

MIRNA M. VIDAKOVIĆ
ZORA D. TRNINIĆ JANJIĆ¹
UNIVERSITY OF NOVI SAD
FACULTY OF ECONOMICS IN SUBOTICA

WEASEL CLAIMS IN ADVERTISEMENTS IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN

ABSTRACT. This paper investigates the use of weasel claims in advertisements in English and Serbian. Weasel claims represent a form of covert communication and are characterized by the use of deliberately vague and misleading language. In the advertising discourse, this linguistic device helps advertisers to deal with sensitive issues, overcome consumers' distrust and thus influence their behavior.

The research has been conducted on a corpus of 100 advertisements that belong to various categories, such as cars, cleaning products, cosmetics, drinks, food, etc., published in printed magazines and online sources from the year 2000 onwards. The aim of the analysis is to identify manifestations of weasel claims in the corpus, establish similarities and differences regarding their use in the given languages, and show how they influence the interpretation of the advertising message and create consumer behavioral patterns. Descriptive and contrastive analyses have been employed in the research. The study also draws on Grice's Cooperative Principle. The results will show that this deceptive tool is widespread in both languages and that its use in the advertising discourse in Serbian requires further research.

KEYWORDS: weasel claim, advertisement, cooperative principle.

¹ vidakovicm@ef.uns.ac.rs; zorat@ef.uns.ac.rs

Рад је примљен 4. новембра 2016, а прихваћен за објављивање на састанку Редакције Зборника одржаном 1. марта 2017.

INTRODUCTION

Advertisements represent a form of public (addresses anonymous audience), one way communication about goods, services, causes, ideas, organizations, etc., which is carried out through means such as telephone, newspapers, magazines, radio, the Internet, etc., and whose objective is “to change the thinking pattern (or buying behavior) of the recipient, so that he or she is persuaded to take the action desired by the advertiser” (Advertisement, n.d., Vestergaard and Schroder, 1985, pp. 10, 13–14). In an attempt to attract a wide range of consumers and influence their buying behavior, advertisers employ a variety of linguistic strategies. A commonly used strategy is covert communication, which means that advertisers often choose to convey their communicative intention without revealing the informative one. According to Tanaka (1994, p. ix), “the distinction between the informative intention, the intention to inform the audience of something, and the communicative intention, that is, the intention to reveal this informative intention, is crucial in accounting for covert communication”. In addition to influencing consumers’ buying behavior, covert communication enables advertisers to deal with sensitive issues while “avoiding taking responsibility for the social consequences of certain implications arising from advertisements” (Tanaka, 1994, p. 42). This linguistic strategy clearly violates the Cooperative Principle that is generally assumed to govern communication (Grice, 1975; Yule, 1996). The Cooperative Principle, defined by Grice (1975, p. 45), states the following: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”. This means that there is a generally accepted unstated assumption among the participants in interaction that their talk exchange is based on truthful, clear and relevant utterances (Yule, 1996, p. 37). In Tanaka’s (1994, p. 21) opinion, Grice formulated this principle in order “to make the important claim that the speaker tries to meet certain standards in communication, and that the hearer uses these standards in deriving what the speaker intends to communicate”. Advertisers exploit this principle in order to influence consumers’ interpretation of advertising messages and accomplish their goals i.e. sell a product or a service.

This paper investigates the use of weasel claims as a form of covert communication in advertisements in English and Serbian. The first part offers the theoretical framework, i.e. definition and description of this phenomenon based on contemporary dictionaries of English language, and literature that deals with advertising language and covert communication (Larson, 2012; Myers, 1994; Rudinow and Barry, 2008; Schrank, 1988; Tanaka, 1994, etc.). The second part presents the results of the research that has been conducted on a corpus of 100 advertisements in English and Serbian, taken from printed and online sources, with the aim of illustrating various manifestations of weasel claims in the given languages and the ways in which they create consumer behavioral patterns. Finally, the paper briefly looks into the application of Grice's Cooperative Principle in advertisements from the corpus, with the aim of gaining more insight into the process of interpreting weasel claims.

WEASEL CLAIMS: DEFINITION AND ORIGIN

Both *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005) and *Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1994) define weasel words or claims as a form of deliberately vague, ambiguous, or misleading speech. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1993) and *Collins English Dictionary* (1994) also provide information regarding their usage. According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1993), weasel words "reduce the force of what one is saying" and are "used when one wishes to avoid committing oneself to a definite statement", while *Collins English Dictionary* (1994) states that such words or statements are employed when a person wants "to avoid answering a question clearly or to make someone believe something that is not true". Schrank (1988) observes that weasel words initially "appear substantial", but upon closer look, they "disintegrate into hollow meaninglessness". They frequently occur in written or spoken discourse characterized by persuasive nature, such as advertisements and political speeches.

The deceptive character of weasel claims is based on an addressee's inference that stems from his/her expectations associated with the conveyed message. Rudinow and Barry (2008, p. 317) state that when the addressee hears or reads a message that contains a weasel word, he/she tends to ignore it and focuses only on the claim. For example, a lexeme *help*, one of the most frequently used

weasel words in advertisements, is often found in phrases such as “*helps stop, helps prevent, helps fight, helps overcome, helps you feel, helps you look*”, i.e. advertised products *help keep us young, help prevent cavities, help keep our houses germ-free* and the like (Rudinow & Barry, 2008, p. 317). The lexeme *help* means *aid, assist* (Rudinow & Barry, 2008, p. 317), and does not guarantee that the statement is true. However, the recipients of a message interpret *helps stop* as *stop* and *helps prevent* as *prevent*. This interpretation actually represents the desired result. Therefore, as Rudinow and Barry (2008, p. 317) point out, “once *help* is used to quantify a claim, almost anything can be said after it”.

Another frequently employed weasel word is *virtually* as in the slogan *For virtually spotless dishes nothing beats Cascade*. Although *virtually* means *almost*, recipients of the message tend to infer the meaning that the product leaves the dishes spotless. According to Larson (2012, p. 436), “if the product truly did the job it promises to do, the word *virtually* would be irrelevant”.

Myers (1994, pp. 67–68), who investigated vague language in advertisements, says that it is “worth distinguishing” ambiguity “from another indeterminate use of meaning, in which no definite meanings can be pinned down”, and which is found in the use of words such as “quality, excellence, style, incomparable” and the like. He (1994, p. 68) notices that such lexemes are particularly common in advertisements for luxury goods and services. Schrank (1988), on the other hand, associates them with advertisements for parity products and concludes that “since no one superior product exists, advertising is used to create the illusion of superiority”. Therefore, it might be noted that weasel claims are widespread in the advertising discourse in general, which will also be confirmed by the research that follows.

As far as the origin of the term is concerned, various sources suggest its relation to a weasel’s habit to suck out the content of the egg, without seemingly breaking the shell (Collins English Dictionary, 1994; Rudinow & Barry, 2008; Schrank, 1988; Weasel Word, n.d.; Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1994). However, such weasel behavior has not been confirmed by scientists (Weasel Word, n.d.).

According to The Phrase Finder (Weasel Words, n.d.), some of Shakespeare’s plays contain evidence which indicates that such belief existed in the past – in Henry V (1598) Shakespeare wrote: *The weazel Scot Comes sneaking, and so sucks the princely egg*, and As You Like It (1600), contains the following line: *I can suck melancholy out of a song, as a weazel sucks eggs*.

The first recorded use of the term *weasel word* dates back to 1900, when it appeared in the article titled “Stained Glass Political Platform” by Stewart Chaplin, which was published in *The Century Illustrated Magazine* (Weasel Word, n.d.; Weasel Words, n.d.).

THE RESEARCH: AIM AND METHODOLOGY

The research conducted in this paper is based on a corpus of 100 advertisements in English and Serbian that belong to the following categories: cars, cleaning products, cosmetic products, drinks, food, etc., and that have been used in various printed and online sources from the year 2000 onwards. The advertisements in Serbian have been taken from magazines such as *Esquire*, *Gloria IN*, *Harper’s Bazar*, *Lisa*, *Men’s Health* and a video-sharing website *You Tube*, while the advertisements in English have been found in magazines such as *Glamour*, *Seventeen*, the website *Ads of the World*, which represents a huge database of advertisements from all over the world, and *You Tube*. As far as the corpus in Serbian is concerned, it needs to be mentioned that the advertisements which refer to foreign products or services often represent a translation that has sometimes undergone certain adaptations to a greater or lesser degree, while the advertisements for the domestic products and services represent the original messages. This observation needs to be taken into account in the research, because it might affect the results of the study.

The aim of the analysis is to illustrate various manifestations of weasel claims in both English and Serbian, compare their usage in the given languages, and show how they covertly influence consumers’ interpretation of a message and direct their behavior towards the advertisers’ desired outcome (i.e. the purchase of a product or a service). Therefore, descriptive and contrastive analyses have been employed in the research. The first method has been used to describe, categorize and interpret weasel claims, which can shed light on the ways this linguistic device creates consumer behavioral patterns. This part of the research is based on the descriptions and classifications offered in Larson (2012), Mallery (n.d.), Schrank (1988) and Vidaković (2008). It also briefly addresses Grice’s Cooperative Principle (1975) with the aim of giving deeper insight into the interpretation of the advertising messages. Contrastive analysis has been

used to draw similarities and/or differences with regard to the use of weasel claims in English and Serbian.

THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

A very frequent manifestation of weasel claims comes in a form of unspecified comparison, where the element that should serve as a basis for comparison is left out. For example, when consumers read the slogan *Ford has a better idea*, they do not know which other product the advertised car is being compared to, and therefore cannot measure the extent to which a certain feature has been improved, i.e. one cannot measure *better*, if the starting point i.e. *good* is not identified or defined. Making comparison requires the existence of a reference point which, in this case, is omitted, and the resulting statement is not as informative as it should be. This phenomenon is illustrated by the examples taken from the corpus in English (examples 1– 8) and Serbian (examples 9–16).

- 1) *Skin looks younger, healthier, more radiant*. (Glamour)
- 2) *Uplifting Results. Younger eyes in an instant*. (Glamour)
- 3) *Stand out with a brighter, bolder designer smile*. (Glamour)
- 4) *Rosier color. Creamier feel*. (Glamour)
- 5) *For healthier looking skin*. (Glamour)
- 6) *See brighter, smoother skin in just one week*. (Glamour)
- 7) *Bigger. More powerful and ready for action*.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOImUeM36DA>)

- 8) *Fast just got faster*. (Ads of the World)
- 9) *Jače delovanje na bore i čvrstinu kože u mesec dana*. (Gloria IN)
- 10) *Colgate Max White for Men. Za belje i sjajnije zube*. (Men's Health)
- 11) *Vozite dalje. Živite bolje*. (Men's Health)
- 12) *Mekana Lunarlon pena koja se nalazi u međudonu učiniće da svaki tvoj kontakt sa podlogom bude mekši i stabilniji*. (Esquire)
- 13) *Muzika nikada nije bolje zvučala*. (Esquire)
- 14) *Vode ovih karakteristika imaju bitnu ulogu u prevenciji i očuvanju zdravlja. One omogućavaju bolju hidrataciju organizma, na taj način se naše*

telo alkalizuje i neutrališe negativne produkte metabolizma. (Lepota i zdravlje)

15) DIS. Platićeš manje.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wljynm_-6Y)

16) Traje 3x duže nego što ste očekivali.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HzbgKS0d4Q>)

The underlined examples show that unspecified comparison is used to reinforce the meaning of a message, i.e. to add the component of superiority to an advertised product. For example, the use of adjectives *rosier* and *creamier* in *Rosier color. Creamier feel.* implies the improvement in colour and feel of the advertised makeup, while *further* and *better* in the advertisement *Vozite dalje. Živite bolje.* (Eng. *Drive further. Live better.*) suggest that the Renault servicing and maintenance office helps drivers enhance their driving experience and thus improve their lives. General expectation regarding the use of comparative forms in advertisements (which require a basis for comparison and imply the change for the better), as well as the background knowledge (consumers know that advertisers cannot compare their products or services to the competitive ones explicitly) may eventually lead the consumers to think that the advertised product (makeup) is a better choice compared to products of the same category offered by other brands, while the consumers' decision to have their car checked or serviced in the servicing and maintenance center is desirable, because it would not make sense to decline an offer that promises a better driving and living experience. However, at the same time, these messages are vague because there is no reference point which would inform the consumers of the extent to which the improvement has been or will be made (i.e. we cannot measure the improvement suggested by *rosier*, *creamier*, *further* and *better*) or which brand the given product is compared to so that the difference and benefits are made obvious. This phenomenon actually corresponds to the definition of weasel claims as a device used by communicators (advertisers in this case) to avoid committing themselves to making definite statements (Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1993).

Schrank (1988) observes that "the only time *better* can be used is when a product does indeed have superiority over other products in its category or when *better* is used to compare the product with some-

thing other than competing brands. An orange juice could therefore claim to be *better than a vitamin pill*, or even *the better breakfast drink*". He (1988) also highlights a specific use of the superlative form *best*. In his opinion, *best* should be interpreted as *equal to* in advertisements, i.e. "*best* means that the product is as good as the other superior products in its category". Therefore, the use of this superlative form in the advertisements *Braid gives you the best protection at home and on-the-go.* (Seventeen); *Najbolji izbor za vaše dete.* (Eng. *The best choice for your child.*) (Lepota i zdravlje); *Najbolje rešenje za vaš pod.* (Eng. *The best solution for your floor.*) (Lepota i zdravlje) does not necessarily guarantee that the advertised products are the best in their own category. This is particularly the case when the superlative form is accompanied by a hedging device, which "indicates that what we are saying may not be totally accurate" (Yule, 1996, p. 38). For example, in the advertisement *Perhaps it's not that strange that probably the best air purifier in the world was created here* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=he0Kxis_Z2Q&t=55s), the claim of superiority has been explicitly weakened by the hedge *probably*.

Weasel claims are frequently manifested through the use of numbers in a prepositional phrase. Such use of weasel claims can be detected in the following examples taken from the sources in English (examples 1–6) and Serbian (examples 7–10).

- 1) *Starting at \$22,500.* (Glamour)
- 2) *Mightiest protection for even the skin tightest. Up to 100% leak-free periods.* (Glamour)
- 3) *Brighten, whiten, freshen, and save up to 30% per load.* (Glamour)
- 4) *World's only body wash with fragrance touch technology. Touch your skin to release fine fragrance for up to 12 hours.* (Glamour)
- 5) *Olay Total Effects fights 7 signs of aging. Reviving skin to look up to 10 years younger in 4 weeks.* (Glamour)
- 6) *The Tiguan. From only \$ 24,999.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Z2q9o0kcaA>)

- 7) *Pružite vašoj koži kvalitetnu negu i obezbedite joj svežinu i vitalnost u toku 24h.* (Lisa)
- 8) *Banca Intesa: Do 48% niža kamata na revolving. Odloženo plaćanje do 45 dana bez kamate.* (Gloria IN)
- 9) *Super kaša sadrži i do 75% lako rastvorljivih ovsenih pahuljica.* (Lepota i zdravlje)

10) *Do 3x brže čišćenje masnoće.*

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnyvIG13MtQ)

The numbers accompanied by a preposition in the examples above convey a vague idea of the actual benefit associated with the use of the advertised product or service. For example, the phrases *up to 100%* and *do 75%* (Eng. *up to 75%*) refer to any value between 0% and the stated percentage point (i.e. 100% and 75% respectively). Also, *starting at* and *from just* followed by a number (i.e. price) express an indefinite price range. Furthermore, *u toku 24 sata* (Eng. *during 24 hours*) does not explicitly mean all day.

However, consumers initially tend to read these claims in such a way so as to reach the best possible interpretation, i.e. *up to 100%* is probably interpreted as close to 100% or even 100%, which, however, is rarely true. Such interpretation actually reflects their expectations.

In addition to the above mentioned examples, the same effect is achieved by the use of lexemes and phrases such as *more*, *over*, *as much as*, *as little as*, *under*, *less than*, etc. in English (Albrighton, 2010), or *više od*, *preko*, *samo* and the like in Serbian. According to Albrighton (2010), depending on the lexeme or expression used to provide a vague numerical range, people will either overestimate or underestimate the value or quantity. Albrighton (2010) even gives an example in which the combined use of *up to* and *more* suggests a benefit that exceeds consumers' expectations, as in *Save up to £50 or more!* However, upon closer analysis, this message is clearly a nonsensical claim, because *up to* and *more* exclude each other semantically.

Weasel words also comprise verbs and nouns such as *help*, *attack*, *fight* and the like, which suggest proactive aspect of products. i.e. the advertised products seem to offer effective solutions to consumers' problems. This is illustrated by the examples taken from the sources in English (examples 1–3) and Serbian (examples 4–7).

- 1) *Olay Total Effects fights 7 signs of aging.* (Glamour)
- 2) *Baking Soda plus Oxi Clean stainfighters. A powerful 2-in-1 laundry detergent.* (Glamour)
- 3) *[...] made from carefully selected oats that can help lower cholesterol.*

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKagAiiWRT0)

- 4) *Vichy Liftactive Supreme objedinjuje [RAMNOZU 5%] i [DAY-PROOF KOMPLEKS] za borbu protiv pojave znakova starenja, pogotovu onih koji se javljaju uveče.* (Gloria IN)
- 5) *Izuzetna nega sa dva patenta pomaže u borbi protiv znakova starenja kože.* (Lepota i zdravlje)
- 6) *Pruža podršku imunom sistemu i štiti od alergena [...] kao pomoć kod virusnih prehlada i kijavice alergijskog porekla.* (Lisa)
- 7) *Verujte snazi Q10 plus bisernih perli u borbi protiv bora.* (Harper's Bazar)

Lexemes such as *fight*, *fighter* and *help* in the corpus in English, and *podrška* (Eng. *support*) and *borba* (Eng. *fight*) in the corpus in Serbian are, in Mallery's (n.d.) opinion, "powerful and assertive words" that convey the "impression of effectiveness", though they actually reduce the force of the claim. For example, when consumers encounter a verb *fight* in *Olay Total Effects fights 7 signs of aging*, or *podrška* in *Pruža podršku imunom sistemu*. (Eng. *Provides support to the immune system.*), they tend to interpret *fights 7 signs of aging* as *stops 7 signs of aging* and *provides support to the immune system* as *builds immune system*. Such interpretations represent the desired result. However, the lexemes *fight* and *support* do not guarantee success. Furthermore, in the example [...] *carefully selected oats that can help lower cholesterol*, the verb *help* tends to be ignored by consumers in the process of interpretation, i.e. they only focus on the concrete result – *lower cholesterol*, although this verb, as Mallery (n.d.) points out "takes the meaning away from the rest of the claim". The modal verb *can* even further weakens the claim, because it actually conveys the meaning that the product may not necessarily help lower cholesterol. Therefore, the lexemes such as listed above represent weasel words – they are misleading, i.e. covertly direct consumers' inferential processes so that their interpretation reflects the advertisers' intended meaning and not the actual meaning of the content.

Cases where the use of specific lexemes or phrases creates an illusion of a desired result are also found in the following advertisements in English (examples 1–6) and Serbian (examples 7–9).

- 1) *Skin looks younger, healthier, more radiant.* (Glamour)
- 2) [...] *Plus, every one of them leaves lips looking and feeling healthy and beautiful.* (Glamour)

- 3) *The professional strength formula, developed with Dr. Murad's proprietary surface-filling and firming technologies, instantly lifts, firms and reduces the appearance of lines and wrinkles.* (Glamour)
- 4) *Dove advanced hair series: Beyond repair, hair that feels 100% regenerated.* (Glamour)
- 5) *It's designed for gorgeous results: a double dose of nature and science that reduces the appearance of stress and aging, all while reviving tired skin.* (Glamour)
- 6) *For healthier looking skin.* (Glamour)
- 7) *Bogata nega sa wow efektom! 100% bogata nega. 0% osećaja masnoće. Za lice i telo.* (Lisa)
- 8) *Efekat liftinga tokom celog dana.* (Gloria IN)
- 9) *Flyknit materijal bez šavova nalazi se sa gornje strane patike i ima ulogu da pruži osećaj podrške i komfora stopalu.* (Esquire)

All the examples above imply that the advertised products bring about a visible, genuine change. However, when a product *reduces the appearance of lines and wrinkles*, it does not actually eliminate them. Furthermore, when the advertisement claims that there is *0% of greasy feeling*, it does not mean that the skin is free of grease. The message accentuates the feel of greaseless skin, not the exact state.

Generally speaking, lexemes such as *look, feel and appearance* in the corpus in English and *efekat* (Eng. *effect*) and *osećaj* (Eng. *feeling*) in the corpus in Serbian tend to be omitted from the interpretation of the message by consumers, who focus on the concrete, desired results instead. In other words, *reduces the appearance of lines and wrinkles* is interpreted as *reduces lines and wrinkles*, *hair that feels 100% regenerated* as *hair that is 100% regenerated*, and *pruža osećaj podrške* (Eng. *promotes the feeling of support*) as *promotes support*. The analysis of the examples from the corpus shows that this deceptive tool is particularly common in advertisements for cosmetic products.

Weasel words are also found among adjectives and adverbs whose meaning is vague, as in the examples taken from the corpus in English (examples 1–5) and Serbian (examples 6–18).

- 1) *Super-volumized, super-extended, red carpet lashes.* (Glamour)
- 2) *Mightiest protection for even the skin tightest.* (Glamour)
- 3) *Visibly repairs 2 years of damage.* (Glamour)
- 4) *Give your hair voluminizing boost it needs!* (Glamour)

- 5) *The all-new 2016 Chevrolet Malibu features expressive styling that is sure to take you by surprise. Premium lines and a precisely sculpted exterior designed for exceptional aerodynamics unveil a presence that's truly unexpected.* (Glamour)
- 6) *Priušтите sebi PREMIUM uslugu za razumnu cenu.* (Lepota i zdravlje)
- 7) *Magnezijum doprinosi normalnoj funkciji mišića. Voda vašeg srca.* (Lepota i zdravlje)
- 8) *Prolećni vitaminski detox tretman. Obnavlja ćelije kože, vidljivo povećava elastičnost i čvrstoću, snažno podiže nivo hidratacije.* (Lepota i zdravlje)
- 9) *Za samo dve nedelje: bore na čelu, oko nosa i usana se značajno smanjuju.* (Gloria IN)
- 10) *Ubrzano obnavljanje kože iz dana u dan.* (Gloria IN)
- 11) *Osvežena i bistra.* (Men's Health)
- 12) *Ekskluzivna dvostruko asimetrična četkica za savršen rezultat.* (Harper's Bazar)
- 13) *Nova tekstura. Sveža i lagana.* (Harper's Bazar)
- 14) *Posebna. Prirodna.*
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ky7JA4Iz-uo>)
- 15) *Pričaj skoro besplatno o svemu i svakome. 99,99% popusta na razgovore s omiljenom osobom! Izaberi osobu i odmah aktiviraj broj po odličnoj ceni.*
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HKPFLF6Pjus>)
- 16) *Chipsos Mnogos Dobros!*
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA9XgLdi15I>)
- 17) *Kap Fairyja i toliko mnogo čistih sudova.*
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-2K_ROoCRE)
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HzbgKS0d4Q>)
- 18) *Gust i koncentrovan. Traje neverovatno dugo.*
(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-2K_ROoCRE)

The underlined examples show how certain adjectives and adverbs reinforce the meaning of the advertising message, i.e. they seem to enhance the improvement produced by the advertised product (visibly repairs, snažno podiže hidrataciju (Eng. increasingly hy-

drates), *ubrzano obnavlja* (Eng. *rapidly renews*), *značajno smanjuje* (Eng. *significantly reduces*), *vidljivo povećava* (Eng. *visibly enhances*) etc.), suggest its superiority (*expressive styling*, *mightiest protection*) or just state the benefit without emphasizing it semantically as in the previous examples (*razumna cena* (Eng. *reasonable price*), *skoro besplatno* (Eng. *almost free of charge*), etc.). However, the meaning of the adjectives and adverbs in the examples above is vague in a sense that it does not specify how noticeable *visible repair* is or to what extent *značajno smanjenje* (Eng. *considerable reduction*) changes i.e. improves the current situation. The same can be said for the adjectives such as *exceptional*, *osvežena* (Eng. *refreshed*), *posebna* (Eng. *special*) and the like, whose meaning cannot be determined precisely either.

Finally, it needs to be mentioned that advertisements rarely contain only one weasel element. Sometimes the advertising message represents a set of weasel claims, as can be seen in the following example: *It's designed for gorgeous results: a double dose of nature and science that reduces the appearance of stress and aging, all while reviving tired skin* (Glamour). All the underlined elements are either vague (we do not know the exact amount of *double dose*, how *gorgeous* and *tired skin* are defined, or what *nature* and *science* actually refer to) or create an illusion that the product induces a real change (*reduces the appearance of stress and aging*). In other words, advertisers have produced an impression of excellence, superiority and actual benefits which, upon closer examination, are all superficial, insubstantial.

GRICE'S COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND INTERPRETATION OF ADVERTISING MESSAGES

It has already been stated that participants in interaction normally assume that the speakers' utterances are straightforward, relevant and clear, i.e. that they adhere to the Cooperative Principle (the term has been defined in the introduction). This principle can be explained more precisely through the following maxims:

- Maxim of quantity: 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange), 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required,
- Maxim of quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true. 1. Do not say what you believe to be false, 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence,

- Maxim of relation: Be relevant,
- Maxim of manner: Be perspicuous: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression, 2. Avoid ambiguity, 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity), 4. Be orderly. (Grice, 1975, pp. 44–46)

However, there are situations when speakers fail to observe this principle, i.e. the maxims. The failure to fulfil the maxims can take different forms. According to Grice (1975, p. 49), speakers may violate a maxim “quietly and unostentatiously”, opt it out i.e. say or indicate that they do not want to be “cooperative in the way a maxim requires”, (e.g. when a speaker says *My lips are sealed*), flout it, i.e. “blatantly fail to fulfill it” or there may be a clash, which means that a speaker cannot observe one maxim without failing to fulfil another one (e.g. the speaker knows that the fulfilment of the maxim of quantity will lead to the violation of the maxim of quality). Grice (1975, pp. 44–49) also points out that it is flouting of a maxim that creates a conversational implicature, i.e. additional meaning of an utterance that arises in a discourse. He refers to this phenomenon as an exploitation of a maxim.

Weasel claims represent a form of covert communication that does not fulfil the maxims that comprise the Cooperative Principle. However, it is the reliance on this principle that enables recipients of an advertising message to recognize such failure and interpret the message accordingly. This paper will present just a short illustration of how consumers apply the Cooperative Principle to reach the intended interpretation of advertising messages and provide reasons that might lie behind the advertisers’ infringement of the maxims.

Advertising messages frequently flout the maxims of quantity, quality and manner. As far as the maxim of relation is concerned, having in mind that the advertising space is expensive, the advertisers will probably observe this maxim, i.e. be very careful about the content they choose to include in the advertisement. The analysis of the corpus has shown that weasel claims mostly infringe the maxims of quantity and manner.

The maxim of quantity is, for example, flouted by the use of unspecified comparison, as in *Fast just got faster.* (Ads of the World), *Za belje i sjajnije zube.* (Eng. *For whiter, brighter teeth.*) (Men’s Health), where the basis for comparison is left out, and therefore the advertising message is less informative than is required. During the interpretation of the messages, consumers assume that the advertis-

ers have observed the Cooperative Principle, and their expectation regarding the use of comparative forms as well as their awareness of the context (advertising) and background knowledge (consumers know that advertisers cannot compare their products to the competitive ones explicitly) will lead them to search for additional meaning, and eventually they will reach the interpretation in which the advertised products are better than the products belonging to the same category offered by competitive brands.

The failure to observe the maxim of manner is reflected through the use of insufficiently specified numerical expressions, as in *Brighten, whiten, freshen, and save up to 30% per load*. (Glamour), *Odloženo plaćanje do 45 dana bez kamate*. (Eng. *Deferred payment of up to 45 days without interest*.) (Gloria IN), and adjectives and adverbs whose meaning is vague, as in *Super-volumized, super-extended, red carpet lashes*. (Glamour), *Give your hair voluminizing boost*. (Glamour), *Priušтите sebi PREMIUM uslugu za razumnu cenu*. (Eng. *Treat yourself with a PREMIUM service at a reasonable price*.) (Lepota i zdravlje), *Gust i koncentrovan. Traje neverovatno dugo*. (Eng. *Thick and concentrated. Lasts incredibly long*.) (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u-2K_ROoCRE). In these examples the advertisers have failed to observe the part of the maxim of manner that refers to the avoidance of the obscurity of expression. Grice (1975, p. 57) explains this phenomenon by the following observation: “the speaker has failed to be specific in a way in which he might have been expected to be specific, with the consequence that it is likely to be assumed that he is not in a position to be specific”. In other words, the advertisers want their consumers to reach an interpretation that will influence their buying behavior and vague expressions, as used in the examples above, enable them to achieve this goal. More precise utterances and statements would probably not result in the expected outcome or would otherwise infringe the maxim of quality. For example, *up to 30%* in *Save up to 30% per load* (Glamour) refers to any value between 0% and 30%, so hypothetically speaking, the product could in reality save 2%. On the one hand, such result violates consumers’ expectations, but on the other hand, the use of *up to* with the percentage point ensures that the maxim of quality is observed. The claim saying *Saves 2% per load* would not be persuasive enough for consumers to buy the product, while claiming that the product *saves 30% per load* (having in mind that it actually saves 2%) would be violation of the maxim of quality, which would probably lead to the withdrawal of the advertisement. For example, there was a dispute with regard to the Cheerios’ state-

ment concerning its role in the reduction of cholesterol and the treatment of heart disease, which was brought up by FDA a few years ago ("FDA Warns Cheerios on Health Claims," 2009). Although, generally speaking, such warnings issued by FDA are not legally binding, the lack of response might lead to "enforcement action" ("Warning Letter," 2009).

Adjectives and adverbs whose meaning is vague also flout the maxim of manner. For example, if the recipients of a message take into account that the advertisers have observed the maxims of relevance and quality in *Priuštite sebi PREMIUM uslugu za razumnu cenu.* (Eng. *Treat yourself with a PREMIUM service at a reasonable price.*) (Lepota i zdravlje), they will assume that there must be a reason why the adjective *reasonable* has been used. Vestergaard and Schroder (1985, p. 27) say that "the good-reason principle will often lead us to expect that if a specific claim is made for a product, this must be because the product differs from competitors in this respect". Therefore, the adjective *reasonable* actually creates an implication that the same or similar service offered by other brands is probably not sold at such reasonable price, i.e. it is more expensive.

CONCLUSION This paper has investigated the use of weasel claims as a form of covert communication in the advertisements in English and Serbian. The analysis of the corpus has shown that this phenomenon is widespread in the advertising discourse of both languages. However, it has to be taken into account that most of the advertised products and services from the corpus in Serbian are of foreign origin, which means that the advertising messages have probably been translated, and therefore, the linguistic devices used to manipulate consumers have been transferred into the target language. Yet, the study has shown that similar or same tools are used in advertisements for Serbian products as well (e.g. *Chipsos. Mnogos dobros; Muzika nikada nije bolje zvučala; DIS. Platićeš manje; Posebna. Prirodna.*). This area, however, requires further research.

Concerning the manifestation of weasel claims in advertisements in English and Serbian, the analysis of the corpus has shown the following: weasel claims come in a form of inexplicit comparison, where the element that should serve as a basis for comparison is omitted (e.g. *Traje tri puta duže nego što ste očekivali.* (Eng. *Lasts three times longer than you expect.*)), vague numerical expressions, which lead the recipients of a message to either overestimate or underestimate a certain quantity or value (e.g. *Brighten, whiten, freshen, and save up to 30% per*

load), and lexemes which create an impression that the real action and change are taking place (e.g. *Olay Total Effects fights 7 signs of aging*), or whose meaning is indeterminate (e.g. *Posebna. Prirodna*. (Eng. *Special. Natural*). Weasel claims are a clear example of how advertisers violate the Cooperative Principle defined by Grice (1975). They particularly flout the maxims of quantity and manner, and thus create implications which influence consumers' interpretation of advertising messages and, eventually, their buying behaviour. However, weasel claims represent an acceptable and legal way of communicating in the advertising discourse because they do not represent false claims.

The fact that weasel claims have been used for decades and are still widespread in advertisements suggests that they are an effective form of covert communication which enables advertisers to influence consumer buying behaviour and thus achieve their goal, i.e. sell a product or a service. The results of this study may have significant theoretical and practical implications regarding the investigation of deceptive linguistic techniques found in various types of discourse that employ covert communication, such as media discourse. The research may also raise the readers' awareness about the covert communication in advertisements and highlight the importance of critical approach towards interpreting advertising messages.

REFERENCES

- Advertisement. (n.d.). Retrieved April 16, 2016, from <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/advertisement-ad.html>.
- Albrington, T. (2010). How to Use Weasel Words to Bend the Truth. Retrieved from <http://www.abccopywriting.com/2010/01/25/weasel-words-bend-the-truth>.
- Crowther, J. (Ed.). (1993). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Encyclopedic Dictionary* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FDA Warns Cheerios on Health Claims. (2009, May 13). *CNN Money*. Retrieved from: http://money.cnn.com/2009/05/13/news/companies/General_Mills_FDA/index.htm?postversion=2009051310 (16th May 2016).
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and Conversation. In: P. Cole., J. L. Morgan (Eds.). *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts* (pp. 41–58). New York: Academic Press.
- Larson, Ch. U. (2012). *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility* (13th ed.). Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Mallery, K. (n.d.). An Analysis of Language Manipulation in Advertising. Retrieved from: <https://malleryk.wordpress.com/writing-portfolio/academic-writing-sample/>.

- Myers, G. (1994). *Words in Ads*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Rudinow, J., & Barry, V. E. (2008). *Invitation to Critical Thinking*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Schrank, J. (1988). The Language of Advertising Claims. Retrieved from: <http://home.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/comp/ad-claims.html>.
- Sinclair, J. (Ed.) (1994). *Collins English Dictionary*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Soanes, C., & Stevenson, C. A. (Eds.). (2005). *Oxford Dictionary of English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tanaka, K. (1994). *Advertising Language: A Pragmatic Approach to Advertisements in Britain and Japan*. London: Routledge.
- Thomas, J. (1995). *Meaning in Interaction: An Introduction to Pragmatics*. Harlow: Longman.
- Vestergaard, T., & Schroder, K. (1985). *The Language of Advertising*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Vidaković, M. (2008). *Reklamni slogani na engleskom jeziku i njihovo prevođenje na srpski*. Magistarski rad. Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet.
- Warning Letter. (2009, May 9). U.S. Drug and Food Administration. Retrieved from: [http://www.fda.gov/ICECI/EnforcementActions/Warn ingLetters/ucm162943.htm](http://www.fda.gov/ICECI/EnforcementActions/Warn_ingLetters/ucm162943.htm).
- Weasel Word. (n.d.) Retrieved from: <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.
- Weasel Words. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/weasel-words.html>.
- Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1994). New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers.
- Yule, G. (1996). *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

SOURCES

- Ads of the World. Retrieved from: <http://adsoftheworld.com/>.
- Esquire. April 2016. Serbian edition.
- Glamour. March 2016.
- Gloria IN. October 2015. № 58.
- Gloria IN. January/February 2016. № 61.
- Harper's Bazar. March 2015. № 006.
- Lepota i zdravlje. April 2016. № 182.
- Lisa. April 2016.

Men's Health. April 2016.

Seventeen. April 2016.

You Tube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/>.

МИРНА М. ВИДАКОВИЋ
 ЗОРА Д. ТРНИНИЋ ЈАЊИЋ
 УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У НОВОМ САДУ
 ЕКОНОМСКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ У СУБОТИЦИ

РЕЗИМЕ

 ВЕРБАЛНИ МАМЦИ У РЕКЛАМНИМ ОГЛАСИМА
 НА ЕНГЛЕСКОМ И СРПСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ

Овај рад се бави употребом вербалних мамаца (термин је преузет из Видаковић, 2008) у рекламним огласима на енглеском и српском језику. Корпус се састоји од сто огласа који припадају категоријама аутомобила, козметичких производа, производа за чишћење, хране, пића и сл., а објављивани су у периоду од 2000. до 2016. године у разним штампаним часописима и онлајн изворима. Циљ истраживања је да се утврде облици манифестације ове појаве у рекламама на енглеском и српском језику, укаже на сличности и разлике у њиховој употреби у датим језицима, као и да се прикаже на који начин вербални мамци утичу на тумачење рекламне поруке и понашање потрошача у погледу њихових одлука у вези са куповином производа и услуга. Током истраживања коришћене су дескриптивна и контрастивна анализа. Дескриптивна анализа је употребљена с циљем описивања и тумачења предмета истраживања, док су се кроз контрастивну анализу настојале утврдити сличности, односно разлике у погледу употребе вербалних мамаца у корпусу на енглеском и српском језику. У анализи корпуса примењен је и Грајсов Принцип кооперативности како би се стекао дубљи увид у начине тумачења рекламних порука.

Вербални мамци представљају нејасне тврдње употребљене са циљем да обману примаоца поруке, тј. да га наведу да исказ протумачи на начин који је намеравао од стране пошиљаоца поруке, при чему се та интерпретација у мањој или већој мери разликује од стварног значења исказа. Њихова употреба је један од видова прикривене комуникације, која се, уопштено говорећи, користи како би оглашивачи придобили пажњу потрошача и избегли „преузимање одговорности за друштвене последице услед одређених импликација које произлазе из рекламних огласа” (Видаковић, 2008, стр. 95, према Танака, 1994, стр. 42).

Анализа корпуса показала је да се вербални мамци јављају у облику непотпуног поређења, нумеричких израза и појединачних речи чије значење у одређеном контексту не може преци-

зно да се протумачи. Њиховом употребом рекламни производи и услуге делују примамљивије и супериорно (тј. ефикасније, квалитетније итд.) у односу на оне конкурентне. Према томе, вербални мамци наводе потрошаче да рекламну поруку протумаче у складу са намером оглашивача, те на тај начин утичу на креирање одређених потрошачких образаца. Утицај на интерпретацију рекламних огласа и понашање потрошача сагледано је и кроз примену Грајсовог Принципа кооперативности. Том приликом дат је увид у кршење конверзационих максима од стране оглашивача, али је такође приказано на који начин потрошачи препознају и тумаче импликације, тј. додатно значење рекламних порука које настаје као резултат тог кршења. Током анализе уочено је да у рекламним огласима најчешће долази до кршења максиме информативности и максиме јасности.

Поређењем употребе вербалних мамаца у рекламним огласима на енглеском и српском језику уочене су сличности. Међутим, ваља скренути пажњу на то да често огласи на српском језику представљају превод рекламне поруке са страног језика, при чему је дошло и до преношења аспекта прикривене комуникације. Па ипак, и у рекламама за домаће производе сусрећемо слична лингвистичка средства, те је ову област неопходно подробније истражити.

Кључне речи: вербални мамац, рекламни оглас, кооперативни принцип.



Овај чланак је објављен и дистрибуира се под лиценцом Creative Commons

Ауторство-Некомерцијално Међународна 4.0 (CC BY-NC 4.0 | <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

This paper is published and distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial International 4.0 licence (CC BY-NC 4.0 | <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>).

