English advertising slogans: A modality system analysis

Wenqian Li
W. Shi

1 School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, China

ABSTRACT
Advertising slogans in English are notable for their unique and discursive features, which make them stand out. Samples of 120 English slogans with modality from 500 of the most well-known commercials are chosen to represent the modality system in interpersonal meta-function. The functional qualities of English slogans are intended to be interpreted by a systematic analysis of these slogans from the perspectives of modality type, modal value, and modal responsibility. Because of this, the middle or low modality value is often seen in English slogans, along with an expressive subjective orientation, is used in most of them. Advertisers are expected to benefit from this article, which aims to help them develop great advertising slogans and improve the effectiveness of advertising voice communication.

KEYWORDS
English marketing slogans; modality; interpersonal metafunction

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Introduction
Advertising has become an integral part of people’s daily lives as the economy has gotten more global and society has grown ever more complex, making advertising a necessary part of people’s lives. A growing amount of competition in the market necessitates the use of commercial advertising. From a discourse function perspective, English advertising slogans have their own unique vocabulary, syntax, lexeme, stylistic style, and textual characteristics. Products are promoted, information is disseminated, and people are compelled to buy as a result of its primary function. As a result, advertisers exercise extreme care when selecting the words and phrases they use, ensuring that they stand out from the crowd.

Leech (1966) first proposed looking at the stylistic characteristics of advertising speech in the English-speaking world. Since then, advertising research has not been put on hold. Later, three meta-functions were proposed by Halliday (2000) in order to give a theoretical framework for discourse analysis, which includes both oral and written discourse in English (ideational meta-function, interpersonal meta-function, and textual meta-function).

Using the modality system in interpersonal meta-function, this article examines English advertising slogans from a functional perspective in order to better understand how they operate as a whole. Because of this investigation, teaches advertisers how to design slogans that are more effective at fulfilling the functions of advertisements and enhancing advertising speech communication.

Literature review
Interpersonal meta-function, as one of the three meta-functions in functional grammar, not only refers to people using language to communicate with others, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, and influencing others’ behaviour, but also means using language to express the world view (Bloor and Bloor, 2001).

As a part of interpersonal meta-function, the modality system is indispensable to expressing interpersonal meaning. Modality is the expression of the speaker’s attitude about the certainty, likelihood or frequency of something happening or being. Modality, to a large degree, is a semantic category operating at the sentence level but having effects on the whole text. According to Halliday, modality is the presentation of the standing point of the speaker either “on the validity of the assertion or on the rights and wrongs of the proposal” (Bloor and Bloor, 2001). This definition seems to accord with Lyons, “Modality is concerned with the ‘opinion and attitude’ of the speaker.”

Halliday (2000) divided the modality system into two types: modalization and modulation, and he attached three modality values: high, medium and low.

Modalization refers to any degree of probability (maybe, could, must) and any intermediate degree of usually (sometimes, usually, always). Probability and usually can be realized in the finite modal auxiliary in a verbal group or with modal adjectives like probably or usually or both. The use of modality always indicates doubt to some degree, at least more uncertainty than not using any expression of modality at all.
Modulation refers to degrees of obligation and inclination in proposals (offers and commands). In the exchange of goods and services, the default form is imperative. Accordingly, modality here is concerned with the amount of obligation or willingness, readiness to do or give. And we can realize modulation of obligation and inclination in orders and offers through the use modal auxiliaries.

Obviously, advertising discourse is a relatively practical genre, whose primary function is to establish a relationship between advertisers and consumers. It is necessary to investigate the interpersonal meta-function. In the past few decades, many linguists have penetrated into advertising discourse from various angles.

For instance, diverse hierarchical levels of advertising are explored profoundly from the perspective of stylistics (Leech, 1996; Guowen, 2001; Xuebaic, 2002). A part of pragmatic linguists focuses on the application of English advertising (Bihaic, 2012), and the discourse analysis of advertising (Wangtai, 2011). Most scholars (Jun, 1998; Russell, 1992; Russel, 1993; and Bing and Yue'e, 2000) study the rhetoric of advertising from the three levels of language, namely phonetics, lexical, and syntax. From the perspective of functional grammar, a number of researches centre on the mood system (Hongtai, 2009; Vili, 2007; Yanqiong, 2019).

There are few studies based on the modality system of English advertising, in which most of them are qualitative research. Inevitably, quantitative studies in this field are insufficient. The latest quantitative research is carried out by Yu and Yanlong (2017), who employed the mood and modality system to analyze the linguistic features of six Chinese advertising discourses.

Therefore, in order to make up for the vacancy of research in the area, this article applies the quantitative method to analyze the modality system in English advertising slogans, which has important practical significance.

Analysis of modality system in English advertising slogans

To accomplish the quantitative analysis, the data is from about 120 pieces of English slogans with modality randomly selected from 500 famous advertisements (https://wenku.baidu.com) by the random sampling function of excel. These slogans are systematically analyzed from the perspective of modality type, modal value and modal responsibility, targeting at interpreting the frequency of occurrence of various aspects of the modal system.

Modality and modulation

By means of the modality system, the speaker masterly integrates the topic theme, stance, the correctness and validity of the conclusion. According to functional grammar, the modality system consists of two parts: modalization and modulation. The former is the speaker’s judgment on the probability and the usability of a discourse proposition, while the latter is the judgment on the obligation and inclination of a discourse proposition.

By analyzing the selected examples at length, the statistical table can be drawn as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modalization</td>
<td>Probability 66</td>
<td>55.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usuality</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modulation</td>
<td>Obligation 4</td>
<td>3.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclination</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11.67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What can be apparently discovered from Table 1 is that the type of modality mostly applied in English slogans is the modalization, in which most modal verbs tend to present probability. The modulation is denoted much less in English slogans, while it still exerts its functions to some extent.

Modalization

The modality is chiefly expressed by modal verbs such as “will, should, would, could, can, must” or modal adverbs such as “probably, usually, possibly, always, certainly”, etc. In addition, these two forms can also be combined together to achieve the denotation of modalization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Modalization</td>
<td>Modal Verbs 79</td>
<td>77.45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal Adverbs</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22.55%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 2, it can be found that modal verbs in modalization are used frequently in English slogans, accounting for 77.45 per cent overall.

Modal verbs in English not only have plain meanings (such as “can” usually expresses ability or competence; “may” indicates permission, etc.), but in a particular genre, they also exert disparate functions due to their pragmatic ambiguity. In English advertising, on the one hand, advertising creators attempt to manifest their objective stance through modal verbs, that is, they are only information givers, and do not interfere with consumers’ freedom of making choices. On the other hand, they must embody the persuasion functions of advertising discourse, which is to reflect the credibility of its message as much as possible; consequently, consumers can recognize and adopt the advertising products. Therefore, modal verbs are one of the most common ways to reflect the interpersonal meaning of advertising discourse.
For example:
(1) You can’t beat a Sealy good night’s sleep. (Sealy beds)
(2) Look, you can’t hide Mackintosh. (Mackintosh, a kind of jewellery)
(3) Does Smoking Really Make You Look More Grown Up? (Reynolds American)

In the case of (1), the advertisers implied by “can’t” that there seems to be no other bed in the world, only “Sealy” is the most comfortable for consumers. Accordingly, they have no alternatives but to purchase the product.
Example (2) directly conveys the advertiser’s intention to the consumer through “can’t”. Seemingly, the product “Mackintosh” is desperately credible; as a result, the jewellery must be displayed to accept praise or jealousy. Apart from it, advertisers stimulate or urge consumers to take action, trying and purchasing the product in person.

Modal adverbs also appear in the English slogans, accounting for 22.25 per cent.
In the case of (3), the interpersonal relationship between the tobacco company and the potential young smoker is established through the use of the modal adverb “really”. On the basis of the modality, the advertisers expressed their opinions, attitudes and even confidence toward their own products. From this technique of modulization, advertising is deemed as the way to achieve the goal of promoting products and services by guiding potential consumers.

**Modulation**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 3. Modal verbs in modulization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Modulation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The manifestation of modulation is mainly achieved by modal verbs (such as “will, must, etc.”) and extensions of predicates (such as “allowed to do, supposed to do, required to do, etc.”) (Halliday, 2000). In addition, other parts of speech (such as verbs, and nouns) and prepositional phrases can also reveal the modality (Hongyang & Chunsong, 2011). However, in English advertising slogans, only modal verbs exist in modulization.
(4) You’ll never put a better bit of butter on your knife. (Country Life butter)
(5) We’ll leave the light on for you. (Motel 6)
(6) Don’t consume it or it will consume you. (Stop smoking ad)

Modulation is the judgment of the speaker on the obligations and willingness of a discourse proposition. In the slogans collected, modal verbs like “will” appear frequently. Advertisers often make promises to potential consumers and guarantee product quality by means of modulation.

It also can be found that there are fewer modal auxiliaries in the English advertising slogans, such as “must”, and “should”. This is because advertisers have no right to order potential consumers, and such orders will violate the consumer’s right to make choice freely. Therefore, advertisers often use modal expressions expressing willingness in their evaluation of products to improve their position in the dialogue with consumers.

**Modal values**

Different modal verbs in English generally indicate different levels of modality (Halliday, 2000). Halliday (2000) divided modal verbs into three levels, low modal value (may, might, can, could..), median modal value (will, would, shall, should..) and high modal value (must, ought to, have to, need…). While exploring the interpersonal meaning in the slogan, different modal words can reflect the subtle relationship between the communicative parties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Generally low-media modal words are commonly used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modulization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modulization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 4, the words are very good at using various modal words, and generally low-media modal words are commonly used.
(7) How can a magazine be strong regionally if it is not strong locally? (Asian Weekly)
(8) Carlsberg: the best beer in the world is probably the best beer in the world (Carlsberg)
(9) Will life take you? Where will life lead you? (Louis Vuitton)

The application of modal words can showcase the reliability and authenticity of information sources. Examples (7) and (8) both use low modal value words, indicating that the advertisers consciously reduce their social status to win the customer’s trust and good impression. It shows respect for customers and fully reflects the concept:
client is the God, quality is life, honesty is the essence, and credit standing is the prime thing. However, in example (9), the appropriate use of the median and high-value modal word “will” unfolds the advertiser’s confidence in their products for further promotion. There is no doubt that “will” shows the equal relationship between the advertiser and the customer and shows how the advertiser achieves its goal of persuading the customer step by step.

It appears that English advertising slogans generally contain low modal value words from Table 4, from which advertisers can avert being blamed for the authenticity of the advertisement. In this way, the accuracy of the advertisement is advanced considerably. In the eyes of customers, they will feel that they can objectively understand the quality and performance of the products and they will give more trust to the product. Furthermore, personal interest is also well respected, as a matter of fact, owing to the fact that these kinds of slogans leave behind the right of choice to customers.

Through analysis, it also can be discovered that there are many slogans using median modal value words, such as “will” and “should”, suggesting what is going to happen, and the information provided is merely in accordance with customers’ beliefs, predictions or intentions, not facts. What’s more, “will” bears with the attitude of overt commitment.

(10) If you have oily skin, our popular Daily Oil Control will help keep your skin balanced so it looks radiant instead of oily.

In the above example, “will” expresses a psychological process. Potential customers want to keep their health, and the word will throw customers light on the effects in using the product.

**Modal responsibility**

The modality can be divided into four types: explicit subjective, explicit objective, implicit subjective and implicit objective.

The orientation of explicit subjective clearly expresses the speaker’s own views, attitudes, or comments about certain propositions, not facts. The implicit subjective makes these personal performances less obvious, so its proposition is more like a fact than a speaker’s point of view. The explicit objective is achieved mainly through modal qualifiers. Implicit objective tendency is realized by verb passive form.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Modal verbs in modalization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explicit Subjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Explicit Objective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implicit Subjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Implicit Objective</td>
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</table>

From the data, it can be found that most of the English slogans are inclined to express implicit subjective modal meaning, and most of implicit subjective modalities implemented are through positive affirmative words or negation modal qualifiers, whereas there are little modalities through evaluation adjuncts.

(11) Your skin should glow, not shine! If you have oily skin, our popular Daily Oil Control will help keep your skin balanced so it looks radiant instead of oily.

(12) The all-in-one that won’t limit your advertising ability

(13) Is your microwave cooking fast? You bet!

“Bet” makes the slogan more determined in tone, so the consumer will make sure that his microwave oven is heating very quickly. From the above comparative analysis, English advertising has the tendency to use more subtle subjective modality, thus making advertisements more like presenting facts and leaving choices to potential customers rather than imposing ideas on them.

**Conclusion**

This article examines the modal system of English advertising slogans using systemic functional grammar. Slogans in English tend to use modalization with a median or low modality value and an expressive subjective orientation, according to data analysis of 120 pieces of slogans and instances from throughout the world. This system allows the interpersonal function of advertising to play a significant role in advertising discourse through the use of delicate utilization. Advertisers must think about how to select and consider relevant modal words to convey product information and attract potential customers. Advertisement’s primary goal is to connect businesses with potential customers by showcasing their goods and services. From a functional grammar standpoint, the modality system is prominent in advertising discourse to express interpersonal meaning.

**References**


