Reference in Advertising:
A Functional Approach

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0. What follows bears in the first place on what can broadly be characterized as consumer advertising in British and American colour magazines (such as e.g. *The Sunday Times Magazine* and *Time Magazine*). The approach is sufficiently general, however, to be valid for most other advertising, irrespective of medium or language.

The referring expression with which I shall be concerned is *the proper name denoting the article advertised.* Adopting Searle's version of the speech act theory (with certain modifications to adapt it to my specific purpose), I shall try to show how the meaning built up for the product name is essentially related to the basic function of advertising. And vice versa, how focusing on the product name as a functionally relevant referring expression for which an identifying description has to be set up from the universe of meaning provided by the advertisement, provides an important, if not the most important, key to the way in which a particular advertisement functions.

This conclusion should be viewed in the broader perspective of a pragmatic approach to meaning. Whenever a text or, as is the case here, a whole register [1], has a clearly outlinable function, this function should be the central pragmatic element on the basis of which meaning is assigned.

1. As a starting-point I adopt the following (functional) definition. *An advertisement is a meaningful unit which is intended as advice from an advertiser to the person addressed by the advertisement to consume (buy) the 'article' that is advertised.*

The background for this definition is Searle's approach to meaning as reflected in his formalized analysis of what it means

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1. For the view that functional correlates should be taken to differentiate between different registers, see Goossens 1973.

that „S utters sentence T and means it" (Searle 1969, 49-50) [2]. The speaker's intention to communicate a particular meaning is the central element ; the reason why this communication can be successful is that there is a common knowledge on part of both S and H of the rules governing the speaker's utterance.

Searle's analysis, it must be pointed out, is situated on the level of the sentence, because his treatment of speech acts (the main concern of his book) is also restricted to sentence level. The reasons are not far to seek. To the extent that surface correlates for speech acts are available, they are to be found, not on the level of the text (in so far as this normally consists of more than one sentence), but on the level of the sentence. This holds for both lexical correlates (such as performative verbs, as in '*I promise* to be there in time', or '*I warn you* that I'm not going to tolerate such practices again') and grammatical ones (e.g. the imperative, inverted word order).

On the other hand, the existing correspondences between speech acts and their linguistic correlates are no one-to-one relations. A promise can be expressed by a surface performative verb (as in the example above) or without one (e.g. 'I'll be there in time'); an imperative can express a command, a request or advice. This presents no difficulties, if, following Searle, we assign a central importance to the speaker's intention and the recognition of this intention by H. As regards the latter, it is evident that it does not take place only by virtue of a shared knowledge of the rules of the *language* in which the speech act is uttered. Also a common knowledge of the *context* is an essential requirement : when you have just explained to your shoemaker that you need your shoes urgently and the man answers 'They'll be finished before five o'clock', you get full support from the context to interpret this reply as a promise.

Indeed, the context can work so powerfully, that a coherent sequence of sentences (a text) can acquire a speech act value of its own, independent of the speech act value of the individual sentences constituting the sequence. An instance of this is provided in a master-servant situation : the utterance 'There's a draught here, James. The door is open' counts as two assertions, but will,

2. The full quotation is as follows : „S utters sentence T and means it (i.e., means literally what he says) = S utters T and
(a) S intends (*i*-1) the utterance U of T to produce in H the knowledge (recognition, awareness) that the states of affairs specified by (certain of) the rules of T obtain. (Call this effect the illocutionary effect, IE).
(b) S intends U to produce IE by means of the recognition of *i*-1.
(c) S intends that *i*-1 will be recognized in virtue of (by means of) H's knowledge of (certain of) the rules governing (the elements of) T."

moreover, function as a command, roughly equivalent to 'Shut that door, will you, James'.

In the same way the recognition of an advertisement as an advertisement provides us with the basic contextual information on the strength of which we know that we are confronted with an advertiser who tries to convince us that the consumption of his product will benefit us. In other words, an advertisement can be viewed as fundamentally expressing the speech act of advice.

2. This advice can be expressed directly at the level of the sentence(s) making up the advertising text (as a rule by means of imperatives, as in 'Drink X', 'Enjoy the good taste' – in an advertisement for cigarettes –, 'Go Belgian' – advertisement for Sabena Airlines). Such direct expressions of advice, however, only exceptionally constitute the whole advertisement, and indeed are often lacking altogether.

On the other hand, there is one *constant* : in the presence of *the name of the product* (henceforth P), which, in the type of advertising we are considering here, is practically always ac-companied by a specification of what P is like (in those cases where no further information is given, the advertiser relies on other sources to supply the potential consumer with an elementary identification ; this is common practice in illuminated advertising, but very rare in colour magazines, or, for that matter, in printed advertisements in general). If we want to maintain, as we do, that whatever the form the advertisement takes, it can be related to an underlying speech act of advice, we should be able to explicitate the relation between this constant and the total speech act.

Let us first show how Searle's analysis of the speech act *advise* (Searle 1969, 67) can be applied to the advertising situation. I take each of his 'rules' (or 'conditions') in succession.

Propositional content. 'Future act A of H'
In our case the 'consumption' of the advertised article.
Preparatory rules.
1. 'S has some reason to believe A will benefit H'
   i.e. the advertiser has reasons (or purports to have them) to think that the consumption of his product will benefit the prospective consumer.
2. 'It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events'.
   Indeed, advertising only makes sense, if the consuming public needs special incentives to get interested in the advertiser's

product, or to consume it on a larger scale, or to prefer his variety to other available alternatives.

Sincerity rule. 'S believes A will benefit H'

Again, we may have to speak of pretended, rather than real sincerity, but as such it is an essential ingredient of the advertising game.

Essential rule. 'Counts as an undertaking to the effect that A is in H's best interest'

An advertisement counts as an undertaking to the effect that consuming the advertiser's product is in the interest of any potential consumer.

How does P figure in this ? Of all the elements involved in an explicit advertisement (i.e. one that is unambiguously recognizable as such) P is the only unknown, and the only element that needs explicit identification. The additional information that one may wish to have is why consuming P should be in H's interest, or, in terms of preparatory rule 1, what reasons S has to recommend P. Those reasons should be connected with the product advertised and can therefore be expected to the further characterizations of P. This is what we find : in addition to the presence of P and an elementary specification of what it is like, nearly all advertisements provide information which, directly or indirectly, can be interpreted in terms of a favourable characteristic of P, thus constituting a reason for recommending it.

3. Let us now turn to the product name P as a referring expression. That a referring expression (R) can be interpreted functionally is clear, if, again following Searle, we accept the view that R refers by virtue of the speaker's intention and H's recognition of this intention. As Searle puts it : „R is to be uttered in the context of a sentence (or some similar stretch of discourse) the utterance of which could be the performance of some illocutionary act" and „The utterance of R counts as the identification or picking out of X to (or for) H" (rules 1 and 3 for singular definite reference, Searle 1969, 96). As we have pointed out in sections 1 and 2 the functional context in which a product name occurs can be viewed as a speech act of advice underlying the whole of the advertisement.

It remains to be seen what P refers to and how it does so. In his second rule Searle states : „R is to be uttered only if there exists an object X such that either R contains an identifying description of X, or S is able to supplement R with an identifying description of X, and such that, in the utterance of R, S intends to pick out or to identify X to H". Searle is not completely clear about the nature of the existence of the object behind an R. He accepts

existence in a fictional world, but in general his axiom of existence seems to bear on existence in the real world. In the case of advertising this does not seem to present any special difficulties, since items that are advertised always have some sort of existence in the world around us. It soon appears, however, that we have to rule out any dependence on the real world, if we look at the implications for the identification which S must be able to offer (Searle's principle of identification), or, to consider it from the point of view of the reader of the advertisement, which the H must be able to reconstruct. Obviously, this identification is *not* dependent on the real world, but rather, as Seuren puts it, on the 'universe of interpretation', ,the mentally constructed world' to which the 'definite description' belongs. This amounts to replacing the axiom of existence by a requirement that not the existence of the object is presupposed, but only the occurrence of an object corresponding to the definite description (in the case that we are considering, the proper name) in the universe of interpretation that is built up by the text (Seuren 1972, esp. p. 355). Speaking in advertising terms, the identifying elements behind P will have to come from the universe of meaning built up by the advertiser. He can do this independently of the real world. If he chooses to offer an unrealistic identification, this may make him less believable for H, especially when H has personal experience of the object involved, but as long as H can reconstruct the advertiser's identifying description the reference is successful.

To relate this to the underlying speech act of advice : the advertiser has complete freedom to decide about what he wants to offer as identifying elements behind the referring expression P ; as a rule he only selects those characteristics which he thinks will impress the potential consumer favourably, in other words, what can count as acceptable reasons to recommend P. It is here that we find the key to the manipulating force of an advertisement : the advertiser cuts out whatever might strike his H as negative ; in the closed universe of discourse, to put it with Marcuse, there is no room for antithesis, only positive thinking is allowed, the dialectic process is blocked. In many cases purely imaginary characteristics are suggested for P which in fact have nothing to do with it. While reconstructing – with varying degrees of consciousness, since advertisements are taken in with attitudes ranging from boredom to mild amusement or irritation – the identifying description, H is involved in a universe of meaning to which his own imagination has to supply the missing links. As a result he may be induced to include among the characteristics of P

the capacity of fulfilling some of his totally unrelated 'hidden' needs [3].

4. Finally I want to go into the question *how* H is provided with an identifying description for P.

Every advertisement is different in the way in which it combines linguistic and non-linguistic material to build up a characterization for P. The most direct way of introducing an identifying element linguistically is *explicit* predication, as in *„Every Poggenpohl kitchen is individually designed and built"*. Usually, though by no means always, more or less objective (or pseudo-objective) data are introduced in this way [4]. Sometimes predications are to be decoded the other way round. *„Information travels through Olivetti"* implies that Olivetti is that through which (all ?) information travels. Such reverse predications work indirectly, but they do contribute to the required identification all the same. To the extent that they are assimilated unconsciously by the reader, they have greater manipulating force than explicit predications, which also holds for the other linguistic devices which I briefly exemplify below.

We might speak of *disjunctive predication* in instances like *„Poggenpohl kitchens – for people who refuse to let a little thing like money come between them and the very best"* (the headline of the advertisement from which I borrowed the explicit predication instance) and *„The most coveted – and copied – kitchen system in Europe"* (first line of the body-copy in the same advertisement). *Attributive adjuncts* to P are often difficult to explicitate. What is exactly ascribed to Benson and Hedges cigarettes in *„Gold, bold Benson and Hedges"* ? Or, to take an instance which is even further removed from direct predication, what does H assimilate when he reads *King Size Flavour* under the picture of a packet of cigarettes ? He is made aware of the fact that the cigarettes have King Size, that they have a particular flavour, that there is something special about this flavour, that this something special is to be associated with King Size. With the last explicitation we have reached the point at which it is becoming clear that the connection between size and flavour is a rather empty one, but here we are going beyond what a reader can normally manage in a first, possibly attentive, reading.

Turning to what *the illustration* can contribute, we find a similar

3. These hidden needs are laid bare for the advertiser by the 'motivational research' people (see Packard 1957).
4. A counter-example would be the well-known signature line 'Heinz means beanz'.

range of variation in directness. Closest to explicit predication expressed by means of language, is the picture of the product with the brand name striking the eye : the Minolta camera shiningly dominating the page, the latest Volvo models with details of the new gadgets filling three quarters of a double page ad, the bottle of Martini flanked by two glasses filled with Martini-on-the-rocks. Diminishing directness when the product is shown in use : couple 'enjoying' together their filter cigarette, elderly gentleman relaxing in his arm-chair with a glass of Black & White whisky.

Often the 'image' that is built up around a product is to be derived from the *'interaction' of text and illustration*. This interaction becomes more important when text and illustration are mutually dependent for their interpretation. In such cases the identifying description for P will necessarily contain a subjective element, though at the same time it will essentially be conditioned by the universe of meaning created in the advertisement. I illustrate this with an advertisement for Smirnoff Vodka in *The Sunday Times Magazine* (October 8, 1972), one example among (literally) thousands, but one that will do well for our purposes, because the suggestive element is strongly present.

The full-page illustration represents a young lady in what looks like a country railway station. Apparently she is on the point of leaving for a journey, judging from the sizable suit-case she has with her. From the expression on her face and the way she holds her wrist-watch we conclude that she is eagerly waiting for someone (the look in her eyes suggests that this someone may be a male travelling-companion, but this is not explicitated and must be supplied by our imagination). At the bottom of the page, in red-yellow-white colours contrasting vividly with the grey-blue of the main illustration we find part of a label reading „*SMIRNOFF*" and „*VODKA*". The text, apart from what is on the label, is „*'I'd just popped out to post a letter when I discovered Smirnoff* " (in the middle of the page right across the girl ; apparently an unconventional body copy) and (as a signature line, over the label) „*The effect is shattering*". Putting myself into the position of an average attentive H, I have no difficulty in picking out P. This advertisement, I realize, wants to recommend Smirnoff to me. If I did not know this already, I easily find out that Smirnoff is vodka. The text between inverted commas contains two referential expressions : 'I' (which I identify as the young lady, who gives an explanation for the situation in which she is depicted) and 'Smirnoff' (which I know is Smirnoff vodka). The signature line asks for an identifying description of 'the effect' : between the two occurrences of 'Smirnoff', this can only be the effect of Smirnoff

vodka. On whom ? On the young lady, no doubt. But I feel inclined to expand : on every Smirnoff consumer.

What does this amount to as an identifying description for P ? Smirnoff is vodka. Smirnoff has caused this girl to 'pop' out, not to post a letter as she used to before she discovered Smirnoff, but to set out on this journey, in exciting company, if our imagination was not mistaken. Smirnoff has a shattering effect on people (it certainly had a fundamental effect on the young lady). Maybe I need to be exposed to two or three more advertisements built along the same lines to arrive at this interpretation and no doubt several of these advertisements are necessary to induce me to make the intended generalization (that Smirnoff causes you to break away from a monotonous pattern of life, or at least can free you momentarily from this monotony). Those other advertisements will duly be supplied if you are a more or less regular reader of *The Sunday Times Magazine.* Our ad was just one in a long series : the label and the signature line return in exactly the same form ; the main illustration and the body-copy provide variations upon the same theme (in one instance the I is another young lady in wild-west attire, somewhere in a horse stable, contrasting her present situation with her pre-Smirnoff past : 'I was the mainstay of the Public Library, until I discovered Smirnoff' ; in another one the I sits high on the back of a camel as a member of a caravan making its way through what looks like the Sahara and the body-copy reads : 'I used to take the caravan to Southend, until I discovered Smirnoff' ; etc.). In all instances we end up with fundamentally the same identification for P, of which the advertiser hopes that we may find it a sufficient reason to accept his underlying advice to become consumers (or consumers on a larger scale) of his vodka.

5. *Conclusion*

The name of the product is the constant in nearly all advertising. In a functional interpretation this name is to be viewed as a referring expression for which the advertiser offers, and the reader of the advertisement reconstructs, an identifying description which contains (so the advertiser hopes) a compelling reason to believe that consuming P 'will benefit H'.

Giving due weight to this functional dimension as the main pragmatic element in an advertising context, provides us, moreover, with a unifying principle underlying the universe of meaning constituted by an advertisement, so that the referential expression P

can be handled as a safe key to the way in which the advertisement works.

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