

## Insights into language and ecology

The following are brief analyses of a range of discourses by students who took the *Discourse and Sustainability* module at the University of Gloucestershire.

### **Navy lads (by John Loades)**

So-called 'promotions' in magazines are particularly interesting linguistically because they are laid out in the typical genre of an article, but are in fact advertisements, subtly mixing content and persuasion. A 'Loaded Promotion' from Loaded magazine (Feb 07) attempts to persuade readers to join the Royal Navy by using the concept of laddish masculinity that the magazine is based on. The sub-headline reads 'Fly helicopters! Fire weapons! Travel the world! Party hard! Join the Royal Navy and you've made it!' The first three imperatives all glorify activities which are environmentally damaging. Helicopters use a lot of fuel, and finite resources in their production. Weapons, aside from the obvious damage to whatever the ammunition hits, give off greenhouse gases in their production, in the chemicals used to make them, and the electricity that they use. Travel - be it by sea or land - is bound to be damaging to the environment. The sub-heading is paralleled later in the text 'the job of a lifetime, flying powerful helicopters, firing torpedoes...and partying around the world.' While few readers will actually join the navy, the promotion is tapping into stereotypical laddish behaviour and further encouraging readers to define themselves in terms of the machines they operate or the violence of their behaviour. This is reinforced later in the text: 'For Brendan, it's the thrill of piloting the Navy's super-chopper, the Merlin, that gets his adrenaline pumping. "It's a 50m pound 14 tonne beast of a machine"' The image of overpowering an enormous beast appeals to the ultimate peak of laddish masculinity, and seems designed to create a feeling of dissatisfaction in those lads who only drive a small car and have no weapons. Perhaps this feeling of dissatisfaction will encourage them to join the navy, or, more likely, to get a bigger car, go travelling more, and party more...If this happens, the consequences for the environment are severe, as are the consequences for the world if the navy is made up of trigger-happy lads who joined because they like big machines and firing weapons.

### **Consumerism and the spirit of Christmas (by Laura Heeps)**

Stibbe (2004:2) argues that consumers are often encouraged to purchase goods 'not out of necessity, not for utility, and not even for entertainment,' but because of the 'social symbolism attached to them.' The language used in advertisements frequently appeals to readers' desires to elevate their sense of social status – by buying superfluous products, simply because they have certain connotations of luxury or prestige attached to them. In a recent IKEA advertisement for their range of furniture and house-hold goods available for Christmas, the reader's attention is instantly attracted by the bold font of the rhetorical question at the top of the page: 'How long do you want your guests to stay?' The layout of the advert itself seems to provide the answer – the page is horizontally divided into three sections, each with the image of a different arrangement of dining furniture and accessories. The uppermost image's table setting is reasonably simple and plain, to present the company's lowest priced range of furniture – a stool is highlighted to be £9.99 for

example, the image below slightly more elaborate, with higher priced products on display, and the final photograph depicting the most expensive range of furniture and table accessories, with a chair priced at £74.99 for example. The 'answers' to the advertisers' initial question are placed against each of these images in the same colour and font as the question, and it can clearly be seen that as the eye moves down the page, it is not only the price that increases, but the time scale guests are expected to 'want to stay' too! The advertisers suggest that if you opt for the simplest furniture your guests may only stay at your dinner party for '3 hours,' but if you splash out on the most extravagant accessories, the time scale is hyperbolically foreseen as 'forever.'

This persuasive technique of signifying that social success can be achieved through spending more money on your household interiors and even buying more expensive cutlery, seems to suggest that having friends over for dinner should be an opportunity to show off one's wealth, and denies the intrinsic value of spending time with loved ones as a source of enjoyment – as if being in the company of friends and family is not incentive alone to spend more time at the table! The advertisement's materialistic tone is emphasised in the by-line 'Everything you need for Christmas': the company may be able to provide all the gold-plated candlesticks and crystal chandeliers desired for a special occasion, but these extravagancies are not really necessary for a 'Merry Christmas.'

This kind of marketing denies the significance of having loved ones around you during the holidays, in favour of exaggerating the importance of one's social standing. Encouraging consumers to purchase such unnecessary items of furniture is clearly very ecologically damaging and irresponsible at a time when the depletion of limited natural resources like the world's rainforests is at the forefront of ecologists' concerns.

Reference: Stibbe (2004) 'Real Men Do Shop: Images Of Masculinity And Consumerism In Men's Health Magazine' *Language and Ecology* 1:2

### **Advertising and the construction of the Outdoor Living Area (by Rebecca Pailing)**

Magazine publishers make most of their money not on the few pounds that readers pay for the magazine itself, but on the space sold to advertisers. Another way of thinking about this is that the magazine is selling an audience to the advertiser. In the case of *You* magazine, the audience is one which is fashion conscious and perhaps anxious to climb a rung or two on the ladder of class. We can see how advertisers gear their advertisements to grasp the readers offered to them in the example of an advertisement for Thomas Sanderson awnings (in *You* 3/12/2006, p121). To be blunt, awnings are sheets of canvas or plastic that shops wind down on rainy days to provide a bit of shelter. There is nothing intrinsically romantic, upper-class or fashionable about...an awning. However, the Sanderson advertisement uses *You* magazine's readers' interest in glamour and fashion to make even the humble awning seem like a luxury fit for a top class celebrity. The awnings are said to 'ooze style', with 'gorgeous fabrics and stunning colours, exquisite shapes; all working in harmony'. In this way the awning is portrayed as if it is a garment or accessory, something which can reflect on the style and sophistication of the potential purchaser. The advertisement reinforces this with words which have distinctive upper-class associations: renowned, gorgeous, exquisite, superior, the very finest quality, handcrafted, and alfresco entertainment. The use of third person pronouns addresses the reader directly, as if it was an exclusive offer directed only to them. For example 'to give you a beautiful, year-round outdoor living area' (italics added). This is an example of the use of language to

create something in socially constructed reality which did not exist before: until reading this statement, the reader most likely thought of a living room as being inside the house, but the words used create a new concept: the 'outdoor living area'.

This is a worrying development because the living space includes (optionally) 'built-in lighting and heating to conjure up the perfect atmosphere for alfresco entertainment'. Environmentally, an 'outdoor living area' is the least insulated kind of space there is, and in addition to the initial environmental costs of the furniture, heating system and the awning itself, there is a recurring drain on fossil fuels to heat the space. On one hand the sudden celebration of the outdoors appears to be a way of reuniting people with their gardens and nature, but on the other, it promotes the idea that this can only be done through purchase of yet more items. A real promotion of appreciation for the outdoors or nature does not need to include 'gorgeous fabrics' to improve on the beauty of what is already there, and costs nothing.

### **On the language of advertising and ecological destruction (by Kristina Lupton)**

Focusing purely on the cheapness of a product is a way of using language which shrewdly encourages the consumer to buy more than necessary. The frequently used Buy one get one free phrase is an example of this - perhaps the purchases only actually needs one. Unnecessary over-purchasing of products results in more valuable resources being exploited, and with each up-grade (or re-invention) of a product, advertisers' social pressure (to keep up with the times) inevitably results in the discard of last year's - now unfashionable - product. The discards contribute to the every-growing problem of rubbish tips that are fast running out of space. Rubbish does not decompose fast enough to keep up with the supply of new rubbish, and so more landfill sites have to be made available. When the rubbish eventually does decompose it can form poisonous substances which seep into the soil, causing yet more destruction (<http://www.yptenc.org.uk>). Every unnecessary purchase subtly strengthens the message that advertisers hold over the consumer: what is currently owned is not enough, more is needed. If advertisers could stop using language to encourage consumers to buy more, more, more, and concentrate on providing information about products which fulfil genuine needs, then the damage to the environment would surely lessen.

### **On masculinity, advertising and the environment (Sheree Morgan)**

Stibbe (2004) carried out an analysis of advertising in Men's Health magazine from June - October 2000 and I was curious to see what had changed in the last five years. My findings suggest that although much has changed, there are still aspects which remain the same. In particular, the main purpose of Men's Health magazine still seems to be centred on bodybuilding, with the message: big powerful muscles = 'real' man. In spite of numerous articles which describe ways to achieve 'the ideal body', this is probably a distant possibility for most men to achieve. The message therefore seems to be that although they may never be able to achieve bulging muscles and 'six-packs', they can compensate for their inadequacies with an expensive watch or fashion item. In Men's Health (November 2006) there are fourteen advertisements for watches, some of which are double pages, plus an eight page article dedicated to recommending forty-two watches ranging in price from £60 to £8,600. The language of the article is very similar to that of the accompanying advertisements for watches, for instance 'The ages of Man are measured by what he wears on his wrist'. In this way, the

magazine seems to be linking images of masculinity with consumerism. If men really do feel dissatisfied with their bodies and find alternative avenues for expressing their masculinity through shopping, then this in turn has implications for the environment.

Reference: Stibbe (2004) 'Real Men Do Shop: Images Of Masculinity And Consumerism In Men's Health Magazine' *Language and Ecology* 1:2