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A SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF THE LANGUAGE OF OUTDOOR ADVERTISEMENTS

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Abstract

Advertisement is an important tool in the society and it involves the creative use of language. An advert requires a codified language; the advertising man knows his audience, chooses a language, decides on the appropriate medium and adopts a style that will carry his message across to the target public. This paper, which analyzes data collected from billboards and vehicles on major roads in Lagos, Ibadan and Ilorin, investigates, the syntactic structures of the message of outdoor advertisement. The types and structures of the phrase and sentences used in outdoor advertising are examined using the Principles and Parameter Theory. We discovered that despite the constraint on the copywriter to put so much ideas and concepts in a few interesting and understandable words, he still conforms to the rules governing language use.

Introduction

Knowing a language means knowing the rules governing the use of the language. Language is the major means of all interaction in the society. In order to get people to identify a product or service, remember its name, make them feel it is familiar and persuade them that it is worth patronizing, advertisements rely almost totally on the use of language. Every successful advertisement must make a useful and lasting impression and this is achieved through language. The design of the message helps to determine whether people will pay attention

to it, whether they will remember it, whether it will affect what they do (Olujide, 2000:60). The ultimate aim of any advertisement is for people to purchase, patronize or listen to the message of the advert for positive effects. Hence, advertisers employ various creative tactics.

Advertisement messages are designed to elicit positive responses towards the products or services and advertisement as a form of communication, makes use of language. Language is used to describe a product or service, to give necessary details and to indicate the location where the product or service can be found. The language of advertisements, according to Crystal (1987: 390) "is generally laudatory, positive, unreserved and emphasizing the uniqueness of a product." It is persuasive. An attempt to appeal to customers through the content of the message brings about language creativity (Oyekola, 1999:67). The advertiser adopts a style that will carry his message across to the target public; he employs words that will sell his goods, services and ideas. The message is strictly for the sake of the product or service and there is no doubt about that.

Advertisement

According to Olujide (2000:59), "advertising attempts to move consumers from unawareness of a product or service to awareness, to comprehension, to conviction and to action". Bovee and Arens (1986:5) define advertisement as "non-personal communication of information usually paid for and usually persuasive in nature about products, services, or ideas by identified sponsors through various media." Roderick (1980:4) defines advertising as "a message specified by its originator, carried by a communication system and intended to influence and/or inform an unknown audience". It is a form of commercial mass communication designed to promote the sale of a product or service (Robbs, 2007). It involves the drawing of people's attention to the existence of products, services, issues or

concepts. Kotler and Keller (2006:526) see advertisements as "any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor".

There are different types of advertisements; the largest and most noticeable group belongs to the commercial consumer advertising. There are also categories such as trade advertising, prestige advertising (e.g. by government departments), classified advertising (want adverts, house sales, etc.) and retail advertising (from shop to customer). Different media could be chosen for the advertisement message. This includes, TV, Radio, Billboards, Cinemas, Printed flyers, Newspapers, Labels, etc. The form the message takes depends largely on the media of advertisement. The focus of this paper is on outdoor advertisement.

Outdoor advertisement

Outdoor advertisement is a high-intensity medium that reaches most population segments at high frequency levels. It can effectively create awareness and instant visibility, reinforce brand image, and provide reminders to consumers. Outdoor advertisement includes all media that carry messages to consumers when they are away from their place of residence. These media could be mobile billboards, cars, lorries, vans, etc. that are painted with a company's logo or advert slogans, building sized images, and aerial advertising.

Wherever we go, we find advertisements for various target audiences and for various reasons either urging us to buy, adopt certain attitudes or be entertained. For the advertisement to make an impact, the angle of the structure bearing the display and its position relative to those moving or traveling on the road and the easy visibility of the structure must be taken into consideration. The visual content and design of an advertisement make the initial impact on people and cause us to take note of it. Bold prints, beautiful colour combinations and separations and captivating

captions are the characteristics of outdoor advertisement.

The messages of outdoor adverts come in a bundle. 'In interactional exchanges, much meaning is communicated through non-verbal language, which is often combined with the spoken or written form, to convey meaning' (Adegbija 1999:195). Signs, symbols, icons, indices, pictures, etc. are combined with the written word. There are instances whereby only these signs, symbols, etc. are used. Distinctive colours are used to signify a product. It is another means of wordless reference to a product or service. With the coming of the various networks of the Global Mobile System, for example, the colour 'yellow' has been given a new meaning. Today yellow stands for MTN. Once you see any billboard painted yellow even without any word written on it, it is perceived that it has to do with MTN.

Most times, written words corroborate the symbols and signs and at times, the understanding of the meaning will be based on both the message and the signs. This means that even without the written word, the message could still be understood. The messages of outdoor advertisements are always very brief as they are designed to be attention catching. The basic fact is that either the audience or the message is mobile. The advertiser therefore is limited as the copy is restricted to a few words or a single powerful graphic.

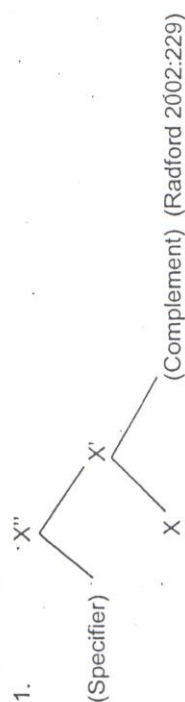
Methodology

The data for this study were collected from billboards and vehicles on major roads in Ilorin, Lagos and Ibadan. These locations were selected in order to have fairly large and varied samples. The data collected cut across product and service advertisements. This is to show the importance of these messages to every advertisement type. A total of one hundred advertisements were collected. The selected messages cut across different syntactic constituents. It is from this corpus that we

selected our data for sampling.

Theoretical Framework

This research study is carried out using the X-Bar Theory. X-bar Theory is part of the grammar that regulates and brings out what is common in the structure of phrases. Cook (1988:94) says that 'in the X-Theory, the phrase structure is a comparatively simple system derived from a few principles and the setting of certain parameters.' A phrase always contains a head in X-bar Theory thereby showing hierarchy among the constituents. Heads are terminal nodes that dominate words. According to Haegeman (1991:105), two levels of projection are distinguished in X-bar Theory. These are the Specifier and Complement positions respectively.



X" above ranges over all phrasal categories like Noun Phrases, Verb phrases, Adjectival Phrases, Prepositional Phrases, Inflectional Phrases and Complementizer phrases. X' on the other hand stands for X and its complement where applicable. 'X' is a category variable that stands for any major word-level category like Noun, Verb, Adjective and Preposition.

Specifier and Complement represent grammatical functions or relations; they have a status similar to terms such as 'Subject' or 'Object'. They are optional constituents for some phrases but obligatory for some others (Radford, 2002:229). The Phrase Structure is as outlined below:

2. XP → (WP) X° YP (MP)

where YP is a Complement and the parenthesized phrases are Adjuncts (Yusuf, 1998:57).

Syntactic analysis of the language of outdoor advertisement

According to Radford (2002:55), 'sentences are built up out of sets of constituents, each of which belongs to a specific category'. Sentences are made up of structured sequences whereby phonemes are grouped together into words, words into phrases and phrases into sentences. Word level categories are expanded into phrasal categories which in turn form the constituents of a sentence.

The following phrasal categories are identified in outdoor advertisement messages:

1. Noun Phrases
2. Verb Phrases
3. Prepositional Phrases
4. Adjectival Phrases
5. Inflectional Phrases
6. Complementizer Phrases.

Noun Phrases

Stockwell (1977:55) defines Noun Phrases as 'clusters of words in surface strings of which the nuclei are nouns'. According to Yusuf (1997:9), 'the Noun Phrase (NP) is the category that orders the participant in the event or state described by the verb'. A Noun Phrase, headed by a noun, is the element that functions as subject, object and complement of preposition. From the data collected, the Noun Phrase is highly used.

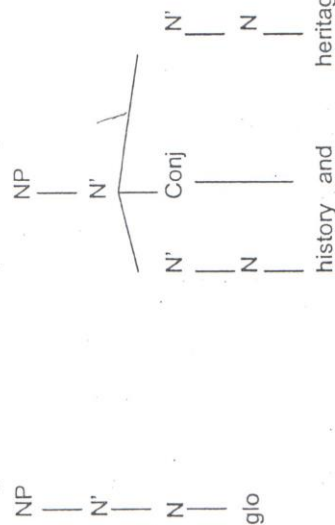
The structure of the Noun Phrase is described below:

NP $\rightarrow$ (DET) (AdjP) (NP) N (PP) (CP)

The various possible structures of NPs are also discovered in outdoor advertisement. The NPs below show some of the possible forms that an NP can take as outlined in the phrase structure rule earlier given. They come with the possible complements and adjuncts and are always headed by a noun.

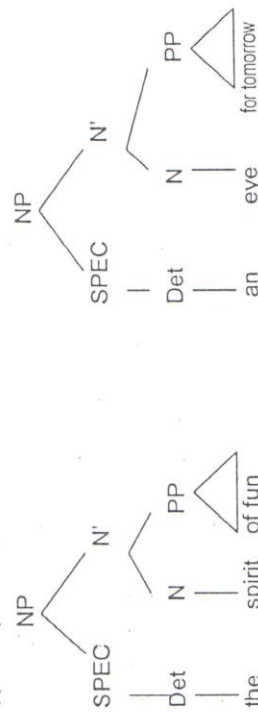
Tree diagrams are provided for better exemplification of some of the structures. The structures below show an NP without satellites and a conjoined NP:

3. a. glo b. history and heritage



These NPs could name the product or service as in (3a) or provide the slogan as in (3b) above. The following structures showcase NPs with PP Complements and some with Specifier:

4. (a) the sign of good taste (b) the cream with real taste
(c) milk at its peak (d) tyres with muscles (e) the spirit of fun
(f) an eye for tomorrow



These NPs describe the function or use of the product or service. The next set are NPs with Determiners as exemplified

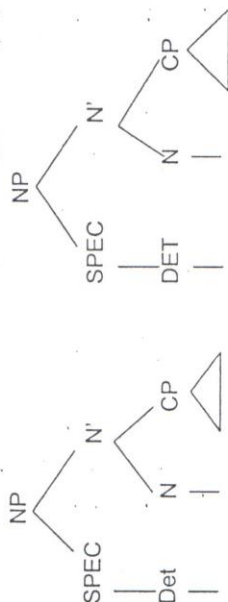
below:

5. a. my choice b. our Hallmark c. always Coca-cola



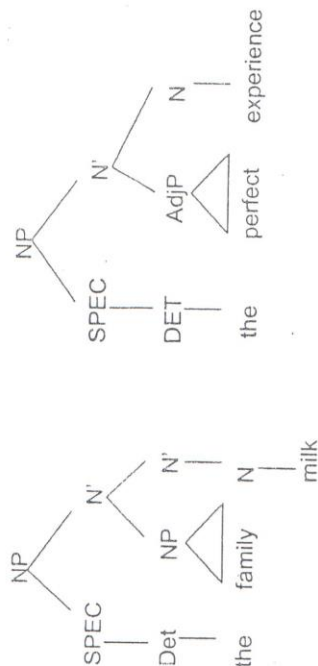
The NPs below have sentential complements:

6. (a) a taste that can only be Guinness (b) 0805 that's our number (c) the car that cares (d) the energy that keeps you going



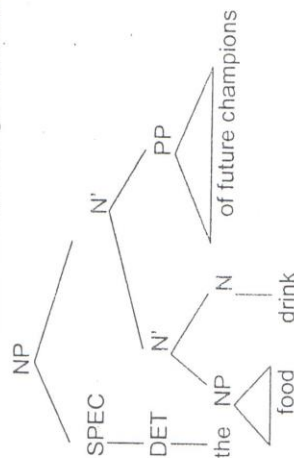
The NPs below have either NP or AdjP as Complements or Adjuncts:

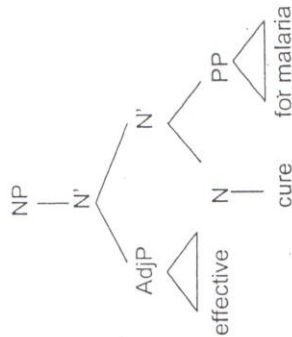
7. (a) big value (b) absolute commitment (c) concrete power (d) soothing relief everyday (e) the Gold Standard (f) the ultimate protection (g) the family milk (h) the perfect experience



These NPs have NPs, Adjectival Phrases and PPs as satellites:

8. a. chocolatey nourishment for tomorrow's leaders
b. brighter life in style. c. the trusted name for high quality
d. the early cure for malaria e. good start to life
f. the food drink of future champions. g. effective cure for malaria
h.





The various punctuation marks used also indicate the structural position they would have taken in a sentence. For example, the ellipsis used before the following NPs in (a) and the fact that the examples in (b) below start with the lower case show that they form part of a sentence and would function as object of the verb.

9. a. ...always a dependable name to count on
...all smiles, no pains.
...our Hallmark
b. comfort on wheels
more energy releasing vitamins
effective cure for malaria

These NPs are used to name the products or services and to describe them. The names of the products are sometimes mentioned. Adjectives are copiously used to modify nouns. They show the quality of the products or services.

Verb Phrases

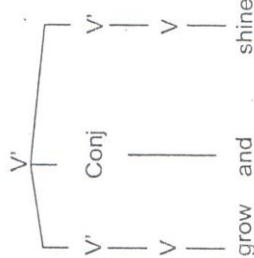
The Verb Phrase, according to Yusuf (1997:21), is 'traditionally called the 'predicate' because it has the sentence predicator namely the verb'. The verb is the head of the Verb

Phrase. It is the lexical category that tells us what the participatory roles of the nominal are in the sentence. It expresses or allocates roles to Noun Phrases in the sentence. The Structure of the Verb Phrase is described with the structure below:

VP V (NP) (PP) (S')

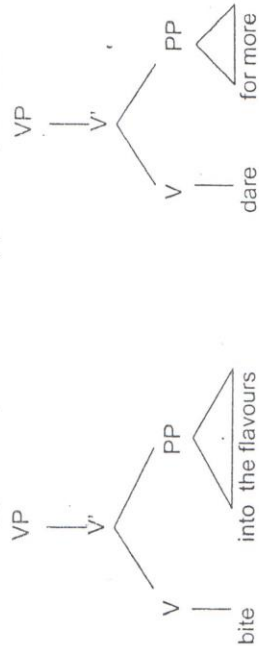
Verb Phrases also feature very prominently in advertisement messages. The Verbs below are without any satellite:

10. a. open
b. grow and Shine!



The Verbs below subcategorize for PP Complements:

11. (a) packed with great taste and healthy goodness (b) settle for cool breeze. (c) stick to your Mirinda! (d) move up to Hi-Malt



The Verbs below subcategorize for NP Complements:

These VPs tell us the function of the product or service. They also give a description of what some of the products and services do or aim to achieve.

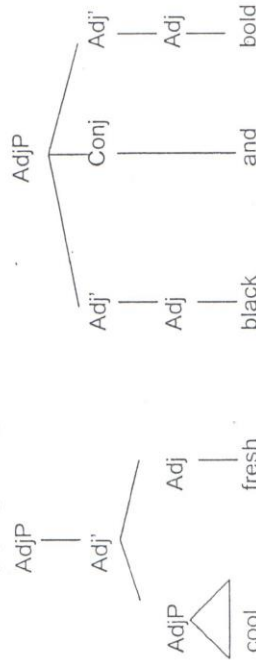
Adjectival Phrases

Adjectival Phrases do normally co-occur with Noun Phrases. They function as either complement or adjunct of the noun (Radford, 2002: 208). Adjectival Phrases are obligatorily headed by adjectives. Adjectival Phrases perform both attributive and complement functions. The Phrase can either consist of an adjective or adjective with modifiers. Below is the Phrase Structure Rule for Adjectival Phrase:

AP → (Spec) Adj (Adv) (PP)

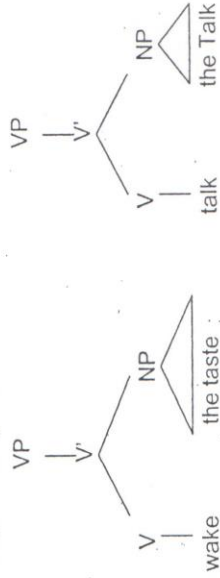
Adjectival phrases are also used in advertisement messages. The data below exemplify this:

15. (a) fresh as the Dew (b) cool fresh
(c) one & only (d) smooth & satisfying
(e) big, strong, reliable(f) black and bold



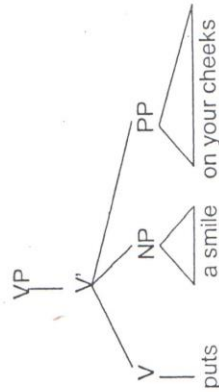
These are used in describing the product or service. It allows for vivid description of what is being advertised. The advert message indicates the quality of the product or service. For example, *big, strong, reliable* is used by a bank that has a horse as its symbol. The message is meant to reinforce the fact that the

12. (a) connecting people (b) reflects the action in you (c) penetrates difficult stain zones (d) building businesses (e) water your imagination (f) Share the fun



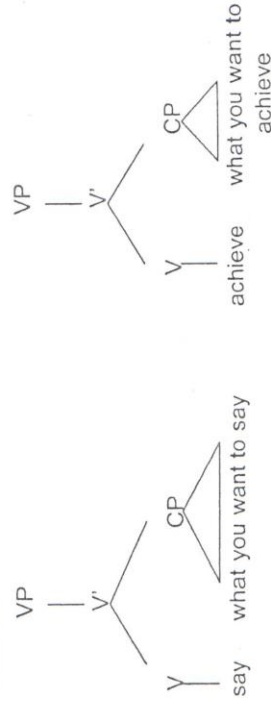
This Verb subcategorizes for an NP and a PP complement:

13. puts a smile on your cheeks



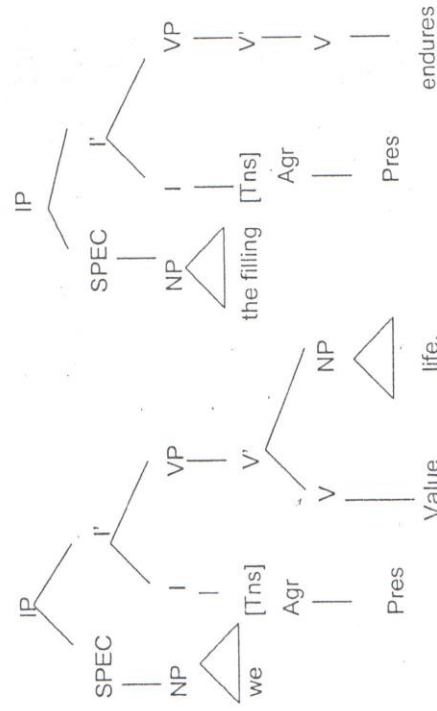
These Verbs take sentential complements:

14. (a) say what you want to say (b) achieve what you want to achieve



in the present. The SPEC of IP is the NP and it compulsorily has a VP which is the complement of I'. Inflectional Phrases are also highly used as most outdoor advert messages are straightforward and clear. The examples below will attest this:

17. (a) we value life (b) the feeling endures.
- (c) We know cool. (d) We like it.
- (e) It's a great meal for your baby.
- (f) details speak volumes.
- (g) your next minute is in your hands.
- (h) there's a good feeling in the air.



Complementizer Phrases

There are also instances of messages that come in form of questions. These are instances of Complementizer Phrases headed by a Complement. Both WH-questions and Yes-No

bank in question is big, has strength and can be relied upon. *Black and bold* was the slogan for Guinness. The slogan describes the product and what it can do.

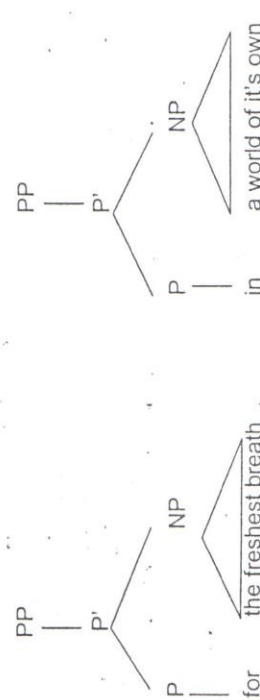
Prepositional Phrase

The Prepositional Phrase headed by a preposition functions as either complement or adjunct to the Noun head or the verb. The Prepositional Phrase codes semantic information like Location, Manner and Instrument. The Prepositional Phrase has as its complement, the Noun Phrase. The structure of the Prepositional Phrase is described in

PP P NP

This type of phrase also features prominently in advertisement copy.

16. a. for solid enjoyment b. for healthy living
- c. for the freshest breath. d. In a world of it's own



Prepositional Phrases are used to emphasize the uniqueness of a product or service, to show location, etc.

Inflectional Phrases

The Inflectional Phrase is headed by Inflection (Yusuf, 1998:60). The tense of the language of advertisement is always

questions are attested. The data below exemplify this:

18. a. Who says only the rich can telephone?
- b. Why be heavy?
- c. Importing or exporting heavy goods?
- d. Have you had your Malta Guinness today?

These messages in rhetorical communication are designed to influence the thought or actions of other people (Mc Croskey, 1968:37). They are meant to persuade consumers.

Sentence Types

Types of sentences used in adverts vary depending on what the advertiser is trying to say or the message he wants to pass across (Durojaiye, 1997:16). In this section we will briefly look at the sentence as a unit. Three sentence types are recognized. They include:

- a. The simple sentence
- b. The compound sentence
- c. The complex sentence

the simple sentence has been discussed under Inflectional Phrase (IP) above. Untensed sentences are however also found in the advert copy as shown below:

19. Great fun to share.

The Compound Sentence

Adegbija (1987:84) defines compound sentence as 'a kind of sentence which has more than one finite verb, that is, the simple sentences will be joined by the lexical category called conjunction or comma (,). It is the coordination of more than one simple sentence by conjunctions. This is also attested in the outdoor advertisement copy. The comma is the most commonly

used conjunction.

20. a. Nature made it, we just bottled it.
- b. Loose the pain...not your smile.
- c. Leave imagination behind, open your eyes to reality.

The compound sentence is not that common but it is used to reinforce the message of the advert.

The Complex Sentence

Quirk and Greenbaum (1972:342) defines complex sentence as 'a sentence which contains more than one clause'. According to Yusuf (1997:63), 'the complex sentence has a sentence embedded in one of the phrasal categories: VP or NP'. The complex sentence has a main clause with one or more embedded or subordinate clauses and as stated earlier the embedding could be in the Noun Phrase or Verb Phrase as exemplified in (21) below:

21. a. with our new look, no one can rip you off.
- b. wherever you go, we glo.

Conclusion

The language of advertisement has certain features which set it apart from other varieties of language use. Attempts are made to appeal to customers through the content of the message and this brings about language creativity. Peculiar grammatical features are introduced which make the language of advertisement to be unique and showcase the creativity of the copywriter. Novel sentences are used which are unique to the product or service being advertised. Innovative words and phrases, lexical substitution and the use of common words in unconventional ways are some features of the advertisement

copy.

The attempt in this paper has been to examine the syntactic structure of the language of outdoor advertisement and see whether it conforms to the rules governing the use of language. We examined the various types of phrases and sentences used in the language of outdoor advertisement. Using the X-bar Theory as our framework, we discovered that despite the brevity of the messages, they are grammatical.

We discovered that despite the constraint on the copywriter to put so much ideas and concepts in a few words that are memorable, interesting and understandable, he still conforms to the rules governing language use. The phrases and sentences despite being concise perform the functions they are meant to perform. They persuade, influence and sometimes move people to actually purchase or patronize the product or service.

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