

THE DISCOURSE OF RADIO COMMERCIALS AND THE FUNCTION OF PERSUASION

Over the last decades, the field of discourse analysis has paid much attention to the description of different forms of discourse -either spoken or written- in order to examine how language is used in a specific context with the intention of obtaining a particular purpose. It is part of every person's cultural competence to identify, distinguish, and classify without much difficulty the various discourse types of his / her society, and their corresponding purpose. Following Brown & Yule (1983), who claim that participants recognize discourse types based on a "principle of analogy" with what they have experienced in the past, and on a shared "socio-cultural knowledge", we can postulate that there must be certain principles and regularities¹ that guide the production of discourse even when their participants are not consciously aware of it. With the previous assumptions in mind, the present paper attempts to briefly sketch out some of the linguistic features that recurrently characterize a type of discourse so prominent in virtually all contemporary societies, as radio commercials. For this purpose, I examined ten transcriptions of radio commercials that were broadcast in an American station, whose audience is mainly formed by middle class individuals.

In a taxonomy of discourse types according to their function, commercials would clearly fall into the category of exhortative or "persuasive discourse" (Lakoff 1982). This classification is based on the fact that their overriding defining goal is to bring about a behavioural response on the part of the audience. However, it is clear that there is a crucial distinction in the way in which radio commercials and other forms of advertising attempt to achieve persuasion. Unlike in other types of advertising discourse, in which persuasion relies heavily on the images and pictures displayed in them, in radio commercials, language, reinforced by the use of music,² constitutes the only tool the speaker³ can resort to in order to achieve the intended persuasive aim. The speaker of radio commercials cannot rely on images to make his / her message more alluring to the audience. The power of language is, therefore, more at stake in this type of discourse than in any other type of advertising, since its possible persuasive power can only be attained by means of linguistic communicative means.

¹ I use the term *regularity* here in the sense intended by Brown & Yule, i. e., as "a linguistic feature which occurs in a definable environment with a significant frequency" (1983: 41).

² Even though music contributes greatly to the success of radio commercials, its study is beyond the scope of the present analysis, and will therefore not be examined here.

³ The term *speaker* is used to subsume the many strata of senders involved in the production of advertising, and to establish the conventional dichotomy between speaker-hearer or speaker-audience.

A careful analysis of the commercials transcribed revealed that radio ones make extensive use of suprasegmental, syntactic, and semantic features, which achieve significant pragmatic value, since they serve to guide the hearer's attention to the most relevant information of the ads. The linguistic traits that recur most often in the radio commercials examined are the following: high pitch tone, emphatic stress, lengthening of vowels, independent clauses, ellipsis, and the use of everyday vocabulary, usually lacking highly specific semantic content.

The first three characteristics mentioned above, i. e., high pitch tone, emphatic stress, and lengthening of vowels, often affect the same words, thus mutually enhancing their emphatic effects. These *supra segmental features*, together with alterations in the speaker's voice quality, violate the conventions of speech production, and thus serve as grabbing devices which attract the audience's attention by exaggerating the pronunciation of specific words. Likewise, these features contribute greatly to the creation of the idiosyncratic rhythm that characterizes each commercial. The terms that are usually emphasized function as key words for the correct interpretation of the message as it is intended by the speaker. These key words are not only those terms that correspond to the brand-names of the products advertised, but also those that address the audience's needs. This seems to be the most likely reason for highlighting, by means of emphatic as well as unusual pronunciations, terms that in their vast majority suggest an inexpensive purchase, such as: *free*, *save*, *extra*, *discount*, *half price*, *lower price*, and so on. Therefore, the semantic content of these words as well as the tone of voice in which they are uttered, act as appeals for notice. The following excerpts taken from the examples analysed will help to illustrate the previous comments:

- (1) ... you can also be sure you'll get sensible *rates*¹ and the *discounts* you dese:: rve ...
- (2) ... A:: ND you'll *save* an extra 50% on clearance price shoes for the whole family ...
- (3) There'll be factory reps on sight, *extra* sale people available, *FREE*:: delivery, and twelve months *free*:: financing with *NO* payment until April ...

Thus, suprasegmental characteristics and the paralinguistic feature of radio commercials mentioned above, i. e., voice quality, interact with language in order to reinforce its meaning and thus give rise to the effect intended on the audience.

Emphasis on the relevant words and phrases of the commercial, and an adequate interpretation of them, seems to be achieved to a certain extent by the use of *independent* and *short clauses*. The shortness and simplicity of syntactic constructions facilitate the audience's quick processing of the message conveyed through the commercial. It must be born in mind that due to the briefness that characterizes commercials -usually no more than thirty seconds- if there were lots of embedded clauses, or complex sentences, the audience would have to pay close attention to the content of the ads in order to be able to process the messages transmitted through these. Moreover, we must take into account that the audience of radio advertise-

¹ The notational conventions used throughout the examples are the following: *underlining* indicates stress or emphatic pronunciation; *capital letters* mark high pitch tone; *two colons* signal lengthening of vowels in pronunciation.

ments is almost invariably formed by passive receptors, individuals who are usually engaged in some other activity while the commercial is being broadcast. Thus, this characteristic constitutes another reason underlying the use of simple syntactic structures. Therefore, in our sample, clauses lack complex structures to provide a straightforward decoding task on the part of the audience and to guide the attention of the hearers to those specific words which are skilfully highlighted by the means referred to above.

As far as the *vocabulary* is concerned, overall this can be characterized as simple, lacking highly specific semantic content. Verbs are general in meaning, and, as Leech points out, they “contribute little to the force of (the) advertising message” (1966: 154). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that there is a salient use of imperative and future verbal forms, which seem to encode an underlying conditional relation suggesting to the audience: “(If you) buy X you will get Y”. The attainment of Y almost invariably implies that the customer will experience an improvement in his / her life style. This analysis seems to be in accordance with Biber’s findings (1988: 111), that prediction modals, apart from implying that certain events will take place, can also function to mark persuasion:

- (4) You’ll always get sensible rates and the discounts you deserve.
- (5) Shelter Insurance, we’ll always be there for you.

Adjectives are mainly qualitative and by and large they are used attributively. The use of attributive adjectives constitutes an integrated form of nominal elaboration.¹ In other words, it allows the speaker of commercials to pack large amounts of information in just a few words. This linguistic feature fulfils a significant role in a discourse produced under time constraints, since it allows “incorporating additional elements into an idea unit” (Chafe 1982: 39):

- (6) But don’t miss all this *great old stuff!*
- (7) Get her a thick juicy steak ...

The most common adjectives found in our sample are mainly all-purpose epithets, such as: *good, lovely, nice, and great*, which are often modified by emphasizing adverbs. Noun phrases containing adjective phrases of this type as modifiers are very common in the discourse of advertising, since the success of the latter depends largely on the creation of alluring pictures of the products advertised. Thus, the creation of a positive image seems to be the main function of such adjectives of general meaning. At the same time, the use of general vocabulary, and simple syntactic constructions tries to emulate the language typical of casual and informal discourse, an aspect to which we will return later on.

¹ *Integration* tends to be considered a characteristic of written discourse. Although advertising on the radio appears in the form of spoken discourse, it must be born in mind that it is not a spontaneous speech, but rather, the speaker of radio commercials is following a script which has been previously carefully crafted and highly edited.

Ellipsis constitutes another feature playing a crucial role in the discourse of advertising mainly due to the time-constraints to which this type of discourse is confined. The use of ellipsis implies leaving out words unsaid for the hearers to fill out. The reason why the deletion of some words is a useful and recurrent technique in commercials lies in the fact that it allows the hearers to complete the missing words with those forms that will suit each one's needs the best. Ellipsis often creates phrases that resemble clichés or slogans, for instance:

(8) No rules, just right! = (there are) no rules, (because it is) just (the) right (thing to do).

The use of these phrases, which resemble slogans, contributes to attract the audience's attention by means of their striking briefness and their similarity with colloquial types of speech¹. As is the case in casual conversation -which is structured by assumptions of shared information- the speaker of a radio commercial presupposes certain knowledge shared between s / he and the hearers, which accounts for the use of simple language. Furthermore, as Cook asserts "through ellipsis and assumptions of shared knowledge, ads create an atmosphere of intimacy and informality"² (1992: 177). Therefore, what the speaker apparently implies by means of ellipsis is that s / he and the audience are close to one another, that they have common things. Accordingly, due to the confidence built up between speaker and audience, the former does not need to spell out everything for the latter to be able to comprehend the intended message.

Another persuasive means employed in radio commercials is what I shall henceforth refer to as *irrealis*, borrowing the term from Gaik (1992)³. From the logicians' point of view, the *irrealis* mode is defined as "the ability of an unrealized utterance to evoke possible or alternative worlds" (Gaik 1992: 277) According to this definition, the feature *irrealis* can be seen in radio commercials as any utterance describing a hypothetical situation that attempts to set the adequate mood to lead the imagination of the listeners into an inner world of dreams. As stated by Cook, "what the ad seeks to achieve is enough contact between reality and fiction, sending and receiving, characters and consumer, fantasy and fact, for the passage of the product to be feasible" (1992: 177). In this sense, it is the speaker of the ad the one who constructs this possible or alternative world for the audience, by means of resorting to the *irrealis* mode. Let us see some of these examples:

(9) Let's say you're thinking about a new kitchen floor ...

(10) It's tough to resist an e:: xtra helping of something you love! ...

(11) OK, you're sitting in traffic, right?, you're tired, you wanna go home, when suddenly ...

Irrealis expressions are often conveyed in the form of striking introductory utterances that present hypothetical situations with the aim of drawing the hearers into subjective imaginat-

¹ Elinor Ochs regards deletion as one of the features that characterize unplanned discourse types (1979: 64).

² Other authors have stated that the gaps within a discourse, which are brought about by omitting any reference to shared information, constitute "the shared ideology of the participants." (Cook 1992: 176).

³ Gaik pays special attention to the pragmatics of *irrealis* in radio talk-show therapy in order to analyse how this feature controls the "therapeutic mode" over the "counseling mode" (1992).

ion of a possible situation. Irrealis transports the audience from the now of the present into a future, and likely, situation. Yet, it is the receiver alone -the audience- the one that has the final power to internalize or not the possible world constructed by the speaker, and to interpret its message as influential and effective. Therefore, the success of this strategy depends solely on the audience's willingness to accept the "contextualization cue" (Gumperz 1982)¹ provided by irrealis to signal the likelihood of entering a possible world. Once again we see the necessity of resorting to simple language, and to innovative or striking utterances that surprise the hearers and allow them an easy access from the actual world into the possible world depicted in the ads. Therefore, it is the hearer's information processing that serves as "a semiotic channel that makes possible the entry into that imaginary world" (Dolezel 1988: 485).

As presented previously, the ads examined are pervaded with numerous features that attempt to create the appearance of casualness and spontaneity in their speech production. A cursory examination of some ads might lead us to conclude that the seeming casualness and informality that characterizes radio commercials constitutes enough evidence to classify this type of advertising under the traditional label of *unplanned discourse*.² However, this classification would be inaccurate. The discourse of radio commercials is read from a script, and as such, it should be always carefully planned, structured and rehearsed before being finally presented to the audience. If we take into account that radio commercials are in general constrained to the short length of thirty seconds, it is reasonable to expect that their production has been painstakingly devised in order to best convey the message in such a brief period of time. And, in fact, along with those features typical of spontaneous speech, in the discourse of radio commercials there are also features that prove it to differ from unplanned discourse types. Thus, the production of ads on the radio is completely flawless, lacking altogether in pauses, repairs, hedges, or fillings, which are some of the features most commonly pervading casual speech production. Consequently, it seems more adequate to classify radio commercials as the type of discourse which Elinor Ochs defines as "planned unplanned discourse" (1979: 77). This classification is established on the grounds that radio advertisements are characterized by the use of self-conscious expressions of unplanned discourse features which are exploited for specific ends. Thus, under a seeming spontaneous production lies a conscious and careful organization. Moreover, due to the fact that the discourse of radio commercials is broadcast under real time constraints, every word is expected to be loaded with meaning and carefully selected for the ad to fulfil its purpose in such a brief period of time.

The appropriateness of making such an impression of informality becomes more evident once we consider that advertising aims to reach the greatest number of people possible. According-

¹ Gumperz (1992) uses the notion of *contextualization cue* to refer to any verbal and nonverbal sign that helps speakers hint at, or clarify, and listeners to make, such inferences. Contextualization cues include prosodic and paralinguistic features, choice of code and particular lexical expressions.

² Elinor Ochs defines *unplanned discourse* as "the discourse which lacks forethought and organizational preparation"; whereas *planned discourse* is described as "the discourse that has been thought out and organized (designed) prior to its expression" (1979: 55).

ly, commercials are characterized by the avoidance of linguistic complexities that would narrow the range of possible decoders of the message, and consequently, of potential consumers. Taking into account that we are dealing with a type of discourse that is read from a script, and whose final goal is to be persuasive, it must not be surprising that there are several rhetorical figures serving different functions. On the one hand, they contribute greatly to the attainment of the final persuasive aim of the commercials. On the other, they serve a cohesive function, playing as well a crucial role in the creation of an agreeable, pleasant, and rhythmical effect. Among these figures of speech the most salient ones are interrogative sentences, parallelism, and anaphora.

The interrogative sentences found in the commercials analysed seem to function as rhetorical questions, since the speaker does not expect an answer to them. Therefore, these questions seem to appeal for notice, thus stirring the consumer from his / her "wonted state of passive receptivity" (Leech 1966: 111). This intended purpose may be the reason why interrogative sentences are mostly placed at the beginning of the commercials, and are often in the form of irrealis:

- (12) Do you know there are only forty four sounds in the English language? forty four!
- (13) An extra helping of savings? ((Laugh)). Don't mind if I do!

As far as parallelism and anaphora are concerned, the partial or total repetition of elements that these imply favours memorisation. Repetition affects mainly those key words that, as stated previously, are usually emphasized phonologically, such as brand-names, or lexical items referring to an advantageous purchase:

- (14) ... *Save* over two hundred sofas, love seats and sectionals; *save* on over three hundred lazy boy recliners; *save!* on over seventy five bedroom groups; *save* on dining sets ...
- (15) Every item in *V. Watts*, one million dollar furniture will be reduced ... and for this sale, only *V. Watts* will have a tractor tailor load ...
- (16) ... *Making sure* you have proper home under protection before *it's needed*, *making sure* you're taken care of when *it's needed* ...

However, the frequent reiteration of a lexical item throughout a commercial does not respond to the speaker's belief that the hearers may have not understood the initial term, as is usual in unplanned types of discourse. Rather, the reiteration of the same set of lexical items functions here as a useful strategy that contributes to the audience's unconscious memorization of those repeated terms. This technique is therefore crucial, since great part of the success of an advertisement depends largely on the fact that by dint of repetition, "the consumer may be brought to the point where the brand-name and some catch phrase associated with it are mutual recall stimuli, so that the product is, so to speak, stored in his mind with a permanently attached label" (Leech 1966: 29).

It seems most appropriate to comment here on a word recurrently reiterated in our sample commercials, and in the discourse of advertising in general, i. e., the 2nd person pronoun:

(17) So, *you* show up all suave and debonair and *you* take her to Outback.

(18) Do *you* want a dealer who can offer *you* blue?; or who can show *you* crystal blue, cyan, jewel teal? The answer is obvious. *You* want choices, and at Dave's discounts they have them.

The use of this deictic pronoun plays a crucial role in those commercials which attempt to create the illusion of a conversation between speaker and hearer. A peculiarity of the so-called deictic elements is that they do not have a specific identified referent, unless it is clarified by the context in which the utterance is produced. Consequently, the use of this deictic pronoun constitutes a useful strategy in the discourse of radio commercials since these intend to draw the attention of a large number of people. Due to the wide range of possible referents that *you* can signal, any person listening to a commercial at the time of its broadcasting can identify him / herself with the referent of that specific pronoun. Therefore, this seems to be a subtle way of conveying singularity since, by replacing *you* by other terms such as *we* or *everyone*, the hearers would lose the individuality conveyed through the second person pronoun and the effect would most likely be a different one.

Yet, the main function of *you* in radio commercials can be accounted for by the process called "deictic projection" (Lyons 1977: 579). By means of this process, the speaker projects his / her context of utterance (i. e., the studio) into the place where every person is listening to the ad on the radio, thus creating the impression of being engaged in a conversation with the hearers at the time of discourse broadcasting, rather than at some point in the past when the recording was made at the studio. Furthermore, by the speaker's shift of the "deictic center" by means of this projection, s / he builds up a shared context with the hearers, which helps them feel identified with the referent intended by the speaker. Likewise, by resorting to an affable type of talk, and to the use of colloquial language, the speaker attempts to create an intimate face-to-face interaction with the audience. By means of these combined strategies, the great spatial distance existing between speaker and hearer in radio commercials is overcome, to a great extent, by a much closer psychological proximity that the speaker manages to create.

In short, I have tried to show that radio commercials, despite being produced with apparent spontaneity, constitute a carefully and highly edited type of discourse. We have seen that the speakers of radio commercials control the selection of specific verbal forms and consciously exploit certain linguistic features in order to convey the intended message to the audience. Therefore, the suprasegmental, syntactic and semantic features that characterize the commercials examined, reinforce and complement their specific effects in order to attain the final persuasive aim of the discourse of advertising.

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