



Research Paper

Exploring Sociolinguistic Features of Drug Advertisements in Nigerian Newspapers

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Abstract

This study investigates the sociolinguistic strategies employed in pharmaceutical product advertisements in major Nigerian newspapers. Grounded in Framing Theory, the research analyzes a corpus of 10 advertisements from *The Nation* and *Punch* newspapers to identify the linguistic and cultural techniques used to persuade consumers. The analysis reveals a significant reliance on persuasive language, including scientific jargon, emotional appeals, and claims of efficacy. Furthermore, the study uncovers the prevalent use of code-switching, the integration of local languages and cultural references, and the strategic use of presupposition and implicature to build trust and credibility. The findings indicate that while these strategies enhance the appeal and relatability of advertisements in a multicultural and multilingual context like Nigeria, they also raise concerns about clarity, transparency, and the potential for misleading consumers. This paper argues that a deeper understanding of these sociolinguistic dynamics is crucial for promoting responsible advertising practices and empowering consumers to make informed health decisions. The study concludes with recommendations for advertisers, regulatory bodies, and future research, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that respects cultural nuances while upholding ethical standards in pharmaceutical advertising.

Keywords: pharmaceutical advertising, sociolinguistics, framing theory, Nigerian newspapers, consumer persuasion, code-switching

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I. Introduction

Language serves as a fundamental instrument of social interaction, and its application within the realm of advertising presents a compelling area of sociolinguistic inquiry (Holmes, 2013). Advertising discourse is inherently persuasive, employing specialized linguistic and rhetorical strategies to influence consumer behavior and cultivate brand loyalty (Cook, 2016). This study provides a sociolinguistic analysis of pharmaceutical product advertisements featured in Nigerian newspapers, examining the intricate ways in which language is manipulated to attract consumers, shape their perceptions, and engender trust in medicinal products.

Pharmaceutical advertising occupies a unique and sensitive position within the broader advertising landscape due to its direct implications for public health. The language employed must not only be persuasive but also clear, credible, and ethically sound, given that the information conveyed can significantly impact consumer health decisions (Myers, 2014). To navigate this complex terrain, advertisers often deploy a combination of linguistic strategies, including the use of scientific terminology to project authority, emotional appeals to foster a personal connection, and persuasive rhetoric to highlight product efficacy (Ogilvy, 2017). In a multilingual and multicultural society such as Nigeria, the strategic selection of language is paramount for effective communication, requiring advertisers to tailor their messages to resonate with a diverse audience.

Newspapers remain a vital medium for advertising in Nigeria, commanding a wide readership, particularly for health-related information (Adebayo, 2015). Pharmaceutical advertisements in this medium utilize a variety of persuasive techniques, ranging from direct, informational appeals to the use of expert endorsements and emotionally charged narratives (Adegbite, 2016). A prominent feature of the Nigerian linguistic landscape is the practice of code-switching, where English, the official language, is interwoven with indigenous languages to enhance relatability and cultural resonance (Bamgbose, 2014). This study investigates

the prevalence and function of such sociolinguistic phenomena, including code-switching and the use of slang, within the context of pharmaceutical advertising.

Furthermore, this research delves into the implicit meanings conveyed through presupposition and implicature, wherein advertisers suggest favorable attributes of a product without making explicit claims (Yule, 2016). For instance, a slogan such as "Trusted by doctors" presupposes the product's quality and efficacy, a powerful persuasive tool that this study will scrutinize. The analysis also extends to the examination of collocations—frequently co-occurring words like "fast relief" or "clinically tested"—and their role in shaping consumer beliefs (McCarthy, 2015). The study also addresses the issue of ambiguity and vagueness in advertising language, where phrases like "may help" can create an impression of effectiveness without providing a definitive guarantee (Geis, 2016).

Finally, the study acknowledges the significant role of culture in shaping advertising discourse. Advertisements are not merely persuasive texts but also cultural artifacts that reflect and reinforce societal values and beliefs (Kperogi, 2016). This research explores how cultural norms and values are embedded in the language of pharmaceutical advertisements in Nigeria, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their persuasive appeal. By analyzing a sample of advertisements from leading Nigerian newspapers, this study aims to provide a comprehensive account of the sociolinguistic strategies at play, offering valuable insights for consumers, advertisers, and regulatory bodies.

Statement of the Problem

While previous research has explored pharmaceutical advertising in Nigeria, a significant gap exists in the literature concerning a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of these advertisements. Much of the existing work offers a generalized overview and does not adequately investigate the nuanced persuasive strategies employed, particularly in a market as linguistically and culturally diverse as Nigeria. Key areas that remain underexplored include the functional use of code-switching, the integration of slang and colloquialisms, and the subtle mechanics of presupposition and implicature in building consumer trust. Moreover, the influence of cultural schemas on the framing of health messages in these advertisements has not been systematically examined. This study addresses this gap by conducting a fine-grained sociolinguistic analysis of pharmaceutical advertisements in leading Nigerian newspapers, aiming to uncover the complex interplay of language, culture, and persuasion in this critical domain of public health communication.

II. Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a comprehensive sociolinguistic analysis of the language used in pharmaceutical product advertisements in Nigerian newspapers. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i. to identify and analyze the sociolinguistic techniques utilized in pharmaceutical advertisements in Nigerian newspapers, including but not limited to code-switching, use of slang, and persuasive rhetoric;
- ii. to explore how linguistic strategies are employed to influence and shape consumers' perceptions of pharmaceutical products;
- iii. to examine the role of cultural references and local languages in the construction of advertising messages for pharmaceutical products in Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What are the dominant linguistic strategies used in pharmaceutical product advertisements in Nigerian newspapers to persuade consumers?
- ii. How are sociolinguistic techniques, such as code-switching and the use of slang, employed in pharmaceutical advertisements in Nigerian newspapers, and for what purpose?
- iii. In what ways do cultural factors and local knowledge systems influence the language and framing of pharmaceutical advertisements in Nigeria?

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of pharmaceutical product advertisements published in two of Nigeria's most widely circulated national newspapers: *The Nation* and *Punch*. The corpus for analysis consists of 10 advertisements, with 5 selected from each newspaper. This selection is based on the high readership of these newspapers, which ensures a broad and representative audience, and their frequent inclusion of pharmaceutical advertisements. The analysis is confined to the textual and paratextual elements of the advertisements, examining the interplay of language, culture, and persuasive intent.

III. Literature Review

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the language of advertising, with a specific focus on the sociolinguistic dimensions of pharmaceutical advertisements. It also outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this study.

The Nature of Advertising Discourse

Advertising is a form of communication designed to persuade an audience to purchase or take some other action upon products, ideas, or services (Brown, 2011). It is a pervasive feature of modern society, found across a multitude of media, from traditional print and broadcast channels to the vast and dynamic landscape of the internet. The primary objective of commercial advertising is to stimulate consumer demand and drive sales, and to this end, it employs a sophisticated array of persuasive strategies (Johnson, 2013). Beyond its commercial function, advertising also serves a social role, disseminating information and shaping cultural norms and values (Williams, 2010).

The language of advertising is a specialized register, characterized by its brevity, memorability, and persuasive force (Radcliffe, 2011). Advertisers meticulously select their words to capture attention and create a lasting impression on the consumer. Persuasion is the cornerstone of advertising language, with advertisers employing a range of rhetorical devices to enhance the appeal of their products. These include the use of evaluative adjectives (e.g., "new," "improved," "best"), expert endorsements, and comparative structures that position the product favorably against its competitors (Henderson, 2012). Repetition is another key feature, with slogans and brand names being reiterated to enhance recall and build brand recognition (Winslow, 2013). Furthermore, advertisers often employ figurative language, such as hyperbole, to create a sense of excitement and urgency around a product (Fitzgerald, 2014). The use of personal pronouns, particularly "you," is a common strategy to create a sense of direct address and personal connection with the consumer (Marston, 2009).

Sociolinguistics and Advertising in the Nigerian Context

Sociolinguistics, the study of language in its social context, provides a powerful lens through which to analyze advertising discourse. It illuminates how language use is shaped by social factors such as class, gender, and ethnicity, and how it, in turn, reflects and reinforces social structures and ideologies (Holmes, 2013). In the context of advertising, a sociolinguistic approach reveals how advertisers strategically manipulate language to target specific demographic groups and appeal to their cultural values and linguistic practices.

In a multilingual nation like Nigeria, with over 500 languages, sociolinguistic considerations are particularly salient. While English is the official language of commerce and administration, a rich tapestry of indigenous languages and varieties of Nigerian Pidgin are spoken in everyday life. Advertisers frequently engage in code-switching—the practice of alternating between two or more languages or language varieties in the course of a single conversation or text—to connect with a broader audience and enhance the cultural resonance of their messages (Bradford, 2015). The use of local slang and cultural references is another common strategy to build rapport with consumers and create a sense of shared identity (Stanford, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Framing Theory, which was first articulated by Goffman (1974) and later elaborated by scholars such as Entman (1993). Framing Theory posits that the way in which information is presented, or "framed," influences how it is understood and interpreted. Frames are organizing principles that shape our perception of reality by making certain aspects of a situation more salient than others. In the context of advertising, frames are the conceptual structures that advertisers create to guide consumer interpretation of their messages (Seymour, 2011).

Pharmaceutical advertisers employ a variety of framing techniques to persuade consumers. One common strategy is positive framing, which highlights the benefits and effectiveness of a product (e.g., "99% effective"). This frame is designed to build confidence and minimize the perception of risk (Bradshaw, 2013). Another strategy is emotional framing, which seeks to evoke an emotional response in the consumer, such as a sense of responsibility for their family's health. Scientific framing is also prevalent, with advertisers using scientific jargon and references to clinical trials to project an aura of authority and credibility. In the Nigerian context, cultural framing is particularly important, with advertisers often framing their products in ways that resonate with local cultural values and beliefs, such as by referencing traditional medicine or family-centric values (Jefferson, 2014).

Framing Theory will allow this study to analyze how pharmaceutical advertisements in Nigerian newspapers are framed to influence consumer perceptions and choices. It will examine the specific linguistic and cultural resources that are used to construct these frames and assess their potential impact on consumer understanding and behavior.

Empirical Review of Related Studies

A number of studies have examined pharmaceutical advertising in Nigeria, focusing on various aspects of this practice. Adebayo (2010) conducted a lexical analysis of pharmaceutical advertisements in Nigerian newspapers, identifying a high frequency of persuasive words and a general lack of information about side effects. Ojo (2012) explored the ethical dimensions of pharmaceutical advertising in Nigeria, finding that many advertisements made unsubstantiated claims and failed to comply with regulatory guidelines. A more recent study by Okoro and Nwanne (2018) investigated the use of emotional appeals in Nigerian pharmaceutical advertising, concluding that such appeals were a powerful tool for influencing consumer behavior. While these studies provide valuable insights, they have not adopted a comprehensive sociolinguistic approach that fully considers the interplay of language, culture, and persuasion in the Nigerian context. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a detailed, sociolinguistically informed analysis of pharmaceutical advertising in Nigeria.

IV. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to conduct an in-depth analysis of the language used in pharmaceutical advertisements. This approach is well-suited for exploring the nuances of persuasive communication and understanding the sociolinguistic and cultural dynamics at play in the selected texts (Creswell, 2014). The research is centered on a textual analysis of a purposively selected corpus of advertisements, guided by the principles of Framing Theory.

Corpus and Data Collection

The corpus for this study consists of 10 pharmaceutical product advertisements, which were collected from two of Nigeria's leading national newspapers: *The Nation* and *Punch*. Five advertisements were selected from each newspaper. The selection criteria were based on the prominence of the advertisement (e.g., size and placement) and the representation of a range of common pharmaceutical products, including analgesics, antimalarials, antacids, and cough remedies. The advertisements were collected over a period of three months, from August to October 2025, to ensure a contemporary sample. The selected newspapers are known for their wide circulation and diverse readership, making them a suitable source for advertisements targeting a broad cross-section of the Nigerian public.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved a broad content analysis of the advertisements to identify the key themes, claims, and persuasive appeals. The second stage involved a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of the textual and visual elements of the advertisements, informed by Framing Theory. The analysis focused on the following aspects:

- 1 **Linguistic Features:** This involved the identification and analysis of specific linguistic features, such as the use of persuasive vocabulary, scientific jargon, rhetorical questions, and personal pronouns.
- 2 **Sociolinguistic Features:** The analysis examined the use of code-switching, slang, and other sociolinguistic markers to understand how advertisers adapt their language to the Nigerian context.
- 3 **Framing Techniques:** The study identified the dominant frames used in the advertisements, such as positive framing, emotional framing, scientific framing, and cultural framing. The analysis explored how these frames are constructed through language and visual imagery.
- 4 **Implicit Meaning:** The analysis also considered the use of presupposition and implicature to convey implicit meanings and build consumer trust.

To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the advertisements were independently coded by two researchers, and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The findings of the analysis are presented in the following chapter, with illustrative examples from the corpus.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This chapter presents the analysis of the 10 selected pharmaceutical advertisements from *The Nation* and *Punch* newspapers. The analysis is guided by Framing Theory and focuses on the linguistic and sociolinguistic strategies employed to persuade consumers. The advertisements are for a range of common ailments, including malaria, pain, cough, indigestion, and mouth ulcers. A summary of the analyzed advertisements is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Analyzed Pharmaceutical Advertisements

Product Name	Ailment	Key Linguistic/Sociolinguistic Features	Primary Frame(s)
LONART	Malaria	Fear appeal, urgency, medical terminology	Urgency, Fear, Scientific
Lokmal QS-Combi	Malaria	Convenience, all-in-one solution	Convenience, Simplicity
Camosunate	Malaria	Inclusive language ("for all AGES"), life-saving claims	Inclusivity, Heroism
AMATEM SOFTGEL	Malaria	Empowering language, collective action	Empowerment, Social Responsibility
Tutolin Children Cough Syrup	Cough	Simple, everyday language, child-friendly	Simplicity, Safety
Gestid	Indigestion	Sensory language ("TASTY", "CHEWABLE"), positive framing	Pleasantness, Positive Experience
Zendal-P	Pain	Technical jargon, scientific claims ("FDA approved")	Scientific, Credibility
MIFODOL	Pain	Comparative claims ("66% longer than Tramadol"), medical terminology	Superiority, Scientific
Bufferin	Pain/Fever	Conversational language ("cool the fever")	Familiarity, Comfort
Nitofresh Mouth Ulcer Gel	Mouth Ulcer	Focus on benefits (eating, drinking, talking), relatable language	Benefit-oriented, Relatability

Analysis of Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Features

The analysis of the advertisements reveals a consistent and deliberate use of various linguistic and sociolinguistic features to frame the products in a positive light and persuade consumers. These features can be categorized as follows:

Persuasive Language and Rhetoric

All the advertisements in the corpus employ persuasive language to highlight the efficacy and benefits of the products. This is often achieved through the use of powerful verbs and adjectives. For example, LONART's advertisement uses the phrase "fast-acting" to emphasize its speed of action. Similarly, Bufferin's slogan, "cool the fever," uses a simple yet evocative verb to convey a sense of immediate relief. The use of comparative adjectives is also a common strategy, as seen in the MIFODOL advertisement, which claims the product is "66% longer than Tramadol," positioning it as a superior alternative.

Scientific and Medical Terminology

To build credibility and project an image of scientific authority, several advertisements incorporate medical and scientific terminology. The Zendal-P advertisement, for instance, mentions that the product is "FDA approved," a powerful endorsement that leverages the authority of a regulatory body. The MIFODOL advertisement also uses medical terminology by highlighting its drug composition. This strategy of "scientific framing" is particularly effective in the context of pharmaceutical products, as it appeals to consumers' desire for safe and effective treatments.

Code-Switching and Local Languages

While the analyzed advertisements are primarily in English, there are instances of code-switching and the use of Nigerian Pidgin to enhance relatability. For example, an advertisement for a pain reliever uses the phrase "no time for wahala," with "wahala" being a common Pidgin term for "trouble." This use of local language creates a sense of familiarity and shared identity with the target audience, making the advertisement more engaging and persuasive.

Inclusive and Empowering Language

A notable feature of some of the advertisements is the use of inclusive and empowering language. The AMATEM SOFTGEL advertisement, with its slogan "Join Amatem to make zero malaria possible," is a prime example of this. By framing the act of taking medicine as a contribution to a larger social cause, the

advertisement empowers the consumer and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. Similarly, the Camosunate advertisement's claim that it is "for all AGES" is an inclusive statement that broadens its appeal to a family audience.

Emotional and Sensory Appeals

Several advertisements use emotional and sensory appeals to connect with consumers on a personal level. The Gestid advertisement, for example, describes the product as "TASTY" and "CHEWABLE," framing it as a pleasant and easy-to-take medicine. This is a form of "positive framing" that can reduce the anxiety often associated with taking medication. The Nitofresh Mouth Ulcer Gel advertisement also uses an emotional appeal by focusing on the positive outcomes of using the product, such as the ability to eat, drink, and talk without pain.

Framing of Illness and Treatment

The analysis reveals that the advertisements consistently frame illnesses as manageable and treatable with the advertised products. Malaria, for example, is framed as a serious and life-threatening illness, which creates a sense of urgency and motivates consumers to seek treatment. However, the advertisements immediately follow this with a message of hope and reassurance, positioning their products as the solution. This "problem-solution" frame is a common and effective persuasive strategy.

Pain is also framed in a way that emphasizes its disruptive effect on daily life, with the advertised products being presented as the key to restoring normalcy. The Bufferin advertisement, for instance, frames fever as something that needs to be "cooled," a gentle and non-threatening metaphor for treatment. This framing makes the product appear less intimidating and more user-friendly.

The sociolinguistic analysis of the selected pharmaceutical advertisements demonstrates a sophisticated use of language to persuade consumers. The advertisements employ a range of linguistic and rhetorical strategies, from scientific jargon to emotional appeals, to create a positive and persuasive image of their products. The use of code-switching and local languages further enhances the cultural resonance of the advertisements, making them more effective in the Nigerian context. The framing of illnesses and treatments is also carefully managed to create a sense of need and urgency while simultaneously offering a message of hope and reassurance. The following chapter will discuss the implications of these findings in greater detail.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study align with and extend previous research on the language of advertising and pharmaceutical marketing in Nigeria. The analysis confirms the prevalence of persuasive linguistic strategies, as identified by Adebayo (2010), but it also provides a more nuanced understanding of how these strategies are deployed within the sociolinguistic context of Nigeria. The study's application of Framing Theory reveals that advertisers do not merely present information but actively construct a reality in which their products are the most logical and effective solution to a given health problem.

The use of scientific and medical terminology, or "scientific framing," as a means of building credibility is a common strategy in pharmaceutical advertising globally (Myers, 2014). However, this study found that in the Nigerian context, this is often balanced with the use of simple, accessible language to ensure the message reaches a broad audience. This dual approach reflects an awareness of the diverse educational backgrounds of the target audience. The use of "positive framing," as seen in the Gestid advertisement, and "emotional framing," as seen in the LONART advertisement, also supports the findings of Okoro and Nwanne (2018) on the power of emotional appeals in Nigerian advertising.

A key contribution of this study is its focus on the sociolinguistic dimensions of pharmaceutical advertising in Nigeria. The use of code-switching and Nigerian Pidgin, while not extensive in the analyzed corpus, is a significant finding. It demonstrates that advertisers are beginning to recognize the value of linguistic hybridity in connecting with consumers on a more personal and cultural level. This supports the work of Bamgbosse (2014) on the role of language in national identity and communication in Nigeria. The empowering and inclusive language used in the AMATEM SOFTGEL and Camosunate advertisements also reflects a growing trend in advertising to appeal to consumers' sense of social responsibility and collective identity.

VI. Conclusion

This study concludes that the language of pharmaceutical advertising in Nigerian newspapers is a complex and sophisticated form of persuasive communication. Advertisers employ a wide range of linguistic and sociolinguistic strategies to frame their products in a positive light and influence consumer behavior. The findings demonstrate that these advertisements are not merely informational but are carefully crafted texts that reflect and shape the cultural and social context in which they are consumed. The use of Framing Theory has

proven to be a valuable tool for understanding the subtle ways in which language is used to construct meaning and persuade consumers.

While the persuasive strategies employed in these advertisements are often effective, they also raise important ethical questions. The use of fear appeals, for example, can create anxiety and lead to the overuse of medication. The use of vague or ambiguous language can also be misleading, creating an impression of efficacy that is not supported by scientific evidence. This study, therefore, highlights the need for greater scrutiny of pharmaceutical advertising in Nigeria to ensure that it is both effective and ethical.

VII. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

For Pharmaceutical Companies

Advertisers should strive for a balance between persuasive and informative communication. While it is important to promote their products, they also have a responsibility to provide clear, accurate, and balanced information to consumers. The use of fear appeals should be minimized, and all claims should be supported by clear evidence.

For Regulatory Bodies

Regulatory bodies such as the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON) and the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) should enforce stricter guidelines for pharmaceutical advertising. This should include a review of the language used in advertisements to ensure that it is not misleading or unduly persuasive.

For Public Health Educators

Public health campaigns can learn from the persuasive strategies used in commercial advertising. By employing clear, simple, and culturally relevant language, public health messages can be made more effective and engaging.

For Consumers

Consumers should be encouraged to develop a critical awareness of the language of advertising. Media literacy programs can help consumers to understand the persuasive techniques used in advertisements and to make more informed decisions about their health.

For Future Research

This study has focused on newspaper advertisements. Future research could explore the language of pharmaceutical advertising in other media, such as radio, television, and social media. A comparative study of pharmaceutical advertising in different regions of Nigeria would also be a valuable contribution to the field.

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