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A pragmatic study of persuasive language in advertising

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Abstract

This study examines the role of Speech Acts Theory, especially Searle's classification, in forming persuasive language in advertising discourse. The paper analyzes various real-world advertisements and analyzes how assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations strategically affect consumer behavior. Through content analysis of selected marketing materials, supported by focus group insights and survey data, the findings reveal how different speech acts contribute to establishing credibility, evoking emotion, and motivating action. This paper also shows how linguistic theory can increase marketing strategies. The study highlights the interdisciplinary relevance of pragmatics in marketing and underscores the potential of linguistic theory as a tool for optimizing persuasive communication in competitive advertising environments.

Keywords: Speech act theory, persuasive language, advertising discourse, searle's classification, pragmatics, consumer behavior

1. Introduction

Problem of the Study

The study addresses the problem of understanding 'how' language functions strategically to persuade and influence consumer behavior in advertising. While it is widely acknowledged that advertising language is persuasive, there is a need for a systematic, theoretical framework to analyze the specific mechanisms behind this persuasion. The research identifies a gap in applying linguistic theory, specifically John Searle's Speech Act Theory, to deconstruct and understand the pragmatic force of advertising messages in real-world contexts. It seeks to move beyond the general observation that ads are persuasive and instead analyze 'what specific types' of linguistic acts are used and 'how' they achieve their persuasive effects.

2. Aims of the Study

The primary aims of this study are:

1. To examine the role and application of John Searle's classification of speech acts (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations) in advertising discourse.
2. To analyze how these different types of speech acts are used strategically to build credibility, evoke emotions, motivate action, and ultimately persuade consumers.
3. To demonstrate the practical relevance of linguistic theory (pragmatics) in the field of marketing and advertising.
4. To provide insights that can help advertisers optimize their communicative strategies for more effective campaign design.

3. Questions of the Study

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How are the different types of speech acts (based on Searle's taxonomy) manifested in persuasive advertising language?
2. What specific persuasive function does each type of speech act (assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, declaration) serve in influencing consumer perception and behavior?

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3. How can the application of Speech Act Theory enhance the understanding and creation of effective marketing communication?

4. Model Adopted

The study adopts John Searle's (1969) ^[12] Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts as its primary theoretical model. This model classifies speech acts into five categories:

1. **Assertives:** Statements that commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition (e.g., claims, descriptions).
2. **Directives:** Attempts by the speaker to get the hearer to do something (e.g., commands, requests).
3. **Commissives:** Commitments by the speaker to a future course of action (e.g., promises, guarantees).
4. **Expressives:** Expressions of the speaker's psychological state or attitude (e.g., thanking, congratulating).
5. **Declarations:** Utterances that bring about a change in reality simply by being successfully performed (e.g., declaring a product launched).

5. Methodology

The current research adopts a qualitative content analysis to study the data, guided by John Searle's Speech Act Theory from 1969. The goal is to look into the different kinds of speech acts seen in advertisements and discover how these acts support persuasion. In this study, the data is gathered by analyzing real advertisements found on online and social networking platforms and others, as well. The advertisements were chosen because they skillfully use words to persuade and cover a range of commercial products and services. Searle's definition of illocutionary acts includes five speech act categories: Assertives, Directives, Commissives, Expressives and Declarations. The methodology is made up of several points.

1. **Data Collection:** Advertisements that consist of persuasive messages gathered from advertised materials found on the internet. The advertisements are selected with care to show different expressions that are used as speech acts. And the selected persuasive statements are organized into structured tables. Each table includes: Number: A serial number assigned to each statement. Original Text: The original advertising phrase or utterance. Translation: The equivalent translation of the persuasive phrase into Arabic. Speech Act Type: The identified category of the speech act based on Searle's taxonomy.
2. **Data Analysis:** The analysis is carried out qualitatively and descriptively, focusing on identifying the illocutionary force of each utterance and discussing its pragmatic effect. The classification of the speech act type is justified through linguistic and contextual evidence. Each utterance is discussed with reference to its intended communicative function, whether to inform, command, promise, express emotion, or declare a change in state.

Advertising depends on using strategic language to convince the intended audience, one of the most important means of influencing consumer behavior. Advertisement language plays an informative and a director role in persuading people to buy goods or services. This is a valuable means of examining how the language accomplishes things in everyday conditions. Research suggests that language is

much higher than a tool for sharing facts; it is also used to promise and release commands and claims. According to the principle, speech plays a vital role in designing the reactions of the customers who come into contact with the advertising messages.

Searle (1969) ^[12] suggests that there are five basic categories of speech acts: One can use assertive, directives, commissives, expressions of feeling, and acts of pinning or holding beliefs. Research indicates that each type is used strategically to continue a special marketing purpose. On the other hand, directive acts persuade the public to purchase a product, whereas assertive acts transmit supporting details that build confidence in the product. The study aims to examine the function of speech acts in ads and the ways they can be used to design motivational ads. Real-life examples will show how marketers use the theory of speech acts to understand better the impact of language on influencing people in everyday situations.

Hence, one of the most essential theories in language study is speech act theory, particularly in discourse analysis and pragmatics. As a main subfield of linguistics, pragmatics helps us understand the implicit meaning of the utterances. Cited in (Hashim: 2023). "In general, pragmatics focuses on how what someone says is communicated by the speaker or writer and understood by the listener or reader". Cited in (Hamad: 2025) ^[4].

Austin (1962) ^[1] gives a clear definition of speech act theory as "the actions performed in saying something". Yule (1996) ^[17] states that linguistic labels such as apology, complaint, promise, and invitation are actions performed by utterances of speech acts. Speech acts theory shows the function and purpose of language in studying language and communication. Cited in (Fawzi: 2014). Searle (1969) ^[12] illustrates that making a command or asking a question are examples of performing speech acts through language. Searle's Speech Act Theory is selected to be applied to literary discourse to show that literary discourse has speech acts and performs illocutionary force.

1. **Previous studies:** Many studies have dealt with the role of Speech Act Theory in commercials, highlighting how language is used to achieve effect and persuasion. Searle (1969) ^[12], in his book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Searle presented a primary classification of speech acts, which became the basis for analyzing speech in various fields, including advertising. Searle identified that advertising relies primarily on directives and assertiveness to guide the audience toward purchasing decisions. Cook (1992) ^[2], "The Discussion of Advertising" noted that advertising is not just informative texts but communicative actions designed to change the target audience's behavior. He explained that declarative language manipulates feelings and the mind using verbs of expression and promise.

The role of Halliday (1978) ^[3] provided a framework for understanding the relationship between language and its social function, emphasizing that advertising relies on specific linguistic patterns to interact with the audience. His theories were used to study how declarative and informative verbs are applied to enhance the credibility of the advertising message. In their study, Wen-Ti Young and Katrina Harris (2005) ^[16] discussed the use of directive speech verbs in digital advertising. Phrases such as "Buy Now" or "register today" are among the

most influential in modern advertising. Recent studies on advertising speech analysis have addressed advertising analysis from a linguistic perspective, noting that the combination of promising and telling actions enhances consumer confidence in brands, especially in competitive markets.

Hence, previous studies indicate the importance of speech act theory in understanding the language strategies used in advertising, highlighting the power of language in influencing human behavior. These studies focus on the applications of theory in various fields, while this research aims to analyze real-life examples of advertising to clarify the role of speech acts in achieving persuasion and marketing.

2. **Theoretical Framework:** This study is fundamentally grounded in the theoretical framework of Speech Act Theory, primarily as developed by J.L. Austin (1962) ^[11] and systematized by John R. Searle (1969) ^[12], which provides the core analytical lens for understanding persuasive language in advertising. The research operationalizes Austin's tripartite model, distinguishing between the act of saying something (locutionary), the intention in saying it (illocutionary), and the effect it achieves (perlocutionary), to deconstruct how advertisements function as strategic communicative actions. Specifically, it applies Searle's (1969) ^[12] taxonomy of illocutionary acts, which classifies utterances into five categories (assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations), to analyze real-world advertisements. This framework allows for a systematic examination of how each type of speech act serves a distinct persuasive purpose: assertives build credibility, directives prompt action, commissives establish trust, expressives forge emotional connections, and declarations create new realities or events. By integrating this linguistic model with the objectives of marketing communication, the study demonstrates how pragmatic theory reveals the mechanisms through which language strategically influences consumer perception and behavior.

3. Classes of Speech Acts

3.1 Locutionary Acts

Austin distinguished speech acts into three types in his book entitled "How to Do Things with Words" Austin states that every utterance consists of three acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary (Tarigan, 2021) ^[15]. (Parker & Riley 2005) ^[7]. Binker (2004) describes locutionary acts as meaningful and transparent to the hearer. According to Surastina (2011) ^[13], locutionary acts are related to the speaker's production of a meaningful utterance. The purpose behind uttering locutionary is to introduce only meaningful linguistic expressions. Locutionary Acts include three subacts: the act of vocal noises, the act of words related to lexicogrammatical rules, and the act of using these words with meaning and reference. Uttering an illocutionary speech act means that a speaker has some functions and purposes to be done by the hearer. The acts reflect the force or power of the speaker in saying something. It describes with concerning the communication. The act may be persuading or annoying to achieve something or not (Levin 1976) ^[6]. The speaker creates an uttering to achieve an effect, so the impact on the

hearer is labeled prelocutionary (Robson and Stockwell 2005) ^[11].

3.2 Illocutionary Acts

Illocutionary acts are connected to the speaker's intent, meaning what the speaker wants to convey in their mind will be expressed through an utterance. This may include specific intentions embedded in the spoken words, the function of those words, and the particular goals the speaker has in mind (Surastina, 2011) ^[13]. An illocutionary act is the core function or intention performed in the act of uttering something. It is the purpose the speaker has in mind, the intended force of the utterance. While the locutionary act is the literal meaning of the words, and the perlocutionary act is the effect on the listener, the illocutionary act is the communicative purpose itself. In simpler terms, it answers the question: "What is the speaker doing by saying this?" For example, are they making a promise, issuing a threat, stating a fact, making a request, or giving an order? The same locutionary act (the string of words) can have different illocutionary forces based on context (e.g., "It's cold in here" could be a simple statement of fact or an indirect request to close the window) (Searle, 1969) ^[12].

3.3 and Perlocutionary Speech Acts

The perlocutionary speech act is related to how the effect received by the listener in understanding the intent of the speaker, which is manifested or occurs in an action. A perlocutionary act is the act of producing an effect, consequence, or change in the thoughts, feelings, or actions of the listener (the audience) through an utterance. It is not the act of saying something (locutionary) or the intention in saying something (illocutionary), but rather what is achieved by saying something. In essence, it is the pragmatic outcome or impact of the speech act. Perlocutionary acts are characterized by being:

Listener-Centered: The focus is entirely on the hearer (or reader, in the case of ads). It answers the question: "What did the utterance do to the audience?"

Consequential: It is defined by its results, which can be intentional or unintentional on the part of the speaker.

Beyond Language: The effect is a real-world phenomenon. It could be an emotional state (feeling happy, reassured), a cognitive state (being convinced, informed), or a physical action (purchasing a product, clicking a link). Surastina (2011) ^[13].

4. Searle's classifications of Speech acts

Searle provided important classifications of speech acts that are divided into five main types, particularly focusing on illocutionary acts. According to Searle, speech acts relate to the intentions held by the speaker and how these actions affect the listener. Also, Searle (1969) ^[12] says that "all linguistic communication involves linguistic acts" (Cited in Adeeb, 2024, p. 76) ^[4]. There are five types in Searle's classifications of speech act, particularly in the context of illocutionary act (Parker & Riley 2005) ^[7].

4.1 Assertives: Statements that convey information or beliefs about the world. It represents the reality of utterance (Yule 1996) ^[17]. By relating a word to the world as perceived by the speaker, it demonstrates truth. For example, "The car is too expensive." If the statement is

accurate, it satisfies the success of fit. An assertive statement is used to describe a certain condition of things, such as "The sky is blue." This statement asserts a fact about the world.

4.2. Directives: Acts that aim to get the listener to do something or to persuade the listener to do something, such as giving an order or a request, such as saying "close the door". Also, it is an utterance used to direct the hearer to achieve something. That matches the world fit with the words (Peccei1999)^[10]. For example, Could you please pass the salt?" This request directs the listener to perform an action.

4.3. Commissives: Statements in which the speaker commits to a future action. Searle states that such utterance commits the speakers to achieve specific things in the future. For example, I promise to help you with your project." The speaker commits to providing assistance in the future. This kind of utterance, involves offer, the act of promising and so on.

4.4. Expressive: Acts that express the speaker's emotional state or feelings. For instance, "I'm sorry for your loss." This statement expresses sympathy and conveys the speaker's feelings. In this type of utterance the speaker states his emotion state for instance "never mind." Presupposes, it is a response to a person who offers an apologizing. Apologizing expresses the speaker state of the affair rather than reality. Expressive has no direction of fit. This kind of utterance involves: congratulating, apologizing and so on.

4.5. Declarations: Statements that bring about a change in the world simply by being uttered. For instance, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." This utterance changes the legal status of the individuals involved. The illocutionary speech act results in changing the status of something.

1. Assertive Speech Acts

"Our toothpaste is scientifically proven to whiten teeth in just two weeks."
(معجون الأسنان الخاص بنا مثبت علميًا لتبييض الأسنان في أسبوعين فقط)

Analysis and Discussion

1. Confirmation of the speech: this speech employs as an assertive speech act, since it aims to transfer information the speaker holds to be true. This persuasive effect works since the phrase "scientifically proven" (مثبت علميًا) makes the statement more credible, while "in just two weeks" (في أسبوعين فقط) appeals to the consumer's desire for quick results. The word "just" (فقط) minimizes the time frame and is very important because it increases the desire for the product by advertising quick effects and the outcome sound even more attractive. Together, these linguistic choices create trust (ثقة) and urgency (الحاج) that push the customer towards believing and buying the product. From a pragmatic standpoint, assertive acts like this are central to building consumer trust. This short duration helps enhance the product's appeal from a consumer perspective.

2. Credibility: The term "scientifically" علميًا is strategically employed to try to gain the consumer's trust and show it is

reliable, making the consumer feel more confident in the product. Scientific validation also implies that the claim can be based on objective evidence rather than subjective opinion or marketing hype. According to John Searle, "Our toothpaste is scientifically proven to whiten teeth in just two weeks" represents an assertive speech act. It does this by definitely saying the product works as intended which Searle considers an assertion of fact. According to Searle, assertive acts aim to convey information or facts the speaker believes are true. In this case, the statement affirms the efficacy of the toothpaste in reporting a fact that the speaker considers certain. The phrase "scientifically proven" reinforces this assertion by providing an objective basis for the claim, making it sound reliable and verifiable. And using these three points: Credibility (Ethos): using the word "scientifically" → increases the credibility of the speech. Passion (Pathos): "in just two weeks" arouses hope and enthusiasm in the consumer. Logic (Logos): the claim seems to be based on scientific data; it is presented as a rational logic.

2. Directive Speech Act

"Order now and get 50% off!"
(اطلب الآن واحصل على خصم 50%)

Analysis and Discussion

This phrase provides an example of a directive speech act, which tries to motivate the listener to take specific action. Here's how the persuasion works in your directive speech act that affect the people. For example, urgency (الحاج): the imperative form "Order now" (اطلب الآن) gives a direct command, making the consumer feel they must act immediately. And the use of imperative form ("Order now" (حافز): the "50% off" (خصم) functions as a reward, creating motivation through saving money. Also, it indicates that the speaker is asking the listener to take a specific action (e.g., "order now") to receive a discount. This speech is the goal-oriented, which intends to change the behavior of the listener in favor of the speaker's business purposes. From a practical point of view, a directive speech in the advertisement is designed to eliminate immediate consumer commitment. Searle defines directive speech as those speech acts intended to cause the listener to take action, and this example utilizes both command and encouragement to influence behavior and fits squares within that classification. Directive: the speaker conveys an invitation or an order to the listener in order to make a purchase immediately to take advantage of the offer.

Intention: The speaker's intention is to motivate the listener to make a quick decision to buy (order NOW), thereby benefiting from the discount.

Content: The phrase presents an incentive (50% discount) that increases the likelihood that the listener will feel the need to respond to this directive to get the offered feature.

3. Commissive Speech Act

"We promise 100% satisfaction or your money back!"
(نحن نعدك بالرضا التام أو استرداد أموالك)

Analysis and Discussion

The phrase "We promise 100% satisfaction or your money back!" is consistent with the type of speech act called covenants (commission). We promise" → **وعد صريح** (clear pledge) first creates a binding sense of trust and second customers feel the company is morally and commercially obligated. This type of speech act involves the speaker expressing a future commitment or a promise to do something. The language of promise ("We promise 100%") constitutes a binding expression of intention, which is foundational in creating consumer assurance. The goal of this commitment is to build trust and encourage the customer to make a purchase decision with confidence. The phrase "We promise 100% satisfaction or your money back!" is also "100% satisfaction" → **رضا كامل** (total satisfaction) that refers to two things: first, strong quantifier ("100%") convinces emotionally and logically and second suggests perfection and no compromise. This phrase "Your money back" → **فلوسك راجعة** (refund guarantee) indicates two things: first, eliminates fear of loss and second Customers think: "I can't lose either way.", which builds trust and encourages the customer to make a purchasing decision.

4. Expressive Speech Act

"You deserve the best, and we're here to provide it."

(أنت تستحق الأفضل، ونحن هنا لنقدمه لك)

Analysis and Discussion

This phrase is a kind of expressive speech act, expressing the feelings or personal beliefs of the individual speaking. The phrase stands for an expressive speech act "you deserve the best, and we are here to provide it." fits into the fourth type of speech act in Searle's classification. These phrases "You deserve the best, and we are here to provide it." works persuasively because: (1) expressive (**مشاعرية**) → It shows care, **احترام، تقدير** for the customer. (2) personalization (**شخصنة**) → Using the word "you" directly addresses the listener, making them feel important. (3) positive Emotion (**عاطفة إيجابية**) → The word "deserve" (**تستحق**) creates a feeling of value and worthiness. (4) promise (**وعد**) → The second part "we are here to provide it" builds trust and assurance. Each word indicates something important such as (You) (**أنت/أنت**) → makes the message personal. Deserve (**تستحق**) → creates **إحساس بالقيمة والجدارة**. Best (**الأفضل**) → taps into the desire for quality and excellence. Here (**هنا**) → shows closeness, comfort, and presence.

Therefore, using the word "deserve" to address someone shows you hold them in high regard and feel respect, care and liking for them. They help create an emotional and personal bond between the brand and the people watching. The phrase "You deserve the best, and we are here to provide it," is an act of the type of acknowledgment (Expressive) in Searle's theory. The speaker (company or brand) expresses appreciation and respect to the listener, asserting they deserve the best. The main goal of this phrase is to strengthen the emotional connection with the listener and build trust and loyalty to the brand.

5. Declaration Speech Act

"We're launching the newest model this Friday!"

(سنطلق الطراز الأحدث يوم الجمعة القادم)

Analysis and Discussion

This sentence qualifies as a declarative speech act, where the speaker utters a change in the external world through the utterance itself. According to Searle's classification, declarations are speech acts that, once uttered, change a situation or social change. The phrase "We" **جماعية، قوة** represents an official announcement by the speaker (likely a company or brand) making an official announcement regarding a future event - the launch of the newest model. **عنصر التجديد والحدثة (جاذبية للزبون)**. This announcement does not just provide information or convey a request; it contributes to a change in reality, as the launch occurs as soon as the speaker announces it. When the speaker reveals the new model, they can inspire listeners or customers to be more interested and motivated to purchase or watch further details.

These types of acts are used to increase focus and interaction in marketing campaigns. The phrase "We will launch **إعلان حتمي، ليس مجرد احتمال** the latest model next Friday! **توقيت محدد، يخلق إحساس بالانتظار والترقب**" The declaration of the announcement is because it brings into reality as soon as it is declared. The launch takes place on the specified date, and the statement becomes reality as soon as it is performed. Therefore, these words together make the message more reliable + mandatory + interesting, achieving the desired effect on the customer (attention, anticipation, willingness to buy).

Results

The paper indicates that language behavior theory provides a useful structure to understand how the language is used in advertising to achieve specific effects. By integrating linguistic analysis into marketing strategies, advertisers can create a more effective campaign that can better contact the audience. Understanding speech behavior can help improve advertising for advertising, which increases the success of marketing campaigns in competitive markets. In addition to, it was found that the Searle's classification can be applied in advertisements. With assertive speech acts, products were often given credibility with claims like "scientific proof". The directive usually includes "Buy right now" or tells people about a "Special offer." Many companies use commissive speech acts, mainly offering satisfaction guarantees, to encourage trust and make customers less unsure about buying. Expressive speech acts help form emotional connections with audiences, often used in messages like "You deserve the best". In the end, declaration speech acts sometimes appear in launch announcements or updates about status changes. They demonstrate that certain words and phrases are used for distinct reasons to help with persuasion.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes the critical role of Speech Act Theory in developing effective advertising strategies. By analyzing and examining various types of speech acts, such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, this research highlights how advertisers strategically employ language to influence consumer behavior and foster emotional connections. The findings demonstrate that understanding the nuances of speech acts enhances the credibility of advertisements and provides valuable insight into consumer motivations. Moreover, integrating linguistic principles into market research not

only improves the design of persuasive advertisements but also deepens our understanding of the relationship between language and consumer choice. As advertising landscape becomes increasingly competitive, the need to apply linguistics principles is expected to become increasingly important for the creation of persuasive communication campaigns. The study calls for further investigation of Speech Act Theory within the marketing domain, and encourages industry professionals to integrate linguistic perspectives and craft messages that are appealing to their target market audience. Productions should seek to further explore the effects of speech acts in various advertising scenarios and their effect on consumers' trust and engagement.

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