

Linguistically-Relevant Diachronic Study of Cultural Values in Early British Advertising Discourse

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on linguistic data retrieved from early advertisements published in British newspapers between 1788 and 1900, the study seeks to map out a set of values and account for linguistic means used to codify them in the diachronic perspective. For the purposes of the study, the corpus of advertisements from random issues of British newspapers Caledonian Mercury, The Times, The Morning Post, published between late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with a span over thirty years was compiled with a total of three hundred texts under scrutiny. The axiological-oriented analysis of the early British advertising discourse shows that advertisers based their appeals on a limited number of values, namely 'economy', 'quality' and 'assortment' that are found throughout the period under investigation. This finding demonstrates that producer/seller-oriented consumption of that period forced potential buyers to rely on the producer/seller for prices quoted, quality and variety of goods with the advertisers intending to build credibility by employing values related to seeking uncertainty avoidance in the Hofstede dimensions of culture and construing a positive image of themselves. The analysis of the values in the diachronic perspective proves to deepen our understanding of persuasion and its evolution in advertising discourse.

KEYWORDS

Advertising discourse, cultural values, diachronic perspective, the Hofstede cultural dimensions, persuasion

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Introduction

General remarks

Advertising discourse promotes goods and services by establishing a positive link between advertised products and customer's attitude drawing on means of persuasion that show synchronic and diachronic variation (Biswas, 2016; Taylor, 2002). It is a common place to claim that advertisements, in order to attract potential customers, employ cultural values to facilitate the decision-making process and induce people to buy products (Diehl, Terlutter & Mueller, 2015). Since culture is considered an important bedrock for advertising (Cheng & Schweigzer, 1996), a vast material is devoted to studies of cultural values in this discourse domain on the synchronic level, but diachronic approach to cultural values as they are embedded in advertisements has so far been a neglected area. Furthermore, a linguistic

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perspective on cultural values manifestation has been rarely adopted as well, and there have been few linguistically-oriented contributions to the field.

Advertising discourse with its long history that is documented in texts available in many electronic archives is a very interesting specimen to be studied in diachronic perspective with relation to dynamics of cultural values employed at different stages of its existence and evolution of language units that codify them. Addressing the data from early period of British advertising, the paper aims to reveal cultural values employed in early advertisements and seeks to shed light on how values and language related to them have evolved.

In the remainder of the article, the author first provides a literature review of cultural values and advertising appeals.

Framework of the study

Cultural values are defined as “stable, slow-evolving, desirable end-states that play an important role in shaping behaviors” (Kahle, 1983) form the backbone of culture. They can be studied in cultural (Zhang & Gelb, 1996), cross-cultural (Dubé et al., 2015); synchronic, and diachronic perspectives (Kheovichai, 2014). This section provides a review of classifications of values, approaches to cultural values and empirical studies that attempted to link those approaches to advertising appeals.

Classifications of values were developed in different fields by philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists. Some taxonomies propose a rather limited number of values (Rockeach, 1973; Kahle, 1983) while others such as the one composed by R.W. Pollay (1983) include an extended list. Compiled through a content analysis of advertising texts written in Western cultural context, the R.W. Pollay (1983) list of values represents a synchronic level of advertising discourse and has been successfully applied complete or in parts to analyze values in certain cultural contexts (Gupta & De, 2007) or for cross-cultural advertising studies. First, it was used in international marketing research as advertisers want to employ strategies relevant to expectations and needs of people of a particular culture (Goldman, 1992; O'Barr, 1994; Zhang & Gelb, 1996). To ascribe significance to certain values, a comparative quantitative analysis was conducted for advertising texts published in similar cultural contexts, for example, the British and American advertising discourse (Caillat & Mueller, 1996; Dahl, 2000) and societies that are commonly considered distinctive in relation to values, such as the US and China (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Lin, 2001), the US and Japan (Mueller, 1987; Okazaki, Mueller & Taylor, 2010), the US and the Arab (Kalliny & Gentry, 2007), the US and Korea (Young-A, Hongmin & Yongjun, 2014). Since the R.W. Pollay (1983) list is extensive and includes miscellaneous values, authors often choose to categorize them into various subclasses depending on the research purposes, for example traditional vs modern (Capan 2013), rational vs emotional (Albers-Miller & Stanford, 1999).

The most influential theory for cross-cultural value studies is the G. Hofstede (1980, 1984) dimensions in culture, namely individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. As F. Shen (2013) points out, though not particularly designed for advertising studies, the dimensions suggested were transferred into advertising research by N.D. Albers-Miller (1996) and related to the R.W. Pollay (1983) list of values. Whether values are studied within the context of one culture or across diverse cultural contexts, the G. Hofstede (1984) dimensions

are employed either to trace dynamics of values in traditional societies, such as Turkey (Capan, 2013), China (Shen, 2013) in order to estimate the impact of Western cultures on value content employed in ads or bring out similarities and differences in value content in multicultural comparative studies (Young-A, Hongmin & Yongjun, 2014).

Linguistic-relevant studies of values in the advertising discourse are represented by several contributions that suggest the analysis of syntactical and semantic structures codifying values in print advertisements, announcing different types of products and services that offer environment friendly solutions and alternatives (Lago & Hernández, 2008) or the cognitive approach, based on relation between values and metaphors, metonymies and other image schemata (Lago & Cortes de los Rios, 2009).

The present study adopts a diachronic approach to discourse studies and attempts to reveal cultural values in early British advertising texts and relate them to the R.W. Pollay (1983) list and G. Hofstede (1984) cultural dimensions. The discussion of implications that can be inferred from the results obtained is offered.

Aim of the study

The author reports a content analysis that examined hypotheses and questions regarding cultural values in early British advertising discourse. The study aims at accounting the linguistic means used in newspapers Caledonian Mercury, The Times, and The Morning Post in order to codify cultural values in the diachronic perspective.

Research questions

To achieve this objective, the following research questions should be answered: What cultural values did advertisers in British advertising discourse of late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries employ to appeal to potential customers? What dimensions of culture in terms of G. Hofstede (1984) do these cultural values relate to? What are the linguistic units that are linked to these values and is there any linguistic variation in how cultural values are codified in English advertising?

Methods

Materials

The preliminary material for investigation of the advertising discourse was drawn from random pages of randomly selected issues of *The Times* and the regional variety of newspapers that circulated in different counties of the United Kingdom, such as *Morning Chronicle*, *Caledonian Mercury*, *Dundee Courier*, *The Morning Post*, *London Illustrated News*, etc. The newspapers were retrieved from the British Newspapers Archive, the site that gives access to more than 200 newspaper titles from every part of the UK and Ireland. The newspapers mainly date from the 19th century, but include runs dating back to the first half of the 18th century. The final selection of newspapers was reduced to *The Times*, *The Morning Post* and *Caledonian Mercury*.

The time boundaries were chosen between 1788 and 1900 for a number of reasons such as 1) 1788 is the year when *The Times* started to circulate and the author wanted to draw a comparison between the national newspaper and provincial papers to identify how advertisers from different places used to appeal to

recipients and whether they based their appeals on different or the same values, if any; 2) the turn of the twentieth century is identified by many authors as the turning point in advertising discourse with many developments in the text format, language and style (Vestergaard & Schröder, 1985; Görlach, 2004), so one can expect that during this period, values may also show changes.

Sampling strategy

To gauge values in British advertising discourse of late eighteenth and nineteenth century, a sample of 300 print ads was compiled in accordance with the commonly accepted procedure, suggested by R.W. Pollay (1983). The texts were drawn namely from the front pages of randomly selected issues of British newspapers, chosen with a span over thirty years between late eighteenth the nineteenth century, 1788-1900. For each year, the author chose the three best-circulated newspapers, then five issues per year were selected and five ads were drawn from each issue, for four years, for the three newspapers, producing the total 300 per the period under examination. The author excluded advertisements that reoccur from issue to issue over a certain time period and those that were published in different newspaper titles, which was often the case. Since it turned out to be impossible to find newspapers that survived over such a long period, the author had to replace the ones that ceased publication at some point in time. One newspaper, *Caledonian Mercury* (1720-1867), was from Scotland and the results obtained were compared to the newspapers, published in the London area, namely *The Times* and *The Morning Post*. Although *The Morning Post* started circulation in 1770, the electronic archive the author used does not have issues prior to 1801. Therefore, for 1788, two newspapers remained, since no suitable substitutions could be found. The only newspaper that existed throughout the period in question is *The Times* and any changes in this newspaper can be attributed to diachronic variation, so the results obtained from other sources were compared against this newspaper to bring out similarities and differences. The selected advertisements are restricted to the ones offering different types of products and we excluded the categories of advertisements for services, medication and books, as well as property, lotteries and auctions.

Procedure

The author employed inductive and bottom-up content and linguistic analysis of advertisements and compared the lists of semantic-syntactic patterns contained in several parallel corpora from different time periods; the aim was to uncover changes over time both in the value content and language, related to certain values, taking into account social and cultural issues that were considered worthy of attention. To perform a content and linguistic analysis of values the author investigated semantic features of words in the advertisements, identified synonymic words and phrases and categorized them into semantic clusters. The quantitative analysis of words and syntactic patterns related to a certain value allowed defining the distribution of values in different newspapers and throughout the period. To complete the linguistic analysis, the author analyzed the syntactic patterns and parts of speech that were employed for the codification of values. At the last stage, the author compared and contrasted the data obtained for each year under investigation and described trends in values distribution and variations in language related to them.

Data, Analysis, and Results

A close investigation of advertisements, published in several English newspapers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century with a focus on values they employ, yielded a set of three core values that display comparable significance throughout the time period and the newspapers examined. The analysis of the corpus revealed *economy*, *quality* and *assortment* as the basic values employed in early advertising to promote products and attract potential customers.

The content of the 'quality' value is understood as stressing the overall superb and durable nature of the product without referring to any specific virtue (Pollay, 1983; Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996); an appeal to economy includes stressing the low price of the product, mentioning discounts, reductions in price, free bonuses, gifts or special paying arrangements (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996). The 'choice' value is identified whenever the text mentions a wide assortment of goods that might meet any requirements or preferences of the potential customer.

The score for each particular value from the three newspapers is reported in three separate alphabetically marked variants of Table 1

Table 1. The distribution of values over the period between 1788 and 1896 (percentage)

Value		Economy			
Year	1788	1825	1860	1896	
Caledonian Mercury	36	16	52	-	
The Times	20	55	52	40	
The Morning Post	-	20	48	32	
Value		Quality			
Year	1788	1825	1860	1896	
Caledonian Mercury	32	56	68	-	
The Times	16	55	24	35	
The Morning Post	-	56	40	8	
Value		Choice			
Year	1788	1825	1860	1896	
Caledonian Mercury	48	23,3	40	-	
The Times	24	15	36	20	
The Morning Post	-	20	20	12	

The results show that appeals to economy that are wide-spread in modern advertising can be often found in early samples, as advertisers considered it important to attract potential customers by offering goods at reduced prices, giving discounts or announcing sales. Comparison of the results in Table 1.a reveals that the percentage of advertisements containing this value was high in all three newspapers, though *Caledonian Mercury* tends to use this value much more frequently in the late eighteenth century, compared to *The Times* that seems to exploit appeals to economy much more heavily in following periods. In 1825, *The Morning Post* equaled *Caledonian Mercury* and both newspapers pick up the trend in 1860.

While more recent advertising practices explicitly state the exact percentage of a discount, early advertisements in 1788 and 1825 made statements about economy that were rather vague and did not provide any indication of how much the price had been reduced, compared to the original one. However, advertisements nearly always provided a reason why the prices had been cut in order to assure the recipient that it was only due to certain circumstances or efforts of the advertiser

that the price was lower than usual and, consequently, the recipient should take advantage of the situation. In 1860, advertisers employed the practice of indicating the exact discount, for example, *a saving of one-fourth even below the advertised prices*.

Lexical units that are related to this value directly are the noun *economy* in the meaning of *'thrifty and efficient use of material resources'*, (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary – further referred to as MWOD) the noun *reduction*; the deverbal adjective *reduced (price)*, the noun *bargain* meaning *'advantageous purchase'* (MWOD). A common practice was to use a clause either main or subordinate, for example, *'the prices are lower than are usually charged'* (Hoffman, 1860). A peculiar feature of the advertisements in 1860 is that they usually started with stating a product category or an appeal rather than indicating the name of the seller or the producer, e.g. *THE TIME to BUY MUSLINS CHEAP. – Clearing out last year's muslins. Retail drapers, shippers, and families will save immensely by seizing this opportunity* (Smith, 1860). Advertisers often gave a detailed account of why their prices are lower as compared to other producers or sellers, thus preventing suspicion that might arise in the recipient that the quality of the products advertised can be below their expectations.

Table 2. The lexical analysis related to the “economy” value

	1788	1825	1860	1896
Economy				
Noun	0.11	0.25	0.31	0.52
Adjective	0.11	0.35	0.11	0.12
(Intensifier) + Adjective + Noun	0.66	0.32	0.36	0.28
Finite verb		0.06		0.08
Non-finite verb				
Adverb	0.11			
Clause	0.22		0.09	

A close insight into the selected ads shows that nouns are the dominant language units related to this value. As Table 2 shows, the number of nouns that appeal to the ‘economy’ value increased from 0.11 in 1788 to 0.52 in 1896. As for other syntactic patterns, especially verbs and clauses, they are much less frequent in the period under investigation. In 1860, non-finite forms of verbs occur, for example: *having lowered [their prices], having reduced [the prices of]*.

The verb that is linked to the ‘economy’ value is the verb *to save*, defined as *'to avoid unnecessary waste or expense; to spend less money'* (MWOD). Occasional incidence of the verb *to save* in the imperative form, which is characteristic of modern advertising practice, is found in *The Times* in 1860: *SAVE 25 per CENT. – SADDLERY, Harness, and Horse Clothing. The largest and cheapest assortment in the kingdom, at DUFFIELD's manufactory, 1. Long-lane near to Aldersgate – street, E.C.* (Duffield, 1860). Nevertheless, this instance is the only one in our corpus of advertisement and could be regarded as an innovative advertising technique at that particular period, but the form had not been used until early twentieth century, of which the following example can be given: *Save your meat bill* (Briens, 1917). Nevertheless, in the early twentieth century the verb *to save* often occurs in finite forms in declarative sentences: *Purchasers save 3/3 on every yard the secure* (Murphy, 1917).

Table 2. shows that *Caledonian Mercury* contained twice as many appeals to the ‘quality’ value in late eighteenth century as *The Times*. In 1825, all the three

newspapers had a nearly equal number of appeals to quality. In 1860, *Caledonian Mercury* still heavily relied on appealing to quality, whereas the number of appeals in *The Times* reduced by half, and advertisements in *The Morning Post* employed this value less frequently. By the end of the nineteenth century, the situation changed and advertisements in *The Times* increased the number of appeals to quality by half, compared to the previous period. As for *The Morning Post*, it seems that it adhered to a more objective, non-evaluative style.

Regarded language units, related to the ‘quality’ value, include the noun ‘quality’ that expresses an explicit appeal and various adjectives with the semantic component related to quality in their meaning. Normally, the noun ‘quality’ in the meaning *degree of excellence; superiority in kind* (MWOD) is used in combination with a positively evaluating adjective. The density of adjectives that are used as attributes to the noun ‘quality’ in noun phrases or as part of other syntactic patterns is rather high, the most frequent among them being the following: *superior* defined as *of higher rank, quality, or importance* (MWOD); *excellent* – *very good of its kind; eminently good* (MWOD); *elegant* – *of a high grade or quality* (MWOD); *exceptional* – *better than average* (MWOD); *perfect* – *1 a : being entirely without fault or defect; b : satisfying all requirements; corresponding to an ideal standard or abstract concept* (MWOD); *first-class* – *of the highest quality* (MWOD); *superb* – *marked to the highest degree by grandeur, excellence, brilliance, or competence, terrific, top-notch, unsurpassed* (MWOD). In late eighteenth century, quality of goods was mentioned in 32% of all the texts in *Caledonian Mercury* and in 16% of the advertisements published in *The Times*, most of which represented an expression of gratitude to the customers, which seems to be designed to accentuate the quality of goods indirectly as in the text offering stationery: *Adam Thompson, at his Paper Manufacturers Warehouse, Hand-Court, Upper Thames-street, begs leave to return his friends sincere thanks for all past favours; and as he is now well stocked with a general and choice Assortment of Writing, Printing, Wrapping, sugar and Blue Papers, ... shall be happy to receive their further orders, which shall be duly attended to on the most moderate terms. Notes and Bills taken in payment, at one, two or three months* (Thompson, 1788). The analysis of lexical units related to the ‘quality’ value is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The lexical analysis related to the “quality” value

Quality	1788	1825	1860	1896
Noun	0.12	0.14	0.11	0.07
Adjective	0.62	0.48	0.53	0.92
(Intensifier) + Adjective + Noun	0.25	0.25	0.34	0.28
Finite verb				
Non-finite verb		0.03		
Adverb				
Clause		0.07		

Language units related to this value include mainly evaluative adjectives, such as excellent perfect, approved, first-class, splendid, elegant, superior and some others. For example: Furniture, Carpets, and Beddings, Robert Geen invite the nobility and gentry to their extensive STOCK of FURNITURE which for style and steeling quality is unsurpassed (Geen, 1860). Quality seems to show a trend to be related to adjectives more frequently. Of all the language patterns related to the quality value, adjectives comprised 0.62 in 1788; the number dropped in the

subsequent periods and reached as much as 0.92 in 1896. It means that one is more likely to find an expression first-class stationery than first class quality that seems redundant. Obviously, here one observes a trend towards a more compact and concise style.

In early twentieth century, advertisers started giving more emphasis to the benefits of the product and its features, so instead of blunt statements that the product is of the best quality they tried to give a description of why buying this product could be a better choice. For example, *Peter Robinson* offers ‘*PRACTICAL TAILOR SUIT in real Home-spun Tweeds, in a large variety of Overchecks, all perfect colourings*’ (Robinson, 1917).

Simultaneously, advertising texts began employing adjectives denoting product features and benefits: *reliable, durable, dependable, responsible, safe, secure, solid, steady* and others. For example: “*Viyella*” is *soft, warm, and non-irritant, exceedingly durable* (Player, 1917); *The most reliable Military Waterproof Produced* (Paul, 1917); *More reliable on the road, more resilient, longer lasting, British made* (Maxwell, 1917). In comparison with the previous period, the advertisements of the early twentieth century placed the product in the theme position and rarely mentioned producers or retailers’ names.

Linguistic analysis revealed another value employed by advertisers, namely “choice” that was explicitly linked to the nouns *choice, assortment, variety* and was widespread in the middle of the nineteenth century. Table 1.c shows that in 1788, appeals to choice dominated in *Caledonian Mercury*, as compared to *The Times*. Then the numbers for these newspapers decreased and went up again in 1860. *The Morning Post* employed this type of appeal less frequently, as compared to other newspapers. As for language structures, the “choice” value shows a relative stability in linguistic patterns, which can be seen from Table 4.

Table 4. The lexical analysis related to the ‘choice’ value

Choice	1788	1825	1860	1896
Noun	0.10	0.07	0.14	
Adjective	0.05	0.07	0.09	0.18
(Intensifier) + Adjective + Noun	0.85	0.83	0.66	0.64
Finite verb				
Non-finite verb		0.03		0.18
Adverb				
Clause			0.04	

Discussion and Conclusion

It is pertinent to point out that content analysis is more objective yardstick of advertising content than a reflection of the consumer’s subjective experience with the advertising (Abernethy & Franke, 1996). According to this, D. Lerman & M. Callow (2004) have proposed a special model of content analysis that is based on consumer interpretation of advertisements in order to capture the meaning of the language and cultural systems imbedded in ads.

A similar method of measuring cultural values we used in our investigation reflected in another research in linguistics (Kochetova & Volodchenkova, 2015; Lago & Cortés de los Ríos, 2009; Lerman & Callow, 2004). But it should be noted that few studies focus on content analysis revealing diachronic aspect of the advertising axiological profile.

The results of our inquiry show that advertisers considered appeals to economy important to decoy potential customers by offering goods at understated prices, giving discounts or announcing sales. The same tendency is determined in the recent research of cultural values in modern advertising discourse (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000; Bang et al, 2005; Samiee, 2015).

Of all discourse types, advertising is commonly accepted as value-driven, as its major purpose is to persuade the recipients to buy the product or service by appealing to their needs or playing with their emotions. Despite numerous materials written on values employed in advertising discourse, linguistic studies in this field are rare. Therefore, one can claim that tracing values in British print advertisements from the period between the late eighteenth century and the 1890s, in relation to sociocultural context, can help better understand persuasion and the way cultural values evolved in certain cultural contexts.

Answering the research questions of this paper, it is possible to state that advertising discourse, as shown by the present investigation, has always been value-oriented, although a number of values was restricted to, namely, 'quality', 'economy', and 'choice', which can be considered core values of the advertising discourse. Transferring the G. Hofstede (1984) dimensions into advertising research, the values revealed can signal a very high uncertainty avoidance in the period under investigation. The 'economy' value, however, when related to the G. Hofstede (1984) dimensions is associated with low power distance (Albers-Miller, 1996). While appeals to the quality of goods and assortment can be explained by peculiarities of consumption of that period, which was producer/seller oriented, while advertisers tried to reassure the addressees that they could rely on the quality and variety of goods on offer, a plausible explanation of why the advertisers used to appeal to economy, taking into account that according to some authors, the recipients of advertising texts of that period belonged to the high class, is much more difficult to provide. It might be an indication that the advertising discourse in the nineteenth century was intended for an extensive middle class. Besides, an ever-increasing growth in the number of advertisements published and tightening competition might account for the fact that advertisers were forced to use stronger appeals to attract customers. Research into values in early British advertisements shows that core values of the advertising discourse have stood the test of time and continue to be employed by modern advertisements.

As for linguistic evidence of the values found, early advertisements make heavy use of nouns and noun phrases when appealing to the 'economy' value, which were replaced by finite verbs and imperative verbs in early twentieth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, linguistic structures used in appeals to quality show less variety and mainly resort to adjectives that had become much more frequent.

Implications and Recommendations

Researches into cultural values as they are codified in the language of advertising discourse has so far been scarce, both synchronically and diachronically. The analysis of the values in the diachronic perspective proves to deepen our understanding of persuasion and its evolution in advertising discourse. The practical value of the study also is that the paper suggests prospects for future research. Firstly, the author investigated British advertisements only. Therefore, a promising area is to study cultural values in advertisements from different cultural contexts. Furthermore, using a larger data set with British advertisements from

other printed sources of the past periods and extending the study to other time periods would shed more light on how cultural values have evolved in the diachronic perspective.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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