# ADVERTISING AND LANGUAGE MANIPULATION

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**Abstract:**

Research has revealed that much of what happens in our minds as a result of language use is still hidden from our conscious awareness. Advertisers know this phenomenon better. They use the manipulation of language to suggest something about their products without directly claiming it to be true. Although the advertisers use colours, symbols, and imagery in advertisements, "the most direct way to study ads is through an analysis of the language employed" as all the other aspects are meant to reinforce the language message.

Ads are designed to have an effect on consumers while being laughed at, belittle and all but ignored. Some modern advertisements appear to be almost dissuading consumers from the product – but this is just a modern technique. This paper is going to analyze a series of language techniques used by advertisers to arrest our attention, to arouse our interest, to stimulate desire for a product and ultimately to motivate us to buy it.

Once we become familiar with the language strategies used in advertising messages we will be more able to make our own buying decisions.

**Key-words:**
Advertising, language, manipulation, claims, techniques.

## Advertising and ethical issues

The last decade has witnessed a lot of discussions on the moral dimension of marketing and advertising.

According to Thorson and Duffy (2011), the backbone of marketing advertising theories is based on the notion of the sovereign consumer and it is obvious that marketing and advertising practices abound in discourses about consumer sovereignty. The two authors argued that most common definitions of advertising follow the consumer sovereignty model, with an emphasis on the need for "*customer orientation*", "*customer focus*" or "*customer driven strategies*". It is a really positive fact that marketers focus their attention on consumers and try to satisfy their needs and desires. But while they are customer-oriented on the one hand, the marketers' main interest is to persuade and manipulate the consumers to buy their products. As Ph. Kotler (2003) wrote:

"*The marketing concept and one of its components – advertising are created to meet the needs and wants of the target market. Satisfying these needs is*



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*how organizational goals are achieved, to surpass the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than competitors*".

However, the idea that consumers generate needs and that marketers identify and satisfy them has been criticized and considered inaccurate.

In her book (2005), Ileen E.Kelly states that consumer needs seem to originate from the marketers rather than being satisfied by them and argues that *"the industrial system has assumed sufficient size and power to render the consumer helpless in deciding what and how much is produced and purchased"*. Kelly supported her point of view on Vance Packard's book "*The Hidden Persuaders*" that described how the consumer needs are manipulated by marketing. Packard's argument is that all consumption stems from a single basic force – the human need to differentiate from one another by purchasing and using consumer goods.

We could say that marketing is about "*merging*" consumer satisfaction with corporation profitability. However, it is true that marketing practices are aggressive and try to control the mind of the target customer, but the decision to buy should be essentially and individual one. The essential goal of advertising is to persuade the target customer to buy a product or a service.

These persuaders use a variety of techniques to arrest our attention, to gain our trust, to stimulate our desire for the product or service and to make people buy it. These techniques are known as "*the language of persuasion*" and they are not new. Aristotle wrote about rhetoric and the art of persuasion more than 2000 years ago.

Learning the language of persuasion is an important media literacy skill. Once we know how the advertising messages try to persuade us to act in a certain way, we will be more able to make our own decisions. That is the reason why the **goal** of our paper is to analyze this language.

**The language of persuasion and manipulation: Overview**

It is a matter of common knowledge that language has a powerful influence on people and their behaviour. This is especially true in the language of advertising. Certain words and phrases can stir an emotional response – a fact that is well known and skilfully exploited by advertisers and copywriters.

At first, advertisements had a lot of texts and very few images. Today it is exactly the opposite: the text is kept to a minimum but it is still very important. Although the use of colours, symbols, logos and imagery in advertising can be studied to determine their psychological impact on the consumers, the simplest and



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most direct way to study advertisements is through an analysis of the language of the advertising claims as all the others elements focus on it.

In an article entitled "*The Language of Advertising Claims*", (2012), J. Schrank analyzes ten advertising claims that rely on the manipulation of language to attract the consumer to the product.

According to Schrank, the claim is: "*the verbal or print part of an ad that makes some claim of the superiority for the product being advertised*".

As many products are similar or nearly identical many companies rely on advertising techniques to attract consumers.

The ten claims analyzed by Schrank are: the special use of "*better*" and "*best*", *the weasel claim, the unfinished claim, the different and unique claim, the water is wet claim, the vague claim, the endorsement or testimonial, the scientific or statistical claim, the complement the customer claim* and *the rhetorical claim*.

In a media literacy project entitled "*The Language of Persuasion*", the authors identified 40 persuasion techniques and divided the list into three levels: basic, intermediate and advanced. Many media messages, such as television commercials, use several techniques simultaneously while others employ one or two.

**Analysis of persuasion techniques and practice**

We have based our study on a selection of the most frequent persuasion techniques employed in advertising and we have tried to analyze and illustrate them with examples from the world as well as the Romanian adland.

**1. Association** can be a very powerful technique. It tries to connect a product or a service with something already liked by the target customer, such as: pleasure, beauty, security, fun, wealth. It can create a strong emotional transfer.

Association may include several types of techniques, such as: **Beautiful people, Symbols, Nostalgia, Warm and fuzzy.**

a. **The Beautiful people** is a technique extremely common in advertisements. It insinuates that the customers will look like the models only if they use the product advertised.

b. The **Warm and fuzzy** technique employs images of families, kids and animals to induce a feeling of warmth, pleasure, comfort and joy.

c. **The Nostalgia** technique invokes a golden time when life was simpler and the quality was better ("*like Mom used to make*").

A good example in point would be the campaigns carried out in Romania for Napolact products. The first one launched in 2008 was "*Gusturi de demult*"



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(Tastes from the time of old). It was for yoghurts with jams that remind us of grandmother's goodies.

In 2009 Napolact launched another range of products. The brand slogan was from the beginning "*Ca odinioară*" (Like in the times of old), a very emotionally-loaded expression which can be translated in many ways but only the Romanian words can capture the magic and the nostalgia for the times of yore.

d. Another more sophisticated technique consists in the use of **Symbols.** They are words or images which can bring to mind more sophisticated concepts with higher emotional content, such as: life and death, nature, nation, religion, gender or lifestyle. Advertisers use the power and intensity of symbols to gain the audience to their case.

With reference to the power of symbols, we quote Quintilian (apud Jacob, 2006) who said that an idea you insinuate could be compared to "*an invisible arrow*" that enters the soul of the public, but the public will not be able to remove it because they do not know where it is.

A good example would be an advertisement used to promote first aid courses. The advertisement is rather shocking, in black and white. The only red colour comes from a candle lying on a tomb. The colour red hints at the name of the Red Cross, while the half-full candle burning is a symbol of light in times of darkness. The message sent is that there is still time and still hope to save lives on Earth, but only if people get involved.

**2. Intensity and weasel words** are also techniques meant to draw customer's attention to the product or service and to make them buy it. The language of advertising is full of intensifying words, including superlatives (best, most, greatest, fastest, lowest prices), comparatives (better, improved, more, healthier, fewer calories, less fat), hyperboles (amazing, tremendous, terrific, incredible), exaggerations, etc.

Worth mentioning is the use of the terms "*better*" and "*best*", which are the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective "*good*". The word "*better*" implies superiority, but companies cannot legally say that their product is better than a competing product. That is why they resort to using grammar manipulation.

According to Schrank in his study "*The Language of Advertising Claims*" when the products are equal in quality, "*better*" means "*best*" and "*best*" comes to mean "*equal to*". Therefore, "*best*" means that the product is as good as another superior product in its category by a distortion in the grammar of language.



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The **technique *"of weasel words"*** is usually used in unproven, exaggerated claims. A weasel word is named after a habit of weasels. They suck out the inside of the egg leaving it appear intact to the outside observers. Similarly, on a close examination such words are meaningless. Some of the most common weasel words include "*helps"*, "*virtually"*, "*acts"*, "*can be"*, *up to"*, "*refreshes"*, *"comforts", the feel of"*, "*strengthened"*, "*as much as*", etc.

In Schrank's list of weasel words most of them are verbs and adjectives derived from verbs. This implies that a sense of action is required from the customer. The prepositional phrase "*up to*" in the sentence "*Save up to 20%"* doesn't mean that we will save 20%. In fact, it can mean "you can save between 0% and 20%.

A weasel word can also convey an illusion of strength. Such words as *"fortified"*, *"enriched"* and "*strengthened*" can create such a feeling.

**3.** Another technique used by advertisers is to employ **celebrities** to draw our attention. By appearing in an ad, celebrities endorse a product. Companies pay famous persons a lot of money to appear in an ad, but this type of testimonial seems to be effective as some people are still fascinated by celebrities.

**4.** An opposite type of testimonial used in ads is that of **plain folks**. This technique works because we tend to believe an ordinary person more than a well-paid celebrity. It is used especially for products used daily, such as detergents or cleaning powder, etc.

**5.** Another technique is **flattery.** Marketers and advertisers flatter the target audience by saying "*you deserve it*", or "*you deserve more*, or "*you deserve only the best*".

**6.** Another widespread advertising technique is **bribery.** This technique tries to persuade the customers to buy the product or service by promising something else, such as a discount, a coupon, a free gift, a rebate. Sales, special offers, sweepstakes, contests are well-known to the buyers. The BOGOF (buy-one-get-one free) is very familiar to all of us. Unfortunately, nothing is really for free, the selling price covers everything.

**7.** The **expert technique** and the **scientific evidence** make use of charts, graphs, statistics etc. to prove something. Scientists, professors, doctors and other professionals often appear in advertisements and commercials to make the product or service more credible. It often works because many people tend to trust scientists and scientific evidence. However, it is important to examine the "*evidence*" because it can be misleading.



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Besides, an advertiser may employ a false expert to testify that a product is very effective, when in fact it is not. An example in point is having actors dressed as doctors or in lab coats.

An example would be the Colgate statement that their toothpaste is **the one** that dentists in Romania recommend the most. In fact, dentists recommended brushing our teeth regularly because of the fluorine in the toothpaste.

Another example would be the TV commercial for children's yoghurt **Danonino**. It is stated that the product contains Calcium and Vitamin D for strong bones, essential for children's healthy growth, and that the doctor recommends daily consumption of Danonino yoghurt. But the message sent is misleading because a) it is not a doctor who recommends Danonino, in fact it is a boy dressed as a doctor, and b) it should not state that doctors recommend a particular product containing certain ingredients as there are other products on the market containing the same ingredients in the same quantities, even healthier than Danonino.

**8. Exaggeration** is also a king of association by promoting false promises about a product. According to Thorson and Duffy, exaggeration is actually a form of puffery which is the use of "*harmless superlatives*". The two authors state that the main purpose of puffery is to appeal to consumer's emotions rather than reason. The best example to illustrate this point is the slogan used by Ursus, a Romanian beer company, to describe their product: "*Ursus: the king of beer in Romania"*.

Another example would be one of Coca-Cola's slogans "*Open and taste the happiness*". This is basically promising consumers that by drinking Coca-Cola they will be happy, which is over-exaggerated. Similar to this is a Coca-Cola advertisement which suggests that by sharing the drink with someone else we can make the world a better place. As a matter of fact, drinking Coca-Cola with the loved ones can be enjoyable, but it does not make a better world.

Another example of an exaggerated claim is offered by the recent TV commercial for **Bucegi pâté.** The commercial ends with the slogan "*Bucegi pâté – for well educated families*". One can be satisfied with the taste of a product but that does not make us a better person. Moreover, the slogan is a bit biased because it suggests that only well-educated people can eat Bucegi pâté or if you eat this product you become better educated.

**9. Humour**. Many advertisements use humour because it is a powerful persuasion technique. Advertisers make us laugh to create a good feeling to their product.



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**10.** Another technique worth examining refers to **explicit claims**. A claim is explicit if it is clearly stated or demonstrated. For example, some advertisements state the main ingredients, the price, place of manufacture, the quantity, effectiveness and reliability. Such claims can be proven true or false and that is the reason why so few advertisements make such explicit claims. If they prove false, the advertiser may have problems.

**Final remarks**

Language manipulation may have negative effects on consumers and may encourage them to make irrational choices. Quite often with the "*embellishment*" of advertising, products have been described not as simple items, but as tokens of happiness, love and better lives. Advertising should not inflict upon people the idea that consumerism can bring them happiness, nor that they should feel unhappy when refusing to buy unnecessary products.

However, advertising is important because it represents the customer's main source of information and that is the reason why companies should be held responsible for this correct information.

Furthermore, the consumers are increasingly more sensitive to advertising statements and arguments in favour of their health or well-being. This is another argument why self-discipline and honesty in the profession of advertiser is advisable, desirable and necessary.

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