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Dancing on the edge of truth: A study of weight-loss advertising and implication

Karen Ann Smith

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DANCING ON THE EDGE OF TRUTH:
A STUDY OF WEIGHT-LOSS ADVERTISING AND IMPLICATION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Karen Ann Smith
March 1997
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March 1997
Approved by:

Rong Chen, Chair, English
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Date
2-12-97
ABSTRACT

Research Problem. Advertisers use many strategies to create their advertisements. One of those strategies is the use of implication, that is, saying something indirectly. Advertisers are relying more often on implication to avoid prosecution for possible deception. It is the intent, therefore, of this study to focus on the creation and use of implication in the genre of weight-loss advertising. The principle questions addressed in this inquiry are: 1) Do advertisers use implication? 2) If advertisers use implication, how are they creating it? and 3) Why might advertisers rely on implication? In order to provide a theoretical foundation for this research, I used a model of conversational expectations formulated by H. P. Grice (1975). He devised the theory of the Cooperative Principle which states that all communication is a cooperative endeavor.

Method. The Cooperative Principle is built upon four maxims: 1) be informative, 2) be truthful, 3) be relevant, and 4) be perspicuous. When a speaker/writer openly violates one of these maxims he alerts the addressee that a meaning other than the one uttered was intended. That is, the speaker created a conversational implicature. In this study, I investigate 50 weight-loss advertisements. I grouped these advertising claims according to Grice's maxims they violate. Under each category, I discussed the possible reasons why the advertisers choose to not abide by the maxims.
Findings and Conclusions. After examining the data, I found that these weight-loss advertisers routinely violate the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. Grice noted speakers/writers use implication partly because the speaker can always cancel the implied meaning. This cancellability seems to be the primary motivation for the use of implication in these advertisements. If readers believe the implied claims and becomes dissatisfied with the product's performance, the advertisers can always reply that the readers misunderstood the implied message. Because these advertisements do not alert the readers that they are not abiding by the Cooperative Principle, they can be considered to have created possibly misleading and/or deceptive advertising.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The phrase "dancing on the edge of truth" found in the opening of the title of this study and the concluding words of this study are a quote from Malcolm D. MacDougall, 1977 (cited in Bolinger, D., 1980, p. 105).

I gratefully acknowledge the support and assistance given to me by my thesis committee. The insightful critique and guidance offered by Dr. Rong Chen, Dr. Sung-Heh Hyon, and Dr. Wendy Smith helped me to focus and improve my analytical and writing skills and added to the quality of this thesis.

In particular, I want to especially thank Dr. Wendy Smith for all the years she has acted as my advisor, teacher and friend. She was my teacher for many of the classes I took in the program and I learned much from her. But above all, I want to thank her for the valuable lessons she has taught me in friendship and loyalty.

I also want to thank my parents, George E. Smith and Laura J. Smith for all the many years of quiet and unwavering encouragement and support. I am particularly indebted to my "fourth reader," my husband, Dr. Phillip A. Minor. His advice provided the needed perspective of a reader outside my discipline, and he got my words going again when they would not come readily to me. His loving support and patience helped me achieve my goal.

And so I would like to conclude my academic career as I began it many years ago at my parochial school by putting on this work what I did on each and every assignment +J.M.J.+ Jesus, Mary, Joseph.
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"Burns Away More Fat Each 24 Hours Than If You Ran 14 Miles A Day!"

"What a truly remarkable claim," I thought to myself as I flipped through the Sunday newspaper's coupon supplement. I felt I should know that the claim was remarkable since I had completed four marathons, and I knew what running fourteen miles a day can do and what it will not do. So if a weight-loss product manufacturer could come up with a product that would burn off that much fat each day, then I thought, this was the miracle product of the century.

My curiosity was aroused. Were there other weight-loss products that claimed such weight-reduction wonders? And so I began to look at other weight-loss product advertisements. "Fat Fighting Breakthrough!" Could this be what I and every other weight-conscious American was looking for? I looked further. "I Lost 40 Pounds in 32 Days! (and ate what I wanted!)" This was getting better all the time. Eat and lose, who wouldn't like that. Finally one advertising claim seemed to bring me to the brink of happiness: "Barbara and Gwen chose Cybergenics for their weight loss and appearance goals and have lived their dreams".

But something in my mind said: "Wait! These things cannot be." I have been a foot soldier in the battle of the bulge for the better part of my life. Like millions of others, I had bought into the American emphasis on a thin, slender body. I came to believe my self-worth was somehow connected to my body weight. "Our society is
obsessed with excessive weight....Many people who are at or below their ideal weight are fearful of being or looking fat and are fighting a constant battle to eat less than they desire" (Brownell and Steen, 1987, p. 127). Grunwald (1995) states that "almost half of all Americans think they need to lose weight. A third actually do" (p. 58).

Grodner (1992) cites a study of five American magazines covering the years from 1950-1983. The study indicated that there was an increase in magazine articles concerning weight loss and in diet product advertisements. Grodner says these articles and advertisements promoted "dieting and thinness...as a superior way to achieve female ideals" (p. 208). Because dieting has been so idealized in contemporary American society, the diet industry has become a $30 billion a year industry (Grunwald, 1995).

**Sensible Weight Loss**

It has been my personal experience that to lose weight one must reduce the body's caloric intake and involve oneself in a regular, moderately vigorous exercise program. "The most reasonable means to losing weight seems to be in a comprehensive program that integrates information on nutrition, exercise, life-style changes, and psychological factors" (Brownell and Steen, 1987, p. 137).

I also know from personal experience that diet drinks, diet candies and gum, diet food supplements, diet cookies and fad diets do not provide reliable means of weight loss. "Most fad diets are nutritionally inadequate, scientifically unsound, expensive, and potentially dangerous. Nutritionally, the best diet still is to eat a
variety of foods drawn from the basic food groups. Any diet that ventures far from
this premise should be regarded with skepticism" (Brownell and Steen, 1987, p. 129).
In the face of the growing body of literature cautioning against fad diets, there
nonetheless continues to exists a plethora of products and gimmicks aimed at those
who desire to lose weight.

Advertising

Manufacturers keep on creating weight-loss products which they claim fulfill
the needs of the weight-loss conscious population. However, what must these
manufacturers do to make the public aware of their product? They must advertise.

But what exactly is an advertisement? An advertisement can be a word-of-
mouth comment, a sandwich board or a 30-minute informercial. All advertising
promotes the sale of a product, service or ideas. Advertising is a "verbal/non-verbal,
public, one-way communication" and "exists in a particular communication
situation,...has texture, and...communicates meaning" (Vestergaard and Schroder, 1985,
p. 14). According to Vestergaard and Schroder (1985) there are three participants in
the communication situation of advertising: the advertisers, the product and the
prospective buyer.

Smith (1988) argues that advertising is a form of propaganda because it is a
"conscious and open attempt to influence the beliefs of an individual or group" and
that advertising, like propaganda, is "guided by a predetermined end and characterized
by the systematic use of irrational and often unethical techniques of persuasion"
Kennamer (1988) suggests that "advertising may be the most visible 'propaganda' in the United States" (p. 139).

Advertising exists, therefore, when people have a product or service that they wish to make known to others. Advertisers hope that by means of advertising, their particular audience will become aware of their product and buy the product or make use of the service, or the acceptance of their ideas. Advertising, then, is communication designed to influence behavior or alter beliefs.

But advertising can go beyond informing the public of a service or product. Advertising can create a need or demand for something which did not exist before (Leiser, 1979). Often advertising tries to link the product or service not so much with a real need but as the means to another end. "Advertising...does not try to tell us that we need its products as such, but rather that the products can help us obtain something else which we do feel that we need" (Vestergaard and Schroder, 1985, p. 29). Some of the tasks of the advertiser, according to Lund (1947:83, cited in Vestergaard and Schroder) must be to:

1. attract attention
2. arouse interest
3. stimulate desire
4. create conviction
5. get action

Advertisers have many avenues of approach in achieving these goals. For example, they can use psychological, social, sexual, and emotional appeals to attract
attention. The ad may use visuals to stimulate and arouse interest. But ultimately the ad must rely on language to get the message across, even if it is only to make known the brand name. Shimp (1983) states that advertising language is like other language and "consists of words and sentences that combine to form claims or representations" (p. 197). Leech (1966) points out that advertising copywriters must use language that is concrete and matches up with the purpose of the ad, to sell a product or service.

In order to accomplish their advertising purposes, advertising writers routinely manipulate language to achieve their goal. Coleman (1983) reminds us that manipulation of language in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. Each one of us does it constantly to achieve our communicative aims. But Coleman also reminds us that advertising copywriters "have entire control of what is dealt with in their advertisements, and if they wish to avoid a subject, it is generally within their power not to bring it up at all." (1983, p.222)

Most advertisers need only to persuade the receivers to purchase the advertiser's product. For example, one running shoe basically does what any other running shoe does, whether it be a Rebok or a Nike shoe. Both brands of shoes cover the feet and afford the wearer a certain amount of foot protection and support. The differences are largely a matter of degree. Advertisers of weight-loss products, however, must do two things in any advertisement. The advertisement must: 1) persuade the ad's receiver that the product will actually do what it claims it does; and 2) persuade the receiver to purchase the weight-loss product. In order to accomplish these two goals, weight-loss advertisers create advertisements that suggest
that their products, in fact, cause weight loss and that their products are more effective in reducing weight than any other means.

Receivers of weight-loss advertisements are confronted with a quandary. Science tells them that weight loss is achieved by a gradual process of diet modification, exercise and life-style changes. But when confronted with weight-loss ads, the receivers seem to be offered a product that goes contrary to established methods of weight loss. These advertisements often seem to promise that with the use of their products, one can shed pounds easily and effortlessly. To establish in the receivers’ minds the belief that the weight-loss products are effective, these advertisers may at time use indirectness or inference in their advertising copy to communicate their claims of quick and easy weight loss. In other words, they may imply claims which they do not wish to make directly.

Therefore, it is the intent of this study to focus on the creation and use of implication in weight-loss advertisements. This study thereby hopes to provide a better understanding of what the advertisers are doing when they use implication to establish their claims of product effectiveness. In other words, I hope to provide some insights into the question: “How can the weight-loss advertisers say what they appear to be saying in these weight-loss product ads?” The following questions will be addressed:

**Research Questions**

1. Does this genre of advertising use implication?
2. If this genre of advertising does use implication, how are the advertisers creating implication?

3. Why might these particular advertisers rely on implication?

In order to answer these questions, I have chosen to use the conversational model formulated by H. P. Grice (1975) to be detailed in the next chapter. For Grice's theory has been believed to be a valuable analytical tool because "it explains how discourses are able to endow an interchange with meaning that goes beyond literal content" (Riley, 1993 p. 181). While Grice in his study used the term implicature to describe meanings that go "beyond literal content," I will throughout this study use as a synonym the term implications to mean what Grice terms implicature.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of Grice's Cooperative Principle and the reasons why speakers/writers may choose to violate the maxims. It concludes with a discussion of relevant literature on advertising and implication. Chapter 3 presents the methodology used in this study, and Chapter 4 offers an analysis of the findings and a discussion of the findings on weight-loss advertising and implication. It is hoped that this study will provide some insight into the workings of implication in advertising and how it can be manipulated to achieve the advertisers' goals.
Since its inception in 1914, the Federal Trade Commission has been very successful in “attacking...deceptive claims” (Preston, 1994, p. 36-37). The FTC has practically eliminated blatantly false advertising that existed previous to the formation of the FTC. Preston (1994) claims that since advertisers can no longer rely on outright deceptive claims, they have begun to resort to other linguistic means to convey their message. “They...began falsifying indirectly with implied content” because with implication “the falsity that lurks in the implication is difficult to detect” (Preston, 1994, p. 37). Shimp (1983) says that because of regulation by the FTC “there has been a reduction in the amount of ‘hard data’ in ads and a trend toward the use of nebulous, evasive, and subjective claims” (p. 195). Advertisers create these nebulous claims through “careful semantic selection,” which “can convey information far beyond what appears on the surface as the ‘literal meaning’ of an advertisement” (Coleman, 1983, p. 224).

Since this study will be examining the use of implication and the reasons for its use in weight loss advertising, three areas of literature were reviewed which would address the following questions: 1) What is implication and how is it created?

2) What are the reasons communicators, in verbal or written discourse, use implication?

3) How do advertisers use implication?
Grice's Theory of Implicature

How is it that we humans are able to communicate our meanings even when we do not say exactly what we mean? Linguistic study offers an explanation of how speakers, and by extension writers, are able to convey meanings that go beyond the literal or surface meaning of their utterance. Riley (1993) suggests that "linguistic theory can help analysts to understand both the "how" and the "why" of the use of implication and indirectness. Linguistics can identify " these strategies and the sociolinguistic forces that lead to their use" (Riley, 1993, p. 194).

The philosopher H. P. Grice (1975), in his seminal work *Logic and Conversation*, noted that conversations are not just random utterances without connection between thoughts. Rather there are unstated behavioral norms or expectations in conversations. Both the speaker and the addressee are aware of a commonality of purpose or direction. These conversational expectations Grice termed the "Cooperative Principle: "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" (1975, p. 45).

Grice formulated four "maxims" under the Cooperative Principle. If participants in a conversation adhere to these maxims, then their conversational efforts will "yield results in accordance with the Cooperative Principle" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). The four maxims are:
Quantity: (Be informative and give the right amount of information)

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (Do not say too little)

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Do not say too much)

Quality: (Be honest)

1. Do not say what you believe to be false. (Do not tell lies)

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation: (Make your contribution relevant)

Manner: Be perspicuous (Be easily understood)

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief.

4. Be orderly.

While we are aware of and follow the Cooperative Principle, we routinely violate its maxims. Yet in spite of the fact that we violate these maxims, we are still able to communicate our meaning to our hearer. Participants in a conversation may fail to fulfill a maxim in several ways.

1. Speakers may quietly violate a maxim. In this situation, a speaker may possibly mislead the hearer.

2. Speakers may opt out from the operation of the maxim and the Cooperative Principle. By some means, the speaker indicates
to the addressee that he or she is no longer willing to cooperate.

3. Speakers may be faced by a clash between maxims. For example, a speaker may not be able to be as informative as is required without violating the maxim to have adequate evidence for what is said.

4. Speakers may flout a maxim. He or she may purposefully and blatantly fail to fulfill the maxim.

When speakers openly flout or violate these maxims they are alerting the addressee that they wish to convey a meaning different from the surface meaning of the utterance. Grice (1975) termed this discernment of unuttered meaning or reading between the lines “implicature.”

Conversational implicature is dependent on the context of the utterance. An example of conversational implicature might be:

A: “What do you want for Christmas?”
B: “My PC isn’t working.”

Here the implicature is that “I want a new personal computer for Christmas.”

However, the implicature might be different if the context is changed.

A: “I need this term paper typed.”
B: “My PC isn’t working.”

In the second example the implicature is different, “I can’t type your term paper.”

The meaning derives not only from the conventional meaning of the words uttered, but also from the context of the utterance. A conversational implicature, according to Grice, must have the following features:
1. Cancellability. This allows the speaker to cancel the implicature by the addition of a clause that states or implies that the speaker is opting out of both the maxim and the Cooperative Principle. The utterance may also be cancelled if it is said in a context that makes it clear that the speaker is opting out.

2. Non-detachability. This means that the implied meaning cannot be detached if certain words are changed. The implicature has nothing to do with the linguistic structure; that is, in a given context the speaker can say an infinite number of things to produce the implicature he or she desires.

3. Calculability. The hearer must be capable of working out the implied meaning.

Finally, in order for an addressee to work out a conversational implicature, the addressee must know the following:

1. The literal meaning of the statement or utterance.
2. The Cooperative Principle and its maxims.
3. The context in which the statement is uttered.
4. The mutual knowledge of Nos. 1-3. These are shared by the speaker and hearer.

**Why Use Implicature?**

Grice’s theory of implicature provides a means of studying what exactly implicature is and how it is created. But the question remains: why would a
communicator, whether it be in verbal or written communication, choose to violate any of these maxims and run the risk of being misunderstood or not understood at all?

Some speakers may violate the maxims and create conversational implicature in politeness situations. Brown and Levinson (1978) claim that often speakers use implicature as a politeness strategy. "These Maxims define for us the basic set of assumptions underlying every talk exchange" (1978, p. 94-95). They assert that "the assumption of cooperative behaviour is actually hard to undermine: tokens of apparent uncooperative behaviour tend to get interpreted as in fact cooperative at a deeper level" (1978, p. 5). Speakers often violate the maxims in situations which call for politeness strategies—either positive politeness (expressions of solidarity), negative politeness (expressions of restraint), and going off-record (the avoidance of unequivocal impositions) (p. 5). Politeness for Brown and Levinson is "a major deviation from such rational efficiency" of fulfilling the conditions set forth by the maxims "and is communicated precisely by that deviation" (1978, p. 94). Brown and Levinson believe that addressees, when faced with a violation of a maxim, continue to assume that the maxims are still in operation. The addressees are "forced to do inferential work that establishes the underlying message and the (polite or other) source of the departure—in short, to find an implicature, i.e., an inference generated by precisely this assumption. (1987, p. 94-95).

Suggesting a different prospective from Brown and Levinson, Green (1987) proposes three reasons why a person would use conversational implicature instead of "just saying exactly what you mean" (p. 77). She suggests that implicature is used
because it is 1) quicker, 2) safer, and 3) more effective. Implicature is quicker, Green explains, because speakers can use five words in a half a second instead of using twenty-five words and taking two and a half seconds to say it. By being too prolix, the speaker may run the risk of losing the addressee's attention.

Implicature can be safer for the speaker because implicatures may be cancelled. If an addressee misinterprets the implicature of the utterance or takes offense at the implicature of the utterance, the speaker may cancel the implied meaning by claiming that the implication was not what he or she meant. Therefore the speaker cannot be held accountable "for committing herself to whatever a hearer infer MIGHT (or might not) have been inferred" (Green, 1987, p. 80). Green agrees with Brown and Levinson (1978) that implicature is safer since it may be used as a face saving strategy.

Finally, Green argues that speakers may use implicature because it can be more effective than saying something directly. At times, speakers and writers may use rhetorical figures of speech such as a metaphor. Green suggests when a speaker uses a rhetorical figure of speech, it takes the addressee more time to process the message—thus, creating a more permanent impression in the addressee's mind. "When a person works out an implicature, by expending whatever effort is required to do that, he has a stake in the interpretation he (re) constructs being the correct one. Narcissist that he is, having worked hard on it, he is inclined to accept it" (1987, p. 83). The implicature therefore "has a much better chance of making an impression on him than a 'plain language' message that he merely decodes" (1987, p. 83).
Chen (1993) offers three motivating principles for using conversational implicature. The three principles are: 1) the Politeness Principle, 2) the Self-Interest Principle, 3) the Expressiveness Principle. The Politeness Principle reinforces the theory of Brown and Levinson (1978) in calling attention to the fact that "politeness very often conditions what one says and/or how she says it in a particular situation" (Chen, 1993, p. 62).

The Self-Interest Principle declares that the needs of the speaker may determine what or how something is said. The speaker may wish to avoid "undesirable consequences" (p. 62). As Chen (1993) points out, language by its very nature commits the speakers to what they say. In any society "there are certain things that, if said, would produce undesirable consequences, regardless of whether that something is true or not. This at times prevents us from telling truth, saying what we actually think, or saying anything at all despite the fact that we are required to say something in that given situation" (Chen, 1993, p. 62).

When a speaker wishes to be more expressive with his or her language, he or she may violate a maxim--thus Chen's Expressiveness Principle. Expressiveness by means of implicature frees the speaker to indirectly express his or her emotions. By using implicature to express strong feelings, the speaker leaves "as much impact, psychological, aesthetic, or otherwise, as possible on the hearer" (Chen, 1993, p. 62-63).
Relevant Studies on Advertising and Implication

General Advertising Studies

Advertising is omnipresent in contemporary American society. It is a very expensive as well. Every word and punctuation mark costs money and carries enormous significance. Such a costly medium of communication has been the focus of various linguistic studies. Some studies, while not in themselves directly applicable to the study of advertising and implication, have given insight into the nature of advertising.

One technique common among advertising is the creation of incomplete comparisons. Sawyer and Howard (1991) conducted research on the effects of omitting conclusions in advertising. Their research tested the effects of the audience's level of involvement in an advertisement and whether the audience's level of involvement was greater with an open-ended advertisement (that is, one that does not have an explicit conclusion) or with a close-ended advertisement. They concluded that the advertising audience had a higher level of involvement with open-ended advertisements (incomplete comparisons) because the audience had to infer a conclusion rather than having one supplied by the text.

Addressing their study to the prospective advertising copywriter, Percy and Rossiter (1980) discuss the perception of message content. They examined vocabulary and sentence structures in order to understand how a receiver's "reasoning process mediates individual comprehension of those sentences into combinations of sentences" (p. 129). Specifically Percy and Rossiter discussed the impact of words and how
words are combined into sentences to give meaning to advertising communication. They alert the prospective copywriter to the problems of using semantic and syntactic ambiguity. If the message contains semantic or syntactic ambiguity, then the advertising's message may be misinterpreted or not understood at all. Percy and Rossiter also address the role that inference plays in communication and reminds the prospective copywriter that "the better one understands how a receiver draws an inference...from a message, the better one will be able to ensure that the desired message is communicated" (p. 152).

**Studies in Advertising and Words**

In spite of the admonitions of Percy and Rossiter (1980) to prospective ad copywriters to avoid ambiguity, advertising writers do not steer clear of the treacherous shores of semantic ambiguity. In fact, many authors have discussed how copywriters seem drawn to the use of ambiguity in their advertising texts. Pei (1973, 1978) vigorously denounces the semantic distortions created for advertising and product packaging. He claims that copywriters will resort to the use of ambiguous words in order to deceive or mislead the advertisement's audience.

Larson (1979) spoke of symbols as forming the "raw material of persuasion" and that words are "the central carriers of symbolic meaning" (p. 221). He stressed that an advertisement's audience must be aware of how clever writers of persuasive advertising messages are able to use words to suggest underlying meanings. In particular, Larson discussed "Weasel Words". Weasel words are words like "such as," "helps," "like," "virtually," "as much as," "stronger," "faster," and "better." These
words can suggest a lot of meaning and promise in the mind of the ad’s recipient, yet in reality these Weasel Words do not say much of anything. Larson argues that the ad copywriters know that these words are empty of concrete meaning and use these words because "they are loaded with escape hatches so they can promise without really giving" (p. 222).

Like Pei and Larson, Bolinger (1980) examined semantic ambiguity carried by words in advertising. Bolinger notes that advertisers use words with a double meaning, hoping that the ad’s audience will pick up on an underlying meaning. Advertisers, Bolinger declares, lean on the "crutch of literalism" to evade responsibility by using words and sentences "that purport to represent reality, but are skewed by some linguistic mismatch—a word with a double meaning or a construction that makes a false connection" (1980, p. 107). Unfortunately, as Bolinger notes, such reliance on ambiguity and the use of false connections can ultimately deceive the advertiser’s audience.

Studies on Advertising Claims

Larson (1979), Leiser (1979) and Schrank (1974) have all written on the use of claims in advertising. "The ‘claim’ is the verbal or print part of an ad that makes some claim of superiority for the product being advertised" (Schrank, 1974, p. 249).

Advertising claims do not directly address the subject of implication in advertising, but they do demonstrate some of the techniques used by advertising copywriters that might lead an advertisement’s receiver to infer an implied meaning. Each of the authors listed above have created categories of advertising claims. They based their
categorizations upon typical reoccurring claims. The authors, each working independently, have created categories for their claims. Some of the categories of advertising claims created include: The Vague or Hazy Claim, the Irrelevant Claim, the Unfinished Claim, the False Claim of Needs, and the Magic Claim. Like many of the researchers of the semantics of advertising English, Larson, Leiser and Schrank have attempted to alert the reader to the possibility of deception lying beneath the surface of claims.

Studies on Advertising and Evaluative Claims

Much of advertising today consists of evaluative, rather than objective claims. Evaluative claims are claims that cannot be objectively and tangibly verified. An example of an evaluative claim would be "Nike shoes make running seem like flying." There is no objective way such a claim can be verified. Although studies on evaluative advertising claims do not directly relate to the study of implication in advertising, such studies do, nonetheless, provide insights as to how receivers of advertising claims construct meaning from evaluative claims. Garfinkel (1983), and Shimp (1983) have studied evaluative claims in advertising.

In order to ascertain the truth in subjective advertising claims, Garfinkel (1983) conducted a content analysis of television commercials on breakfast foods and fast food restaurants. He found the information content of the two classes of television commercials "to be nonobjective to a very large extent" (1983, p. 188). Because of the absence of objectively verifiable information, Garfinkel warns that it becomes difficult to determine the truth of these commercials and concludes that "there is a
large amount of completely subjective advertising claims about which it cannot be said that they are either true or false; they cannot be measured in this way". (1983, p. 191).

Like Garfinkel (1983), Shimp (1983) investigated the subject of nonobjective claims in advertising and discussed how consumers can draw implicational meanings from evaluative statements. He notes that much of advertising text uses nonobjective, evaluative claims. Nonobjective, evaluative claims could be achieved through the use of words like: "super," "sexy," "better." Factual advertising content is different from evaluative content in both "terms of word choice, and more importantly, with regard to the perceptual task imposed upon receivers in order to obtain meaning" (Shimp, 1983, p. 198). In factual advertising claims, the claim represents something that is concrete and has a physical reality. "An Edsel gets 10 miles per gallon". However, in evaluative advertising, what is being represented in the claims is not a physical property of the product. Rather, these claims are "devoid of physical referents" (p. 198) and, therefore, inherently tenuous and ambiguous. The impact of an evaluative claim on the receiver comes about as the result of what is implied, not what is stated directly. Shimp concludes that evaluative claims are "believable because of pragmatic implication" (p. 201) and notes that advertisers are aware that consumers often draw implicational meanings from evaluative advertising claims.

Studies on Advertising and Implication

While Garfinkel (1983) and Shimp (1983) focused their studies on objective versus nonobjective, evaluative claims and found that implication may result from the use of evaluative claims, Preston (1994), Riley (1993) and Kennamer (1988) have
focused on other aspects of implication and advertising. Preston (1994) studied deception in advertising from a legal perspective. In his book he discusses implication and its potential for deception. While not coming from a linguistic perspective, Preston acknowledges that much of advertising's implications, particularly false advertising, is pragmatic, in that "consumers reasonably infer the claims from the context of the background of the ad" (p. 32). He explains how a false implication in an advertisement can begin. The advertiser starts with an explicit claim, such as, "An Edsel get 10 miles to the gallon." The consumer knows that the explicit claim is true. Because the consumer knows the truthfulness of the explicit claim, he or she may believe the additional claim whether it is true or not, "An Edsel makes driving fantastic." However, as Preston points out, "professionals don't waste their efforts saying things indirectly when they can legitimately say them directly" (1994, p. 39). Therefore, advertisers use the implicational process because, as Preston notes, the implicational claim has a stronger claim than the explicit claim. Since the implicational claim may have a stronger claim it is "more likely to appeal to consumer and thus create sales" (Preston, 1994, p. 39).

Discussing implicature and its ethical use in professional communication, Riley (1993) states that the context and the text can work together to create misleading communication, be it intentional or unintentional. Implicature can cause ethical problems because it creates "unstated meaning" (p. 179) which the writer of the text may, in fact, not have wished. Riley notes that an understanding of pragmatics, in particular, Grice's Cooperative Principle and its maxims, "may help analysts not just to
recognize, but to predict written patterns that are likely to create ethical problems" (p. 180).

Riley examined five types of professional communication, one of which was a warning information sheet placed in boxes of tampons. The warning discussed the possibility of toxic shock syndrome for its users. By applying Grice's maxims to the statements contained in the text of the warning information, Riley demonstrated that because of implicature the reader of this warning material might be confused or misled as to the safety of the product's use. The sociolinguistic forces which operate in business and other professional settings make implicature and indirectness the common "rhetorical strategies in sensitive situations" (p. 187). Because of these sociolinguistic forces, the professional writer must use these rhetorical strategies carefully so as to avoid unclear or misleading and possibly unethical professional communications.

Kennamer (1988), like Riley (1993) drew on Grice's work on conversational implicature to explore deception in advertising claims. He sought to relate advertising claims with the "expectations about the patterns of conversation" (p. 140). Specifically, Kennamer sought to explore the ways in which these conversational expectations "can be systematically manipulated by advertisers so that readers, hearers, or viewers of such ads may be deceived" (p. 140). Kennamer wanted to relate those conversational expectations to Grice's maxims and the creation of implicature. For instance, an incomplete comparison, such as "Ford makes a better truck" violates Grice's Maxim of Quantity because it omits the rest of the comparison. Therefore, the advertiser is not
being "as informative as is required." If the receiver of this ad were to make sense of its advertising claim, he or she must be provided with more information than is presented in the claim "Ford makes a better truck." Ford makes a better truck than who? Kennamer believes that as receivers of advertising messages, we are somewhat responsible for making inferences based on those messages. Nonetheless, he also believes that advertising copywriters must be held to some accountability because they are the creators and manipulators of our expectations in regards to the veracity and reliability of the advertising claims. Kennamer believes that such a manipulation of the conversational expectations "of the Cooperative Principle by a message sender, without the knowledge of the receiver, constitutes deception on the part of the sender" (1988, p. 148). Advertising for Kennamer is a form of powerful propaganda "because it takes advantage of systematic weaknesses in what are normally very functional processes of inference drawing, processes that serve us well in most circumstances of everyday life" (p. 148).
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Implication is an everyday means by which humans can infer meaning from incongruous words and actions. It is also a valuable technique for advertising copywriters. Implication can help copywriters create imaginative, interesting, and effective advertising. However, it should not be forgotten that the use of implication, may mislead or deceive the advertising audience. Therefore, it is the goal of this paper to examine three critical questions concerning advertising in the weight-loss industry: a) does the genre of weight-loss advertising use implication? b) how do the advertisers create implication? and c) why might these advertisers use implication as an advertising technique? It is my hypothesis that these weight-loss advertisers do use implication in order to create an image and belief in the minds of the readers that their products are highly effective. In addition, the data will demonstrate that these advertisers use implication because it allows the them to say indirectly that which might be unwise to say directly.

Research Questions

In order to address the issues raised in my hypothesis, I sought to answer the following questions.

1. Do these weight-loss advertisers use implication?
2. If these advertisers use implication, how are they creating implication?

3. If these advertisers use implication, why do they do it?

Subjects

Advertising, whether it be for cigarettes, gasoline or running shoes, can come in many forms--posters, television, billboards, radio, word of mouth, newspapers and magazines. For the purposes of this study, I selected weight-loss advertisements from magazines and newspapers. There are two reasons for this. First, it is easier to gather data on print advertising. Second, this medium of advertising relies more on text than other media, such as television, which relies heavily on pictures. Indeed, some of the selected advertising has no graphical images at all, which enabled me to concentrate on the use of language.

Fifty weight-loss advertisements were selected from popular magazines and newspapers--the kinds of magazines and newspapers to be found in supermarkets, bookstores or public libraries. It is not unusual for weight-loss advertisers to use the same advertisement for two years in a row. The fifty advertisements I chose were published from February 1994 through June 1995 and appeared to be fifty distinct advertisements.

The advertisements I selected ranged in size from 4.5" x 2.5" to 8.5" x 11." While I tried to select as many different brands as possible, some of the advertisements are for the same brand but with different texts. A weight-loss advertisement may also use the same text in several advertisements but use a different
pictorial layout in each. With the exception of one product, none of the products advertised in the selected ads had any brand-name recognition. In order to avoid conflicts with copyright laws or lawsuits, whenever I mention a product's name in this study, I will use the fictitious name--Trim-Me.

The weight loss products were not limited to only one type of product. The fifty ads I analyzed covered an array of different types of products, such as: chewing gums, several so-called weight loss plans or programs consisting of some "pills" (often consisting of vitamins combined with appetite suppressants), appetite suppressants, dietary food supplements (minerals or vitamins), teas, drinks (pre-mixed or powdered), food bars, a video with a food supplement and nutrition and an exercise guide, an ear plug, a book about "fat destroying" foods, an hypnosis audio tape, and some unidentified 30-day weight loss program. The costs of these different types of products ranged from $10.95 to $69.95. I excluded advertisements for exercise equipment because, while its advertising approach is similar to weight-loss advertising, I believe that exercise equipment advertising forms its own advertising genre.

Research Methods

Implication is "hidden." That is, implicational meaning lies below the surface meaning of the words, and the addressee of the utterance must discover the hidden meaning. In order to find and analyze implied meanings in weight-reduction advertisements, I believe it is necessary to understand how implicational meanings arise. H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle, with its maxims, offers an analytical model by which a researcher can analyze textual data in order to understand how implication
is made by a speaker or writer. The maxims establish categories which offer explanations for why a violation fails to meet some conversational expectation and how an addressee intuitively knows that some other meaning is being suggested. For instance, a speaker says what he or she knows is ambiguous—the utterance has two meanings. By providing some clue to the addressee, the speaker indicates to the addressee that the implied meaning is the intended meaning of the utterance.

Therefore, using Grice's maxims, I created nine categories in which a claim might violate a conversational expectation. The nine subcategories are:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
3. Do not say what you believe to be false.
4. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
5. Be relevant.
6. Avoid obscurity of expression.
7. Avoid ambiguity.
8. Be brief.
9. Be orderly.

After establishing these nine categories, I examined each claim in each of the fifty advertisements. If a claim violated one of the maxim categories, I would put it in that category.

Here is an example of my approach to analyzing the advertisements. One of the ads I analyzed had this claim: "U. S. Govt. Scientists Announce New Wonder --
In normal conversation, the addressee of this utterance might next expect to be told the name of the government agency or scientist(s) who were responsible for announcing this “New Wonder.” The claim seems to imply that some scientist(s) with connections to a federal agency has/have announced a new and wonderful way to lose weight—in fact to “Shrink Away Fat!” However, the name of the “scientists” or government agency is never revealed. This claim has violated the maxim of Quantity—make your contribution as informative as is required. Readers, taking the next mental step, might infer from this claim, therefore, that the U.S. government scientists are reputable researchers and that this product is scientifically sound and effective in causing weight loss since “U. S. Govt. Scientists” announced the new wonder food. If the product is, indeed, scientifically sound, then the advertiser should be forthcoming with the names of the scientists, but it is not.

This approach of using Grice’s Cooperative Principle as an analytical model fulfilled the purpose of my study since it was not my goal to do a quantitative study with quantifiable statistical data. I believe the nature of the material, textual matter which always carries with it inherent ambiguity, lends itself better to a descriptive, qualitative study. However, this method was not without a problem. As Saddock (1991) noted, Grice’s maxims are so powerful in explaining conversational expectations that they sometimes vie with each other in explaining the same facts. The claims do not always reflect a violation of one and only one maxim. I found this to be true in the present study. For instance the advertising claim, “No Mahuang No
Ephedra" violated the maxim of manner--avoid obscurity of expression--and it also violated the maxim of quantity--make your contribution as informative as is required. No explanation of the terms were to be found anywhere in that particular advertisement, and a reader should be informed as to exactly what Mahuang and Ephedra are. Working with that knowledge and that limitation, if I found a claim with a violation of more than one of the maxim categories, I would put the claim in the category I felt had the strongest relationship to a particular violation.

In analyzing the reasons why an advertiser might wish to use implication, I relied on the categories established by Green (1987, 1989), Chen (1993), and Brown and Levinson (1978). The explanations were that implication can be used for self-interest, self-expression, economy/effectiveness and politeness. After all the data was analyzed, I examined the individual categories in order to offer reasons why the maxims might have been violated. For instance, one of the maxims of Quantity stipulates that one must "Make your contribution as information as is required" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). One of the advertisements proclaims, "Scientists have discovered how to give your diet a powerful boost." However, the advertiser never produces the name of these scientists who discovered the "powerful boost" and has not been as informative as he or she should be. The reader, believing the advertiser to be cooperative, may infer that the advertised product, therefore, is scientifically sound. The advertiser may be less informative than is necessary because the advertiser cannot provide scientific support for the ad's claim, and therefore, implication is safer.
In conclusion, I approached the examination of each claim from the perspective of a casual reader who might be interested in purchasing that particular product. I tried to ask the questions: What kinds of information would I need to make an informed purchasing decision? Would the claims meet my normal conversational expectations--would the ads be informative, would they be truthful, would they be clear? Although no method can answer every question, I believe my approach to this study gave me, the researcher, a preliminary understanding of the uses of implication and possible reasons for its usage in printed weight-loss advertisements.
The preceding chapters have shown that there is a shortage of in-depth analysis of advertising implication from a linguistic perspective. It is the purpose of this chapter to analyze and discuss the data, to address the research questions that have been posed in earlier chapters, and to draw conclusions based upon my analysis.

Research Questions

All of the data was approached from a linguistic perspective. In addition, I tried to keep in mind the questions a typical reader might ask: a) what is the product advertised, b) how does it work, and c) will it, in fact, do what it claims it will?

1. Do these weight-loss advertisers use implication?

Implication occurs often in conversation and in writing. “Implication is a fundamental aspect of information processing” (Shimp, 1983, p. 200). Since implication is such a fundamental part of how we gather information, it is not surprising that the advertising copywriters use implication. Analysis of the data revealed that these texts contain very little objective, verifiable data. The only objective statements consistently seen in these weight-loss advertisements were: a) the name of the product, b) information about the ingredients in the product, c) the price of the product, d) where the reader may purchase the product, and e) information that the results are “atypical” and that “individual results may vary.”
The rest of the information in the advertisements consists of nonobjective, evaluative claims to attract the buyers. Because of the subjective, and often ambiguous, nature of evaluative claims, readers may infer things that are not actually claimed in the texts. Being ambiguous, according to Grice, is a violation of the maxim of Manner--avoid ambiguity. When a speaker/writer is ambiguous, the addressee has to decide which of two meanings are intended. "Evaluative claims are inherently more ambiguous than factual claims; the receiver is required to make more choices in order for meaning to emerge" (Berdine, 1974; Foss, Bever, & Silver 1968, cited in Shimp, 1983, p. 198). Therefore, implication in an utterance may lead the receiver "to expect something neither explicitly stated nor necessarily (logically) implied in the sentence" (Harris & Monaco, 1978, pp. 2-3, cited in Shimp, 1983, p. 200). So, in the case of these weight-loss advertisements which use mostly nonobjective, evaluative claims, the casual reader may infer that the product will effect a speedy and lasting weight loss. However, I believe such an inference is most likely not warranted by a careful examination of these texts. On the contrary, I feel that the data show that weight-loss advertisers consistently use advertisements which create implicature in order to suggest conclusions to the readers which are not supported by facts.

2. If these advertisers use implication, how are they creating implication?

3. If these advertisers use implication, why do they do it?
The question of how implication is created is closely related to the question of why it might be used. Therefore, the answers to Question 2 and Question 3 will be addressed jointly in the sections below.

Use of false comparisons

One means of creating implication is to use false comparisons in the claims. While it was not the intention of this paper to study these false comparisons, nonetheless, there was a false comparison that was noteworthy. Several of these advertisements compared the effectiveness and safety of their product to starvation.

(1) "In fact clinical tests prove: Not even total starvation can slim down and firm you up this fast-this safely!"

(2) "...and most amazing, converts loose, bulging flab into trim, lean, muscle-firm flesh, just like you see on a cover girl...and does it faster than even total starvation!"

(3) "Yes, finally released to the public--a trial supply of medical science's clinically proven wonder-treatment for obesity that slims you down and firms you up even faster, safer and more effective than even total starvation!"

(4) "...step on your scale and almost refuse to believe the incredible amounts of pounds gone and inches gone in days, as Trim-Me slims you down and firms you up faster, safer, surer than even total starvation!"

Such claims sound convincing—a means of quick weight loss which is safer than total starvation. Starvation is indeed an effective and lasting means of weight loss. However, the advertisers are comparing two different things: their means of weight loss with a slow, painful death. The two are not remotely the same. Losing weight with a weight-loss product is not like death (it may only seem that way!)
Why use false comparisons? Most likely, these advertisers are relying on the casual reader to pass over the comparison of these two unlike things—death and starvation. Advertisers probably feel safe from the careful scrutiny of most readers. In addition, such a comparison, while faulty, is highly effective. It may leave in the readers' minds the impression of a product that will do what is says it will--cause weight loss. For one thing is assured with starvation, the victim of such a tortuous death does lose weight. If a reader of such an ad can be guaranteed such a weight loss and remain healthy, then the advertiser may have gained a consumer.

Violations of Grice's maxims

While these ads used logical errors to create implication, the majority of the advertisements analyzed used evaluative claims that violated normal conversational expectations as formulated by H. P. Grice in maxims which form the Cooperative Principle. For sake of illustration, I will discuss each element of Grice's maxims, how these advertisements violated the maxims, and then under each, discuss why the advertisers may have violated the maxims. In discussing the reasons why the advertisers may have violated the maxims, I will consider the factors which may have led the advertisers to violate the maxims, factors including the principles of politeness, expressiveness/effectiveness/, speed and safer/self-interest.

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.

The data revealed that these weight-loss advertisements typically violate this maxim in four ways: a) they use incomplete comparisons, b) they fail to explicitly identify scientific, governmental and/or educational institutions or persons in their
advertisements, c) they offer testimonials that fail to establish causal relationships between the individual’s weight loss and the use of the weight-loss product, and d) they fail to explicitly inform the reader as to how the product works to cause weight loss.

a) Use of incomplete comparisons. Incomplete comparisons (or open-ended messages) lead the readers to complete what is left unsaid. With no clear-cut conclusion, the audience of such a comparison “is more likely to generate its own thoughts and conclusions when exposed to an open-ended ad” (Kruglanski, 1980, cited in Sawyer & Howard, 1991, p. 467).

(5) “Nothing—no nothing—is as effective and safe.”

(6) “The Trim-Me Diet is the most effective fat loss program I’ve ever tried.”

(7) “With two new Garcinia formulas from Trim-Me, you can achieve faster, more dramatic weight loss without taking stimulants.”

These weight-loss claims do not give enough information because they do not finish the comparisons. As with addressees in a conversation, we as readers expect that we will be given enough information so as to understand what we are told in the written text. If a reader is making a cheese omelette, he or she presumes that the writer of the recipe will supply more information than “add cheese.” There are hundreds of kinds of cheeses, and the reader needs to know which is required for the recipe. And so it is with comparisons.

Readers need to know with what the product is being compared. For instance, in example (6) the Trim-Me Diet has been compared to other fat loss programs.
Because readers have not been told what other fat loss programs have been tried, they might infer that the person making this quote has tried every imaginable weight-loss program and found Trim-Me to be the best. Yet, the person in the quote may have tried only one other weight-loss program “the most effective fat loss program I've ever tried.” Or the person in the quote may have tried a multitude of programs. But the readers are never informed. The advertisement has not given enough information so as to allow the reader to gauge accurately the validity of the claim. Since the comparison is incomplete, readers may believe that by using these products they will have a slimmer body than the one they have now, or that the advertised product is a more effective means of weight loss than any other product. Yet, there may be no foundation for such a belief in the product's effectiveness. These advertisers have used incomplete comparisons to create implication, and by doing so, readers of these ads may draw a conclusion not supported by the facts.

Why use incomplete comparisons? Advertising copywriters are aware of two factors when they create claims that contain incomplete comparisons. First, copywriters know that receivers of their ads often bring an incomplete comparison to a conclusion. When advertisers omit information in the comparison, the readers must finish the comparison in order to create meaning. Advertisers, by using incomplete comparisons, imply that the advertised product is better, safer, cheaper than another product. Advertisers use this technique because it is effective. It is effective because of the human tendency to complete what is left incomplete. In other words,
incomplete comparisons may lead to implications not stated directly in the weight-loss claims.

The second thing copywriters are aware of is, should an advertiser claim that his/her product is better than another's, or the best, then the advertised product must be able to stand up under such a comparison. For in the world of the courts, 'better' (or a similar comparative) has been legally interpreted to be a comparative and therefore becomes a clear claim of superiority" (Schrank, 1974, p. 250). The only time "better" can be used, therefore, is when the product is actually superior to products in its category. However, "best" (or a similar superlative) in the legal world only means "equal to." Therefore, the copywriters are safe in using such a strategy. By leaving the comparison incomplete, they are not compelled to prove that their product is actually better than any other product or equal to any other product. In other words, the advertisers are compelled to prove nothing.

Finally, as Schrank (1974) notes, if a product is indeed superior to any other similar product, "the ad will say so very clearly and will offer some kind of convincing evidence of the superiority. If an ad hedges the least bit about a product's advantage over the competition you can strongly suspect it is not superior--maybe equal but not better" (p. 250).

b) Failure to identify scientific, governmental or educational institutions or persons. Time and again, these advertisements claim support for their products from scientists or established institutions. But the ads never clearly identify by name the person or institution. From such allusions, the reader might easily believe that these
weight-loss products have creditable support. But further reading of the advertisements shows that additional information is never forthcoming. No names are ever given, only vague references to some scientist, government agency or educational institution. If these products are claiming such support, then they should be willing to supply the reader with such valuable information.

(8) "Even more mind-boggling--based upon California Medical School research, this doctor's wonder-development burns away as much as 11 to 15 times more fat every 24 hours than even some of the most gruelling, exercise imaginable."

(9) "U. S. Govt. Scientists announce new wonder--food discovery that actually shrinks away fat!"

(10) "These results have been documented in clinical studies in the U.S., Great Britain and Australia."

*Why not provide names of the scientists or institutions?* When readers encounter such claims as "These results have been documented in clinical studies in the U.S., Great Britain and Australia" (10), they may believe that the product has been tested and verified by institutions in these countries. Here, the claims violate the readers' presumption that the writers will be as informative as is necessary, and thus an implication is created. Since the advertisers claim scientific and/or institutional endorsement, readers may presume that there have been "clinical studies in the U.S., Great Britain and Australia" (10). The advertisers, however, have not offered the names of these "clinical studies," but by implication, it may be assumed that the studies are legitimate and worthy of the readers' confidence. Readers, relying on such statements, may feel that the product is not some cheap gimmick but rather a product that has been tried and tested and given an institutional blessing.
Such a failure to provide names seems to suggest the possibility that the advertisers cannot produce the names of scientists or agencies. By leaving the implication that there is such endorsement for their products, the advertisers are providing themselves with a safe escape route. If no names are given, then the advertisers can never be pinned down regarding who the purported scientists or agencies are. Readers cannot directly contact those institutions if they are not provided with their names. Yet, it stands to reason that if these products had the scientific/agency backing they claim, the advertisers would provide names. If advertisers provide no names, they cannot be held accountable to disgruntled consumers. Once again, incomplete information is used effectively to imply that these products have institutional support. Yet, no facts exist in these advertisements to support such an implication.

c) Testimonials that fail to establish a causal relationship between the use of the product and weight loss. Many of the advertisements employ testimonials from putative users of their products. By offering such testimonials, the advertisements might lead the reader to suppose that the product worked for the person quoted in the testimonial, and, therefore, the product might also work for the reader.

Some of these testimonials never specifically mention the product's name, thereby leaving out important information in the testimonials. Since the advertisement is promoting one specific weight-loss product, the readers may infer that the weight-loss product advertised is the product used in the testimonial. Readers may further
conclude that the use of the product was responsible for the weight loss. But the testimonials never establish that the weight loss proclaimed in the testimonial was achieved by means of the product advertised because they never specifically supply readers with such vital information.

(11) "I got thinner than I ever thought I could and faster than I ever thought possible!" Charlene Meyer

(12) "I Lost 38 pounds fast! And no dieting!"

(13) "I lost 52 pounds with the most amazing diet discovery available today and it was free!" Christy Davis

In other testimonials, where the product is mentioned, the readers might presume a causal relationship. But as with the other testimonials, no such causal relationship exists. Words like "used," "started" or "tried" hint at usage of the product. However, such words do not clearly link the use of the product with the weight loss. The putative person in the testimonial may have, indeed, used the product, but the language never unmistakably establishes that the product advertised is the catalyst for the weight loss. The reader, again, needs more information such as: a) whether the product was used alone without any change in reduced-caloric diet or exercise regimen, b) whether the product was used in conjunction with a reduced-caloric diet and/or exercise regimen or c) whether was the weight loss was achieved by some other means—intestinal bypass, jaws wired shut, the use of barbiturates, or attendance at a weight-loss spa.

(14) "I continued to use Trim-Me and I continued to lose weight...52 pounds in only 10 weeks!"
"I believe I was a participant in every weight-reducing plan there ever was. I failed at all of them. Then, about two years ago, I started the Trim-Me Program. And I haven't regained a pound." Renate M.

The Trim-Me Diet is the most effective fat loss program I've ever tried. In just 3 months I lost 45 pounds and reduced my body fat by almost 50%. More incredibly, I've kept the weight off for over a year now."

Why use testimonials that fail to establish a causal link? Such testimonials sound impressive and the "results" may be enough to induce an overweight reader to give the product a try. But these testimonials do not specifically mention the product's name in association with the weight loss, "I lost 52 pounds with the most amazing diet discovery available today and it was free!" (13) Neither do these advertising claims directly claim that their products were solely responsible for the person's weight loss. "I continued to use Trim-Me and I continued to lose weight...52 pounds in only 10 weeks!" (14) Advertisers may hope that the readers might fill in the missing information and associate the advertised product with the lost weight in these testimonials. If so, then the advertisers would have succeeded in creating an implication about the weight-loss potential of their product, an implication which may inspire their readers to purchase the product.

It may be of no importance to someone who sorely wants to lose weight that the advertiser failed to clearly show in these testimonials that the product was solely responsible for such weight losses. Testimonials can have great appeal especially when they make claims like, "I lost 38 pounds fast! And no dieting!" (12). The benefit of this type advertising claim is that it can have sales appeal to readers while never having established that the product was the causative agent for the weight loss.
Not only are these testimonials appealing, but they also provide the advertisers a means of protecting themselves from disgruntled consumers and the regulatory agencies. Because they never clearly establish a causal link between the product and the weight losses, the advertisers, if confronted, may claim that the fault was on the part of the readers, not the advertisers, for no such clear claims had ever been established. Again, if their products were directly responsible for the weight losses claimed in these testimonials, the advertisers would loudly proclaim it.

d) Failure to explain how the product works. A casual reading of the ads would leave the readers with the impression that they had been somehow informed as to how the weight-loss product works. Closer scrutiny of the advertisements reveals that no factual information has been supplied to the readers. The advertisements make passing references to how the product works, but never specifically and/or in detail give the readers information regarding how the product effects weight loss. All the reader is left with is the impression that the product does what is claimed.

Example (17) states, “Trim-Me’s Fat Control targets the body’s fat storage at the cellular level.” Such a statement sounds informative, but exactly how does “Fat Control” know how to target cellular fat? The advertisement never explains. The reader needs to be told in nontechnical terms specifically how these products cause weight loss.

(17) “Trim-Me Fat Control targets the body’s fat storage at the cellular level. As a result, fat calories are burned for optimal weight loss.” (18)

(18) “This powerful combination helps reduce appetite, suppress food intake and stimulate the body’s metabolism without the use of harsh chemicals or stimulants.”
(19) “Trim-Me’s doctor-recommended nutrients help your body burn calories for wholesome energy.”

Why not explain how the product works? While these statements about the products seem to be informative, they are not. A claim such as Example (17) seems to provide readers with an explanation of how this product works to reduce weight. Readers may infer that because the product “targets the body’s fat storage at the cellular level,” the advertised product will provide an “optimal weight loss.” Yet, the advertisement never specifically addresses the issue of how the product “targets fat storage at the cellular level” or how that assures that “fat calories are burned.” But the implication is that the mere targeting of fat at the cellular level will burn away fat more effectively than any other method.

The readers have been given the most minimal of information. They may suppose that the advertisers are giving them all the information that is required in order to explain how the products work. Relying on that supposition, readers may look no further and purchase the product based solely on these less-than-informative statements and the implications such minimal statements create.

In their defense, advertisers could claim that the general reader may not understand detailed, technical explanations. A claim of this type may have some validity. Yet, advertisers can provide readers with more information as to how the “doctor recommended nutrients” (19) help their body burn calories. Explanations do not necessarily have to be technical to be valid and intelligible. The readers should be supplied with enough information as to how the product works to enable them to make informed purchasing decisions. Such a lack of information may well suggest
that the advertised products do not do exactly what the claims state. By making only perfunctory remarks on how the products cause weight loss, the advertisers may protect themselves from an invalidation of their claims, while at the same time implying that their claims of product effectiveness are factual.

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The data showed that these advertisements typically violated this maxim in two ways: a) unnecessary information about the ingredients is given, and b) background or historical information about the product is given.

a) Unnecessary information about the ingredients is given. Weight-loss advertisers seem to be disposed to giving the readers unnecessary information about product ingredients. While it may be beneficial to the readers to know about the ingredients contained in the product, especially about potentially harmful chemicals, much of the information supplied is of the vaguest kind—"made from selected Oriental herbs and leaves" (22).

(20) "Trim-Me is the only source of HCA certified for guaranteed potency and quality."

(21) "The Plan incorporates Beta P.E.A., the natural "feel good" compound found in foods such as chocolate to keep you energized while dieting."

(22) "Trim-Me Tea is a 100% natural product made from selected from Oriental herbs and leaves from a blend developed by the venerable Chinese herbalist Li Se-Zhen (1508-1593)."

(23) "There are other benefits too...There are no amphetamines. No drugs of any kind. No pills. No powders. No chalky-tasting drinks to mix...It's low in sodium, so you don't hold water."
Why give unnecessary information about ingredients? Offering such non-vital information can act as a distraction to the reader. When we, as readers, encounter these texts, we anticipate that what is contained in the ad is information that is necessary to us as potential consumers. Claims like "The Plan incorporates Beta P. E. A., the 'feel good' compound found in foods such as chocolate to keep you energized while dieting" (21), seem to offer readers explanations about the product. However, such claims do not give the readers the all-important information of how the product works. That a diet plan incorporates "Beta P.E.A., the "natural 'feel good' compound" may be of passing interest, but the advertiser never explains exactly what "Beta P.E.A." is, nor does the advertiser explain how a "feel good compound" affects weight loss. Advertising claims like the ones above create implication in that they lead readers to assume that these properties have some important connection with causing weight loss.

Yet, unnecessary information about ingredients may have little or no direct bearing on the issue of weight loss. By using such advertising tactics, the advertisers are acting in their own self-interests. They establish with the readers an image of openness about the product and what it contains or is made of. No consumer wants to do business with a manufacturer who is reticent about their product. When readers see such statements about product ingredients, they might infer that the advertisers have given them vital information about the weight-loss product. Such seeming openness about a product may encourage sales. When the advertisers provide unnecessary information about the product's ingredients, the advertisers divert the readers' attention
away from the fact that they have been given little objective information that bears directly on how the products bring about weight loss.

b) Background or historical information about the product is given. Often these advertisements include information that does not directly relate to the efficacy of the product or to the topic of how the product works. Example (24) informs the reader that HCA has been studied for more than twenty years. However, the advertisers never explain how this 20-year study of HCA has anything to do with causing a person to lose weight. Example (25) tells readers that Marq Prince used the advertised product and lost seven pounds in six weeks. The advertising copywriters fail to show how the product caused Mr. Prince's weight loss. Since Mr. Prince is a runner/triathlete, his weight loss may, indeed, have been caused by his exercise regimen or the "program" which accompanies the Trim-Me bar.

(24) "HCA has been the subject of more than 20 years of study."

(25) "Marq Prince, runner/triathlete, switched to the Trim-Me bar and program and lost 7 pounds of body fat in six weeks."

(26) "Traditionally used by the Chinese as a beverage to purify the body, aid digestion and remove fat. It promotes good health and is safe to use."

(27) "This is the first-time it's been available outside of a clinical setting. Dr. Cooper has asked Trim-Me Press, Inc. to distribute it."

Background or historical information, while it may be of passing interest to a reader, nevertheless is superfluous. Contrary to reader expectations that they not be besieged with unnecessary information, the advertisers have done nothing more than include claims which have little value to the readers. They may hope to establish with
the readers that somehow such information is a crucial part of the product. Yet what the readers really need is to be told specifically what the product is and to be given detailed information as to how the product causes weight loss.

*Why give unnecessary background or historical product information?*

By giving unnecessary background or historical information, the advertisers appear to be informative, despite the fact that they are only providing information of little value. Since readers may rely on the writers to provide only necessary information in these advertisements, they might therefore follow the advertisers' implication and conclude that such information provides important data on the product. Yet, this information is nothing more than window dressing. It may sound impressive, but that is all it is, impressive sounding words. Such unnecessary information provides a covering behind which the advertisers may hide the fact that they have not given the readers the information they need to know.

3. *Do not say what you believe to be false.*

To know what another believes to be true or false is never an easy proposition, especially when the other is an anonymous copywriter. Because of this problem of knowing another's mind, it was difficult to clearly discern what the copywriter believed to be false. There were some claims, though, that strongly suggested that what was written was in fact false. They were claims which appeared to promise things which cannot easily or ever be obtained. For instance, example (28) proclaims that "This device is all you'll ever need, ever, to control your weight and get rid of the
flab." Studies show that up to 95 percent of those who lose weight gain it back (Grunwald, 1995). If this is indeed true, and my own personal experience has shown it to be true for me, then it seems unlikely that this advertisement can clearly state the the advertised weight-loss product “is all you’ll ever need, ever...” [my emphasis]. The claim seems extremely dubious in the light of weight-loss studies on recidivism.

Example (30) promises a "happier you" and Example (32) seems to proffer "self-confidence." Even if these products do cause weight loss, no product can promise or supply happiness or self-confidence. A person could be slender but still be unhappy and/or lacking in self-confidence.

(28) “This device is all you’ll ever need, ever, to control your weight and get rid of the flab. It will work for you or we’ll refund every cent you paid for the product.”

(29) "Turns Bulging Flab into Lean, Muscle-Firm flesh without diet, without exercise.”

(30) “With Trim-Me, pounds and inches will drop away quickly, transforming your body to a slimmer, healthier and happier you.”

(31) "Now you can lose fat once and for all with New Trim-Me.”

(32) “Enjoy the self-confidence your new firm body brings.”

(33) “Other reports show increased energy, reduced sugar cravings, and improved vision!”

Why say what you believe to be false? Why indeed resort to apparent falsehoods when one risks the loss of the good will and purchasing power of the readers? Why run the risk of appearing to be a liar? One has to look at the claims in order to gain some understanding.
These claims seem to offer the overweight readers exactly what they want: an easy, and quick weight loss with the attendant social payoffs. Who would not feel the pull of their words? "Lose fat once and for all," (31) "a slimmer, healthier, and happier you," (30) and "enjoy the self-confidence your new firm body brings" (33). All of these claims promise what each and every person wants, self-confidence, social acceptance, happiness, and for those with less than perfect vision, "improved vision.

And best of all, these things can be achieved "without diet, without exercise" (29), and it will be "all you'll ever need" (28). Readers rely on the texts they read to be truthful, unless they are otherwise informed. Therefore, casual readers may believe in the promises which are created by these highly dubious statements. These questionable claims imply that the product will indeed produce happiness and self-confidence. Unwary consumers will rely on the implied results and buy the advertised product in the hopes of realizing those dreams.

Advertisers know the allure of such claims. They create claims which suggest that by using the product, the readers can achieve their personal longings. Such promises are false since such intangibles cannot be given or guaranteed by these products. However, the advertisers are willing to run the risk of appearing to be mendacious precisely because such claims can provide the incentives to prospective purchasers. Even if the consumer does not achieve the promises made, the advertisers have made a sale. In addition, dissatisfied customers, according to Olive (1979) are "not likely to experience disconfirmation of their prepurchase expectations" (cited in Shimp, 1983, p. 210). When confronted by such inconsistency, "consumers may be
motivated to ignore, suppress or minimize the inconsistency in order to avoid psychological discomfort” (cited in Shimp, 1983, p. 210). Should the customer be dissatisfied with the product and its purported claims, the advertisers have nevertheless achieved their goal of turning the readers into consumers, even if it is for a one-time purchase.

4. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

This maxim is not unlike the previous maxim which requires truthfulness. It is not always easy for the addressee or reader to know upon what evidence the speaker/writer is basing his or her claim. Yet there are advertising statements which appear to have no adequate foundation for the claims made. Typically, these claims intimate easy weight loss by means of the advertised product. In Example (35) the claims suggest that the product will strengthen one’s willpower so as to preclude the user from straying off his or her diet. Contrary to the claim, willpower comes from a personal sense of determination to accomplish a goal. Since this is so, it seems unlikely that there is any adequate evidence on which to base the statement that the advertised capsule will “actually strengthen your willpower.”

(34) “Warning--Trim-Me is so incredibly effective some people can lose weight too fast.”

(35) “Each capsule contains a blend of nutrients and herbs that actually strengthen your willpower so you easily fight the urge to cheat.”

(36) “Burn away fat by the hour--carve inches by the week--while you still take in calories by the thousands!”
"Trim-Me makes it possible to lose between 6 and 10 pounds per week, while eating foods like fried chicken, meatballs on a hoagie roll smothered in tomato sauce, pork chops, a double burger—would you believe even Belgian waffles and pancakes with syrup."

Why make claims for which you may lack adequate evidence?

Claims like these tempt the reader with promises of a product "so incredibly effective" (34) that you will "easily fight the urge to cheat" (35) while you "burn away fat by the hour" (36) and still eat "calorie-laden foods like "fried chicken...pork chops...and pancakes with syrup" (37). The suggestion is that the reader will easily and effortlessly drop unwanted pounds. Yet, losing weight and keeping it off is not easy. Losing weight permanently requires a lifelong discipline in controlling food intake, making appropriate food choices, and maintaining a regular exercise program. Often one has to sacrifice one's pleasure and time to achieve this goal.

Because readers presume that the advertisers are making claims for which they have adequate evidence, readers might rely on the implied truthfulness of these claims. They may believe that these products actually strengthen their willpower and allow them to eat "calorie-laden food" (37). Relying on the implied credibility of these claims, readers might give credence to the idea that they can achieve their weight-loss goals without discipline and sacrifice. The advertising copywriters must know that the implications they are creating about a quick and easy success are very effective in appealing to the desires of reader to achieve what normally takes some time. Such implications may be the very hook needed to draw in the readers.
5. Be relevant

Something that is relevant is something "affording evidence tending to prove or disprove the matter at issue or under discussion" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977, p. 976). Thus, in an ad about weight loss products, something relevant would tend to prove the efficacy of the product. In these advertisements, much of what is stated might be considered irrelevant to the issue of product effectiveness. Some testimonials are clearly irrelevant to any discussion regarding whether the product does what it says or not.

Testimonials are only relevant to the person making the testimonial. What happens to or works for another person may not have any relevancy to anyone else. Lisa Marcina in Example (39) claims that she lost weight and became what she "always wanted to be." Others who use the product may not lose weight or may not become what they "always wanted to be." In Example (43) the testimonial relates one person's experiences with being overweight. However, other people who are overweight may not be "tired," or "embarrassed to go out on weekends."

(38) "I have never been happier or more confident than I am now since using Trim-Me! Thank you Trim-Me!" Gwen Warner

(39) "Trim-Me has enabled me to lose weight and finally become what I always wanted to be." Lisa Marcina

(40) "My muscle tone really improved as the weight dropped off. I have more energy for my kids, and I even went back to school....And I'm down to a size 7! This outfit was one I saved from high school, more than 25 years ago, and it finally fits me again!" Jan, H., Dallas, TX

(41) "I was feeling good about myself for the first time in years."
(42) "If you're fat, your husband or boyfriend may NOT want you to lose weight. Because if you lose weight, men notice you. You're more attractive."

(43) "I was too tired to go out with my friends at night. I was even embarrassed to go out on weekends by myself. I waddled when I walked. I sweat when I ate. I wore anything loose that would hang straight down and wouldn't cling. I couldn't even cross my legs. I wasn't just 'overweight.' I was fat. I was 5'4'' and weight 202 pounds."

*Why use irrelevant testimonials?* When readers encounter such testimonials they presume that the testimonials are relevant to themselves and their expectations of losing weight with the product. There would be no other reason, they might infer, for including testimonials in the advertising text. The advertisers makes use of those readers' assumptions and thus can imply that the testimonials are relevant to the readers' weight-loss concerns. They hope to make the readers believe that they, too, can be assured of similar weight losses. If Jan H. now wears a "size 7" (40), maybe the overweight Jane Doe may achieve the same success with the product Jan H. used.

However much the readers hope for similar results, the advertisers know that they are safe in presenting such testimonials. Since the testimonials only relate to one's individual's weight-loss experiences. What works for one person may not work for another. At times, in fact, some advertisers warn their readers, albeit in fine print, "The supplement component will not promote faster fat loss" and "Results atypical." Nowhere in the advertisements does the test declare that the product is guaranteed to give others similar results.

Some testimonials paint a bleak picture of life as an overweight person. They create a belief that overweight people may not feel good about themselves and
be “embarrassed to go out on weekends” (43). One advertisement urges the readers not to “miss this opportunity to change your life for the better.” By using such bleak testimonials, the advertisers may be doing two things.

First, these texts can suggest to the overweight reader that the life of a fat person can only be one of misery and embarrassment. By painting such a sorry existence for overweight people, advertisers may be able to create a sense of unease and inadequacy in the minds of the readers. That is, they produce a problem in the mind of the readers, and then offer the readers the solution to the problem. As Leiser (1979) points out, “Part of the American scheme of things seems to be the creation of needs, the introduction of a conviction into the minds of people that they ought to have something that they never had needed before.” (p. 476). If the advertiser sells a weight-loss product, then it might be a good tactic to hint that overweight people cannot be happy.

The second thing these ad copywriters accomplish by using “bleak” testimonials is that they avoid insulting potential customers and thereby avoid losing sales. The testimonials relate other peoples’ weight-loss failures and successes. In contemporary American society, it is considered extremely impolite and rude to call attention to another’s weight problems. Therefore, by using these testimonials, the advertisers address the readers’ supposed weight problems without specifically noting that the readers are indeed overweight. The advertisers have not insulted the potential buyer by calling them “fat” or “overweight,” terms that might offend readers and drive
away customers. Yet they have planted in the readers' minds the weight issue and the possible solution to perceived weight problems.

6. **Avoid obscurity of expression.**

Weight-loss advertisers seem especially fond of obscure words or phrases. Time after time, the copywriters use undefined technical terms, obscure phrases, and words that seem to promise much but mean very little; that is, they use weasel words.

*Unexplained technical terms*

(44) "from a mild appetite suppressant to our triple strength diet aid the maxim legal limit of phenylpropanolamine, a drug available previously by prescription only."

(45) "The Trim-Me all-natural herbal formula works by increasing thermogenesis, the body's calorie burning process."

(46) "Trim-Me contains three of the most powerful 'fat burning' ingredients available--patented Chromium Picolinate, L-Carnitine, and Lipotropics."

*Why use undefined technical terms?* What is "phenylpropanolamine" (44) or "thermogenesis" (45)? Readers may believe that such a product has truly wonderful ingredients and properties and must therefore "work." This terminology suggest a scientifically sound product. Ad copywriters know that in this present age, science reigns supreme. If scientists can eradicate smallpox and send men to the moon, then readers may believe that surely scientists can create a "scientific" means of losing weight.

When advertisers use such "scientific" terminology, they are hoping to establish product credibility in the readers' minds. Readers expect that writers
will be cooperative and avoid obscurity of expression. Advertising readers presume
that ad copywriters will explain any words which may be unknown or possibly unclear
to them. By leaving undefined such terminology as “Lipotropics”, the advertiser may
create the implication that the product is so wonderfully complex that it would be
difficult to explain such terms to one not trained in the sciences. In addition, the
readers may also infer that products with “scientific” terminology might be more
efficacious in eliminating unwanted pounds than another product. Here at last,
readers may believe, is a product that is up to date and not some “snake oil” medicine
dispensed from a traveling medicine show.

Obscure phrases.

(47) “You wake up and start the day with one tiny, tasteless capsule which
helps you set off a fat-burning chain reaction throughout your entire
body.”

(48) “…and the proven caloric-abatement recommendations designed to
neutralize the fat-building effect of all the calories in the food you
eat.”

(49) “The Trim-Me’s Plan...America’s first metabolic activator, has
revolutionized the way millions of people have lost weight.”

(50) “In overweight people the excess caloric infusion simply overwhelms
your body’s natural fat-destroying defense system.”

Why use obscure phrases? Phrases such as “fat-burning chain reaction” (47)
and “metabolic activator” (49) are certainly colorful. It would seem that in using
such phrases, the copywriters are giving vent to their need to be expressive. Because
the phrases are left unexplained, readers are free to use their imaginations to build up
mental pictures of what the weight-loss product may do. Created are images of an
overweight body as a warzone ("simply overwhelms your body's natural fat-
destroying defense system" (50)), a weight-loss product as a nuclear reactor ("helps you set off a fat-burning chain reaction throughout your entire body" (47)), and the product as a catalyst to revolution ("America's first metabolic activator, has revolutionized the way millions of people have lost weight" (49)).

Imagery such as this suggests a product that is powerful and invincible, that the enemy, fat, cannot resist. In the battle of the bulge, such a product needs to be purchased and used. While the copywriter may use such imagery to fulfill a need to be creative and expressive, nonetheless, the ultimate goal of such mind pictures is to, as always, sell the product.

While these phrases seem somehow to explain to the readers how the product works to cause weight loss, they never actually do. Usually, readers expect that the writers will clarify all obscure phrases, so the readers will know exactly what is being stated. Yet, often in these advertisements, such obscure phrases are left unexplained. How does a product create a "fat-burning chain reaction" (47)? Phrases like this are never explained and the readers are left with meaningless verbiage. The advertisements appear to be informative, but they are really not.

By using obscure phrases, advertisers may imply that these weight-loss products are beyond the usual, mundane weight-loss products the readers may have tried in the past. A weight-loss product that has a "metabolic activator" (49) or one that overwhelms "your body's natural fat-destroying defense system" (50) must be very
special and must surely eradicate fat. But by using colorful phrases like these, advertisers may plant the belief that they have created a powerful product, while, in fact, their product may be no more effective than any other weight-loss product.

Weasel words. Advertising copywriters use words that suggest promises of easy weight loss. These words have little substance to them because their meaning is so indeterminate and shifting. Some of the more common weasel words in these advertisements are:


(51) "You have nothing to lose except inches from your waistline."
(52) "Now, you can get results in just 2 short weeks!"
(53) "It works to promote a trimmer, firmer, leaner body."

b) Words that seem to imply effectiveness of the product: "works," "helps," "lose weight," "guaranteed," "faster," "surer."

(54) "Lose Weight! Results Guaranteed!"
(55) "Extensive scientific review and our customers' satisfaction are proof that the Trim-Me Plan works!"
(56) "It helped me lose the weight I never thought I could."

c) Words that seem to imply something other than a reduced-caloric diet and exercise program: "plan," "program," "formula," "system."

(57) "The Only Formula That Really Works!"
(58) "The secret ingredient in my diet plan is only natural. Trim-Me."
"Now you can attack your toughest weight loss obstacles head on, with the revolutionary Trim-Me Weight Loss System."

**Why use weasel words?** Weasel words are used because their meanings are so insubstantial. There is no concrete reference point with such words. Readers may indeed experience “results” with “inches” lost for a “slimmer,” “trimmer” and “leaner” body, but the advertisements offer no information as to how such experiences can be measured. No specific promises are made regarding how many inches constitutes inches lost? Again, when advertisers declare “Results guaranteed” (54), “results” are never defined for the readers.

Words like “plan,” “program” or “system” hint that the product is not a reduced-calorie diet and exercise program. The advertised product is something different, something special to alleviate weight problems. Yet, it is not unusual for purchasers of these products to find enclosed in the package a diet and exercise regimen. Indeed, seventeen of the analyzed advertisements actually included mention of an exercise program and “diet” as part of their “plan,” “program,” or “system.”

"Free Trim-Me Diet Program with your order!"

"Best results are obtained when Trim-Me is used in conjunction with a balanced diet and exercise."

"Use as directed with enclosed diet plan."

"The Trim-Me System combines our unique formula with a healthy diet and exercise plan that can revolutionize the science of weight loss."

In conversation and in writing, the addressees expect the speakers/writers to say exactly what they mean and say it in words that express clearly the meaning intended.
So, when weight-loss advertisements promise a "slimmer" body, or a product that "works," and a product that is a "system," readers may easily follow the implication of the advertisers and may easily believe that the product is unlike any other weight-loss product, and that it will actually cause permanent weight loss and that the effects on the readers' bodies will be noticeable to all. However, weasel words such as these are undefined and their exact meanings unclear. Because these words are so vague, advertisers often use them. Weasel words are the escape route for advertisers. Weasel words hold out the promise of a product which purports to do much, "while hiding a loophole" (Larson, 1979, p. 222).

7. Avoid ambiguity.

A speaker or writer can never entirely avoid all ambiguity in speech or in writing, since, by its very nature, language is ambiguous: words and sentences may have two different meanings. So as speakers and writers we are urged and trained to be as clear and concise as possible. In advertising, Percy and Rossiter (1980) warn the prospective copywriters to avoid ambiguity since ambiguity increases "the likelihood of misinterpretation or disinterest" (p. 143). The copywriters of these weight-loss advertisements have not always taken such advice to heart. These ads repeatedly create ambiguity by using a) play on words, and b) the pronoun "it" which has no antecedents.

a) Play on words. When creating a play on words, copywriters purposely and openly flout the maxim to avoid ambiguity. In these instances, the ambiguity is a means to catch the readers' attention and signal to them that the advertisement has
something to do with losing weight.

(64) "Chews To Lose" [Here the product is a chewing gum]

(65) "Scaled Down Beautifully"

(66) "Stop the Weight"

(67) "Want Not Waist Not with Trim-Me"

Why use a play on words? Advertisers create such plays on words because they are quicker and more effective in catching the eye of the reader. In magazines and newspapers, the advertisers have to contend with other texts, all of which vie to attract the readers' notice. In their desire to quickly and effectively call attention to their advertisements, copywriters sometimes violate the maxim that requires that one avoid ambiguity. Claims like "_scaled Down Beautifully" (65) and "Stop the Weight" (66) create double meanings. Because the ambiguity is so flagrant, the readers know that there must be one meaning that is being implied. The implied meaning notifies readers that this advertisement has something to do with the problem of being overweight and the product might be of benefit to readers if they are interested in losing weight.

Here the ambiguity acts as a red flag to create and hold attention.

b) The use of "it" without an antecedent. Often these advertisements contain pronouns with no antecedents. The pronoun most favored by these advertisers is "it." Sometimes the pronoun appears in headlines, as in (68). Other times, "it" is used in paragraph headers (70), or in the first sentence in a new paragraph (69). Putative testimonials (72) also sometimes contain the pronoun "it" without the use of an
antecedent. In all of these types of situations, the copywriter has not used an antecedent to which a reader could refer.

(68) "Don't Take Our Word for It. Take Your Own Word for It!"

(69) "We did it with Trim-Me!"

(70) "Now: If you think it won't work for you, we challenge you: Try it."

(71) "Make it happen"

(72) "Just Lose It!"

(73) "We did it in 14 days!"

Why use "it" without an antecedent? The ambiguous use of "it" may create the impression of claims about weight loss having been made, which, in fact, have never been made. Since readers have not been alerted to the ambiguity of the use of "it," they will try to establish a defined point of reference for the pronoun "it." One of the most likely points of reference the readers may establish in their minds is a connection to the product or a weight loss associated with the product. However, such a linkage cannot be shown since the pronoun has no antecedent on which to anchor a specified meaning. "We did it in 14 days!" (73) seems to suggest that the speakers lost weight with Trim-Me. Yet the "it" can refer to other meanings: the speakers traveled across the country in 14 days or maybe they built a brick wall in 14 days. The possibilities are almost limitless.

In these types of claims, the lack of an antecedent is an effective way to create the implication that some event or action is related to weight loss, when, in fact, no directly relationship can be established. Therefore, the advertiser is not compelled to
prove such a relationship exists. As with the use of weasel words, the advertisers may use such a ploy since it can be a safer means of making claims. There are no referents to which the “it” can refer. Therefore, the advertiser, if necessary, can claim a meaning other than the one a reader may have inferred. Using a sentence like “We did it in 14 days!” (73) all but “negates the claim that follows,” for the “it” allows any substantive claim to “disintegrate into hollow meaninglessnes” (Schrank, 1974, pp. 250, 251).

8. Be brief

At first glance, it would seem that many of these advertisements follow this maxim because they were small in size. Yet size in and of itself is not an adequate indicator of brevity. I may ask you, “May I move this chair?” and you may respond, “My answer is an affirmative.” Though your answer is not long, it was too long for me. All I wanted was a “yes” so I could move the chair. You have wasted my time. And so it is with all of these advertisements; even the smallest of them are not brief enough. They are too long because they do not clearly and simply answer the questions: a) how does the product work? and b) will it do what is claims it will?

Some of the full-page advertisements were very wordy, with text occupying most of the page. One advertisement had a small picture of a man with the headline “Do You Recognize Me?” above it. The rest of the advertisement consisted of text comprised of 24 paragraphs. Readers might be overwhelmed by such wordy text. They might read a headline, move onto some large-print paragraph headers, and then
being intimidated by so much text, move on to something else in the magazine or newspaper. The readers may come away from such a simple reading of these wordy texts that the product promised much.

Whether the ads were small or large, they were not brief enough. The advertisers failed to provide the readers with succinct and understandable information by which they could decide if the product was worthy of purchase.

*Why not be brief?* By being prolix, the advertisers are distracting the readers’ from the fact that the advertisers have not given them enough information that would be of value to them as consumers. Readers want to be given only enough information that will enable them to make informed purchasing decisions. They expect the writers to be brief and to the point. Because the advertisements are not brief enough, readers may infer that the information in the advertising texts is important for them to know and is an essential aspect of the weight-loss product. Being confounded by excess textual material, readers may fail to realize that they have been given little objective information, and have not been given answers to the questions they pose. So much extraneous information may overwhelm the readers into trying a product that has so much to say for itself.

9. *Be orderly*

In conversation or writing, we expect that speakers/writers will follow a certain sequence in their speech or writing. For instance, in an historical narrative, we might logically expect the speaker/writer to begin at the beginning of the event and follow a chronological sequence to the end of the story. Or if we are called into the
supervisor's office, we do not want a long conversation about our family life and recreation if the supervisor's intention is to give us a layoff notice. We would expect a more direct approach. Yet, these weight-loss advertisements often violated orderliness by putting warning information in inconspicuous locations such as at the bottom of the page. In addition, the warning information was often printed in tiny, almost illegible print. At times it was necessary to use a magnifying glass to read the information. Readers would expect that something as important as warning information would be easy to read and in a prominent location. However, it was not so with these advertisements.

(74) "Note: For many dieters, weight loss is only temporary. A development of lifestyle patterns for long term weight loss is recommended."

(75) "The supplement component will not promote faster fat loss."

(76) "Use only as directed with enclosed diet plan."

(77) "Results atypical."

(78) "Individuals with heart disease, diabetes or pregnant women should not use the Trim-Me capsule. Have your physician check regularly to be sure you're not losing too much too fast...and advise when you've lose enough."

(77) "Consult your physician before beginning any weight loss or exercise program. Diabetics/Hypoglycemic: Use only under a physician's supervision."

*Why the placement of warning information?* Warning information in these advertisements often seemed to contradict many of the preceding claims. Some warning information alerted the reader that the product may not be best suited for him.
or her. When warning information is positioned in such ways it becomes invisible to the casual readers. Readers may never see the warning statements.

Warning information may act as the proverbial messenger bearing the bad news, "will not promote faster fat loss" (75), "For many dieters, weight loss is only temporary" (74) and "Results atypical." (77) The advertisers are advertising their products as means to a quicker, and easier weight loss. If readers should encounter such messages, they may be disinclined to buy the product. Why buy the product if it "will not promote faster fat loss" (75)?

Clearly, such a violation of this maxim is done in the advertisers' own self-interests. They include warning information in such a way so as to not drive away sales. There is also an element of legal safety in such a placement of the warning information. Rather than being successfully sued because they had not provided any warning information, the advertisers provide themselves an out. They can truly state that such information was provided to the consumers. Such a provision of warning information may be all that is necessary to shield the advertisers from irate customers and regulatory agencies.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

As can be seen from the data presented in the previous chapter, these weight-loss advertisers repeatedly violate the maxims upon which Grice's Cooperative Principle is based. Some suggestions have been offered as to why an advertiser might violate a specific maxim. Before presenting my concluding remarks, I would like to offer some general remarks as to why these advertisers might use implication. Following that discussion, I would next like to consider the question of whether conversational implicature resulted when these advertisers violated Grice's maxims.

Why These Advertisers Use Implication?

Time and again the advertisers in these weight-loss ads violated Grice's maxims. They did not give enough information to their readers. The advertisers sometimes made claims that were probably false or made claims for which there is no evidence to support the claims. They filled their texts with irrelevant information. They used obscure or ambiguous language, and they sometimes hid important warning information. Advertisers did these things, I believe, in order to imply that which they did not want to openly declare.

Implication is used because it is a safe means of suggesting what cannot be boldly stated. As previously mentioned, objective, factual data makes up a very small part of these weight-loss advertisements. Instead, the advertisers fill their advertising
texts with suggestions and promises of products that will effect successful and easy weight loss. When an advertiser feels it is necessary to suggest things for which no factual substantiation exists, implication is a safe means of accomplishing his or her advertising goals. It is safe, because as Grice (1975) notes, what was implied can be cancelled by the speaker/writer at any time. Advertisers must be well aware of this cancellability.

If a reader, who lost only three pounds, confronts a weight-loss advertiser with the fact that he or she did not “get results in just 2 short weeks” (52), the advertisers can respond that the advertiser only claimed results, but did not state what the results would be. The reader got “results,” but unfortunately, not the results the reader had hoped for. The advertiser cannot be liable therefore for disappointed expectations when those expectations have been so vaguely described. Thus, it seems, that these weight-loss advertisers use implication because it provides a shield behind which they can protect themselves.

Was Conversational Implicature Created?

When a participant in a conversation fails to fulfill or violates a maxim, implicature may result. The most obvious violation occurs when a speaker intentionally flouts a maxim. Grice (1975) states that a speaker “may flout a maxim; that is, he may BLATANTLY fail to fulfill it” (p. 49). When such flouting occurs, the addressee, assuming that the speaker is cooperating, realizes that some meaning other than the conventional meaning was intended. It is a type of situation “that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature.” (p. 49). However, in the
case of weight-loss advertisements, the writers seldom resort to a blatant flouting of conversational maxims. The violations of Grice's maxims seen in these advertisements are almost exclusively subtle or quiet in nature.

Cooper (1982) argues that “only when speakers and writers... overtly [my emphasis] and cooperatively violate the maxims do implicatures occur, and speakers and writers are taken to be communicating something indirectly” (p. 117). Cooper's approach would suggest that perhaps no implicature is created in these weight-loss advertisements. Yet when Grice (1975) discusses the violation of a maxim and its relationship to conversational implicature, he does not rely solely on the blatant form of violations but also states that a speaker or writer "may quietly and unostentatiously violate a maxim" (p. 49). The following example involves a quiet violation of a maxim.

A. Did Joe go to the library?
B. He left 15 minutes ago.
   [Joe told B not to tell A that he was going to a local tavern instead of the library]

In this example, B has quietly violated the maxim which requires that a person make his or her contribution as informative as is required. Here in this situation, B should have added that in addition to leaving 15 minutes ago, Joe went to the tavern. Yet B has created an implicature by implying that Joe went to the library.

In the case of weight-loss advertisements, a quiet implicature can occur when a maxim is violated by doing something as subtle as being more informative than is required. The advertisers have not let the readers know that they, the advertisers, are giving the readers more information than is needed in the advertising situation.
When one studies these advertising claims, it becomes obvious that these weight-loss advertisers do violate the maxims. But there seems to be nothing in the texts, graphics, or layouts to alert the casual reader that these maxims have been violated. More than likely the advertisers are well aware that the casual readers will not be aware of the maxim violations. The typical consumer environment often exists under "conditions of less than full attention, with little motivation to study the message, and with demands from other stimuli" (Kennamer, 1988, p. 145). The only time a maxim is blatantly violated in these ads is when it appears in headlines that use ambiguity to catch the readers' attention, such as the headline "Chew To Lose" (74).

If the advertisers do not alert their readers, what can one reckon from such continual and repeated maxim violations? Grice states that those who "quietly and unostentatiously VIOLATE a maxim" may be considered to have misled the hearer. (1975, p. 49). Cooper (1975) believes that "those who hide their violation (and are caught) are taken to be liars and disbelieved; those who violate maxims so as to obstruct communication are taken to have reasons for their uncooperativeness" (p. 117). Kennamer (1988) in discussing advertising agrees, "a purposeful violation of the Cooperative Principle by a message sender, without the knowledge of the receiver, constitutes deception on the part of the sender" (p. 148). Since these weight-loss advertisers do not blatantly call attention to their maxim violations, it must be concluded that their use of implication functions chiefly as a means of deceiving and/or misleading the readers of these advertisements.
Before closing this section, I would like to offer several suggestions for further research in this area. In conducting the present research study, I found the literature addressing this topic to be all but nonexistent. Assuming that the advertisers are not facing a clash with another maxim and are not clearly opting out of the conversation, there appears to be no literature addressing the issue of whether one must always assume that the advertisers (or anyone else for that matter) are being misleading and/or deceptive. Grice (1975) does not seem to suggest any, and indeed, there may be none. More scholarship is thus needed in this area.

**Concluding Remarks**

After having examined the data presented in this study, I believe that the data show that these weight-loss advertisers use implication. They create implication by violating the maxims upon which the Cooperative Principle of conversation is built. Casual readers of these ads may believe that the advertisers are being cooperative in their communication since these advertisers do not alert the readers that they are being anything other than cooperative. Yet it has been shown that these advertisers violate the maxims. They distract the readers' attention with superfluous verbiage. At times they make statements that are all but untrue. At other times they hide the insufficiency of their claims behind obscure or ambiguous language. The weight-loss advertisers give the readers little in the way of objective, factual information. Instead they hide behind irrelevant and unimportant claims. When advertisers have little "to say factually about an item, the more it must be advertised in order to make up for that deficiency" (Preston, 1994, p. 81).
The advertisers, in their quest for sales, instead rely upon implication to carry
their messages. Implication is safe because it can be cancelled. Advertisers can
cancel the implication by replying to consumers and regulatory agencies that the
advertisers’ meaning was misunderstood.

As consumers long exposed to advertising, we should not be so easily
deceived, but still we are. Kennamer (1988) reminds us that we, at times, “deceive
ourselves” when we encounter advertising (p. 148). We do so “by making inferences
as to the meanings of messages that are not warranted by the actual information
provided. We jump to conclusions on limited information, we fill in gaps in
information, and we expand information beyond what is given” (p.148). Yet he goes
on to argue, that though we do deceive ourselves, “we may be ‘set up’ by advertisers
who create messages of a form and content that make it likely that we will draw
specific, possibly misleading, conclusions about the products involved” (p. 148).

In this case, the weight-loss products appear as a magic elixir promising us
much more than just a means of losing weight. The elixir also offers promises of:
1) beauty (“I tried Trim-Me and in just two weeks lost 14 pounds and never felt or
looked so good”) 2) social acceptance, (“The world treats you differently when you're
fat...not just the social world, but the business world. My whole world has changed
since getting those 88 pounds off”) and 3) love, (“after I'd lost 67 pounds my husband
and I were getting ready to go out to dinner. As I brushed by him in the living room,
he caught my arm and kissed me”). For those who struggle with unwanted pounds,
such promises can be irresistible.
Much of what is claimed in these advertisements is nothing but a smoke screen created by implication. When the air clears, the readers may find that there was nothing after all. And thus, someone reading these weight-loss advertisements might conclude that these advertisers, in their quest for sales, are dancing on the edge of truth.
APPENDIX

Sources of Weight-Loss Advertisements

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<th>Advertisement No.</th>
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<td>4</td>
<td>TV GUIDE, January 16, 1995, p. 132</td>
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<td>8</td>
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REFERENCES


