



RESEARCH PAPER

Selling Authority: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Power Dynamics in Language Used in Pakistani Advertising Captions

¹Hafiza Mesbah, ²Dr. Haniya Munir* and ³Tehmina

1. MPhil Scholar, Department of English, The Women University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of English, The Women University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
3. MPhil Scholar Department of English, The Women University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: munirjahangir786@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In today's fast-moving consumer culture, advertising isn't just about selling products—it's about shaping minds. In Pakistan, the language used in advertising captions often goes unnoticed, yet it carries weight in how people see themselves, others, and the world around them. This study sets out to understand the hidden power dynamics in the language of Pakistani advertising and moreover, the choice of pronouns, emotional hooks, and cultural references that resonate with Pakistani audience. In a world where advertising shows not only what we buy but also how we think, the language in advertising captions has more than just a marketing message—related to power. This study explains how linguistic choices in contemporary Pakistani advertising captions overtly construct and reinforce power relations. For this study, we have taken a qualitative approach, using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis model to closely examine advertising captions from Pakistani TV, print, and social media. Instead of just reading the words, we have focused on how they were used—looking at tone, pronouns, and cultural hints—to understand how power and influence quietly operate through language. Taking Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research investigates how these brief but persuasive captions use authority, social positioning, gendered language, and cultural symbolism to influence consumer behavior and identity. By interpreting a diverse range of Urdu and English advertisements from television, social media, and billboards, this study puts light on the silent but potent strategies advertisers use to command attention and obedience. In doing so, it enlightens the ways language becomes a vehicle for power in everyday consumer culture. Moreover, the findings of this study reveal that even the simplest advertising captions carry subtle layers of power. Undoubtedly, Brands often use friendly, familiar language to sound close to the audience, but underneath, they maintain authority—shaping how people think, feel, and respond through culturally loaded and emotionally charged words.

KEYWORDS Language, Power, Advertising Captions, Pakistani Media, Consumer Manipulation, Linguistic Strategies, Social Positioning, Discourse and Media Influence

Introduction

Language is more than just a tool for communication—it is a means of constructing reality, authority, and negotiating power. In everyday social life, from casual conversations to political speeches and advertising slogans, language gives the way to understand ourselves and the world around us. The "Speech in Social Life" series underscores this very idea about understanding language that is fundamental for understanding of how modern social structures operate and how individuals navigate their roles within them. When Norman Fairclough first published *Language and Power* in 2013, it was hailed as a phenomenon work. His critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework showed up new ways to examine how language perpetuates or challenges power structures in society. Fairclough argued that the words we use are never neutral; they reflect, reinforce, and often resist the power dynamics embedded in social life..

One field where this relationship is especially visible is advertising. In Pakistan, advertising captions are taken as a powerful yet subtle linguistic space where power relations are both constructed and contested. These short, punchy statements are not only designed to sell products but also to assert authority, shape consumer desires, and reinforce cultural norms. Captions often carry more than just catchy lines; they encapsulate ideologies, evoke emotions, and suggest hierarchies. Whether it's a fairness cream commercial promoting Eurocentric beauty standards or a detergent ad that reinforces gender roles, the language of advertising silently shapes how power operates in daily life.

To understand this study, we must also engage with key linguistic theories that help in unpacking power works through language. Fairclough's (2013), CDA emphasizes two dimensions: *power in discourse* (how language choices create and enact power) and *power behind discourse* (the social and institutional forces that shape those choices). The Grecian Maxims, (1990) too, portray how speakers strategically obey or violate conversational norms to either cooperate or dominate interactions. In Pakistani advertising, all these forms of power intersect. For example, politicians may use populist language to appeal to the masses, while brands rely on cultural stereotypes and authoritative tones to assert superiority over competitors or even consumers.

As we often find language in political settings - especially persuasive. If we consider Clinton's famous inaugural address where he said, "And you have changed the face of Congress, now we must do the work the season demands." His use of pronouns like "you" create personalization, making each listener gets personally addressed—an effective rhetorical strategy that blurs individual and collective responsibility, a hallmark of persuasive political language (Wareing 2004).

In this study, by critically analyzing the structure, tone, and context of these captions, we aim to understand the ideologies they propagate, the identities they promote or marginalize, and the socio-political influences that shape them. It brings together theories of politeness, discourse analysis, conversational maxims, and social power to offer a rich, understanding of how language commands, manipulates, and influences in ways both obvious and invisible.

Ultimately, this research hopes not only to reveal the hidden power of everyday language but also to encourage greater linguistic awareness among consumers, educators, and policymakers. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions around language ethics, cultural autonomy, and the importance of resisting manipulative discourse in a rapidly commercializing and mediatized society like Pakistan.

Literature Review

The study of language in advertising has long attracted scholars interested in how words shape perception, identity, and power. Rooted in the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), much of the literature highlights how language is not merely a tool for communication but a mechanism for maintaining or challenging social hierarchies. Prominent theorists like Fairclough argue that advertisements do more than promoting products only—but they promote ideologies, often reflecting and reinforcing dominant power structures (Baldwin, 2016). Within this contextual situation, advertising captions become a rich site for examining authority that is constructed, negotiated, or resisted through linguistic choices. Researchers have shown that strategies such as imperative tone, rhetorical questions, or appeals to nationalism and gender roles can subtly position the advertiser as an expert or a social superior, thereby influencing the audience's behavior and beliefs.

According to Bouchet (2013), literature on South Asian advertising suggests that captions often reflect colonial dominance, patriarchal norms, and consumer aspirations, which are deeply embedded in local cultural narratives. Scholars have also pointed to the way religious sentiment is co-opted to lend moral weight to consumer messages. However, there is limited focused work on how these patterns manifest specifically in advertising captions in Pakistan. This gap presents an opportunity to explore how language functions as a vehicle of authority in shaping consumer consciousness, particularly through brief but powerful textual content.

Our objective is to focus on language in social life but with a particular agenda in mind. To highlight how language, in its everyday as well as professional usages enables us to understand issues of social concern. More specifically, to examine how the ways in which we communicate are constrained by the structures and forces of those social institutions within which we live and function. To display, too, how institutions and our roles within them are in frequent measure defined by such particular language use. Such an agenda suggests three points of reference for books within the Series: on the one hand that of language, on the other that of social theory, and thirdly, that of the particular professional context providing as it were a location for critical linguistic exploration. However, each of these points of reference must be stated in respect to the others. In this Series, language is not a separate construct or a mere system of sentences; rather, it operates as discourses.

Similarly, society is not an aggregate of unique lives seen through a hierarchical framework, but rather an evolving formation of relationships and practices largely shaped by power struggles; professions function as institutions whose conventions are shaped by social relationships and particular discourses. His theory shows the co-determination of the orders of society and the driven and conventionalized choices made from the various linguistic options.

This is important not just for Economics but also for Linguistics. Foucault called these links; orders of discourse, investigating one starting to explain the other. The most practical and useful way to carry out this kind of explanation is to analyze communication inside specific social structures, connecting the macro study of society with the micro analysis of individual social interactions. Students studying social theory should pay close attention to the ideas presented here. They connect the work of British and Australian "critical linguists" the actuates of encounters by connecting the abstract ideas of Fairclough, (1995) in examining how language policies have changed historically and how this has affected the division of political power while taking nation-building initiatives, colonial legacy, and linguistic integration attempts into account examining conceptual structures connected to identity politics, cultural hegemony, and sociopolitical theories as well as linguistic theories in order to comprehend the link between language and power (Goldsmith, 2013).

The relationship between variation in language use, language ability, and political participation; this encompasses election processes, minority representation strategies, and the use of language in political activism. studying studies on the impact of language policy on interpersonal interactions, unity in society, and identity formation in diverse countries, taking into account things like revitalization of languages initiatives, linguistic rights movements, and the significance of language in establishing cultural identities discussing research on language-based differences in advancement in society, employment prospects, and access to money, as well as studies on the economic impact of language policy on the distribution of political power. Doing comparative research on the political power structures and language policy around the globe, including issues such language rights disputes, revitalization of languages programs, and management of diverse languages (Lenski, 1988).

This literature study offers an in-depth assessment of today's state of knowledge and identification of gaps and topics for additional research in the discipline by merging existing scholarship in these areas. The foundation of politeness theory is Russell's, (2004) notion of face "the beneficial social worth a person effectively claims for himself by the line others think he has taken during a specific contact "in Metts&Cupach, (2008). People constantly perform theatrical productions intended to maintain and enhance their public persona. While Thomas (1997), emphasizes the effort persons make to preserve and invest their own faces, politeness takes a different tack, emphasizing the part people play in protecting and conserving the faces of others they deal with. People generally assume that those with whom we engage on a regular basis will offer us confirmation and interactional support. Consequently, being courteous entails expressing oneself in a way that considers the sentiments of others.

Theoretical Framework

Fairclough is a British scholar of linguistics and English that has been studying since 1941. Discourse analysis (DA) is an approach used for examining power, philosophy, and politics. This research is based on Norman Fairclough's model of Critical Discourse Analysis, which serves as the guiding lens to examine language constructs and how it maintains power in advertising captions. This framework is especially suitable because it doesn't treat language as neutral or isolated—it interprets every word, phrase, and tone as part of a larger social puzzle. His three-tier model explores the *text* itself (the words used), the *discursive practice* (how the text is created and interpreted), and the *social practice* (the broader cultural and power structures at play). This three layered approach helps reveal the subtle ways in which advertisers use language to assert authority and influence public perception in the different Pakistani context.

By using this framework, the study portrays how certain linguistic choices—like the use of imperatives, emotional appeals, or code-switching between Urdu and English—are not just marketing techniques but also reflections of deeper societal values and power imbalances. Fairclough's model convinces us to read between the lines, to see how even a short caption can mirror gender norms, class hierarchies, or colonial legacies. In a Pakistani society where advertising holds significant cultural influence, this framework helps uncover the often-unseen power dynamics shaping how people think, feel, and consume.

Material and Methods

To explore the power dynamics embedded in the language of Pakistani advertising captions, this research adopts a qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary method. CDA allows us to go beyond the surface meaning of words and investigate how language in advertising reflects, reinforces, or challenges authority and social hierarchies. The study draws particularly on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, which examines the text (the captions themselves), the discourse practice (how these captions are produced and consumed), and the socio-cultural context (the wider Pakistani society and its power relations).

A purposive sample of advertising captions will be collected from a variety of sources—television commercials, billboards, digital platforms, and print media. These will include both Urdu and English content, with attention given to ads from different sectors (e.g., fashion, food, telecom, and banking) to ensure a diverse and representative dataset. Each caption will be analyzed to identify linguistic features such as tone, vocabulary, persuasive strategies, and instances of code-switching. The captions will then be interpreted in relation to broader social themes like gender roles, class distinctions, consumer culture, and authority structures.

Results and Discussion

L'Oréal - 'Because you're worth it'

This famous beauty caption supports the perceived notion that women's satisfaction and self-worth have a direct connection with the beauty products they purchase. In order to provide the reader the sense that they are dealing with someone right away, it also employs the pronoun of the second person, "you"; such an approach is known as "direct approach."

Ya ha ponds ka Wada
Stars ki Jhalak
Khobsoorti ak Sacha khawb
Jo face fresh wohi beautiful

Translated into English:

Ponds swear is this.
A glint in the stars'
'Beauty' A wonderful fantasy,
A fresh face is beautiful.

The word "swear" indicates an ownership of power over customers who believe and belong to certain beauty standards by expressing a promise or commitment. A glint in the stars shows how beauty is usually seen as a concept that should be achieved but fails to come true in the context of power. The place of business of unattainable objectives which affect consumer behavior and uphold cultural ideals of beauty is where the power dynamic in that scenario is found. Labeling beauty a "wonderful fantasy" draws focus on just how misleading and elusive it is. This statement emphasizes how the beauty business builds and maintains the ideals that people desire to. It argues that beauty is more than just an attribute of appearance and is instead a produced ideal that has a big impact on people's attitudes and behavior. This claim emphasizes the importance of young and beauty as the dominant ideals of beauty. It suggests that lifetimes and age are less important, which supports age discrimination and its focus on youth in society. This sentence a fresh face is beautiful highlights how those who do not meet these standards suffer discrimination as a result of how relationships of power define and influence what people find attractive.

Why Not meri jaan

In Urdu, "merijaan" is a term of affection that means "my life" or "my lover." It may be suggested that introducing it into a brand slogan, such as that of Pepsi, would help the company establish a stronger emotional bond with consumers in South Asian regions, where the term is often used. The new Pepsi slogan, "Why Not MeriJaan," is more than merely a phrase; it's a powerful call to action inspiring Pakistanis to strive big, aim elevated, break expectations, and follow their dreams with bravery. A particular initiative under "Why Not MeriJaan" is the Pepsi Ride for Freedom program, which aims at empowering women by removing the prejudices linked to riding bikes and offering them with an option to depending on others for getting around. The Beneficial Effects of "MeriJaan" in a Pepsi Slogan

Cultural Correspondence

Emotional Connection: "Merijaan" is a kind and caring level of expression that is often used amongst family members. It could invoke sentimental, positive feelings for the brand when used in a slogan.

Relatability

This term is typical speech for many South Asian customers, which offers the brand a more private and trusted vibe.

Differentiating That Brand

The term "originality: adopting a that is culturally appropriate term that other businesses might not be adopting, such a slogan can help Pepsi stand out from its rivals. Memorability refers Customers are more likely to recall a brand if its slogan is original emotionally stirring.

Dalda Jahan Maamta Wahan

Using feeling

The headline builds a mental connection among the brand and the consumer by utilizing a powerful and generally positive experience that is connected to motherhood. Manipulation of has been shown to boost loyalty to brands and impact consumer choices.

Trust and Authority

Dalda promotes itself as a professional on family well-being and food by identifying itself with the protective and loving aspects of mom. This linkage subtly puts the strain on customers to live up to this ideal by suggesting that selecting Dalda is the responsible and compassionate option.

Conventional Roles

By associating women with household duties and cooking, the tagline promotes conventional gender norms. This can regulate notions of female roles within a home since it fosters the idea that a woman's operates is to provide food for the family.

Influence on Women

By emphasizing mothers in especially, the tagline supports women's role as main caregivers by placing the weight of family health and nutrition on them. This might be understood as a means of upholding standard practices and family systems in order to carry out social control.

Discussion

Language has long been a tool of power—used to control, include, exclude, and dominate. From colonial regimes imposing foreign tongues to modern-day advertising shaping consumer behavior, language not only reflects societal structures but actively reinforces them. Drawing on Fairclough theory of discourse, we see how dominant ways of speaking are often privileged, granting authority and credibility to some while marginalizing others.

Further, political and advertising language and practices—such as language discrimination or revitalizing efforts—also mirror power ideologies in society. These socially construct ideologies intersect with race, gender, class and identity, giving voices to those who are valued and who are silenced. Hence, language can also be a site of resistance. In studying advertising language through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis, this research seeks to uncover language practices in Pakistan's media landscape both reflect and reproduce deeper power structures, and political ideologies only taking as a sales pitch.

Moreover this paper also examines how language is used to establish, uphold, or challenge power relations by critically analyzing how language is used in news, entertainment, and marketing. Examine how social media and technological innovations affect language and power relations. Look at matters including advocacy on the internet, digital literacy, and the propagation of false information. To provide readers a more complex grasp of how language works as a tool of power, put your results into an overall history and political framework. Think about the specific organizational, structural, and cultural elements which impact language dynamics in the context(s) you have selected. Make connections between your research and the ideas and theoretical frameworks presented in the literature on language and power. Assess how effectively these theories interpret and explain your empirical findings, and think about any changes or additions that might help your data make more sense. Examine deeper the power processes at work in your investigation, taking into account not only overt but also more covert or indirect ways that language may affect resources, social hierarchies, and access.

Conclusion

In Pakistan, captions are frequently utilized for their successful means of popular mobilization. The messages are certain to have a substantial impact on the target population through intentional incorporation of regional and local languages, such as Urdu. Political parties, social movements, and national campaigns are examples of this mobilization. The nation's social structures are reflected in the words. They portray the ideologies, aspirations, and misfortunes of various groups. For instance, political campaign slogans focus attention to the contentions and detractors of parties in power, whereas movement slogans focus on topics like women's rights, anti-corruption, and education. Slogans' choices of language frequently highlight deeper power relations. Slogans are instruments that are used by influential or influential individuals to establish their status and spread their stories. On the other hand, those on the margins express their disapproval and resistance through slogans. This simultaneous application emphasizes how language is used to uphold and subvert power hierarchies.

Recommendations

For future researchers, it would be valuable to explore how language and power operate not just in advertising captions but also through visuals, background music, and social media content, as these elements work together to shape meaning and influence audiences. Expanding the research to different regions of Pakistan—especially comparing urban and rural settings—could uncover how cultural and linguistic nuances affect the way power is communicated in advertising. It may also be helpful to focus on how real people, especially from different age groups, genders, and social backgrounds, actually receive and respond to these messages. This kind of audience-centered research can reveal whether the power strategies used in ads are truly effective or simply reflective of outdated stereotypes. Additionally, blending Critical Discourse Analysis with other approaches, like interviews or case studies, could offer a more holistic understanding of the emotional and psychological effects of persuasive language. Ultimately, future research should aim not just to critique, but also to contribute positively to more thoughtful and inclusive communication in media.

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