MORE PLAY. YOUR WAY – DECONSTRUCTING COSMETICS ADVERTISING. A PRAGMA-LINGUISTIC CASE STUDY

Anișoara Pop¹

¹Prof., PhD, ‘G.E. Palade’ University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureș, Târgu Mureș, Mureș county, 540 142, Romania

Abstract: Cosmetics advertising provides a rich field of analysis in terms of pragma-linguistic and multimodal communication, as well as different degrees of persuasion and language creativity. This paper is a case study of Bobbi Brown Cosmetics through the multimodal discourse analysis framework. It employs different deconstruction tools as research variables: the AIDA persuasion pattern (attention, interest, desire, action) in ad constituents, deixis, disjunctive grammar, tropes, and elements of visual semiotics. The analysis will provide insight for master students who intend to develop a career in public relations as copywriters, helping them to understand the persuasion attainment and the potential of strategies and techniques used in advertising communication.

Keywords: cosmetics advertising, person deixis, disjunctive grammar, pragma-linguistics, persuasion

Advertising has been defined as one of the most popular arts of our times, and, like art, it shares the same intention of “making an emotional impact on the viewer or eliciting an emotional response” (White, 2022). It is a ubiquitous, unsolicited, one-way and nowadays progressively interactive method of mass communication, faced with different attitudes that range from indifference to scepticism and cynicism. The term “advertise” comes from the Latin word ‘advertere’, which means to “turn towards”, i.e., to make viewers/readers respond in a specific way to the ad’s informative and persuasive intent, either by inducing a favourable disposition for the product (psychologic intent), or by making them remember the product (cognitive intent), and eventually buying it. Whether advertising breaks communication rules through attention-getting devices and connects emotionally through humour, by scaring or by making people laugh, the advertising's ultimate communicative, often hidden purpose remains that of encouraging the consumer to choose the advertised products and services (pragmatic intent).

The major potential customers of cosmetic advertising are women (Renaldo, 2017:142) who are persuaded into buying by being induced to a feeling of dissatisfaction between reality
(create a problem) and the ideal of beauty associated with the new product (offer a solution). In terms of product, cosmetics belong neither to the strict necessities nor to the class of durable products, but rather to “luxuries and non-durables” (Leech, 1972). Whence, the far more concerted efforts advertisers invest to make products stand out and attract women through the employment of sophisticated soft selling and tickle strategies (Simpson, 2001).

Postgraduate master students of the programme Creative Writing and digital composition study different genres of marketing and public relations communication in their first-year mainstream curriculum, especially cosmetics advertising providing them with a fertile field of identification, interpretation, and application of pragmalinguistic strategies, multimodal discourse analysis, persuasion versus manipulation, as well as language creativity. This case study of Bobbi Brown cosmetics employs pragma-linguistic deconstruction tools that may provide insight to those who intend to develop a career in public relations as copywriters, adding to their understanding of the persuasion continuum. It is qualitative research, interpretative in nature, one that will examine the text's ‘inherent traits, characteristics, and qualities’ (Grix, 2004: 173) in order to find out the strategies employed, as well as their functions.

**Bobbi Brown Cosmetics (BBC) – or the natural makeup trend**

BBC is a relatively young brand launched in 1991 with the unique selling proposition of achieving a “natural look” and individual beauty, of teaching and empowering women “to be like themselves, only prettier and more confident” (Beard, 2014). Ignited by its founder Bobbi Brown, a makeup artist who was at that time frustrated by the lack of shades available to suit all of her clients, the company was for many years a successful part of Estée Lauder (2016). During the pandemic in 2020, BBC launched the next brand, Jones Road, which brought as the brand’s added value a “relatively small range of ‘clean’ products, formulated to eliminate potentially harmful ingredients such as parabens, phthalates and sulfates” (Griffith, 2019) thus focusing even more on quality.

**Why BBC?**

BBC is more than cosmetics. The woman at the heart of the brand is herself a beauty icon who proposed a novel approach to women through honesty, communication, and education in the field, constantly supporting her beauty product range with podcasts and a MasterClass on makeup lessons. She is also a blog writer and book writer. Her book - *Beauty from the Inside Out*, is based on the same philosophy of “wellness-centric lifestyle” as that of cosmetic products: more about inner beauty than outer appearance: “What you put in your body is just as important as what you put on it” ([https://evolution18.com/](https://evolution18.com/)).

This philosophy has been evident in BBC cosmetics launches. The brand favoured concealers over contouring and neutral lipstick over trendy hues, timeless makeup products for every woman (not just the Caucasian women promoted in most advertising) that have made the Bobbi Brown brand a household name (Cruel, 2017). The BBC simple logo itself (Sans-serif watermark of her name) depicts the same naturalism and simplicity of the products.

In this paper, the multimodal and pragma-linguistic discourse analysis applied to two bi-modal print ads and a commercial (multi- and sub-modal video clip) will differentiate between simple/complex copies, reason versus tickle persuasion, and the linguistic realisation of AIDA according to Leech’s (1966) principles of loaded language: Attention-getting, Interest-maintenance, Desire stimulating, Response seeking.

1. **Be Rain Ready!**

As construction, according to Cook (1992:3), “an ad is not a tangible or stable entity; it is the dynamic synthesis of many components, and comes into being through them”. The ad for Primer plus Mattifier ([https://tinyurl.com/5fdpwbwz](https://tinyurl.com/5fdpwbwz)), included in the analysis for its simple
black/white classical style that evokes the golden ages of advertising, visually distinguishes the target users’ problem – weather conditions: high temperatures and thunderstorm (top left) – and the solution, brought forth by the product (image, right). The text has a straightforward, balanced composition: a hooking icon that pinpoints product specificity, the headline (Be Rain Ready), sub-titles functioning as a rudimentary copy, signature, and the visual on the right, reinforcing the product name and brand through repetition.

A basic distinction required in decoding the ad meanings is that between simple versus complex composition based on reason versus tickle persuasion. Whereas in simple ads all the items (lexis and visual) are related to the product, in complex ads, communication occurs through symbols and is based on the transfer of qualities from the “ad-internal world” or ad story, towards the product and its potential user. Moreover, simple ads are usually connected with a reason approach, i.e. presenting logical reasons to select the product. In terms of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986), whatever is presented in the simple and reason ad has strong relevance for the product. Conversely, complex ads that tend to be linked with a tickle approach, favour positive emotions, sex appeal, mood or good disposition, oftentimes conveyed through inciting or humorous images (Simpson, 2001). In complex ads, the reader or viewer resorts to inferences in order to decode the meaning. In pragmatic terms, this latter type of communication is oblique and has weak relevance for the advertised product as the advertiser can also draw weaker, non-relevant implicatures (Pop, 2008, 2010). As such, the readers are required to construct their own relevance through a higher degree of involvement in meaning processing (Simpson, 2001:593) which can be associated with better recall. Through the prism of pragmatic relevance, the ad for Primer plus mattifier is a simple, reason ad that resorts to direct, relevant persuasion, in keeping with the professed brand philosophy.

In terms of urge (AIDA in marketing), ads resort to either a hard or a soft approach to selling. The hard type, specific to earlier ages of advertising, is based on direct appeal and extortions to buy the advertised product, while the latter achieves persuasion by highlighting product excellence, insisting on a limited amount and affordable price. Conversely, the soft approach is more subtle and indirect as it suggests rather than urges. In terms of our analysed ad, it features a stark product image while the text delineates the features (mattifier for rainy conditions, and oily skin), which are evidence of a hard approach.

A softer persuasive intention can be identified upon language analysis. It has been noted that “advertising language is one of the most creative, original, and novel types of language (Popescu, 2014). According to G. Leech (1966), “Advertising language is loaded”, i.e., it aims to change the will, opinions or attitudes of its audiences based on four key principles: to draw attention to itself, to sustain the interest it has attracted, to be remembered or at any rate recognized as familiar, to prompt the right kind of action”.

As far as the textual constituents are concerned, the following pragma-linguistic elements are identified:

- hooking text that sets the problem: “Mumbai. 21°C. Thunderstorm” – in the form of sentence fragments, in declarative form. It is an example of manifest intertextuality (Fairclough, 1992: 279) referring to the weather forecast genre at both linguistic and semiotic levels, which enables us to identify the target group as women with particular skin concerns caused by adverse weather conditions.

- title - in bold large capitals: “Be Rain Ready” - advances the solution through an imperative;

- sub-title – descriptive and extolling product superiority, is linguistically conveyed through a pre-(superlative) and post-modified NG+ imperative syntagm: “The perfect mattifier for oily skin. Make it matte”. This directive-imperative sentence - “Make it matte” - in the sub-title functions as a perlocutionary act of inviting, whereas
the third person deixis “it” with endo- and anaphoric reference to the “oily skin” serves as a lexical cohesive device, involving the reader in communication.

- **signature**: “Shop now” – the response-seeking part, visibly isolated in white letters against a black background, performs another perlocutionary act, i.e., that of persuading the reader, whereas the temporal deixis **now** in the appeal is urgency stressing.

As evident, the text employs advertising-specific linguistic licenses that are techniques of poetic expression (Vasiloaia, 2018), thus drawing attention to language and sustaining this interest. One such trope, alliteration, defined as the repetition of the same consonant sound or letter in successive words, confers rhythm and euphony to the whole construct: *p-* in the product name (**Primer Plus Mattifier**), *r-* in the headline (**Be r-* Rain Ready**), and *m-* in the sub-title (**Make it matte**).

The ad’s persuasive intent is also evident at the semiotic level through salience. Salience has been defined as the degree to which an element draws attention to itself due to its size, its place in the foreground or its overlap with other elements, its colour, values, sharpness or definition (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Product salience of this ad is attained through image priming in the ad architecture and verbally as repetition of the company name ad-initially and ad-finally, on the product image. What is thus inferred is that the product is important and that we are invited to remember it.

2. **A Little Makeup Can’t Hurt**

The second analysed cosmetic ad for the “NEW long-wear even finish compact foundation” is more elaborated and advanced on the persuasion continuum scale than the previous. It employs pragmalinguistic devices at practically all ad functions while maintaining a similar balanced distribution of textual realisation on the left and a graphically salient photograph of Katie Holmes, who endorses the product, on the right (https://www.eonline.com/news/389492/katie-holmes-first-bobbi-brown-ad-revealed-see-the-pretty-pic).

_Drawing attention to itself._ Different pragma-linguistic devices are employed with each ad constituent in order to draw the reader’s attention:

- **The headline**: “Confidence is everything, But a Little Makeup Can’t Hurt” is based on litotes, a rare device in advertising as it promotes reversal of the readers’ expectations to be convinced by more substantial cues. Litotes is a form of understatement and is always deliberate with the intention of emphasis (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Litotes). The quantifier “a little” in the adversative clause is in keeping with the brand’s philosophy of natural, light makeup and beauty as truth and confidence (“Confidence is everything”), a reading that is also anchored by the natural, confident-looking actress that endorses the product.

- **The subtitle**: introduces the product name through a long, highly descriptive, heavily-premodified noun group. Unlike in discursive language, advertising nominal groups are grammatically independent constituents of disjunctive grammar (Leech, 1966:93). The capitalised “NEW”, a favourite adjective legitimised by the product novelty in commercial advertising, seems to have grown announcement-like block language functionalities, due to the ellipsis of the definite article specific to discursive grammar (the new foundation), thus rendering it ambiguous between: [It’s] _new!_ and [Here’s the] _new …_

_Sustaining interest._ The copy presents the reasons to buy the cosmetic product in terms of benefits (“perfectly matched”, “flawless wear”, “not makeup-y”) rather than product features (number of shades) since the stress is on “You” the product beneficiary: “Perfectly matched to your skin tone and texture”.
Being remembered. At the linguistic level, this function is conveyed by a mix of both discursive and disjunctive grammar. The three asyndetically coordinated sentences in the copy are informative and all refer back cohesively to the product name as the subject, informing the reader about product qualities: “Delivers smooth even skin and 12 hours of flawless wear. Never looks fake or makeup-y. All you see is your skin – at its best”. The exact numeric reference to the hours is a strong factual claim, seldom encountered in advertising.

On the other hand, disjunctive grammar is more conspicuously employed in the form of sentence fragments, used as independent sentences: “Available in NEW compact and original liquid. In 20 shades”. Sentence fragments sound brisk and rhythmical and bring the copy closer to oral rather than written communication, making information easier to process.

In keeping with advertising-specific disjunctive grammar are also the superlatives (“flawless”, and “at its best”) and the linguistic creativity – coinage of a new word (“makeup-y”), suggesting that the cosmetic product possesses distinctive qualities, as well as novelty.

Prompting the right kind of action. This function is placed in the copy-final position: “Visit Bobbi Brown’s counter for a makeup lesson and personalized foundation sample – our treat”. The imperative force in the verb “visit” is modulated, however, by the company’s bonus, making it an honest invitation. In the end, the signature is a celebrity endorsement: “Katie Holmes - Bobbi’s makeup makes you feel pretty and confident”.

Person deixis. All the ad elements, the copy, logo and endline (signature) play with person deixis. According to Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deixis), deixis is the set of linguistic elements used by the speaker to refer to the context of the situation, to orient the hearer as to the time and the place of the discourse (“here” and “now”) and to set up of a direct communication link between the speaker and the hearer. In advertising, person deixis is employed in order to make direct appeals to consumers (Kurzon 1985: 187; Nurmaharani, 2021). On the same line, Laura Hidalgo Downing (2000) proposes that person deixis plays an essential role in creating a persuasive advertising message and it contributes to adopting a familiar, conversational tone. It creates a unified spatiotemporal situation common to both the viewer/reader – YOU and the sender – WE.

The endline 1st person plural deixis with exophoric reference to the company/the copywriters, in the form of a possessive adjective (our treat) and inclusive of I, with endophoric reference to the endorser, Bobby Brown (text internal). This is opposed to 2nd person YOU with exophoric reference (cataphoric, text-external): you the reader and potential user – (“all you see”, “your skin”, “makes you feel”). Such frequent use of 2nd person deixis is intended to narrow down the gap between the advertiser and the reader. Although ambiguous for the plural, You, as singular, directly addresses each woman who can, thus, feel unique.

Visual semiotics. As with the previous ad, there is a similar complementarity in this ad construction in terms of distribution against the vertical axis, which allows a continuous movement from left (already Given, text) to right (New, image). In linguistic and semiotic interpretation, the left is the side of the ‘already given’, something the reader is assumed to know already, a point of departure for the new message, whereas the elements placed on the right are New. Therefore, it is on the right where the key information or what the reader must pay particular attention to, must be found: the fresh-faced, flawless and natural style. This New information distribution is made evident through image salience, a covert invitation to identify with the actress, but at the same time through the overt invitation in her embedded endorsement: “Bobbi’s makeup makes you feel confident. Me, you can do anything” (Katie Holmes). By assuming that this information is construed as already known, familiar and agreed-upon and also within the context of the litote in the headline, the directive speech act (Visit) can be assigned a force of invitation rather than command.

The visual ‘lexis’ or ‘grammar’ refers to the meanings inferred from the way image elements are used (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006:18). The image implicitly suggests (covert
communication) rather than directly transmits as is the case of the text. The smiling woman in a close shot, at an eye-level angle suggests equality and personal interaction (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 149). Halliday (1978) classifies the participant’s gaze into offer (i.e.: looking away) and demand (i.e.: looking at the viewer). The demand gaze is a visual configuration whose function is to create a visual form of address. The character looking at the viewer demands something from the viewer, more precisely that they enter into some kind of imaginary relationship with the model in the image: to form a pseudo-social bond and involvement of a particular kind, which enhances the impact of her look. Likewise, the demand look acknowledges the viewers explicitly, addressing them with a visual ‘you’ in parallel to the text (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006:117).

In the analysis of the visual modality of expression, Kress also mentions ‘colour coordination’ (221). Soft colours with golden-brown hues as part of the visual persuasion contribute to conceiving the pleasure the product will afford, as fantasy or promise, as ‘what might be’, rather than as reality (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006, 202) 3.

3. More play. Your way

The third analysed ad is a 2022 BBC dynamic, vibrant online commercial for the NEW 24-hour Long-Wear Cream Shadow Stick (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13lg-QY4qPU), which adds to the communication process the predominantly oral dimension of multimodal discourses inherent in online advertising.

The attention-getting function is achieved through the onset scene of the storyline: ringing the bell at the Bobbi Brown royal brand. Its linguistic realisation is based on the capitalized trigger word “NEW” followed by a descriptive heavily-premodified product name (referring to product duration, texture) with postmodification (referring to product presentation, stick): “NEW 24-hour Long-Wear Cream Shadow Stick”.

The desire stimulating purpose involves the:

- Linguistic level: “More play. Your way. Blends softly. 24-hour wear. 10 new shades. Guesswork”. It exploits the poetic function through the following tropes and disjunctive grammar:
  - Assonance in “More play. Your way” – repetition of a vocalic group, doubled by rhyme and rhythm that attract attention and facilitate memorability (Robu, 2015).
  - Sentence fragments, used for emphasis. Orality and cadence are achieved by isolating strategic pieces of information that refer to product characteristics (“blends softly”), wear/durability (“24-hour wear”), and variety (“10 new shades”). Frequent full stops emphasize the product’s unique selling propositions by creating several foci of information that facilitate information processing and memorability. The precise numeric expression also contributes to reason persuasion through product informativeness and adds to the factual claim strength about durability and variety.
  - The hingeless comparative “More” underlines the conative function meant to get the attention or reaction from the target user. The comparison is finished only in the reader’s mind and is considered vague advertising language since it is ambiguous among several readings: more play than with the previous product, than with the competitor’s products, than with all the cosmetic products (Pop, 2008:107).
  - Metaphor: “guesswork” and “play” define the makeup.
- Semiotic level: the ad persuasion works through the transfer of feminine appeal – i.e., images of modern young women of mixed races. The commercial features models and young celebrities engaged in a stylish, elegant play with rich
eye shadow tones (product-in-use representation) that appeal to women customers
to create similar styles.

The response seeking in the “endline” is achieved linguistically through perlocutions
(directive speech acts): invitations to meet and shop: “Meet NEW 24-hour Long-Wear Cream
Shadow Stick. Shop now”.

Urgency stressing is also present through the employment of the temporal deixis now.

One common denominator for the three analysed ads is disjunctive grammar. A
characteristic of spoken language, it serves the general aim of the copywriter to portray the
message at a glance. Although this language uses no formal cohesive markers, the lexical
cohesion of each text is ensured through repetition (= lexical cohesion), endophoric reference
(adjectives in nouns) and lavish deployment of tropes (alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and
rhythm).

Conclusion

"In order to be irreplaceable, one must always be different," said Coco Chanel. Bobbi
Brown cosmetics advertising has spearheaded a new approach to feminine beauty that values
genuineness, individual beauty, and confidence. At the linguistic level, this is evident through
a continuum of reason persuasion but also specific ingenious forms that are common to the
art/genre of advertising in general.

The most common pragma-linguistic devices identified in this case study, which
underline the predominantly conative function of advertising communication are:

- at the phonological level: alliteration, assonance, rhythm and rhyme, repetition - mnemonic devices;
- at the orthographic level: capitalization (NEW);
- at the lexical level: trigger words (meet, visit), highly modified
descriptive product names, catchphrases, and linguistic creativity (makeup-y);
- at the grammatical level: breaking the norms of discursive
communication - structural simplicity, disjunctive grammar, imperatives, repetitive
constructions, superlatives (perfect mattifier), hingeless comparatives (more play);
- at the semantic level: litotes, metaphors (guesswork, play) and vague
language (more);
- at the pragmatic level: direct appeal to the target users through exophoric
reference (you), speech acts of persuasion (invitations), sentence fragments that convey
a conversational quality, save space, create rhythm, and emphasize the product features
or benefits;
- At the level of visual semiotics: images that evoke freshness, elegant
covert appeal and personal involvement through the immediacy of the demand gaze;
colours suggestive of simplicity enhance the message: a) timeless white background
(purity, cleanliness) and b) shades of golden-brown (reliability, earthiness).

To conclude, BBC, a global prestige beauty brand that empowers women to embrace
and enhance their beauty, has an equally unique advertising approach. As this analysis
demonstrates, cosmetic advertising texts are highly elaborated, based on a specific architecture
whose originality is the salience of any persuasive discourse (Popescu, 2014). It is a careful
melange of direct, reason persuasion (factual claims) and emotional persuasion in a continuum,
conveyed through proximity with the ad consumers, linguistic simplicity, and artistic
expression.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


More play, your way – commercial retrieved February 2023 from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13lg-QY4qPU.


