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SYNTACTICAL MEANS OF IMPACT IN AMERICAN POLITICAL ADVERTISING

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Abstract

The article deals with syntactical means which are used in American political advertising to express a hidden meaning or to attract attention. The aim of the research is to analyse how these linguistic means exert their influence implicitly. In total, 200 video clips referring to the United States elections from 2018 to 2020 were used as a material for study. The conducted research showed that these expressive means are the most popular among advertisers. Syntactical means are used in almost all commercials and can carry different meanings. Their popularity can be explained by the fact that in video clips they address several organs of human senses, cause intrigue mental connections and, therefore, achieve strong recipient's reaction. As a result, this commercial becomes more memorable and later emerges in mind when the recipient sees and hears something similar. Among the most common syntactical means occurring in commercials are syntactical parallelism, rhetorical questions, anaphor, imperative structures, antithesis and detachment. They are often accompanied with graphical means for the enhancement. Their graphical emphasis helps to attract visual attention to the main facts and ideas. The main function of syntactical devices is either to catch attention by unusual linguistic patterns which are yet unfamiliar to the human brain, or to create an alternative reality which will become real if you choose this or that candidate.

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1. Introduction

Political advertising especially that on the airwaves is a very peculiar type of advertising. Its functions are different from those of other types. Political ads are intended to persuade the audience that one candidate is better than others, to encourage supporters to cast a ballot for their candidate and to acquire citizen-personal information in order to target individuals with more effective persuasive methods (Motta & Fowler, 2016). There are various definitions of advertising but, in general, all of them encompass the same aspects. For example, Shevchenko (2015) defines political advertising as a complex formation that constitutes the system of integrated marketing communications, activities on information distribution, image cultivation and market promotion of the political “goods”. Nevertheless, the most peculiar thing about political ads that have been studied for many decades is not the essence of commercials but the way they exert their influence on the audience. It is a very important issue because huge sums of money are annually spent on pre-election campaigns.

1.1. Manipulation principles of ads

Political advertising appears on the airwaves during the pre-election period which is abundant with the releases of this kind. Such a cascade of political bombarding influences the emotional condition of the society. Informative messages can hardly be distinguished from smear campaigns containing manipulative contents. These commercials do not only convey information about the candidate, they use different means to give a hint that this candidate is better than others thus manipulating the audience’s consciousness.

Any person’s behavior depends on depth perceptions which lie in subliminal consciousness, formed under the influence of social environment, personal experience and various psychological patterns. It is believed by many scholars that the goal of advertising is the predetermination of behavioral motivation and its manipulation. Consequently, the idea conveyed by the commercial is usually placed on the unconscious level, while the advertising concept is based on people’s emotional and psychological perceptions (Romanova, 2015).

The manipulative power of political advertising is based on surveys that are conducted before the campaign starts. On the basis of the survey that reveals the main contemporary problems of the society the candidate builds up their strategy (Nebredovskaya, 2018). In fact, it does not matter whether politicians really want to solve these issues or not, they just use their promises to solve the problem to manipulate the audience.

Another manipulation mechanism is the production techniques used by sponsors in ads. One of the most powerful of them is the language choice. The catchier the advertising clip is made, the more memorable it becomes, and the more it makes the voter think of this candidate.

1.2. Negative advertising

Manipulation can be easily traced in negative advertising, or attack advertising. The point of this type of advertising is to diminish the political role of the subject of the attack, providing the attacker with some sort of advantage (Belt, 2017). Negative ads are opposed to positive ones, which are also called

promotional ads because they advocate for the candidate. The third type of advertising is contrast ads; they combine elements of both positive and negative commercials. Contrast ads portray one candidate from the positive side and their opponent from the negative side. The contrast can even be shown on the visual level. Candidates under attack are presented in black-and-white, whereas the target candidate is portrayed in brighter colours. As these ads still include an element of the attack, they are considered to be negative as well (Belt, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are different opinions on the effectiveness of negative ads. Some scholars believe that negative advertising is more powerful than positive one. The claim it exerts a greater influence especially on uncertain voters. As Nebredovskaya (2018) says, it is the easiest tactic of the electoral campaign because negative advertising appeals to voters' emotions causing the sense of resentment. Discrediting the competitor is believed to be much simpler than presenting your program and suggesting ways of solving existing problems.

Other researchers claim that modern markets want 'more aspirational value offerings, they want to be engaged with in a positive way that gives them hope that their government and nations will be better places to live in' (Hughes, 2018, p. 2). Negative ads do not satisfy this belief and, therefore, are not effective. In this way, negative ads can produce a backlash effect, discrediting the target candidate of the ad instead of the attacking candidate.

In general, it is a doubtful question whether negative advertising is effective or not, but, anyway, it provokes fact-checking behavior and interest in the political campaign.

2. Problem Statement

Of all the elements that give meaning to a statement, the most powerful is syntax. It controls the order in which impressions are made at the reader and conveys the relationships behind the chain of words.

Syntactical parallelism is a very popular syntactical device used in political advertisements. This is based on placing systematically identical structures which can be completely or partially different. The main aim of using parallel constructions is to make the recipient subconsciously focus on some ideas and memorize them so as they start being perceived as a true fact, ideas that belong to the recipient and do not come from the outside. Thus, parallelism creates a balanced flow of ideas and is often employed as a tool for persuasion (Poddubskaya, Lineva, Savelieva, & Yakovleva, 2016).

Rhetorical questions are an inseparable part of political advertising. It is usually a statement in a form of a question, which makes this construction an emotional appeal to the recipient in the majority of cases making the listener question this or that idea or pay attention to particular phenomena (Špago, 2016).

Repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of sentences or word groups is anaphora. Anaphora helps to draw attention to some particular fact or phenomenon in an advertisement and makes the ad more memorable.

An imperative sentence in a political advertisement can be intended to give advice (to vote for this particular politician) or to force people to take some steps. Also imperative structures can aim at showing the power of a politician and their determination to succeed (thus creating an image of a person who

knows what to do and how to do it). This can make the recipient trust the advertised politician (Annapurna, 2016; Motta & Fowler, 2016; Slater, 2016).

Antithesis can be defined as a stylistic device which involves seemingly contradictory ideas, words or sentence structures. Antithesis usually emphasizes opposition of different ideas (Fengjie, Jia, & Yingying, 2016). This kind of opposition makes the ideas very vivid and noticeable thus attracting the attention of the recipient.

Detached construction, or detachment, appears when a part of a sentence is placed so that it creates an independent sentence. Such syntactical structures help create the emphasis and underline the main information that needs the recipient's consideration. Detachments are aimed at making us focus at a particular idea that can be the key one in a political advertisement (Usmonov, 2018).

So, to make advertising more vivid, ad makers use various language techniques. The most widespread are syntactical means which are often used to highlight the main idea of an advertising text. Overall, the following syntactical means can be often observed in advertising text: syntactical parallelism, rhetorical questions, anaphor, imperative structures, antithesis and detachment.

3. Research Questions

The main issue of this research is to figure out how these syntactical means exert their influence, how they are formed in the advertising context, why ad makers use them, and how they convey their message on the subconscious level.

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research is to analyse how syntactical means exert their influence implicitly. To reach this goal, we have analyzed two hundred clips (from 2018 to 2020) and closely scrutinized the usage of these devices. The most common syntactical devices were grouped into such categories as syntactical parallelism, rhetorical questions, anaphor, imperative structures, antithesis and detachment. The study progress is stipulated by the methods of the research used in political advertising.

5. Research Methods

Political advertising has been analysed from a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches. Kearney and Banwart (2017) highlight three types of methods for examining ads: empirical, rhetorical and interpretive. Rhetorical and interpretive methods are used to analyse case studies and specific themes. Empirical methods are one of the most common. It is very important to take a close look at empirical methods as they usually form the basis for any advertising research.

5.1. Empirical methods

Empirical methods include content analysis, surveys and experiments. Let us start with the latter. Experiments presuppose the use of control or comparison groups to study the effects of political advertising. Most of such research takes place online now, for example, the Internet survey experiment

conducted by Fridkin, Kenney, and Wintersieck (2015) on the subject of fact-checking. The scholars examine the influence that fact-checks have on shaping the citizen's views of negative ads and political candidates.

Surveys study the effects of political advertising on people's political behaviors. Survey methods are used to describe and track these effects nationwide or over time. They demand a huge collection of observational data.

Content analysis, when combined with experimental or observational data, can be used to make suggestions about potential effects of certain advertising media. For example, some researchers matched the results of political ads study with levels of exposure to different geographical areas (Slater, 2016). Content analysis is closely related to systematic categorization of advertising components through numeric assignments. This type of analysis concentrates on the items that represent three major categories of research: production techniques, verbal content and nonverbal content (Kearney & Banwart, 2017).

5.2. Content analysis

This study relates to the content analysis of American political ads shot from 2018 to 2020 and deals with the verbal and nonverbal contents. As for the verbal content, this research only touches upon syntactical means of expression, such as syntactical parallelism, rhetorical questions, anaphor, imperative structures, antithesis and detachment. As for the nonverbal content, it speculates on the idea that syntactical devices are often accompanied by visual representation on the screen for emphasizing the verbal content.

The language means are described thoroughly and studied from their implicit meaning perspective. In this research we tried to describe the principles of the formation of linguistic expressions which influence the recipients' mentality and, therefore, cause the intended reaction. Consequently, the descriptive method and the cognitive analysis method contribute greatly to the content analysis employed in this study. Moreover, the content analysis is examined through the perspective of the stylistic analysis, a method, which is used to study the given piece of text (Khan, & Mansoor, & Upham, 2018). The stylistic analysis is determined by various figures of speech, in our case, the syntactical ones.

6. Findings

The study shows that various syntactical devices are frequently used in advertising clips. Through their usage the meaning of the advertising clip can be deeply enhanced. The most popular syntactical devices are parallelism and rhetorical questions, 30% and 23% respectively, while anaphor, imperative structures, antithesis and detachment make up 18%, 15%, 8% and 6% correspondingly.

6.1. Syntactical parallelism

Syntactical parallelism helps to concentrate on the main idea. Even if the thoughts conveyed in both sentences are different they seem to be one idea, expressed with different words, due to the usage of parallel structures. For example, in 2018 'Rod Rosenstein: Do your job or resign!' ad, parallel structures sound like slogans ('Time for him to stand up for the rule of law and stand up for the American people'.

It's time for Rod Rosenstein to do his job or resign'). Syntactical parallelism can be used in combination with rhetorical questions, anaphor and imperative structures.

6.2. Rhetorical questions

Rhetorical questions are peculiar kinds of devices in the way that they draw two realities in mind: one is connected with the positive answer to the question and the other is connected with the negative answer. Our brain is structured in such a way that it analyses both, but the recipients do not even notice this because it happens very quickly and subconsciously. As a result, the recipient chooses the negative answer because rhetorical questions predict the answer in advance. They already contain the answer in themselves but it does not prevent them from suggesting two ways of thinking. In the 2017 ad 'Immoral', Roy Moore is hammered by Doug Jones over sexual misconduct. The audiences are asked the question 'Will we make the abuser a U.S. Senator?' The intended answer is, of course, 'No', but people are still made to think what will happen if the answer is 'Yes'. They are allegedly given the chance to choose, but the choice is obvious. That is why such syntactical devices are always used in negative advertising.

6.3. Anaphor

Anaphor serves for emphasis. It highlights the main idea that the recipient should catch and, as a result, make a conclusion. Anaphor is mostly used in positive advertising with the exception of cases when it is implied in rhetorical questions. Thus, in the 2018 ad Phil Bredesen plays on the audience's senses saying, 'We need and deserve something better than we're getting from Washington. We need and deserve a senator who can make that happen,' implying the idea that he is the senator they need. The repetition of ideas with the help of this device makes the recipient think of it thoroughly and seal up the idea in the mind, even if it is not expressed explicitly. The brain has to figure out the implied meaning by itself. Due to this fact, due to the complex operations that the brain has to do, such ads become more memorable. The more complex operations the brain does while processing information, the more this information stands in mind.

6.4. Imperative structures

Anaphor can be combined with imperative structures that can sound either compulsive or subtle. Imperatives as well as rhetorical questions presuppose two possible variants of the situation development. If you do this, there will be one consequence. If you do not, there will be another. These ideas are played mentally. We do not notice how our brain analyses them, but it results in a strong impact. In 2020 ad 'Imagine', Joe Biden says, 'Imagine the progress we can make in the next 4 years. Imagine a country where affordable healthcare is a right, not a privilege...' So, when you 'imagine' this, you understand that the reality is different. These examples of imperatives sound subtle and soft, unlike the ones that directly call up to vote. They sound very compulsive. The survey has showed that imperative structures are used both in negative and positive ads.

6.5. Antithesis

Antithesis is a powerful tool carrying both positive and negative connotation in political ads. Antithesis is built on the counterposition of two candidates. In some cases the attacked candidate is not even mentioned but implied. In the 2016 Hilary Clinton's ad 'Roar', the ideas of the pre-election campaign message are repeated with the anaphora 'I'm voting for respect. I'm voting for courage. I'm voting for equality,' and then they are suddenly interrupted with the antithesis 'I'm voting against hate.' This is the hint on Donald's Trump political agenda against immigrants, though his name is not even pronounced. Antithesis presupposes both the syntactical use and mental. The latter means that the antithesis may not be present in the text, it can be implied subconsciously.

6.6. Detachment

For emphasis, ad makers often use detachment, separating words carrying the main sense and, therefore, making the recipient concentrate their attention on it. Moreover, in all commercials with detachment examples, these syntactical structures are printed on the screen in order to be enhanced. For instance, in the advertising of 2018 called 'Disturbing', the detached words are printed on the black-and-white background to sound worrying ('Court Documents. Real facts. Roy Moore's disturbing conduct.'). The detailed examination has showed that detachments are mostly employed in negative ads because such abruptness sounds frightening.

7. Conclusion

Syntactical means not only emphasise the main idea of the ad, they enhance it. Syntactical means in political ads often sound like a slogan, even if they are not. Some of them, like syntactical parallelism, anaphor and imperatives, are used in both promotional and attack commercials, others, such as rhetorical questions and detachments, are only used in negative advertising because they are structured in such a way that they carry negative connotations. Antithesis is typical of contrast ads, because it is already hidden in the structure of such ads.

Syntactical parallelism makes the audience concentrate on the main idea, repeating the same structure so that it can easily reach out the recipient. Rhetorical questions force the audience think of two possibilities of the development of the situation. Despite the fact that they do not demand the answer, they subconsciously force to contemplate on two possible consequences, in case of 'No' and 'Yes'. The repetition of words with the help of anaphor is an attempt to get through to the recipient. Anaphor can occur in rhetorical questions and in imperative structures. Imperative structures, as well as rhetorical questions, in their own way, provoke the mind to contemplate on two possible situations and analyse what will happen if you follow the command or not. Antithesis is built on the counterposition of ideas and candidates that is why it is common in contrast ads and can be accompanied by visual changes in the color of the picture: when the attacked candidate or the idea is shown in black-and-white, while the attacking one is portrayed in bright colours. Detachments are always accompanied by graphical means; they are always printed on the screen to catch the audience attention. If they were not shown in such a way, they would not be achievable for the audience.

All in all, stylistic means are a powerful tool which is constantly used in political advertising and occurs even more often than lexical means of expression. They have a very strong subconscious meaning which is in most cases expressed implicitly, behind the words. Syntactical means are often enhanced graphically, because they can be more easily traced by the viewer and quicker deciphered. While watching video clips with syntactical means, you have to hear them, see (if they are printed in the video picture) and restore their hidden meaning. Your brain has to analyse different channels through which it gets this information. As a result, these adds become more memorable and have a stronger influence because more mental operations were employed in getting the main meaning.

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