

## The Phonetic Particulars of Modern English Advertising

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### Abstract

This article is designed to give a sharper focus on the phonetic properties of advertising in the English speaking world. We come from the premise that globalization processes and the consumer culture of the so-called Net Generation make the marketers change their sales strategies and find new, no less effective promotional tactics, which would be more attractive to the young. To see how this language policy actually works an in-depth processing of the material is required, and cognitive syllabics happens to be a great help in this respect.

**Key words:** *code-switching, phonetic interference, cognitive syllabics, rhetoric.*

### Introduction

As is well known, the linguistic properties of advertising have concerned very many scholars both in this country and abroad since time immemorial. It transpires, however, that even these days quite a few aspects of this rather prolific sphere of knowledge are still open to interpretation and further elaboration in philological and, more specifically, phonetic terms. Thus, the sound form of the so-called 'Global English Advertising', meant for a potential clientele the world over appears to be one of them.

The fact is that ad making, intrinsically, as it were, thrives on the ineluctable unity of the oral and the written forms of speech. That is why, unless one is fully aware of its present-day phonetic particulars some of the innovative marketing strategies and techniques which are cleverly exploited in

advertising will fail to work and become ineffective for the target-audience. To put it in a nutshell, reading and appreciating the advert presented in black and white implies that it is actually heard and reflected adequately in one's inner speech.

This is by no means the whole story, for today the marketer's language seems to abound in all kind of verbal tricks, as well as cases of play upon words, which not so long ago would have been unthinkable in the ad text. This makes us think that now being properly equipped with different social, cultural and psychological traits of ELF<sup>1</sup> community will hardly suffice unless the copywriter also demonstrates a good working knowledge both of the buyer's national variety of English and the basic principles of Global English usage. To be more exact, it is the ELF speaker's code-switching (or code-mixing) skills (Gardner-Chloros 2009)<sup>2</sup> that should be taken into account and examined in greater detail.

In other words, it is people's ability to accommodate and change (or reorient) their habitual speaking-hearing stereotypes against the background of the two main - British and American - most influential variants of modern English that is indispensable for ELF communicative efficacy. Without exaggeration, it seems to form the central core of Global English speech. It is a kind of matrix, into which elements of other languages are embedded, and to succeed in promoting goods and services ad makers should be well acquainted with the underlying mechanisms of British - American phonetic interference (Decheva, Il'ina 2018).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Highlights of the Present-Day Marketing Industry**

To this we have to add that the main factors which make for the changing landscape of the present-day sales and marketing industry can by no means be confined only to the globalization of the English Language. It has also very much to do with the unprecedented technological advances of our time and the digital expertise of the new, increasingly young and technology-oriented generation of buyers who are impatient, easily bored and highly attuned to visual symbols. They are very particular about brands, that seem to add

authenticity to the marketplace and help them sift through the volume of options they face in the 'too much information' society. They are confident, communicative, connected and differ from their elders by their growing demand for retailers to bow to their needs and respect them. They are the force to be reckoned with because the speed and availability of new information in the digital world put more control over purchasing in their hands.

It is only natural that the 'old-school', rather aggressive and excessive product-pushing should be unacceptable these days. It could only annoy the young customers who have been brought up under the influence of the Internet. Marketers or advertisers have to reinvent their policy and find new tools and persuasion methods that are more appealing to the young. Otherwise stated, it is the tastes and demands of the Net Gen (Millennials) and the so-called Digital natives or Generation Y (also described in special literature as 'Generation Buy') (Yarrow, O'Donnel 2009, Prensky 2001)<sup>4</sup> that now seem to hold an incredible sway over almost every aspect of shopping and advertising respectively.

There is every reason to believe that to adapt to these changing realia psychologists and advert makers have to sense the pulse of the time, so to speak, and undertake special studies of all the social, cultural and emotional factors behind the new consumers' buying tactics. To relinquish their former authority, they look for the ways and means that are more subtle and less straightforward in linguistic terms, so that their promotional strategies could slip past their young customers' vigilance. Thus, for example, brand techniques are widely exploited and most welcome today because, being devoid of any requisites for political correctness, they may not infrequently serve as a conversation starter. To be more exact, young people's awareness of brands appears to be a new 'weather' subject that not only can provide fodder for a free exchange of ideas but also make for the sense of connectedness Gen Buy always strive for (Yarrow, O'Donnel 2009:38).

This being the case, to get to grips with the phonetic peculiarities of modern advertising, which will be efficient with the representatives of this target audience, their processing and perceptive characteristics should be

looked into and treated with utmost care. However reluctantly, we have to admit that the Net Gen mental capacities and the way they consume information seem to be mainly conditioned by their technological experience, as well as video games and so many other computer technologies, on which they have actually grown up. Therefore they expect gratification in everything they do, and shopping is no exception in this respect.

### **Modern-Day Advertising as a Syllabic Proposition**

It follows from what has just been said that for us to gain a deeper insight into the peculiar sound form of modern ad text a highly comprehensive, cognitive approach to the material is required, when all its linguocultural and purely phonetic antecedents are studied in minute detail. In view of this, the basic postulates of cognitive syllabics as a branch of anglistics, whose main focus is on the hidden dynamics of English phonation (Decheva 1997)<sup>6</sup> may happen to be particularly problem-solving. It opens up new and so far unavailable vistas for an in-depth study of marketing techniques and helps to trace and reveal their underlying mechanisms. The concept of the syllable and those stereotypical speech movements which lie behind British-American phonetic dichotomy, as well as people's ability to code-switch come here to the fore and make our knowledge in the field really productive and operational.

Our material demonstrates conclusively that the syllabifying capacities of the English language are now widely and most effectively exploited in advertising as a rhetorical device. They endow the advert with all kind of expressive-emotional-evaluative overtones, which otherwise are impossible to impart and are extremely appealing to the young audience. Thus, for example, in the following advertisement the brand name of one of the biggest clothes retailers in the US TJ Maxx is specially played upon in syllabic terms and happens to be a powerful attention getter:

**Fashion blogger:** I'm always happy about **TJ Maxx**. TJ is a perfect place to find designer pieces for less.

**Voiceover:** Fashion direct from designers. Saving direct to you.

**Fashion blogger:** Born **fashionista**, self-made **maxxinsta**.

**Voiceover:** TJ **Maxx**. Let us make a **maxxinista** out of you... Start shopping in a new way. Start **maxximizing** at the place where you always get more than you pay for – TJ **Maxx**. Brands you love, prices that work for you. **Maxx** style, **Maxx** savings. Keep your standards high and your spending low. Fashion, family, home – **Maxx** is what matters most to you. **Maxx** life at TJ **Maxx**.

It does not require a close examination to see that in this case the brand name is not only repeatedly used, but also made particularly pronounced in articulatory terms to entertain the target audience and capture their buying power. To be more exact, the copywriters' awareness of the cognitive capacities of the Net Gen make for their special promotional tactics. It is the Gen Yers' flexibility and readiness to be involved into different kind of play upon words that are taken into consideration, and it does not matter what ways and means to achieve the impression of a big and competitive game are actually used.

The first point to be made here is that it is neither morphemes, nor phonemes in the words “fashionista” and “Maxxinista”, let alone their peculiar interplay in the extended forms of the brand name “Maxximizing”, “Maxx savings”, “Maxx style” and “Maxx life” that make for the desirable effect of this advert. It is the syllabic properties of American phonation that are relied upon and serve to convey the retailers' intention to perfection.

The fact is that the morphonological peculiarities of this advertisement are heavily dependent on a skilful treatment of identical syllables. The words containing them are brought together and made accented by the admen. Otherwise either phonetic or morphological repetitions which are made extensive use of in the ad text won't be perceived and will be merely beyond most of the young consumers' audience. As for the syllables, they are the ultimate units of speech that remain global in the process of encoding and decoding messages (Zhinkin 1958, Akhmanova 1957)<sup>7</sup>.

They are most naturally isolated in the flow of speech and are psycholinguistic by nature. Bringing them out or, contrariwise, degrading them are the skills, which are innate or automatic and there is no need to develop them any further.

It is not difficult to surmise in this connection that the syllable-based

techniques of this kind have been familiar to the young generation of buyers since early childhood, and they are prepared to join in with the vendors and undergo an exhilarating experience of being a Maxxinista. The ad text under consideration happens to be extremely demonstrative insofar as marketers' tactics are concerned, and can serve as a beautiful illustration of play upon words in the English language or, at least, one of its manifestations, described in the literature as paronymic attraction (Nazarova 2003)<sup>8</sup>.

Thus, first come the words “fashionista” and “Maxxinista” in “Born fashionista, self-made Maxxinista” that appear to be similar in morphological and syllabic terms. The Spanish suffix “-ista”, which today gets increasingly productive in American English is brought out to the utmost, so that the two syllables, which it comprises “-ist-” and “-ta” and which are totally unstressed on the emic level become accented and are pronounced with clarity and intensification. In combination with “fashion-” it forms a peculiar American-Spanish morphonological blend, which is frequently used and appreciated in the ELF community in general and the multi-ethnic, as well as multicultural American society in particular.

To this we have to add that “Maxxinista” is a stretched or extended form of “Maxx” in “TJ Maxx”. Due to the repetition of the suffix “-ista” and the intrusion of the syllable “-sin-”, which is identical with “-shion-” in “fashionista” it undergoes an amazing expressive-evaluative transformation and acquires in this ad text a highly meliorative (positive or pleasant for most American Gen Yers) connotation.

Almost the same is also true of the so-called nonce word “maxximizing” in “Start maxximizing”. In this case two suffixes “-iz-” and “-ing” are attached to the noun stem “maxx-”. As a result, “maxximizing” becomes homonymous with the word “maximizing”, which implies people's ability to use their shopping expertise to the maximum, spending less for the best possible quality. Here again it is a new metasemiotic and clearly meliorative connotation, which the use of the occasional word is meant to impart. No doubt it is addressed mainly to the young people who consider themselves to be particularly savvy and knowledgeable in their purchasing decisions.

The idea behind is enhanced by a further extension of “Maxx” in the unstable compounds “Maxx style”, “Maxx savings” and “Maxx life”, where the monosyllable “maxx-” is accented and made extra prominent. In other words, the typically American quantitative component of the syllable is played upon and made special use of. To be more exact, the effect of branding in this commercial, which invariably attracts young customers is based on the prolongation of the syllables with the American gliding vowel N5 and the continuants “m” and “n”: “fashionista”, “Maxxinista”, “Maxx”, “maxximizing”, “Maxx style”, “Maxx life”, “Maxx savings”, “brands”, “standards”, “fashion”, “family”, “home”.

Of special interest in this connection are the specificities of the highly original 'paradoxical' timbre of voice, which accompanies the presentation of this ad text to the public. It is no longer didactic or authoritarian, unbending and indisputable, that most advertisements of the past have usually implied, but rather informal, friendly and consultative, as if you were asked to play a competitive game or were invited to a cocktail party just to enjoy yourself and have fun. It is more in the nature of a slapstick or humorous acting, where all the parameters of the performer's speaking voice are grossly exaggerated and reach (or even exceed) their maximum indexes. Thus, loudness is enormously increased (the speaker dwells on the vocal element of the syllable and his manner of speaking turns into shouting). Tempo is accelerated to such an extent that the better part of the utterance is engulfed by its phonetic environment and an extremely vociferous (extra long and intensive) pronunciation of the monosyllabic brand name “Maxx” and its numerous extensions. Pitch variation is realized within an incredibly wide diapason, which goes far beyond the confines of the unmarked American 'monotone' or 'levelled out' enunciation. Rhythm is stress-timed and clearly beaten ousting a much more involved rhythm pattern of American English, which sometimes starts to approximate syllable-timing.

There is hardly any need to say here that when all these parameters are brought together, they no longer make for the imperative tone of voice, which ad texts have so far been associated with. It has nothing to do with 'patronizing'

and is merely used to entertain people and arouse their curiosity. Being grotesque by its nature, this manner of exposition is totally syllable bound and becomes operational only by means of cognitive processing of all its articulatory characteristics.

### **British vs. American Phonetic Interference in Global English Advertising**

It should be noted here that quite a few of the present day ad texts are oriented mainly towards global English speaking Millennials. In syllabic terms it means that both British and American syllable stereotypes serve as a necessary background against which play upon words is realized. In the following commercial, for example, British-American phonetic interference is used as a rhetorical device, which enables the addressee to grasp the idea of advertisers:

**Voiceover:** The finer things are like Grey Poupon Dijon Mustard. So fine, it's even made with white wine.

**1st Gentleman:** Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?

**2nd Gentleman:** But of course.

(1<sup>st</sup> Gentleman drives off).

**2nd Gentleman:** Farnsworth, I do believe that well-groomed man has driven off with our Grey Poupon.

**2nd Gentleman's Driver:** Shall I chase him down, sir?

**2nd Gentleman:** Fine idea.

The first point to be made here is that the final aim of the ad text is to show that the advertised product now seems to be growing in popularity the world over. The desirable effect is achieved by switching between British and American pronunciation, which English as a Lingua Franca is primarily centered upon. Thus, the slogan presented by the Voiceover, as well as the 1<sup>st</sup> Gentleman's speech are clearly American. Their task is to remind the potential consumers that this initially French mustard is now also made in the USA. It is their free and vowel-based syllable stereotype and the generally relaxed and unhurried manner of speech that makes this part of the ad text discernible American (Decheva 2012).<sup>9</sup>



As for the pronunciation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gentleman and his Driver, they clearly speak British variant. The syllables are checked and the consonants at the releasing and the arresting stages (or at the syllable onsets and its off glides) are relied upon and intensified. Moreover, the syllable stereotypes of British and American English are specially played upon here, and the voice parameters of the two speaking voices are not only opposed to each other but also deliberately enhanced and made additionally pronounced to entertain the public and correspond to the innovative spirit of the ELF and predominantly Net Gen consumer culture.

### **Conclusions**

Summing up our research into the phonetic properties of Modern English advertising, we would like to reiterate that the role of syllable dynamics in the design of the Millennial-oriented ad texts can by no means be overestimated. It enables us to trace the metacontent, which each advertisement invariably conveys and to get to grips with the new marketing strategies that affect, attract and appeal to the young generation of buyers. They are meant, first and foremost, to slip past one's shopping vigilance and produce the impression of a totally unbiased and unaffected choice of an advertised product. In this sense English syllabics happens to be an inexhaustible rhetorical reservoir, from which ad makers readily borrow quite a few most cunning and highly expressive techniques that suit their intention and help to promote goods and services in a peculiar inoffensive and unobtrusive fashion.

### **Notes:**

1. In this article the abbreviation ELF suggested by J. Jenkins stands for English as a Lingua Franca (Cf. Jenkins 2000).
2. By phonetic interference we mean numerous cases of rhetorical interplay of the two British and American Englishes, which enables the speaker to establish a close contact with the target-audience (See about it in greater detail in Decheva, Il'ina 2018).
3. It is an opposition of free vs. checked syllable stereotypes that makes it

possible to tell British and American Pronunciation from one another in speech intercourse (Decheva 2012).

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### Գովազդի հնչյունաբանական առանձնահատկությունները Ժամանակակից անգլերենում

Սույն հոդվածում առանձնակի ուշադրության են արժանանում անգլախոս աշխարհում գովազդի հնչյունաբանական առանձնահատկությունները: Մենք ելնում ենք այն դրույթից, որ համաշխարհայնացումն ու

այսպես կոչված համացանցային սերնդի սպառողական մշակույթը ստիպում է վաճառողներին վերանայել վաճառքի՝ իրենց ռազմավարությունը և գտնել նոր, գովազդի ոչ պակաս արդյունավետ մարտավարական հնարներ, որոնք կարող են ավելի գրավիչ թվալ երիտասարդներին: Մույն լեզվի գործնական կիրառությունը ստուգելու համար անհրաժեշտ է մանրամասն ուսումնասիրել առկա նյութը: Այս առումով ճանաչողական վանկատումը կարող է շատ օգտակար լինել:

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