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## AN ANALYSIS OF COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE IN CHINESE FOOD TV COMMERCIALS

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**ABSTRACT:** *Today, advertisements can greatly influence people's consumption behavior. To arouse consumers' purchasing desire, some merchants produce appealing advertising language that may help them achieve their prospect of promoting products greatly. Many scholars have dug into TV commercials from various perspectives, such as, acoustics, visual effects, and discourse analysis. Compared with other perspectives, there is few analysis concerning the application of Cooperative Principle (CP) in TV commercials. Based on the theory of CP, this thesis adopts qualitative research method and investigates whether the advertising language in Chinese food TV commercials observes or flouts the maxims of CP and what effect it may achieve. This thesis is expected to shed light on the writing of advertisement copies for Chinese food TV commercials and increase the pragmatic awareness of the advertising copywriters. Meanwhile, consumers can better infer the implicature in Chinese food TV commercials and avoid being deceived by some advertising language.*

**KEYWORDS:** Chinese food TV commercials; cooperative principle; conversational implicature

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### INTRODUCTION

Advertising has completely merged into our lives and it is quite important in commercialization as a means of sales promotion. Though the application of advertising language varies a lot, to arouse the consumers' purchasing desire and attain their prospect of sales, all the ads aims to leave deep impression and to be persuasive. In a word, commercial has a striking effect on drawing consumers' attention and enlarging markets. Meanwhile, advertisements should not only impress the consumers but also create a positive image of the product, which may bring latent profits for the companies. Compared with last decades, people's demand towards living standards, including eating, housing, transportation, etc. soar sharply. Thus, food industry in China has received more concern. People focus more on food security and variety and large amount of food advertisements appears on media. Food advertisers use various language strategies to fulfill a rhetorical effect, which is expressed in an indirect way. As a result, it is difficult for consumers to select the most satisfied commodities for themselves. Social-cognitive theories reveal that the effect of food TV advertising on eating behaviors is subtle, which may occur without participants' consciousness (Bargh & Morsella, 2008). Consumption behaviors can be activated through the media, such

as TV commercial, which bridges the gap between consumers and producers. Food TV commercials spread powerful food consumption cues, for example, images of appealing snacking at nonmetal moments, and pleasant emotions connected with food consumption (Folta et al., 2006; Harrison & Marske, 2005). That is to say, the messages presented in TV food advertising lead to corresponding eating behaviors. Thus, it is useful to know how the food advertisements influence consumers' choices and fulfill their functions. Many linguistic devices have been employed in studying advertising language, such as, phonetic, trope. Compared with those, fewer scholars focus on the discussion of advertising language in terms of the CP theory and conversational implicature. However, in strengthening the intercourse in TV commercials, implicature occupies a vital position. Implicature, a linguistic form, imparts and expresses extra meaning. It can help the advertisers emphasize the characters of their commodities in a limited time and help the potential consumers avoid being deceived from ambiguous words. H. P. Grice proposed conversational implicature, attempting to illustrate the process of literal interpretation between the speakers and the hearers. In commercials, conversational implicature passes on the intention of the advertiser. In the field of Chinese food TV commercials, the research of the application of the CP theory and conversational implicature is valuable. Thus, this thesis, aims at discovering how implicature is applied to food advertisements for specific rhetorical effects and marketing purposes. The application of CP theory and conventional or conversational implicature contributes to the theoretical structure for the thesis.

### **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING**

In pragmatics, the key issue is to explore why interlocutors can smoothly communicate with each. The basic view is that they should follow some widely accepted principles to continue the communication. The theoretical framework of the paper is Cooperative Principle. The CP theory, one of those principles, said that the speaker and the hearer cooperate in the communication through sustaining the intercourse (Grice, 1975). Grice also proposed four maxims, the concrete content of the CP theory, including Quantity, Relation, and Manner, which are elucidated as follows (Fromkin & Rodmad, 1993):

#### *Quantity*

Make your contribution as informative as required.

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

#### *Quality*

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Do not say what you believe to be false

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

#### *Relation*

Be relevant.

#### *Manner*

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief.

Be orderly.

In the conversation, when speakers observe all the maxims of Cooperative Principle, the conversational implicature will not be produced (Runqing Liu & Xu Wen, 2006). However, people do not comply with the four maxims all the time. Conversational implicature is a violation of conversational maxims (Weidong Dai, 2002).

English in Advertising (Leech, 1986), the initial linguistic work on advertising language, discusses the utilization of linguistic devices in commercials. It is useful for further study on linguistic. Instead of merely giving his own views, Geoffrey used a quantitative method to describe advertising language. He analyzed the advertisers' intention, and then, he practices the linguistic theories on advertising language. This work is the first analysis of language in context. The falsehood in TV commercials was once mentioned in *The Language of Television Advertising* (Geis, 1982). The main contribution of the work is that it provides the appropriate approach on commercial expression, which conforms to the importance of advertisement. Without function consideration, the research on advertising language would be meaningless; thus, it should be closely related to communication and pragmatics. Sperber and Wilson believe that the quality of communication is connected with pragmatics because effective communication occurs when the audiences understand the speaker's intended meaning, not the linguistic or literal meaning of the utterance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative method is mainly applied to the discussion to find how implicature is generated by flouting the maxims of Cooperative Principle, and if they do not flout the CP theory how consumers interpret the advertisements. In this thesis, data are all collected from TV commercials including CCTV1, HNTV, LNTV, JSTV. Those ads are all Chinese food TV commercials. Moreover, those selected ads are typical and are familiar to consumers.

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on the CP theory, they are segregated into two groups: the one observing the CP theory. The group observing the theory of CP is used to analyze how the ads convey messages by means of CP; the group flouting the theory of CP is sort by the four maxims of the CP theory and can reveal the generation mechanism of pragmatic implicatures. There are also specific explanations on the comprehension process of the implicatures in ads.

### **The Maxim of Quantity in Chinese Food TV Commercials**

Most food advertisements present the information about the commodity name, origin area, use, etc. Advertisements are stereotyped by various types of commodities, for instance, the alcohol commercial emphasizes the origin area and year, while the advertisement of spice focus on its traditional procedure. To make the advertisement more effective, the adviser should afford sufficient information.

*Example 1 “困了累了喝东鹏特饮。——东鹏特饮”*

*Translation 1 “When you are tired or sleepy, drink Dongpeng Vitamin Drinks.  
——Dongpeng Vitamin Drinks”*

Discussion: This ad is for a drink. Dongpeng Vitamin Drinks serve as functionality drinks which can help their users relieve fatigue and increase energy. This line aims at people who are sleepy and tired and indicates the effect of Dong Peng Vitamin Drinks. According to the commercials, consumers can make choices with less effort.

### **The Maxim of Quality in Chinese Food TV Commercials**

To score big points, the enterpriser should ensure product quality; On the other hand, he should never cheat consumers by fake propaganda which may damage his own image and hurt consumers' confidence.

*Example 2 “黄金产地，健康好油。——中粮福临门玉米油”*

*Translation 2 “Healthy oil is produced in the golden area. ——Fulinmen Oil”*

Discussion: This ad is designed for Fulinmen Oil, introducing its producing area and quality. Gutter oil refers to inferior oil served on tables, such as repeatedly used fried oil, which may cause cancer or other diseases. In September 2011, the Chinese police cracked down on the use of waste oil, which caused widespread concern about food safety issues. In response to such event, Fulinmen indicates the area and quality of its product. 45 degrees north latitude is known as “Golden Maize Zone”, the most suitable area for growing corn. Thus, Fulinmen selects the area as their origin place in order to ensure the oil quality. The advertisement emphasizes on the product quality.

### **The Maxim of Relation in Chinese Food TV Commercials**

To be more informative and effective, most food TV commercials is relevant to their commodities. In finite time, the advertiser tries to convey more messages closely related to the commodity, such as its material, area, function, etc.

*Example 3 “草原好奶造好糖。——金丝猴奶糖”*

*Translation 3 “Tasty toffee is produced by good milk in grassland.  
——Golden MonkeyToffee”*

*Example 4* “美味持久，久到离谱。——炫迈口香糖”

*Translation 4* “Unbelievable lasting taste. —— Xuanmai Chewing”

Discussion: *Example 3* is for milk sugar, stressing the producing area. It shows that Golden Monkey is made of high-quality materials. *Example 4* is for chewing gum, indicating the taste of the products, emphasizing the distinction between Xuanmai and other brands. Both examples above follow the maxim of Relation, that is, the advertising language connects with the products closely and directly. These lines can affect consumers' minds stronger.

### **The Maxim of Manner in Chinese Food TV Commercials**

The manner maxim demands the advertising language to be straightforward, brief and unambiguous.

*Example 5* “点点滴滴，优水悦人心。——康师傅矿泉水”

*Translation 5* “Good water can please people, even a drop.  
—— Master Kong Mineral Water”

Discussion: It is designed for a public welfare activity held by Master Kong, representing producer's expectation of the product. It advocates the public to contribute love bit by bit to those who are in the water-deficient area, at the same time, the consumers will be pleased by quality water.

### **Flouting the Maxim of Quality**

When the advertiser designs something untrue or lacking adequate evidence, an advertisement flout occurs.

Advertisements do not always follow this maxim, and they only conform to the truth within specific constraints.

*Example 6* “咱们不生产水，咱们只是大自然的搬运工。——农夫山泉”

*Translation 6* “Instead of producers, we are only porters in nature. —— Nongfu Spring”

Discussion: This ad is for Nongfu Spring, using porter to visualize their company's own imaginary. They claim that they do not produce water, which converses people's cognition towards waterworks. People are concerned about water quality, which is the core of occupying the market. Although it is impossible for Nongfu Spring to be a porter merely, consumers are still appealed by the slogan and are willing to have a try. Thus, in commercials, metaphor and hyperbole, which are commonly used, obviously glamorize commercials.

### **Flouting the Maxim of Quantity**

According to Grice, the flouting of Quantity Maxim is created when the interlocutors blatantly afford much or fewer message than needed. There should be enough

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information in conversations. The hearer cannot totally comprehend speaker's mind if he or she doesn't get enough information. Thus, the advertiser should describe unambiguously and build up clear images for consumers.

*Example 7 “回味无穷。——剑南春”*

*Translation 7 “Go back to Tang Dynasty. —— Jian Nan Chun”*

Discussion: This line directs audience's mind to Tang Dynasty, which has no relation to Jian Nan Chun literally. Thus, this line doesn't provide sufficient information. The origin of Jian Nan Chun is Mianzhu in Sichuan, which has been produced since the Tang Dynasty. Mianzhu is located in the south of Mountain Jian, in Tang Dynasty, the wine is called ‘春’ in Chinese, so the wine is named as Jian Nan Chun. Consumers can feel the long history of Jian Nan Chun wine through this slogan, which adds the credibility of this product and strengthen the audience's memory.

### **Flouting the Maxim of Relation**

Relevance means that the message conveyed to the consumers should be relevant to the product. Most people only care about the things relevant to themselves. They concern about how to look better, how to relax, how to improve themselves, etc. They tend to focus more on advertisement only if it is relevant to them. Good advertisement should be relevant to the audience's demands.

*Example 8 “新一代的选择。——百事可乐”*

*Translation 8 “It is the choice of the new generation. ——Pepsi”*

Discussion: This line is for Pepsi, indicating that it is the choice of the new generation. Without visual illustration, it is hard for audience to guess what product the advertisement is for. There are many factors can affect the interpretation of conventional implicature, such as job, dressing, marriage, etc., except Pepsi. Thus, there is no strict connection between this line and Pepsi. However, the audience can understand such advertisements. The young are the target consumers of Pepsi, and Pepsi advocates happy free style which is accepted by the young. The audience can understand the brand concept of Pepsi without enough information.

*Example 9 “我要陪你美下去！——天喔柚子茶”*

*Translation 9 “I want to accompany with you to be beautiful forever !  
—— Ten Wow Grape Tea”*

Discussion: This line is for Ten Wow grapefruit tea, announcing that “I hope I can accompany with your beauty.” Generally, grapefruit tea does not directly attach to Forever beauty. Thus, this line flouts the maxim of relation. It indicates that Ten Wow grapefruit tea has the effect on maintaining beauty and remaining youthful. It targets at the ones who hope to maintain beauty. From first-person perspective, this line shortens

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the distance between consumers and commodity. It is definitely a successful advertisement.

### **Flouting the Maxim of Manner**

When an expression contains two or more expressions, it is ambiguous and can be resolved in a special context. In other words, ambiguity is a statement which can be understood in several means. In the food advertisement, the advertisers seldom use obscure words, but some advertisers even use ambiguous words without enough information to describe the product completely. In pragmatics, these seem to be controversial; however, both can impress consumers and even achieve unexpected effects.

*Example 10 “这不仅仅是甜蜜。——雀巢巧克力”*

*Translation 10 “It is more than sweet taste. —— Nestle Chocolate”*

Discussion: This line is for Nestle chocolate, stressing the sweet feeling brought by the chocolate. It seems not provide enough information about Nestle chocolate products; however, it leaves a question to consumers. They want to know that besides the sweet taste, what kind of feeling the Nestle chocolate can bring about. Consumers will buy the chocolate because of the psychological motivation. Although this line seems to express in an ambiguous way, it successfully attracts consumers interests.

### **FINDINGS**

The relation maxim demands for the accordant message. The flouting of relation maxim is seen as conveying irrelevant information and converting the original focus. The main reason of this phenomenon is that advertisers hope to distinguish their brand concept towards their consumers. The flouting of the maxim of quality is always created by trope. The reason for such flout is to create more interesting advertisement and let the consumers remember it. The flouting of quantity maxim can inspire the consumers' imagination, that is, they are able to construe the message on the basis of their own knowledge. As a result, the implication can be created clear to the utmost. The flouting of the manner maxim is often expressed in an ambiguous way to let the consumers think more about the ads and leave deeper impressive on the consumers.

### **CONCLUSION**

Generally, interlocutors follow the maxims of CP in conversations and talk explicitly to maintain the communication; However, people may flout the maxims and express indirectly. On the one hand, in Chinese food TV commercials, some ads observe the CP theory to convey message in an explicit way because food is the necessity of everybody, and consumers mostly cares about the quality and details about the food. The advertisers cater to the consumers' demands to produce successful ads which can

promote sales. Concerning the group observing the CP theory, all have a main idea proposed by the advertisers. Besides, the advertisers also give relevant information to support their central idea. On the other hand, Chinese food TV commercials employ conversational implicature commonly to arouse the consumers' interest and leave deeper impression on consumers.

### **Implication to Research and Practice**

This thesis explored the application of CP in Chinese food TV commercials. Commercials are prevalent in both trade and society. In promoting sales, advertising language is an effective way. It is of great linguistic and practical value to examine the utilization of pragmatic theories into the creation of commercial texts. To some extent, the advertising language can directly influence the effect or success of advertisements. Advertisers can design Chinese food TV commercials with pragmatic theories. They know that it sometimes will be more effective on consumers to make them understand implicatures from ads than the direct description. In designing advertisements, whether observing or violating CP theory depends on what kind of message the advertiser intends to convey to the consumers. Advertisers can make use of the theory of CP to create appealing ads to promote commodities, but they should not take advantage of the theory to produce confusing and misleading advertisements. Consumers can obtain both valuable message and pleasure from the impressive commercials. From the commercials, consumers can learn the latest brand in time. Pragmatic theory can guide consumers to avoid being conceived by some misleading advertisements. For example, department stores always issue the advertising propaganda of “买一送一” (Buy One Get One Free) . Having got there, consumers find that there is only a tiny package of the product served as the free gift prepared for them. “Buy One Get One Free” is only a piece of attracting information which can largely misguide consumers. Consumers tend to be able to recognize the implicatures in commercial through the CP theory. Therefore, consumers will not lose the sense for judgment. Through the analysis of some Chinese food TV commercials, the theory of CP can be found powerful in interpreting Chinese ads. The theory can also be seen as a good mechanism in creating and recognizing real meanings or implicatures in advertising.

### **Future Study**

Based on the analysis above, further studies can be carried out on the following issues. First, visual images should be taken into consideration because all advertisements collected in this thesis are sourced from TV. What's more, it is better to apply other pragmatic theories to analyze ads to make the analysis more comprehensive.



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