The commodification of English in China’s advertisements

The commodification of English in a context where it is not a native language has already been documented (Haarmann 1989, Martin 2002). This paper examines the commodification of English in China, where currently both the government and the general public are very enthusiastic about learning this language (Bolton 2003). It argues that through the use of English in China’s advertisements, a symbol of modernity, internationalization, sophistication, future-orientation, and fun-orientation when used as a foreign language (Piller 2001), the copywriters are constructing an attractive identity for the “narratees” (Goddard 1998), viz., the targeted Chinese audiences, in order to persuade them to purchase the advertised products. In this sense, English has been commodified.

This study is conducted within the sociolinguistic framework of language and social identity (Gumperz 1982, Joseph 2004, Myers-Scotton 1993). It is also guided by the communication theory that the power of persuasion depends on the interaction among three different factors: ethos, pathos, and logos (Garver 1994). The advertisements analyzed in this paper were collected from both the print and the electronic medium.

Bridging sociolinguistic analysis with communication theories, this paper investigates the pragmatics of English use in Chinese media, in this case the commercialization of the English language. This study also contributes to research on the linguistic creativity of bilinguals (Kachru 1986), specifically the creativity of copywriters expert in both Chinese and English. These bilinguals capitalize on the phenomenal symbolic value of English in China and employ Chinese-English codeswitching as a discursive strategy to serve the purpose of persuasion.

References