Persuasion strategy in online social advertising

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Advertising is in constant development, and the language of advertising is adapting on an ongoing basis. Linguists all over the world have attempted to classify and analyse speech strategies used to create the most persuasive advertising text. The present article focuses on the linguistic strategies applied in online social advertising, such as strategies of warning and argumentation in general and the strategy of persuasion in particular. The study identifies the strategy of persuasion as the most popular in online social advertising. The author identifies the tactics instrumental in achieving the main goal of social advertising – encouraging action to the advantage of the advertiser – as well as a wide range of advertising avenues. The article analyses online advertisements using the methods of quantitative, cognitive and discursive analysis and drawing on the data retrieved from British and American website offering online promotional materials.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has given a major boost to the development of advertising. Today, advertising is viewed as one of the most efficient instruments for opinion manipulation. Regardless of the advertising medium, its aim is to encourage people to 'buy'. Over the years, scholars have singled out different types of advertising, such as TV, radio, print, online advertising, etc. However, due to the emergence of ICT, Internet advertising has come under scrutiny, so that today, online advertising is probably the most rewarding area of study. Advertising discourse, particularly its online variety, is of great interest to linguists all over the world. The aim of the present article is to analyse the most frequently used speech strategies in online social advertising in general and the strategy of persuasion in particular as well as the most frequently occurring tactics of their implementation.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The author identifies the tactics instrumental in achieving the main goal of social advertising – encouraging action to the advantage of the advertiser – as well as a wide range of advertising avenues, such as billboards, leaflets and handouts, online advertising, etc. The article analyses online advertisements using the methods of quantitative,

cognitive and discursive analysis and drawing on the data retrieved from British and American website offering online promotional materials.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 Discourse

The development of the cognitive approach commenced in the twentieth century. Dabrowska and Divjak (1996) assume that the main aim of cognitive linguistics is to consider a language as a cognitive mechanism that participates in the coding and transformation of information (Dabrowska & Divjak, 2015). Cognitive linguistics is based on the examination of two fundamental concepts: language and thought.

The establishment of cognitive linguistics is closely connected with the work of George Lakoff (1999), Henry Thompson (1983), Anna Wierzbicka (1990), Elena Kubryakova (1997), Andrei Kibrik (1999), Nina Arutyunova (1999) and other prominent researchers.

The basic notion of cognitive linguistics is 'cognition' meaning 'internal, mental, and interiorised'. Special attention in cognitive linguistics is paid to the emergence of the new functional paradigm of linguistic knowledge – the cognitive and discursive paradigm. That is why it is necessary to take into account two main functions – namely, the cognitive function realised out of participation in the cognitive process, and the

communicative function realised out of participation in acts of intercommunication. In its turn, the cognitive and discursive paradigm is closely related to one of the most fundamental notions of linguistic studies – discourse. Harris (1981) introduced the term 'discourse analysis' in 1952 stating the need to analyse the features of a connected text rather than the structure of an individual sentence. The present research considers the means of implementation of cognitive and discursive analysis in online advertising.

The examination of advertising text and advertising discourse from the point of view of cognitive and discursive analysis is impossible without the identification of the meaning of 'discourse'. One of the most common definitions of this term is *'speech that is wrapped up in life'* (Schiffrin, 1994, p. 103). Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) considered discourse as (in a general sense) a communicative event that takes place between a speaker and a listener (observer) in the process of communication at a certain period of time, and (in a narrow sense), as a complete or continuous 'product' of a communicative act which is interpreted by the recipient (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983, p. 418). Another popular definition of discourse was suggested by Arutyunova (1990) who defined it as *'a textual unity in combination with extra-linguistic, pragmatic, sociocultural, psycholinguistic and other factors'* (Arutyunova,

'Despite the fact that a large number of linguists devote their studies to advertising discourse, it is still quite a topical issue'

1990, p. 136-137). In this research, we consider discourse as a dynamic cognitive process closely related to the production of real speech, the creation of a speech act.

The key objective of discourse is the production of a speech act (text) together with the support of the perception of this text by the recipient. Thus, understanding discourse involves certain mental processes that are aimed at influencing opinion concerning specific events or situations.

In addition, it is necessary to distinguish such notions as 'discourse' and 'text'. One of the main differences between text and discourse is that text is static while discourse is a dynamic phenomenon. Traditionally, linguists classify the term 'discourse' with the help of the notion of 'text'. Text, here, can be considered as a fragment or a component of discourse.

According to the Russian school of linguistics, discourse is a cognitive process which results in the creation of a speech act. At the same time, text is a final result of discourse. That is why discourse is related to speech, and text is related to the

language system (Malyuga & Bantshikova, 2011, p. 122-134).

3.2 Advertising discourse

As concerns advertising discourse, special attention is given to the text and its description from the point of view of the most basic 'text-discourse' paradigm. Advertising text undergoes changes just as discourse does. Although a large number of linguists devote their studies to advertising discourse, it is still quite a topical issue that changes according to the development of the advertising services market.

Advertising is a special type of communication designed to provide information about a product or a particular group of products or services (in case of commercial advertising) or persuade people to take certain action (in case of social advertising). The growing number of Internet users, the development of means of wireless communication and various technological gadgets made it possible to distribute advertisements immediately to the end customer and a particular target audience.

Advertising discourse is a type of institutional discourse. Karasik (2000) defines institutional discourse as a *'special clichéd variation of communication between people who may not know each other but are supposed to communicate in accordance with norms and rules*

of a certain society' (Karasik, 2000, p. 5-6).

Communication in institutional discourse is based on the hierarchical relations between individuals, their role in the society and the status of each particular participant in the discourse. Advertising is involved in all spheres of social life. Usually, the people involved in advertising discourse are advertisers (agents creating the advertising text) and the target audience (recipients of the advertising message).

Advertising texts normally use diverse functional styles – both colloquial (informal) and business (formal) – and often deploy professional terms and professional jargon.

There are several approaches to the definition of advertising discourse. One of them interprets it as a combination of an advertising text and extra-linguistic factors. Among the supporters of this approach are Bovee and Arens (1995), who define advertising discourse as *'a complete message which contains a strictly oriented pragmatic goal that, in its turn, combines distinctive features of oral speech and written text with a complex of semiotic (paralinguistic and extra-linguistic) means'* (Bovee & Arens, 1995, p. 704). According to the definition proposed by Miroshnichenko (2009), advertising text is *'a prosaic or poetic text that contains an implicit or explicit wake-up call, usually aimed at increasing*

demand' (Miroshnichenko, 2009, p. 224). Advertising text is viewed as an extremely useful tool attracting the target audience's attention. In order to make advertising texts more powerful and successful, advertisers use linguistic and speech strategies. As a result, much attention is paid to the study of this notion.

In order to be successful and influential, an advertising text has to be laconic, brief, clear and accurate, thus delivering the most significant information in a few words.

Advertising discourse and advertising text are intended to have an impact on diverse social groups of people as they appeal to a specific frame of mind.

Due to their laconic nature, advertising texts are particularly instrumental in implementing various linguistic strategies. This, in particular, can help make the connection with pragmalinguistics as it identifies which grammatical and lexical units, stylistic devices or syntactic means will be used.

In the majority of cases, advertising is created not only to provide people with information, but to stimulate imagination. In order to achieve this goal, advertising texts use various stylistic devices, such as irony and metaphor.

The expansion of the Internet has also influenced

'Due to its laconic nature, advertising text is an example of the most efficient way to implement various linguistic means'

the development of advertising texts. A single online advertisement may contain different styles and devices – graphic (capital letters, italics), phonetic (alliteration, repetition, rhyme, contrast), lexical (personal pronouns) and syntactic (questions, imperative constructions). In addition, there are extra-linguistic features that characterise advertising messages. According to a study by Liu (2012), the two main groups of extra-linguistic features are primary and secondary. Primary features include subject of an advertisement, its aims and objectives, author identity and recipient identity. Secondary features include distribution channels and conditions of communication.

Focusing on online advertising, we identify other extra-linguistic features that play a significant role in persuading people to adopt a particular attitude or course of action. As online advertising is one-sided communication, advertisers need to use more tools of persuasion. Both the target audience and the producer will influence the way an advertising text is created and presented.

Let us consider the influence of the target

audience, for instance, on the choice of language. If one produces advertisements for children, it is necessary to implement simple words in order for children to understand the advertising message. Advertisements for adults, on the other hand, can use more complicated grammatical constructions as well as some common specialised terms.

3.3 Discourse strategies

Another way to make advertising texts more persuasive is to implement a number of speech strategies. There are many definitions of a speech strategy. In this study, speech strategy is interpreted as a combination of speech acts which purpose is to achieve the communicative goal of the speech process. A person manages their speech behaviour in compliance with several important characteristics, such as cognitive plan, the role and personal qualities of participants of the communication process, communication traditions and so on.

As mentioned before, the choice of speech strategies as well as other linguistic and extra-linguistic factors depends on the target of the advertisement. Issers (2006) defines speech strategies as a combination of speech actions designed to address the general communicative aim of the speaker. However, it is important not to confuse speech strategies and communicative strategies. Though these two notions are closely interrelated, they need to be accurately

differentiated. Speech strategies are used to implement communicative strategies, while communicative strategies consist of speech strategies and extra-linguistic features (Issers, 2006, p. 284). Implementing speech strategies helps potential recipients change their point of view, tune in to public opinion and make a decision, hopefully in favour of the advertiser.

It is a wide-spread belief that people have a negative attitude towards advertising. However, exposed to the same advertisement on a regular basis, one will inevitably think about its message whether one likes its content or not.

3.4 Social vs commercial advertising

The main difference between social and commercial advertising is that social advertising is not aimed at selling some specific range of products. The role of social advertising is to change the model of human behaviour and bring into the public eye the most significant phenomena and global issues. Therefore, social advertising is able to develop new social values. The target audience here is not a particular social class but the society at large. This is because social issues, as a rule, are related to people all over the world as they tend to have similar problems and

'Social advertising is of great interest to public organisations and charities as well as to governments'

concerns. Social advertising is of great interest to public organisations and charities as well as to governments.

Legal definition of the term 'social advertising' is suggested in Article 3 of the Federal Law of the Russian Federation 'On advertising' dated March 13, 2006 No. 38-ФЗ: *'Social advertising is information distributed by any ways and in any form using any means and addressed to uncertain scope of people and aimed at achieving charity and any other publicly useful goals[1] as well as provision of government interests.'*

Currently, there are several targets of social advertising campaigns, including family (child protection, family values, etc.), society (social development, social rights, discrimination, etc.), health care (standard of living, population, lifestyle, disease prevention, smoking, etc.), and ecology (deforestation, pollution, environmental protection, animals and plants extinction, etc.).

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[1] The Federal Law of the Russian Federation 'On advertising' dated March 13, 2006 No. 38-ФЗ. Retrieved from http://www.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc&base=LAW&n=304150&fld=134&dst=10000%2000001,0&rnd=0.2691413210415823#04409431588 9519264

The language used in social advertising makes abundant use of imperative constructions. The particle 'not' is also used rather frequently in social advertising as a way of attracting attention to what not to do. The goal of social advertising in such cases is not only to warn people, but to prohibit certain action.

4. STUDY AND RESULTS

Having analysed over roughly a thousand advertising texts used in the texts of social advertisements, we find three common speech strategies used in social advertising discourse – namely, warning, persuasion and argumentation strategies (Fig. 1).
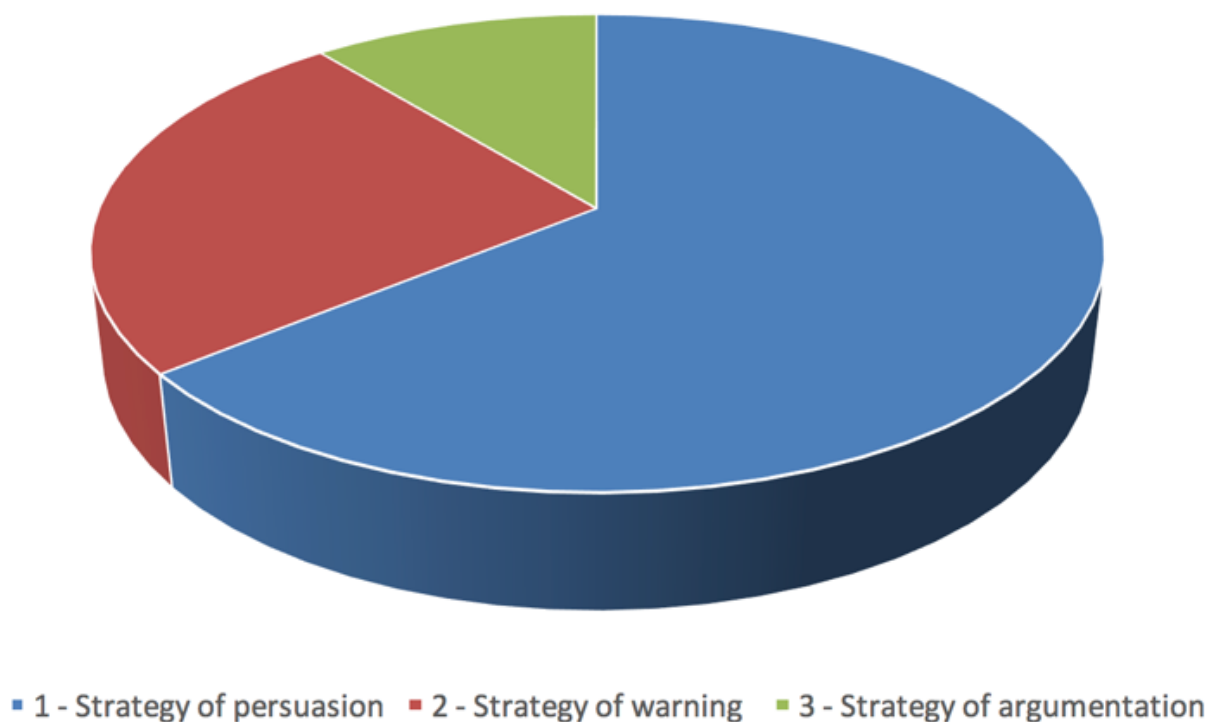

■ 1 - Strategy of persuasion   ■ 2 - Strategy of warning   ■ 3 - Strategy of argumentation

Figure 1. Frequency of occurrence of persuasion, warning and argumentation strategies in online social advertising

The strategy of warning is realised using the tactics of showing ways of problem solving. Such types of advertisements suggest what can be done to address the current issue and/or offer ways to avoid its negative consequences. Thus, the following example shows that careless driving may have certain consequences, often tragic and dramatic (Fig. 2):
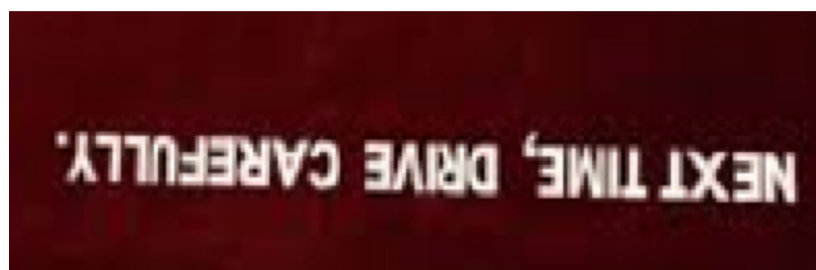
Figure 2. Example the strategy of warning realised in online social advertisement

It is not accidental that the text of the advertisement is turned upside down, as it targets those who prefer not to abide by the rules and are thus more likely to end up in a car accident. This category of people needs to be reminded that they are responsible for the lives of others – be it passengers or pedestrians.

'HE SEES A LOT MORE OF HIS MOM
NOW THAT HE'S LOST HIS LICENCE.
MAYBE SHE'LL GIVE HIM DATING ADVICE.
DRINKING & DRIVING
IS IT REALLY EVEN WORTH IT?'

In this case the tactics of showing ways of problem solving is used to highlight the impropriety of certain decisions and thus serves as a reminder that before doing something one should think whether it is really worth it. This particular advertisement is telling a story of a man who has decided to drink before driving. The consequences of this decision are rather predictable – he loses his licence. That is why, now if he wants to go on a date, he needs to ask his mom to give them a lift.

The warning strategy in this particular example also relies on sarcasm and a rhetorical question as 'backup' tools in making the point. Thus, sarcasm appeals to the sense of shame, reminding the irresponsible driver that he might at some point have to rely on his mother in intimate matters and listen to her advice on how to handle his love life. Rhetorical questions are also frequently used to make people think about their behaviour and possible responsibility. In this advertisement, the rhetorical question is introduced by 'maybe'.

'Maybe you will be lucky enough and you will just lose your licence. However, there is a possibility that you will injure or even kill somebody. So, should you think twice before getting behind a wheel drunk?' The answer is, obviously, yes.

Another strategy which is also used in social advertising is the strategy of argumentation that is implemented by the use of emphasis. Such advertisements commonly appeal to facts and statistics, as in: *'Over 20% of all deaths in the US are from TOBACCO.'*

The last strategy – the strategy of persuasion – is admittedly the most popular among advertisers. Its primary tactic is associated with an appeal to emotions and is implemented through linguistic devices, such as the present continuous tense, imperative constructions, modal verbs, the passive voice and impersonal sentences.

'Without a plan, it's like you're leading them to disaster. Your family's safety is in your hands.'

The advertiser appeals to emotions, addressing one of the most important of human interests – family. The picture that accompanies the words is an image of a child caught in the middle of a natural disaster. This advertisement is designed to remind the parents that bringing a child to this worth is a responsible endeavour. If one decides to have a baby, one should prepare for it, giving consideration to a variety of issues involved.

Making a decision to have children is supposed to turn a person into a responsible individual, who will be expected to always have a plan. Bringing up a child is not an easy task at all, and if one doesn't take care of all the aspects the bringing up process, nobody will do it for them. This is why advertisers use a well-known idiom 'in your hands' meaning 'accepting responsibility'.

'GLOBAL WARMING IS LEAVING MANY HOMELESS'

This social ad once again appeals to emotions, making the target audience stop and think about the environment, the planet, and its inhabitants. The problem of global warming is extremely urgent nowadays. The climate is changing, the glaciers are melting, and the average temperature is rising. All these factors influence not only human life but also the lives of animals, such as, for example, polar bears who cannot stand a hot climate and are now registered as an endangered species.

The advertisement calls on us to pay attention to this problem because one of the major reasons for global warming according to scientists is the human impact on the environment. The climate is changing in response to external man-made forces causing both drops and rises in temperatures.

One of the examples of such impact is the growing greenhouse gas emissions. The key message of the advertisement thus has to do with reminding people that they are to be held accountable for the unfortunate environmental changes taking place across the globe.

Therewith, the present continuous form of the verb shows that the existing problem is really dangerous, because the process of global warming is accelerating. This means that every hour, minute and second a certain number of animals lose their homes.

women need to

women need to be put in their place

women need to know their place

women need to be controlled

women need to be disciplined

women need to be seen as equal

Today the question of gender equality is broadly discussed everywhere as feminists struggle for the right to be treated equal to men. The advertisers highlight this problem by using the strategy of persuasion in order to appeal to target audience's emotions. In fact, the issue is rather pressing.

According to the UN reports, we are currently far away from a world where men and women are treated equally. This is especially true in terms of employment, responsibilities and salaries. Many educated women cannot find an adequate job, and even if they do, it is quite possible that they will earn less money than a man in the same position.

For example, in countries such as Sweden and France women can earn 31% less than men, and in emerging countries – 75% less than men.

In addition, the advertisers use bold and cursive types in order to attract attention, and make use of passive constructions and impersonal sentences to show that it is appealing not just to women but to a general audience.

5. CONCLUSION

Online advertising is viewed as one of the major channels used to persuade people to take certain action, which is why the majority of advertising agencies prefer to use this medium as is a quick way to reach the target audience.

Social advertising differs from commercial advertising in that it isn't intended to make people purchase a product, and it isn't about gaining profit. On the contrary, its key goal is to advise on difficult situations or modify social norms and behavioural patterns within the society. People usually take notice of such advertisements as they can sometimes help them find a solution to their problems.

The key aim of this article was to classify the most frequently used speech strategies in online social advertising. Having analysed a large number of online social advertisements, we find that the key strategies involved include warning, argumentation and persuasion. These strategies are implemented by means of such tactics as problem solving advice, appeal to emotions and emphasis.

In addition to these speech strategies, advertisers involved in social advertising use a wide range of linguistic devices, including graphic (capital letters, italics, and bold type,) lexical (personal pronouns), syntactical (rhetorical questions, the imperative and the present continuous tense), and

stylistic devices (irony and sarcasm).

The study highlights that speech strategies implemented in online advertising are yet to be thoroughly investigated. Our hope is it will be of value to advertisers whose aim is to create the most influential and persuasive advertising and to researchers and teachers seeking to deconstruct the language of advertising and raise their students' critical awareness.

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