

The 'unreality principle': one use of television commercials

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This article¹ argues that a little unreality in language learning may be no bad thing. Specifically, it suggests why and how learners might respond positively to language practice based on television advertisements of the 'fantasy' type. It considers how the form and content that reflect the advertisers' original purpose help to make 'fantasy' adverts appropriate and accessible as input to language practice with learners at a wide range of levels of English proficiency.

Why unreality?

Current theory and practice in foreign language teaching stress the importance of authenticity and realism.² Teachers are now so used to the idea that language courses should contain and demand actual, or at least likely and appropriate, language use that there is a risk that the unrealistic will be excluded from learners' experience. This would be unfortunate, since unreality—in the form of dreams, fantasies, ambitions, and so on—clearly plays a vital role in our lives. Moreover, there must be limits on the extent to which classroom activity can be expected to derive solely from students' current or long-term needs in the real world. There are times when an injection of the unreal can stimulate expressive use of the foreign language, which seems to me a valid and desirable complement to reality-anchored activities.

The particular form of the unreal—though one that is part of daily language experience—that this article will focus on is the fantasy television advertisement. If carefully selected, fantasy adverts could provide the sort of input that would spur students to interaction. Both the linguistic form and the communicative purpose of adverts lend themselves to classroom exploitation, and provide a springboard to discussion.

The television commercial

The term 'television commercial' does no more than describe a language text transmitted via a particular medium with a particular intention. It does not provide a comprehensive description of the forms and characteristics of any stereotypical TV advert, any more than the term 'leading article' could be said to encapsulate features common to what might appear in widely differing newspapers. I will be concerned here with the pedagogic opportunities offered by one type of TV advert, chosen because it fits the bill in terms of the elements it contains and the platform it provides for interaction. Nevertheless, the following general comments on TV adverts indicate why I see them as suitable material for language practice.

If we assume that all TV advertising is intended to persuade the viewer to consume, clearly the underlying message has to be more memorable in the long term than other televised items of similar duration, say, a traffic report, or a trailer for a forthcoming programme. This basic objective naturally influences the length, verbal content, text completeness and,

above all, visual design of TV commercials. I will briefly consider each of these components.

First, advertisements (in Britain, at least) are normally very short; the average duration is approximately 35 seconds. This makes them compact and manageable 'packages' for intensive study by language learners. Second, they are often characterized by the type of repetition of key phrases (normally the product's name and its advantages) that we might expect to occur in texts for language teaching purposes—though for less altruistic reasons. Third, commercials may tell a complete 'story', offering the foreign viewer a satisfying opportunity to understand a self-contained entity, rather than a frustrating part of a whole. Finally—and crucially—adverts need to be visually arresting in order to stand a chance of making a long-term impact on potential consumers. They need, in other words, to maximize their use of the visual medium to fulfil their principal purpose. A side-effect of this is to make adverts more accessible to the foreign viewer and more suitable as language practice materials. The first three elements outlined above could apply equally well in the case of radio commercials, but I wish to emphasize the crucial visual element—novelty of image—and the way it relates to the language activities to be presented in this article.

The task that learners are required to complete is to interpret, remember, and retell an advert 'story'; they are considerably assisted in this by having experienced something both dynamic and visual, as opposed to the static and visual stimulus of a printed advertisement, or the dynamic and aural experience of a radio commercial. A television commercial is likely to be the most easily remembered. In a discussion of how individuals construct a mental representation of a written text, Stenning made the point that 'the texts that are easily and accurately represented . . . are intuitively ones that could easily be represented by an image' (Stenning 1977:203). In the case of a TV advert, when students have seen the images, the work of forming a mental representation has been done for them, so to speak. They therefore have a richer and fuller 'mental picture' as a basis for recall and retelling.

Fantasy advertisements

The unreality element can take a number of forms. Although fantasy can be expressed in cartoon or semi-animation, or represented by animal 'actors',³ it may equally well involve human actors. The degree of reality or unreality is established through the story line, and is not inherent in any single format. For example, a public service announcement intended to draw motorists' attention to the need to watch out for cyclists at road junctions might involve the presentation of staged accidents using toy vehicles. This would still be 'real', in the sense that such accidents do happen. On the other hand, actors may be required to play a totally 'unreal' scene. I assume there are no households in the real world where the cost/benefit analysis of rival washing-up liquids (one always unnamed) would form the basis of earnest conversation. So, in this case, the unreality derives from the content of the advertisement.

The visual element

Clearly, a television viewer has access to information unavailable to a listener or reader. But the role of the visual element is not simply to support the overall message. There is a risk that terms such as 'message' and 'text' are taken to refer essentially or exclusively to the spoken or printed *word*. The visual, non-verbal elements used in TV commercials should not be thought of as 'optional extras', playing a secondary role in the message. In certain circumstances, the visual component carries the message by itself.⁴

In a discussion of the role of non-verbal elements of interaction that can be captured on videotape, Riley stresses, 'They are not just a sort of gloss on the verbal component. We need to get out of our heads completely what we might call the "audio-visual course" notion of the role of non-verbal features' (Riley 1981:145). The pedagogical value of TV fantasy adverts is that they often contain a *predominant* visual element; it is possible to watch them with the sound turned off and still understand the message, with minimal loss of meaning. Because of their natural focus on the visual, fantasy adverts can be used with learners at a wide range of proficiency levels.

The relationship between the visual and the aural elements is important in the retelling activity that I will be concerned with here. It seems likely that the interplay between them on screen is one reason why learners find it easier to retell something they have seen and heard, than to recount something they have merely listened to or read. They are able to draw on static and dynamic aspects of memory. After watching a televised sequence, students can retain and express more of the original message than after just reading or listening to something.

The humorous element

I happen to have a good memory for phrases and scenes from foreign advertisements. The reason why I recall some and not others seems to have something to do with their intentional or unintentional humour. For example, I spent a short time in Finland in 1970 and happened to break a tooth. I remember then seeing a TV advert for toothpaste, featuring an improbably angelic child who emerged unscathed from a dentist's surgery, because she used the brand in question, and then beamed 'Kiitos ja näkemiin' ('Thank you and goodbye') with the sort of self-assured smile that would not normally be associated with anyone in that particular context. No doubt my memory is strengthened by the fact that dental treatment was on my mind at the time. Similarly, I recall a Portuguese radio advert from 1974 for Sagres beer, because the music chosen to accompany that advert was 'Land of Hope and Glory'. Given its colonialist associations, it struck me as being an odd piece to use in Portugal's post-revolutionary era. It is precisely this type of vividness of memory, sharpened by incongruity or humour, that the fantasy advert can be used to tap.

An example of a fantasy advert

Below is an example of the type of fantasy advertisement that might be used for follow-up language practice. This particular example features semi-animation, although the point could be made equally well with commercials using cartoon or dream sequences.

Heinz Salad Cream⁵

Soundtrack: (male voice) *Remember when we told you salads were made for a certain salad cream?*

Image: Brand X salad cream is poured on to a succession of salad items: a lettuce leaf, a stick of celery, a hard-boiled egg and, finally, a tomato. Each of them flips or rolls over to avoid contact, while the salad cream is in mid-air. As a result, the dollop of salad cream lands not where it was supposed to, but on the table top instead.

Soundtrack: *Well, if you're having any bother with your salads this year, it could very well be that you're using the wrong dressing . . . it could be you're not using Heinz Salad Cream.*

Image: A bottle of Heinz Salad Cream appears in the foreground, with the various bits of salad arranged behind it.

Soundtrack: *Salads were made for it.*

There are two reasons for selecting the Heinz advert as an illustration: the first is its visual humour; the second is linguistic.

Firstly, animated salad items are visually unusual; students faced with problem-and-solution texts are normally intrigued to see what form the solution will take. In the case of this Heinz commercial, the problem—the salad items' rejection of the Brand X cream—is heightened by the humour of its presentation. 'If the listener is interested at all in what he is hearing, he will actively try to make sense out of it. Of course, he can make nonsense as well!' (Howatt and Dakin 1974:93). In this particular case, the conventional constraints on 'sense' have been relaxed, in that the viewers find themselves in a world where boiled eggs have the power to make decisions and frustrate human intention.

The second reason for using this advert as an example is that it presents a built-in linguistic problem: what to call the 'dollop' of salad cream. 'Dollop' is the only word for it in my idiolect: 'lump' would be too solid; 'drop' would be too small and too liquid. I have asked a number of native speakers to describe what happens when you hold a bottle of ketchup upside down and bang the bottom; their answers invariably involve a 'dollop'. There is an apparent lacuna in the formal lexicon of English. So if foreign learners were asked to agree on a retold version of the Heinz advert they would be forced to bridge the lexical gap. My experience is that when faced with the task of describing sufficiently intriguing visual materials, students tend to adopt a strategy of 'resource expansion' (Corder 1981:105), such as gesture or paraphrase. They seem to feel committed to giving as accurate and complete a version as possible; they tend therefore not to follow the alternative route, which Corder terms 'message reduction'. The particular tactics used in such situations by different learners can be compared and evaluated in follow-up discussion (see below).

A suggested classroom procedure

Viewing and retelling

- 1 Students watch a commercial.
- 2 Paired discussion of what happened. Teacher should not provide any help with vocabulary.
- 3 Teacher makes a note of tactics used by individual speakers when faced with a lexical gap problem, such as 'dollop'.
- 4 Group/plenary negotiation of an agreed version of what they saw on screen. This is recorded, if possible on videotape.
- 5 Teacher plays back the recording of Stage 4, asking learners to compare and comment on the various contributors' communication tactics.

Adaptation abroad

Although the example presented here is, naturally, specific in terms of content, its overall format and purpose (persuasion through fantasy) will be matched in equivalent advertisements in other countries with commercial television channels. In addition to the possible exploitation outlined above, with English the medium of both the original message and of follow-up language activity, various changes might be rung on the basic theme:

- a Learners might be shown a fantasy advert in their own language, which

they translate into the foreign language; if videotape copying facilities are available and if local legislation allows,⁶ a learner-produced soundtrack can be audio-dubbed on to a second copy of the advert. The type of practice activity presented here—retelling and negotiation—could either precede or follow the soundtrack production stage.

b Another adaptation, building in an information gap, would be to show the original advert to only half the group; these students could then be paired with students who have not seen it, and given the task of describing the advert to them.

c A further extension might require groups of students to collaborate on the design of a fantasy advert for a product not normally advertised on TV, such as fresh fish. This could bring in what we might term an 'imagination gap', since more than a straightforward discrepancy of information would be involved.

Summary

Television advertisements display various characteristics (limited duration, verbal repetition, completeness of story) that would make them successful vehicles for comprehension and discussion by foreign language learners. In addition, fantasy adverts of the type exemplified here depend for their effect on an original combination of sound, image, and story line; this makes them potentially suitable for use by foreign language learners at differing levels of proficiency. The unreality of adverts—e.g. the world inhabited by salad items—can produce a positive, amused response from native speaking and non-native speaking viewers alike. In the case of language learners, this might be used to stimulate them to real, purposeful description of what they have watched together, but may not have interpreted in identical ways. □

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Notes

- 1 This article is partly based on a paper given at the TESOL Convention in Toronto in March 1983.
- 2 For a discussion of the semantics of 'authenticity' in language teaching, see Lynch (1982).
- 3 In recent years, advertisers in Britain have used, among other things, a koala bear to promote an Australian airline, a donkey to sell tinned soup, and a frog to advertise washing machines. It may be that the frequency of such associations is specific to the English-speaking world.
- 4 We might note in passing that this point is not lost on commercial television companies endeavouring to sell advertising space to clients with a product to promote. In a recent series of adverts about adverts, British commercial TV companies have emphasized the advantages *for the advertiser* of being able to exploit moving pictures, as opposed to the static medium of newsprint.
- 5 The text of this advertisement is quoted by kind permission of H. J. Heinz Company Limited.
- 6 The law on the copyright of television advertisements will vary from country to country, and teachers should get informed advice on the legality of using recorded TV commercial material. Current

UK legislation predates the advent of video technology and consequently makes no explicit reference to video-taping. As the law stands, teachers wishing to make legal use of TV adverts as lesson material have to rely on appropriate commercials being coincidentally broadcast during 'video' lessons. We can only support Brumfit's call for a revision of UK copyright law, as far as copying and playback for educational purposes is concerned (Brumfit 1983:vi).

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