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**DIGITAL EDUCATIONAL ADVERTISING:  
PLAIN TEXT VS. MULTIMODALITY**

**ЦИФРОВАЯ РЕКЛАМА ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫХ УСЛУГ:  
ТЕКСТОВЫЙ ФОРМАТ VS. МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНОСТЬ**

The purpose of this paper is to determine methods for encoding Chinese-language, English-language and Russian-language messages that promote educational services and are distributed through digital channels. The ratio of verbal (lexical, syntactical) and nonverbal means used in educational advertisements in the three languages is established. The results of the study demonstrate that, despite the polycode nature of modern media texts, digital educational advertising is still largely text-based, while multimodal messages make up a smaller part of the information flow.

*Key words: media text; digital educational advertising; text-based advertisement; multimodal advertisement; advertising appeal; verbal and nonverbal means of encoding.*

Целью работы является определение способов кодирования китайскоязычных, англоязычных и русскоязычных рекламных сообщений, продвигающих образовательные услуги и распространяемых через цифровые каналы. Устанавливается соотношение вербальных (лексических, синтаксических) и невербальных средств, используемых в рекламе образовательных услуг на трех языках. Результаты исследования демонстрируют, что, несмотря на поликодовый характер современных медиатекстов, при создании цифровой образовательной рекламы предпочтение по-прежнему отдается текстовому формату, тогда как мультимодальные сообщения составляют меньшую часть информационного потока.

*Ключевые слова: медиатекст; цифровая образовательная реклама; текстовый формат рекламы; мультимодальная реклама; побудительный мотив рекламы; вербальные и невербальные средства кодирования.*

With the advent of information technology, modern society has reached a qualitatively new stage in its development, which is characterized by an increase in information dissemination channels, a boost in media markets, as well as

creation of media texts on a fundamentally new basis [1, p. 20]. Digital advertising is one of such innovations. It offers numerous advantages over traditional advertising, ability to respond promptly, high level of interactivity, targeting local consumers and increased variety of advertising formats being among them [2, p. 25]. Facilitation of the exchange of non-linguistic forms of messages in Internet communication has also led to the development of “multimodality” concept [3, p. 183].

As traditionally defined, digital advertising “is broadcast to the target audience through the usage of any digital media capable of reproducing it, including: stationary and mobile devices with Internet access, digital television, interactive terminals and screens” [4, p. 299]. To create such media texts, the entire range of multimodal expressive means is used.

Multimodality cannot be perceived as a plain sum of its parts, though. On the contrary, “multimodality means a semiotic complex that ‘works’ as a single whole” [3, p. 182]. In a multimodal media message, nonverbal means may act as an addition to the verbal elements, performing informative or expressive functions, but they “also act in close relationship with verbal components” [5, p. 178]. Apart from *multimodal*, modern multimedia texts can be dubbed *mixed*, *creolized*, *polycode*, *hypertexts*, etc. [1, p. 21]. All of these terms refer to the complex nature of such messages, where verbal and nonverbal elements are tightly intertwined.

Obviously, the sender will always choose means of encoding a message based on circumstances such as the specific commodity and the context of advertising. The mainstream view of the current academic community is that “the advertising text consists of both verbal and nonverbal components” [5, p. 178]. In composing an advertisement, the verbal and nonverbal parts are neither independent nor homogeneous, but they are combined with each other in order to be effective.

As for verbal elements of a message, they are varied and can range from direct instruction [6, p. 161] to more subtle manipulative techniques that either attract attention or divert it [7, p. 326]. Moreover, this verbal side of communication has an intricate multilevel hierarchical structure (from a phoneme to a complex syntactic whole or even a hypertext) and appears in numerous stylistic varieties [8, p. 118]. Compared to nonverbal means, linguistic elements lead to faster and more accurate verification of congruent advertising objects in the minds of customers, as “representations activated via verbal means are more categorical and show greater consistency between subjects” [9, p. 170]. Thus, an advertisement brings more precise and uniform memories to customers through verbal means.

The opposing view is that nonverbal means are much better at enabling customers to remember more of the advertising content. There are studies proving that verbal and nonverbal information is perceived differently by the addressee. Specifically, information contained directly in text messages is absorbed by only 7 %, while the presence of visual images significantly increases perception to 55 % [10, p. 10]. Another advantage of nonverbal means is that they can make the advertisement stick in the customer’s mind for a longer period of time as compared to verbal means. “As time goes by, the reader forgets the facts, but an image remains in their mind based on the initial emotional reaction to what they have

read or heard” [11, p. 181]. Meanwhile, it should be noted that “not all nonverbal expressions accompanying certain verbal messages can become means of communication, only those nonverbal expressions that are meaningful, can serve as symbols and perform information functions” [12, p. 240]. Bearing the above in mind, we conclude that the condition for achieving a communicative goal lies in the interaction between words, sounds or images [5, p. 179].

The materials of this study are samples of advertisements which promote educational institutions and services and are distributed via digital channels – the Internet, digital TV and outdoor digital billboards. The analyzed advertisements come from kindergartens, primary schools, middle schools, vocational colleges, universities, vocational training institutions, hobby schools, off-campus tutoring institutions and language training schools in China, the UK and Belarus. Thus, three languages are contrasted – Chinese, English and Russian. A total of 600 digital advertisements are chosen, 200 per language. The advertisements are collected randomly, with no fixed proportion for each of the above-mentioned types of educational institutions or channels.

In terms of verbal means, the analysis results show that among the collected 200 Chinese-language educational advertisements, there are a total of 624 lexical markers that are used to carry out advertising (i.e. promotional) appeal. By classifying these verbal markers according to their semantic similarity, we identified groups of lexical means including words that describe feelings and emotions, growth and progress, price, time and distance, effectiveness, success, life philosophy, etc. For instance, Chinese-language educational advertisements commonly appeal to the feelings of love and care, which are associated with home atmosphere, and the verbal markers involved are 大家庭 ‘big family’, 家人 ‘family members’, 呵护 ‘care’, 陪伴 ‘accompany’. Happiness is recognized as one of the core dimensions of positive emotion and is fundamental to a person’s well-being in general and the process of effective studying in particular. Consequently, we come across such markers as 玩得开心 ‘have fun’, 学习的快乐 ‘the joy of learning’, 微笑 ‘smile’ and 快乐 ‘happy’. All of them are used to describe the students’ feelings in the process of learning. Growth and progress is another recurring theme in education. It is likely to catch the eye of parents and students alike and is manifested through verbal markers 成长 ‘grow up’, 提高 ‘improve’, 进步 ‘progress’ and 发展 ‘develop’. Here is an example of their contextual usage: 帮助儿童身心自然发展, 保证儿童健康快乐成长. ‘Help children to develop naturally in body and mind, and ensure children grow up healthily and happily.’ This advertisement emphasizes the words 发展 ‘develop’ and 成长 ‘grow up’ and qualifies them with the positively coloured words 自然 ‘naturally’ and 健康快乐 ‘healthily and happily’ respectively. Such descriptions of children’s growth and development can be quite effective in appealing to their parents’ emotions.

As regards syntactical means, the analysis results show that a total of 81 Chinese-language educational advertisements out of 200 contain expressive syntactical constructions that are aimed at enhancing the advertising appeal. These syntactical markers are exclamations, imperatives, questions, parallelism,

emphasis, etc. In the following example parallelism is used to list the selling points of the product one by one thus presenting them to customers in a clearer way: 质量高, 规模大, 实力强, 师资好. 'High quality, large scale, remarkable strength and excellent teachers.' Another advertisement can serve as an example of gradation, where groups of words are presented in an ascending order of importance, thus highlighting the role of the three educational dimensions for children – learning, thinking and subsequent growing: 我学, 我思, 我成长. 在教育路上, 跟您和孩子一同前进. 'I learn, I think, I grow. Moving forward with you and your child on the road of education.'

Switching on to the English-language educational ads, we should state that a total of 591 lexical markers are associated with carrying out advertising appeal in 200 collected texts. As for syntactical features, 72 messages out of 200 exhibit the usage of syntactical means of advertising appeal. Just like in Chinese-language advertisements, in English-language texts we come across verbal markers expressing positive feelings and attitudes, such as *love, care, family, friends, fun*, etc., which attempt to give the school characteristics of a family or a group of friends, as in the following example: *On an ILC course you will learn, make new friends, have fun and improve your English!* Verbal markers elaborating on price are likely to attract consumers' attention as well, such as *free of charge, affordable rates, competitive prices, budget-friendly*, etc. These may also be specific numbers, as in this ad: *25 % off. Pick your deal. Pay in full. Sign up for 4–24 weeks. Half-price registration fee. Win a free course book.* Words referring to teachers' expertise (*professionals and experts, native teachers, experienced tutors, qualified instructors, top tutors*, etc.) are aimed at highlighting the professionalism and authority of the school's teaching staff: *Whatever your reasons to study Russian, this is your opportunity to do that with a professional Russian language teacher. Look no further! Enjoy learning Russian with a highly qualified and experienced native teacher.*

Syntactical means of enhancing advertising appeal in English-language educational ads are quite varied and involve imperatives, questions, exclamations. Imperatives increase emotional effects by expressing tones such as requests, commands, exhortations, and urgings, for example: *A language learning journey awaits your command! **Let's** get started... **Don't** waste this opportunity!* Questions can attract customers' attention or stimulate their thinking, thus increasing the effectiveness of advertising, as in the following message: *Lost for an idea for a fun gift for a keen Guitar fan? ~ Then why not treat them to some fun and informative guitar lessons?* Here, two types of questions are combined. The first question appeals to the reader's feelings and concerns from the consumer's perspective, and the second makes a suggestion to consumers and is also an answer to the first question. The following advertisement is very short, but the word *fun*, which marks positive emotions, combined with exclamation gives it a strong pragmatic effect: *Learning is fun with us!*

The results of the analysis of 200 Russian-language educational advertisements show that there are 582 words and phrases referred to as lexical markers of advertising appeal, and there are a total of 61 advertisements out of 200 that engage syntactical means of enhancing the pragmatic effect. The following ad shows the usage of verbal markers expressing positive emotions: *От А0 – до В2 – изучение языка может быть интересным!* ‘From A0 – to B2 – learning a language can be interesting!’ The idea of growth and progress is exemplified like that: *Мы убеждены, что кембриджская коммуникативная методика обучения гарантирует лучший результат.* ‘We are convinced that the Cambridge Communicative Teaching Methodology guarantees the best results.’ Appeal to a successful future can be found in the following ad: *Учреждение образования «Пинский государственный аграрный колледж», профессиональное образование сегодня – стабильное будущее завтра!* ‘Educational institution “Pinsk State Agrarian College”, vocational education today – stable future tomorrow!’

Russian-language ads are also characterized by the tendency to combine several means of syntactical emphasis within one text. For example, imperative is coupled with exclamation (*Давайте учиться вместе, скучно точно не будет!* ‘Let’s learn together, it won’t be boring!’), parallelism is coupled with exclamation (*Улучшим отметки в школе, устраним пробелы в знаниях, подготовим к экзаменам на отлично!* ‘We will improve school grades, eliminate gaps in knowledge, prepare for exams with excellent marks!’), antithesis accompanies imperative and exclamation (*Частный детский сад-школа KSV: Инвестируйте в Вашего ребенка **сегодня**, чтобы получить результат **завтра**!* ‘Private kindergarten-school KSV: Invest in your child today to get results tomorrow!’), etc.

In terms of nonverbal means, the analysis results show that among the 600 selected messages, there are 50 multimodal advertisements (accounting for 25 %) in the Chinese language, 45 multimodal advertisements (accounting for 22.5 %) in the English language, and 42 multimodal advertisements (accounting for 21 %) in the Russian language. Compared with pure verbal description, nonverbal means provide richer connotations and layers into advertising while conveying information, which can produce a strong visual impact, help consumers form a deep impression and thus arouse their resonance and interest. The nonverbal elements encountered in the analyzed material mainly incorporate font (including font size and boldness, as well as font color) and images, depicting objects and body language (including action and posture, facial expression, and gesture). As the selected multimodal advertisements do not involve video elements, the nonverbal means used in them are mainly static and visual. The following are some specific examples of nonverbal means combined with verbal elements in the three languages (figures 1–3).



Figure 1. A Chinese-language educational advertisement

猿辅导免费直播课, 在家预习, 全国中小学生适用. 'Yuanfudao free live classes, pre-study at home, applicable to primary and secondary school students nationwide.' The image shows a young girl studying with a mobile phone. The verbal marker 免费 'free' refers to the price and 在家预习 'pre-study at home' describes the convenience of learning location. These are objective descriptions of the product, as well as the phrase 全国中小学生适用 'applicable to primary and secondary school students nationwide', which points out the targeted audience. The object (a mobile phone) in the picture is in accord with the textual description of the product (直播课 'live classes'), and the posture of the girl using her mobile phone to learn appeals to the customer's convenience. In addition, the entire image has an orange background with white fonts, which is eye-catching.



Figure 2. An English-language educational advertisement

*Join our English language classes to improve your speaking skills and become a more proficient English speaker.* In this advertisement, the text is accompanied by a group photo, with people posing in front of London Bridge. The verbal marker *join* calls to action and is meant to involve customers emotionally, while *improve your speaking skills* and *become a more proficient English speaker* refer to the idea of growth and progress. The imperative mood helps to create a persuasive tone, and the image (group photo) conveys the idea that everyone can make progress by becoming part of this group. The object (London Bridge) corresponds to the advertised product (the English language).



Figure 3. A Russian-language educational advertisement

*Берём курс на изучение языков! Ты – с нами?* ‘Let’s head for learning languages! Are you with us?’ The text is accompanied by the image of a girl pointing her hand forward, and behind her is a British flag. The verbal markers *берём курс* ‘let’s head for’ and *Ты – с нами?* ‘Are you with us?’ create a persuasive tone and stimulate the consumers’ desire to join in and consequently improve their foreign language skills. Meanwhile, the combination of exclamatory and interrogative sentences further intensifies the expressiveness of the text. The image of a smiling girl holding a book in one hand and pointing her other hand forward visualizes the feeling of actively moving ahead, thus attracting the customers’ attention and mobilizing them. The British flag echoes the content of the advertisement, which is *языковой курс* ‘language course’, as well.

Summarizing the above mentioned statistics and examples, the following observations can be made. 1. The proportion of plain text vs. multimodal digital ads is roughly the same in the three languages, with the ratio 3 to 1. Thus, plain text advertisements account for 75–79 % of all digital advertisements, while multimodal messages account for 21–25 %. As the samples were chosen randomly, this prevalence of text messages over creolized messages demonstrates a stable

tendency in digital educational advertising. However stimulating and eye-catching the nonverbal means are, in educational advertising the preference seems to lie with exquisite phrases and clever wording, which endow the messages with strong persuasion and can indeed hit consumers' hearts. Thus, despite the overall modern trend towards multimodality, certain spheres of advertising are still text-based, the peculiarities of advertised products or services being one likely reason for that. 2. When present, nonverbal means repeat and enhance the verbal message. There are no cases of contradictions between verbal and nonverbal aspects of digital educational advertisements, where textual information changes the perception of the image to its opposite, or vice versa, the image channels the interpretation of the text. On the contrary, lexical, syntactical and visual elements merge seamlessly to produce a multimodal message that is both eye-catching (in terms of its form) and memorable (in terms of information transmitted). 3. There are no striking differences between Chinese-, English- and Russian-language digital advertisements in terms of preferred means of encoding a message. The semantic groups of lexical means are quite similar (they refer to positive emotions, progress, effectiveness, success, price, convenience, expertise, etc.), as well as the syntactical means of enhancing the pragmatic effect. This result proves the fact that such parameters as the aim of the message (persuading consumers to buy), the sphere of its application (education) and the topic discussed (educational institutions, their products and services) prevail over such factors as language or cultural identity of advertisement creators.

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