

Language Use in Advertising: An Analysis of Linguistic Features Across Readership  
Domains

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May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001

## Language Use in Advertising: An Analysis of Linguistic Features Across Readership Domains

In the words of the renowned advertising pioneer, William Bernbach, “The truth isn’t the truth until people believe you, and they can’t believe you if they don’t know what you’re saying, and they can’t know what you’re saying if they don’t listen to you, and they won’t listen to you if you’re not interesting unless you say things imaginatively, originally, freshly”, which is important because, “It is insight into human nature that is the key to the communicator’s skill. For whereas the writer is concerned with what he puts into his writings, the communicator is concerned with what the reader gets out of it. He therefore becomes a student of *how* people read or listen.” With these two famous quotes, Bernbach emphasizes the importance of language in the modern world of advertising. Commercial verbiage is designed to entice the reader to “read on”, to explore the product or service being offered in greater detail. Linguistic components such as H.P. Grice’s Cooperative Principle, grammatical constructs, jargon, and semantic length are all critical to this process, assisting the copywriter in his eternal wrestling match for the reader’s attention.

In his favor is the trend towards the scientific analysis of advertising techniques championed by Claude Hopkins in the 1920’s, which has transformed the use of language in modern advertisements into a sophisticated discipline. Every linguistic element of an advertisement’s text is now chosen based on intricate psycholinguistic models of human language processing. This paper will examine the results of some of those models in

terms of language differences across two very different readership domains and discuss any significant differences or similarities found.

For this type of comparative analysis, a corpus of advertising text is required which contains a representative sample of the current language patterns of the selected readership domains. The most likely candidate to provide this type of data sample is a periodical, such as a magazine, which is targeted towards an extremely specific viewing audience, and which makes use of the jargon, general domain knowledge, and other linguistic elements present in that field, all within the context of the domain's current events. It was determined that five advertisements would be selected from each of two magazines, providing a sufficiently large text corpus. To provide the most dissimilar corpus of advertising text to analyze, one which would demonstrate a marked difference in language use, two magazines of vastly different readership demographics were selected, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *AAPG Explorer*. The first, *Entertainment Weekly* #592, is a magazine targeted at the public at large, covering Hollywood events, celebrity gossip, movie and book reviews, and artist biographies. The second, *AAPG Explorer* from April 2001, is a trade journal published by AAPG, the American Association of Petroleum Geologists. It focuses on high-technology issues in the field of petroleum geology, as well as general petroleum industry news. Thus, not only are two readership domains represented in this study, but two distinct classes of periodical, with one magazine designed for a very targeted group of specialty readers tied together by trade, and the other for a much broader general viewing audience.

The language in any periodical must support the lowest common denominator in the shared linguistic competence of its readers. This is especially important for a

magazine such as *Entertainment Weekly*, which chooses as its target audience the general public. The tremendous range of shared knowledge and specific language comprehension in such a domain necessitate the use of simplistic language to ensure universal readability. Linguistic elements such as the Cooperative Principle suddenly play a paramount role in the selection of vocabulary and grammatical constructions, as do the attention spans and implicit and explicit knowledge expected of the readership. A careful analysis of these elements thus becomes of great interest in discerning the language characteristics unique to this readership domain.

The Cooperative Principle, first outlined by H.P. Grice in his famous Harvard University lectures of 1967, defines four conversational maxims: The Maxim of Relation, The Maxim of Quantity, The Maxim of Quality, and The Maxim of Manner. The first of these, the Maxim of Relation, requires that all of the text presented be relevant to the task of conveying the primary concept to the reader. This is certainly present in the advertisements from *Entertainment Weekly*, with advertisement #2 asking the reader “how can you make two months’ salary last forever?” and immediately answering it with the paired response “[with] the diamond engagement ring.” Similarly, the Maxim of Quantity, which discourages loquaciousness, is adhered to by the selected advertisements, and is actually exceeded in advertisement #1, in which the three phrases “real clues”, “real investigations”, and “real trials” are found. These three concept-phrases are devoid of any container grammatical constructs, but avoid violating the Maxim of Manner, which requires clarity in expression, due to their strong relation to the overall primary idea of the advertisement. The Maxim of Quality, however, which enforces veracity of expression, has always been treated as a “grey area” in advertising

philosophy, as the purpose of an advertisement is to convince the reader of the product's usefulness to his or her, which occasionally requires "overselling" it. An example of such persuasion may be found in advertisement #4 in which the claim is made that "everything tastes better with a splash of the unexpected" and #5 in which the manufacturer asserts, "Blazer Xtreme won't go unnoticed." Both of these advertisements make subjective claims which cannot be quantitatively supported.

The attention span of a magazine's readers also brings a large amount to bear on the particular word choices used. In *Entertainment Weekly*, the five selected advertisements total 246 words, which is an average of slightly more than 49 words per advertisement. Of these 246 words, 44 were verb forms, which represent almost 18% of the total word corpus. The overall brevity of the advertisements, coupled with high densities of "active" words, tends to promote strong action-based connotations within the reader. Commands such as "You're on the case" (Advertisement #1), "Choose the perfect diamond" (Advertisement #2), and "you better believe you can back up anything you say" (Advertisement #5) all serve as metaphorical vias through which the reader may connect to the advertisement.

In stark contrast to the broad coverage of *Entertainment Weekly*'s readership demographics, *AAPG Explorer* is targeted towards a select group of professionals, all of whom share the common bond of employment in the petroleum industry. It therefore has greater freedom to use industry-specific jargon and technical terminology which its readership is assumed to understand. Concepts such as "tadpole plots" (Advertisement #2), "log correlation" (Advertisement #3), "dip data" (Advertisement #2), and "wellbores" (Advertisement #2) are all unique to the field of petroleum geology. New

terminologies, in the form of acronyms, are also introduced, such as “Statistical Curvature Analysis Techniques (SCAT)” in Advertisement #2 and “Electronic Data Rooms (EDR)” in Advertisement #4.

The Cooperative Principle is followed closely by *AAPG Explorer*'s advertisements as pertains to the central theme of the advertisement, but, rather than focus on a single linear path of reasoning, they often digress to provide additional background material to help the user with his or her evaluation of the product. This causes a fair amount of violations, albeit minor ones, to the four conversational maxims by the additional information. The Maxim of Relation is present throughout the advertisement corpus, except for a few minor violations, such as “extra special delivery” in Advertisement #1, which was used as a lead-in to the advertisement's emphasis on the speed of its product. The Maxim of Quantity is occasionally violated with reinforcements like “right to your screen ... right now ... this minute” (Advertisement #1), which are merely supporting statements. The Maxim of Manner is adhered to overall, as the verbiage of each advertisement forms a synergistic whole. The Maxim of Quality is followed quite meticulously, so that violations such as “but what you really want is a structural picture” (Advertisement #2) become the exception to boasts like “the only package created and supported by geologists” (Advertisement #3), which can be proven quantitatively.

The total word count in the *AAPG Explorer* advertisements is 682 words, which is an average of slightly more than 136 words per advertisement. A total of 120 verb forms comprise almost 20% of the total word corpus, lending a strong action component to the advertisements' connotations.

Thus, careful analysis shows that both *Entertainment Weekly* and *AAPG Explorer* tend to follow the four conversational maxims defined by the Cooperative Principle, despite the distinction made regarding that principle in the *AAPG Explorer* advertisements. The average length of each advertisement was longer in *AAPG Explorer*, which was largely due to the additional background material provided in each advertisement. Such background material was not present in the *Entertainment Weekly* advertisements. Liberal use of domain-specific terminology and other devices such as acronyms were found in the *AAPG Explorer* advertisements, while *Entertainment Weekly* contained none. It is also interesting to note that one spelling error was discovered in the shared advertising corpus, in *AAPG Explorer* advertisement #3, where the word “geologocal” is used in placed of “geological.” This was the only misspelling detected and therefore may be attributed to simple typographical error.

These discrepancies between the two advertisement corpuses definitely seem to be representative of the dialect of each magazine’s readership demographics. The shared knowledge and expected language competence of each advertisement’s audience contributed heavily to its overall construction, lending a unique insight into human perception.

## APPENDIX

### ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY (#592 APRIL 20, 2001)

#### Advertisement #1 (Page 13)

TUESDAY NIGHT, YOU'RE ON THE CASE. REAL CLUES. REAL INVESTIGATIONS. REAL TRIALS. AN OBJECT LYING BESIDE THE ROAD. A BODY WRAPPED IN A SLEEPING BAG. FIBER ANALYSIS POINTS TO A BOARDING HOUSE. PROVE THE CONNECTION. What can micro evidence reveal? Get the goods to solve the crimes at [discovery.com](http://discovery.com)

#### Advertisement #2 (Page 41)

HOW CAN YOU MAKE TWO MONTHS' SALARY LAST FOREVER? THE DIAMOND ENGAGEMENT RING. HOW OFTEN WILL YOU GIVE HER SOMETHING SHE'LL CHERISH FOR THE REST OF HER LIFE? VISIT OUR WEB SITE AND DESIGN AN ENGAGEMENT RING SHE'LL LOVE. CHOOSE THE PERFECT DIAMOND. SETTING AND SIDE STONES OR BROWSE THROUGH MORE THAN 7500 DESIGNS. YOU'LL ALSO LEARN ABOUT THE 4C'S: CUT, COLOR, CLARITY, AND CARAT WEIGHT. TO HELP YOU SURPRISE HER WITH THE PERFECT DIAMOND RING. [WWW.ADIAMONDISFOREVER.COM](http://WWW.ADIAMONDISFOREVER.COM) A DIAMOND IS FOREVER

#### Advertisement #3 (Page 45)

A&E ORIGINAL SERIES If you commit a crime, watch out for the big, bad Wolfe. NERO WOLFE. New Series Premieres Sun., April. 22 at 8pm/7c Escape the Ordinary

#### Advertisement #4 (Page 47)

Club Sandwich? The Captain was here Captain Morgan Original Spiced Rum Everything tastes better with a splash of the unexpected. Join the Captain's crew at [run.com](http://run.com). Enjoy our quality responsibly.

#### Advertisement #5 (Page 77)

YOU WANT QUIET? BECOME A MIME XTREME If you've got something to say, say it loud. With rocker cladding, ground effects and available Bose sound system, Blazer Xtreme won't go unnoticed. And since Blazer Xtreme is built on a foundation of security and toughness, you better believe you can back up anything you say. BLAZER LIKE A ROCK



## **AAPG EXPLORER (APRIL 2001)**

### Advertisement #1 (Page 19)

LiveQuest EXTRA SPECIAL DELIVERY. Introducing the LiveQuest Application Service Provider (ASP) solution. Offering you the fastest possible way to put advanced E&P interpretation, economic and risk analysis, and data management applications from GeoQuest and Merak to work in your company. Delivering the capability right to your screen – without the IT overhead. Right now. This minute. LiveQuest will change the way you access software and data forever. And transform the way you work. Read all about it: [www.geoquest.com](http://www.geoquest.com). Schlumberger YOUR NEW ENERGY

### Advertisement #2 (Page 20)

What you get. What you want. Now you can get what you want. What you get from dipmeter surveys (and many other wellbore-imaging services) is a tadpole plot. However, tadpole plots can be difficult or impossible to interpret, inaccurate, or completely misleading. Our Geodes software implements several innovative techniques in dip analysis, including Statistical Curvature Analysis Techniques (SCAT), enabling you to analyze your dip data quickly, accurately, and completely. But what you really want is a structural picture – horizon maps and structure sections. Tadpole plots only indicate the dip at the wellbore and wellbore images only show you the inside of the wellbore, they don't show you what happens away from and outside the wellbore. Now you can get what you really want. Our Geodes software will help you convert your tadpole plots to horizon maps and structure sections (in any direction), allowing you to see away from and outside your wellbore. Best of all, you get all of this additional, structural control from data you already have! Let Geodes – or our 3D Dip consulting services – help you improve your 3D geological models, your 3D seismic interpretations, and your drilling results!

### Advertisement #3 (Page 26)

SmartSECTION Computerizes Well Log Correlation smartSECTION replaces paper-based log correlation and cross-section analysis workflows with unprecedented efficiency – up to 5-20 times faster than traditional methods. A2D Technologies' leading smartRASTER and vector (LAS) let users select tops and bases of sands or porosity zones and sum intervals with the ease of a mouse click. With smartSECTION V4.6 geologists can generate scenarios and evaluate opportunities more effectively with enhanced fault gapping and automated bed off-set capabilities. These features, along with advanced data management, streamline the well-log workflow with easy data sharing between applications using intuitive import/export features. Visit A2D.com to experience an interactive demo to learn more about smartSECTION and how A2D technologies can help you maximize your well-log data workflow. A2D Technologies continues to lead the industry in PC-based geological interpretation, delivering the only package created and supported by geologists.

### Advertisement #4 (Page 33)

A leading Internet portal and marketplace bringing value and process efficiencies to each stage of the oil and gas property transaction lifecycle – streamlining the discovery,

evaluation, acquisition, divestiture, and managing of petroleum properties. Data Room Explorer Review property listings and access detailed, supporting evaluation data online for properties being offered at upcoming auctions. Electronic Data Rooms (EDR) Review properties and prospects online in virtual data rooms complete with interactive map displays and evaluation tools. DataMap Access an interactive, online map of North America displaying the land grid, cultural data, well and property locations, and FREE production data and graphics for all of the U.S. Discover Discover properties and prospects available for sale or trade through the Petroleum Place digital marketplace – featuring one of the industry’s most extensive inventories of properties and the broadest exposure to prospective buyers. Evaluate Leverage the geotechnical data and software applications on [www.petroleumplace.com](http://www.petroleumplace.com) to efficiently and effectively evaluate properties online. Transact Transact properties through Negotiated Sales, Hybrid Live Floor/Internet and Exclusively Online auctions.

Advertisement #5 (Page 34)

Changing the Way YOU INTERPRET THE WORLD Magic Earth is leading a visualization revolution. GeoProbe is the fastest volume visualization and interpretation software. How fast? Recent projects have recorded reductions in cycle time of more than 75%. Harnessing this speed, GeoProbe’s dynamic suite of flexible, interactive tools ensures a thorough, accurate exploration and development analysis. Go from data to drillable prospect with: Real-time volume rendering / Ribbon sections / Multiple volumes display / Surface slicing / Horizon auto-picking / ezFaults / esSurfaces / Probes For evaluating data, from a regional perspective to reservoir detail, GeoProbe is the new standard. Join the revolution. MAGIC EARTH