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Taste the feeling: an ecolinguistic analysis of Coca-Cola advertising

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Abstract: This article presents an ecolinguistic framework for analysing advertising and applies it to a wide range of TV advertisements for Coca-Cola. This particular product was selected because of well-publicised criticisms of its impact on health and the environment. The framework classifies advertisements into one of five types: *classic-type, identity-type, narrative-type*, *cause-type,* and *counter-type*, with many advertisements being hybrids of more than one type. The analysis uses multi-modal discourse analysis to reveal underlying messages behind the advertisements, and judges these according to an ecosophy based on the World Health Organisation's concept of *One Health*. The aim of the analysis is to reveal linguistic and multimodal features that are used to persuade people to purchase products which potentially harm both the consumer and the environment. The results can be practically applied in critical language awareness materials that can promote healthier and more environmentally beneficial purchasing.

Keywords: advertising; Coca-Cola; discourse; ecolinguistics; multimodality

1 Introduction

A commonly cited definition of ecolinguistics by the International Ecolinguistics Association (IEA) states that "[e]colinguistics explores the role of language in the life-sustaining interactions of humans, other species and the physical environment" (https://www.ecolinguistics-association.org/). The problem is that almost all language use plays some kind of role in shaping how humans interact with other species and the environment. There is language which explicitly mentions animals, plants, forests, rivers, soil, water, ecosystems, or biodiversity, and then there is language which mentions only the human and erases the entire more-than-human world. But both kinds of language can shape how we think, how we behave, and ultimately how we treat the ecosystems that we depend on for our survival. The question is, if all kinds of

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language use potentially play a role in our interaction with the more-than-human world, then what kind of language should ecolinguistics focus on?

This is where pragmatic considerations can be useful because fundamental to ecolinguistics is that it is action-orientated, aimed at making a practical difference in the world. With limited resources, it seems a waste to work hard to resist mildly destructive discourses, or to expend effort promoting mildly beneficial ones. Resistance can most efficiently be focused on the most widespread and destructive discourses, and promotion on the most inspirational, beneficial ones.

What counts as 'destructive' or 'beneficial' depends on the analyst's *ecosophy* – their framework of values around ideal relationships of humans with other species and the physical environment (Stibbe 2021). For the purposes of this article, I will use a simplified ecosophy that can be summed up in one word *Health!*, where the exclamation mark signifies that health is something to be celebrated, protected, and striven for as far as possible. To further expand the ecosophy, *Health!* applies to humans, other species, and the physical environment. This follows the World Health Organisation's idea of *One Health*: "an integrated, unifying approach to balance and optimize the health of people, animals and the environment" (Word Health Organisation 2023). To further expand the ecosophy, the health of the environment depends on humans staying within environmental limits – using no more physical resources than can be replenished, and creating no more waste than can be safely absorbed.

In ecolinguistics, the ecosophy of the analyst is used to judge whether the stories conveyed by particular clusters of linguistic features are considered destructive, beneficial, or ambivalent (i.e. positive in some ways but negative in others). In the case of the ecosophy *Health!*, stories are judged as destructive if they promote harm to human or other animal health, or encourage unnecessary use of resources and waste that can harm the health of the environment. Stories are considered beneficial if they do the opposite.

As well as being used to evaluate stories, an ecosophy can also be used to help decide what data to examine. For the ecosophy *Health!*, the best data from a pragmatic perspective consist of the most widespread and destructive discourses that cause the greatest harm to human health, the health of other species, and to the environment. These are the primary discourses to resist through encouraging critical awareness and through searching for alternative discourses that can promote human, animal, and environmental health.

There are many possible destructive discourses to analyse, but the discourse of advertising stands out since advertising has a huge global reach and its persuasive techniques can encourage people to purchase unnecessary products that harm themselves, others, and the environment. There are a vast number of harmful products that could be focused on, including those of the animal-product industries,

transport industries, or tobacco. However, one product which is particularly notorious in terms of health impact, scale, and harm both to people and planet is *Coca-Cola* or, as it is often known, *Coke.* The Centre for Ethical Organizational Cultures at Auburn University describes some of the controversy surrounding the Coca-Cola corporation:

> Since the 1990s Coca-Cola has been accused of unethical behavior in a number of areas, including product safety, anti-competitiveness, racial discrimination, channel stuffing, distributor conflicts, intimidation of union workers, pollution, depletion of natural resources, and health concerns. (Center for Ethical Organizational Cultures 2014)

The health concerns are that Coke has little or no nutritional value but contains either artificial sweeteners or an extraordinary amount of sugar (Medical News Today 2019). A single 330 mL can of Coke contains 35 g of sugar, which is more than the entire recommended daily maximum for sugar consumption for an adult (30 g) and far higher than that of a 6-year-old child (19 g) (National Health Service 2022). Environmentally, the Coca-Cola company has been accused of "dehydrating communities in its pursuit of water resources to feed its own plants, drying up farmers' wells and destroying local agriculture" (War on Want 2007). The Coca-Cola company has also been found to be the largest plastic polluter in the world, according to an analysis by *Break Free from Plastic* (2021). One reason why Coca-Cola has such high pollution levels is that Coke is the number one soft drink consumed in the world by a long way, something which can be explained by the scale and effectiveness of its transnational advertising campaigns (Chukwuemeka 2023: 8).

In this article, I develop a classification system and tools for analysing advertisements and apply them to the advertising of the Coca-Cola company, focusing specifically on advertisements for the product 'Coca-Cola Classic' (the original, high sugar version). There are two reasons why the analysis of advertising is important for ecolinguistics. The first is that an understanding of linguistic and visual devices that make advertising persuasive can be used in resisting advertising, primarily through exposing the techniques and promoting critical language awareness. The second reason is that the powerfully persuasive techniques of advertising can be reused in counter-campaigns which encourage people not to buy unnecessary products and instead undertake activities which are life-enhancing, heath-enhancing, and environment-enhancing.

While the language of advertising is a key aspect of its persuasive power, advertising makes use of multiple *semiotic modes* (Danielsson and Selander 2021: 17) including speaking, sounds, writing, music, music lyrics, images, gestures, and facial expressions. The different modes have different *affordances* – meanings that they are particularly well suited to convey. And each mode also has limitations in what it can express (Danielsson and Selander 2021: 18). Advertising is highly persuasive because

it combines different modes in ways that allow each one to convey the meanings it is most effective at expressing.

Advertising can be considered to be a particular *genre* since there are conventionalised patterns within it that serve particular goals. As Stöckl and Molnar (2018: 262) write:

> a genre is a type of text characterized by a particular setting, a distinctive communicative function – which reflects in an ordered series of communicative stages – recognizable linguistic (and pictorial, inter-modal) patterns and overall norms of thematic, pragmatic and stylistic organization. (Stöckl and Molnar 2018: 262)

Advertising as a genre exhibits a large amount of flexibility since novelty and surprise form part of its persuasive power. However, all commercial advertising shares the primary goal of selling products, which is a communicative goal as well as a social one. As Fairclough (2003: 65) describes, genres are "ways of acting and interacting in the course of social events". Advertising genres, where corporations pay for pages in newspapers or slots in TV programmes, websites, and social media to persuade people to buy their products, reflect a capitalist, consumerist society. However, the advertising genre does more than just reflect capitalism, it also is part of how a capitalist society is constructed, reproduced, and maintained. In general, the particular repertoire of genres within a society both reflects the structures of that society and plays a role in constructing the society itself (Fairclough 2003).

In this article, I will be focusing on TV advertisements for Coca-Cola Classic (which I will abbreviate to 'Coke') and develop a framework based on five different types of advertising. The five types are the *classic-type, identity-type, narrative-type*, *cause-type,* and *counter-type*. Most modern advertising falls into one of these types, and many contain a mixture of types within a single advertisement. The framework I propose here is not the only possible classification of advertising (see, for example, Cook 2001), but serves the purposes of this article and is useful for ecolinguistics since it highlights some of the key forms of persuasion and resistance.

This article is based on research consisting of multimodal analysis of 80 Coca-Cola TV advertisements found through Coca-Cola's own web pages, advertising archives, and playlists on the platforms Vimeo and YouTube. The advertisements were coded into five categories based on their factual content, identity-forming devices, ethical messaging, explicit communicative goals, and implicit communicative goals. Following this, a search was carried out to discover advertising campaigns from non-profit organisations which encourage people not to buy Coke because of the harm it causes, as examples of counter-type advertising. Finally, prototypical examples of the categories were selected for discussion in this article. The following sections describe each of the five categories in turn and analyse prototypical examples of each category.

2 Classic-type advertising

Early TV advertisements for Coke were primarily what I call *classic-type* advertisements. A classic-type advertisement describes the properties of the product being advertised, represents them in a favourable light, and ends with an explicit statement that calls on the viewer to buy the product.

Classic-type advertising can be seen in some of the slogans that Coca-Cola has used to promote Coke over the years. In 1886 the slogan was, 'Drink Coca-Cola' – an imperative that contains the name of the product and explicitly calls on the viewer to consume it. In 1904, the slogan was 'Delicious and Refreshing', which focuses on the properties of the product, with 'Coke is […]' being implied to make a full clause. In 1905 the slogan 'Coca-Cola Revives and Sustains' makes the drink the active agent of positive impacts on the consumer. In 1959 the slogan 'Be Really Refreshed' implies 'by drinking Coke' to make a full clause. There are various other slogans which refer to refreshment, thirst, taste, and deliciousness which all stay close to the act of drinking the product and the sensations it arouses.

Early video Coca-Cola advertisements made strong use of classic-type advertising with expressions such as the following:

- Coca-Cola is so delicious, so refreshing, so tempting to any guest. (1930)
- Have plenty of Coca-Cola in your refrigerator ice-cold and ready to serve all the time. (1930)
- Coca-Cola makes any pause the pause that refreshes. (1940)
- You be sure to stock up with plenty of extra cartons. (1950)
- There's nothing like it because Coke in the bottle is an exclusive blend […] of delicious natural flavourings. (1950)
- The lively fresh feeling that only Coke can give. (1960)
- When you want to be really refreshed have an ice-cold Coca-Cola, make it king size. (1960)
- Coke lifts your spirits, boots your energy. (1980)
- Pick up a carton tomorrow and for extra fun take more than one. (1980). (from advertisements collated in Evolution Daily 2021)

These expressions focus on the properties of the product itself and convey a positive appraisal pattern through the use of adjectives with positive semantic prosody which modify the product: *delicious, refreshing, tempting, natural, lively,* and *fresh*. The imperatives 'have plenty of Coca-Cola', 'be sure to stock up with plenty of extra cartons', 'pick up a carton […] take more than one', 'make it king size', and 'take more than one' explicitly command the hearer not only to buy the product but to buy large quantities of it. The second person pronoun 'you' reaches out directly to the viewer in

a process of *synthetic personalisation* (Fairclough 2014: 89). Synthetic personalisation occurs when a huge global corporation speaks to a mass audience but uses personal terms to make it appear as if it is a conversation between two people.

Synthetic personalisation is often achieved through a narrator who is physically present in the advertisement but whose words are a direct commercial message from the corporation. An example is an advertisement from the 1950s which juxtaposes ice skating and drinking Coke (Discovering History 2015). The advertisement starts with a medium shot of a man wearing a polo-neck jumper looking straight out at the viewer, his eye contact demanding a relationship with them (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021: 117). The medium shot shows the man from head to waist, placing him in social distance (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021: 123), while also allowing his location to be clearly seen. He is at an ice rink, with a couple skating in the background behind him. The words that the man speaks are as follows:

> Time hasn't changed the fun of ice skating nor the need to stop now and then, rest up and refresh. And for fast refreshment there's just nothing like a frosty bottle of Coca-Cola; so tangy in taste, so ever fresh and sparkled. Coke has a distinctive flavour that's never been equalled. And the way Coca-Cola brings you back so refreshed, so quickly. For Coke offers a bit of wholesome energy, gives you a bright little lift just when you need it. In any season, enjoy bracing ice-cold Coca-Cola. Perfect refreshment anytime. (Discovering History 2015)

The corporation itself is personalised by the narrator with his warm tone and comfortably casual clothes looking into the viewers' eyes and addressing them directly with the second person pronoun 'you'. At the point when the narrator says 'brings you back so refreshed' the image is of the male ice skater now in the foreground drinking a Coke. In this way, the viewer is not only personalised by the pronoun 'you' but also by being projected onto the skater. For a moment, this is not just an image of a skater but of 'you', the viewer, who could equally be refreshed by the product if purchased. In this way, both the corporation and the viewer are personalised and brought into a relationship.

Another advertisement from the 1950s starts with a woman who is carrying a tray of Coke bottles and says, "Wouldn't this be a good time for you and your guests to have Coca-Cola too?". The advertisement then goes on to show the woman hosting a small gathering and giving the guests a Coke, while an off-screen narrator states "Coca-Cola is so delicious, so refreshing, so tempting to any guest" (Paskaloka 2021). The synthetic personalisation here is achieved not only through the second person pronoun 'you', but the presupposition in 'you and your guests', which assumes that, just like the depicted host, 'you' also have guests in your home that you entertain. Assumptions like this make it appear as if the corporation knows something about the viewer, creating solidarity with them (Fairclough 2003: 58).

The facticity (Potter 1996) of the skating advertisement and the host advertisement is very high – all statements are bald-on-record with no hedges, modal auxiliaries, or adverbs to reduce the impression of absolute truth. The advertisement states that "Coke has a distinctive flavour that's never been equalled" rather than "Some people think that Coke might have a distinctive flavour that's never really been equalled". The adverbial use of 'so' acts as an intensifier in both advertisements, modifying the adjectives 'delicious', 'refreshing', 'tempting', 'tangy', 'fresh', 'sparkled', and 'quickly'. This emphasises the appraisal pattern of positive qualities and raises its facticity level. The expression 'so delicious, so refreshing, so tempting' from the host advertisement draws on the rhetorical devices of tricolon (a list of three) and anaphor (the repetition of 'so' at the start of each phrase) in its efforts to persuade.

Overall, classic-type advertising can be characterised as synthetical personalisation where there is an obvious corporate voice which makes a 'direct appeal' to the viewer using positive appraisal patterns to represent the product in a favourable light, and makes assumptions which make it seem as if the corporation actually knows the viewer. The direct appeal uses imperatives and the second person pronoun 'you' to reach out to the viewer. A high facticity pattern is used to present the positive characterisation of the product as a certain and indisputable fact.

It would be wrong to say that classic-type advertising is an ineffective strategy – after all, early on Coca-Cola had a meteoric global expansion that coincided with its vast advertising campaign. However, the problem with synthetic personalisation is that by definition it is artificial, and the very obvious way it is carried out in early classic-type advertisements can be easily seen through by the viewer and met with cynicism. The way that the narrators in these advertisements express themselves, in pure advertising discourse, is so unnatural that it is obvious they are being paid to convey a corporate message. And the corporation clearly has a 'stake' (Potter 1996: 123) in persuading the customer to buy the product, whether or not it will benefit their health and wellbeing. There will, therefore, always be a number of viewers who are critically aware of the stake of the corporation and no matter how high the facticity of the advertisements, will reject them as obviously biased. Later advertising, as described below, reaches out to these cynical viewers by gradually moving away from the obvious synthetic voice of the corporation, the overt claims about the properties of the product, and the imperatives which order viewers to buy the product.

3 Identity-type advertising

More recent Coca-Cola slogans associate the product with positive things that lie outside of the commercial world, and instead exist within what Habermas calls the 'Lifeworld' (see Fairtlough 1991). Examples are as follows:

– Life Tastes Good (2001)
– Real (2003)
– Make It Real (2005)
– The Coke Side of Life (2006)
– Open Happiness (2009)
– Taste the Feeling (2016)
– Real Magic (2021)
– Believing is Magic (2022)

Only the slogan 'The Coke Side of Life' explicitly mentions the product, but even in this case it is a modifier of 'life', allowing 'life' as the head of the phrase to be the main focus. In 'Life Tastes Good' and 'Taste the Feeling' the product is not mentioned explicitly but is alluded to by the word 'taste'. The expression 'Open Happiness' similarly alludes to the opening of a bottle or can, conflating the product with happiness. The other slogans do not mention or allude to the product at all, but since they appear on screen next to the Coca-Cola logo they nonetheless map the elements of the slogan (e.g. magic) to the product. There is, therefore, an erasure (Stibbe 2021: 139) of the product, but of the type 'trace', where a more or less subtle hint of it remains.

Over time, the advertisements increasingly moved from selling a product that had functional benefits such as refreshment to something much more profound: the product as a path to becoming a different and better kind of person. This is what I am calling *identity-type* advertising, where consumption of the product is associated with becoming a particular kind of person.

The focus on identity in advertisements reflects the increasing importance that identity plays in modernity. The sociologist Anthony Giddens describes how in traditional cultures of the past, people's identities were quite rigidly fixed and controlled by society – for example, the son of a blacksmith would be expected to follow in his father's footsteps. In modernity, however, there are more possibilities for people to shape their own identities and tell their own stories about who they are as people. Giddens writes that:

> A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour […] but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography […] must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story about the self'. (Giddens 1991: 54)

This freedom to be who we want to be is something that Giddens treats as a key benefit of modernity. However, in crafting a story of self, people are influenced by

the texts which surround them and advertisements are ubiquitous. Unsurprisingly, advertisers try to shape identities in ways that include consumption of their products. Giddens describes what can happen when advertisers conflate who we are with what we own:

> To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life. […] The consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of self; appearance replaces essence as the visible signs of successful consumption come actually to outweigh the use-values of the goods and services themselves. (Giddens 1991: 198)

Early Coca-Cola video advertisements had elements of identity mixed in with their primarily classic-type advertising, such as being a good host, a committed family member, or someone who engages in an enjoyable wholesome activity like ice-skating. However, in 1979 the TV advertisement 'Have a Coke and a smile' came out, with more subtle synthetic personalisation and a primary focus on lifestyle rather than product. In the advertisement, the corporate voice is still present but backgrounded by being placed within the lyrics of a song, which is played over images of families enjoying themselves outside. The families play sports, fly kites, eat picnics, hold balloons, and dance. Everyone is active, bonding with each other, smiling and, unsurprisingly, drinking Coke. The lyrics are "The whole world is smiling with me. Coca-Cola adds life. Have a Coke and a smile". Although this does contain the typical classic-type imperative 'have a Coke', the primary focus is on life and feelings (of happiness) rather than particular qualities of the product – the lifeworld rather than the corporate world.

The combination of happy, bonding, and active people with the product implies that the product has, in some way, made the depicted families bond, made them happy, and made them active. And that if the viewer purchases the product then they too can create this kind of life and feel this kind of emotion. It is a very far-fetched idea, which is why it is implied by juxtaposition rather than being an explicit (and therefore deniable) claim. The other subtle implication is that this kind of person (active, happy, bonding with others) is the kind of person who drinks Coke, and that if the viewer buys the product then they too can become this kind of person. Again this is farfetched, but with the catchy music and appealing visual images the advertisement only needs to create a subconscious association between the product and particular kinds of people living particular (attractive) lifestyles to nudge an uncertain consumer towards purchase.

The 2001 TV advertisement 'Life Tastes Good' is very similar to the 'Have a Coke and smile'. This advertisement is full of images of young, energetic, attractive people drinking Coca-Cola while surfing, skateboarding, swimming, and dancing. The lyrics of the accompanying song are: "Life tastes good. Coca-Cola. You know how it feels

with a Coke in your hand". The words 'a Coke in *your* hand' occur as a woman dances with a Coke in *her* hand, mapping 'you', the consumer, onto the woman, who is active, attractive, and enjoying life. The ending of the advertisement has the words 'Life Tastes Good' written above the Coca-Cola logo, metaphorically mapping the enjoyable life led by the characters in the advertisement onto the product. The implication is that when you purchase a Coca-Cola your life will be transformed to be like the lives of those people depicted – that consuming the product will lead to a change in *identity*. The advertisement is therefore selling something more than a momentary feeling of refreshment; instead, it is selling a 'new and better you' that the viewer can become through consumption of the product. Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 12) describe how commodification, the treatment of someone or something as a mere commodity or product,

> is a process that has had a profound influence on the way identities are conceptualised […]. Some explanations treat people and their identity positions as passively controlled by economic conditions and the power and rhetoric of advertising. In contrast, other theories suggest that people actively construct their identities by deriving their own meanings for the things they buy, or resisting the positions offered by advertising texts. (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 12)

However, there is no need to split it into a black-and-white 'passively controlled' and 'actively constructed' since there can be a spectrum between these depending on the viewer. Advertisements by their nature are shown to very large numbers of people. Some viewers will make a subconscious connection between the identities in the advertisement and the product, which may result in them purchasing the product. However, for many, the advertisement will just wash over them without a thought, like the hundreds of other advertisements they have seen that week. Others will respond critically, recognising the false connection between attractive lifestyle and product, and will passively resist the message by not purchasing the product or actively resist it through encouraging others to avoid it too. So it is possible to say that with a large audience, advertisements are likely to convey their message to *some* viewers who will absorb them uncritically – that is, after all, why the advertisers spend billions on advertising their products. The aim of analysing advertisements and raising awareness of the strategies advertisers use to manipulate viewers into buying unnecessary products is to increase the number of people in the more critical end of the spectrum.

4 Narrative-type advertising

Continuing with the history of Coke advertisements, by 2016 the slogan had evolved to 'Taste the feeling' (Coca-Cola 2016). The corresponding advertisement still conveys

attractive identities and associates them with the product but is much more sophisticated and contains a new ingredient that has high persuasive power: *narrative*. Escalas (1998: 267) explains that:

> ads tell stories because stories are able to involve, captivate, and entertain consumers. More importantly, stories are able to communicate, persuade, demonstrate, and model the products that should be used and the way to use them. (Escalas 1998: 267)

The 'Taste the Feeling' advertisement is only 3 min 12 s long but contains seven micronarratives which are conveyed entirely in images. A micronarrative is a complete narrative that is embedded within a larger whole. Put simply, a narrative is "an account of events, sequenced over time and space" (Reinsborough and Canning 2017: 122). In addition to the temporal sequencing, it is also necessary to have logical connections between the events, and as will be described below, it is often in these connections that the persuasive power of narrative lies.

The micronarratives in 'Taste the Feeling' are intertwined, with the focus jumping from narrative to narrative within a larger general pattern. The pattern is of everything going well, problems occurring, and then everything being resolved. Although each micronarrative lasts only seconds, they fit Todorov's structure of 'equilibrium', followed by 'degeneration', followed by a 'new equilibrium' (Todorov and Weinstein 1969: 75).

The following is a brief summary of the narrative structure of the advertisement intended to highlight the key aspects relevant to the discussion:

> A man and woman catch each others' eyes in a record shop, go on dates, and dance happily. Entirely separately, a cashier falls in love with a customer who buys and drinks a Coke in the shop where she works. A boy is bullied by other boys, and has his Coke taken away from him, but is protected by another boy who gives him a Coke. A music producer with a Coke on his desk works happily with others on a song. Everything is going well for all the characters, but then a Coke bottle smashes and the music goes quiet. At this point the couple start arguing; the music producer gets stuck; in another micronarrative a footballer is disappointed to get a red card; in another one, a nervous man falls off a diving board; and in yet another micronarrative, two women argue in a car. Then things start working out well: the man and woman who met in the record shop make up over a Coke, the diver completes a perfect dive, the footballer scores a goal, the women in the car make up and hug, the record producer smiles and gets back to work.

The advertisement uses *narrative empathy* to draw the viewer into the micronarratives, where they can vicariously experience the emotions of the characters. Narrative empathy is the "sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen 2014: 521). Keen describes a great range of features that can encourage the viewer to feel emotions similar to those of the depicted characters. This encouragement is attempted via such methods as point-of-view, vivid use of settings,

traversing of boundaries, serial repetition, immersion or transportation of readers, interjections, foregrounding, and defamiliarization.

What is most important in this scene, that makes it so touching and memorable is the *emotional narrative* that runs parallel to the ideational content and uses the pathos mode of persuasion. Emotional narratives are sequences of *emotional events*, where a character or characters are represented as feeling a particular emotion at a particular time. Linguistically, the emotional events are triggered explicitly by *emotive items* – words or phrases which directly state emotions such as 'sad', or 'excited'. They can also be triggered implicitly through physical proxies (a smile, drooping shoulders, or pacing) or emotions which are normally associated with particular actions or events (an interrogation, a birthday, a killing) (Martin and Rose 2007: 30).

In this advertisement, the micronarratives are a powerful way to involve the viewer vicariously in the turbulent but ultimately exuberant emotional lives of the characters. Every scene is carefully designed to evoke feelings. This is achieved multimodally through the facial expressions of the actors (a small smile on meeting in the record shop); gestures (the music producer puts his head in his hands, the diver punches the water in triumph); drawings (a heart to symbolise love); physical closeness; eye contact; the uplifting tone of the music; and the song lyrics (e.g. 'we make the simple moments last for a lifetime'). After the turning point, when everything seems to be going wrong, the lyrics of the song are 'When I taste that feeling nothing can bring me down', linking the overcoming of negative feelings to the product.

The product also plays a key role in the narratives: the cashier is brought together with the customer because he buys a Coke and drinks it in the shop; a bottle of Coke is stolen from the bullied boy; the man and woman make up over a Coke; and there are many instances of product placement such as the Coke bottle on the desk of the music producer. The final message is 'Taste that feeling', in words on screen, where the suppressed subject of the imperative is 'you', the viewer. The implied message is: if 'you' want to taste/experience the powerful emotions of the characters in the advertisement and lead lives of connection, success and achievement like theirs, then buy this product. The advertisement is therefore a mixture of *narrative-type* adverting, where the viewer becomes a vicarious participant in a particular story that is linked in some way to the product, and an *identity-type* advertisement, as it associates attractive characters and lifestyles with consumption of the product.

While 'Taste the feeling' is a bundle of micronarratives, there are also advertisements which contain just one main narrative all the way through. An example of this is the advertisement *Real Magic* (Coca-Cola 2021). To summarise the advertisement briefly:

> A boy in a tense TV eSports contest is shown playing a video game in front of a panel of judges and an excited audience. The shot alternates between the boy concentrating and pressing buttons to the world of the game itself that he is playing. Within the game, he controls a huge green monstrous-looking avatar who fights with a group of armoured soldiers. After a destructive battle, the avatar gets knocked to the ground and the audience groans with concern. The boy then drinks a Coke and the liquid is seen gushing into the game and refreshing the avatar. Rather than resuming the fight, the avatar throws down his weapons, and helps his opponents get up. Everyone then throws down their weapons, the avatar links arms with one of his opponents and the land magically changes from an apocalyptic scene to beautiful green mountains, and a wave of green is shown spreading across the world. The audience and people watching online around the world gasp in amazement at this global moment of peace. At the end, the message is 'We are one Coke away from each other' and then 'Coca-Cola, Real Magic'.

Coca-Cola describes this advertisement as "an epic tale at the crossroads of worlds where a fearless warrior and a young gamer will pave the way to a new dawn, change the course of history […] and unveil the true meaning of Real Magic". The advertisement does have an epic cinematic quality, with dramatic music, strong emotional reactions from the characters, violent battles, and apocalyptic backgrounds. Like many legends, books, and films it follows the narrative pattern of the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949), albeit with a twist at the end. The advertisement draws from the genre of video game movies (e.g. *Free Guy, Tron, eXistenZ, The FP*) and transfers it into the genre of the advertisement. This is a form of what Fairclough (2003: 68) calls 'genre disembedding':

> That is, genres being, so to speak, lifted out of, 'disembedded' from, particular networks of social practices where they initially developed, and becoming available as a sort of 'social technology' which transcends both differences between networks of practices and differences of scale. (Fairclough 2003: 68)

The use of a narrative structure allows advertisements to avoid or downplay synthetic personalisation. The viewer is positioned as a consumer of entertaining media rather than as a potential consumer of the product, and the corporate voice can be disguised among the events and action of the narrative. In *Real Magic,* there is no direct corporate voice until right at the end when the words 'We are one Coke away from each other' appear on the screen. There is, however, a corporate message that is embedded in the narrative structure. As mentioned earlier, a narrative structure consists of a series of logically connected events. The key events in this story are the sequence: avatar collapses on the ground, the boy drinks a coke which reaches into the game and refreshes the avatar, and then the avatar throws his weapons down and embraces his opponents.

As Fritz Heider and Mary-Ann Simmel demonstrated in a classic experiment in the 1940s (see Mead 2014), people are very good at finding logical connections between events, even if they are actually random occurrences. In the case of *Real*

Magic, there is no actual connection between drinking high calorie sugar water and developing warm magnanimous relationships with an opponent. However, the logic of narrative implies a causality that is confirmed by the final caption "We are one Coke away from each other". The Coca-Cola company describes this as "a metaphor that speaks to the belief that what unites us is greater than what sets us apart" (Hein 2023). This sophistication represents a major advance from the original classic-type advertising which used messaging along the lines of "Coke is refreshing and delicious, buy lots of it today".

5 Cause-type advertisements

The *Real Magic* advertisement described above is clearly a narrative-type advertisement, and it is also an identity-type advertisement because it is linking consumption of the product with becoming a kinder person. In addition to this, it goes one step beyond this by engaging in social activism to make the world a better place, or at least to give the impression of doing that. It can therefore be classified as *cause marketing* (Stole 2008), or in the classification system I am presenting in this paper, *cause-type advertising*.

A cause-type advertisement is one which conveys an ethical message to the viewer which is entirely unrelated to the product itself. At first may seem beneficial to convey ethical messages: for example, *Real Magic* shows the importance of eschewing violence and cooperating with others, which according to my ecosophy of *Health!* is positive since violence damages health. However, cause-type marketing can also be used to distract from or disguise the ethical shortcomings of the corporation and the harm that the product causes.

Peace and harmony with others is a long-standing theme that first appeared in the most famous (or notorious) Coca-Cola advertisement of all: the 1971 advertisement, *Hilltop*. This advertisement starts with an extreme close-up shot of a blonde, blue-eyed girl solo singing "I'd like to buy the world a home and furnish it with love". The shot pulls out to reveal two more young white people who join in and start singing along. The camera then tracks across what turns out to be a large multi-ethnic group of people each of whom are holding a Coke bottle in their hand while singing the song. The shot pulls out further to reveal a very large multi-ethnic group of young people, some wearing traditional cultural clothes such as a Japanese *yukata*, standing on a hilltop in Rome in sunset. The key lyrics in the song are "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony. I'd like to buy the world a coke and keep it company […] it's the real thing, what the world wants today". The Coca-Cola company describes this as 'inclusive advertising' designed to call "for people to come together in a moment of optimism and try to celebrate a little bit of peace" (Coca-Cola 2023).

While a call for peace at a troubled time (the Vietnam War was raging in 1971) is hardly objectionable, there are some problematic aspects with the advertisement which become clear with a closer look at the discourse. In systemic functional grammar terms, the *theme* (i.e. the point of departure) of the advertisement is the word 'I' in the linguistic mode and the blonde, blue-eyed British teenage girl in the visual mode, who at this point is singing alone and takes up most of the screen in an extreme close-up. There is no doubt at this point that the pronoun 'I' refers to this girl. In the expressions 'I'd like to teach the world', 'I'd like to buy the world a Coke' and 'I'd like to buy the world a home' the participant 'I' is activated by being the Agent of material processes of teaching and buying. The other participant, 'the world' is passivated through being the Affected participant of 'teach' and the beneficiary of 'buy'. This immediately sets up an unequal power relationship between 'I' and 'the world'.

As the camera pans out to show a multi-ethnic group of young people in traditional clothes who join the song, there is some ambiguity about whom 'I' refers to. It could be that the multi-ethic group represents 'the world' who have been taught to sing by the original teenager (in other words, 'I' is exclusively referring to the original girl). Or it could be that they all, as individual young people, want to teach the violent adult population to live harmoniously with each other. However, the pronoun is 'I' rather than an inclusive 'we' ('we'd like to teach the world'), and each one is holding a Coke, as if they had all just been bought a Coke, while the original girl is not shown holding anything. Plus, the advertisement is presenting the voice of a corporation based in the US.

These facts together suggest a patronising colonial reading of the advertisement, where ideologies and consumer products are spread from an active West to a passive 'world', and rather than being the aggressor the West is portrayed as bringing peace to other countries. While the company calls this 'inclusive marketing', a cynic could suggest that it is primarily about enlarging the market by targeting cultures around the world, failing to respect the actual diversity of local cultures by pushing a blandly uniform global product, and disguising the harm that product and the environmental destruction that goes with its cause to local populations.

The *Hilltop* advertisement is an early cause-type advertisement that is unsophisticated and easy to criticise. More recent advertisements are much more sophisticated and need closer inspection. An example of a more recent cause-type advertisement is the Coca-Cola advertisement *Open like never before* (Coca-Cola 2020a). At first viewing, this advertisement appears to be performing an ethical public service by conveying a positive vision for a country recovering from the coronavirus pandemic rather than promoting a product accused of being unhealthy and ecologically damaging (Center for Ethical Organizational Cultures 2014; Medical News Today 2019).

The advertisement is narrated in the first person by George the Poet (George Mpanga), a prominent social justice campaigner in the UK, who performs a poem on life after the pandemic. The advertisement is appropriating a genre, performance poetry, that often questions the prevailing injustices of a neoliberal world order, but in this case is now disembedded in order to sell soft drinks. The poem itself is about not going back to normal after the coronavirus pandemic but making personal choices to live a better and more fulfilling life, including cooking, music, dancing, loving, spending time with family, dreaming, and appreciating key workers and school. Like many Coke advertisements, it presents activities and social bonding which would genuinely lead to wellbeing (New Economics Foundation 2008) while associating these with the product (Stibbe 2009: 37).

Niceforo (2021:101) describes the narrative structure of the poem, showing how it moves from present to past and future:

> From a thematic and structural point of view, the poem starts with a reflection on the present moment, questioning the assumed 'normality' of old times, and challenging the hearer/viewer to embrace change. The central part explores the many possibilities of the "new normal", with aspirations and resolutions for the present; the final part is a declaration of hope and desires for the future, ending in the closing line "So I'll be open/Like never before". (Niceforo 2021:101)

The first few lines of the poem are as follows:

> Stop [pause], wait [pause].
> Who says we have to go back to normal? [pause]
> Back to anything?
> What if the new normal ain't the normal we knew?
> And we can't just do what we'd [pause] formally do?
> What if the big change is you and me?
> What if we choose to be [pause] open
> (Niceforo 2021:101)

In these words, we can see characteristic features of the engaging wordplay of performance poetry. The poem is free verse, unconstrained by consistent patterns of rhyme and meter. There is sophisticated non-regular rhyming (normal we knew/formally do); a pun (new/knew); reversal (new normal/normal we knew); repetition ('normal' three times), colloquialism (ain't), pauses in unexpected places (after 'we'd', and 'be'), rhetorical questions, imperatives (stop, wait), and metaphor ('open' applied to people's lives). The rhetorical questions, imperatives, pronouns 'you' and 'we', and eye contact of the poet reach out directly to the viewers, including them in the narrative and involving them in planning for a new, better future. The wordplay potentially stimulates the viewer's cognitive processes, increasing engagement. In fact, many of the features such as wordplay, repetition, rhetorical questions, and

pauses in unusual places, are characteristic of the language of hypnosis (Burton and Bodenhamer 2009), potentially increasing susceptible viewers' suggestibility.

The product placement is more subtle than previous Coca-Cola advertisements: the words 'Coca-Cola presents' on the opening screen; the metaphor of people being 'open' potentially mapping onto the opening of a bottle; a Coca-Cola fridge and billboard briefly in the background; two large families having meals outdoors connecting over a wall by holding up Coke bottles; a girl drinking from a bottle just for a second, and the Coca-Cola logo appearing as the closing frame. The performance poetry genre and the toned-down product placement allowed Walter Susini, Vice President of Coca-Cola marketing in Europe, to disguise the intention of the campaign by stating: "This not a campaign. It's an extension of our company's purpose to refresh the world and make a difference" (Coca-Cola 2020a). This statement presupposes that Coca-Cola has intrinsically valuable aims, rather than extrinsic aims such increasing shareholder value through selling as many products as possible.

The narrator and many of the participants are from Black or Asian ethnicities, which could be seen as valuable in terms of diversity since all are represented positively. However, in the UK there are racial health inequalities: black and Asian people were up to twice as likely to be infected with COVID at the start of the pandemic (National Research Institute for Health and Care Research 2020), are more likely to suffer from diabetes (Diabetes UK 2022), and Black adults have the highest percentage of being overweight or obese out of all ethnic groups (UK Government 2021). The product placement of Coke bottles containing 44 g of sugar amidst Black and Asian people enjoying their lives appears to target exactly the audience who suffer most from health inequalities.

The problem with cause-type advertisements is that they can convey an ethical image for a brand without the company actually needing to do anything ethical, because the advertisements make no reference to the company's sustainability actions or the ethics of the production process. Stole (2008: 20) describes how:

> An alarming trend has developed, one in which businesses use cause marketing instead of applying themselves to solving social problems. Such a practice is merely window dressing, a way to improve public image while detracting attention from a business's own role in undermining the public safety net. (Stole 2008: 20)

When advertisers *do* start mentioning specifics about the environmental performance of their products in more classic-type advertisements, then we enter the world of greenwash described by Stöckl and Molnar (2018). For advertisements that use high-profile activists such as George the Poet there is also a danger their ideas will be diluted: that the activist will be constrained to offer feel-good suggestions for personal changes rather than political or systemic changes that could prevent companies from exploiting workers and destroying the environment in the pursuit

of profit. Niceforo (2021: 102) makes the important point that the line of the poem "What if the biggest change is you and me?" places emphasis to change on the viewers of the advertisement (and George the Poet, a social justice advocate) rather than the Coca-Cola corporation itself.

6 Counter-type advertisements

The final type of advertising discussed in this article uses the format and genre of an advertisement but for a very different purpose. Instead of encouraging people to purchase a product by describing its attractive features, a *counter-type* advertisement encourages people *not* to buy a particular product by describing the harm that it causes. Typically these advertisements are produced by individual activists, activist organisations, and health-promotion charities.

Counter-type advertisements are often highly intertextual – they use direct quotations and images from the advertisements they are resisting and then subvert, parody, or satirise them. An example is the counter-advertisement *The Honest Coca-Cola Obesity Commercial* produced by an activist going under the name John Pemberton (who was actually the inventor of Coke). This counter advertisement takes the video from an actual Coca-Cola advertisement but produces a new voice-over which includes the following statement:

> For over 125 years we've been bringing people together […]. The calories in Coca-Cola products have no nutritional value. If you choose to live a healthy lifestyle then you should not be drinking any of our products. If you drink Coke you'll get fatter and fatter. The solution is simple and it's right in front of your eyes. Don't drink Coke. It's killing you and your family.[1]

The counter-advertisement starts with the synthetic personalisation 'we', pretending to be the corporate voice of Coca-Cola. It uses intertextual borrowing in the expression 'bringing people together', a common phrase in Coca-Cola's advertising. The first 25 s of the advertisement continue in an upbeat corporate tone with positive appraisal of the corporation, making it seem like a normal commercial. However, after the initial positivity, the advertisement goes on to catalogue the harmful impact that the product has on health. Importantly, the description of harm stays in the same positive upbeat corporate tone, with the same positive visual images from the original advertisement. The conclusion of the advertisement is 'Don't drink Coke', which continues the synthetic personalisation by using an imperative to directly address the viewer. The use of synthetic personalisation, the explicit description of

1 Available at: https://www.cnn.com/2013/01/14/health/coke-obesity/index.html (accessed 19 March 2023).

features of the product and the imperative are all examples of classic-type advertising, but turned against purchasing the product.

Counter-type advertisements can, of course, do much more than just redubbing and parodying advertisements. More sophisticated counter-advertisements remake the audio and visual modes and create entirely new narratives. An example of this is a Christmas themed counter-type advertisement called *How Coke killed Santa Claus* made by filmmaker Greg Richters (2010). Christmas is a frame (Stibbe 2021: 39) that Coca-Cola advertising often uses, with children and adults depicted showing great anticipation of their gifts, and then smiling happily when Santa hands them a Coke (Coca-Cola 2020b). In some of the advertisements Santa himself is given a Coke at the end, has a drink, and smiles happily.

How Coke killed Santa Claus depicts a fairground setting and fairy lights to trigger the frame of Christmas. A man dressed as Santa is shown walking around the crowds handing out Cokes to people who smile as they receive them. The music includes bells that further triggers the frame of Christmas, but also has sinister undertones. The people who received the Cokes are depicted drinking them but then choking and collapsing, presumably dead. Finally, with screams in the background, Santa drinks a Coke, then collapses. The advertisement finishes with the words-on-screen 'Coca-Cola is bad for your health!'. The narrative contains a simple chain of events, with the key logical connection being between drinking the product and the choking and collapsing on the floor – clearly implying that the Coke has caused a medical emergency or death. This compresses a complex reality where drinking excess sweetened soda in addition to other lifestyle factors such as lack of exercise increases statistical probability of obesity and related illnesses (Bleich and Vercammen 2018). The use of narrative allows this complex reality to be simplified to a cause-effect relation that lasts a few seconds, increasing its impact and making it more memorable.

7 Conclusions

In this article, I have described five types of advertising: *classic-type*, *identity-type*, *narrative-type*, *cause-type*, and *counter-type.* Most advertising consists of a mixture of more than one of these types. However, we can see a gradual evolution from primarily classic-type advertisements which describe the features of products in attractive ways and command the viewer to buy them, through to advertisements which use narrative and make grand ethical statements while the product itself is backgrounded. The focus of the article has been on Coca-Cola's advertising, as an example of a corporation which has been criticised for unethical practices that push an unnecessary, unhealthy, and environmentally destructive product on consumers

around the world. Of course, the same analysis could have been carried out on thousands of other advertisers and their products.

There are two main reasons for analysing the techniques that advertisers use to promote harmful products. The first is to provide tools and materials that can be used to raise critical awareness, for example, educational materials that can be used in schools or free online ecolinguistics courses such as *The Stories We Live By* (Stibbe 2022). Once people become aware of how the texts that surround them shape society in ways that are harmful both to them personally and to the environment, then they can resist the forms of persuasion that are acting on them. There is, in fact, evidence that people who study ecolinguistics become more critically aware of the power of texts to shape the world and change their behaviour as a result, both in their purchasing behaviour and more active forms of resistance (Roccia and Iubini-Hampton 2021).

The second reason for analysing advertising is that it contains effective techniques that work on people's sense of who they are and the kind of society that they want to build. The power of these techniques is used overwhelmingly in contemporary society to promote the purchase of products, but the same techniques can be used in counter-type advertisements that promote health and care for the ecosystems that life depends on. The ecological activist and journalist, Ayana Young, describes how:

> [We need to see] what advertising uses: what does the dominant culture use to seduce us? And why are we not using those tools to seduce people in another direction? Can we look at what does work and actually utilize those tools with integrity, with love, with devotion for a greater good, and also be creative, make art, and have a fun time while doing it? (Young 2022)

At present, there are very few counter-type advertisements for Coke, and like the two discussed in this article they lack the subtlety and cinematic quality of commercial advertising. There is vast scope to do more, and this article has attempted to provide insights and tools to help with that task.

Drinks industries have vast budgets for advertising and invest in ever more creative advertisements, using narrative, poetics, and ethical statements to inspire people to consume ecologically damaging and unhealthy food and drink. Movements working towards health and environmental protection can critique advertisements, produce parallel parody advertisements and original advertisements of their own which make strong use of narrative and disembedded genres. The budget will never be anything like the budget of the big industries, of course. However, it is not necessary to compete advertisement for advertisement with the big industries since it may be possible to reach a tipping point, which has happened already for tobacco, where the damage caused by destructive industries becomes so widely known in the public imagination that governments act to regulate advertising of such products.

An advantage of counter-type advertising is that industry advertising can generate viewer cynicism, particularly when the advertisements are run by companies well known for their unethical behaviour and particularly when containing product placement. Counter-type advertisements, on the other hand, are more likely to be persuasive because there is no obvious ulterior motive of money-making when people are urged *not* to buy something. The issue of 'stake' therefore acts to the advantage of those whose motives are seen as genuinely benefiting the world rather than making a profit.

The aim of counter-type advertising is to encourage resistance of the discourse of advertising at various levels. The lowest level of resistance is just ceasing to buy the product. A higher level of resistance is for viewers of the counter-advertisements to encourage others to also stop buying the product. Even higher is encouraging governments to regulate the advertising and sales of the product (e.g. through minimum pricing and advertising bans). There is an even higher form of resistance, however, which consists of questioning an economic system which rewards corporations for the number of products that they sell rather than the good that they do society, and an advertising system that allows corporations to massively exaggerate the benefit that consumers will receive if they purchase the product.

Neoclassical economics, which forms the foundation of many economic systems around the world, is based on a theory of *utility*. The idea is that consumers will buy a product only if it provides them with something that they believe will improve their lives, otherwise they would not part with a scarce resource (money) to obtain it. A microeconomics textbook explains this as follows:

> A simple way of thinking about this is that **goods are good**. Goods, in being consumed, always provide some benefit to the consumer; more simply, more is always better. (Mochrie 2017: 66, emphasis in original)

However, advertising interferes with this system by attempting to convince consumers that they will receive far more utility from the product than they actually will. Perhaps on a hot day, the consumer might find 'refreshment', but they are unlikely to change their identity and become a different kind of person, or contribute to world peace through their purchase. People naturally have limits to the utility that they gain from purchasing more products than they need, but the advertisements try to overcome these natural limits by pushing for more and more consumption. Daly and Cobb (1994: 87) describe how:

> If nonsatiety were the natural state of human nature then aggressive want-stimulating advertising would not be necessary, nor would the barrage of novelty aimed at promoting dissatisfaction with last year's model. The system attempts to remake people to fit its own presuppositions. If people's wants are not naturally insatiable we must make them so, in order to keep the system going. (Daly and Cobb 1994: 87)

The 'problem' that is leading to excess consumption, ill health, and environmental destruction is not just the economic system, but an advertising system which makes that economic system fail even on its own terms (by invalidating its central assumption about utility). Advertising is therefore of central importance in ecolinguistics, both the analysis of specific techniques that advertisers use and more general critique about the place of advertising within an economic system that is leading the world on a path to ill health, obesity, and ecological collapse.

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