

On voit grand. Très grand : Language and the construction of nature across cultures

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Language has an influence on cultures worldwide. Although principles and behaviour of nations differ when it comes to ecology, the media has the same power to encourage people to act in ways which undoubtedly have an impact the environment. This essay will show how language in some French and English magazines and websites can influence people to abuse and destroy the environment.

In both countries, magazines include adverts for blatantly harmful products. In the English magazine “Farmer’s weekly”, an advertisement for a log splitting machine on special offer suggests you could “save time and money by preparing your own logs with the electric Logbuster”. The magazine is undoubtedly aimed at men working in the busy agricultural sector, so the advertisement uses the adjectives “fast”, “easy” and “powerful” in a large font to appeal to them. The name of the machine, printed in bold red letters, catches the reader’s attention and “buster” gives it a masculine and aggressive nature. The machine is claimed to have a “powerful 4 ton hydraulic ram”, which will “make light work out of big logs”. The word *logs* disguises the fact that what is being talked about is, in fact, trees, and the larger the ‘log’, the older the growth of the tree. The contrast between the heavy ‘4 ton hydraulic ram’ and the ‘light work’ of splitting the logs makes the old-growth trees seem weak and inconsequential in comparison to the might of the machine, an image of humans dominating and subduing nature with their technology. The tone of the advertisement in general seems to encourage the objectification of nature, leading to more destruction of trees, without regard to the habitats and ecosystem services they provide, not to mention their intrinsic worth. In addition, the more ‘powerful’ the machine, the more resources are used in its manufacture and running costs.

A similar advertisement for a chainsaw in a French television magazine seems even more disturbing. Instead of targeting a sector of farming men who might want a log cutter for their work, it targets men in general. The photograph strikingly shows a whole tree trunk sticking out of a blazing fireplace next to a man sitting comfortably in an armchair reading the newspaper. Under the picture, the name of the product is printed in bold black letters: “STIHL chainsaws. For big cutters.” [“Tronçonneuses STIHL. Pour les gros coupeurs”.] The absence of a verb makes it sound very daunting and final. A whole paragraph written in the same dark humour used in the picture continues to convey the idea that bigger is better. For instance, it orders you to give up “the small things, the lack of ambition and mediocrity” [“Assez de petitesse, de manque d’ambition, de médiocrité.”] and people who own the chainsaw, “We see big. Very big.” [“On voit grand. Très grand”.] It asks rhetorical questions such as, “why only cut small wood when you can attack large tree trunks?” [“ Pourquoi couper du petit-bois seulement alors qu’on peut s’attaquer à de gros troncs?”] Violent language and the use of hyperbole could have very severe consequences if put into action. Fireplaces are very popular in France and many wood industries specialise in the harvesting of timber for them, resulting in the clearance of many areas of forest. If people start to cut down large amounts of trees on top of this, the environment could be severely damaged. These advertisements promote the unsustainable use of precious resources and the destruction of natural habitat.

Women are also targeted for the sale of environmentally harmful products in both countries. An advert for an Electrolux washing machine in a British woman’s magazine also promotes the idea that bigger is better regardless of the amount of electricity or water which is used in

the process (Cosmopolitan, 2007). This advertisement includes a photograph of the washing machine with a large wardrobe full of clothes in the door window. The slogan is, “we were thinking of people who could always use more room for clothes.” In a very matter-of-fact way, the company mentions what most modern-day British women want: more clothes than they need. Ecological impacts are dramatic. Not only do more clothes mean more raw material and energy wasted in their making, but the actual washing machine “with a drum that easily fits your laundry load” (presumably, a very large one), leads to more water and electricity consumption. Although one might imagine that water would be saved by one big wash as opposed to many smaller ones (say, if you had a regular sized machine), this idea is falsified by the image of buying “more clothes”. Readers are ironically suggested to buy more clothes so that they can fill their washing machine!

In France, advertising companies often use the image of nature or happiness to convince people to buy their product even though it won't really bring you closer to nature or make you happy. An advertisement for fabric softener in a women's magazine uses the image of nature's qualities to sell the product which is far from really being natural (Gala Magazine, 2005). A page-sized photograph of a beautiful green valley with a stream running through is very appealing, however it is thwarted by a large shirt in the foreground: the sleeve of the shirt forms the stream and its colour is the same as that of the product (milky blue). The company wants to imply that washing clothes with their product can bring you into nature. If one thought closely about this idea, it may subtly bring to mind a dark irony: the fabric conditioner will undoubtedly *really* end up in streams once the washing cycle is complete. Nothing is mentioned about the harm caused by cleaning agents in the liquid; in fact, the paragraph below describes it as a “harmonious combination of soap powder, a natural softener and essential minerals” [“La combinaison harmonieuse d'une lessive, d'un adoucissant naturel et de minéraux essentiels”]. Now we may ask ourselves: how “natural” are soap powder and fabric softener? And also, in what way do clothes benefit from “essential minerals”? The language used is indeed appetising and the presence of essential minerals makes it sound almost as healthy for you as a glass of mineral water. After this small print, a slogan in large, wavy letters adds to the dreamy combination of image and language and states, “let yourself be touched by nature” [“Laissez-vous toucher par la nature”]. This extremely misleading sentence suggests that pouring some fabric softener in your washing machine will bring you closer to nature, almost as if you were walking in the beautiful scenery shown in the picture. In fact, rather than being “touched by nature”, you are touching nature in a rather more sordid way.

The horseracing industry generates a huge amount of money each year in both England and France, making it a popular target for advertisers. For the horses, the stress and physical strain from racing is enormous and very often dangerous or even fatal as they are pushed to run beyond their natural abilities. In the Cheltenham Festival of 2006, for example, nine horses died. Races bring millions of people together each year, causing pollution and congestion where the races are held, and considerable damage to the environment. More important, though, is the image of nature portrayed by racing. The jockeys are quite literally on top of the horses, subduing and controlling them with whips. The term for training horses is suggested by the rather evocative notion of ‘breaking’ them, and there are books with titles such as ‘The gentle art of horse breaking’, ‘Breaking in your horse’, ‘Breaking and training the driving horse’ and ‘The ABC guide to breaking and training horses’. At the dawn of horsemanship, this idea of ‘breaking’ the spirit of an animal that is the icon of power and speed shows some of man's first intentions to ‘break’ nature on a large scale. When it comes to racing, though, the word “horse” is often absent from advertiser's language, and the focus is purely financial. Readers are encouraged to bet to gain “a HIGH MONTHLY second

income”, or “FINANCIAL FREEDOM” (*Elite Horseracing website*), rather than contributing to an abusive and environmentally damaging industry. The words are capitalised to catch the readers attention and convince them to pay “only £6.50 per day” to join the company. The irony of this particular company is to make money from horses that “lose”. They transform the act of losing into a source of money, but as pointed out earlier, for the “losing” horse it often results in discomfort or death. When the word “horse” is mentioned by advertisers, it is part of the combination “horse racing industry” but the sport is often simply referred to as “racing”, thus ridding it of its most important features and victims, the horses. (*Racing Economics website*).

In France, the most popular form of racing is “trotting” [“les courses de trot”]. This sport concerns a particular breed of horses, “French Trotters” [“Trotteurs Français”], which are bred for the speed at which they can trot whilst pulling a type of light carriage with a jockey on it. These horses are the most widely bred in Europe and are mainly used for racing: this gives an idea as to how many animals go through the system each year. Again, the industry is very money-centred and although the breed is very renowned, the horses are not always treated well and can often end up at the butcher’s once their “career” is over:

“Not only does he seem precocious and can run from the age of two years old, but he is capable of showing an outstanding vitality in competitions at the age of ten years or more [...] if he has been suitably exploited.”

[“Non seulement il sait se montrer précoce et courir dès l’âge de deux ans, mais il est capable de montrer une vitalité peu commune en compétition à dix ans ou plus [...] pourvu qu’il ait été exploité convenablement.”]

By telling us that the horses can ‘run from the age of two’ [courir dès l’âge de deux ans] this extract puts emphasis on getting horses into racing as young as possible, clearly for economic reasons. This is dangerous, however, as horses this young are not fully grown, thus putting them under tremendous amounts of strain. One word at the end of the description stands out: “exploited”. This word is violent, making the horses sound more like slaves than the renowned pedigrees they were set out to be, which, if one observes their treatment, is true. (One particularity of the French language is that it does not use the pronoun “it”, therefore all animals are “he” or “she” depending on the gender but this is the case for objects too, so there really is no personification as one might think when the horse is referred to as “he”.) Later on in the description, the horses are referred to as “products” and it becomes apparent that “the price varies considerably according to the sportive value of the animal” [“Le prix varie considérablement selon la valeur sportive de l’animal”]. This defines the worth of the horses as being solely in their ability to win races (*Cheval Français website*). For both countries, the images and language of horse racing could encourage people to “exploit” nature rather than understand, respect, and work with natural systems rather than against them.

Some advertising companies deliberately use cunning techniques to sell unnatural and environmentally harmful products. They craft language persuasively to make the products seem fantastic and beneficial: one example is the online store for pet accessories, “Pucci Petwear”. The name of the company recalls that of the famous brand “Gucci” to make it sound glamorous to pet owners who might want to match their pet to their clothing style. The products sold are far from the traditional pet accessories like collars and leads: you can buy pet clothes, luxury beds, dining sets and fragrances... All these products are undoubtedly unnecessary for the animals and are very harmful for the environment, be it during manufacture or when they are discarded. In fact, the introductory paragraph on the website tells you to “dump last year’s collar and lead, throw out the tartan turtleneck from the 80s and

come on in...” The language is dynamic, casual and humorous to catch the reader’s attention and blatantly cause waste by ordering them to “dump” and “throw out” year-old items! Animals definitely have no notion of human style and this “wardrobe makeover” is only designed to please the owner (after all, the owner is the one with money to spend). Personification is frequent throughout the website but the exaggeration is far from beneficial for the pets or the environment. After all, nature gave animals fur and their own natural smell, not sweatshirts, pyjamas and spray-on fragrances made from polluting man-made materials. From a scientific point of view, changing the animals’ ability to thermo-regulate by putting clothes on them and removing their natural smell (used for identification and communication between animals) by spraying them with fragrance is very harmful for them both physically and mentally. It is robbing them of their natural characteristics!

In France, with a raised awareness of environmental issues, many companies play on the idea that their product is eco-friendly. Often, this is far from the truth. A popular television magazine included two advertisements from the Peugeot Company claiming that their cars are part of the “campaign for green cars” [“La campagne des voitures vertes”]. If the reader has any notion of global warming, the oxymoron of ‘green cars’ should ring alarm bells. Indeed, there is no such thing as a “green car”, environmentally speaking. From the manufacturing of the vehicle to the consumption of petrol when the car is being used and the release of toxic gasses: cars are not environment-friendly. However, with a certain use of language, advertisers are able to disguise this fact. Only the positive is mentioned. The car has a “Filter for Particles that captures and destroys most harmful particles and black smoke [...] allowing it to preserve the environment more” [“un Filtre à Particules qui capture et détruit la plupart des particules nocives et des fumes noires [...] permet de mieux préserver l’environnement”] while giving it the benefit of “maximum driving” [“conduite maximum”], which seems contradictory. How can you preserve the environment by driving more? It is also said that with biofuel [“biodiesel”] the car’s CO₂ emissions are “even reduced by 20%!” [“mêmes réduites de 20%!”]. By giving concrete figures, the company seems more credible. However, according to George Monbiot, biofuel is “the world’s most carbon-intensive fuel” because millions of hectares of forests are destroyed for its production. (Monbiot website) The conclusion of the advertisement is that “Peugeot makes ecology rhyme with economy!” [“Peugeot fait rimer écologie avec économies!”] The company combines both poles of concern in a rather idealistic way.

The advertising techniques and use of language in England and France are very similar. Companies know which facts to disguise in order to seduce customers into buying their products. If both nations do not raise their awareness of the impact language can have on them, the result will be a continuation in the exponential rise of ecological destruction. Luckily, many activists in both countries are bringing their efforts together to raise awareness of the connection between language and ecology, and show people the consequences not only of their actions but also their words. Just as consumerism touches the whole planet, ecological concern is also spreading around the world.

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