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Pragmatic properties of idiom modifications in the language of advertising

The language of print advertising abounds with pragmatically-motivated phraseological units (PUs) such as: idioms, metaphors, slogans, proverbs, etc. In order to draw the reader's attention, advertisers exploit the pragmatic potential of PUs. The paper explores the various interpretations of meaning as well as the use of idiom modifications (as a group of PUs) in the advertising discourse, primarily via pragmatic devices such as presuppositions and implicatures.

Key words: advertising; pragmatic principles; phraseology; idiom modifications; presupposition; implicature.

1. Introduction

In today's world of mass media, advertisements are ever-present and influence people to a high extent. It can be said that advertising, as a phenomenon, has rapidly developed for the past few decades, thus becoming a fertile ground for various linguistic and other analyses. A crucial precondition for good communication, and the starting point for making sense of what is being communicated, is that the participants (writer-reader, sender-receiver, producer-consumer, addresser-addressee etc.) cooperate with each other (Yule 2002: 35). Broadly speaking, the present paper deals with the phraseology, i.e. phraseological units (henceforth abbreviated as PUs) that advertisers use and the effects and influences that print advertisements have on addressees i.e. readers. More specifically, the pragmatic properties of *idiom modifications* (as a group of PUs) in print advertisements are the main focus of this paper.

2. Pragmatic principles underlying the study

The paper is based on several pragmatic points and principles. Firstly, the paper deals with relationships between linguistic forms and entities in the world i.e. how words literally connect to things. In this particular case, it refers to how advertising messages or the discourse of advertising connect to their addressees i.e. readers, with the focus on the meaning that comes from linguistic knowledge. The analysis will also try to establish the relationship between verbal descriptions and states of affairs in the world (Yule 2002:4). In addition, the paper will analyze the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms in the discourse of advertising. It refers to advertisers' intended meanings, their assumptions, their purposes or goals or any kind of actions. The focus is on the aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge alone - taking into account the reader's knowledge about the physical and social world (Peccei 2001: 5).

The two questions which will be primarily dealt with in the analysis of the advertisements are as follows:

- A) How idiom modifications are used in the print advertisements as a persuasive force?
- B) How advertisers' presuppositions and implicatures work in this discourse?

2.1. *Presuppositions*

One of the most important topics both in semantics and pragmatics is presupposition.¹ Many authors such as Kempson (1975), Gazdar (1979), Fodor (1975), Levinson (1983) and Sperber and Wilson (1986) showed strong interest in this subject (Melchenko 2003: 20). The importance of presupposition, according to Melchenko (2003: 26), is that it lies at the borderline of the division between pragmatics and semantics. Furthermore, presupposition is based both on conventional meaning and mutual knowledge. The definition given by Yule (2002: 25) says that "a presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance." According to Peccei (2001: 22), the defining properties of a presupposition can be classified as the following:

- 1) Presuppositions are inferences about what is assumed in an utterance rather than directly asserted;

¹ Cf. Levinson 2005.

- 2) Presuppositions are closely linked to the words and grammatical structures that are actually used in the utterance and our knowledge about the way language users conventionally interpret them;
- 3) Presuppositions can be drawn even when there is little or no surrounding context.

Pragmatic theories of presupposition (Karttunen and Peters 1979; Gazdar 1979) assume that “presuppositions are part of the conventional meaning of expressions” (Melchenko (2003: 21). According to Herskovits (qtd. in Melchenko 2003: 21), presuppositions need not be true if the sentence including the word or construction is true: their truth depends on pragmatic factors - on the mutual knowledge or common ground of participants.

A presupposition is a necessary precondition for the processing of any communication. As far as the discourse of advertising is concerned, Peccei (2001: 21) states that “presupposition has a great deal of importance in persuasive language, particularly in the courtroom and advertising.” Advertisers are not allowed to directly assert claims about their products or their competitors’ for which they have no evidence. However, they can generally get away with making indirect assertions via presuppositions. The following examples, taken from Peccei (2001: 23), illustrate how the concept of presuppositions works in the discourse of advertising:

- (1) a. *The secret to Blasee’s effectiveness is Calming Fluid.*
 - Presupposition: *Blasee is effective* and *There is a secret to Blasee’s effectiveness.*
- b. *Watch all the puffiness and wrinkles disappear!*
 - Presupposition: *All the puffiness and wrinkles will disappear.*

Similarly, advertisers write their messages presupposing that their addressees can read what is ‘behind’ the message, and not what is actually said.

2.2. *Implicature*

According to Levinson (2005: 100), “unlike many other topics in pragmatics, implicature does not have an extended history.” The term implicature was first introduced by Paul Grice (1975, 1989) “in order to explain speaker’s and hearer’s cooperative use of inference” (Melchenko 2003: 22). In addition, Grice argued that ‘the predictability of inference formation could be explained by the cooperative principle and the maxims’ (Melchenko 2003: 22). There are several

definitions of implicature in the linguistic literature. For instance, Gazdar (1979: 38) states that “implicature is a proposition that is implied by the utterance of a sentence in a context even though that proposition is not a part of nor an entailment of what was actually said.” Similarly, Heim (1992: 184) states that “implicatures are the inferences that are blessed by mutuality and are not truth-conditional entailments.”

It is important to mention that Grice himself distinguishes between two classes of implicatures: conversational and conventional. The conversational implicatures are to be in the focus of the analysis below. Namely, according to Yule (2002: 40), “the basic assumption in conversation is that, unless otherwise indicated, the participants are adhering to the cooperative principle and the maxims.” According to Melchenko (2003: 23), “the concept of conversational implicature explains how it is possible for speakers to mean and for hearers to understand more than is literally said. The hearer understands the speaker’s intended meaning by generating conversational implicature.”

Furthermore, Melchenko argues that (2003: 2), from a linguistic perspective, ‘one of the central aspects of advertising is the heavy use of implicature, which involves the recipient in a process of inference-drawing’. The same author distinguishes so-called covert and overt implicatures, stating that advertisers very often want the audience to understand advertisements in a particular way, thus misleading consumers to infer more meaning than is actually said. They do so because covert inferences are processed unconsciously and therefore can affect the audience without them noticing it (Melchenko 2003: 3). The other type of implicatures, so-called overt ones, are used for several “honest reasons in order to get audience’s attention (e.g. by exploiting humor) and making the ad ‘stick’ in the audience’s memory” (Melchenko 2003: 4). On the other hand, one of the definitions of the Grice’s theory of implicature, according to *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicature>) states the following:

An implicature is something meant, implied, or suggested distinct from what is said. Implicatures can be part of sentence meaning or dependent on conversational context, and can be conventional or unconventional. Conversational implicatures have become one of the principal subjects of pragmatics. Figures of speech provide familiar examples. An important conceptual and methodological issue in semantics is how to distinguish senses and entailments from conventional implicatures. Implicature has been invoked for a variety of purposes, from defending controversial semantic claims in philosophy to explaining lexical gaps in linguistics.

According to Levinson (2005: 97), “the notion of conversational implicature is one of the single most important ideas in pragmatics.” Implicature is impor-

tant for the discourse of advertising and this thesis for several reasons. Furthermore, Levinson (2005: 97) states that,

... implicature stands as a paradigmatic example of the nature and power of pragmatic explanations of linguistic phenomena. The sources of this species of pragmatic inference can be shown to lie outside the organization of language, in some general principles for co-operative interaction, and yet these principles have a persuasive effect upon the structure of language.

In addition, many of the advertising samples below will, at first, seem pointless with no communicative value but they, used in the context given, intend to communicate more than is actually said (Yule 2002: 35). The additional, conveyed meaning i.e. an implicature is the focus of the analysis below as well. The following is a set of examples on how implicature is pragmatically analyzed, according to Peccei (2001: 25):

- (2) a. A: *Do you like my new hat?*
B: *It's pink.*
- Implicature: *I don't like your hat.*
- b. A: *Coffee?*
B: *It would keep me awake all night.*
- Implicature: *I won't have some coffee.*
- c. A: *Have you finished the student evaluation forms and the reading list?*
B: *I've done the reading list.*
- Implicature: *I haven't done the evaluation forms.*

Levinson points out that “inferences arise to preserve the assumption of cooperation; it is only by making the assumption contrary to superficial indications that the inferences arise in the first place” (2005: 102). In other words, this is a kind of inference that Grice dubs a conversational implicature, pointing out that people do not always adhere to the maxims on a superficial level, but that wherever possible, people interpret what is said as conforming to the maxims on at least some level (Levinson 2005: 103). There are four properties of conversational implicature (Melchenko 2003: 27) which make it favorable for being widely exploited in advertising. The properties are as follows:

- A) negation tolerance
- B) cancellability
- C) context-dependency
- D) calculability

Melchenko (2003: 26) states that conversational implicatures are *cancellable* in cases when it is possible to cancel them by adding new premises to the original ones. In this sense conversational implicatures resemble presuppositions and are thus treated in the similar way. In addition, a conversational implicature is *context-dependent* because it is not a part of the conventional meaning of an utterance; i.e. the same utterance might give rise to different conversational implicatures in various contexts (Melchenko 2003: 26).

Furthermore, Melchenko (2003: 26-27) points out that conversational implicatures are *calculable* because it is possible to construct an argument which shows ‘how from the literal meaning of an utterance, the cooperative principle, and the maxims, it follows that the hearer would make the inference in question to preserve the assumption of cooperation’.

2.3. Grice’s cooperative principle

It is worth to mention here Grice’s theory of conversational implicature, i.e. on a set of assumptions of how people use language. Levinson points out (2005: 101) that ‘Grice’s suggestion is that there is a set of over-arching assumptions guiding the conduct of conversation’. These arise, it seems, from basic rational considerations and may be formulated as guidelines for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation to further co-operative ends’. Grice’s *cooperative principle* and the two (out of four) *Maxims of conversations* within it are of high importance to the language of advertising. According to Levinson (2005: 101), ‘Grice identifies as guidelines of this sort of four basic maxims of conversation or general principles underlying the efficient cooperative use of language, which jointly express a general cooperative principle’. The cooperative principle and the maxims, by which the hearer (i.e. the reader in this paper) may distinguish between what is said and what is implicated, are presented as follows (Levinson 2005: 101):

2.3.1. The cooperative principle

Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The maxims

The maxim of Quantity

- (i) *make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange*
- (ii) *do not make your contribution more informative than is required*

The maxim of Manner

be perspicuous, and specifically:

- (i) *avoid obscurity*
- (ii) *avoid ambiguity*
- (iii) *be brief*
- (iv) *be orderly*

This paper, as far as the analysis of the selected examples of advertisements is concerned, will be based primarily on the following concepts:

- a. type of PU exploited i.e. idiom modification
- b. presupposition
- c. implicature

It has to be mentioned here that all the points in focus mentioned above (a.-c.) must be recognized primarily as unstated assumptions used in conversations - i.e. - in this case in the discourse of advertising. It is to be assumed that there are appeals to certain human emotions in order to achieve something; that an advertiser is going to provide an appropriate amount of information; that the information provided is relevant and as clear as possible (Yule 2002: 37).

2.4. Emotional appeals

According to Agres, Edell and Dubitsky, “a growing body of mood research suggests that feelings can change the nature of cognitive processing” (1990: xiv). The applicability of this to the discourse of advertising is as follows: “if the emotional reaction is positive, more positive thoughts may be generated in response to the message of the ad, because the emotional reactions one has in response to an advertisement may influence what gets activated from memory” (Agres, Edell and Dubitsky, 1990: xiii).

In addition, Etzioni (1988) states that even in the area of decision making one finds models that suggest that the basis for most decisions is emotional. Therefore, Agres, Edell and Dubitsky (1990: xiv) stress the importance of the potential influence and the role of emotions in advertising, pointing out that theories of advertising are not complete unless they incorporate emotional factors.

According to Goddard (2005: 4), “advertisements are forms of discourse which make a powerful contribution to how we construct our identities.” The same author points out that “we all recognize the types of advertising text that occurs in newspapers and magazines, where a product is being presented as desirable for us to buy” (2005: 5). Harris (1999, qtd. in Melchenko 2003: 6) states that “an average person in the United States is exposed to about 500 advertisements per day, 182,000 per year, and millions in a lifetime.” All these advertisements will try offer some product or service in a way which satisfies some consumer need or desire – “a tablet which is represented as relieving pain or alleviating the symptoms of the cold, a frozen food that is represented as easy to prepare, nutritious and tasty, or a brand of beer that is said to taste great” (Melchenko 2003: 6).

The basic aim of any advertiser is to get attention. The quickest way to achieve that aim is to get to people’s deep-lying desires.² If advertisers are capable of getting to know what people privately yearn for, they will have the best chance to arrest their attention and establish communication (Fowles 2001: 61). Therefore, advertising is not just about the promotion of certain branded products or services, but “can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of an individual, group or organization” (Goddard 2005: 8). In today’s world people are constantly bombarded by hundreds of advertisements on a daily basis but only a few of them can actually attract their attention.

3. Pragmatic properties of idiom modifications

The analysis of the selection of print advertisements below specifically focuses on the ways (particularly via presuppositions and implicatures, as pragmatic devices) the message is communicated by the exploitation of idiom modifications as PUs. The analysis takes into consideration only the linguistic aspect of print advertisements, excluding pictures, drawings and other extralinguistic tools.

² Fowles (2001: 61) points out that the late media philosopher marshall McLuhan recognized the nature of effective advertisements in his book *Understanding Media*, in which the first sentence of advertising reads: “The continuous pressure is to create ads more and more in the image of audience motives and desires.”

- (3) It seems, *like great minds, great e-businesses think alike*.

The core of this example lies in the modification of the idiom *Great minds think alike* which, in order to emphasize the key term *e-businesses*, becomes *like great minds, great e-businesses think alike*. Therefore, it is presupposed that the company in focus and the reader share the same views on *how the business is properly conducted*. Furthermore, the advertiser, by using such a wording, achieves, at the same time, the element of affiliation with the reader, by placing him or her into the category of *great minds*. The modification of the well known idiomatic expression serves as the main persuasive tool as well. In addition, the implicature is that the logical choice for the reader is to do business with someone who *thinks alike*.

- (4) *Carpe diem?* Isn't that Latin for more places to go and more seats to get you there?

The advertiser poses a question *Carpe diem* at the beginning of this advertisement, implying that readers may not *seize the pleasures of the moment without concern for the future* to the extent that they are supposed to. The aphorism *Carpe diem* itself refers to the need to achieve as much as possible in one's life. The presupposition found in this message lies in the paraphrases of the above mentioned Latin aphorism (found in the Roman writer Horace's Odes, used in English since the 1800s) by adapting it to the purposes of the advertisement: *to seize the day in the sense of visiting as many places as possible*, which the credit card advertised can provide (*Seizing the day just became a little easier*). Having in mind that it is the *credit card* in question, such wording seems to be very effective in terms of attention-seeking means. *Carpe diem* or *Seize the day* is a well-known and frequently used aphorism, thus suitable for exploiting in the discourse of advertising. *Carpe diem* is well-known phrase, often heard or read in many types of discourse, and is additionally adapted here (*...more places to go and more seats...*) to serve the purpose of the advertisement and therefore communicate the information thoroughly. By explaining what the possession of the object advertised provides, the advertiser highlights the message and gives an additional persuasive force to it.

- (5) *Seize the Week*. It's easier to grasp the future if you know what it looks like.

This advertisement has similar pragmatic properties as the example (2). *Seize the Week* is the modification of the well known idiomatic expression *Seize the day*, which presupposes that the reader must keep up with the changes in a business world, if they want to succeed in what they do. The modification of the ex-

pression *Seize the day* - *Seize the week* serves as the main persuasive and attention-seeking device, while the remaining part of the advertisement provides an elaboration on the importance of *seizing the week*.

(6) Isn't it time your company *kept better company*?

To be in good company is a frequently used idiom which is, in its modified form, exploited here as an attention-seeking and a persuasive device, offering "the sense of friendship" to the reader. The presupposition is that the company advertised is better than the solution the reader currently has (or that they have previously had). As it often happens with advertisements, it is not presupposed here (nor is explicitly stated) that the company offered is *the best*, but simply *better than others*, and it is up to the addressee to decide. In addition, the implied message is that the reader's current state of business may be improved by the choice offered.

(7) *The Pain Stops Here*.

The phrase *The Pain Stops* here is the modification of the well known idiomatic expression *The buck stops here*, meaning *something that you say in order to tell someone that you will take responsibility for a situation or problem*. The advertisement presupposes one of the things people fear most - *being ill or in pain* and the modification of the well known idiomatic expression serves to highlight that sense of fear and induce the reader to buy the product advertised. *To be healthy* is one of the basic human needs, which is in focus here. This product is advertised as 'an ultimate pain reliever', so that the implicature is that some other medicines may not work so as to *stop the pain*.

(8) *It's sync or sink*. Add 85,000 knowledgeable people from around the world to your team and you'll find yourself in a powerful position. Because when everyone moves in the same direction, you can get to the future first. Together, we can move forward faster. Dive in.

The first thing to notice about this advertisement is the use of the modification of the idiom *sink or swim*, by changing *swim* into *sync* (which is the advertised term in focus), and reversing the word order. The idiom *sink or swim*, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1995), refers to 'a situation where one will either fail totally or survive by one's own efforts'. The presuppositions are that *the sync option* is supported by *85,000 knowledgeable people from around the world who move in the same direction thus finding themselves in a powerful position* and that the option mentioned gives the reader the same opportunity. At the same time such a wording is exploited as an atten-

tion-seeking device, by implying that *85,000 people cannot be wrong*. The number itself sounds impressive and conveys a huge persuasive power, which gives an additional value to this advertisement in terms of influencing people to buy or use a certain product/service. In other words, the message implied here is that if one wants to *find oneself in a powerful position*, they had better choose *sync*, otherwise they will *sink*, i.e. fail in what they are endeavoring to achieve.

Concerning the emotional appeal involved, the justification for the choice of this idiom is used by the advertiser lies in the fact that most people are familiar with this expression, it is often used in everyday speech, and it immediately draws attention, especially when paraphrased in this way, which makes it an effective attention-seeking tool. Therefore, the main objectives of the advertiser are fully accomplished: attention is drawn and the appeal for guidance is successfully conveyed, because a certain number of consumers will choose to try *not to sink*, to *dive in* as well as to be a part of *a team of knowledgeable people* and *to move to the future first*.

- (9) *When the Tough Get Going*. Swiss Life is the way to go for coordinated global programs and real financial savings. As the world's leading international network of life insurers, we're never far from where you need us. The right direction.

When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Get Going is a famous inspiring, 'problem solving' proverb, attributed to Joseph P. Kennedy (1888-1969), the father of U.S. President John F. Kennedy. A modified part (more precisely, a clipping) of this culturally-marked proverb is used in the advertisement as an attention-drawing tool. The presupposition is that those *who are tough get going* are prepared to deal with any challenge lying in front of them and they never give up. Therefore, the advertiser sends the message that, in order *to be tough* in all aspects of life, you need financial background i.e. savings. Another presupposition says that the life insurer advertised is the direction or the guide for the reader to take because it ensures (another presupposition) real financial savings.

The element of affiliation is achieved by stating *we're never far from where you need us*. By stating so, the advertiser is implying that the company presented is not only a *life insurer* but also a *friend*. Another implicature is that there are people *who are not tough* and those are the ones *who cannot find the way to go for coordinated global programs and real financial savings* i.e. they fail to *find the right direction*.

- (10) We see your grandfather's *dream realized*. The future success of any business depends on its next generation of leaders. If they've learned

well and worked hard, they can take a business to whole new levels. We stand in awe of business and its potential, it's what inspires us to create software that helps them start, grow, and thrive. Your potential. Our passion.

The core of the message is the modification of the well known idiom *a dream come true* (...*your grandfather's dream realized*). It conveys the presupposition that the reader is a success (as an embodiment of *his or her grandfather's dream*). The presupposition number two is that *it takes learning well and working hard* in order to achieve what one wants or even more than that (...*take a business to whole new levels*). The presupposition number three deals with the offer/product in question, i.e. the *software that helps people start, grow and thrive*. Therefore, it guides the reader to achieve what is above mentioned: *We see your grandfather's dream realized*. The final presupposition complements what the previous presuppositions state, adding that, in order to achieve *your grandfather's dream*, you should entrust the advertised company with your potential, which is the ultimate formula for success. Following what is the above mentioned, the implicature in this message may be as follows: there is no use of one's potential if it is not properly directed by someone who stands *in awe of business and its potential*.

4. Conclusion

Pragmatic concepts such as presuppositions and implicatures are closely related to the feature which says that PUs describe interpersonal relationships of people and the world around them (e.g. emotional states, involvement etc). Idioms and their modifications, for example, often refer to various situations (both pleasant and unpleasant ones) that people experience in their lifetime. The advertisers use this fact to strike a cord of human emotions and induce readers to think of possibilities to strive for or perhaps avoid certain situations or mental/physical conditions. In order to achieve that, the readers are 'required' to buy a certain product or to use a certain service, which is done via presuppositions and implicatures the advertisers employ as additional persuasive or manipulative means.

Idiomatic expressions, as a group of PUs, are often used in colloquial language, they are familiar to the reader, and thus they make a fertile ground for the exploitation in the discourse of advertising, because they convey semantic 'density' to the message. The analysis in the paper, on the one hand, does not prove that PUs such as idiom modifications are frequently exploited in the discourse of print advertising. On the other hand, the analysis does show that PUs, where present, constitute an important part of an advertisement as a whole, in prag-

matic terms. Finally, the larger corpus analysis may have produced different findings, so that this paper may serve as a starting point for a more elaborate research.

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PRAGMATIČKA SVOJSTVA MODIFIKACIJA IDIOMA U JEZIKU REKLAMNIH PORUKA

Jezik reklamnih poruka u tiskanim medijima obiluje pragmatički motiviranim frazeološkim jedinicama kao što su idiomi, metafore, slogani, izreke, itd. Da bi privukli pažnju čitalaca, oglašivači, koriste pragmatički potencijal frazeoloških jedinica putem presupozicija i implikatura. Rad istražuje pragmatičke aspekte upotrebe modifikacija idioma (kao grupe frazeoloških jedinica) u diskursu reklamnih poruka tiskanih medija.

Ključne riječi: reklamne poruke; pragmatički principi; frazeologija; modifikacije idioma; presupozicija; implikatura.