

## Book Review

***Sold on Language: How Advertisers Talk to You & What This Says About You.* By Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.**

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Linguists Sedivy and Carlson offer an engaging and accessible exploration of the potential for advertisements to persuade consumers both at the conscious and unconscious levels. Drawing on research from psychology, cognitive science, and linguistics while also incorporating web sources, news features, and magazines, the authors consider how messages gain persuasive power from their lexical and syntactical construction. Primarily concerned with the risks inherent in reflexive decision-making—a result of impulsive, gut reactions rather than logical reasoning—the authors worry that the general public’s inability to identify and understand persuasive strategies at work may negate the much-celebrated freedom of choice that, at least in theory, defines American society.

Sedivy and Carlson investigate how advertisers employ linguistic strategies to attract consumers. They emphasize the need for cautious consumerism rooted in a nuanced awareness of language and persuasion. However, they also infuse the text with a persistent concern for the political implications of persuasive language; while readers are likely already skeptical of political messages, the authors marshal fine-grained linguistic evidence to show how even the selection of a single word can resonate with audiences. Importantly, persuasive language can inform but also mislead in settings ranging from a shopping trip to the ballot box.

Sedivy and Carlson argue that “having a clearer sense of how our minds work when advertisers talk to us can only bolster our own power of choice.” (14) This statement implies that such power of choice will extend beyond purchasing decisions and into other, more critical realms such as the maintenance of a democratic society. To provide readers with this foundational knowledge, the authors offer numerous examples and explanations of how language can be used—and in some cases manipulated—to serve speakers’ and writers’ interests.

Chapter 1, “The Power of Choice,” sets forth basic principles and definitions that inform subsequent chapters. Establishing that “advertising is a form of persuasion” (4) in which the speaker and the listener have different interests, Sedivy and Carlson define persuasion as successful change of “not just the hearer’s actions, but also the internal state that leads to those actions” (6). The authors further emphasize that “there’s no persuasion without choice” (7), thereby distinguishing between persuasion and coercion. This chapter urges the need for gaining “scientific understanding of the processes that underlie persuasive language” as a “starting point for awareness in knowing our own minds” and therefore placing “ourselves into a better position to choose how we choose” (4).

Sedivy and Carlson devote the rest of the book to explaining psychological and linguistic studies on how the mind filters, processes, and applies information. Chapter 2, “The Unconscious Consumer,” summarizes developments in psychology that influenced twentieth century marketing strategies. As new research showed that “arbitrary links between unrelated concepts or events could in fact be made and remembered over a long period of time,” advertisers shifted the focus of their messages away from details about the product and toward “abstract ideas such as love, purity, and patriotism” (18). Bringing in linguistic concepts such as

“lexical neighborhoods” (40) and “sound symbolism” (41), this chapter notes that marketing strategists select brand names carefully and with awareness of consumers’ likely mental associations. The chapter concludes that ads will increasingly try to appeal to our “fast, streamlined, automatic, unconscious minds.”

Chapter 3, “The Attentional Arms Race,” argues that advertisers will either work diligently to claim consumers’ attention or else “craft messages that will manage to persuade on the attentional sidelines” (64). As the number of persuasive messages increases, the concept of peripheral thinking—“a kind of thinking that doesn’t really do any serious analysis at all”—becomes more relevant. The authors worry that when people are “instinctively reacting to low-level cues and knowledge” (57)—a default strategy amid information overload—they are less aware of their choices and more susceptible to persuasive messages that offer little in the way of logical argument. Chapter 4, “We Know What You’re Thinking,” extends this discussion by showing how certain communication strategies, including the use of presuppositions, invite reflexive decision-making rather than critical thought.

In Chapter 5, “Why Ads Don’t Say What They Mean (Or Mean What They Say)”, Sedivy and Carlson explore how, by default, people assume statements to be true and also assume that sequential statements “are linked together in some coherent way” (141) unless given strong reasons to believe otherwise. Advertisers draw on these tendencies by using indirect language (153) and therefore leading readers to draw conclusions that may or may not be accurate.

Chapter 6, “Acting Out,” builds from the fundamental premise that “to speak is to act” (159). The authors discuss how performative verbs differ from declarative language (160) before

shifting to a discussion of the “small fictions” (164) that advertisers create for consumers and the effects that the blending of fiction and reality has on messages’ persuasive power.

Chapter 7, “Divide and Conquer,” begins by identifying the “McDonaldization of advertising” (193) as indicative of “a larger marketing trend of mass customization” that is “likely to continue and to deepen” (196). As consumer choice increases and technological tools for predicting consumer behavior continue to expand, the authors observe that “persuasive messages are likely to get even more intensely personal” (196). Bringing in studies on dialects and the links between personal identity and verbal pronunciation (218), this chapter offers an especially rich discussion of how ads target audiences based on obvious traits such as gender as well as less obvious factors such as regional accent (243). The discussion concludes with the observation that targeted ads will lead to “greater fragmentation of the social landscape” (241), not only perpetuating social divisions but also creating new ones (243).

Chapter 8, “The Politics of Choice,” brings together the themes of advertising and politics to reinforce how persuasive language can sell products as well as political candidates. The authors observe that advertisers’ persuasive messages have evolved over the years to focus “less on selling the product, and more on selling you a *relationship* with the product, and a means of announcing your own identity” (253). Here, and also in Chapter 7, rhetorical concepts such as Kenneth Burke’s notion of identification seem particularly relevant but are not mentioned. While this book is rooted in psychology and linguistics rather than rhetoric, the absence of rhetorical concepts and thinkers within discussions of persuasive language was at times surprising.

Paired with readings in rhetoric, this text would be an excellent addition to an undergraduate composition class. The conversational and often witty tone—with jokes aimed at college-aged students—invites readers to engage with the content and realize that persuasive language is a topic worthy of their consideration. While the authors make the personal implications clear, they also suggest that scholars from psychology, linguistics, cognitive science, marketing, and communication have a professional investment in exploring these topics further. Even though this book emphasizes the need for consumer awareness and thus seeks to reach a general readership, the implied payoff of further scholarly attention to persuasion—a subtle thread throughout—will likely be gratifying for graduate students and scholars who share a concern for the study of language.