

Original Research Article

A Study on pragmatic presuppositions in automobile advertisements from the perspective of adaptation theory

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Abstract: With the rapid economic development, the importance of automobile advertising in the world is becoming increasingly prominent. The complexity of advertising language is particularly prominent in the automotive industry. This study explores pragmatic presuppositions in English automobile advertisements from the perspective of Adaptation Theory, and analyzes their distribution and how advertisers adapt to consumers' needs through pragmatic presuppositions. The results of this study provide implications for understanding the relationship between advertising language, context and consumer behavior, and have practical significance for both advertisers and consumers.

Keywords: Pragmatic presuppositions; Adaptation theory; Automobile advertisements; Consumer behavior

1. Introduction

In the contemporary global economy, the automotive industry stands as a pivotal sector. With the proliferation of automobile advertisements across various media platforms, the language employed in these advertisements has become a critical area of study. And understanding the role of pragmatic presuppositions in automobile advertisements provides valuable insights into the intricate interplay between language, context, and consumer behavior.

The study of pragmatic presuppositions firstly focused on semantics and gradually turned to pragmatic phenomena. Some scholars had classified presupposition triggers (Karttunen, 1973; Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). Huang (1988) had explored the characteristics of pragmatic presuppositions. Regarding presuppositions in advertising language, Leech (1966) employed a stylistic framework and Goddard (1998) applied functional linguistics. Wei (2008) investigated the empathy mechanisms using construction grammar. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the static functions, paying insufficient attention to how they dynamically adapt to consumer needs.

Adaptation Theory (Verschueren, 1999) builds a theoretical framework for analyzing how language users adjust language according to context and audience needs. This theory takes context adaptation and audience design as its core concepts, and emphasizes the dynamics of language use. It is highly relevant to the study of pragmatic presuppositions in advertising, and can provide a perspective to understand how advertisers use presuppositions to adapt to context and audience needs.

This study delves into the pragmatic presuppositions in English automobile advertisements from the perspective of Adaptation Theory, exploring how these linguistic elements function to influence consumer behavior.

2. Research design

The objects of this study are sourced from the top 20 automobile brands listed in the Top 100 Global Automobile Brands by Value 2024, as released by Brand Finance, a renowned British brand evaluation agency. By consulting the official websites and relevant news articles of these automobile brands, the author collected 10

English advertisements for each brand, amassing a total of 200 advertisements.

The original classification of pragmatic presuppositions of advertising language is proposed by Chen (1998), including factive, belief, state and behavioral presupposition, but through the analysis, it is found that there are also existential and emotional presupposition. The following are the specific data.

Table 2.1. The distribution of six types.

Types	Number	Ratio	Examples
Factive Presupposition	32	16%	The quickest production car ever. (Tesla)
Belief Presupposition	28	14%	Luxury must always be comfortable, otherwise it is not luxury. (Mercedes-Benz)
Behavioral Presupposition	41	20.5%	Don't just admire sports car. Own one. (BMW)
State Presupposition	25	12.5%	Even you split it in pieces, it is still a beauty. (BMW)
Existential Presupposition	18	9%	There is a Ford in your future. (Ford)
Emotional Presupposition	56	28%	Freedom brings happiness. (Hyundai)

This distribution indicates that emotional presupposition is the most frequently used type in English automobile advertisements, followed by behavioral, factive, belief and state presupposition. Existential presupposition is the least frequently used.

3. Analysis of pragmatic presuppositions

3.1. Factive presupposition

Factive presupposition refers to the part of the discourse that is an established fact. This type of presupposition is often used to establish a common ground between the speaker and the audience, ensuring that the message is built upon shared knowledge.

Example 1: Mercedes-Benz broke the frontier of automotive engineering. (Mercedes-Benz)

Example 2: Tesla's dream. Your reality. (Tesla)

Example 1 presupposes that Mercedes-Benz has achieved significant breakthroughs in automotive engineering, pushing the boundaries of what is technologically possible. Example 2 presupposes that Tesla has successfully transformed its visionary goals into tangible products that consumers can experience and own. Mercedes-Benz's slogan reinforces the brand's image as a leader in innovation, attracting consumers who value cutting-edge technology. Tesla's slogan creates a sense of alignment between the brand's aspirations and consumers' potential ownership. Both slogans use factive presupposition to build trust and credibility by assuming a shared understanding of the brands' achievements and their relevance to the consumer.

3.2. Belief presupposition

Belief presuppositions are related to certain beliefs or attitudes held by consumers. This type of presupposition is used to create shared values between the advertiser and the consumer. In automobile advertisements, it is often used to stimulate consumers' psychology, such as environmental consciousness and the pursuit of luxury.

Example 3: Leave pollution light-years behind. (Tesla)

Example 4: The relentless pursuit of perfection. (Lexus)

Example 3 assumes the audience is environmentally conscious and values reducing pollution. By highlighting Tesla's commitment to sustainability, it positions Tesla as a leader in eco-friendly solutions, appealing to eco-conscious consumers and reinforcing its image as a responsible company. Example 4 assumes the audience values perfection and is drawn to high-quality products. By emphasizing Lexus's dedication to perfection, it reinforces the brand's image as a symbol of quality and excellence, appealing to consumers who prioritize these values. Both examples align with Adaptation Theory by tailoring messages to the audience's beliefs, enhancing persuasive appeal.

3.3. State presupposition

State presupposition relates to a certain state or condition of the product or the consumer. This type of presupposition is used to create a sense of urgency, often by highlighting the current state of the market or consumers' situation. In automobile advertisements, state presupposition is used to emphasize the timeliness of the product.

Example 5: Now is the best time to buy the Volvo. (Volvo)

Example 6: You've wanted one for years. Don't wait a day longer. (Volkswagen)

Example 5 presupposes that there is a current opportunity or advantage to purchasing a Volvo, such as a limited time offer or special deal. This utilizes consumers' fear of missing out, a strong psychological motivator. Example 6 presupposes that the consumer has had a long standing desire for a Volkswagen, tapping into their pre-existing aspirations. It suggests that the time to act is now, reinforcing the idea that delaying could mean missing out on a long awaited opportunity. By using state presupposition, the advertisers effectively communicate the time sensitive nature of the offer, encouraging consumers to make a purchase decision sooner rather than later. This strategic use of presupposition helps to drive immediate sales and create a sense of excitement around the brand.

3.4. Behavioral presupposition

Behavioral presupposition involves the assumption of certain actions that the consumer is expected to take. This type of presupposition is used to encourage the consumer to engage with the product, often by suggesting that the consumer should take a specific action.

Example 7: Find new roads. (Chevrolet)

Example 8: Answer the call to any adventure. (Ford)

Example 7 presupposes that the consumer is expected to explore new roads and experiences with a car of Chevrolet, assuming that the consumer is adventurous. This slogan positions Chevrolet as a brand that enables exploration and discovery, making it appealing to those who value freedom. Example 8 presupposes that the consumer is expected to embark on adventures and that a Ford vehicle is the ideal choice for this, assuming that the consumer is ready to answer the call to adventure. This slogan positions Ford as a brand that is reliable and capable, capable of handling any adventure that comes its way. The use of behavioral presupposition effectively communicates the idea that the vehicles are not just means of transportation but tools for experiencing life to the fullest.

3.5. Existential presupposition

Existential presupposition involves the assumption of the existence of a product or the features. This type of presupposition is used to create a sense of familiarity and expectation, often by highlighting the presence of a product in consumers' life or the market.

Example 9: There is a Ford in your future. (Ford)

Example 10: A world full of endless, from the beginning. (Mercedes-Benz)

Both slogans use existential presupposition to create a sense of inevitability and relevance, effectively positioning their respective brands as integral parts of consumers' life and the world at large. Example 9 presupposes that a Ford vehicle will be part of consumers' future, implying that it is a natural and expected choice. Example 10 presupposes that Mercedes-Benz vehicles are part of a world of endless possibilities and that they have been a part of this world from the beginning. By using existential presupposition, these slogans effectively communicate that the brands are not just options but essential choices for consumers who want to be part of a world of endless possibilities and a future that is both reliable and exciting.

3.6. Emotional presupposition

Emotional presupposition is very effective in influencing consumer behavior, as it resonates with personal values and aspirations, making the advertisements more persuasive and memorable. Advertisers strategically use emotional presuppositions to evoke feelings such as excitement, happiness, and freedom, which helps build a loyal customer base.

Example 11: Love. It's what makes a Subaru a Subaru. (Subaru)

Example 12: The Heartbeat of America. (Chevrolet)

Example 11 presupposes that the emotion of love is central to the Subaru brand, suggesting that Subaru vehicles are not just cars but objects of affection and loyalty. This slogan utilizes consumers' desire for a personal and emotional connection with their vehicle, making Subaru feel like a trusted part of their life. Example 12 presupposes that Chevrolet vehicles are deeply connected to the American spirit and identity, evoking a sense of pride and belonging. By associating the brand with the heartbeat of America, Chevrolet creates an emotional bond with consumers who identify with American values and culture. Both slogans create a deep emotional bond between the brand and the consumer.

4. Functions of Pragmatic presuppositions

4.1. Adapting to physiological needs

Automobile advertisements frequently employ pragmatic presuppositions to address consumers' tangible physiological needs, such as safety, comfort, and performance. These presuppositions implicitly assume that the audience prioritizes practical features in their purchasing decisions. For instance, Volvo's "At least there's still one safe place to be" presupposes that safety is a non-negotiable requirement for consumers, positioning the brand as a reliable choice. By highlighting advanced engineering or ergonomic designs, advertisers adapt to the physical context of driving, where functionality and reliability are paramount. Such presuppositions align with Adaptation Theory's emphasis on contextual relevance, as they directly respond to the audience's need for vehicles that enhance their daily lives through superior physical attributes.

4.2. Adapting to social needs

Pragmatic presuppositions in automobile advertisements often cater to social needs by invoking themes of status, belonging, and social recognition. Mercedes-Benz's "Luxury must always be comfortable, otherwise it is not luxury" presupposes that the audience associates luxury with both comfort and social distinction. This adaptation to social context reinforces the brand's image as a symbol of elite status, appealing to consumers who seek validation through their purchasing choices. Similarly, existential presuppositions are employed to create a sense of community or shared identity. Ford's "There is a Ford in your future" presupposes that Ford vehicles are ubiquitous and socially endorsed, implying that ownership connects consumers to a broader, aspirational group. This strategy reflects Adaptation Theory's focus on audience design, as advertisers tailor messages to resonate with collective social aspirations.

4.3. Adapting to psychological needs

Advertising designers often take the emotions of consumers as the presupposition basis (Qi, 2021). Emotional and belief presuppositions dominate in addressing psychological needs, such as the desire for freedom, happiness, or self-actualization. Hyundai's "Freedom brings happiness" presupposes that consumers equate driving with emotional liberation, utilizing their subconscious yearning for autonomy and joy. This aligns with Adaptation Theory's principle of audience design, as advertisers use emotionally charged language to evoke

specific psychological responses, thereby deepening consumers' emotional connection to the brand. Additionally, action presuppositions like Chevrolet's "Find new roads" presuppose that consumers seek novelty and adventure, framing car ownership as a pathway to personal growth. By appealing to the audience's psychological need for exploration, advertisers position their products as catalysts for transformative experiences.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided an analysis of pragmatic presuppositions in English automobile advertisements from the perspective of Adaptation Theory. Through the analysis of 200 advertisements, the research has identified six types of pragmatic presuppositions: factive, belief, behavioral, state, existential, and emotional presuppositions. The study has also demonstrated how advertisers strategically use these presuppositions to adapt to consumers' physiological, psychological and social needs, thereby enhancing the persuasive power of the advertisements.

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