The Informal Language of Advertising

Seminar paper in Linguistics Studies
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 3  
2. Slogans and deixis in advertizing ......................................................................................... 4  
3. Genres of informal in advertizing ......................................................................................... 8  
4. Sensational Spelling in advertising ...................................................................................... 11  
5. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 14  

Bibliography ................................................................................................................................... 15
1. Introduction

In today’s world we find ourselves under the constant influence of both formal and informal language. Since the advent of the internet we have experienced a new kind of language, the e-language, which is without any doubt the largest “playground” of the language. On this playground, just like children, we play with words and concepts, and in so doing we create informal language. Of course, informal language can be found almost anywhere: literature, newspapers, news, TV shows, graffiti, comic books, text messages, etc. I would argue that what defines language as informal is its level of “vagueness”. If we look at the standard language and its characteristics we can see that a certain level of “control” is present in formal language, i.e. we pay special attention to grammar, spelling, style, and especially meaning. The whole point of standard language, besides being the “correct” one, is to convey the message and the meaning of a text as clearly as possible. If it is intended for the text to lack clarity, it is most certainly meant to be informal. It would not be far off the mark to say that informal language is designed for social bonding, that discourse acts as a tool in social bonding, and that imposing, i.e. “insisting” on the message has no place in informal language.

The language of advertising is interesting to look into because language for commercial purposes has to have a clearly defined message which will persuade the customers to buy the product. At the same time, it must not be imposing in order to avoid losing customers. On the one hand, we have a defining, formal, message-oriented language, and on the other, social need for “meaningless” interaction, vagueness, and bonding-oriented language. Is it, then, possible to combine the two diametrically opposed views of language in advertising? As you shall see in this paper, it is more than possible to combine formal and informal, what is more, to completely substitute formal with informal language. It seems that in the recent years informal language has
completely taken over the formal in advertising. It goes without saying that we still have those everlasting commercials with thorough descriptions of their products; however, the number of creative and informal advertisements is on the rise. In this paper, I will analyze different commercials in order to identify the informal language and its features in those ads. As we shall see, numerous famous corporations have adopted the informal language as the means of addressing their potential customers, primarily, I believe, as it sounds more appealing to both young and senior viewers and listeners. Furthermore, it is easier to manipulate customers if they are not aware of the true message behind informal language.

2. Slogans and deixis in advertising

For starters, let us have a look at one of the most famous and easily recognizable advertisements in the world, namely the Nike commercial. It is very interesting to mention that Nike’s slogan Just do it works perfectly well outside of the context, i.e. if you see one of the many Just do it triples on a billboard or a wall you will immediately recognize it as a Nike ad.

![just do it](image)

This is important because, as a rule, informal language does not work outside of the context. Perhaps because of its omnipresence, you will hardly ever ask yourself what does Just do it mean. The triple as a whole has an informal tone: Just works as an adverb, do is a verb and it is a pronoun. The slogan is cleverly composed to conceal the true message, it is a kind of subliminal message if you like, behind the informal language. Once you start contemplating the meaning of the slogan you start to uncover different possible meanings. For example, what is that it that we
are supposed to Just do? Perhaps save ourselves by running away from a pack of dogs, just like the person in a Nike snickers-ad does? Or could it be a “word of God” helping us to make a decision on a crucial point while jogging or watching TV and accidently stumbling upon a Just do it slogan? As we have mentioned before, the goal of informal language is social bonding whereas the goal of advertising is selling, i.e. to persuade you to purchase a product by imposing. Just and it work together to soften the do part of the slogan, the imposing one; the deictic word being the most important part of the message as it stands for action - spending money. Together, by being quite vague, they actually convey the following: Simply buy our product(s)!

Interestingly, you do not even have to actually see these words to be aware of the Nike brand - all that you need to see is their logo. It is now clear what we are supposed to do, however, before we depart onto our next example of informal language in advertising we have “just” to address the it part of the triple. It is arguably the most informal aspect of the slogan; it appears without a previous reference as to what it stands for in an official ad (message/text). However, even without a previous reference we can still figure out the meaning of it only if we do the “second reading”. Luis Althusser, in his 1965 work Reading Capital, argues that the absence is really what a cultural text (or any text for that matter) is all about; thus, in Just do it what really matters is Simply buy our products.

Another example of a ubiquitous ad is McDonald’s Corporation. As with Nike, the McDonald’s brand is easily distinguished by the famous golden arches. And again, like Nike logo, it works perfectly well outside of the context; just like their slogan I’m lovin’ it. There is no chance that you would not associate the I’m lovin’ it triple with McDonald’s. This is rather interesting since you do not get more informal than that and yet the meaning is perfectly clear outside of the context.
First, we have a contraction I’m instead of I am. Than we have lovin’ instead of love or even loving. And finally, it without a previous reference. With all that in mind, we still have some distance to travel until we grasp the true meaning behind these words. Let us have a look at the I’m part of the triple. The very first thought that comes to one’s mind is - who is (am?) I? It could easily be the person who came up with the idea for the slogan. Or is it the person who actually wrote the slogan on a billboard? The owner? It is quite unclear who is I meant to be, however, we might just have an explanation. The person saying I at any time subconsciously puts him or herself in the position of an I whereby I is the customer. It may sound complicated, but it is in fact very simple - I, the customer, am lovin’ it! We now only have to decipher what is that it that the customer loves. Is it the corporation? The witty sign itself? Perhaps the clown mascot? I presume you already guessed right - it is the food. In other words, it is the product that the customers love. Be it a burger, ice-cream or French fries, a potential customer will love it (even if it is not love at the first bite) because of this subconscious I’m lovin’ it message. What we have here, in both instances, is a cleverly concealed message that is supposed to boost consumerism; as a reminder, the message is never supposed be obvious precisely because of its content. That is why teams of managers and advertising experts work around the clock to find the best possible solution to get their ideas across; and what better way than through the informal and non-imposing language.
Finally, if we look at Budweiser commercial campaign *All Together Now* during the Super Bowl (National Football League - NFL) we see the same deictic “issue”, however, a completely different approach to advertising and mass appeal.

(All Together Now Budweiser)

It does not take long to spot the first “problem” in this triple - *All Together*. We do not know who *all* are, we can only make wild guesses. They could be all the members of the advertising team working on this ad; in this sense, *all together now*, would be asking all of the team members to pour their hearts into this ad! One could even infer that Budweiser are selling their products *all together*, e.g. a six-pack with one of each kind (Bud light, Bud dark, Golden Wheat, Lime-a-Rita etc.). The temporal deixis *Now* raises the question of *when* exactly is now? It could have been at the time the ad was being created, meaning that by time you have read it *Now* was already in the past, being *Then*. On the other hand, even if *Now* is at the moment of reading it, what are we expected to do? The solution comes in the form of *People start buying Budweiser!* *All together* refers to the people, customers, who are expected to drink Budweiser. Thus we have solved the enigma of “what are we to do *now*”. Start buying is mirror reflection of *Now*, as in immediately or as soon as possible. Phrased like this, the message is informal and friendly, especially when sung to the tune of the Beetles’ *All Together Now* song. This approach is different to the previous two examples as it borrows the text from another source, the Beetles, giving it a new meaning.
3. Genres of informal in advertising

Now we will look into different genres or styles of informal language in advertising. In order to find out if there was a certain pattern of informal language being used in advertising I have investigated a number of commercials and compared their form of delivery. In this section we will have a look at the most recurrent genres of informal language in advertising. This is not only relevant from the commercial point of view, but seen from the social angle it provides an insight into the most natural style of communication (provided that this vital information has been exploited by advertising agencies).

1. Kate Upton Zoo York ad (KateUptonPics, 2012)

Kate Upton is jogging and stretching in a New York park whereby two cockroaches are commenting on her looks and on the performance of two skateboarders. C1 is referring to Upton’s body and C2 comments on the skateboarders.

C1: New York City stinks! I love it.
C2: Yo, how would you like to grind that thing?
C1: Oh, I would like to grind that thing…
C2: Wow, sliding it backside.
C1 (5): Backside, front side, any side…
C2: It doesn’t even look like it needs to be waxed!
C1: Oh, it definitely needs to be waxed.
C2: Oh, look out bro, they’re coming this way!
C1: Yeah they are… Come to daddy!
C2 (10): Suit yourself, I’m outta here.

(In italics - deixis; underlined - slang language)

It is interesting to analyze the use of words in this commercial to see how repetitive deixis and slang phrases are used to refer to completely different actions and objects. This is not the case in the first line; however, it is useful to have a look at it since it could be interpreted in two different ways. It in this case could either mean New York or the stink of it (we can presume that it is the...}
smell that the cockroach finds attractive). When asked “how would you like to grind that thing”, C1 replies “Oh, I would like to grind that thing”; the matter is that C1 and C2 are not discussing the same action. C2 refers to a skateboard (thing) and is actually asking C1 would he like to ride (grind) it. C1, on the other hand, staring at the woman, makes sexual connotations; recurrently in lines 5, 7, and 9 (in fact, only in the opening line does he not refer to her body). The same logic follows for waxing - C2 remarks on the skateboard sliding smoothly against the rail (it), whereas C1 remains “romantic”. The style of language used here is not obvious since C1 and C2 are not having a meaningful dialog; C2’s messages are always read differently by C1, thus no apparent meanings seem to have been exchanged. However, there is a style characteristic for informal language that is less than conspicuous in this ad, namely gossip. It may sound strange, since the two interlocutors are not actually talking about one and the same topic or object; however, the ad has all the necessary features of gossip. It involves the 3rd person (in addition to the two objects if we count the skateboards) and it has judgmental or evaluative tone or language. It is difficult to contemplate about the topic of discussion, since the cockroaches have gone separate ways. Nevertheless, the emphasis is on Kate Upton’s body in new Zoo York jogging cloths, and thus we can conclude that her looks is their topic of discussion.

Another recurrent genre in advertising is small talk. It usually occurs in awkward situations, often to break silence; in most cases the beginning of small talk comes right after a greeting, e.g. Good morning! How are you? We are not supposed to give an elaborate answer to questions like these since they serve to break the silence, not for one’s entrance exam. If one receives a good morning greeting, and the weather happens to be “not that good”, one is not supposed to reply in a have-you-looked-outside-your-window-today fashion. I have chosen one
funny ad to prove this point. Here follows a Budweiser “how you doin’” ad where you will see how this works in a bar.

There are 6 (S)peakers involved in this “conversation”, including the (B)artender (Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, 2007).

B: How you doin’?
S2: How you doin’?
S3: How you doin’?
S4: Well, thanks for asking. I’m doin’ fine. Just got in today, my brother-in-law picked me up at the airport. And mighty big airport ya all got here. And the people here are so nice.
B: You wanna beer?
S4: I wanna Bud.
S5: How you doin’? (coming in from the outside)
S2: How you doin’?
S3: How you doin’?
B: How you doin’?
S5: How you doin’?
S4: I’m doin’ fine, I just got here today. My brother-in-law picked me up at the airport and the people sure are nice.
S5: Nice people.
S6: How you doin’? (coming in from the outside)
S4: I’m doin’ fine, I just got here. My brother-in-law came and picked me up from the airport, some mighty big airport…

Whenever S4 answers the “question” How you doin’? all the other speakers look in disbelief. It is quite interesting to note that How you doin’ stands for polite How do you do? to which one replies, oddly enough, How do you do? If you are to answer How you doin’ question, you either answer How you doin’ or Fine. (Thanks.) How you doin’? If you look at the commercial again, you will see that all of the speakers involved (S4 excluded) follow this How do you do pattern in its informal How you doin’ form. Again, we are witnessing social bonding preference over controlled or “correct” language. This particular example is characterized by ellipsis, contractions, and adverbial intensifiers, all of which are vital for informal language. How you doin’ could be read as How are you doing, a slightly more controlled version of the former. Just
got in today is the equivalent of I arrived today. The bartender asks for S4’s order by saying You wanna beer? we have once again omission of certain words. The controlled form would be Do you want a beer or Would you like to order a beer, however, all of the speakers follow informal language to the letter, except for S4 who likes to elaborate on a simple greeting. Intensifiers are very informal as well. For instance, intensifiers such as mighty and sure in mighty big airport and people sure are nice are not very usual in formal language and would sound odd if they did occur in it. An airport cannot be mighty in any instance; it could be well-organized or it could have big runways and even bigger shops, but it cannot be mighty. However, exactly because of social bonding, adverb mighty is used to “over” intensify the greatness of one’s city. In addition, as if making sure to leave a good impression on everyone, S4 addresses all of the speakers by adding ya all got here. For the same reason, the emphasis is put on the “niceness” of people living in this city. S4 uses adverbs such as so and sure to intensify the adjective nice. Thus, instead of simply being nice, the people are so nice and sure are nice. We also have a chunk of narrative or mini narrative which is present in S4’s explanations.

4. Sensational Spelling in advertising

Sensational spelling or intentional misspelling of words is very common in informal language. The evidence of sensational spelling can be found in abundance on the internet, not only in casual chatting but also in advertising. We resort to this technique whenever there is a limited amount of space or letters we can use to leave a message. It would be reasonable for ads to have misspelled words in order to shorten them if they are being paid per letter to be advertized; however, that is not the case in TV ads where you pay per second broadcasted. So why do advertizing agencies resort to this form of informal language? It is because the use of unexpected spellings draws attention to an otherwise common word, and in advertising you want
to draw as much attention as possible to your products (Sensational Spelling, 2012). Here are some examples of sensational spelling in advertising:

1. *Cheez-It* Crackers (American snack food cracker)

2. "I'm not dreaming anymore. I had eight shots of espresso, a six-pack of Jolt Cola, and a large bowl of *Froot Loops* with extra sugar. You don't sleep; you don't have nightmares." (Steve Urkel in *Family Matters*, 1997)

3. *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino’s 2009 movie title)

4. While-*U*-Wait Car Radio Repair (name of a business in Bloomfield, New Jersey)

5. Nick at *Nite* (block of nighttime programming on the Nickelodeon cable television network)

6. *Kool-Aid* (Drink mix and Pouched Beverage and liquid) examples provided by (Nordquist)

The list of sensational spelling examples is practically endless, and as you can see, some of very famous corporations or individuals have used this technique to draw more attention to their products or work. It is important to point out that online language has yielded numerous new word formations which are today used on a daily basis. These are known as *rebuses*, *reduced forms*, *initialisms*, etc. Let us have a look into some of those “new” forms of internet language with respect to advertising. If you look at the 4th example of Nordquist’s list of examples you will see an example of homophony used in rebuses (While-*U*-Wait); according to David Crystal, they occur “where time-pressure on typing or playful intentions motivate an abbreviated style” (Crystal, 2009, p. 101). This is true for advertising as well; ads are time-pressured and at the same the designers try to make them look as catchy and innovative as possible. Here is an example of a very peculiar rebus: YY U R YY U B I C U R YY 4 ME = ‘too wise you are, too wise you be, I see you are too wise for me’ (Crystal, 2009, p. 102). Crystal gives another example
where pictures and words together construct a meaning. Needles to say, this is true for advertising as well. It works like this:

\[
\text{numeral + picture + picture + picture + numeral + picture}
\]

\[
\text{2 of a bee of an oar of a knot 2 of a bee}
\]

(Crystal, 2009, p. 102)

An example of an interesting acronym would be WYSIWYG, read as “wizziwig” and standing for ‘What You See Is What You Get’ (Crystal, 2009, p. 122). Acronyms are used quite often in advertising as well. For instance advertisements for personal computers (PCs):

(PC World, 2011)

Finally, an unbelievable new type of informal language used in online advertising, which I call Spam Filter Evader (SFE) since I did not come across any official term used to describe this type of language. Spam Filter Evader can be found in every person’s spam or junk folder. It is rich with graphological variations designed to evade word-matching function in a filter. These filters are designed to prevent junk emails by recognizing specific words; thusly, ad designers resort to numerous combinations of symbols and letters which constitute for this SFE language.

This is an example of SFE type of language:

supr vi-agra online now znwygghsxp
VI @ GRA 75% off regular xxp wybzz lusfg
fully stocked online pharmac^y
Great deals, prescription d[ rugs

(Crystal, 2009, p. 127)
5. Conclusion

It is fair to say that the language of advertizing is taking on a new, informal form, faster than we might have expected. If you open your eyes wide enough you will see that we are surrounded by advertisements 24/7; we are being bombarded with brand names, slogans, and graphical representations wherever we go (unless you live in a desert or another remote place this is true for everyone). Curiously, as the number of informal language ads grows so does our awareness of it. Thus, we can conclude that we are being invaded by informal language for most of our days. We have seen how informal works in advertizing, how the feel-good and social-bonding factors are being exploited by advertizing agencies to maximize their income. The physiology of advertizing and informal language are separate fields of study; however, I have tried to bring the two together and explain how, together, they work perfectly well regardless of the medium.
The Linguistics of Informal Language

Bibliography


