

## An Examination of Language Use in Contemporary Nigerian Advertisement Copy Messages

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**Abstract:** Various forms of language are often used by advertisers of goods and services to captivate the attention of the target audience or prospective customers, to arouse their interest, to make them desire the advertised goods and services and ultimately to make them demand for them. This paper presents the outcome of a study and analysis of 80 randomly selected contemporary Nigerian advertisements. The Study/analysis shows that seven out of the eighty adverts i.e., 9% use personification. Eleven out of eighty i.e., 14% use alliteration. Thirteen out of eighty i.e., 16% use ambiguous language. Eight out of Eighty i.e., 10% use indigenous language. Six out of eight i.e., 8% use Nigerian Pidgin. Four out of eighty i.e., 5% use faulty language. Seven out of eighty i.e., 9% use pun. One advert each i.e., 1% each use simile, climax and sexist language. The remaining twenty i.e., 25% use simple or plain language.

**Key words:** Language use in Nigerian advertisement messages

### INTRODUCTION

The word advertising or advertisement has attracted myriad of closely related definitions or interpretations by experts in the fields of advertising and others like Business Management, Marketing and Communication. An advertisement according to the first edition of the Code of Advertising Practice of 1992 by the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) is a communication in the media paid for by an identified sponsor and directed at a target audience with the aim of imparting information about a product, service, idea or opinion. Advertising, according to Kotler and Armstrong (1997) refers to any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by identified sponsors. William also defines advertising as any paid non-personal communication from an identified sponsor using the mass media to persuade or influence an audience. Belch and Belch (1998) however, state that such advertisement can be in form of television or radio commercials, newspaper or magazine advertisements, handbills, posters or billboard advertisements which are a source of entertainment, fascination, motivation, fantasy and information.

The word copy is also susceptible to various definitions or interpretations even in the field of communication. However, Adeleye (2003) defines a copy from the viewpoint of advertising as the verbal

(spoken or written) elements of an advertisement message i.e., the headline, the name and address of the advertiser as well as the text itself. To Jefkins (1976), a copy means the wording of any advertisement, whatever the medium hence, to him copy writing is a primary communication skill that can be adapted to any medium that uses words. He further describes creative copy writing which has to do with thinking up the theme as well as writing the words as the heart of advertising. A good advert message according to Adcock *et al.* (1998) must be read, understood, believed, remembered and acted upon to be effective. In a similar vein, Appleby (1981) points out that copy messages must achieve the ultimate goal of arousing the interest of the audience and encouraging them to take steps to demand for the advertised goods or services.

The study aims to examine the language use in contemporary Nigerian advertisement copy messages hence, the data for the study are eighty randomly selected contemporary national adverts drawn from posters, handbills, newspapers, magazines and billboard advertisements. Identified features in the course of linguistic examination of the randomly selected advertisement copy messages are: Personification, alliteration, ambiguity, faulty language, simile climax, sexist language, use of Nigerian pidgin and indigenous languages. These features as found in selected advertisements are presented below:

### **Personification in nigerian advert copy messages:**

Personification happens to be one of the figures of speech commonly used in contemporary Nigerian advertisements. Adewusi and Babatunde (1993) describe personification as a figure of speech that makes inanimate objects, ideas or things of abstract qualities to behave as though they are human beings i.e., that gives characteristics of actions, feelings, thoughts, etc. to lifeless objects. Personification to Onibonjo is a figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are represented as persons, or attributing human characteristics or qualities to non-human organism, inanimate character or abstract idea. Oseni (1998) also described personification as giving of life personality and understanding to things that are inanimate and abstract ideas.

Personification therefore, is a linguistic creative technique often used to establish a kind of relationship between the brand or products, services, ideas or organizations being advertised and prospective customers who constitute the intended advert audience. Some of the contemporary Nigerian advertisements identified from the eighty randomly selected and examined which make use of personification are those of Guinness, Vitafoam, Maltina, Maldox, KIA Motors, Gala, Global Bank and Glade Air Freshener with the following copy messages/headlines:

- Guinness brings out the action in you (1)
- Vitafoam1 takes care of you from the cradle (2)
- Maltina cares for you/cares in a special way (3)
- Maldox hits malaria hard (4)
- Kia-The car that cares (5)
- Gala, the filling endures (6)
- Global Bank, your caring bank with global connections (7)

### **Alliteration in nigerian advert copy messages:**

Alliteration is another literary or figurative technique commonly used in contemporary Nigerian advertisements. The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language edited by Cayne and Lechner (1992) describes the word alliteration as the repetition of the same initial alphabetical letters, usually consonant letters in a group of words either in speech i.e., while speaking/talking or in/while writing. To Adedeji (2002) alliteration simply refers to the occurrence of initial consonant phonemes in two or more words in a statement. This is closely related to the first interpretation of the word alliteration. Nwosu (1996) however, gives a very short and general definition of the word alliteration simply as repetition of sounds for effect.

Jefkins (1976) in discussing the alliterative copy writing device broadens the interpretation of the word alliteration by defining it as the repetition of sounds whether letters of alphabets, prefixes, suffixes or syllables or initial letters. To him, alliteration is just a sophisticated literary repetition which covers even the final repetition of consonants sounds otherwise called consonance. He, however, points out the fact that an alliterative copy writing device helps readability because it prods readers and makes a copy fun to read. It also aids memorability because the rhythmic pattern of the repeated sound makes it easy to memorise and remember advert copy messages that use the alliterative device. Some of the adverts randomly selected and examined that use the alliterative device are those of Vedan, Bachus, Ovaltine, Dangote Portland Cement, Vitafoam2, Equity Bank, Novena, Clarks and Start-right, Pampers, Toshiba DVD player and Lux as shown below:

- Vedan, Cooking can be much more fun (8)
- Bachus, today's taste, today's toast (9)
- Ovaltine, Malt makes the difference (10)
- Dangote Portland cement, for solid structure (11)
- Vitafoam2, for foam at its finest (12)
- Equity Bank, strength in service (13)
- Novena, the first Italian furniture factory in Nigeria (14)
- Clark and Start-right, 30% slash on school sandals and shoes (15)
- Novena ... for drier, healthier and happier babies (16)
- Toshiba DVD player.. simple, stylish, sophisticated (17)
- Lux... for smooth, soft and naturally health skin (18)

### **Ambiguity in nigerian advert copy messages:**

Ambiguity is a linguistic term or concept that has attracted various but closely related definitions or semantic interpretations. Copi (1978) defines ambiguity as a word or an expression which has two distinct meanings in which the context of its use does not make clear which meaning is intended. Trask defines ambiguity as the phenomenon in which a single string of words receives two or more sharply distinct meanings in such a way that the ambiguous string corresponds to two or more distinct sentences. Ayodele *et al.* (1996) also describes an ambiguous utterance as a statement which lacks clarity, which signals more than one meaning and which may be understood in more than one sense. To Oloruntoba-Oju (1999), however, ambiguity means or refers to a situation in which a unit of communication is capable of more than one interpretation and is therefore capable of impeding receiver's comprehension of the unit.

Various types of ambiguity have been identified as enumerated and discussed by Oluga (2003). Copi (1978)

identifies three types namely, equivocation, amphiboly and ambiguity of accent. Hirst (1982) also identifies three types based on three main levels of linguistic analysis as lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity and phonological ambiguity. In addition to these three, also identifies lexicoc-syntactic ambiguity and global ambiguity. Yusuf (1989) however, recognizes another type called semantic ambiguity.

Various causes of ambiguity have been identified by language experts. Moulton and Robinson (1981) identify the use of ambiguous lexemes as a major cause of ambiguity. Cook (1983), Ayodele *et al.* (1996) identify the use of pronouns with ambiguous reference. Leech (1974) identifies omission or faulty use of vital punctuations and use of non restrictive adjectives. Cook (1983) identifies the use of hanging clausal modifiers as another major cause of ambiguity. Quirk identifies multiple class membership of some verbs and the positional interpretation of modifying adjuncts. However, improper arrangements and multiple pre and post modifying grammatical items have been identified by Oluga (2002) as major causes of ambiguity in human communication.

A number of the selected/examined contemporary Nigerian advertisement messages are ambiguous because they are susceptible to double or multiple semantic interpretations as they convey both intended and unintended meanings. They, therefore, lack semantic precision which is an important principle of advertisement message writing/development. Below are the identified ambiguous advert messages and their possible semantic interpretations:

Pain kil... the great pain reliever (19)

- Reliever of great pain
- Pain reliever that is great

Gala the tasty snack with pure filling (20)

- The filling of gala is pure i.e. without dirt
- The filling is made of beef only and not mixed

Camela, pure vegetable oil (21)

- Vegetable oil that is pure/clean
- Oil that is made of/from pure vegetable

DSTV Super sport... watch your favourite premier league strikers (23)

- Watch your favourite strikers in the premier league
- Watch strikers in your favourite premier league

Solar Energy Battery, Super high power (24)

- The power is super (extremely) high
- The high power of solar is super/excellent

Dispirin, fast solution for everyday ache and pain (25)

- For everyday ache and any form of pain
- For everyday ache and everyday pain

Vim, effective on stubborn stains and germs (26)

- Effective on stubborn stains and germs in general
- Effective on both stubborn stains and stubborn germs

Vitalo, complete family food drink (27)

- A family food drink that is complete
- A food drink for a complete family

Cowbell Chocolate contains 17 vitamins and minerals (28)

- Cowbell contains 17 vitamins and unspecified number of minerals
- Contains 17 vitamins and 17 minerals cont
- Contains vitamins and minerals totaling 17 altogether.

Peak, with 28 vitamins and minerals (29)

- With 28 vitamins and unspecified number of minerals
- With 28 vitamins and 28 minerals
- With 28 vitamins and minerals totaling 28 altogether

Heatol Chinese Balm, gives fast relief to suffers of muscular ache and pains. (30)

- Sufferers of muscular aches and sufferers of pains in general
- Sufferers of muscular aches and other pains
- Sufferers of both muscular aches and pains

OK Plast, original quality plastic (31)

- Plastic with original (good/genuine) quality
- Quality plastic that is original1 (producer's idea)
- Quality plastic that is original2 (unique/different from others)
- Plastic with the same quality as the original (initial one)

Turkey, pure vegetable cooking oil (32)

- A pure oil made for vegetable cooking
- Oil made for cooking pure vegetable
- Cooking oil made of/from pure vegetable
- A vegetable cooking oil that is pure.

**Indigenous language in nigerian advert copy messages:**  
Nigeria is a linguistically heterogeneous country with about 400 indigenous languages. Three of these languages namely, Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa are regarded as major indigenous languages while others like Efik, Tiv, Fulfufe, Igbala, etc are regarded as minor or minority indigenous languages. But English, since its adoption as

Nigerian's official language of education, legislation, media, etc has been enjoying lot of prestige as a language over and above other Nigerian languages Muhammed (1995). It is against this background that Kachru (1995) opines that "English in Nigeria is no more a guest in the linguistic ecology of the country but has become an integral part of the linguistic family.

For a long period, English, because of its official status as the major language of the press/mass media dominated Nigerian advertisement as most adverts especially poster, handbill, billboard, newspaper or magazine adverts were mainly in English. This presupposed the marginalisation of a reasonable number of prospective customers of such advertised goods/products, services or ideas and reduction in the coverage and efficiency/efficacy of the communicated advert messages (Oluga, 2003). However, a wind of change is blowing in the field of advertisement in Nigeria which is evident in the preponderance of contemporary adverts with their copy messages communicated in indigenous Nigerian languages especially the major ones. Some of such advertisements, code mix English with the major indigenous languages while some code switch from English to indigenous languages. Code mixing according to Oluga (2001) means the mixing of code i.e., words of different languages within an utterance or a sentence while code switching means a total shift from a language to another within the same context or discourse. Some of the selected/examined advertisements which make use of indigenous languages are:

- Globacom1 ... Kini soo, now Ibadan can glo with pride (33)  
 Globacom2 ... Eko akete, now Lagos can glo with pride (34)  
 Omo Detergent ... Ma nwo gbogbo kolofin idoti (35)  
 National Bank ... Pelu banki temi ojo ola temi ti dara (36)  
 Close up ... Fun eemi to fanimora, lo Close up (37)  
 Odu'atel ... Ba mi soro joo, Your sure link (38)  
 Jinchang Motorcycle ... Kabiyesi ooo, Comfort on wheel (39)  
 Prudent Bank ... E kaa bo (40)

**Nigerian pidgin in contemporary nigerian advert copy messages:** It is important to point out from the world go, that advocates of the Nigerian pidgin as a common means of communication in Nigeria prefer the term Nigerian pidgin to pidgin English. They believe pidgin has been Nigerianised by the influx of very many lexemes of the various Nigerian languages, hence, in addition to its basic

English vocabulary and syntax, it is also Nigerian to a great extent. So, just as English develops in Nigeria, pidgin also develops and Nigerian pidgin in the field of advertisement. This is an innovative linguistic technique just as the use of indigenous languages in communicating advert message. It is advantageous in that while the use of indigenous language has geographical limitation, the use of Nigerian pidgin does not because of its national coverage. It enables advertisers to reach as many people as possible at once. It is against this background that the products of many business firms, services of some organizations and even ideas or programmes of the government are usually advertised using the Nigerian pidgin. Some of the selected/examined advert copy messages that use the Nigerian pidgin or that interlard with the English language are:

- Lipton Home Cup Tea ... New home cup tea, na the only one for us (41)  
 Raid insecticide2 ... Raid power e no get photocopy (42)  
 AIDS (by Femi Kuti) ... E no de show for face, use condom (43)  
 MVS-365 ... Body no be wood. Pay attention to your health (44)  
 Privatization Share Scheme Practice Loan (PSPLS) ... PSPLS na my own loan (45)  
 Elegance Ankara ... Wear elegance, everybody go bow (46)

**Faulty language use in contemporary nigerian adverts:** Faulty language as used here simply refers to incorrect or imperfect use of the language of communication. This may be as a result of over-generalization of known or established rules of a given language. It may be due to tautology or lexical redundancy. It may be due to wrong collocation. It may be due to the violation of any other grammatical rule of the language of communication. To Caynes and Lechner (1992) tautology refers to useless repetition of an identical meaning in different terms while redundancy means the state or quality of being unnecessarily repetitive. Collocation refers to a combination of words that often or usually go together in a given language. The following advert copy messages out of those selected/examined, are those with faulty language usage:

- Raid Insecticide2 ... Kills insects dead (47)  
 Gulder ..... Extra matured (48)  
 Gordon Spark ..... Spark up the connection/relationship (49)  
 Omo ..... Super stain removal (50)

Advert message (47) is faulty because of the redundant use of the word dead. The word kill already implies death because it means to make somebody or something die. We can only have He was shot dead because somebody shot may not die. We can also have Raid kills insects fast. However, the advertiser may claim the use of dead is international. Advert message (48) is faulty because there is nothing like matured in Standard English. What we have is mature' just like secure. Hence, the advert message should be Gulder ... Extra mature just as one can say I feel more secure here and not I feel more secured here. Advert message (49) is faulty because spark up as used in that context is a wrong collocational combination. Rather, what should be there is spark off which means to cause something to start or develop, hence, the message should be spark off the connection/relationship. Advert message (50) is faulty because of removal, the head of the post modifying appositive complex noun phrase which is abstract while Omo being modified is concrete. So, the advert message should be Omo ... super stain remover or Omo for super stain removal.

**Pun in contemporary nigerian advert messages:** The word pun according to Onibonjo refers to a play on words suggesting two or more meanings simultaneously in the word or phrase, or a word having the same sound or perhaps the same spelling as another, but with different meaning and origin. Caynes and Lechner (1992) describe pun as a witticism involving the playful use of a word in different senses or of words which differ in meaning but sound alike. Adedeji (2002) describes pun, which he otherwise calls paronomasia, as a numerous use of different words which sound the same or of two meanings of the same word. Pun in the field of advertising has to do with word play which can be a play on the spelling, meaning or sound/pronunciation of such a word. Some of the selected/examined advert messages which play on words are:

- |  |      |
|--|------|
| BIC ... Your write choice                          | (51) |
| Tom Tom ... What a sweet relief                    | (52) |
| Milksi, ..... Creami! Tasti                        | (53) |
| Bournvita ... Your fortified chocolatey food drink | (54) |
| Equatorial Trust Bank ... you can bank on us       | (55) |
| Legend ... It's your life. Xpress it now           | (56) |
| lobacom2 .... Glo with pride                       | (57) |

In advert message (51) the word write a verb, has been used instead of right, an adjective, just because they are homophones pronounced alike/rait/ and also because the advertised product is used to write. Advert copy

message (52) has the word sweet a noun meaning a kind of food licked which is usually sugary or an adjective referring to sense of being sugary or being pleasant. Hence, sweet relief can mean a relief that comes by taking a sweet or a pleasant relief. Advert message (53) has the adjective creamy and tasty spelt as creami and tasti without semantic confusion because they sound alike. Advert message (54) has a non-existing adjective chocolatey derived by adding y to chocolate, the nominal adjective or noun adjunct that should have been there. Advert message (55) has the word bank which refers to what Equatorial Trust Bank, being advertised, is and also means to rely or depend (on). In advert message (56) the word express is shortened to or spelt Xpress just because the syllable ex and the alphabet x/eks/sound alike. Also, in advert message (57), the word glow is also reduced to or spelt as glo because they sound alike/gloù/and because the name of the organization also start with glo.

**Simile, climax and sexist language in nigerian adverts:**

This word simile according to Adewusi and Babatunde (1993) is an overt or direct comparison drawn via the use of either as or like between two things that are naturally different from each other but are identical in terms of the qualities they have. Climax, according to Nwosu (1996) is a figurative expression which consists in gradual ascent from a lower to a higher statement by successive steps or in which ideas are presented in ascending order of magnitude or importance. Sexist language simply refers to gender-biased language, hence, Owonibi (1998) describes sexism as portrayal of one sex or gender as naturally superior to another and sexist language as that which portrays a level of bias or prejudice for a particular sex or gender which they appear to be the only referent. This can occur at the lexical, morphological or syntactic level of language analysis. The following are the examples of simile, climax and sexist language out of the selected/examined advert copy messages.

- |   |      |
|---|------|
| Union battery ... As tough as rhino (simile)                    | (58) |
| Delta soap .... Be clean, Be protected, be happy (climax)       | (59) |
| Squadron .... The real drink for the real men (sexist language) | (60) |

**Other selected/examined advert copy messages:** Apart from the already discussed sixty advert copy messages with the use of personification, alliteration, ambiguous language, indigenous language, pun, simile, climax and sexist language, there are others which use simple or plain language. The wording of these other advert messages

comply with some fundamentals of advert message development identified by experts like simplicity, precision, conciseness, etc. The copy messages of the said adverts are enumerated below:

Cowbell ... Our milk	(61)
Aspen ... simply the best	(62)
MTN ... The best connection	(63)
Lulu ... sparkling fruit drink	(64)
Fidson Drugs ... We value life	(65)
Coca-cola ... Life tastes good	(66)
Guilder2 ... the ultimate in beer	(67)
Ragolis ... the goodness of nature	(68)
Binatone ... Word class products	(69)
Nulec ... Adjudged the best	(70)
33 Export ... the clear leader	(71)
DHL ... Every second counts	(72)
Malta Guinness..Feel good everyday	(73)
Prudent Bank ... symbol of relationship	(74)
Premier paint ... exactly what you need	(75)
Petals ... What beauty is all about	(76)
Econet ... Inspired to change your world	(77)
Ladycare ... Makes you feel like a real woman	(78)
Dangote Flour ... the pride of every baker	(79)
Star ... for the celebration of life	(80)

### CONCLUSION

It is crystal clear that various forms of language(s) are used in contemporary Nigeria advert messages which is evident in the eighty randomly selected/examined and analysed advert copy messages. However, while some are to be encouraged, some are to be discouraged. Those that should be encouraged because they constitute linguistic aesthetic or beauty of language are personification (1) to (7), alliteration (8) to (18) indigenous language (33) to (40) Nigerian pidgin (41) to (46), simile (58) and climax (59). Faulty language use as in (47) to (50) should be discouraged because it does not speak well of the advertisers and the advertised products or services. Ambiguity in advertisements, because of susceptibility of multiple interpretations which makes adverts to fall short of the fundamental advert principle of semantic clarity or precision, should not be encouraged especially those that communicate unintended negative messages. But it could be argued that those that communicate unintended positive messages constitute virtue of language use. Pun should be used with caution especially those that play on spellings of words as in (51) and (54) which can be taken for faulty language usage. Other examples of Pun like (53), (56) and (57) can confuse those learning the language as they may take some pun spellings for granted. Apart from these, pun, especially when

understood as used, constitute aesthetic of language. However, sexist language as in (60) should be discouraged to avoid such a gender bias which feminists usually frown at, but it should be noted that woman as used in (78) is not an example of sexist language usage because the advertised product is actually meant for women and women only.

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