

The Violation of Cooperative Principle in Advertisements

Bing Xu

Foreign Languages Department
Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College
Zhangzhou, China

Abstract—With a review of cooperative principle (CP) in conversation, this paper attempts to testify the violation of CP in business commercials by examining a case of a specific TV advertisement. It is revealed that the purposeful violation of CP in advertisements is art of language and helps to attain the goal of the advertisers.

Keywords—*cooperative principle; advertisement; violation*

I. INTRODUCTION

With the business prosperity today, more and more advertisements, whether in the written form or visual/audio form, have bombarded every aspect of our life. The purpose of advertisements is to create favorable awareness for a product or services that simulates or initiates a positive intended action to generate sales. It is persuasive and informative. Therefore, nearly all advertisement creators spare no effort in making their advertisements more impressive and unforgettable. Various means are used by advertisement creators, such as playing with words, story series and wonderful music, etc. To achieve a unique effect, some advertisements even violate the cooperative principle in pragmatics. This paper tries to illustrate the violation of cooperative principle by analyzing a TV advertisement in terms of the maxim of quality, quantity, relevance and manner, to state the significance of violation of CP in advertisements. There are four parts in this paper, Part One is introduction, which offers the context of the problem and states the purpose of this paper. Part Two reviews the previous studies on cooperative principle. Part Three explores the violation of cooperative principle in a case of a specific TV advertisement for a phone company. Part Four is the conclusion of the study.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The linguistic philosopher Paul Grice introduced the term “cooperative principle” in his pragmatic theory. Grice advised speakers to “make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.” (Grice, 1975, p41). He also noted that in ordinary conversation both parties to the interaction share a principle which serves to promote understanding and comprehension. Grice identifies four basic maxims of conversation underlining the efficient co-operative use of language, which

is known as co-operative principle (Levinson, 2001, p101). The principles are expressed as follows:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Levinson, 2001, p101).

The principle breaks down into particular maxims that summarize particular assumptions about conversation. Grice proposes four maxims as follows:

A. The Maxim of Quality

For example, “Does your farm contain 400 acres?” This sentence simply extends the scope of quality by viewing truth as a special sub-case of sincerity applied to assertions; when one asks a question, one may standardly be taken to be asking sincerely and hence to be indeed lacking and requiring the requested information.

Actually, Grice suggests that the observance of the Quality maxims is a matter of greater urgency than is the observance of others. He said: “[A] man who has expressed himself with undue prolixity would, in general, be open to milder comment than would a man who has said something he believes to be false. Indeed, it might be felt that the importance of at least the first maxim of Quality is such that it should not be included in a scheme of the kind I am constructing; other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of Quality is satisfied.” (Jiang, 2000, pp39-40) this consideration perhaps explains why the Quality is made in the first category in the presentations.

B. The Maxim of Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange);
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

For example:

A: How did Harry fare in court the other day?

B: Oh, he got a fine.

If it later transpires that Harry got a life sentence too, then B (if he knew this all along) would certainly be guilty of

misleading A, for he has failed to provide all the information that might reasonably be required in the situation.

C. The Maxim of Relevance

- Make your contributions relevant.

For example:

A: Can you tell me the time?

B: Well, the milkman has come.

It is only on the basis of assuming the relevance of B's response that it can be understood as providing a partial answer to A's question. The inference seems to work roughly like this: assume B's utterance is relevant; if it's relevant then given that A asked a question, B should be providing an answer; the only way one can reconcile the assumption that B is co-cooperatively answering A's question with the content of B's utterance is to assume that B is not in a position to provide the full information, but thinks that the milkman's coming might provide the A with the means of deriving a partial answer. Hence A may infer that B intends to convey that the time is at least after whenever the milkman normally calls. It is clear that such inferences are fundamental to our sense of coherence in discourse: if the implicatures were not constructed on the basis of the assumption of relevance, many adjacent utterances in conversation would appear quite unconnected.

D. The Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous, and specifically:

- Avoid obscurity of expression;
- Avoid ambiguity;
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); and
- Be orderly (Levinson, 2001, pp101-102)

For example, "Open the door". This sentence is directly related to doing something. This maxim, different from others, relates not to what is said but to how something is to be said.

Grice does not think this list exhausts all the possible maxims. "There are, of course, all sorts of other maxims. That may also generate nonconventional implicatures." In a word, Grice proposed that all speakers, regardless of their cultural background adhere to a basic principle governing conversation, which he termed the above the cooperative principle. That is assumed in a conversation the participants will cooperate with each other when making their contribution.

Grice uses his principles and maxims to make the important claim that the speaker tries to meet certain standards communication, and the hearer uses these standards in arriving at what the speaker intends to communicate. So people have to speak sincerely, relevantly, clearly and to provide sufficient information. But he doesn't claim that these maxims cover all the conversational assumptions, which may need the other principles, for

example, polite behavior. The maxims also may produce inferences that go beyond the literal content of the utterances.

III. THE VIOLATION OF COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE IN A CASE OF TV COMMERCIAL

A. The Violation of the Maxim of Quality

Advertising, flouted the maxims of Quality, occurs when a speaker blatantly offers something untrue or something she lacks adequate evidence. According to Grice (1981) there are several rhetoric devices which typically give rise to the flouting of the first sub-maxim of quality, including irony, metaphor, personification, hyperbole and pun. For example, in this TV commercial for phone company:

Anthony: *I mean I failed. Math, English, Physics, Geography, German, Woodwork, Art — I failed.*

Grandma: *You didn't pass anything?*

Anthony: *Pottery.*

Grandma: *... Anything else?*

Anthony: *And Sociology.*

...

Grandma: *... you're a scientist.*

Actually, Anthony didn't fail everything in exams, with the exception of Pottery and Sociology. But he still said that he failed, which is apparently not true. According to Grice, saying what you believe to be false or for which you lack adequate evidence is flouting the maxims of quality. Moreover, a hyperbole is used in Grandma's utterance: "... you're a scientist". All audiences know that the boy is not a scientist at that moment, but grandma said that as encouragement.

B. The Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

According to Grice (1981), when a speaker purposefully gives more or less information than the situation requires, flouting of the maxims of quantity occurs. In advertising, if the advertiser leaves out some information, he will give audience enough room for thinking or finally reveal the answer. For example:

Grandma: *You didn't pass anything?*

Anthony: *Pottery.*

Grandma: *..... Anything else?*

Anthony: *And Sociology.*

In this commercial, Anthony answered the two subjects which he didn't fail not in an outspoken way, but in two turns. Here he purposefully didn't offer sufficient information. Another example is that this ad didn't tell which product it was about until the end when a narrator supplemented "Product Telecom", which the audience understands.

C. The Violation of the Maxim of Relevance

Based on the Grice's CP, the demand for relevance simply means that the advertiser should only include information in his message that is relevant. To attract people's attention and interests and at the same time make them not feel bored is becoming very difficult. Successful ads have to adopt something original and creative, which often seems to be irrelevant to the product at the very beginning. For instance:

Narrator: Whether it's well done or hard luck, a phone call says a lot.

Grandma: — and the most brilliant boys, it's the teachers that were wrong. You know, they can't mark. A lot of them can't see.

[Blue screen with Product Telecom logo superimposed on it in yellow. Under that: "It's you we answer to"]

Narrator: Product Telecom. It's you we answer to.

This whole advertisement superficially talked about exam results, which seems to stray from the point. But the audiences were attracted in the beginning and waited to find out what it is about. In this way, this advertisement left a deep impression on its audiences.

D. The Violation of the Maxim of Relevance

In advertising, the flouting of the maxim of Manner, especially the sub-maxim "Avoid ambiguity" and "Be brief" is worth more attention. Despite the apparent failure of observing the maxims of manner, the audiences still can cooperate at some deeper level and infer what the goal of the advertisers is. Even though, some advertisements are ambiguous and complex, the audiences' rich imagination and purchasing desire are being evoked. For example:

Grandma: [over phone] An -ology. He gets an -ology and he says he's failed. You get an ology, you're a scientist.

Here, grandma adopted the suffix "-ology", which is selected from the word "sociology." "-ology" means a certain branch of learning or a subject, such as psychology, phonology, biology, aerology, ethnology etc. The "-ology" was repeated for three times, which obviously violate the maxim of being brief. The repetition shows that Anthony has passed a very important, profound and academic subject. Grandma encouraged him and felt very proud. Whenever the advertisers avoid some simple expressions and favor some complex ones, audiences will get their point.

IV. CONCLUSION

As is analyzed of this TV commercial for the phone company, it is found that advertisements are works of art and art of language. Advertisement creators purposefully violate the cooperative principle to attract audiences and extend their time in interpreting the content.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Levinson Stephen, *Pragmatics* Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2001.
- [2] C.Yule., *Pragmatics*. London: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- [3] G. N. Leech, *English in Advertising*. Longman, 1966.
- [4] Guowen Huang, *Theory and Practice of Discourse Analysis: a Study in Advertising Discourse*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, 2001.
- [5] H. P. Grice, *Presupposition and Conversational Implicature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- [6] H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way at Words*. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1989.
- [7] M. Geis, *The Language of Television Advertising*. New York: Academic Press 1982.
- [8] M. Toolan, *The Language of Press Advertising*. London: Pinter, 1988.
- [9] P. Grice, "Logic and conversation". In Cole, P.; Morgan, J. *Syntax and semantics*. 3: *Speech Acts*. New York: Academic Press. pp. 41–58. 1975.
- [10] R. Goldman, *Reading Ads Socially*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- [11] R. Harris, *Information Processing Research in Advertising*. Hillsdale NJ: Edbaum, 1983.
- [12] Wangqi Jiang, *Pragmatics: Theories and Applications*. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2000.
- [13] Yumin Cheng, *Discussions on Gricean Theory of Conversational Implicature*. *Linguistics Abroad*, 1983(1).
- [14] Zhaoxiong He, *A New Introduction to Pragmatics*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Languages Education Press, 2000.
- [15] Ziran He, *Pragmatics*. Changsha: Hunan Educational Press, 1988