

The Use of Clichés in Advertising Discourse*

O Uso de Clichês no Discurso
Publicitário

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"falar é incorrer em tautologias."
(...)

"A certeza de que tudo está escrito nos
anula ou nos fantasmagoriza."

Jorge Luiz Borges

Summary

This paper aims at studying the cliché in advertising discourse, having as starting point the idea that language is made up of a set of clichés which work as vehicles of ideology, thus affecting human behavior.

The signs found in clichés, either verbal or non-verbal, will be analysed as an intertextual phenomenon and their renewal as an attempt to counterattack a dominant ideology and prevent the predictability of the paradigmatic/syntagmatic axis.

Resumo

Este trabalho se propõe, a partir da idéia inicial de que a língua é um grande conjunto de clichês, veículos de ideologia e portanto norteadores de comportamento, a analisar os clichês no discurso publicitário, presentes em forma de signos verbais e não-verbais, como um fenômeno intertextual, e sua renovação como uma tentativa de contra-atacar uma ideologia dominante e impedir a previsibilidade do eixo paradigmático/sintagmático.

1. Definition

The word cliché is defined by the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics as

A phrase or figure which from overuse, like a dulled knife, has lost its cutting edge; a trite expression. Cliché in verse results when the poet's imagination arises

from other poems rather than from a fresh response to experience.

Versiani (1981:53) defines cliché as

"todo grupo de palavras que se situe no ponto de maior previsibilidade do contínuo de combinabilidade das palavras desde que haja nele um mínimo valor metafórico."

According to Bakhtin (1981: 159), "toda atividade verbal consiste em distribuir a 'palavra de outrem' e a palavra que parece ser de outro." Both the Encyclopedia definition and Versiani's convey the idea of somebody else's word. When Versiani talks about "predictability," it should be understood that one is only able to predict what he already knows, what has already been said. The Encyclopedia talks about overuse, that is to say, the same phrase has been used by many people and repeated many times. When the cliché in verse is seen as repetition of another artistic creation, once more we see the appropriateness of Bakhtin's statement. It is Bakhtin (1981:121) again who says that

O centro organizador de toda enunciação, de toda expressão, não é interior, mas exterior: está situado no meio social que envolve o indivíduo. Só o grito inarticulado de um animal procede do interior do aparelho fisiológico do indivíduo isolado. É uma reação fisiológica pura e não ideologicamente marcada. Pelo contrário, a enunciação humana individual, é, do ponto de vista de seu conteúdo, de sua significação, organizada fora do indivíduo pelas condições extra-orgânicas do meio social. A enunciação enquanto tal é um puro produto de interação social, quer se trate de um ato de fala determinado pela situação imediata ou pelo seu contexto mais amplo que constitui o conjunto das condições de vida de uma determinada comunidade lingüística.

A man does not create his own speech, he just repeats the language

* Adapted from part of my M.A. dissertation "Reading ads with critical eyes". UFMG, 1987.

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imposed upon him by society. The language (parole) as a whole becomes then a big cliché, the opposite of a hypothetic "speech zero degree." Whorf's hypothesis that a person's world view and behavior depends on his native language seems reasonable when we analyse the metaphors which pervade our world view. The repetition of these metaphors will create the clichés and it is in the world of native language, full of clichés, that a person looks for his or her identity, accepting or not the values established by the society he or she lives in.

2. The role of clichés

In daily discourse, the dominator's voice reveals itself through the ordinary man's repetition of clichés which produce ideas and values accepted as undeniable truths. People go on repeating such imposed concepts without any criticism. Paradoxical concepts live side by side. Take, for instance, "Time is money" and "Money does not bring happiness." While "Time is money" heightens the value of money and measures time by means of a monetary unit, the other one, "Money does not bring happiness", undervalues money, and emphasizes the christian concept that "heaven belongs to the poor." Obviously, such clichés never come together. They appear whenever society requires them to explain its material contradictions. According to Soares (1986:22), the use of clichés "... dispensa o exercício da reflexão e simplifica pelo empobrecimento a tarefa da troca de idéias em sociedade." Alienation arises out of this intertextual phenomenon as the world is seen through alienating lenses.

Artists are the ones who manage to cheat the dominant ideology underlying the clichés by disrupting either their syntactic or semantic structures. Speech play, in contrast

with the use of efficient language, keeps the object of discourse itself but, looking for an immediate aim, breaks the ideological structure. Thus proverbs such as "What can't be cured must be endured" receives the complementation "but not until you take an aspirin" and "No use crying over spilt milk" is complemented by "Have your cat lick it."

Clichés work as a kind of sacred language. As we know, the language used in religious rituals is not supposed to undergo any change. Any alteration, even in pronunciation, may be interpreted as a threat to the effectiveness of the ceremony. By the same token a change in the structure of a cliché may represent a threat to its ideological structure. It is true that whenever one breaks an ideological structure, another ideology is born, but our intention is not to interpret the phenomenon with manichaeistic eyes.

3. Clichés in advertisements

Clichés are widely employed in advertisements. This statement is reinforced by a metalinguistic ad from the British Airways which says "The one first class service for which no claims, clichés or superlatives are necessary". The apparent criticism underlying this statement is in fact the acknowledgement of advertising language as a code made up of claims, clichés and powerful linguistic devices used to persuade consumers to buy such and such products. The overuse of clichés in advertising is by no means due to lack of creativity. It is an effective way of fulfilling the consumer's expectation as it is the kind of language people want to listen to. Some of the clichés found in the majority of advertisements are adjectives such as: better, comfortable, different, famous, higher, incredible, lighter, modern, natural, new, practical, pure, reliable, safer, special,

successful, super, wonderful, etc. We also find phrases like: feel the difference, half the price, high efficiency, lasts longer, the gift of love, visible action, win one of the prizes, etc.

According to Riffaterre (1973), clichés, in general, can be renewed by means of four rules which are: substitution, addition, grammatical change and metalinguistic remark.

Substitution occurs when one of the components of the cliché is substituted by one or more words. The remaining component is responsible for the context which makes the reader predict the other element(s). As the expectation is not fulfilled the reader is surprised. An example of substitution is an ad of HAWAIIAN punch with the caption "Everything ventured. Nothing gained" which comes from the proverb "Nothing ventured, nothing have." The indefinite pronoun "nothing" was substituted by "everything." Another ad presents the following caption: "Sears Lady Kenmore / The do-it-yourself dishwasher." The cliché "do-it-yourself," a ready-made sentence, is renewed when "yourself" is replaced by "itself."

In *addition*, new components may be added and the statement then becomes unusual. An ad of KODAK is a good example. The picture shows a man holding the photograph of a girl and a sentence just above the photo says "I think I'm in love." One expects the man to be in love with the girl, but below the photograph another sentence complements the first and we read "with this new camera." In this particular example the surprise is even greater because the photograph of the girl reinforces the predictability that the sentence "I'm in love" will be normally followed by *with + a person*.

Grammatical change occurs when one or more word in the cliché change from one grammatical class to another.

The example is another ad of KODAK which presents the following caption: "How to pick your father's pocket." The word "pocket" in this ad is different from the one in the well known expression "To pick someone's pocket," which means "to steal from the pocket." In the ad, "pocket" is not a noun but an adjective. That is, "pocket" is not a "small bag forming part of an article of clothing, for carrying things in," but a KODAK pocket camera, one whose size is suitable for a pocket. The construction thus strikes the reader and consequently motivates him or her to read the rest of the text.

At last, a *metalinguistic remark* can be made on a metaphorical element in order to warn the reader that the cliché is to be literally understood. Some examples will make it clear.

In the first one (Fig.1),¹ the metaphorical expression "We beef d-up the flavor" is to be literally understood as well. The metaphorical verb "beef up" means "to add weight, strength, or power to." In our example, there is a photograph of a box of dog food where we can read "chunky beef flavor." This caption works as a metalinguistic remark and leads us to understand that "beef d-up" is also to be understood as something having more taste of beef.

In the second example (fig.2) the cliché "A ray of hope" keeps its metaphorical meaning as long as it advertises a product which promises the solution for a problem which seemed insoluble. But the iconic representation of sun rays around the name of the product tells us that the word RAY may be also understood as sun ray. The signifier ray has two different signifieds: ray (light) and ray (small sign, a sign of hope). Although the product cannot sell sun rays, it does not work without them. Any tanning product will work only if there

is sunshine. The pun makes the ad interesting and calls the reader's attention.

"I can't believe my eyes" is the cliché presented in the third example (fig.3). The photograph shows beautifully made up eyes and the cliché divides itself into two meanings:

1. I can't believe what I see (or read)
2. I can't believe my eyes may look so beautiful.

Under the main caption there is a smaller one telling us that the product is at bargain price. Besides being cheap the consumer can get nine eye shadows at one time. This reading restores the basic meaning of the cliché, that is, "It is incredible". So the signifier "eyes" will have two different meanings: when someone reads the caption linked to the picture, he or she does a different reading from that of the person who reads it associated with the small text. The written expression is associated with a picture which ignores the metaphor presented in the cliché and calls the reader's attention to the literal meaning. Surprisingly enough, communication is not broken, on the contrary, the reader gets so surprised that the simultaneous presentation of two different meanings through different codes does not make him or her confused, but urges him or her to decode the verbal language and enjoy the visual code.

In the fourth example (Fig.4), we have an ad of DURACELL batteries. In this ad, the word track (the parallel rails of a railway) is, of course, a metaphor which means "a line of action." Nevertheless, the picture shows two male dolls on a toy vehicle, which requires batteries in order to work. The text states that over the years, they have kept trying to find ways to improve the batteries, which last up to twenty per cent longer than the ones they made just three years

before. The text adds that they intend to go on improving the product to which they have been giving all their attention (one-track mind, another metaphor with the word track). The verbal metaphor — track as a line of action — is ignored by the picture, but another metaphor is born, a visual metaphor — the track as a preestablished route which must necessarily be followed because those who are "off the track" can have an "accident." It is worth observing that the picture shows the track going upwards, which stands for the future in the visual code.

These examples show us that the apparent disruption of the clichés via visual devices makes them actually more recognizable, bringing out the effect of surprise and humor.

4. Tearing the masks off the clichés

New jargons are constantly created by advertising and other mass media. The text repeated by comedians is immediately copied, adapted, repeated, quoted and many times renewed. Cury (1982:119), quoting Laurent Jenny, reminds us that

"a intertextualidade é pois máquina perturbadora. Trata-se de não deixar o sentido em sossego — de evitar o triunfo do "cliché" por um trabalho de transformação."

The ideological masks are sometimes torn off by means of substitutions, additions, grammatical changes and metalinguistic remarks. By raising objections to this "ready-made," non creative language, man has the possibility of seeing the world with different eyes.

Marjorie Boulton (1978:103) says that

Because when we have a habit of hearing things we tend also to acquire a kind of habit or at least readiness to believe them, we can usually examine the meaning of some quite unfamiliar

statement more critically than that of a statement we have often heard before. It follows that since we are more likely to be misled by repeated assertions, precisely the assertions we most often hear are those we should examine most carefully with regard to their meaning, in order to consider whether or not they are true. Our most dangerous errors are probably the ones we take for granted.

As clichés tend to make people uncritical, teachers should work with this kind of language in the classroom

in order to make people aware of the unconscious repetition process they have been undergoing. Clichés in the form of slogans create automatic habits of consuming although they are often meaningless and sometimes mere tautologies. Uncritical minds are always ready to accept orders, to behave and act without stopping to think. The study² of clichés will make students aware of the amount of ready-made sentences they read and

repeat all the time without thinking about the ideology conveyed by them. An analysis of different clichés in advertising will reveal the myths and false beliefs which makes up the dominant ideology in our society. As advertising belongs to the students' real world it will prove to be an excellent example of concrete material for them to handle and analyze. □

NOTES

¹ Reproductions of the ads will be found in appendix 1.

² Appendix 2 presents an example of an exercise to be developed during a conversation class.

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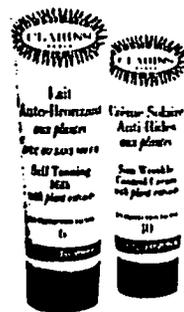
APENDIX 1

Figura 1



Figura 2

Tan vs. Skin Damage: A ray of hope!



It is a well-known fact that the sun's rays are the most powerful natural source of energy on earth. While they provide us with the warmth and light we need to survive, they also cause skin damage. This damage is most noticeable in the form of wrinkles, age spots, and a general loss of skin elasticity. However, there is a ray of hope! Clarins has developed a line of skincare products that can help protect your skin from the harmful effects of the sun. These products are formulated with natural plant extracts and are gentle on the skin. They can help to reduce the appearance of wrinkles and age spots, and they can also help to improve the overall texture and tone of your skin. So, if you want to enjoy the sun without the risk of skin damage, Clarins is the answer.

- 1. Contains natural plant extracts that are gentle on the skin.
- 2. Helps to reduce the appearance of wrinkles and age spots.
- 3. Improves the overall texture and tone of the skin.
- 4. Contains natural plant extracts that are gentle on the skin.
- 5. Helps to reduce the appearance of wrinkles and age spots.
- 6. Improves the overall texture and tone of the skin.

CLARINS PARIS 110 PRINCE ALBERT IN NEW YORK PRINCE IN FRANCE
MACYS • WANNAMAKEYS

“No pain, no gain.”

Figura 5



To unlock your body's potential, we proudly offer Soloflex. Twenty-four traditional iron pumping exercises, each correct in form and balance. All on a simple machine that fits in a corner of your home. For a free Soloflex brochure, call anytime 1-800-451-1111.

BODY BY SOLOFLEX
NO PAIN, NO GAIN. NO PAIN, NO GAIN.

APPENDIX 2

A. Look at the picture and then answer the following questions:

1. What is the man in the picture wearing?
2. What is he like?
3. Why is he touching his left arm?
4. What had he been doing before?
5. Look at his face. Do you think he is happy? Justify your answer.
6. Does he need physical exercises?
7. Why was a young man chosen to appear in this ad?
8. What are the human needs involved in this ad?

B. Now read the text and answer the following questions:

1. What kind of machine is SOLOFLEX?
2. What is SOLOFLEX designed for?
3. Does SOLOFLEX require much space?
4. What is the purpose of the "free Soloflex Brochure"?
5. What is the ideology underlying this ad?
6. Now that you have interpreted the picture and the text, try to justify the title *No pain, no gain*. Do you agree with this proverb?

C. Observe how the following proverbs were altered:

- a) "What can't be cured must be endured. But not until you take an aspirin."
- b) "No use crying over spilt milk. Have your cat lick it."

Now try to modify the following proverbs:

1. No pain, no gain.
2. People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.
3. Barking dogs don't bite.
4. After rain comes fair weather.
5. It's a sad house where the hen crows louder than the rooster.
6. Silence gives consent.
7. All cats are grey in dark.
8. The end justifies the means.
9. One rotten apple spoils the barrel.
10. Laugh and your troubles will melt away.
11. A closed mouth catches no flies.
12. Everything comes to him who waits.