an impression of nothing-but-facts-journalism” (Roeh & Feldman 1984: 347), which in turn enhances the value of the story and increases the reliability of the news article, and therefore of the newspaper. Similarly, van Dijk (2000: 46) asserts that, “[a]s it is well known for news, [...] *numbers* are the *rhetorical* device to suggest precision and objectivity, and hence credibility”; “[t]hey are predominantly meant as signals of precision and hence of truthfulness” (Van Dijk 1988: 88). His analysis of a news article from the British tabloid *The Sun* reporting on illegal immigration provides a good example of what he calls “number rhetoric” (van Dijk 2000: 47): precise and recurrent reference to the number of illegal immigrants in Britain, to how many illegal immigrants were arrested and sent back, or voluntarily returned to their countries of origin, to the number of raids and of immigration officers, gives the news article “its hard core, factual character” (ibid.) and contributes greatly to the discursive reproduction of racism. According to van Dijk, the frequent use of numbers and statistics rhetorically enhances the credibility and facticity of such news reports, and seems to be a key feature of media reporting on ethnic affairs “within the overall strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation” (van Dijk 2000: 48).

As evidenced by Campbell (2000), the same holds true for the use of numbers in the broadsheet coverage of criminal issues in the UK, where newspapers typically deploy “a range of numerical (and non-numerical) expressions to accomplish a variety of rhetorical goals” (Campbell 2000: 60). She argues that “quantification - conventionally viewed as 'neutral', objective' and 'hygienic' - is a *rhetorical* medium through which criminal (and other social) statistics are made meaningful, and different political standpoints are expressed” (Campbell 2000: 64).

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that claims about the persuasive power of numbers in news articles have partly been confirmed by Koetsenruijter (2006), who carried out an experiment to determine whether the use of numbers in news articles can increase the credibility and reliability of the article, and therefore of the medium itself. While his findings do point to a connection between numbers and accrued reliability, he suggests that a further experiment, which could demonstrate that readers are indeed convinced or influenced by numbers even though they do not remember them, could better support claims about the function of numbers as primarily rhetorical devices.

3. The Rhetorical Use of Numbers in Print Ads for Cosmetics

Similarly to newspaper articles, print advertisements for cosmetics generally display a pronounced preference for numerical quantification in headlines and/or body-copy. This section is an attempt to show that, although they are commonly associated with precision and “straight facts”, numbers are exploited in print adverts due to their potential to perform certain rhetorical functions.

I have identified five salient linguistic patterns that include numbers in my corpus, which shall be presented and examined in what follows:

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|----------|---|
| Number + | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • time-related nouns • noun <i>step</i> • positively connoted adjectives related to physical appearance • negatively connoted nouns & adjectives related to physical appearance • (noun <i>women</i> +) verbs of approval & of perception |
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3.1. Number + time-related nouns

Most often, numbers in print ads for beauty products occur in prepositional noun phrases serving as adverbial adjuncts of time, of the type “preposition + cardinal number + time-related noun”, with the observation that, in most cases, the preposition employed is *in* (occasionally, it alternates with *after* – cf. example (8) below), and that

such structures typically occur in final position in the sentence (be it elliptical or not). Here are a few examples:

- (1) “Captivating colour **in 10 minutes**. Cashmere soft and mirror shine in no time.” (L’Oréal hair dye)
- (2) “Think it takes hours to get hair colour like this? Think again. Get long-lasting, high gloss colour [...] **in just 10 minutes**.” (Clairol Perfect 10 hair dye)
- (3) “[...] dries **in less than 5 minutes**.” (Neutrogena Sunless Tanning lotion)
- (4) “Micro-Clear Technology powers medicine down deep to reduce redness and swelling **in just 8 hours**.” (Neutrogena anti-pimple gel)
- (5) “Whiter smile **in 1 day**.
Now get a smile that’s more than white it’s 3D white. [...] Use each product individually. Or use the collection together to start seeing results **in 1 day**. Intrigued? Let us prove it to you at 3DWhite.com. Use the collection together to see a whiter smile **in 1 day!** (Crest tooth products)
- (6) “50% stronger nails **in 3 days**” (Sally Hansen nail cure)
- (7) “When used regularly, the Nivea Goodbye Cellulite Fast Acting Serum leads to a visible reduction in the appearance of cellulite **in as little as 10 days**.” (Nivea anti-cellulite cream);
- (8) **After just 7 days**, skin is noticeably improved [...]” (Neutrogena acne intervention kit)
- (9) “7 out of 10 women saw a healthy skin **in less than 2 weeks**.” (Bioré face products)
- (10) “[...] clinically proven to help increase skin’s firmness and elasticity **in only 8 weeks**” (St. Ives skin firming lotion)

As illustrated by the examples above, all the adverbials of time that employ the time-related nouns *minute*, *hour*, *day* and *week* point to the fact that the advertised product will only take effect at some point in the future. However, this future moment is supposed to be perceived as a very near future, due to the cardinal number used in predeterminer position, which is always a small number, ranging from 1 to 10. Most of the examples provided above show that this effect is heightened even more, by means of the intensifier that usually precedes the cardinal number. As illustrated in (2), (3), (4), (7), (8), (9), (10), the intensifier is expressed by an adverb or an adverbial phrase, such as *just*, *only*, *less than*, and *as little as*. The same effect can also be achieved through other linguistic means, which I discuss elsewhere (cf. Kilyeni 2012).

It is noteworthy that the noun phrases that make up the prepositional phrases serving as adverbials of time, i.e. “cardinal number + time-related noun”, are sometimes used independently in elliptical sentences. The example below evidences that such

noun phrases always occur in initial position in elliptical sentences, and that they are generally followed by the preposition *to* introducing certain benefits resulted from using the advertised beauty product:

- (11) “**10 minutes** to Rich, Radiant Colour”, “**10 minutes** to Better Conditioned Hair”
(L’Oreal hair dye)

In short, when employed in such linguistic patterns, numbers perform an intensifying rather than a quantifying function; they are exploited in an attempt to “shrink” time, so to speak, in that they emphasize the promptness of action of the advertised products, and hence, the immediacy of the change for the better traditionally promised in ads.

Conversely, when a cardinal number collocates with the time-related noun *years*, the resulting linguistic unit points to a past moment:

- (12) “Look **five years** younger in a moment.” (No.7 Age Rewind foundation)
(13) “Look up to **5 years** younger in a flash.” (Max Factor Age Renew foundation)

Real age is actually the implicit element of comparison in the widely used comparative structure of the type “cardinal number + *years* + *younger*”. Interestingly, a woman can look five years younger than she is, but not three, four or six (although eight does occur in isolated examples), probably because five is perceived as “rounder”, given that it marks half a decade, than surrounding numbers, and hence, more persuasive. As it is highly unlikely that so many beauty products can take exactly five years off women’s looks, it can be argued that the number is used for purely rhetorical reasons, just to highlight the effectiveness of those products.

Notice that the numbers present in the examples examined in this section, similarly to most of the numbers used in my corpus of adverts, are almost never written in letters, which makes them more conspicuous and which, in turn, draws the readers’ attention to the adverbials containing them as well as to the idea of immediate action the adverbials puts forth.

3.2. Number + noun *step*

The examples provided below point to the fact that the collocation “cardinal number + *step*” exhibits the same linguistic/discoursal behaviour as the collocation “cardinal number + *minute/day/hour/week*”:

- (14) “[...] lets you create the colourful smokey eye **in just two easy steps**” (Smokey shadow blast)

- (15) “Dramatize your eyes **in 4 easy steps**” (L’Oreal eye shadow)
- (16) “**in 1 step**, precision colorants transform the darkest brunettes to vivid reds.”
(Garnier hair colour cream)
- (17) “**Three easy steps** to a golden glow” (hi-she tanning lotion)
- (18) “**2 steps** to a 3-D lip look”(Covergirl lipstick)

Although, syntactically, such phrases function as adverbials of manner, not of time, I believe that they nevertheless point to the same idea of promptness of action (cf. 3.1.). Reference to a small number of steps (usually 2 or 3), which is often intensified by means of the adverbs *just* and *only*, as well as to the minimal effort required to achieve impressive results with the help of the advertised product, as indicated by the adjective *easy* that frequently occurs in premodifying position, suggests that these adverbials of manner essentially evoke the idea of immediacy. Differently put, the numbers employed in such structures serve to stress both the ease and the quickness of the beautification process.

3.3. Number + positively connoted adjectives related to physical appearance

Consider the following examples, where numbers combine with positively connoted adjectives related to physical appearance, typically occurring in the comparative degree; the resulting collocation shares, in my opinion, the features of intensified adjectives (cf. Gieszinger 2001: 132), which may function syntactically as attributives or as predicatives:

- (19) “**2X cleaner**, smoother skin” (Garnier the Brush Gel-Cleanser)
- (20) “Tresemmé Naturals makes hair **10X stronger** after one use” (Tresemmé shampoo)
- (21) “Lips are visibly fuller and **up to 50% smoother**.” (Maybelline lipstick)
- (22) “Lashes appear up to **80% LONGER** instantly.
Lashes appear up to **117% LONGER** after 30 days.” (Lash Accelerator mascara from Rimmel)

On the one hand, there are multiplicative numerals, which are generally expressed through a combination of mathematical symbols, of the type “figure + multiplication sign” (cf. (19) and (20)). On the other hand, there are percentages, as illustrated in the last three examples, the pattern being “figure + percentage sign.” In both patterns, numbers are (seemingly) meant to denote the rate of improvement in some body quality. At the same time, however, they also suggest that the product has been thoroughly researched and that its increased effectiveness can be empirically proved. Moreover, despite their apparent specificity, such multiplicative numerals and

percentages have, in my opinion, a primarily intensifying function, as it is highly unlikely that physical qualities such as cleanness, strength, brightness, firmness and smoothness can be measured accurately. In other words, numerals do not serve as quantifiers when they occur in this particular pattern; instead, they function just like the oft-used adverbial intensifiers (e.g. *visibly*, *noticeably*, *remarkably*, *dramatically*, *incredibly*), while only seemingly indicating the precise proportion to which the qualities in question will increase.

3.4. Number + negatively connoted nouns / adjectives related to physical appearance

When numbers occur in this particular pattern, they are always employed to “problematize”, in a very explicit (sometimes offensive) way, the body parts that have not yet undergone beautification with the help of the advertised product. Beauty and cosmetic products are then offered to women as *solutions* “to perceived problems of self-image” (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 216). What is more, the fact that quantification “conveys a sense of ‘transparency’ and objectivity’ and calculation tends to be regarded as an impersonal, mechanical routine devoid of human emotion, desire and bias” (Campbell 2000: 55) makes these “problems” seem even worse, stressing the need of urgent remedial action on the part of the reader (i.e. buying the advertised product).

Here are some examples:

(23) “**5 problems**, 1 solution.

1. **weak**
2. **limp**
3. **lifeless**
4. **dull**
5. **straw-like**

The conditioning formula that targets **5 top UK hair problems**.” (L’Oreal hair conditioner).

(24) “why just make up your face
when you can make up the years
helps fight **seven signs of aging**
A youthful effect today,
even more so tomorrow.
Now there’s a remarkable makeup and lipcolour, with Olay’s exclusive VitaNiacin. It actually helps fight **seven signs of aging**, over time.” (VitaNiacin from Olay)

Notice how, in (23) above, the one *solution*, i.e. the advertised product, is contrasted to the 5 hair *problems*, which are identified with precision through enumeration and which seem to be of national concern (i.e. *UK* hair problems). The same dramatic scenario is at work in example (23), where readers are told that the product can fight 7 (no more, no less) signs of aging. Needless to say, verbs such as *to target* (cf. (23)) and *to fight* (cf. (24)) are meant to heighten the drama, by adding a war-like tinge.

3.5. Number (+ women) + verbs of approval / perception

In the last linguistic pattern under discussion in this paper, statistics, expressed either through percentages or through “X out of Y” units, usually collocate with the verbs *to agree* and *to see*, so as to depict the consumer satisfaction rate:

- (25) “skin feels firmer: **85% agree**”, “skin feels less fragile: **81% agree**” (L’Oréal age re-perfect night cream)
- (26) “**93% of women saw** instantly longer lashes.” (Revlon mascara)
- (27) “**7 out of 10 women saw** a healthy skin in less than 2 weeks.” (Bioré face products)
- (28) “**4 out of 5 women saw** an instant reduction in the appearance of fine lines and wrinkles” (Almay foundation)

Statistics, as employed in the examples above, are meant to inform the female readers about the number of women whose (reported) experience with the advertised product has met or even exceeded expectations. However, from a rhetorical standpoint, the use of statistics is just another persuasive technique that seeks to optimize selling potential: while denoting a precise quantity, such statistics connote not only scientific credibility, but also increased quality and efficiency, by implying that the advertised products are already used frequently by many women, most of whom being very satisfied with the results.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Without any doubt, numbers abound in print advertisements for cosmetics; actually, one can hardly find an advert for beauty products that does not contain some kind of numerical quantification in the headline or in the body-copy. My research into the use of numbers in print advertisements for cosmetics has revealed, on the one hand, that numbers typically occur in five salient linguistic patterns in this particular text type, and on the other, that they are exploited in an attempt to achieve a

variety of rhetorical effects, which I shall summarize in what follows and which are very similar to the ones in newspaper articles (cf. section 2).

First and foremost, the clear preference for mathematical symbols instead of linguistic symbols can probably be accounted for by their increased conspicuousness in a constellation of words, which attracts attention not only to the advert, but also to the linguistic unit containing them (which, needless to say, always argues the case for the product), as well as by their aura of factual, scientific evidence. In what concerns the latter, following Gieszinger (2001: 142), it can be argued that numbers are used extensively in my corpus to meet people's need for expertness and for more detailed, specialist information in an advertisement. While (seemingly) denoting a quantity, numbers connote scientific knowledge and research, and hence, seriousness and prestige. If one ever doubts the credibility of the advertising message, the numbers stand out to drive away any questions.

The heavy reliance on numbers in my corpus of ads is part and parcel of the advertising endeavour to mimic scientific discourse (cf. Kilyeni 2009), seeking to maximize scientific credibility and thus certify the effectiveness of the advertised product. It is the implied "authority of science" (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 311) and not accurate quantification that makes numbers so valuable in advertisements.

In addition, the use of distinctive fonts (e.g. bigger font size, different font or font colour, font effects) - either for numbers only or for the entire linguistic unit in which they occur - makes such implicit references to science more conspicuous and simultaneously emphasizes the prestige of science.

Moreover, as shown in 3.3, numbers are also exploited to heighten some positive outcome of using the advertised product. From a gender studies perspective, it can also be argued that, due to their intrinsic potential to indicate with (apparent) precision the proportion to which certain body parts will improve, such numerical formulations tighten the contemporary straightjacket of femininity even more, by additionally quantifying culturally established, desirable bodily attributes, as if beauty could be measured scientifically (i.e. objectively).

Finally, the examples examined in 3.4 have revealed that numbers may also dramatize some otherwise ordinary bodily condition, making the advertising message emotionally loaded. Once again, these examples also illustrate that numerically based information can contribute to the shaping of the contemporary feminine beauty canon, by pinpointing all sorts of fabricated bodily flaws. That is why I believe that the rhetoric of numbers, as manifest in my corpus, is part of the broader rhetoric of transformation that adverts for cosmetics rely on (cf. Kilyeni 2012).

Given the significant rhetorical power of numbers, as evidenced in this paper, critics of advertising would probably argue that numbers in ads are just another advertising trick meant to mislead the readers through false claims. In my opinion, the examples discussed in this paper cleverly exploit the magic of numbers in the hope that they will work wonders in the fantasy world of the readers, and will eventually push the advertised products into their real world (cf. Cook 1992: 178); that is, ads will eventually accomplish their main task: that of selling. Advertising, just as science fiction, may appropriate the language of empirical science, but this makes science of neither. Numbers mean one thing in, say, a scientific report, and another thing in the above adverts, which I presume most women are aware of, given people's vast and recurrent experience with advertisements in contemporary society.

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