

Pragmatic potential of precedent phenomena in advertisements

The article touches upon the problem of precedent phenomena in Russian and American advertisements of household appliances and motor cars from the perspective of their pragmatic potential. Precedent phenomena have the ability to accentuate certain properties (one or more) of the advertised product, and the author analyses those of them, which are most often accentuated in advertisements by means of precedent phenomena.

Advertising has been the focus of attention of a wide range of humanitarian and social sciences for quite a long time. This can be explained by the fact that advertising is a powerful means of conditioning people's behavior and consciousness (K.L. Bove, D. Denison, E.S. Kara-Murza, O.A. Ksenzenko, S.L. Kushneruk, A.N. Lebedev-Lyubimov, M.A. Manujlov, E.V. Medvedeva, F.G. Pankratov, T.E. Postnova, V.R. Stepanov and others). From this point of view advertising can be defined as "a kind of mass communication, in which informative-figurative, expressive-suggestive texts of one-way and impersonal character are created and disseminated; these texts are paid for by the copy-writers, whose aim is to induce his target audiences to make a choice or perform an action they desire"¹.

Pragmatic potential of advertising is achieved by different means and ways of influencing the consumer. Specific linguistic and psychological devices of influencing the target audience are studied in numerous scientific publications.

O.F. Rodina, for instance, speaking of devices intensifying pragmatic strength of advertising, numbers among them presuppositions, which include national culture and mentality, society's gender stereotypes as well as background knowledge, and units representing it.

Different stylistic, syntactico-stylistic means and the context (including the cultural context, which enters the text of the advertisement in the form of idioms, quotations, and images of celebrities) are studied as means of influencing the consumer in the article by O.A. Ksenzenko.

Understanding advertising texts as literary texts, E.V. Medvedeva uses in her analysis such concepts of rhetoric as ethos, pathos and logos. Pragmatic

potential belongs to the pathos of advertising: “In terms of its pathos, modern advertising aims at imposing on the consumer the desire to acquire a product or a service (in other words it conditions him), accentuating the product’s particular property and ascribing some special value to it”². The idea of accentuating the product’s particular property seems to be most important in the above given definition. It is closely connected with the concept of unique trading offer, whose essence can be described as follows: “the consumer should be made a really specific offer. The advertisement should not exaggerate the product’s good properties, nor should it just demonstrate the product. It is necessary to advertise a specific benefit of the product to the consumer.”³ In other words, copy-writers should not only accentuate the unique properties of the product, but also show the benefit, which the consumer will gain from these unique properties.

Accentuation of this or that product’s property as well as the specific benefit, which the consumer will gain from buying this product, can be achieved by means of referring to precedent phenomena. The definition of precedent text, which was later extrapolated to precedent phenomena in general, was introduced in 1989 by Y.N. Karaulov who defined precedent texts as “...texts, which have a special value for this or that individual from the perspective of their cognitive and emotional content, have universal character, i.e. are well known to the individual’s environment, including his/her predecessors and contemporaries, and, finally, are regularly referred to in the discourse of this individual”⁴. Pragmatic potential of precedent phenomena is primarily revealed by the fact that they are “signs, reference to which in the advertising text results in the actualization of knowledge and concepts connected with the past cultural experience of the lingual community and which are valuable for its representatives in terms of their cognitive and emotional aspects”⁵. A precedent phenomenon is always supported by the invariant of its perception, which makes all references to it connotatively marked and creates a basis for actualization of its pragmatic potential. Precedent phenomena can be defined as a linguo-cultural means of conditioning.

There are a number of studies, in which precedent names and precedent utterances are understood as units of pragmatic potential (Kh. Kaftandgiev, O.A. Ksenzenko, S.L. Kushneruk, L.P. Prohorova, O.V. Rodina). It is noted that precedent phenomena are used to create a positive image of the product or an association with certain cultural symbols, to accentuate the product's status or quality by means of direct or indirect reference to the opinion of famous people. But the above mentioned publications are not aimed at creating any complex classification of precedent phenomena on the basis of their ability to actualize specific product properties or benefits the consumer is likely to gain from buying it.

This article presents an attempt to create a classification of this kind. Analysis of 1319 precedent phenomena in Russian and American advertisements of household appliances and motor cars (679 and 640 respectively) made it possible to discover the most frequent categories of product properties, which are accentuated by means of precedent phenomena.

Let us look at the categories of product properties, which are most frequently accentuated in Russian and American advertisements by the phenomena under discussion. The categories are arranged in their frequency descending order in Russian advertisements.

1. "Quality" (10,6% in Russian advertisements and 20,8% in American).

Sound-system Microlab Hi-Fi. *"You have never seen the Beatles in live. You have never driven Formula 1 bolide. You have never seen a storm in the ocean. So what? You can hear it all! Microlab V3650"* (AudioVideo 2007, Nr1). Precedent names *the Beatles* and *Formula 1* symbolize in the collective cognitive mentality of Russians high quality of music and sport competition respectively. The implication that by using the advertised sound-system you will have the effect of being present at the Beatles concert or at Formula 1 racing convinces the potential buyer of the quality of sound. Because the quality of any sound-system is estimated by its sound quality, we consider the category "Quality" to be the main one.

Grille Bar-B-Chef Texas Charcoal Grill. *“Open-flame aficionados insist on charcoal, and this model from California-based Barbeques Galore is widely recognized as the top entry-level charcoal-burning grill on the market. Case in point: Food TV know-it-all Alton Brown uses one on his show, Good Eats» (www.details.com). Alton Brown is the host of the popular television cooking show “Good Eats”. In the show Brown explores the science and technique behind cooking, the history of different dishes, and the advantages of different kinds of cooking equipment. The fact that Alton Brown uses this grille in his show is a proof of the high quality of this product for the American consumer.*

2. “Technical characteristics” (9,3% and 16,1%).

TV-set Pioneer PDP-508XD. *“Light at the end of the panel. If you close one eye with your hand, move this magazine about 50 centimeters back from your nose, and jump on your right leg, just the same you will only see white letters in this picture. Though in reality under these letters there is a new plasma panel Pioneer. Simply it conveys the black color so well that it is absolutely invisible. But you can perfectly see what it shows”* (Maxim 2007, Nr 9). The phrase “*light at the end of the panel*” is a precedent utterance and the transformed quotation from the press-conference speech (1962) of the 35th President of the USA John F. Kennedy, who used it in his commentary on the situation in South Vietnam: “We don't see the end of the tunnel, but I must say I don't think it is darker than it was a year ago, and in some ways lighter”. This phrase became popular in Russia after the release of the Soviet crime film “Light at the End of the Tunnel” (1974, film director Aloize Brench). This transformed quotation accentuates the ability of the TV-set to convey the black color (technical characteristic).

Sony LF-XI Location Free TV. *“You’re on vacation in Rome, but you want to watch your local weather cutie. Or you want to watch your favorite DVD, view shows recorded to your TiVo or surf the Web. This allows you to do all of that from almost any WiFi hot spot or Ethernet connection – in airports, hotels and other locations – anywhere on the planet. The portable 12.1-inch, 5.3-pound touch screen transmits your commands over the Internet to the base station, which is*

connected to your broadband back home. The base station, in turn, controls all of your audio-visual equipment and sends video and sound back to the screen. We'll never have to miss another Lewis Black rant on The Daily Show" (www.maximonline.com). The Daily Show is a Peabody and Emmy Award-winning American satirical television program produced by and airing on Comedy Central, and Lewis Black is one of the hosts with his show "Back in Black". The peculiar feature of this program is that the reporters pretend to be on location, but are taped live in the same studio in front of a greenscreen, which is filled in with an appropriate location backdrop. This peculiar feature accentuates the fact that thanks to the ability of this TV-set to connect to all video- and audio-equipment at your house (which is a technical characteristic), no matter where you are, you can feel "at home" (which is a unique trading offer).

3. "Design" (9,1% and 5,8% (the fifth place according to its frequency in the American advertisements).

Rolls Royce 101 EX. "City Lights. *People in big cities rarely see the stars. That's why Rolls Royce 101 EX carries the sky with it*" (Autopanorama 2006, Nr6). The roof of this car has hundreds of tiny flashlights. This peculiar feature of design is accentuated by the precedent text – the film by Charlie Chaplin *City Lights: A Comedy Romance in Pantomime* (1931), which is by right considered to be the best film of the great actor.

The mobile phone Samsung Black Jack. "Don't let that iffy advert starring Rachel Zoe put you off this ultraslim handset: The BlackJack's a Berry-beating alternative for data-heavy cell toters (it's the thinnest full-QWERTY keyboard out there..." (www.details.com). Rachel Zoe is an American professional fashion stylist notable for having worked with numerous high-profile female celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan, Mischa Barton, Cameron Diaz, Paris Hilton, and others. Rachel Zoe is famous for being very skinny. By comparing this ultraslim phone with Rachel Zoe, the copy-writers accentuate its design.

4. "Exclusiveness" (8,3% and 11,5% (the third place according to its frequency in American advertisements). The usage of the precedent phenomena of

the category “Exclusiveness” is aimed at satisfying the consumer’s need in self-respect, in having prestige and dignity, which, according to A. Maslow, is one of the highest human needs.

BMW X5. “Imagine that you are reading Hemingway’s new story. Imagine that you are driving a new BMW X5. New BMW X5. The icon of its epoch» (Maxim 2007, Nr4). Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) is a prominent writer of the 20th century, who has exercised great influence on world literature. Discovery of a new, earlier unknown story by the writer would be exceptionally important. That’s why the comparison of driving a new BMW with reading this exclusive literary work imparts the differential characteristic of exclusiveness to the car. The unique trading offer present here is as follows: by buying this car you will get something exceptional and exclusive, which will distinguish you from other people.

LG 50PY2DR TV. “*Some moments you never forget: J.R. getting shot. The space shuttle Challenger exploding. In the world of the high-definition TV, there’s a more recent one for me: North-Western University’s football upset by then undefeated University of Wisconsin, that I watched Oct. 8 on ESPN HD. On LG’s \$ 5.000 50PY2DR, every detail stood out as I enjoyed my alma mater’s 51-48 triumph – from the concern on the Badgers’ defensive line-men’s faces after a last-minute turnover to the jubilant expressions of Wildcats fans as the clock wound down” (Businessweek 2005, 7 Nov.). The name J.R. (J. R. Ewing) actualizes a precedent situation – the murder of one of the main characters in the last episode of the season in the serial “Dallas” (1980). The killer was not found and throughout the following year, while the next season was being shot, the question “Who shot J.R.?” was widely discussed in the USA. The “Challenger” explosion in 1986 became a national tragedy, and football matches between the teams of “Badgers” and “Wildcats” are very important sports events in the USA. The precedent situations, referred to in this advertisement, are exclusive and exceptionally important in the history and life of Americans. So, we can formulate a unique trading offer, which they convey, as follows: it is an exclusive TV-set for exclusive moments in your life.*

5. “Functions” (7,8% and 4,6% (the ninth place according to its frequency in American advertisements).

Samsung DVD-camera. *“Imagine... a 33x zoom! It’s amazing how the world changes thanks to the new Samsung DVD-camera. With the 33x zoom deep impressions become much closer”*. In the picture: a close-up of Jesus Christ statue in Brazil (Geo 2006, Nr9). Jesus Christ statue in Brazil is not very big and difficult to discern, especially if you stand at the foot of the mountain. But despite the moderate size of the statue, it represents the symbol, which is great and extremely important for the whole humanity. The unique trading offer can be described as follows: with this camera you will see objects small in size, but extremely important for you.

The mobile phone MotoKRZR. *“Sounds as good as it looks. The sleek and slim MotoKRZR, the must-have phone for music fans”*. In the picture: the album and song by Shakira: Shakira. The Fray. How to save a life (Rolling Stone, 2007 Nr 8). In this advertisement the reader comes across the precedent name of the singer Shakira and the precedent texts – her album and song. They accentuate the specific function of MP3-player of this telephone: its target audience is music fans. It must be noted, however, that good knowledge of these precedent phenomena is not necessary. One must know only the invariant of perception: Shakira is a singer, which will be quite enough for understanding the message of the advertisement.

Besides the categories common for Russian and American advertisements there is a category, which is included in the list of the most frequent ones in American advertisements only. It is the category of “Universality” (5,9% – the fourth place according to its frequency).

Toshiba HD-XA1. *“Here’s the Beauty that won’t kill the Beast. Introducing the Toshiba HD DVD Player. The new Toshiba HD DVD Player allows you to start enjoying a new library of High Definition DVDs that give you brilliant video, audio and entertainment capabilities. Yet, you can still enjoy your current library of DVDs and CDs with the same player... like King Kong, now available on DVD.*

It's the latest innovation from the King of the home entertainment jungle. Toshiba” (Rolling Stone 2006, 04 May). In the picture: King-Kong.

In the above given advertisement the precedent text, the transformed title of the cartoon “Beauty and the Beast”, accentuates the ability of this new DVD-player to show your both old and new films (universality). In other words the “Beauty” of the picture of the new high-resolution DVD-discs won't “kill the Beast”, by which your old film “King-Kong” is meant, and you can continue to watch it (which is a unique commercial offer). The precedent name *King-Kong* accentuates the status of the product as well – it is the King of the home entertainment jungle.

Very often one precedent phenomenon accentuates several product properties, i.e. several differential characteristics of one precedent phenomenon are actualized.

Camera Sony HDR-HC1. *“If you've just shelled out five grand for a slick new HD plasma, what's another couple thousand for a camera that can actually take advantage of all that resolution? This Sony is the first true consumer high-def camcorder to hit the market, and there simply isn't anything else around that shoots crisper 1080i video. Color range and sound are both excellent; there's an image-stabilization-equipped 10x zoom; and, like pricier professional Sonys, the HC1 can simulate 24 frames per second (which any aspiring filmmaker knows is the format Sundance juries expect)...”* (www.details.com). Sundance Film Festival is the largest independent cinema festival in the USA and one of the largest in the world. The sentence *“the HC1 can simulate 24 frames per second (which any aspiring filmmaker knows is the format Sundance juries expect)”* accentuates not only the technical characteristic of the camera, but also its shooting quality. It is implied that the quality of the film shot with the help of this camera will enable this film to be nominated for award at America's largest film festival (which can be identified as a unique trading offer). Thus, there are two differential characteristics actualized by means of this precedent phenomenon: the core characteristic – the largest film festival in the USA, where only high-quality films

can be nominated for awards, and the peripheral characteristic – the format of films presented at this festival.

Audi A8. “*La Scala* – 2400 seats. *Grand Opera* – 2130 seats. Audi A8 salon – 4 seats. Audi A8 with the Bang&Olufsen speaker system. Only the few can have their own box in the world best concert halls. The owner of Audi A8 has this privilege. The speaker system specially built for this car will turn the luxurious salon of Audi A8 into the temple of music. 14 powerful loud speakers and the digital audio signal processing make the sound quality ideal. Audi A8 with the Bang&Olufsen speaker system – your personal box in the best concert hall” (Elle 2006, Nr8). In this advertisement the precedent names *La Scala* and *Grand Opera* accentuate the construction of the advertised motor car – a built-in speaker system, which will turn your car into an opera-house. Besides, the opera-houses *La Scala* and *Grand Opera* are world famous stages. This fast accentuates the status of the motor car as well – the speaker system will turn your car into a high-class opera-house (which is a unique trading offer).

Thus, the above given analysis leads us to the following conclusions:

1. The pragmatic potential of precedent phenomena in advertisements has a concrete one-way character, accentuating specific product properties or a unique trading offer. The fact that precedent phenomena are used to accentuate the unique trading offer in advertising texts speaks of a high level of their pragmatic potential, which is sufficient for expressing the main idea of the text.

2. The quantitative ratio of categories actualized in Russian and American advertisements of household appliances and motor cars shows what product properties are most important for Russian and American consumers and for that reason are most frequently accentuated in advertising texts. For Russians these properties are (in descending order of their importance): quality, technical characteristics, design, exclusiveness and functions. For Americans these properties are: quality, technical characteristics, exclusiveness, universality and design.

3. These findings can help to identify the properties most often taken into consideration by the representatives of the two linguo-cultural communities while choosing a product. Both Russian and American consumers try to buy a high-quality and exclusive product. The representatives of both linguo-cultural communities pay great attention to technical characteristics and design of the product. The functions of the product are important for the Russian consumer, and its universal usage – for the American consumer.

4. One precedent phenomenon can accentuate several product properties. It holds especially true for such categories of properties as “Quality”, “Universality” and “Exclusiveness”. This peculiarity is determined by the extraordinary informative capacity of precedent phenomena, their ability to compress a lot of information expressed in their differential characteristics. One or several differential characteristics can be actualized in the advertisement, depending on the aims copy-writers set themselves.

Notes.

1. См.: Медведева, Е.В. Рекламная коммуникация / Е.В. Медведева. – М. : Едиториал УРСС, 2004. С.6.
2. См.: Там же. С. 47-48.
3. См.: Кафтанджиев, Х. Тексты печатной рекламы / Х. Кафтанджиев. – М. : Эксмо, 2004. С.40.
4. См.: Караулов, Ю.Н. Русский язык и языковая личность / Ю.Н Караулов. – М. : Наука, 1987. – С. 216.
5. См.: Кушнерук, С.Л. Использование прецедентных феноменов для ситуативного промоушена в российской печатной рекламе / С.Л. Кушнерук // Политическая лингвистика. – Вып. 20. – Екатеринбург, 2006. С.202.