

Speech Acts In Drug Advertisements On Vietnam Television

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Abstract:

This study was conducted to find out what speech acts are used in drug advertisements on Vietnam Television. 15 advertisements of pharmaceutical products broadcast on VTV1 and VTV3 channels were used to collect the data for the study. The result shows that four out of five broad categories of speech acts suggested by Searle which are expressives, representatives, directives and commissives are used in these drug advertisements. Typical speech acts belonging to each group appear in the sample are complaining, complimenting, thanking, informing, describing, warning, advising and promising.

Key Word: drug advertisements, speech acts, expressives, representatives, directives, commissives.

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I. Introduction

It is undeniable that thanks to the development of science and technology as well as the society's increasing demands, new products and services are launched every year. In order for those new products to reach the target customers quickly and effectively, advertising becomes an extremely necessary way of communication. Advertising, an intermediary channel connecting manufacturers with potential customers, is a tool to convey information with the aim of persuading readers, listeners or viewers to take a certain action. Advertising can appear everywhere such as on television, in newspapers, on streets, on public transport, ect but perhaps television advertising is the most popular form as it can easily reach large audiences in a short amount of time.

Television advertisements need a vivid combination of images, sounds, and languages to help viewers believe that the products will positively impact on their lives. Product information is conveyed through both visual and audio channels, so advertising language plays a very important role in achieving the ultimate goal which is convincing viewers to make purchasing decisions. According to Dinh Kieu Chau (2013) "Advertising discourses also contain familiar speech acts such as narration, interrogation, negation, requests, etc. Specific speech acts (inviting, suggesting, doubting, persuading, ect) are associated with the psychology involved in the action." This article focuses on analyzing what types of the speech acts are used in health-care medicine advertisements on VTV1 and VTV3 channels of Vietnam Television, the national television station under the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

II. Literature Review

Speech acts

The speech act theory was coined by J. L. Austin (1962) in "*How to Do Things with Words*" and then developed by J. R. Searle. Searle (1969) states that "speaking a language is performing speech acts, acts such as making statements, giving commands, asking questions, making promises, and so on." Each speech act consists of three interrelated acts, namely, locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary.

- A locutionary act is an act of "saying something" when the speaker produces words that carry a certain sense and reference.

- An illocutionary act is connected with the speaker's intentions, e.g. questioning, threatening, promising, requesting, giving commands and many others.

- A perlocutionary act is an act having an effect on those who hear a meaningful utterance, such as persuading, surprising, deterring, etc.

Searle classifies illocutionary acts into five broad categories as follows:

- Representatives: The purpose of this act is "to commit the speaker (in varying degrees) to something being the case, to the truth of expressed proposition". The representative group consists of informing, asserting, claiming, describing, reporting, etc.

- Directives: The speaker intends to get the hearer to do something. This could be done by giving an order, offering advice, making a request, etc.
- Commissives: The speaker commits to doing something in the future by making utterances of a promise, a plan, a vow, an offer, a refusal, etc.
- Expressives: The speaker expresses his/her psychological state towards a situation specified in the propositional content. This could be an apology, a complaint, a welcome, etc.
- Declarations: The speaker declares something that has the potential to bring about a change such as “You’re fired” and “I resign.” The sub-categories are declaring, naming, dismissing, approving, etc.

A speech act is recognized when it contains one of the performative verbs. When these verbs are spoken, people immediately perform actions, for example “describe”, “call”, “classify”, “state” (representative verbs), “order”, “command”, “request” (directive verbs), “promise”, “pledge”, “vow” (commissive verbs), “apologize”, “congratulate”, “thank” (expressive verbs), and “appoint”, “declare” (declaration verbs). Other indicating devices are specialized expressions, typical structures, word order, and stress and intonation.

Advertisements and speech acts

Advertising is defined in Cambridge Dictionary as “the activity of making products or services known about and persuading people to buy them” and an advertisement is “a picture, short film, song, etc. that tries to persuade people to buy a product or service”. Mai Xuan Huy (2005) claims that “in terms of content, an advertisement is information about products and services that the advertiser is selling. In essence, it is a display of self-praise and product praise. In terms of purpose, it aims to comprehensively influence the readers, hearers, and viewers, to convince them to finally purchase the advertised product. In terms of language, from the point of view of communication theory, advertising is a form of speech acts.” In the textbook “Applied Linguistics”, the authors Dinh Van Duc, Nguyen Van Chinh, Dinh Kieu Chau (2016) also affirm that “the advertising language includes acts of inviting, encouraging, requesting, etc.”

III. Results and Discussion

To clarify the types and characteristics of speech acts used in drug advertisements, a sample of 15 advertisements broadcast on VTV1 and VTV3 channels of Vietnam Television were selected. The researcher noted down the transcripts, analyzed semantic, syntactic, pragmatic aspects of utterances and categorized them in types of speech acts according to Searle’s theory. The result of the research shows that the language used in each drug advertisement is a combination of different speech acts which belong to following categories.

Expressive speech acts

*** Complaining**

The act of complaining occurs when the speaker expresses sadness, discomfort or dissatisfaction and hopes for sympathy and sharing from the hearer. In TV drug advertisements, complaints are often made at the beginning with the focus on somebody’s health problems.

(1) *“Your dad is going senile and sometimes he even talks nonsense.”*

(2) *“You just bring me aches and pains.”* (you refer to headaches, toothaches, muscle pains)

(3) *“Oh my God, I have ulcerative colitis. When I eat strange food, I keep using the toilet. I can't stand it.”*

Due to typical characteristics of drug advertisements, the complaints about diseases are not to seek the sympathy of viewers as in normal communication, but instead, the purpose is to express sympathy for viewers. They may feel that their health problems are understood by others who are suffering the same matters. After the complaints, there come other speech acts such as introducing, praising and suggesting.

*** Complimenting**

In advertisements, advertised businesses boast about how wonderful their services and products are, therefore compliments are often used. This act is indicated directly through positive adjectives described the health care drug.

(4) *“How good Dai Trang Tam Binh is! Taking the drug improves metabolism immediately.”*

(5) *“Vien Khop Tam Binh is really good.”*

Indirect compliments are mainly expressed by mentioning the benefits of using the products. Indirect compliments appear in all advertisements surveyed because this act is used to convey good assessments of the pharmaceutical products and to highlight their outstanding advantages which make viewers feel secure about advertised drugs.

(6) *“Hoat Huyet Nhat Nhat helps boost brain blood flow, fall asleep quickly and sleep deeply, be fully awake and alert in the morning.”*

(7) *"Bao Khi Khang helps reduce phlegm, cough, shortness of breath, complications of asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Bao Khi Khang helps reduce anxiety about phlegm, cough, and shortness of breath."*

Indirect compliments are also expressed through the act of making statements which are considered as slogans of the products:

(8) *"Bo Phe Nam Ha - cough medicine for Vietnamese people."*

(9) *"Tam Binh – wholeheartedly in every product."*

Slogans are often short, concise, rhyming, easy to remember and make a strong impression on viewers.

***Thanking**

The act of thanking is done when the speaker benefits from something and wants to express his/her gratitude. In the drug advertisements surveyed, this act is performed with the phrase *"thanks to"*.

(10) *"Thanks to Vien Khop Tam Binh, I no longer have joint pains."*

(11) *"Thanks to Dai Trang Tam Binh, now I can eat and drink anything."*

With the phrase *"thanks to + product name"*, the speakers want to confirm the good effects of the medicinal products so the viewers may feel these drugs are reliable. This is also an indirect way of thanking the products/ businesses for helping them solve their health problems.

Representative speech acts

These are direct speech acts that state what the speaker believes to be the case or not, including asserting, stating, informing, claiming, describing, etc. Among the surveyed drug advertisements, the acts of informing and describing are used the most.

*** Informing**

Texts of the TV advertisements inform audiences of the advertised product brands and the current product promotions to attract their attention.

(12) *"Vien Cao Gobi is a precious gift from Mongolia, a product of VIMOS.JSC."*

(13) *"Nhat Nhat Pharmaceutical was given the National Quality Gold Award by the Prime Minister."*

(14) *"... (Customers) have a chance to win a Mercedes car per year, a Vespa motorbike per month, 100% reward points, regular health care and many other benefits. The total value of the program each year is up to 70 billion VND." (Angela Ginseng advertisement)*

*** Describing**

The act of describing appears in most drug advertisements and is an effective way for manufacturers to provide detailed product information to consumers, especially about its compositions. Words used in the product description are usually specialized and associated with the pharmaceutical sector.

(15) *"Made from white horse bones of the distant and harsh Mongolian steppe and precious herbs, Vien Cao Gobi supplements calcium and amino acids which help improve bones and increase resistance."*

(16) *"Sara contains Paracetamol. Sara has a sweet taste without alcohol and sugar."*

(17) *"Colocol Extra contains paracetamol and caffeine."*

(18) *"Bo Phe Nam Ha Chi Khai Lo cough syrup is made from herbal ingredients."*

Directive speech acts

Directives are used when the speaker wants to make the hearer do something.

*** Warning**

The speaker tells the hearers about certain dangers and discomforts that are likely to occur in the future so that they can avoid them. The warning act usually appears at the beginning of a drug advertisement.

(19) *"Dementia not only reduces the quality of life of the elderly, but also makes their families extremely difficult."*

(20) *"Alcohol and dirty food destroy liver cells, causing hepatitis, high liver enzymes, liver failure, indigestion, bloating, anorexia, allergies, rashes, urticaria, boils."*

(21) *"Sputum, cough, shortness of breath are symptoms of asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)."*

(22) *"The joys of the old age are no longer complete; the pleasures are hindered; happiness becomes far away because of impaired eyesight, dry and tired eyes."*

These warnings are oriented not only to those who are suffering from health issues but also to healthy people so that they can anticipate problems they may face in the future. In the collected advertisements, after the warning, there is an introduction and/or a description of the medicinal product whose main function is to solve

the problems mentioned in the warning. The act of warning is intended to make hearers worry about their possible health problems, thereby they will decide to buy products to prevent such bad things. Words used in warnings are often terms related to symptoms and consequences of illness or diseases.

*** Advising**

This speech act indicates what the speaker wants the hearer to do and refers to things considered beneficial to the hearer.

(23) *“Choose Jex Alipas, Angela ginseng and Ecogreen products. Only buy products with stamps intact to check the product’s authenticity, ... Call 1800556889 for more information.”*

(24) *“Spray as soon as your throat itches to stop coughing.”*

(25) *“If you have irritable bowel syndrom and flatulence, remember to take Tam Binh drug.”*

The act of advising in these drug advertisements is expressed by using the base form of the verbs as an imperative. The things mentioned such as choosing Jex Alipas, spraying the itchy throat (an advertisement for Nhat Nhat throat spray), taking Tam Binh drugs are said to be good for hearers, especially to help deal with their health problems, therefore they have no reason to refuse. Before offering some advice, the speaker often introduces information about the drug or compliments its good effects so that consumers have no doubt about its effectiveness.

Pieces of advice are also expressed through negative imperatives which are found in all advertisements, usually at the ending position. The hearers are told what not to do to avoid possible damages and unfortunate things.

(26) *“Do not use Sara for people with hypersensitivity, anemia, G6PD deficiency, heart, lung, kidney and liver diseases.”*

(27) *Do not use Colocol Extra for people with liver failure, kidney failure, hypersensitivity to any ingredients of the drug.”*

(28) *“Do not use the drug for pregnant women. Read the instruction carefully before use.”*

The above advice helps drug takers pay much attention to how to use the product to avoid possible risks affecting their health.

Commissive speech acts

Commissive speech acts, including promising, vowing, offering, refusing, threatening, etc., are a way for the speaker to state what he/she will do or will not do in the future. In 15 pharmaceutical advertisements studied, the act of promising is used most and often appears after warnings, complaints and descriptions.

*** Promising**

In advertising, the promising speech act is not the speaker’s commitment to doing something for the hearers, but a guarantee of positive outcomes that the product will bring for the users.

(29) *“Bao Khi Khang helps reduce phlegm, cough, shortness of breath, complications of asthma, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Bao Qi Khang helps reduce anxiety about phlegm, cough, and shortness of breath.”*

(30) *“Hoat Huyet Nhat Nhat helps boost brain blood flow, fall asleep quickly and sleep deeply, be fully awake and alert in the morning.”*

(31) *“Lohha Tri Nao helps prevent brain atrophy, dementia.”*

(32) *“Ataxavi Vision, 1 capsule per day for healthy eyes.”*

(33) *“Boni Vein helps increase the strength of veins, reduce leg pains, heavy legs, leg numbness, leg cramps, leg swelling, bruising.”*

The act of promising appears in all advertisements when the speakers introduce the expected effects of the product by using the verb “help” or the structure “drug name + help”. The speakers give an assurance about good results after using the product which helps audiences believe that their health problems can be dealt with successfully. By doing this, advertising has performed its key function of enticing potential customers to become real customers.

IV. Conclusion

Through analysis of the typical speech acts in 15 televised pharmaceutical advertisements, we can see that no declaration speech act appears in these advertisements but different acts belonging to 4 other groups are used appropriately to attract viewers’ attention. Due to the characteristics of the product, a variety of scientific and specialized words are used in speech acts of warning, describing, promising, complimenting, etc. These speech acts not only meet the requirement of helping manufacturers provide information about medicinal products to customers, but also achieve the purpose of showing the empathy for other people’s health issues. When television viewers or potential customers are provided with an accurate amount of information, they will believe that the product can reduce their anxiety and solve their health problems. Therefore, speech acts have a

very important role in helping advertisements perform the main functions, which are to introduce products to viewers, raise their awareness of the brands and products and persuade them to make prompt purchase decisions.

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