

Analysis of Presupposition and its Function in Advertisement

PRESUPPOSITION DU LANGAGE PUBLICITAIRE ET ANALYSE PRAGMATIQUE

Wang Yingfang¹

Abstract: In modern society, advertising plays a very important role in people's daily life. The language of advertising is basically persuasive; therefore all possible means, linguistic or non-linguistic, have been adopted by advertisement writers to serve the purposes of advertising. As a very important topic in linguistic, especially in pragmatics, presupposition is frequently employed in order to enhance the effects of persuasion in advertisements because of its own special properties. There exist some relations between presupposition and advertising language. This paper gives a brief introduction of pragmatic presupposition and analyzes its functions in advertising. The emphasis of this paper is placed on presupposition and its pragmatic functions of advertising language from three angles: presupposition and advertisement information, presupposition psychology and market strategies of advertisements. By presenting advertising examples in the process of analysis, the author hopes that the paper can be some help of designing advertising language.

Key words: Presupposition, Advertising Language, Pragmatic Presupposition Function, Strategy

Résumé: Dans la société moderne, la publicité joue un rôle très important dans la vie courante et la communication du peuple. Au fond, le langage publicitaire est une sorte de langage de persuasion. A ce effet, le concepteur de publicité s'efforce d'employer toutes les techniques langagière et non langagière pour atteindre le but de propagande de la publicité. En tant qu'une problématique importante de la pragmatique, la présupposition, grâce à ses propres caractéristiques, est toujours utilisée par le concepteur pour renforcer l'effet de persuasion de la publicité. L'article présent argumente la fonction positive de la présupposition dans la publicité sur les trois plans suivants : la présupposition et la communication de l'information publicitaire, la présupposition et la stratégie psychologique publicitaire, la présupposition et la stratégie de marché. De plus, l'argumentation est illustrée d'exemples de publicité. L'auteur espère que cet article peut servir au design du langage publicitaire.

Mots-Clés: présupposition, langage publicitaire, présupposition pragmatique, fonction, stratégie

1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF PRESUPPOSITION

Presupposition is a subject widely studied by linguists nowadays, but actually it is first studied by philosophers and logicians. Various opinions exist about the definition of presupposition by different linguists. During the daily communication, it happens that speakers assume certain information is already known; such information will generally not be stated and consequently will count as part of what is

communicated but not said. The technical terms "presupposition" and "entailment" are used to describe two different aspects of this kind of information. (Yule, 2001) A presupposition is something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance. Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions. An entailment is something that logically follows from what is asserted in the utterance. Sentences, not speakers, have entailments. There are two basic types of presupposition: semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. The former analyzes presupposition from the aspect of logic and semantics; the latter analyzes presupposition from the aspect of pragmatics.

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University, China.

*Received 25 January 2007 ; accepted 1 March 2007

In many discussion of the concept, presupposition is treated as a relationship between two propositions. If we say that the sentence in [a.] contains the proposition A and the sentence in [b.] contains the proposition A', then using the symbol >> to mean 'presupposes', we can represent the relationship as in [c.].

Tom's cat is cute. (A)

Tom's cat isn't cute. (A')

>> Tom has a cat. (B)

Propositions A or A' presupposes another proposition B.

Let us look at another example:

Dad: The refrigerator is empty. Where are all the bottles of yogurt?

Mum: It seems that Tom (the son) is satisfied today.

Though on the surface there is no relation between the words of Dad and Mum, the pragmatic meaning of Mum can be inferred as "All the bottles of yogurt maybe have been drunk by their son Tom." In order to make advertising language convey more information and be full of agitation, advertisers always use presupposition. In the above examples, presupposition is a very important element to infer the pragmatic meaning—children like drinking yogurt. Presupposition is "the set of conditions that have to be satisfied in order for the intended speech act to be appropriate in the circumstances, or to be felicitous", "the speaker's assumptions (belief) about the speech context", "that of shared background information", and "about what is assumed to be true in the utterance rather than directly asserted to be true" (Peccei, 1999). So presupposition in advertisement belongs to pragmatic category. It is the common knowledge known by both sides of language communication or at least the information that can be inferred according to context. Without this presupposition, both sides of language communication can hardly understand mutually.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE FUNCTIONS OF PRESUPPOSITION IN ADVERTISING

Companies spend millions of dollars each year in advertising their products. These advertisements attempt to persuade us to buy certain products through various strategies. Obviously, presupposition is one of the strategies adopted by the advertisers. As a kind of applied language, the language of advertising has its own characteristics. The language of advertising is in different degrees influenced by linguistics, psychology, economics, marketing strategy, sociology and aesthetics etc., thus the study of presupposition phenomenon in this paper has to draw on the knowledge of the above-mentioned disciplines besides linguistics. As is known to all, presupposition as a very important notion

in pragmatics can serve the multiple purposes of advertisement, therefore presupposition and the language of advertising should be studied together. Therefore, the analysis of functions of presuppositions in advertisements will be carried out from the following three aspects: presupposition and the language of advertising, presupposition and the information of advertising, presupposition and the strategy of advertising.

2.1 Presupposition and the Language of Advertising

Without doubt, presupposition can contribute to the economy of the language of advertising. As far as the diction is concerned, good advertisements should be concise and economical because of the cost of advertising and the characteristics of good advertisements.

However, for advertisers, this means spending. Firms which previously paid out but a few hundred dollars for advertising have to spend much more money on it. Just think of the risk in investing a few thousand dollars in a single page advertisement. How can the advertisers expect to get back the equivalent of such a sum of money from a single advertisement?

In this case, the advertisers have to take the cost of advertising into serious consideration. The diction of the advertisements will directly influence the costs because it will influence the time (especially for television advertising) or space (especially for print advertising) of the advertisements.

Presuppositions have the property of making the diction of the advertisements more concise and more economical. This can account for the presupposition phenomenon in the advertisements.

Another reason has something to do with the characteristics of good advertisements. *America's Marketing Manager's Handbook* points out that a good advertisement should have the following five functions: Attention, Interest, Desire, Memory and Action, that is the so-called AIDMA functions. In other words, AIDMA means that good advertisements can attract the consumers' attention from the things they are doing to the advertised products or services, arouse their great interest in the advertised products; more importantly, good advertisements should reveal the benefits of buying the advertised products or services and activate consumers' desires to buy. Without doubt, "the economy of the language of the advertising will make contribution to the memory value of the advertisements", "concise or economical language can be more easily noticed, memorized by the consumers and thus more effective" (余小梅, 2003). The reason why presuppositions have the power to make the language of advertising more concise and more economical is that presuppositions are the kind of

pragmatic inferences in some sense, thus treated as known information or knowledge, therefore the corresponding expression of such information or knowledge can be omitted accordingly. The example I will talk about below can show this point.

E.g. 做女人挺好

This is an advertisement for a kind of cosmetology product which can enlarge the breast. The sentence of this advertisement is really short, but there are two meanings. First it shows that the feeling to be a female is fine. And second it shows the feature of the product. Meanwhile it uses obscure words to express the topic which women feel ashamed to bring up. In the following advertisement example:

A: Where is my box of chocolate?

B: The children were in your room this morning.

Obviously, the implied meaning of sentence B is that your chocolate has been eaten by children. The information that I have a box of chocolate and children like chocolate is presupposed successfully so that the language of this text is greatly economized; otherwise the advertisement would be very redundant so as to influence the efficacy of the advertising effect.

Since advertisement should be short and easy to memorize, there are many presupposed sentences which are not spoken openly contained in advertisement. These presuppositions which are not spoken openly play a direct role in advertising language.

“Presuppositions seem to be tied to particular words or aspects of surface structure in general. We shall call such presupposition-generating linguistic items presupposition-triggers.”(陳 新 仁 ,1998) Presupposition-triggers are certain words or sentences which can presuppose presuppositions. The inference of presupposition may not be necessarily based on the whole speech but on these presupposition-triggers, which can be definite descriptions, factive verbs, implicative verbs, change of state verbs, iteratives, verbs of judging, temporal clauses, cleft sentences, comparison and contrast, non-restrictive relative clauses. We need to talk about presupposition-triggers because by talking about them, we can know how advertising language produces the presuppositions which sponsors expect. Advertisement designers handle part of the information as presupposing information according to demand to make language succinct. For instance,

Oscar de la Renta knows what makes a woman beautiful. (an advertisement for Oscar de la Renta cosmetics) >> Women want to be beautiful.

Coke refreshes you like no other can. (an advertisement for Coke) >> Drink can refresh you.

Here, “know” and “no other can” are presupposition-triggers. Sponsors make use of the presupposition-triggers to presuppose certain information and then achieve the purpose of enlarging the amount of information and agitating advertising

recipients.

2.2 Presupposition and the Information of Advertising

Presupposition information always appears with assertion information. Advertisements containing presupposition not only pass assertion presupposition on, but also pass on one or more presupposition information at the same time. To the advertising language which needs large amount of information, presupposition can enlarge the density of information. For example:

你還在爲身材矮小而苦惱嗎?

This is an advertisement for a kind of medicine for growing taller. The presupposition information is “You have been a short man” and “You are troubled by your short figure”. The advertisement not only promise, but also point out the worries that consumers have before they use the advertised product. It makes a comparison between past and now as well as strengthens the vigor of advertisement.

When we express ourselves, we share information. Appropriate information sharing is essential to successful advertisements. Generally every piece of writing contains given information and new information, so do the advertisements. Presupposition is closely related to information sharing because of its interesting properties. Both given information and new information sharing are very important for the advertisements to be successful: if all the information sharing is given information, the advertisement will be meaningless; if all the information is new information, it will be very difficult for the consumers to understand what is said in the advertisement. In the process of normal communication, information is usually arranged from the old to the new in conformity to the cognitive laws of human beings.

In the advertisements, new information is usually directly asserted in order to give emphasis while given information is presupposed to provide background or acts as the initiating point of information sharing for the whole text of advertisement to develop smoothly. According to relevance theory, the placement of information in the advertisement should create some contextual effects in the hearers and minimize the processing efforts it involves. So, presupposed information and asserted information should be used properly in order to achieve maximal effects. For instance,

Seven-up is uncola. (an advertisement for Seven-up drink)

Ask for More. I’m More satisfied! (advertisements for More cigarette)

愛生活，愛拉芳 (an advertisement for La Fang shampoo)

百變所以美麗 (an advertisement for Belle shoes)

Readers can easily accept and memorize the information of products from these advertising words. Everyone knows that they “愛生活”, as everyone love life, everyone will “愛拉芳”. Consumers can easily infer that using La Fang shampoo can make you live happier.

Thus, we can know that presupposed information and asserted information can be combined together to strengthen the power of persuasion. If direct assertions are used too much, doubt will be thrown on the advertised product or services for people generally believe it is too good to be true.

2.3 Presupposition and the Strategy of Advertising

Firstly, in order to achieve sales promotion, advertisement writer usually loves to use some exaggerated words, phrases and expressions to describe the advertised products or services. By doing so, the advertisement will leave a very deep impression on the minds of the consumers; however, it may also be very repulsive to the consumers. Therefore, here presupposition can play its role again because it can downgrade the praising words, phrases and expressions and make the advertisement at least appear to be more objective. For example,

And it's the reason why millions of Americans are falling in love with the first really new bed in 75 years: our high-tech weightless sleep system.

In the above excerpt from an advertisement for Tempur-Pedic bed, it is obvious that certain exaggerated information is conveyed by factive presupposition and existential presupposition. Such expressions as “millions of” and “the first really new...”etc. will undoubtedly give the consumers an impression that the advertised product is perhaps exaggerated and doubts will be thrown on the creditability of the advertisement. However, if such information is transmitted through presupposition, the exaggeration or praise of the properties of the product will be downgraded because these pieces of information are not directly asserted.

Secondly, in order to persuade the consumers to buy the advertised products, the advertisement writer must convince the consumers that what they said in the advertisement is true. No doubt, affirmative tone will be more effective in the process of persuasion. In this respect, presupposition can help to make the advertisement more persuasive in that presuppositions have the ability to survive under negation or question; and even though in some contexts presupposition can be cancelled or suspended, this kind of presupposition canceling can be also helpful because in order to overthrow the presupposed information, it requires the consumers to spend more time in learning more about the advertised products or services, such as “不走尋常

路”(take the unusual way)—an advertising slogan for the Metersbonwe Clothing. When people first hear the advertisement, they would hardly associate the slogan with a brand of clothing. However, this sounding slogan can soon arouse people's curiosity and drive people to notice and to discover “不尋常” or the distinctive features of this brand. In this way the advertisement will leave a very deep impression on the minds of the consumers.

What is more, presupposition can also be used to cheat the consumers if the claims of the advertisements are false because in most cases the consumers are really not in a position to learn whether the presupposition in the advertisement is true or not. Some claims as “XX 牙膏經中華牙防組認證”and alike seemingly gives consumers an assurance of the quality of this product, but in fact that kind of authorized evaluation organization--中華牙防組 do not even exist. In many cases, consumers have been cheated by the presupposition and been attempted to purchase the product with a belief of its quality. The reason is that the consumers do not want to spend too much time in checking the truthfulness of the contents of the advertisements and at the same time, they also lack related professional knowledge and means. Just because of this, the advertisement writers can take advantage of the psychology of consumers to serve their purpose.

3. PRESUPPOSITION PSYCHOLOGY AND MARKETING STRATEGIES OF ADVERTISEMENT

Some features of presupposition, especially its feature of being the “shared background information”, coincide with the psychological and the marketing requirement for advertisements. “Background” is defined as “the scenery or ground behind something” or “a position as unnoticeable as possible”; it is “the information for the understanding of something” (*Encyclopedia Britannica* Vol.1). That is to say, if certain advertising information is put in the form of presupposition, then it is necessary but not noticeable. Some advertising information needs to be made faint in an advertisement for certain purposes, and so presupposition is regarded as an important and effective device to realize these purposes and to produce some advertising strategies.

3.1 Presupposition and its Orienting Function

Presupposition information contained in an utterance has the tendency in orienting and restricting people's thought in an easy and a concealable way. All questions have inner presuppositions, and they have orienting functions, which are regarded as “very useful for interrogators or trial lawyers” (Yule, 2000). It is the

same case in advertisements. For example,

Why Sony, when they could have had any TV in the world? (Sony TV set)

In asking this question, the advertisers have presumed that “people would like to use Sony TV set even though they could have any other TV set in the world” as a fact. Therefore, this fact is a roundabout way. People will have a greater intendency in accepting the information that is put in the form of presuppositions.

According to stylistic analysis, one feature of advertising language is the high frequency in the use of question. One explanation to this phenomenon is that all questions imply presuppositions, in which the advertisers often skillfully advertise their products.

3.2 Presupposition and its Concealment Function

Sometimes advertisers conceal specific advertising information deliberately to achieve certain effect and presupposition is employed. Presupposition closely connects with the speakers’ belief, attitude and intention. In other words, although presupposition seems to be objective, in fact, it is subjective in essence. Even more, presupposition comes from people’s knowledge about the way language users interpret the words and structures, so presupposition can be quite “sneaky”. It has the features of concealment and deceptiveness and so it is used to cover some facts in advertising. For instance,

A: What makes this World Business Class so special?

B: Your own experience. (Dutch Royal Airlines, Newsweek, Feb. 19, 1996)

>> This World Business Class is not special.

When the first speaker raises the question, he takes that “something makes this World Business Class so special” and “this World Business Class is so special” for its presupposition information. Since the presupposition information is the assumption made by the speaker, it has several possibilities in its authenticity and reliability. No matter it is true or not, the speaker takes it as a fact when he uses this presupposition in his speech therefore, the advertising information conveyed in the form of presupposition has a low probability of being rejected.

Besides, the concealment function of presupposition is also embodied in the use of euphemism. In daily life, language used for describing specific subject matter will cause people’s either pleasant or unpleasant response. Pleasant response often connects with people’s positive attitude while unpleasant response with negative attitude. So advertising language must be stimulating, readable and it should arouse people’s pleasant associations. In order to reach this goal, some mild, roundabout, tactful

expressions are used to avoid offending customers, and to eliminate the unpleasant associations. Then this leads to the use of euphemism. Presupposition is an effective means to the realization of euphemism, by which the factual embarrassment is concealed. For instance,

To rid your hair of unwelcome build-up you must switch to a shampoo with superior rinsability. (Shampoo)

>> There is unwelcome build-up in your hair.

No one would like to be disgraced by the others, especially in public situations, and so people have psychological resistance against the utterance that might minimize their benefits. Because the assertion “There is unwelcome build-up in your hair” reveals the embarrassing condition of the information recipients, who will surly dislike that kind of “accident”. In the above example, advertisers make this assertion in the form of presupposition smartly and avoiding causing recipients’ unpleasant feeling.

3.3 Presupposition and its Targeting Function

Advertising language shares some general features with the language used in daily communication. When people speak or write, they use language with a certain purpose and in a certain circumstance. Otherwise, the information receivers cannot make sense of what they have said or written. For the same reasons, some advertisements are designed to all readers, but some to a set of readers. Therefore, the advertisers designed advertisements for the people who intend to read them. An advertisement is not necessary to sell a product or service to everyone, but to target the most likely group of consumers for its product. Presupposition is an effective means to serve advertisements in targeting certain groups of readers through shared background or assumptions that can be identified. For example:

Behind that healthy smile, there’s Crest kid. (Crest tooth paste)

雅芳，比女人更瞭解女人。 (Avon cosmetics)

The targeted readers “kids’ parents” and “women” are pointed in the above two advertisements respectively. When parents read the first advertisement, they would probably think that using Crest to brush their children’s teeth is good, and Crest should be used from childhood. When women read the second advertisement, they would probably think that Avon can provide the cosmetics that women really need and the considerate service that even picky women could not complain. That is the effect presupposition has in targeting readers.

3.4 Presupposition and its Distance-shortening Function

Some advertisements are ungrammatical or illogical in a strict sense, especially in the use of pronoun.

In communication, speakers have the right in deciding what information is already known by their listeners. Such kind of information that is presumed to be “common” or “shared” and that is put in the form of presupposition can shorten the distance between advertisers and the receivers because it is very natural that people in close relationship tend to have more shared background knowledge. For example,

Is Mike giving Annie that chocolate cake?

“That” in the above example is based on the pragmatic presupposition in that the utterance is an extending part of a previous dialogue between two persons in a close relationship. The presupposition triggered by “that” leads readers to presuppose that the dialogue between the advertisers and the potential consumers have taken place for at least a while, and in their previous dialogue they have mentioned something about certain kind of chocolate cake, and the chocolate cake being mentioned actually existed. Both speakers

and listeners know what kind of chocolate cake the utterance refers to.

4. CONCLUSION

Advertising is a kind of communicative art which is full of tactics. The quality of advertising propaganda directly influences the sales of products, economic benefits and the existence of enterprises. It is not easy to achieve the purposes of informing, attracting, agitating consumers and promoting the consuming behaviors by a few short sentences. The use of presuppositions can help advertisements to enlarge the amount of information; make up for the shortcomings brought by short time and space, and furthermore can attract consumers to do the inference themselves.

To sum up, the enormous competition for potential customers has led advertisers to exploit the incredibly versatile capacities of language to influence people's thoughts and actions. Advertisements attain this significance, largely by drawing upon and prescribing accustomed beliefs. Due to presupposition's unique characteristics and special functions, presupposition is an oft-adopted language technique in advertisements.

REFERENCES

- Britain. *Encyclopedia Britannica Dictionary Vol. 1*. Britain: Encyclopedia Britain, Inc., 1985.
- Cook, G.. *The Discourse of Advertising* [M]. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Jean Stilwell Peccei. *Pragmatics* [M]. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press/Routledge, 2000.
- George, Yule. *Pragmatics* [M]. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社, 2000.
- 余小梅. *廣告心理學* [M]. 北京: 北京廣播學院出版社, 2003.
- 陳新仁. 論廣告用語中的語用預設[J]. *外國語*, 1998.
- 胡壯麟. *語言學教程*[M] 北京: 北京大學出版社, 2001.

THE AUTHOR

Wang Yingfang, Postgraduate, English Department of Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430079, P.R. China.