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A DISCURSIVE-SEMANTIC MODEL OF ATTITUDINAL APPRAISAL OF SEXUALITY IN ROMANIAN ONLINE PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS

ABSTRACT
Ph.D. thesis

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2019

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Background

The current thesis examines the attitudinal appraisal of sexuality on the basis of Martin and White's (2005) discursive-semantic model, a model that has been applied to Romanian online personal advertisements, in an attempt to illustrate the huge potential of language to evoke all the participants' values, norms, relationships and choices across a wide spectrum of social effects.

Due to its widespread dissemination in worldwide societies, advertising is considered to be the art of the modern world that has become critical in shaping the new modern globalized culture, impacting collective awareness and transcending national boundaries. As a purely linguistic phenomenon, it is deeply enmeshed in social discourse by means of its fast diffusion. As media products, whether in electronic and print formats or in newspapers and magazines, advertisements play a crucial role in the modern society through the main function they perform, that of mass-targeting the promotion of products and services. Besides their pragmatic function, by way of intruding upon consumers' private lives and feelings, advertisements perform a social function as well. This social function is determined by the relationship established between the ad producer/maker on the one hand and the ad consumer on the other. Starting from Barthes' (1979) text notion, according to which the reader of a text becomes an active explorer and meaning maker alike in the reading process, any potential consumer is presumed to be the reader of an advertisement whose desires, likes, needs, behaviour and lifestyle as well as targeted emotional responses, beliefs and values call for the consumer identification with peers and fellows. Such social context features are defined and sustained by means of carefully selected language choices apt to stimulate consumers' buying drive, which ultimately makes advertisements both the "medium and outcome of social practice" (Giddens 1984). On the other hand, if discourse is to be seen as a three-dimensional construct: as text, discursive *practice* and *social practice* (Fairclough 1992), then advertising simultaneously conveys and shapes ideologies to serve consumerism. Particularly along this line, the projection of women as feminine subjects is promotionally

sustained via consumerism of beautifying products, which facilitates the self actualization and liberation of women.

In systemic functional theory, the notion of social context is premised on the idea that language is metafunctionally based (ideational, interpersonal and textual) and that appraisal represents, along with involvement and negotiation, a significant resource for interpersonal meaning construction. The interpersonal function enables language to inform, question, make offers, express attitudes and beliefs, hence show the speakers'/writers' interferences in messages, which is why advertisements are typically analysed *as discourse* rather than *texts*, being text and context together.

The present thesis aims to examine the language of attitudinal appraisal with reference to sexuality on the basis of the discourse-semantic appraisal model proposed by Martin and White (2005), a model that deems *attitude* as one of the three fundamental tools for making interpersonal interpretations into *affect, judgment* and *appreciation*. The model helps trace and implicitly decode the interpersonal level in language, being explicit about writers' (and speakers') subtle and subjective commitment to texts as they embrace stances relative to both the individuals they communicate with and the language they make use of in the process.

Primarily studied as a genre, with a focus on the linguistic and stylistic features, advertisements in the present thesis have been analysed through the sub-genre of personal ads (PAs) with a view to explaining how, why and to what degree the language in the advertisement discourse builds and shapes attitudinal meanings with social effect.

Research Questions

APPRAISAL represents evaluation in texts and, as a term, it was used by Martin and White (2005) to distinguish it from the broader significance of the EVALUATION term and to underscore its discourse-semantic load.

This appraisal model stands for a perfect vehicle for the identification of the linguistic mechanisms underlying the text construction by communities of shared values, feelings and assessments. It helps identify the subtle ways by means of which writers, as well as speakers, are able to construct authorial identities and interventions, in particular with how writers engage with respondents in constructing an intended audience for their texts. The analysis model that this thesis uses is circumscribed to the longstanding tradition and concern of linguists for function and semiotics-based approaches to language, namely the *Systemic*

Functional Grammar, a perspective that was developed by M.A.K. Halliday (2002, 2004/1994), Martin (1992, 1997, 1997, 1997) and Matthiessen (1995) and which operates with three identifiably simultaneous modes of meaning occurring in every utterance – namely the *textual*, *ideational* and *the interpersonal*.

Our primary goal in the present thesis was to examine the language of attitudinal appraisal with respect to sexuality by developing and extending the SFL tenet of the interpersonal mainly beyond what has been traditionally referred to as 'affect' – which is the means by which writers are able to express their positive or negative evaluation of their own attitudes and well beyond 'epistemic modality' and 'evidentiality' – representing the means by which writers show commitment to utterance truth. Our approach extends such traditional accounts by exploring not only the possibilities of 'affect'' enabling writers to present their attitudes, but also the possibilities they have to activate assessment stances as well as enact readers and/or listeners to supply their own evaluations. As well, epistemic modality- and evidentiality-wise, our approach aims to attend to such issues concerning how writers' in-text voices position themselves relative to other voices or textual positions.

In light of the above considerations, our attitudinal appraisal of sexuality in this thesis has been premised on the following research questions and hypotheses:

- What is the speaker's or writer's opinion on sexuality in personal ads?

- To what extent is the speaker's opinion on sexuality in personal ads a reflection of his/her value system of his/her community?

- How can attitudinal appraisal/evaluation construct and maintain relations between the writer and reader?

- How is sexuality discourse organized?

- How is negotiation of meanings managed among real PA users and/or potential interlocutors (respondents)?

- How is solidarity among PA users negotiated?

- What is the frequency of occurrence of direct and indirect attitudes in personal advertisements?

- What are the characteristics of attitudinal choices? What about their status and social effect?

- Can these attitudinal choices be categorized? If yes, to what extent and how?

- Should the interest be only in the attitude-encoding potential of the language or rather in the linguistic potential for triggering attitudes?

Research Contribution

The appraisal framework has emerged as a need to develop and extend traditional enquiries into issues of speaker/writer's commitment and evaluation as well as accounts regarding the positioning of textual voice relative to both different voices and other positions in the textual discourse. Consequently, such a shift in theoretical orientation has triggered a closing approach towards an account of meanings in context rather than towards grammatical forms, on the basis that both grammar and discourse generally rest on a set of meaning making resources rather than being conceived as structure-making rules.

In our view, the appraisal model (Martin 2003; White 2003; Martin and White 2005) represents an adequate response to the social and subjective approach to evaluation, as it advances a complementary perspective on interpersonal and inter-subjective meanings beyond grammar and its clause level interpersonal systems (mood and modality). The interactive turn-taking focal point of these two mood-based systems are highlighted by the "personal" focus of interpersonal meaning in the appraisal model which makes it a good and most effective framework of evaluation in particularly what regards personal advertisements.

The appraisal model has been applied in different genres and approaches of various languages, experiential fields and genres that allow for the adjustment of the semantic systems of the model. No research has so far been conducted from this viewpoint on the Romanian personal advertisements placed in the online environment The results emerging from our examination of the attitudinal appraisal of sexuality on the basis of Martin's discursive-semantic model applied to Romanian online personal advertisements are apt to illustrate the huge potential of language to evoke all the participants' values, norms, relationships and choices across a wide spectrum of social effects.

Summary of Thesis

The thesis consists of 5 main chapters preceded by two Introductory and Conclusions Chapters.

CHAPTER II, entitled THE MEDIUM, provides a synchronic doubled by a diachronic view on advertising, reviews some fundamental advertising techniques and presents the genre of personal ads in the larger context of computer-mediated communication. It addresses the five critical questions that can be analyzed in advertising production: Who (Speaker), says What (Advertising Message), To Whom (Audience), How (by means of which media channel) and with What Intended Effect (Outcome). The chapter also reviews a great variety of scientific research that includes (non-)linguistic approaches concerned mostly with ideology and mass

communication, media standards, the semiotics of the media news and popular culture in Romania. With regard to a more systematic linguistic analysis, this Chapter examines two existing strands of analysis that have been distinguished with reference to media language: on the one hand that of *discourse structure* and *linguistic function*, on the other, that of the *ideological* and *the pragmatic*. The key questions addressed and expanded in this Chapter concern the way in which the language of advertisements during socialism in Romania and after the fracture of communism was apt to embed the cultural and social practices of their advertisers, being a reflection of cultural linguistic coding of social standards and norms.

Since, personal ads have become largely semiotic in their various combinations of written texts incorporating photographs or other forms of graphic design, which are intended to enhance expression and impact on reader's evaluation, this chapter also examines a set of commercial conventions (ATTENTION, INTEREST, DESIRE and ACTION) that point to the fact that, despite their seeming limitation in presentation, personal ads provide a wealth of meanings deriving mostly from the advertiser's attempt to project a most appealing, catchy and different image of himself/herself. Several subsections draw on personal ads in Romania and review the existing research on sexualities, language and language choice in personal ads.

CHAPTER III is entitled CORE ISSUES: LANGUAGE, GENDER AND SEXUALITY and sets out to conceptualize *sex, gender* and *sexuality* with a view to providing more (en)coding clarification of these terms in personal advertisements and hence in advertisers' self-representation. While the term sex marks biological (reproductive) distinctions between males and females, sexuality indicates how one externally depicts herself or himself at a (sub) conscious level and varies in flexibility of sexual expression. If sex is unquestionably biological, both sexuality (largely determined by one's early childhood development and culture) and gender rest on hardly any biological basis. Gender is primarily considered to be a cultural label used for distinguishing a male from a female whereas gender roles provide a wide array of choice in their acceptance throughout the world. The chapter also examines how sexes are often ascribed predicted behaviours and how reactions to deviations from the norm lead to viewing the deviant in a negative light, such as women who are criticized for aspiring to politically (or otherwise) powerful positions (often reserved for men). Terminology clarifications related to these core issues shed light on the nature and changing tastes of the gendered post-socialist culture that poses relevance for our thesis and for the triangulation of Language, Gender and Sexuality. Resting on various research methods by which personal advertisements may be approached for more in-depth analyses and for the

purpose of obtaining more information about gender, sexualities and partner search, this chapter outlines the operational framework of gender performativity, firstly in terms of *operational framework* and, secondly, in terms of *gender performativity*.

CHAPTER IV, entitled THE LANGUAGE OF APPRAISAL: A THEORETICAL MODEL, reviews the theoretical foundation underlying the present study. The APPRAISAL theoretical framework provides a description of identifiable language resources used to express feelings as well as attitudes, being a systematic account of evaluation sources, of voice interplay within texts, and of amplification of both ATTITUDE and ENGAGEMENT. This model represents a perfect vehicle for the identification of the linguistic mechanisms underlying the text construction by communities of shared values, feelings and assessments. It helps identify the subtle ways by means of which writers, as well as speakers, are able to construct authorial identities and interventions, in particular with how writers engage with respondents in constructing an intended audience for their texts. The chapter consists of four main sections: Section 4.1 highlights the larger context of the development of language studies following Chomsky's publication of Syntactic Structures (1957), Section 4.2 presents an outline of *Systemic Functional Linguistics* with its central concepts and tenets, Section 4.3 discusses Martin's discourse-semantic model whereas Section 4.4 reviews our model of analysis taking account of Bednarek's (2006) perspective on evaluation and newspaper discourse that is central to our approach.

 CHAPTER V, THE CORPUS, takes a practical focus to illustrate the main aspects related to building the necessary corpus and the sub-corpora necessary for the discursive-semantic model of sexuality appraisal in Romanian online personal advertisements. For all the apparent content transparency of all the 7 dating sites archives under examination, used as the main database, the chapter touches upon additional issues regarding the ease of access, topical variety of the personal ads posts, (4 topic categories), as well as the growing number of users and size of the archives. The difficulties inherent in dealing with huge files, an impressive topic variety, and an overwhelming data base including the endeavour of building a corpus have been clarified in this section along several important theory-related methodological aspects.

CHAPTER VI is entitled SEXUALITY APPRAISAL IN ROMANIAN ONLINE PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS and is structured into two sectional blocks: The first section summarizes the key findings of this research and provides a framework of suggested

readings for these results. The second section discusses the implications of the research, highlighting the particular contributions of this thesis.

The results obtained, in particular our findings on sexuality, are contributing fresh insights into the personal advertisers' opinion/reflection/self-identification on sexuality in personal ads, the perceived value system of both heterosexual men's, women's and gay's and lesbians' communities, into the very way sexuality discourse is organized, the management of meaning-making and solidarity among personal advertisers, the frequency of occurrence of direct and indirect attitudes in personal advertisements, into the characteristics, status and social effect of attitudinal choices, and not in the least amount, into the linguistic potential for sexuality- triggering attitudes.