

Study on American Culture from the Perspective of American Advertising Language*

Wei Zhou

Foreign Languages Department
Harbin Engineering University
Harbin, China

Abstract—From the perspective of pragmatics and based on the theory of context, this paper analyzes and studies the application of context theory to advertising language and cultural view with the method of case study. The paper explains the context theory first and a simple introduction is made to advertising language. Then, it focuses on the analysis of the application of context theory to advertising language and classified context into linguistic context and non-linguistic context. Through the analysis, the paper seeks to understand the American cultures conveyed by advertising language.

Keywords—context theory; advertising language; American culture

I. INTRODUCTION

Globalization has boosted economic development of the whole world and promoted communication among different cultures at the same time. As the main vehicle of cultural diffusion, media helps people have a better knowledge of what happening in the world. As different media develop, advertising can be seen everywhere in our daily life, whether watching TV at home or driving on the highway. To some degree, advertising changes our life. It not only brings a huge number of advertisements from other countries, but also helps citizens to learn more about different cultures. In regard to advertising, the language of advertising is always necessary. People can see or hear it from newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the Internet. Actually, languages are symbolic systems, which are the most effective and precise. In the world of languages, each word used in communication is a symbol and has its own meanings. Advertising language is generally applied by advertising agencies to present their ideas, products, consumption concepts and fashionable pursuits of the market. Whether it is commercial or non-commercial, advertising renders the world connecting closely. However, commercial and non-commercial advertising has different objectives. For commercial advertising, operators of promotional items and service providers bear the costs of selling goods and services directly or indirectly by means of certain media and forms, while non-commercial advertising aims to evoke attention to focus on fixing some social problems. Commercial and non-

commercial advertising will be probed into according to the context theory in this paper. Many scholars have done many researches on advertising language from different perspectives, such as the perspectives of lexical semantics, syntax, and applied psychology. However, few carry out studies from the perspective of the context theory. In fact, context theory can help understand advertising comprehensively after learning the historical background, social environment and the cultural tradition. The paper will adopt the non-linguistic context to analyze advertising language.

Context theory has been studied by scholars from home and abroad for ages. In foreign countries, Malinowski was the first to put forward the context theory; then J. R. Firth (51) developed the theory, and built the systemic functional school; Halliday (76) established the register theory and Hymes (53-62) presented the SPEAKING formula. Each alphabet means elements of context: S=Setting, P=participants, E=End, A=Act sequence, K=Key, I=Instrumentalities, N=Norms of interaction and interpretation, G=Genre. In China, Wang Dechun (64) divided the context into subject and object; Chen Wangdao (48) used language factors and situational factors to classify the context. He Zhaoxiong (315) classified it into context knowledge and extra linguistic knowledge; following the view of Halliday, Hu Zhuanglin (402-409) proposed the linguistic context, situational context and cultural context, and so on. To sum up, context can be divided into linguistic context and non-linguistic context and this paper is based on this fundamental classification.

The aim of this paper is to use the distinctive linguistic theory in daily life, and get a better understanding of American culture and values.

II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

A. Relationship Between Language and Culture

Language is an important and unique part of culture. As Malinowski pointed out, "The culture as a whole, language is part of it, but it is not a system of tool, but part of a pronunciation of customs and spiritual culture" (7). There are three reasons to explain the uniqueness of language. Firstly, language is an existing product since prehistoric times with human unconscious creation, which is not exactly the same

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as creativity of culture. Secondly, language neither belongs to the subjective world nor the objective world, but ranges between the two. Finally, the uniqueness lies in its interaction with culture — language is the carrier of culture and reversely culture influences the connotation of language.

Language is a mirror to reflect the culture. Language is like a mirror that reflects the social reality. Language is the external expression and culture is the reason behind it. As a part of the culture, language is not just a cultural phenomenon but a meaningful access for people to learn different kinds of culture.

The formation and development of language are based on cultures. Many aspects of language, such as syntactic structure and lexical meaning, all contain many cultural factors. Hence, modern anthropologists consider language as a cultural behavior. Words are the basic elements of language and each word means a concept. The word in one type of language can always reflect the national culture and social environment of this language.

Culture is the source of the symbolic meaning of language vocabulary. Each word has its original meaning and the figurative meaning. The original meaning is the surface meaning of a word, while the figurative meaning is the symbolic meaning of a word. Symbolic meaning of the word always connects with cultures. Due to the different cultural backgrounds of each nation, understandings of the same things will be very different.

B. Context Theory

1) *Definition:* Context is the abbreviation of context of situation. It contains linguistic context and non-linguistic context. The context theory mainly refers to the micro and macro collocation structure and the context of language elements in the language system. There are various forms of links among words, sentences and temporary or stable forms.

2) *Classification:* Context can be classified into linguistic context and non-linguistic context. Linguistic context consists of phonological context, lexical context and grammatical context. Non-linguistic context, the main focus of the paper, is comprised of social context, situational context and cultural context.

a) *Social context:* Social context includes objective factors, such as time, place, occasion, participants, and environmental background. Malinowski made it clear: “A statement spoken in real life is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered. Utterance and situation are bound up inextricably with each other, and the context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of works” (307). Social context has three functions: first, reflecting the social status of participants; second, narrowing or extending the meaning of words; last, reflecting the educational background.

b) *Situational context:* Hatim and Mason give the definition of context of situation, which is also called situational context. It refers to all aspects of the situation in which a language event takes place which is relevant to the

interpretation of that event (204). This context can influence the type of writing and reappear the author’s views and attitude.

c) *Cultural context:* It refers to the social and cultural backgrounds that are related to verbal communication. It can be divided into two aspects. One is cultural custom, referring to the social lifestyle that people inherit from generation to generation, and it is group habit of social mass in language, behavior and psychology, and has normative binds to the members who belong to this social mass. The other is the social norms. It refers to a variety of regulations and restrictions on verbal communication in social activities. Cultural context can conform to the unique customs and conventions, which convey the cultural background information and reflect the geographical, political or historical features.

C. The Features of Advertising Language

1) Lexical features:

a) *The use of trademark:* J ’adore Dior.

Put the trademark name “Dior” in the advertisement will help people remember the trade through the media. Use the shortest words to express the huge messages and promote the products effectively.

b) *The use of monosyllabic verbs:* “Bring, choose, feel, get, help, keep, know, love (like), make, meet, save, taste, try, use” are all examples. (Song Hong 17)

Thinking beyond banking (BNP-Paribas) (Salem 5)

This advertisement uses a monosyllabic verb “thinking” to show that the bank can do what you hope. It makes customers feel the sense of confidence of the bank and trust it. The use of verbs will make the language of advertising terse and lively, so that customers can clearly know it at a glance.

c) *The use of adjectives:* Words like “new, good, better, best, fine, free, fresh, great, delicious, real, full, easy, bright, clean, extra, safe, special, rich” are all examples. (Song Hong 18). For instance:

Washable, safe, easy to use, clear. (glue)

This advertising describes the features and characters of the glue by using four adjectives. It helps customers to understand and trust their products.

2) Syntactic sentences:

- Elliptical sentence

Intelligence everywhere. (Motorola)

Advertisements need to get the best publicity in a limited time, space and charge. Thus, advertisers use many elliptical sentences to make the advertisement simple and clear, while containing a massive amount of information. This advertisement omits the predicate verb “is”, however, this omission helps the advertisement become simpler and clearer and contain a generous amount of information.

- Interrogative sentence

Can we give you a lift? (Boeing) (23)

Where else? (Sears) (16)

Interrogative sentence is the most prevalent form in advertising writing. Usually, facing this kind of advertisements, people cannot but give an answer to the question. Therefore, people will be evoked and bestow more reaction on this advertisement.

- Imperative sentence

Be a pioneer (Greenland) (10)

Just do it (NIKE)

Imperative sentence has the meanings of asking, ordering, and calling upon people and has the function to encourage people, showing the confidence of the company. The aim of advertising is to persuade customers. Thus, this sentence pattern is used a lot in advertising.

3) *Rhetorical features:*

- Personification

She sings like an angle (magazine)

Personification is always used in advertising. It is anthropomorphized and endowed with emotions and feelings, thus helping customers get intimacy. This advertisement uses the rhetorical device of metonymy and personification and catches the attention of readers. It ostensibly uses angle for metaphor of woman's voice, but implicitly shows that readers will enjoy the magazine.

- Metaphor

Metaphor includes simile, metaphor and metonymy.

Fly smooth as silk (Thai Airways Co. Ltd)

The example above is simile. Use silk to imply the smoothness of the fly. Bring people into imagination.

A Safe Place to Keep Your Valuables (Rolex)

This advertisement is metonymy, which vividly compares time to valuables. Time is priceless for everyone, and it compares Rolex to A Safe Place, implying that their watch keeps good time and have a high quality.

- Pun

The character has the features of polysemy and homonymy that makes some words have double meanings. It not only attracts customers, but also makes customers connect it to the mind and deepen their memories.

Ask for MORE (MORE)

Pun is used in this advertisement. Here, MORE is the brand of cigarette, which is welcomed by women. Since the brand has the same pronunciation with the word "more", people will easily enjoy this product and follow the advertisement to buy more MORE cigarettes.

D. *The Interaction Between Advertising Language and Culture*

Language and culture are closely related. Social-culture influences and restricts the language of advertising and its expression. On the contrary, the language reflects social-culture. Thinking model, culture psychology, morality, lifestyle, customs and habits, social systems and religious beliefs of a nation will have effects on the language of advertising.

First, national psychology will affect the writing of the language of advertising. Some of the language of advertising use positive words to attract customers, such as "home" "happiness" "love". And others use some euphemism to replace some sensitive words, like the advertising of female products. Second, life attitude also influences the language of advertising. Advertisers would like to use words that customers want to see. In recent years, Americans pay more attention to healthy food; more and more people would like to buy organic food. So the word "organic" becomes a hot word in food advertising. Last, the language of advertising has changed our lifestyle imperceptibly. One of the functions of advertising is to guide customers' consuming behavior, which is beneficial to promote the material and spiritual civilization. With the development of economics, countries of the world are connected more tightly. We can get any advertising from any country if we want. Different cultures begin to mix.

III. THE STUDY OF AMERICAN ADVERTISING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

A. *Case One: Commercial Advertising*

(1) Just do it (Nike)

Nike is the world's number one manufacturer and marketer of athletic footwear and apparel and its name comes from the goddess of victory. Since 1988, this advertisement has been used for 28 years. Surprisingly, the inspiration of this advertisement comes from what Gary Gilmore, a person who had been executed by shooting in Utah, said at the last moment of his life—"Let's do it"; and it is employed by Dan Wieden to be a slogan of Nike as he believed that "do it" can represent the American sports spirit. "Just do it" is an imperative sentence that enables people to actively follow it and makes the advertisement more unforgettable and it is created to show a feeling of fearlessness and determination. In combination with the cultural context, it could be detected that sport has been a lifestyle for Americans, which is thought to be a direct access to achieve external self-improvement. Moreover, Americans' quality of directness, decisiveness and strong power for action can be perfectly revealed in this advertisement.

(2) Have you got a WKD side? (WKD)

This is an advertisement of Vodka and what makes this advertisement special is the application of interrogative sentence pattern and trademark; also, the trademark "WKD" has the same pronunciation with the word "wicked", being

understood as “Have you got a wicked side?”, which uses the rhetorical features of pun to make the advertisement more attractive and easily remembered. More importantly, what is shown in this advertising video is the gist of this advertising connotation; in the video, some humorous pictures and description of the relationship between alcohol and happiness are vividly displayed. Connected with the situational context, this advertisement aims at bringing the product into contact with a sort of relaxing lifestyle and a notion of living in the moment, which are highly praised by Americans and has already been an essential part in American culture.

(3) Listen to your gut (Yakult)

Similar with example (1) and (2), example (3) is an advertising including imperative sentence pattern and rhetorical features of pun. This sentence has two-fold meaning, respectively “paying attention to the health of your intestine” and “following your own instinct”. If customers do not know it is an advertisement of yogurt, they would think it is a proctology hospital advertisement; however, the deeper implication could be concluded under another consideration. By applying the situational context, this advertisement reflects that Americans are habituated to think independently and hold their own ideas towards surroundings, which entirely differs from following others opinions and drifting the current. Furthermore, “following your heart and making your own decisions” is one of the manifestations of individualism which is the quintessence of American culture.

(4) Red Bull gives you wings (Red Bull)

This is an advertisement of functional drink that supplies energy in a quick way and the product itself is associated with power. The metaphor that the “wings” are deemed as “power” is used to demonstrate the function of Red Bull — increasing strength for those who need on the way to their goals. This advertisement video utilizes a story that a boy turns into a superman to accomplish what he wants with the help of Red Bull, which enables people to believe that their product can bring them energy and braveness. This example is a typical application of situational context, which leads people into the scene that they create and lets them obtain the encouragement and finally the advertising purpose is achieved. Hence, it can be deduced that the superman plays an irreplaceable part in American culture and most of Americans regard him as their hero.

(5) Covering the world like nobody can

(6) World’s news leader

(7) Be the first to know

(8) Go beyond borders (Salem 406-407)

All the four examples above come from CNN. Example (5) is the earliest in 1991, showing a rat race with Fox News and MSNBC. The privative word “nobody” is used to show that CNN has a desire to be a dominant place in American media. Example (6) is produced in 1992, an elliptical sentence with three words, to make a vow to be the American news leader. Both example (5) and (6) are examples of cultural context and both show the confidence to

be the best originates from American education. Children are encouraged to bravely and actively express their ideas in class and strive for their best; the confidence and the concept of competition they learn in school can be helpful in their whole lifespan. As a result, from the above two advertising it can be known that being confident and competitive are classic features of American culture. Example (7) and (8) are both the application of social context but they are set in different social background. 9.11 terrorist attacks is the background of Example (7) which is used from 2001 to 2009. Just three minutes after the attack happened, CNN sent the on-the-spot news reports to the world which was a top emergency that the whole world was dying to know. “Be the first to know” exerts that media has the responsibility to let the public know the truth of the event in American society. Example (8) is used for memorizing the 20th anniversary of the Berlin Wall’s fall. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of cold war, Germany achieved unification. Twenty years later, CNN uses this advertising to remind people of this historical event, stressing the importance of maintaining peace with the whole world’s contribution. The attitude of facing history with courage is embodied in “go beyond borders” and in American culture, taking history as a mirror can avoid history repeating.

(9) Always Coke-Cola

(10) Open happiness (Salem 408)

(11) Taste the Feeling (Coca-Cola)

Coca-Cola, as the best salable carbonated drink, has possessed many favorable advertisements and the above three are the most representative. In the advertising video of example (9), the advertiser aims at bringing Coca-Cola into contact with fun and happiness and tries to form a concept that drinking Coca-Cola can bring people fun. There is further development of this concept in example (10) that Coca-Cola is the source of happiness and opening a Coca-Cola means the release of happiness. In both (9) and (10) the theme of advertising video is about happiness and fun, however, in example (11) the theme is enlarged into more aspects of life. For example, Coca-Cola can be with friendship, secrets, refresh, music and madness, which enables people to believe that Coca-Cola can fit in everywhere. These examples are applications of cultural context. The pursuit of happiness is what Americans mostly want to achieve in their American dream and Coca-Cola just caters to this concept, making the product popular. What’s more, it can be also known from advertising that in American culture people enjoy every moment of life and the treasure that life brings to them, which is considered to be unique and precious.

(12) Like a Girl. (P&G Always)

P&G Always is a famous female product brand in America and its advertising video is shown in a special way—unprepared interview. The video starts with a question that “What does that mean to do something ‘like a girl’?” and two elder girls and two boys are asked to run, fight and throw like a girl, and they all feel shy and uncomfortable. However, when the same question is thrown to the younger

girls, the answer is “run as fast as you can”, which is totally distinctive from the former. Then a question is raised that “When did doing something ‘like a girl’ become an insult?” and the answers begin to change with full consideration of its reason. This video by Always is intended to break the stereotype that female is weaker than male and to shape a new concept that girls can do something as best as boys rather than just like a girl. This is a good example of applying the social context, nowadays in American culture the equality of men and women has been stressed for a long period of time, while because of the influence from the whole society women still hold the view that they are weaker than men and to some extent being a girl is shameful. Therefore, this advertising is eager to change sexual cognition of women and to evoke their confidence. In American culture, human is believed to be born in equal and the sexual equality is also highlighted; from the example above, it could be concluded that reshaping the sexual cognition of women is the priority for women in America.

B. Case Two: Non-commercial Advertising

This part will mainly study the public service advertisement from aspects of education, health, safety, family and community.

(13) Releasing potential (Enhance)

This advertisement aims to support disabled people and to help them find their confidence back. This is an elliptical sentence, powered by two words, encouraging not only the disabled but also ordinary people. On the basis of social context, in American culture all men are created equal and everyone has their own potential. This advertising aims at motivating the disabled’s potential rather than persuading people to help the disabled. In the United States, there is disabled access in public place and disabled persons have the absolute priority and Americans are educated to be kind to the disabled. From the analysis, it could be obtained that in America the disabled are respected and they are encouraged to have self-development, reflecting that America takes the lead in the welfare of the disabled.

(14) I want to be understood

It is a teenage issue that most children drop from school because their family cannot afford the tuition. In the U.S., one in five children struggle with a learning or attention issue. There are 15 million kids aging three to twenty, and many of their issues go undiagnosed. Adults in their lives often have a hard time understanding their issues due to misconceptions and a lack of information and resources. As a result, these children often face both academic and social challenges. The word “want” is a monosyllabic verb, which clearly and deeply shows children’s longing for school. This advertisement tries its best to protect the right of children and help them go back to school. It is not hard to understand this advertising through social context, there are still big gaps between the rich and the poor. In the poverty-stricken area, with the lower education and income, children are forced to go to work instead of going to school, which results in a huge number of children becoming illiteracy. This

advertising uses their longing of knowledge to evoke social concern that each child has right to be educated.

(15) I am a witness

This is a good example for social context. A statistic shows that more than one in four children a year experience bullying in America. Bully is a common phenomenon happening in school, which hurts both the mind and body of children; however, this phenomenon still exists although government and schools try to make regulations to resolve this kind of school violence. One of the reasons for that is their ignorance of the significance of the witnesses who directly encounter the bully. This advertising stresses their importance in solving the problem by using several words and encourages children to oppose against bullying. It can be inferred from the advertising that being courageous to speak out the truth and stand by the side of righteousness is an essential quality of Americans.

IV. CONCLUSION

Context becomes a hot issue in recent years; many scholars have conducted massive researches from different aspects. Based on the studies both in China and abroad, this paper classifies the context theory into linguistic context and non-linguistic context. It colligates the classification of Malinowski and Hu Zhuanglin, and also classifies non-linguistic context into situational context, social context and cultural context, which is theoretical foundation for the analysis of situation, social background and culture connotation in advertising. Besides, through the analysis of examples, It can be seen that American culture in advertising can safely fall into two categories — one is the insistence of American dream and the other the pursuit of democracy and freedom, though commercial advertising and non-commercial advertising are used for distinctive purposes and achieving various effects.

The merit of this paper lies in the use of non-linguistic context when analyzing the advertising language, which offers a new access to explore the new connection between context and advertising, and then the use of distinctive classification of context, which enlarges research scale, paves the way for more comprehensive understanding of the American culture from advertising and provides useful view for the further researches in this field. Meanwhile, it could be a reference for those who are willing to make researches on American culture. The paper could not only expand the application fields of context theory and enrich the theoretical study of advertising language but also give some implications to advertisers and provide a new access to learn more American culture for English learners.

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