A Diachronic Multimodal Analysis of How Dog Food Advertisements Construct Meanings for Promotion

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Abstract: Based on Michael Halliday's systemic functional grammar and its important extend-visual grammar proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen, this paper aims at analyzing how different features in the dog food advertisements gather together to realize their functions of appealing, promotion, and persuading. By collecting and coding data in a diachronic sequence, this paper gives a case study in which 15 representative dog food advertisements from 1960s to present are thrown in to a multimodal discourse analysis framework. The findings, from the social semiotics perspective, shed light on figuring out main patterns of representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of dog food advertisements.

Keywords: Dog Food Advertisement; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Meaning Construction; Visual Grammar

1.Introduction

With the dramatically increasing proportion of middle-class around the world, dogs, who are claimed as humans' best friends, have eventually become a significant part of family life in recent decades. As a part of a family, dogs certainly deserve dog food of a high quality that is fresh, nutritious, delicious, etc. In order to meet such needs, a variety of dog food brands with different features are constantly entering the market, which has led to the emergence of dog food advertisements as well. Those advertisements, however, are not designed to attract dogs, but their owners, who will potentially pay for them [1,2]. Even though the amount of dog food advertisements continues to expand, few researchers have focused on analysing those advertisements systematically [2,3]. For the purpose of filling the gap, particularly in the social semiotic landscape, this paper addresses some questions for exploration:

a)How do they make dog owners believe their dogs love/need those kinds of dog food?

b)What are the differences between dog food advertisements in terms of their structures?

2.Theoretical Literature

Consideration of advertising as discourse is one of the most effective ways to explore. Though the term "discourse analysis" is first put forward by Harris to do linguistic research only, due to human beings' marching to the digital era, some linguists point out that the frontier of literacy has expanded from writing to other systems of visual semiotics, such as painting, dancing, sculpturing, etc., enhancing the meaning-making potential [4,5,6,7]. In this case, inspired by Halliday's three metafunctions (ideational, interpersonal, and textual) in his systemic functional theory, Kress and van Leeuwen take a further step to propose three new meanings in images, which are representational, interactive, and compositional meanings [8,9]. In their seminal work, Kress and van Leeuwen introduce a systematic as well as comprehensive grammar to comprehend images from a semiotic perspective and conclude them as "visual grammar".

3.Data Collection

To find the slight changes in dog food advertisements in the past several decades, this paper selects 15 pictures (see Picture.1-Picture.15) in the diachronic sequence and divides them into five groups, the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s

to present. All images were sourced from well-known commercial websites such as Amazon, eBay, or professional pet food websites like www.petfoodindustroy.com.

1960s

Picture.1

Picture.2

Picture.3

1970s

Picture.4

Picture.5

Picture.6

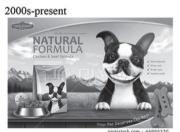**1980s**

Picture.7

Picture.8

Picture.9

1990s

Picture.10

Picture.11

2000s-present

Picture.12

Picture.13

Picture.14

Picture.15

4.Data Analysis & Discussion

4.1Representational Meaning

4.1.1 Action and reaction

Participants in dog food advertisements are typically common pet dogs that can be seen in day-to-day life. In contrast to the 1960s, dog owners are, however, interestingly added to such advertisements more frequently in the 1970s. 1960s advertisements are more like magazine pages while the 1970s are snapshots of a certain moment with their adorable pet dog in their daily life. In the majority of cases, see picture.1-picture.6, dogs are either eating the particular band's dog food or simply looking at it desirably. Advertisements from the 1980s (see picture.7-picture.9) show dogs starting to be given humanities. For instance, dogs will become melancholy; that is, if not given high-quality dog food, they will be sad. As depicted in the picture.7, the dog just stays on the ground and keeps unmoved because it has not eaten "Mainstay" yet. Even more strangely, the dog in the picture.9 appears to be dissatisfied with the pure beef because it prefers "MIGHT DOD". When it comes to the 1990s and new century, dog food advertisements once more emphasised the dogs themselves. With the popularity of television, a number of dog food advertisements come in the form of videos (see picture.10 and picture.11).

4.1.2 Speech and mental

A dog food advertisement tends to have fewer and fewer linguistic and mental parts. When examining dog food advertisements from the 1960s, at least one-third of the advertisements employ persuading words to introduce the brand names, functions, or features. The use of persuading words appears to have diminished as the new media develops. They are not really instinct but are presented in other forms. See picture.12, the dog's teeth are switched to humans' and are smiling warmly, showing its satisfaction towards the dog food. There is no need to add words like "I am happy" or any other sentences using rhetorical devices because its viewers already know that this kind of dog food can make their dogs happy. Particularly, in the picture.13, there are even no words; instead, there is only a package of food in a small place.

4.1.3 Analytical and symbolic

All dog food advertisements claim that their products can make dogs happy, healthy, and energetic. In particular, the prime focus of 1960s dog food advertisements are how fast the dog food can be prepared and whether or not it can guarantee that dogs will not be hungry for a long time after once feeding. 1970s dog food advertisements indicate how their food can give dogs the energy to play with their owners. What's more, elaborately decorated departments, lush gardens, and well-dressed dog owners all suggest that these dog food brands are popular in middle-class families. This persuasive strategy becomes the mainstream and lasts for 30 years (see picture 4, 6, 7, 8, 11). But 21st-century dog owners are not willing to buy them anymore. Instead, dog owners' attention focuses on keeping their dogs slim. See picture 13, after eating this kind of dog food continuously, a dog is surprised to find its skin unfit, just like the oversize trousers for fat people. This emphasises one of its unique features, that is, helping dogs keep fit. Besides, see picture 12, "no preservatives contained" also becomes a new requirement.

4.2 Interactive Meaning

Table 1. Interactive meanings in dog food advertisements

	Picture number	Contact	Social distance	Camera angle
1960s	1	Offer	Social	frontal angle-involvement
	2	Demand	Social	eye-eye angle-equality
	3	Demand	Impersonal	high angle-viewers' power
1970s	4	Demand	Social	eye-eye angle-equality
	5	Demand	Personal	high angle-viewers' power
	6	Demand	Impersonal	frontal angle-involvement

1980s	7	Offer	Social	frontal angle-involvement
	8	Demand	Social	eye-eye angle-equality
	9	Demand	Personal	eye-eye angle-equality
1990s	10	Offer	Social	frontal angle-involvement
	11	Demand	Social	eye-eye angle-equality
2000s-present	12	Demand	Personal	eye-eye angle-equality
	13	Demand	Social	high angle-viewers' power
	14	Offer	Social	frontal angle-involvement
	15	Offer	Personal	frontal angle-involvement

Since there are participants in each of the 15 advertisements, this paper solely discusses camera angle in the attitude section of interactive meaning. As can be seen from Table.1 above, limited by the quantity of data, there are no clear patterns in terms of interactive meaning. It should be noted, though, that there is a trend of not adapting the impersonal social distance. To be specific, 33.3% of advertisements from the 1960s and 1970s used impersonal social distance but the number becomes 0 in the 1980s and no pictures of impersonal social distance can be observed since then.

4.3 Compositional meaning

4.3.1 Information value

Kress and van Leeuwen pointed out that information value can be realised by the placement of the image. Among the 15 pictures, 13.3% of them feature the dog food brand in the "given" section (see picture.11 and picture.12), which is against their framework of information value [9]. But it continues to be proven useful since 80% of these pictures actually show the brand names in the "new" section. There is also a picture that takes both sections of "given" and "new" (see picture.6) into account. Interestingly, 100% of brand names are in the "real" section whereas there is no key information in the "ideal" section with the exception of some "modal dogs".

4.3.2 Salience

Naturally, dogs and dog food are highlighted, except for the 1970s, when people occupy the most conspicuous position, symbolising the human-oriented idea. On the other hand, from 1980, salience is given to dogs' emotions, usually depicted in a feature photo. In the group of 2000s-present, some new functions in dog food advertisements are displayed in big front in order to draw the attention of potential customers. Regarding the colours, with the progress of printing technology, colour saturations in dog food advertisements become much brighter.

4.3.3 Framing

Since the 1970s, there has been a clear trend toward less and less use of segments. In dog food advertising from the 1960s, pictures are always separated from words in the introduction of brand names. Lines in these advertisements divide them into different parts, performing different functions-pictures are utilised to attract people's eyes and words are employed to persuade them to buy. Whereas in the 1980s and since then, words are used to express dogs' emotions. See group five, the colours are bright enough to stand out. Moreover, some backgrounds like picture 13, illustrate a normal scene of the kitchen, come into being, adding much more reality in comparison to other dog food advertisements, highlighting the metaphor of "dog's skin is clothes".

5.Conclusion

Firstly, based on the analysis of representational meaning, even though dog food is the actual product, there is nothing special to clearly present the food itself. It will only make potential buyers bored. Instead, they choose dogs to be the primary characters and indicate dog food's superior qualities by showing dogs' emotions. Sometimes, by presenting successful people's lives with their dogs, these pictures associate dog food with high social status. Furthermore, they use metaphors to draw in dog owners. For instance, see the picture.12, if not obvious enough, they substitute dogs' faces with human faces to demonstrate

how happy the dogs are. Additionally, recent research finds that rotated faces draw fixations to the upper eye, which can foster a sense of non-aggressiveness and can emphasise the loveliness of animals/people (see picture.11) [10].

Secondly, in accordance with the analysis of interactive meaning, with the help of an eye-eye camera angle, which symbolises equality, viewers can strongly feel dogs, as part of family members, should share the same quality of food as human meals. Likewise, the high angle represents humans' power and dogs' weakness, which implies that dogs need more care from their owners; the frontal angle represents involvement, which functions similarly to the eye-eye angle but pays more attention to the harmonious life and the human-animal interaction.

Finally, besides the technological issues, the different time's dog food advertisements primarily variate in framing. To illustrate, in contrast to the dog food advertisements in the 1960s and 1970s, lines or text frames are strictly used now. In addition, this kind of strategy is good at combining the exact products with dogs' mental words, connecting the food with good values such as health, green, less fat, deliciousness, and so forth.

In conclusion, this paper adopts visual grammar to demonstrate how dog food advertisements work to draw in potential buyers, which partially fills the gap in analysing a certain kind of food advertisement from a social semiotic standpoint. However, given the limited data and a single framework, this paper cannot draw the panoramas of different time's dog food. Hence, the analysis is far from exhaustive and this topic requires further exploration.

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