

Reviews: A Book I Like

Words in ads

Greg Myers

Edward Arnold 1994

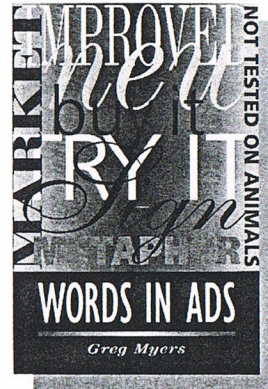
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How should *Words in ads* be categorised? Is it 'background material'? Or is it 'mainly for reference'? For me, at any rate, it has been as much for pleasure as for reference. For my work, Greg Myers has provided more than just a new text which can be added to the bibliography. This book is an aid to the rendering of the complex language of ads into a more accessible workaday language for students to analyse. Translation is always to a greater or lesser degree adaptation, and this sophisticated language use is good material for would-be translators to cut their teeth on. Understanding the strength of the culturally-based relationships which make up the meaning of an ad is a good way of learning how far the translator needs sometimes to go in rendering a text into the target language so as to make it meaningful – if that is, in fact, possible.

In *Words in ads* I particularly enjoy the cross-cultural viewpoint which Myers inevitably offers. The author teaches on a degree course in 'Culture and Communication' at Lancaster University, and it shows. While he draws on American sources, much of his book centres on material taken from the British media industry – generally recognised to be more sophisticated than most. Being an example of reverse flow in the 'brain drain' – he's an NNS (Non-native speaker) American working at a British university – Myers uses material which catches his attention. Similarly, he uses a first person singular narrative style, complete with contractions, which I find refreshing in an academic work. This is particularly important when he explains linguistic or literary terms, as he always finds a reader-friendly way of expressing things.

To begin with, Myers sets the historical scene by describing the development of ads through the years, from those intended to 'make' a brand name by attracting the potential consumer's attention, to the current day situation in which the advertising market is saturated and copy writers are having to communicate with a jaded consumer. Then he develops his arguments based purely on the application of text analysis techniques as he carries out his aim. Greg Myers clearly states this aim as being that of viewing ads from the perspective of texts which can be analysed to provide us with insights into language and social communication. His passage through the world of advertising texts – which he considers a genre, in the broad definition of the term – covers specific features of language. These range from the basic 'sentence types and sentence structure' or 'pronouns and address', to the more demanding 'puns, associations and meanings' or 'metaphor'.

Myers handles all of this from a set of basic assumptions which regard the construction of



texts as a process of choice, and the interpretation of any one text as dependent on an awareness of other texts. He describes three principal characteristics of the relationship existing between advertisers, their products and their audience: first, that an ad 'constructs a position' for the audience – that is, it is designed to fit the audience into a specific profile; second, that audiences receive ads in their own way, which may not coincide with that profile; and third, that the relationship between advertiser and audience is based on the meaning associated with the products.

The cross-cultural considerations of ads and a construction of one such profile appear in the book when Myers examines an Audi ad shown, as it happens, in the same form on both British and Spanish television. In the ad, the German words *Vorschprung durch Technik* appear in both written and spoken form as a part of the text, in the firm belief that the very 'Germanness' of this would in the audience's mind be equated with high quality, apparently the selling point of the ad. At another point, Myers talks of a Spanish car ad for the special Blue Jeans series Renault 5. This uses the text *Póntelo* [Wear it!]. The image, as he says, offers a close-up of the seat of a pair of Levi's worn by a particularly attractive girl. What he doesn't mention is the fact that a subsequent series of Government-sponsored Aids campaign ads used the same text.



There is a complete chapter on the subject of Aids ads, and here Myers brings to the fore the nature of the relationships between society and Aids victims as created by the ads themselves. The taboo which exists and which is expressed through the absence of first or second person pronouns, and the structuring of our ideas about what Aids is, who it affects, and what should be done about it demonstrate the way in which language as used in ads structures our ideas. As such, words in ads are extremely powerful. The pleasure of reading this book comes from appreciating the clarity with which the author describes these subtleties.

III Bryan Robinson (Received March 1996)

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'... Myers sets the historical scene...' An ad from 1891.