

Relevance and Persuasiveness

– An Analysis of Advertising Language –

Kyoko Arai

Faculty of Business Administration

Toyo University

arai-k@toyonet.toyo.ac.jp

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of persuasiveness used in advertising language as viewed through the lens of relevance theory. There have been considerable numbers of books and other literature explaining how our communication can be made more persuasive in the fields of mass communication, advertising, marketing, psychology and so on. However, none of them adequately make manifest or define persuasiveness.

This paper proposes that a part of what makes successful advertising copy (headlines/phrases) persuasive can be explained using relevance theory's notion of mental profit (cognitive effects) for the listener (reader). One of the aims of advertising copy is to inform the audience about a product name or brand and to persuade them to buy the product. This paper suggests that making advertising language more persuasive has much to do with the notion of 'relevance' and supports this assertion by quoting several examples in advertising articles.

0. Introduction

Some advertising copies consisting of just a few phrases are very persuasive, while many others are less so. What is the difference

between them? Compare the following examples:

- (1) a. Stop throwing empty cans. (Japan Public Advertisement Organization, 1989)
- b. Your personality was left behind. (Japan Public Advertisement Organization, 1998)

Both phrases are used in advertising posters persuading people not to throw empty cans on the streets. In the second poster (1b) there are some empty cans on the pavement. In (1a) the message is quite direct, and we easily understand what the sentence means. On the other hand, the sentence meaning of (1b) has little to do with disposing empty cans on the street, but we all feel this message is more persuasive than (1a).

This paper suggests that persuasiveness has much to do with the notion of 'relevance' as defined by relevance theory. Firstly, the scope of the study of pragmatics on persuasiveness in advertising language will be set by considering the borderline between linguistics and other faculties of study. Secondly, the relationship between persuasiveness and relevance will be discussed using some relevance theoretic concepts. Thirdly, Concrete examples taken from advertising copies using rhetorical expressions will be examined from the standpoint of such relevance theoretic notions such as ad hoc concept construction for metaphor and poetic effects. Finally intending to convey weak explicatures also contributes to relevance by amplifying poetic effects.

2. The Scope of the Study of Pragmatics on Persuasiveness

According to recent books on advertising (see bibliography) there are many faculties of study involved in studying persuasiveness in advertising. If we think that persuasiveness is measured only by the sales of products then the conventional faculties of business administration, such as marketing, can explain it, but consider the following advertising copy:

- (2) This tree. What's the tree? The tree we care for. (Hitachi)

advertising language and the scope is from the state of unknown to the state of understanding in the DAGMAR model.

3. What is Persuasiveness in Relevance Theory?

Consider the following utterances:

(4) Some small boys are running and acting up. Their mother wants to persuade them to be quiet, so she shouts:

- a. Shut up and be quiet!
- b. Hey, Spiderman is on TV!

We know that for the purpose of persuading children to be quiet (4b) is more effective than (4a) and we often use this kind of tactic with children. When we talk about persuasiveness the first famous notion that comes to mind is ‘perlocutionary force’. It is said the force is that a sentence (an utterance) has to affect other people’s actions and attitude. In this theory an ordering utterance like (4a) should be more effective than (4b). However, relevance theory explains that (4b) is more relevant to the children than (4a).

‘Relevance’ is the notion measured by processing efforts and cognitive effects, the more the effort, the less the relevance, and the more the effects, the more the relevance. Cognitive effects are defined as denying assumptions, replacing old assumptions with new assumptions, or getting contextual implication through the utterance. In the above example, the children think that (4b) is more relevant to themselves than (4a) and they get the contextual implication that they can and should go and sit in front of the T.V. set immediately. Although the form of the utterance (4a) is an order, the declarative sentence (4b) performs better for the purposes of persuasion because (4b) is more relevant than (4a) to the children.

For this reason it can be concluded that relevance is one of the crucial determinants when measuring persuasiveness. Let’s see whether we could say ‘the more relevant, the more persuasive’ by looking at some advertising copies in the next section.

4. Rhetorical Expressions in Advertising Copy

According to Uejo (2005, p. 62), in the advertising field the term ‘copy’ means the literal parts of the advertisement, including headlines, body text, slogans, captions, plugs, product names, company names, etc. In this paper we are primarily focusing on headlines because they usually consist of short phrases or a few words and have similar characters with the shortest literature, Haiku, which the author previously discussed in the paper given during the PALA 2006 conference and also in Arai, 2006.

These are quite famous headlines in Japan:

- (5) For the man who knows the difference, Gold Blend. (Nestle Japan, 1970)
- (6) A good day to start traveling. (West Japan Railway 1978)
- (7) Yes! I’ll go to Kyoto! (West Japan Railway)
- (8) One day Nikkei will show on your face. (Nihon Economics Newspaper, Nikkei Ltd. 1994)

As you might have already realized, they are very rhetorical. Many headlines have become hits uses rhetorical expressions. The copy in (5) was used in television commercials showing famous good-looking men, such as Kabuki actors, classic musicians, and so on. This short phrase is easily understood that the man who knows the difference between good coffee and bad coffee will choose Gold Blend.

The headlines of (6) and (7) were also used in TV commercials with many beautiful sceneries of Kyoto and other Japanese sightseeing places. They didn’t say anything about using the railroad company, choosing indirect messages instead to persuade traveling inside Japan. These indirect messages include the notion that when traveling in Japan trains are more convenient and cheaper than airplanes. Further, the message persuades us to travel inside Japan rather than to foreign countries.

This company had also made the following phrases very popular in the 1980s: “Discover Japan” and “Exotic Japan”. In relevance theoretical

terms these two phrases promote many weak implicatures. Intending to convey many weak implicatures are one of the rhetorical expressions, referred to as poetic effects, which improve the level of relevance.

In sentence (8), used as a headline for an advertisement in newspapers and magazines, Nikkei is the name of the newspaper and this sentence was printed on the face of a young girl. The aim of the advertisement was to persuade more young people to read the economic newspaper. The word ‘Nikkei’ could be a metaphor for ‘intelligence,’ and this sentence could mean that if you keep reading the newspaper, someday your increased intelligence will show on your face. A metaphor is considered to be an ad hoc concept construction of a word in relevance theory (Carston, 2000), the meaning of ‘intelligence’ is instantly constructed only at the moment we read this word in this sentence.

Other important efficacy checkpoints for headlines were described in Uejo (2006, p. 89), including that they should be understood instantly and not include many meanings, and the shorter they are in length, the better. The author argued in the PALA 2006 conference and in Arai, 2006, that purposefully including weak explicatures is also very effective in many utterances and literatures like poems and Haiku. This will be discussed in detail in the next section.

5. Amplification of Poetic Effects

Look at the following example:

(11) Add nothing. Subtract nothing. (Suntory)

This advertises one of the Suntory’s whiskies, called “Pure Malt Yamazaki”. The writers of this headline should have wanted to convey many explicatures, as well as implicatures. Consider the following table:

(12)

Logical Form	Explicatures	Implicatures
Add nothing.	<input type="checkbox"/> We add nothing to the water used for the whiskey.	<input type="checkbox"/> The water used to make the whiskey is pure and

Subtract nothing.	We subtract nothing from the water used for the whiskey.	clean.
		<input type="checkbox"/> The place called Yamazaki where the whiskey factory is located is famous for good water.
		<input type="checkbox"/> The water was made famous by having been used in Rikyu's tea ceremonies.
	Etc.	
<input type="checkbox"/> We add nothing to the malt of the whiskey. We subtract nothing from the malt of the whiskey.		<input type="checkbox"/> The malt used is very pure.
		<input type="checkbox"/> The whiskey is very tasty and smells wonderful.
		<input type="checkbox"/> The malt whiskey is still made in the traditional way.
		Etc.

As the above shows, while the reader infers some different explicatures, at the same time each explicature makes the reader infer many implicatures. Many weak explicatures amplify weak implicatures. One might argue that this contradicts the earlier checkpoint that a headline “should not include many meanings”. However, this checkpoint simply means that the processing efforts should be minimized. Headlines should indeed be understood instantly and thus be short and easy to understand. But, it never means that headlines should not *imply* many meanings. Again, poetic effects are meant to improve relevance, and as such, persuasiveness.

6. Conclusion

When we suppose that persuasiveness can be partly explained by relevance, we can understand why many popular advertising copies are persuasive. In addition, the issue in Arai, 2006, arguing that weak explicatures improves relevance as well as poetic effects in Haiku, is confirmed in the phenomena of advertising copies. If we can adopt the

notion of relevance into the field of advertising, the notion should be measurable in some way. That will be the subject of subsequent study.

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