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Irrationality in the Consumption of English: The Case of *Eikaiwa* Advertising in Japan

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Choice in the Learning of English

As *the* global language *par excellence*, the number of learners of English has, in all likelihood, never been greater. Students of all colours and creeds learn English for a variety of reasons, ranging from an *instrumental* view of language learning (Park & Wee, 2012; Tupas, 2008; Wee, 2008) as a means to an end, to a view of language learning as a form of *leisure* consumption or end in itself (Kubota, 2011a, 2011b). However, for many, perhaps even the majority of learners of English as a second or other language, there appears little, if indeed any, meaningful choice to be made in regards to the initial proposition of whether one starts learning the language or not. Françoise Grin is surely right when he asserts that “the common situation where the level of language skills acquired by actors is, to a large extent, the outcome of language education policy” (2003, p. 44). However, there has for some time been a significant private commercial sector of language education around the globe, where the question of whether to learn a language, is very much an exercise of individual agency – a genuine choice as it were. However, once one begins to ask the question of why certain choices are made over others, two, often contradictory explanatory forces come into play. Firstly, there is the *a priori* assumption of rationality that one finds in certain fields of classical liberal economics, where it is assumed that all human action occurs in line with the imperative of sacrificing the least for the greatest reward, in an exclusively self-interested way (Foley, 2004; Graeber, 2001; Vickers, 1995). In contrast, is the view, particularly in the social sciences, that people exist not as atomised individuals, but are subject to all manner of social influences, not least of all in the play of ideological forces, which cause choices to be made in a distinctly irrational manner (i.e. in ways that do not lead to the most gain for the least sacrifice, and/or are not made exclusively out of self-interest). What this article aims to do is to build on the work done by the likes of J.S.Y. Park (2011) and Pennycook (2007) who examine the *false promise of English*, by adding nuance to the analysis

of how dominant discourses on English are expressed through texts such as advertising, addressing the shades of truth or the *modality* (Van Leeuwen, 2005) of claims made within texts such as advertising. It is argued that while outright false claims may well exist and inhibit ones' ability to make rational choices, there is, at least in the case of advertising, far greater weight of salience given to claims which are neither objectively true or false, but nevertheless influence the choice of the individual, and problematize the view of advertising as passive informer, and of the individual language learner as sovereign rational decision maker.

Advertising: Persuaders or Informers?

One of the most common forms of information which exists specifically for the purpose of informing our choices in the marketplace, is advertising. Packard (1980) takes the view of advertising as a *Hidden Persuader* detailing the millions of dollars that advertising agencies have spent on 'motivational research' that draws on psychoanalysis and various strands of social theory to probe consumers' "subsurface desires, needs, and drives" (ibid, p. 57). Such approaches are not marginal or exceptional, but rather are part of the mainstream practice of advertising in general. One common technique through which advertising accomplishes its persuasion and instigation of wants is in what the art critic John Berger (1972) refers to as the proposition of *transformation*:

Publicity [advertising] proposes to each of us in a consumer society, that we change ourselves, or our lives, by buying something 'more'... And Publicity persuades us of this transformation by showing us people who have apparently been transformed, and are, as a result, enviable. (Berger, 1972)

Such a view of advertising as persuasive instigator of wants, finds no parallel in neoliberal discourse on advertising. The proposition of advertising, as a force external to the individual's in-built rational calculus, as capable of creating or influencing desires is entirely irreconcilable with the neoliberal commitment to the "independently determined desires" of consumers (Galbraith, 1989, p. 127). In critique of economist Gary Becker's (1996) *Accounting For Tastes*, Hodgson points out:

Becker does not fulfil his promise to 'account for tastes'...They are simply assumed. In particular, as in previous models, tastes are 'immaculately

conceived'. There is no accounting for the origin or nature of these tastes. (2003, p. 160).

As economists such as Mirowski have argued, it probably should not come as a surprise that sources external to the individual are often rejected as influencing wants and desires, as to do so would be to call in to question one of the pillars of the neoliberal free market society - the sovereignty of the consumer - that is the 'democratic' proposition that it is the wants and desires of consumers that are 'freed' within a free market society (Mirowski, 2009). Such a proposition of 'freedom' "holds only if wants cannot be created, cultivated, shaped, deepened or otherwise induced" (Galbraith, 1989, p. 81) by forces external to the sovereign individual.

Advertising as Information

In contrast to the notion of advertising as *persuasion*, is the proposal of a view of advertising chiefly as a source of information to the rational consumer (Al-fattal & Ayoubi, 2012; Davis, Kay, & Star, 1991; Nelson, 1974; Stigler & Becker, 1977). Here, "Advertising exists to inform in the cheapest and most efficient medium" (Davis et al., 1991, p. 9), by which the consumer gains information which helps them to make rational decisions in the market. Indeed, as a cheap and efficient form of dispensing 'information', advertising is praised as something of a social good:

Advertising also serves something of a socially beneficial role, in that it reduces the cost of consumers searching around. It is a view of advertising quite consistent with the usual tenets of economic behaviour – that it is self-interested, and in the long term rational. (Davis et al., 1991, p. 10)

In such a view, advertising is positioned as something consumers themselves seek out as it best serves their own interests:

Whatever their explicit reasons, the consumers' ultimate reason for responding to advertising is their self-interest in so doing...If it were not in consumer self-interest to respond to advertising, then consumers' sloppy thinking about advertising would cost enough that they would reform their ways...If consumers were losing out by trying advertised products, they would have had an enormous number of opportunities to discover this fact. (Nelson, 1974, p. 751)

In this sense then advertisements cannot be deceptive or manipulative, as though this may work in the short term, sooner or later consumers would “reform their ways” and start consuming a different and superior product. So then, advertising here is not only “merely a transmitter of information” (Hodgson, 2003, p. 160), but the information that they relate is not misleading, but sincere and genuine. However, rather than the information contained within advertising such as the descriptions or claims about the products – the content of the advertisement, it is the existence of advertising itself which both Nelson (1974) and Davis, Kay, and Star (1991) focus on in their view of advertising as information:

The first and most obvious piece of information that the advertisement can provide is that the producer is willing to advertise. This itself provides a signal of the producer’s commitment to the product...Under this view, advertising convincingly signals the quality of a product by displaying the producer’s sincere faith in his [sic] own output, reflected by the money that is spent on promoting it. (Davis et al., 1991, p. 6 -7)

Though synonymising superior products and producers, with those who spend most on advertising may raise eyebrows, it is the over-readiness with which the move away from the content of advertising is made that warrants discussion. This is so, as it sheds light on the concept of ‘information’ as a binary of true or false. If this is one’s definition of information – there is simply very little to talk about within the content of most advertising, not least of all in the fact that the use of image is so prevalent. The literature which sees advertising as information, in taking a binary view of information as either true and sincere, or purposely misleading, concludes that in the long term, the rational calculus of the individual ensures sincere advertisers prosper in the long run, as consumers “reform their ways” should they fall a foul of misleading false information from disingenuous advertising and buy a different product. The arguments of Packard (1980) and Galbraith (1989, 1998) of advertising as persuasive, is rejected on the erroneous grounds that persuasion and deceit are one and the same. On this point Hodgson (2003) highlights the extent of such a reductive view of ‘information’:

Typical of many economists, [for example] Becker recognises nothing in between ‘brainwashing’ on the one hand, and ‘free choice’ based on given preference functions [determined by ‘information’] (p. 169).

The view of information as a simple matter of true or false however, is problematic. Aside from the banal point that not all written or spoken information in advertising is a falsifiable truth claim, the extent to which the literature on advertising as informant focusses almost exclusively on written text, highlights not only the reduction of information to binary true or false ‘statements’, but a monomodal reduction of information to written text exclusively. What is necessary then, is an analysis which examines the multiple *modes* (Kress, 2009) present, and examines how these modes work together to express modalities of truth, that is claims and information which is more or less expressed with certainty - shades of truth, rather than a black and white dichotomised view of information which is either true or false.

Advertising in English Language Teaching

There are a number of studies that have looked at the advertising of English language teaching (hereafter ELT) in various contexts (Bailey, 2006; Pegrum, 2004; Seargeant, 2009; Simpson, 2019). Of the literature reviewed here, the notion of advertising as beneficent informer, is absent. Rather, the literature, on the whole stands, in contrast with the view of advertising as informant, not only in that advertising is seen as a largely persuasive affair, but further, that quite contrary to the informant view, information in the content of advertising is indeed deceptive. This ranges from the conclusion of Pegrum (2004) that in advertising “the advantages tend to be overstated by those with a vested interest in the promotion of English” (p. 3), to the all-out pseudoscience of claims from advertising, firstly in the case of ELT advertising in Iran, where: “[T]he [teaching] method was asserted to operate on learners’ subconscious mind through magic X waves sent to their brain cells” (Mirhosseini, 2015, p. 932), and secondly in Seargeant’s discussion of advertising, quoting from the promotional literature of the *eikaiwa* (commercial English language schools in Japan) corporation *Nova*:

[T]he truth is that the English and Japanese languages exist on different wave lengths. For this reason, a normal Japanese person’s brain cannot distinguish English which is on the non-Japanese wave length from noise, and thus can’t catch what is spoken in English...It is important to listen repeatedly to and speak with native speakers in order to activate the language field within our brain. (cited in Seargeant, 2009, p. 97)

Such flat-out falsehoods directly contradict the view of advertising as sincere informer. The argument that the rationality of consumers will in the end triumph,

essentially disciplining those who deceive through advertising by poorer sales in the long term, is at odds with the standing of *Nova* as one of the market leaders of *eikaiwa* corporations (Currie-Robson, 2015). Overwhelmingly, the majority of literature on ELT advertising does not take up the question of rationality and consumer choice, but rather analyses advertising as a site within which to examine ideologies of ELT. For Mirhosseini (2015) for example, ELT advertising in Iran reproduces certain ideological beliefs about ELT which make presuppositions including: certification as ‘evidence’, oral communication as the primary skill, the possibility of learning English within a limited time frame, and native speakerism. While Mirhosseini (2015) uncovers the ideological beliefs that relate specifically to the pedagogical practices of language teaching, Bailey (2006) casts the ideological net wider, to ideologies of gender, eroticism, and race.

Methodology

In this study, digital photographs of all of the *eikaiwa* advertisements present within the train carriages of twelve of the major subway and over-ground lines in central Tokyo, were taken over a two-day period. This totalled 11 different advertisements, many of which were present on multiple train lines. Though the sample size in this study is somewhat limited, and the discussion of the empirical data below is admittedly somewhat brief, what I hope this article highlights some of the pressing issues as regards multimodal discourse analysis in light of rationality in language learning.

Text in the mode of written language was translated from Japanese to English by 3 highly proficient users of Japanese. Following this, each element (sentences, images, frames, etc.) of the advertisement was coded according to its *salience* - the way in which “elements [...] are made to attract the viewer’s attention to different degrees, as realized by such factors as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or colour), [and] differences in sharpness” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). In this way analysis sought to uncover not just how much factual or persuasive information the content of the advertising contained, but also how much emphasis each kind of information was given in terms of space, layout, or other ways of giving importance or marginalising parts of the advertisement in relation to others. The analysis of written language categorised all information which was not factual, according to its *modality*, defined as “the social semiotic approach to the question of truth [...]” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 160). Following Van Leeuwen, non-factual information was categorised according to three

levels of *linguistic modality* (2005, p. 162-163), ranging from a low modality – the claim that something might be true or may happen, through median modality – the claim that something will happen, to high modality – claims that something does happen or must happen in the future. Analysis of images in the advertisements followed Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) model of *visual modality*, and were analysed according to their degree of articulation of detail, background, colour, depth, light and shadow, and tone (see also Van Leeuwen, 2005).

Factual Information: written language

All of the advertisements sampled contained falsifiable factual information. This included: details of promotional special offers, phone numbers, website addresses, details of refunds, details of how classes are levelled, details of free trial lessons, number of schools, the location of schools, awards, accreditation, and association with other institutional bodies. For the purposes of analysis, it was assumed that such information was presented in good faith - it would seem rather nonsensical for the advertisements to give fraudulent information about their contact details, for example. Of this information however, it is only a relatively small amount which one might reasonably consider as relevant information regarding informing the language learners rational choice of this *eikaiwa* over that one. Information of phone numbers and website addresses, though of course important, do not in and of themselves provide information for a rational choice to be made. Though on the face of it, such information such as refund details, locations of schools, and awards, might inform a rational preference for one *eikaiwa* over another, such is the prevalence right throughout the sample taken, that they do not in fact offer any meaningful difference between any of the advertisements sampled. For example, one might think that the location of schools certainly would inform, given it would dictate how convenient the learners' lessons would be to get to. In the case of the advertisements for *Dila* and *RIZAP*, this is certainly true as only one single school and three school locations respectively are mentioned and would constitute invaluable information for a language learner making a rational decision – i.e. whether a particular school would be convenient to go to. However, the remaining *eikaiwa* advertisements offer little in regards to the location of school branches that would help one distinguish one from the other. Those advertisements that do mention their school branch locations, relate to between 33 - 186 schools each (all within Tokyo), while the larger corporations such as *Aeon* and *Gaba* do not detail any locations of schools, presumably as it is common knowledge that as the biggest of the big players in the *eikaiwa* market (Currie-Robson, 2015) they have a great number of schools all over

the city. Simply put, if the location of the school was a priority for the language learner as rational decision maker, there would be little in the advertisements to help them determine a preference of one over another, as almost any location in Tokyo would most likely be catered for. Similarly, details of free trial classes, special offers, and refunds, are so commonplace, present on all but one of the advertisements sampled, that they do little to distinguish one *eikaiwa* from another. So far as details of prices of lessons are concerned, the matter is a little more difficult as most advertisements in the sample do not contain any information on the pricing of their lessons, thus the ability to distinguish between cheaper or more expensive lessons based on the information provided by advertisements alone is very limited.

Typically, factual information was afforded a low salience within the overall balance of composition, as it was very often written in a small font and marginalised at the side or at the bottom of the layout. None of the elements containing falsifiable factual information were given anything further than a medium level of salience, and indeed elements such as refund policies, awards and accreditation, and information about free trial lessons were afforded an extremely low salience, as text was written in a font so small as to be practically unreadable in situ – i.e. by a train passenger. In relation to the salience afforded to unfalsifiable information, not least of all in image, the elements of advertising which contained falsifiable information were literally and metaphorically marginalised. In general, all elements that expressed a level of modality were afforded a much greater salience than that of the factual information discussed above. Elements in the mode of written language at all levels of modality were often centrally placed, or featured as headlines, written in large font, and occasionally demarcated from the rest of the advertisement by framing devices.

The Multimodal ‘Whole’

With one exception, the images contained within the advertisements exclusively featured photographic images of students, or celebrities in the role of a prototypical student (Simpson, 2019), and thus displayed a *naturalistic modality* - “an image of something [that] resembles the way we would see that something if we saw it in reality” (Van Leeuwen 2005, p. 168). It is beyond the scope of this article to investigate what these images ‘say’, so to speak, as such research would require analysis of interpretations viewers themselves create upon ‘reading’ the images as Bailey (2006) has done elsewhere. Rather, what follows is a discussion of the cumulative modality (in terms of gradations of truth claims) that the multimodal whole of the advertisement creates. In other words, the question of what it is that the

advertisements as a whole seem to claim or suggest, and how strongly they make these claims or suggestions.

While elements in the mode of written language such as the claim “If you have good English you can make a difference to your annual income” (as written in an advertisement from the *eikaiwa* chain *RIZAP*) in and of themselves do not seem particularly inclined to persuade, misinform, or otherwise inhibit ones’ rational calculus, seeing as they are written in a low degree of modality (“you can” merely suggests it is possible not necessarily probable), when viewed in relation to other elements of the advertisement, the overall modality of *the message* as it were – the suggested link between English proficiency and financial gain, is amplified considerably. Firstly, the sentence is written in a large sized font, in black on a square gold background which demarcates it from the rest of the advertisement with the words “annual income” highlighted in red. The sentence, and the demarcated box within which it is placed, is itself placed in the centre of the advertisement, at the intersection of the two *vectors* of *gaze* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006) from the two men pictured. The images, bringing their naturalistic modality to bare on the overall effect, lend further modal weight to the proposition, as does the headline above them, which features a testimonial quote: “This time my/your English will improve: A manager in his 40s” (pronoun omitted in original). The naturalistic modality of the image, the testimonial style headline, the centrality of layout and large salience all given to the sentence claim of causality between language proficiency and financial gain, give the multimodal message of linguistic instrumentalism a far greater weight of modality – a much greater degree of truth, than the written sentence does when looked at in isolation.

Conclusion

In summary then, what the analysis here has shown, is that advertisements do indeed contain information which is factual which seems to be presented in good faith. However, both the quantity of this information, and the weight of salience it is afforded in the balance of the overall composition, pale in comparison to information which expresses modalities of truth in a variety of modes. While certain discourses are made explicit through the mode of written language – the example above of the relation between English and annual income drawing on linguistic instrumentalism for example, their degree of modality – the gradation of truth such claims are coloured in, is greatly amplified in the multimodal orchestration of other modes such as image, layout, and colour. Thus, a view of advertising as an informer, where

information is seen monomodally as written language expressing binary true or false claims, ignores not only the lion's share of information within the advertisement, but the overall effect of the advertisement in its multimodal totality. Indeed, the factual information itself, in most cases offered little if any information which would inform a rational decision of preference for any one *eikaiwa* over another.

In order to maintain the view of advertising as informer, one would be forced to view the majority of information within advertisements (use of colour, image, layout, etc.) as inconsequential as regards informing or inhibiting a rational decision. Moreover, one would have to believe that sign-makers – those who make the advertisements, spend a great deal of time and effort creating something for no apparent purpose, given that so much of the advertisements' semiotic work is carried out along suggestions and claims made through modal expressions of truth, not binary true or false ones. Furthermore, one would have to accept that such sign makers, quite independently of one another, produce advertisements with a stunning consistency, that cannot be explained through the art of persuasion, as to do so would be to compromise the sovereignty of the rational consumer, and the freedom in which they exist to express rational decisions.

The conclusion that advertising exists to persuade, and thus individuals do not act exclusively according to a self-interested rationality will raise few eyebrows in applied linguistics and related fields. Indeed, it may at first glance seem rather a case of preaching to the converted. Though the notion of rationality may seem an abstraction peculiar to certain fields of economics, there remains a need for work in linguistic anthropology and applied linguistics to address questions of both choice and persuasion within markets of all kinds, including linguistic ones.

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Abstract

In Neo-classical economics, the concept of rationality refers to how individuals universally act in their own self-interest to maximize a certain desirable good or resource, for the least amount of effort or cost. Typically, outside of neo-classical economics, advertising has been seen as a means of undermining rationality - inducing desires within us, *persuading* us to consume. Many within neo-classical economic circles on the other hand argue that advertisements facilitate rational consumption, as they are primarily a source of *information* for the consumer. Do English language learners then, make rational choices based on *information*, or are they *persuaded* into buying into the false promise of English? This paper highlights how the view of advertising as *informer*, has largely limited itself to written textual analysis, and goes little further than asking binary questions of whether informative statements in the text from advertisements are true or not. This paper moves beyond merely text, conducting a multimodal analysis of advertising of English classes in Japan, that problematizes the notion of advertising as merely ‘informative’, and thus aims to illustrate the limits of a ‘rational’ view of the learning of English.

Keywords: Rationality, English Language Teaching, Advertising, Multimodality, Critical Discourse Analysis

