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## **ANALYSIS OF VAGUENESS IN ENGLISH ADVERTISEMENT FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ADAPTION THEORY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

With the development of economic globalization, advertising, as a marketing strategy to attract consumers, is exerting more and more influence on people's consumption behavior. In the modern society, the application of language skills has been paid much more attention to when commercial advertisement is being designed. Thus, the effect of capturing attention as well as stimulating the consumption desires can be achieved. Adaptation Theory, proposed by Verschueren, provides a pragmatic perspective in the study of language. This thesis analyses the application and function of vagueness used in English cosmetic advertisements from the perspective of adaptation theory, expecting to provide enlightenment for the vagueness research and help common readers have a better understanding of English cosmetic advertisements.

**Keywords:** Adaptation Theory, Cosmetic, English advertisement, Vagueness

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to the Association of National Advertisers, advertisement refers to a notice which intends to provide information for consumers, simultaneously to capture their attention and to motivate their aspiration of consuming (Gu Jiazuo, 2000). With the rapid development of society and economy, the living standard is greatly improved and advertisement has permeated our daily lives. Cosmetic consumption has become fashionable as loving beauty is an important part of human nature. In order to seize this commercial opportunity and promote the products, the cosmetic industry attaches great importance to their advertisements. Advertisers prefer to employ various kinds of common linguistic strategies involves vagueness to make their advertisements more persuasive, so it is useful for every potential customer to distinguish the vagueness in the English cosmetic advertisements and pick up the most valuable information.

Advertising has become an important subject in many fields such as marketing, linguistics and sociology for its essential role played in the modern society. The past a few decades have witnessed a large number of research results in advertising language both at home and abroad. More and more linguists have begun to focus on the study of advertising language and made great contributions. In general, scholars both at home and abroad have explored advertising language from various aspects, such as lexical, syntactic, pragmatic, stylistics and so on.

A lot of researches have been carried out on advertising language in many aspects, but few have been conducted on cosmetic advertisements. As cosmetic advertisements have become increasingly popular and common in daily life, it is essential to know the characteristics and purposes of English cosmetic advertisement language, which is included in business English. Therefore, the study of cosmetic language is helpful to business teaching and learning. The author pays great attention to the investigation of vagueness in cosmetic advertisements.

The Adaptation Theory proposed by Verschueren, which has contributed much to linguistic research, provides practical, comprehensive and systematical models for pragmatic vagueness in cosmetic advertisement and connects advertisement and daily life. The previous studies and research results have built a solid theoretical basis for the present research, but few studies on the vagueness in cosmetic advertisements have been analyzed under Adaptation Theory. The major objective of this thesis is to apply the Adaptation Theory into the research of vagueness in cosmetic advertisements. To conduct a systemic research on the English cosmetic advertisements, qualitative and descriptive methods are adopted in this study. All the samples in this thesis are mainly attained through the access to some important websites, magazines, newspapers, and so on.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 The Adaptation Theory**

The Adaptation Theory was created and developed by Jef Verschueren who was the secretary of the International Pragmatic Association. After a great deal of research, he first put forward the notion of the Adaption Theory in 1987 when he wrote the paper Pragmatic as a Theory of Linguistic Adaption. After that, he elaborated this theory in his book Understanding Pragmatics which published in 1999. This book was considered as the symbol of the maturity of the Adaption Theory for it underlines the significance and perfection of the theory. Verschueren pointed out (Verschueren, 2000) :“it is impossible to identify pragmatics as a specified unit of analysis, so that it cannot partake in the division of labor associated with the traditional components of a linguistic theory...therefore, pragmatics should not be regarded as an additional component of a theory of language, but pragmatics offers a different perspective”. The

Adaptation Theory extends the range of linguistic study.

After carefully reviewed traditional pragmatics subjects, Verschueren put that, compared with linguistics of language resources, linguistics of language use differs from the component view of linguistics, but it is closely link with cognitive, social and cultural elements which cannot be neglected as exploring the complicity of linguistic usage and behaviors in human life (Verschueren, 2000). The limit of previous researches on pragmatics is that most of them are not analyzed from comprehensive view. Verschueren advocates that linguistic phenomenon should be studied from the realistic and functional view including cognitive, social and cultural perspective. Based on this, Verschueren further defined pragmatics as “a general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behavior” and accordingly develops the Adaptation Theory. The key notion of this theory will be introduced in detail.

### **2.1.1 Making Choices**

The Adaptation Theory derives from the theory evolution which put forward the idea of evolutionary epistemology, which holds that adaptation is significant for organism involves human to gain the dynamic balance between the surroundings and themselves. According to Verschueren, use of language is quite similar to the process of adaptation in nature (Verschueren, 2000). In order to satisfy the need of communication, linguistic choices from all sorts of possibilities should be made by both speaker and hearer consciously or unconsciously. The following are characteristics the process of making choices has. Firstly, choices are made at every possible level of linguistic structure like phonetics, words, sentence patterns or grammatical forms and so on at the same time. Secondly, both communicative forms and strategies are concerned by speakers. Thirdly, the process of making choice can reflect speaker's various degree of consciousness. That is, some choices are made on purpose to achieve certain communication needs while some are made without intention. Fourthly, choices are implemented in both producing and understanding an utterance, which ensures the smooth communication and the way meaning created. Fifthly, a language user is not free from choice-making or not if only he keeps silence which also can express some meaning under certain situation. Finally, the choices are not equivalent because selections of certain linguistic forms as well as strategies are closely related to social and cultural factors. Different people choose to produce and interpret the context in different ways when they are in different situations.

### **2.1.2 Three Features of Language**

People continuously make choice during the communication in daily life because language has three features, including variability, negotiability and adaptability, which Verchueren has claimed

in his book. Furthermore, these three key notions have hierarchical relationship. According to Verschueren, variability is the possible alternatives that people can choose (Verschueren, 2000). For example, words such as beautiful, handsome or pretty can be chose to describe a good-looking person. The scope of possible selections is not stable and fixed but a changing and flexible one on synchronic and diachronic perspective. Besides, both linguistic forms and communicative strategies are involved in the process of choice. With different communicative goals people convey similar viewpoints in different ways. And the selections are under various levels of awareness. Some are selected consciously while some are automatically. In this thesis, as the vagueness in cosmetic advertisements is concerned, the choice is definitely deliberate because copywriters could achieve their special goals. This consciousness can usually be seen from the communicative strategies and structural forms that they choose.

According to Verschueren, negotiability refers to the property of language responsible for the fact that choices are not made mechanically or according to strict rules or fixed form-function relationships, but rather on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies (Verschueren, 2000). That is, when making choice, there is no restrict linguistic principles people should abide by but only correctness and suitability in the pragmatic principles. Briefly speaking, pragmatic principles are several formal pragmatic policies presumed by participants of communication and direct people's behavior in daily life. Compared with rules which are definite, principles are more flexible and allow language users to negotiate. As a result of the existence of the pragmatic principles, negotiation can be possibly made. Negotiability also means uncertainties of linguistic choices can be made as well as renegotiated permanently on both sides of speaks and listeners.

It has been illustrated above that linguistic choices can be selected from different possibilities and are lasting negotiable. But it is adaptability enable language perform communicative function successfully. Verschueren defined that adaptability is the property of language which impels people to make negotiable linguistic choice from a scope of possibilities in order to achieve the needs of communication in specific context (Verschueren, 2000).

Therefore, it can be inferred from above discussion that variability and negotiability provide a basic foundation, and adaptability is considered as the ultimate goal and result. These three features of language are fundamentally inseparable and correlated. Adaptability regards as the core in language use, however, without variability and negotiability, it can never obtain the communicative goals.

### **2.1.3 Four Angles of Investigation**

As it has been discussed in the previous section that variability and negotiability are basic foundation in linguistic choice-making, while adaptability is the ultimate result. Using adaptation

as the starting point, Verschueren makes explanations of pragmatic from four angles of investigation. These four elements include contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability, and salience of the adaptation process. These four angles together can be regarded as essential component of an adequate pragmatic perspective no matter what given linguistic phenomenon it is. However, each of them does not have equal value for pragmatic investigations. Their functions are different and complementary to each other.

First of all, the most vital angle is contextual correlates of adaptability, which involves all the ingredient of communicative context requiring adaptation by making choice. The range of context goes from physical environments to social relationships between speakers and listeners as well as the state mind of interlocutors. In conclusion, the communicative context embraces four aspects, including language user, physical world, social word and mental word.

Secondly, according to Verschueren, "Structural objects of adaptability refer to 'structures' in the strict sense (at various layers or levels of organization) as well as principles of 'structuring'" (Verschueren, 2000). The structural objects of adaptability indicate that linguistic research penetrates into all levels of linguistic structure. In the linguistic system, structure refers to phonetics, morphology, text and so on. Different levels of linguistic structure account for the suitable linguistic choice-making when they adapted to certain context. Therefore, the structural aspect is an unneglectable factor in the study of language.

Thirdly, the dynamics of adaptability refers to the dynamic process of choice-making and corresponds to the context over time. Choices of linguistic forms are made in the actual dynamics of adaptation. From Verschueren's point of view (2000), dynamics of adaptability shows how communication principles and strategies are used when linguistic choices are made in the process of making an utterance and interpreting an utterance. In addition, structural objects of adaptability together with context correlates can explain the combination of linguistic and non-linguistic in a linguistic phenomenon. Thus the function of language refers to the dynamic process manipulating in context-structure relationship.

Finally, salience of the adaptation process is the last angle of investigation, which should be concerned with at the same time. According to Verschueren, salience is a function brought from operating the reflexive awareness during the process of language use (Verschueren, 2000). That is, salience is a state of process of meaning generation related to the cognitive apparatus. It can be concluded from daily communication that choices as well as adaptations are not made randomly and spontaneously. As it is mentioned above, people select the linguistic choices under different level of consciously. Human mind plays a key role both in generating and understanding certain linguistic choices.

These four angles of investigation are considered as indispensable parts of a comprehensive pragmatic analysis on any given linguistic phenomenon. They are mutually related and provide an all-round framework. Context adapts to structural objects flexibly, both of which observe the principle of dynamic adaptation. Whatever varieties of choices and adaptations are made, they are all made under certain degree of salience.

## **2.2 Vagueness**

Vague language and expressions can be seen in everyday life. For instance, no one can tell exactly what is good and what is bad, no one can tell exactly which day is the beginning of spring and which day is the ending of winter. Another example is that we can easily say a girl is beautiful, but it is hard to tell an exact boundary of a beautiful and ugly people. Similarly, it is difficult to tell how long a stream should be to become a river; it is difficult to tell how big a hill should be to become a mountain. Therefore, it can be concluded that this kind of indefiniteness of language is called vagueness.

In addition, different linguists have different viewpoints on the definition of vagueness. Peirce, as the initiator and producer of this term, argue that, "A proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regard them as excluded or allowed by the proposition" (Channell, 2000). That is, vague words can be interpreted more than one possible meaning under different situation on different communicative purposes. Some scholars also try to trace the causes of vagueness used in language. From Ullmann's point of view (1962), there are several causes and some of them are intrinsic while others only account for certain situations. He provides four reasons for the existence of vagueness. The first one is that words have generic characteristic; secondly, the meaning of words is always based on context; thirdly, boundaries cannot be cut clearly in the non-linguistic world; the last one lies in people's unfamiliarity with the representation of words. After that, Crystal & Davy also list four factors includes memory loss, no exactly suitable word (or the language user are unaware of it), no requiring for precise and achieving some goals deliberately. In this thesis, as talking about advertisements, it is obvious that vagueness is intentionally used by writers.

Based on this definition and causes discussed above, as well as Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, this thesis analyzes the phenomenon of vagueness in the English cosmetic advertisements.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF VAGUENESS IN ENGLISH COSMETIC ADVERTISEMENT**

At the beginning of this thesis, advertising language is introduced as the language manipulated by advertisers with the intention to persuade consumers to buy certain products or services. In

order to achieve this goal successfully, advertisers usually employ abundant communicative strategies includes vagueness. As demonstrated in section 2.1, in accordance with Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, "using language consists of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) and/or language-external reasons." (Verschueren, 2000) Language users can make linguistic choices at whatever level of language. Based on this theory, the vagueness employed in cosmetic advertisements can be researched in three aspects: adaptation on structural level, adaptation to contextual correlates and pragmatic effects. Thus, in this chapter, these three aspects will be analyzed respectively in detail through examining numerous English cosmetic advertisements.

### **3.1 Variability of Vagueness in English Cosmetic Advertisement**

#### **3.1.1 The Lexical Level**

A successful English cosmetic advertisement depends more or less on the choice of appropriate and correct language strategies. In order to achieve the persuading needs, strategies are carefully applied by the advertisers. Vagueness is one of these language strategies that advertisers used in cosmetic advertisements to grasp more consumers' eyes and achieve the intended effects.

##### **(1). Hedging**

According to the book *A Survey of Pragmatic*, the definition of hedges is that words or phrases whose function is to make things fuzzy. From the point of Biber, hedges are those informal and less specific makers of possibilities and uncertainty.

Generally speaking, there are two categories of hedges can be classified based on their different functions: one is called approximator and the other is shield. To introduce the approximator first, it is a term that refers to those hedges that revise the truth-conditions of propositions and modify the original meaning of the communication to a certain degree according to the real situation. This kind of hedges usually includes phrases like sort of, almost, very, really and so on. While shield does not affect the degree of truth-condition but it can reflect the affirmation of the speaker's tone. For example, perhaps, I think, I believe and so on. In the English cosmetic advertisements, when vagueness adopted, advertisers can broaden the potential meaning and give listeners more freedom to understand and interpretation the utterance. Be afraid of failing to keep their promise to potential consumers, advertisers usually apply hedges to enlarge their commodity's effect as well as protect their own interests to the max.

Example 1: Our richest expression of color for the sultriest smokies.  
(L'oreal Paris Eye Shadow)

Example 2: Get your softest, smoothest, most kissable lips with the widest range of fashionable shades, only from Revlon Color Authority.

(Revlon Super Lustrous Lipstick)

Example 3: Beauty that is skin deep just went deeper. At last, a silky makeup that works exactly like the best skincare.

(Neutrogena Healthy Skin Liquid Makeup)

Example 4: Finally, a better clean from a gentle cleanser. So gentle, dermatologists recommend it for sensitive skin.

(Neutrogena Ultra Gentle Daily Cleanser)

In examples 1 and 2, vagueness words are applied by advertisers to strengthen products' functions as to cater to consumers. The superlative words richest, softest, smoothest, most kissable, and widest, all of which are vagueness, used in cosmetic advertisements on the purpose of enlarging the wonderful and intensive effects of commodities. Instead of using the true numbers or statistics, advertisers provide readers with an idea that the two products better than other similar brands. In the example 3 and 4, the comparatives such as deeper and better are hedges used by advertisers to stress the effect of products without comparing with other cosmetic products. In this way, it reduces the commitment to certain facts in that whether the skin gets better care is unknown. However, it allows gives more imaginary space to consumers and even have the power of attraction and mystery.

## (2). Commendatory Adjectives

Adjectives are widespread in cosmetic advertisements. There is no obvious boundary between new and old, beautiful and ugly. Therefore, it can be concluded that adjectives have no definite and clear connotations and their meanings are unsure. It is this characteristic and feature that advertisers use it to create a vague yet beautiful image of the products and services. By adopting this strategy, advertisers can both achieve their promotion aims and also defend themselves when problems and controversies occur. Cosmetic advertisements are marked by a great deal of adjective vocabularies. The highly frequent used adjectives are: amazing, clean, clear, good, new, wonderful, fresh, smooth, new, safe and etc.

Example 5: Discover a dermatologist's way to reveal fresh, new, healthy skin.

(L' Oreal Advertisement)

Example 6: Harder, smoother snails in seven days!

(Sally Hansen Nail Oil Advertisement)

Example 7: Lime-fragrant, fresh, pure.

(Headline of Lime Shampoo Advertisement)



In the above advertisements, the commendatory evaluative adjectives play an important role in the whole sentence. fresh, new, pure, and healthy are wonderful words that allow women associate with good image. Thus, cosmetic advertisements can easily grasp women's eyes by using this language strategy and persuade them to buy the products for women tend to be moved by beautiful and fragrant things. The skillful use of these evaluative adjectives can add glaze to an advertisement. Therefore, it is common to find evaluative adjectives used in cosmetic advertisements.

### (3). Numbers and Percentages

Another distinctive feature of cosmetic advertising is the usage of numbers and percentage. When numerals and quantifiers applied in scientific field, they are accurate. However, if they are used in the context where they don't signify and stress any specific numbers, their numerical meaning is cancelled with associate meaning conducted instead. The specific numbers and quantifiers turned into vague words. In cosmetic advertising, this strategy is often used to create special rhetorical effects and persuade audiences to believe the real effect of the product. The employment of numbers and percentage can promote certain cosmetic products and fulfill advertisers' communicative needs.

Example 8: Go sleeveless in just 5 days.

(Dove Go Sleeveless Soothing Chamomile)

Example 9: 72 hours ultra-polished, frizz control.

(L'oreal Polishing Shampoo)

Example 10: 5 days, 3 steps, 1 healthy—looking you.

(Olay Complete Ageless)

Example 11: 7 benefits of a Salon Manicure in 1 bottle! With up to 10-day wear.

(Sally Hansen Complete Salon Manicure)

From the first sight, these cosmetic advertisements are common and plain. The winning point of these advertisements is the employment of the numbers and percentage, such as 5 days, 72 hours, 3 steps, 7 benefits and so on. Advertisers use the numbers to emphasize the quick and great effect of the products. The numbers will arouse consumers' interests to see whether this product can really fulfill their needs in the given time. It will be appealing to consumers and give them margins to imagine the good effect. The audience will be offered more space and room for aesthetic interpretation.

Example 12: Now reduce hair fall by 64% due to breakage.

(L'oreal Reinforcing Shampoo)

Example 13: 24-HR bounce-back hold even in 90% humidity powered by natural bamboo extract.

(Garnier Anti-humidity Hairspray)

In examples 12 and 13 advertisers use seemingly concrete numbers 64% and 90% to intensify the strong effect of these cosmetic products. To a certain degree, the percentages of 64% and 90% are also vague for the exact number is hard to examined. In conclusion, the employment of numbers and percentage can promote certain cosmetic.

### **3.1.2 The Syntactic Level**

We have discussed above that vagueness in cosmetic advertisements is realized by manipulating linguistic devices on lexical level. Nevertheless, the employment of unusual syntactical structures in cosmetic advertisements could also achieve the effect of vagueness. Vagueness in advertisement is usually realized by refuting the traditional grammatical rules or collocating different parts of sentences.

#### **(1) Adopting Indirect Speech Acts**

The action of indirect speech act heavily relies on the mutually shared background knowledge between speakers and hears. Based on Austin's Speech Act Theory, Searle proposed the indirect speech act theory, which mainly refers to the situation that an illocutionary performance is done by performing another. And from Leech's point of view, speakers leave hearers the part of the responsibility of the meaning. For this reason, indirect speech acts are often tactfully employed to activate vagueness in English advertisements. Advertisers usually adopt questions, declarative sentences and imperative sentences as a strategy to perform such illocutionary acts.

Example 14: Are you starting to notice telltale lines around your eyes?

This re-texturing eye treatment targets those signs, which are directly related to dryness and loss of elasticity, with three active complexes.

(La Prairie)

Example 15: Do you crave a more even-toned, more luminous complexion-yet with a natural "un-made-up" appearance? Then this product is the product for you!

(La Prairie)

Example 17: Capture the World of Color.

(L'Oreal)

Example 18: Don't make matte forever.

(Estee Lauder)

In examples 14 and 15, advertiser applies two questions from the standpoint of female consumer to attract consumers' attention. In example 15, the question conveys that the product can solve the any problem of appearance. This advertisement is appealing to those consumers who wish to have even-toned and luminous appearance. Therefore, this product is a wise choice and then under this temptation people buy it. Examples 16 and 17 are imperative sentences which are more influential and absorbing. In this reason, it is widely used by advertisers to achieve the purpose of persuading and guiding people to try and buy the products. The above four examples, advertisers' ideas are not imposed on consumers. However, they leave consumers part responsibility of the understanding. Through indirect speech acts, advertisers can both achieve their goals and mitigate the enforcement on consumers.

## (2) Adopting Figures of Speech

Advertisers also adopt vagueness through figures of speech to arouse the consumers' interest of the products and purchase that on impulse. Language is the tool to convey ideas, while figure is the art of language utterance. Usage of figure of speech can greatly improve the capability and effect of language, and enhance the vitality of advertisements. Therefore, advertisers employ various and numerous figures of speech when they design the cosmetic advertisements. One of the most widely used is metaphor, which will be discussed in detail in this section. As a kind of vagueness, metaphor allows advertisers to express a range of meaning. In this way, consumers have more freedom to interpret and understand. The consumers' attention is attracted and their association is created.

Example 19: Texture is polished to a silky glow.

(Shiseido White Lucent)

Example 20: Your eyes are the windows to your soul, not your age.

(Philosophy Miraculous Anti-aging Retinoid Eye Repair)

Example 21: Dare to be a work of art.

(Revlon Nail Art Expressionist)

Example 22: The only mascara that does for lashes what stilettos do for legs.

(Maybelline Lash Stilettos)

Example 19 is a typical advertisement that describes the quality of the product by means of metaphor. It urges consumers to imagine and associate the excellence of the product. In example 20, advertisers compare eyes to windows of people's soul which attach importance to eyes. Then consumers are will to buy the Eye Repair. The next two examples also adopt metaphor to urge consumers to better understand the quality of the products. All the examples realize the vague effect and provide consumers with a good and fantastic image of the products they promote

through metaphor. Thus, it can be said that metaphor plays an essential role in English cosmetic advertisements.

### **3.2 Adaptability of Vagueness in English Cosmetic Advertisement**

As has been iterated in previous sections, vagueness is a highly conscious act of linguistic choice. Its wide application in English cosmetic advertisements is highly motivated and intention-driven. According to Verschueren's Adaptation Theory, vagueness is employed as an effective communicative strategy resulting from certain extra-linguistic factors. In this section, the production of vagueness depends on the non-linguistic contextual correlates in cosmetic advertisements is analyzed.

As Verschueren illustrated in his Linguistic Adaptation Theory, "adaptability is the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communication needs" (Verschueren, 2000). Contextual correlates of adaptability, which "motivate and/or are affected by the linguistic choices that are made", are constituents of context. According to Verschueren's Linguistic Adaptation Theory, contextual correlates of adaptability probably involve all the constituents of the communicative context with which linguistic have to be interadaptable. The scope varies from sides of the physical surroundings to social relationships between language speakers and language interpreters and sides of language users' state of mind including both producers and interpreters. In order to discuss it in more detail, the constituents which are inter-adaptable contain: language users, mental world, social world and physical world. The properties of speakers and hearers play an important role in contextual correlates. A specific context sets up around speakers and hearers. In speech communication, the contextual aspects of the physical, social, and mental world play a role in the process of producing and interpreting language. They are activated by the language producer's cognitive process. In the following parts, linguistic adaptation to the mental world, to the social world and to the physical world will be analyzed respectively.

#### **3.2.1 Adaptation to the Mental World**

Mind plays a very important role in the process of language use. Thus, when making linguistic choices in certain cases, the contextual factors acting in the mental world plays a significant role. Due to the present widespread bearing of psychology on cosmetic advertisements, the adaptation to the mental world will be analyzed firstly. Mental world represents belief, personality, emotion, desires or wishes, motivates of language users. The language users include both speakers and interpreters. In order to have a clear perspective, we divide the adaptation process into two parts: consumer-oriented adaptation and advertiser-oriented adaptation

(1) Consumer-oriented adaptation

In order to persuade consumers to purchase the advertised services or products, cosmetic advertisers tend to use advertising language to attract consumers' attention. Therefore, it is wise for the advertisers to be concerned about the consumers' mentality. And in many cases, advertisers use vague words or expressions to adapt to consumers' personality or desires in order to promote certain cosmetic products. The consumers' attitude and action may be influenced; the stimulating and promoting effect of a cosmetic advertisement can be enforced and strengthened. In a word, consumers are the center and focal point of advertising processing. From this point, advertisers usually cater for consumers' emotion by way of pragmatic vagueness so as to promote their products and service.

Example 23: Because you are worth it.

(L'oreal Paris)

Example 24: I have a long-term friend in SK-II. It looks after me.

(SK-II Facial Treatment)

Example 25: 90% of the women find it more effective than their current serum.

(Clarins Double Serum)

In these three examples, advertisers use words like you, I and women to represent consumers. In this way, the advertisements make potential consumers feel comfortable and be willing to try the product. It can be seen that there are no direct and obvious words concerning the promotion in these three cosmetic advertisements. The word, such as you, is a vague expression intends to adapt to the mental world of consumers. The example 24 is speak from the standpoint of consumer themselves which leave audience with a good impression and then trust this brand. In the example 25, consumers are urged to buy the product because it is a favor of 90% women. That is a convincing factor for other women. Therefore, these vague words employed by advertisers are adopted to consumers' mental world by catering for their inner desires and interests. Consumers' eyes can be caught and the purpose of advertisers will be achieved.

(2) Advertiser-oriented Adaptation

In the previous section, the consumer-oriented adaptation has been investigated already. Correspondently, there is advertiser-oriented cosmetic advertisements and adaptation. Under some conditions advertisers tend to use pragmatic vagueness as a strategy to avoid unexpected things.

According to the famous American psychologist Abraham H. Maslow, who proposed the

Hierarchy of Needs Theory, people constantly seek protection and safety if psychological demand. In the process of design advertisement, advertiser can also employ this theory. In some cosmetic advertisement, vagueness is applied to protect advertisers from anything unexpected. Advertisers reduce the commitment to certain facts and avoid carrying responsibility for possible consequence or losses due to the information gap between consumers and advertisers. In this way, the interruptive range of advertisement can be enlarged, and allow advertisers to keep their interests to the utmost.

### **3.2.2 Adaptation to the Social World**

In the Adaptation Theory the social world refers to social situations, social environment, cultural atmosphere and so on, where exist principles and norms to constrain and regulate of communicators' speech acts. According to Verschueren, the phenomena of the utmost importance in the relationship between linguistic choices and the social world are the setting, institution or community-specific communicative norms (Verschueren, 2000). Actually, human beings are all social entities living in the society, with different social and cultural background, so their behaviors will be inevitably influenced and restricted by social principles and norms. When making linguistic choices, interlocutors always try their best to observe those social conventions and take their social identities into consideration. It can also be inferred from cosmetic advertisements where advertisers usually employ vague expressions to convey something concerned with social convention and culture. If advertisers do not consider consumer's social world when making advertisements, they will definitely offend some potential buyers. Therefore, advertisers should take this factor into consideration carefully.

Example 26: Get the London look.

(Rimmel Sexy Curves Mascara)

Example 27: What's next from Paris now?

Colour Riche Nail and New 3D Nail Lingerie. Become your own Color Genius.

(L'oreal Paris Colour Riche Nail Lingerie)

Example 28: Discover the Hollywood secret. The stars use to look younger.

(Life Cell Skincare)

Place name Paris and London are used in examples 26 and 27 as a strategy of promotion not just because the two brands come from the two cities, but deeper cultural meanings. As we know, Paris is considered as a fashionable city of the world for a great number of famous cosmetic manufactures and brands are based there, and the London look also represents a kind of fashionable style, elegant and classic. In addition, the fashion influence of the two cities even become globally so that many people believe that once cosmetics are produced by Paris or

London, its credibility is somewhat higher than any other. These two ads indicate that by using the two cosmetic products could keep time with Paris and London fashion trend and get cosmetics with guaranteed quality. The copywriter of this advertisement just makes use of this strategy to deliver this kind of connotation so as to adapt to this culture convention. The way example 28 conducts by refers to Hollywood which as we know is gathered with a crowd of movie superstars. As common people, maybe everyone has a superstar dream in inner part. This ad's implication is the reason why Hollywood superstar look so young and beautiful dues to the usage of the skincare. Thus, the ad adapts to the culture of the society successfully. Above advertisements do not sell their products directly, but they adapt to the culture norms, which makes the advertisements more acceptable.

There are a large number of social conventions in different cultures. It is impossible to generalize all of them in this thesis. In this section, some typical examples are listed and analyzed so as to illuminate the fact that vagueness can be used in cosmetic advertisements to adapt to social conventions and cultures in certain conditions.

### **3.2.3 Adaptation to the Physical World**

Apart from mental world and social world, physical world also exerts an influence on linguistic choice for participants in the context. Physical world refers to the geographical and natural environment where people in different areas with different physical features may have different means of thinking and using language. According to Verschueren's Linguistic Adaptation Theory, physical world represents time, space, bodily gestures, physical conditions, physical appearance, biological property and so on. In addition, the communicator's bodily postures that associate with certain verbal behavior and position in the physical world all have some influences in the process of making linguistic choice. Advertising language is not a exception. Thus, advertisers also make their vague advertising language adapt to the physical world so as maximize its effects in promoting products or services advertised.

Example 29: The beauty of a second chance. Meet Repairwear Laser Focus for face, and now for eyes.

(Clinique Wrinkle Correcting Eye Cream)

In this advertisement, the temporal word now and is used as a vagueness to adopt to consumers' physical world. In this high-speed developing society, people have strong sense of time and different audiences have different understanding. But by using vagueness, the advertisement vividly depicts a temporal-spatial scenario where consumers have an exciting world of emotions. How can a consumer deny an advertisement like this? Therefore, the advertiser successfully

obtains the goal of promotion.

In this section, the adaptability of vagueness in cosmetic advertisements has been illustrated in detail. The advertisers select vagueness intend to adapt to the mental, social and physical world of consumers. In this way, a fantastic image of the product and brand will be established. That is, advertisers can promote their products in this skillful and strategical way.

### **3.3 Functions of Vagueness in English Cosmetic Advertisement**

As mentioned in the beginning of this thesis, the main intention of cosmetic advertisements is to persuade consumers to purchase the advertised services or products. Therefore, the foremost task of cosmetic advertisements is to attract customers' attention, arouse consumers' interest and leave them a lasting impression. Pragmatic vagueness in advertising by the application of vagueness mainly performs following functions.

First of all, vagueness in cosmetic advertisements can increase the intention and memory value of the advertisements. In the above section, it has been analyzed in detail that advertisers choose various linguistic devices to arouse consumers' attention. The vagueness requires more time to be interrupted and leaves a longer period memory. In this way, cosmetic advertisements can catch the audiences' eyes and persuade potential consumer to try the product.

Moreover, advertisers have more flexibility to make explanations for the certain products if they employ vagueness in English cosmetic advertisements. The same utterance in advertisements can be interrupted in different ways according to different circumstance and context. Advertisers can seize the initiative of explaining the advertisements by using vagueness in case there is some dispute about the cosmetic advertisements. Thus, advertisers can even escape from undertaking the responsibilities under the protection of the flexible advertisements.

Besides, vagueness in English cosmetic advertisements can also create some rhetorical and aesthetical effects. Advertisers are especially apt to employ beautiful language and graceful expressions to represent the beauty of female. In cosmetic advertisements, advertisers also produce good images in order to leave a fantastic impression on audience.

Therefore, employing vagueness in cosmetic advertisements in an appropriate way in English cosmetic advertisements bring benefit to advertisers.

However, if vagueness in cosmetic advertisements is misused and over-used, it may mislead and cheat the consumers. Therefore, employing vagueness at random is not allowed. This behavior violates the relevant law and is contrary to morality. To sum up, vagueness in cosmetic



advertisements can perform both positive and negative functions. In order to achieve the optimal pragmatic effects, advertisers should carefully ensure the appropriate employment of this linguistic strategy.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The main purpose of this thesis is to make a linguistic analysis of the vagueness applied in English cosmetic advertisements from the view of Verschueren's Adaptation Theory. In this thesis, from the perspective of the Adaptation Theory, vagueness is considered as a communicative strategy in advertisements, which is generated by the manipulation of vague expressions to obtain certain communicative objectives.

From the analysis of the theoretical framework in the second section, this thesis found that linguistic choices stem from the language user's communicative demands, which advance the motivation in his mind. Therefore, in order to achieve the motivations, the language user has to choose an appropriate and suitable communicative strategy. During the course of implementing the strategy, certain contextual correlates are adapted to by linguistic structures. Since the study project is concerned, vagueness is adopted in cosmetic advertisements as a communicative strategy. In order to achieve vagueness in cosmetic advertisements, linguistic devices are adopted. The linguistic manipulation for vagueness in cosmetic advertisements can be carried out at lexical level and syntactic level. Hedging, resorting to commendatory adjectives and numbers and percentages are the main ways in which vague language is used at the lexical level. At the syntactical level, the linguistic manipulation can be achieved by employing indirect speech acts and figures of speech.

The other core notion of the Adaptation Theory is adaptability. In cosmetic advertisements, advertisers use pragmatic vagueness to adapt to mental world, social world and physical world. For the mental world, it includes consumer-oriented adaptation and advertiser-oriented adaptation. For the social world, advertisers usually employ vagueness to convey something connected with social convention and culture. And finally, for the physical world, vagueness is used to demonstrate things that have a relationship with time, space, physical appearance, etc.

Vagueness in English cosmetic advertisement has several functions. On the one side, it can attract the attention of the consumers and strengthen the memory value of a cosmetic advertisement. At the same time, it can also enhance the appropriateness of English cosmetic advertisements and shorten the content of English cosmetic advertisements. Furthermore, in some cases, vagueness can produce rhetorical and aesthetical effects. However, it can result in some negative effects and misled or cheat consumers.

Although this study may contribute to a better understanding of vagueness used in English cosmetic advertisements from the perspective of Vershueren's Adaptation Theory, limited by time and research competence, it is obvious that there are deficiencies in this thesis. First of all, accumulating data for the study is a challenging job because it demands the adequacy of both quantity and authenticity of the data selected. In spite of making great efforts, a major limitation of the study is concerned with the data which are far from enough to represent all the types of cosmetic advertisements. Besides, due to the limited space and capacity, the analysis of vagueness in cosmetic advertisements in this thesis is only made from the perspective of the Adaptation Theory, no other approaches have been taken into consideration.

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