

A Brief Study on Pragmatic Presupposition in Advertising

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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 linguistics especially in pragmatics, presupposition is frequently employed in order to enhance the effects of persuasion in advertisements because of its own special properties and characteristics. This paper will study the advertisement from the perspective of pragmatic presupposition, so as to find out the positive roles played by presupposition in helping advertising achieve its persuasion goal.

Key words: advertising, Pragmatic Presupposition, linguistics

I. The meaning of pragmatic presupposition

In clearer terms, presupposition, as its name implies, are inferences about what is pre-supposed, or assumed to be the case in an utterance rather than directly asserted. Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions. Various opinions exist about the definition of presupposition by different linguists. Basically, there are two basic types of presuppositions: semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. The former analyzes from the aspect of logic and semantics, the latter analyzes from the aspect of pragmatics.

Linguists define pragmatic presupposition with different focuses and in different diction. However, they agree on one point, that is, pragmatic presupposition is closely connected with the speaker whereas semantic presupposition is associated with the sentence or the propositions of the sentence. In brief, from the pragmatic perspective, speakers have presuppositions; from the semantic perspective, presupposition is part of the meaning of the sentence itself.

There exist differences about the definition of pragmatic presupposition in academic circles. Presently there are three kinds of attitudes. The first attitude thinks that pragmatic presupposition is a kind of pragmatic inference. It means "those presupposition relations which are sensitive to context and are related to the beliefs, attitudes and purposes of speakers (sometimes including speaking objects)." (He Ziran, 1997)

And the second attitude thinks that pragmatic presupposition is the appropriate conditions which must be satisfied when effectively carrying out speech act.

The third attitude thinks that pragmatic presupposition is the common knowledge that both sides of communication share (He Ziran, 1998). That is also called background knowledge. This kind of knowledge includes the knowledge which is shared by both sides of communication and other people and is related with certain context, the knowledge which is only shared by the both sides of communication in some particular context and the knowledge which is related with certain logic. (He Ziran & Chen Xinren, 2002) Although this kind of knowledge should not be known in advance by listeners, only if speaker implies it in words, listener can understand. If common knowledge cannot reach a consensus, communication will be unsuccessful.

II. Characteristics of pragmatic presupposition

The presupposition in advertisement belongs to pragmatic category. When we study presupposition from the pragmatic perspective, it is most important to consider appropriateness (or felicity) and mutual knowledge (or common ground). They are two properties of pragmatic presupposition.

1. Appropriateness (or felicity)

The appropriateness of presupposition means that presupposition should be closely related with context and presupposition is the pre-condition of speech act. For example,

Example(1): 过生日, 上龙塔

This is an advertisement for Dragon Tower. The designers and the consumers both know the Dragon Tower; the Dragon tower obviously has already prepared the thing for birthday party.

2. Mutual knowledge (or common ground)

Common ground means pragmatic presupposition must be known by both sides of the conversation. And this point is the most important. For example,

Example (2): Without vitamins, life itself would be impossible.

This is an advertisement for drugs. As everyone knows Vitamins are necessary to life, so advertisement designers use this common known pragmatic presupposition to emphasize the efficacy of this medicine.

Example (3): 豆奶, 还是“黑牛”好。

The pragmatic presupposition of this ad is "Soy milk is good for your health.", which is the common knowledge. Without this presupposition, the ad will not be understood.

III. Application of Pragmatic presupposition in advertisement

Advertisement is closely linked with social psychology because advertisement has the characteristic of persuasion. So successful

advertisement designers or sponsors can't do without social psychology, especially the use of the consuming psychology of the mass. The purpose of advertisement is to affect the attitude of consumers and thereupon affect their behavior. Therefore according to Chen Xinren (1998), advertising pragmatic presupposition will be classified from the angle of social psychology. From these classifications we can discover a few rules in advertising language.

Relatively speaking, social psychology about consumption mainly includes judgment of values, tendency of feelings, habits, spirit etc. According to these aspects, the factors which make up influences include the persuasive facts, the change of belief, the necessity of behavior and the improvement of state. In a corresponding way we can classify the advertising pragmatic presupposition as the following ones.

1. Factive presupposition

Factive presupposition is the presupposition that states facts. An old saying has it that "Action speaks louder than words." To alter the attitude or behavior of an individual or a certain group, the undeniable facts must be presented. Holding this in mind, the advertisers often present what seem to be facts to convince their customers. For example:

Example (4): Why is it that so many people of distinction choose PARKER writing instruments over all other? (From the packing case of the pen)

Example (5): 收礼只收脑白金!

These assertions in the presupposition give the readers an impression that the information conveyed is a fact. However, people will not take much time and trouble to prove the truth of it. Actually, most consumers accept such presuppositional facts and will not spend much time or take much trouble to carry out an investigation and then decide whether to take the purchase action or not, and such psychology is taken use of by advertisers.

2. Belief presupposition

The frequently-employed strategy in advertising language to shake or change the consumers' beliefs is to impose new beliefs on them. Presupposition shows its advantage in such a strategy. Here are some examples:

Example (6): 非常可乐, 中国人自己的可乐

This is an advertisement for a kind of Coke drink which is made by the Chinese. As everybody knows Coke is a kind of drink which is imported from foreign countries. So the pragmatic presupposition here can be expressed as "consumers originally think of Coco-cola when talking about Coke". We must admit that many people have this kind of attitude about Coke drink. But this is a harmful fashion because everybody worships foreign things and fawns on foreign powers. As a result, the competitive power of domestic products must be charged. This advertisement shakes the deep-rooted notion of people, so it is fresh and new to consumers and is easy for them to remember. And every Chinese people who likes his or her country will buy the native drink. The viewpoints that presupposition expresses are not inevitable themselves. Let's have a look at the following advertisement which has the same effect.

Example (7): Spoil yourself, not spoil your figure.

This is an advertisement for Weight Watcher ice cream. As is known to all, ice cream is a kind of sweet food pf large quantity of heat and people who have eaten it will get fat. Foreigners pay much attention to this aspect. So designers should think over how to secure a market. So this advertisement makes use of belief presupposition to show that the product is the food of small quantity of heat and consumers can eat as much as they like.

3. State presupposition

State presuppositions refer to those that presuppose some states of emotions or feelings of the people involved. There are two main kinds of state presuppositions. One presupposes the unpleasant state that the targeted recipients were in before they use the advertised products or services. The other presupposes the favorable state that the consumers are or will be in after they use the advertised products or services. For example:

Example (8): 腰酸背痛腿抽筋, 请服巨能钙。

This is an advertisement for a kind of medicine. This Chinese advertisement is also a very typical example of state presupposition. And I found that many medicine advertisements make use of state presupposition to cause the sympathetic responses of consumers because the consumers who are in that state are eager to break away from it.

Example (9): Arthritis pains? All you need is Bayer Aspirin!

This is an advertisement for Bayer Aspirin. The pragmatic presupposition of this advertising sentence is that at present you are in the condition that your joints are painful. Of course the consumers who are in that state conceive desires to break away from this state. After hearing or seeing this sentence, the consumers who are in difficult positions are bound to be greatest gratified.

4. Behavior presupposition

Behavior presupposition presupposes the potential customers' behaviors that they once had or that they will have. Some of these behaviors perhaps are very desirable because they reflect the consumers' present wants and needs, and others may be unpleasant that the consumers are willing to give up yet have no choice but to accept them under the present conditions if they do not use the advertised products or services. For example:

Example (10): 头屑去无踪, 秀发更出众。

This is the advertisement for Head & shoulders shampoo. P&G Company manufactured it for all the people who have the trouble of dandruff. The dandruff is very troublesome and it is very difficult to be gotten rid of. This kind of shampoo can not only clear your hair but also can drive out the ugly dandruff. Could it be said that it can satisfy the demands of the people who have such trouble?

Example (11): “Since smoking isn’t allowed in your hospital, make sure you have plenty of Wrialey Spearmint Gum to see you through.”

The behavior presupposition of this advertisement is that you need kill time in the hospital. This behavior need is first presented and then the reality is shown, that is, you can not satisfy this need by smoking because smoking is forbidden in hospital. To put it differently, in this case, you can not satisfy your behavior need unless you buy our product Wrialey Spearmint Gum. Thus this advertisement succeeds in fulfilling the persuasive function of advertising through the use of such kind of presupposition.

IV. Functions of Pragmatic Presupposition in Advertisement

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. The study of the functions of presuppositions is important for two reasons: on the one hand it can help the advertisement writers manipulate and use it better; on the other hand, it can help the consumers make informed decisions regarding purchasing.

1. Pragmatic Presupposition and Advertising Language

Advertising sponsors need succinct language. On the one hand, they need to shoulder the advertising expenses. Succinct language can economize expenses. On the other hand, succinct advertisements are easy to draw consumers’ attention and to memorize. Presupposition is a kind of pragmatic inference so it can make language succinct. Presupposition is regarded as the known or existed knowledge. There is no need to speak it out. So accordingly the relative language can be omitted. For example,

Example (12): 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 that the feature of the product. Meanwhile it uses obscure words to express the talking-point which women feel ashamed to bring up. Since advertisement should be short and easy there are many presupposed sentences which are not spoken openly contained in advertisement.

2. Pragmatic Presupposition and Advertising Information

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:

Example (13): 你还在为身材矮小而苦恼吗？

This is the advertisement for a kind of medicine for growing taller. The presupposition information are “You have been a short man” and “You are troubled by your short figure”. The advertisement not only promises, but also point out the plight that consumers have before they use the product in advertisement. It makes a comparison between past and now and strengthens the vigor of advertisement. And another example:

Example (14): 爱生活爱拉芳 (an advertisement for La Fang shampoo)

Readers can easily infer the implied meaning and the effect of the products from these advertising words. From the surface“ 爱生活 ”and“ 爱拉芳 ”are not related. But consumers can infer the meaning that using La Fang shampoo can make you live happier. All these advertisement make use of implication to make consumers infer themselves. And also they are full of attraction and agitation because they make full use of the feelings of consumers.

3. Pragmatic Presupposition and Consuming Psychology

Consumers will result resent attitude under the long-term influence of certain advertising public opinions. It is also a kind of consuming psychology. Because of the development of the society and the change of the customs, “Up-to-date” tendency not only suit young people, but also get with children and grown-up people. Therefore, the designers of advertisement must strain after an effect of novelty and uniqueness. And the purpose of presupposition is to attract consumers. For example:

Example (15): Are you going gray too early?

This is an advertisement for a kind of hair dye. All people want to be young and gray hair will he disgusting. The advertisement presupposes that you are going gray. But the form of presupposition changes the emphasis of attention in to the theme of the advertisement, that is “you need this kind of hair dye”. So consumers won't feel resentment. Consumers' attention shifts with these considerate words.

V. Conclusion

From the above study we can see that the study on pragmatic presupposition in advertising language has realistic significance. Presupposition can serve the persuasive purpose of advertisement in various points of view. Presupposition can expand the amount of information and agitate the customers. So it is necessary for us to study presupposition and advertisement together. The former can enhance the quality of language in advertisement and the latter can provide real materials for the former to study and broaden the scope of its study.

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