

Advertising Discourse: A Contrastive Analysis of Computer Adverts in English and Spanish

Laura Cruz García

Heather Adams

University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

This article looks at the specific discourse features of press ads for computer products in English and Spanish and, to this end, presents the findings of a comparative analysis of two parallel corpora of ads, one in each language. Two particular aspects are considered: firstly, discourse features which are common to the ads analysed in both languages, and which differ in some way from advertising discourse in consumer ads (as described by a number of experts), and secondly, the different ways in which the English and Spanish languages are used in the promotion of these products. In both cases, the communicative function of the discourse features identified is examined. Finally, some suggestions are proffered as to possible didactic applications for these texts, in the light of the conclusions reached, for translators, trainee translators and the teaching of languages for specific purposes.

1. Introduction

The discourse used in the advertising of different types of product in different media varies in a number of ways. Focusing on the printed press, we have observed that ads for computer products present a number of linguistic and discourse features which differ from those found in ads for other types of products in the same medium. The social and cultural context in which the ads are produced also plays an important part in shaping the use of language.

This article presents the results obtained from a comparative analysis of two parallel corpora of adverts of computing products, one in English and the other in Spanish, taken from international and Spanish editions of popular computing magazines such as PC World, PC Magazine, Byte, Macworld, Linux Journal or PC Actual. Special attention has been paid to the communicative function of the most relevant elements of the advertising messages and to the context in which the adverts appear. In the first instance, we outline those aspects observed that are common to print ads for computer products in both English and Spanish. We will then examine particular linguistic characteristics which we found to be different in the two languages.

The findings of this study may be applied in a number of different fields as they constitute an introductory study on discourse analysis, as well as being of interest for the teaching of English for specific purposes looking at language use in both the field of advertising and that of computing. Professional translators also need to be aware of the specific linguistic implications of the product type and social and cultural context in order to make decisions as to the most appropriate use

of language. These same implications can also be used in the training of future translators in the identification of different discourse features.

2. Characteristics of print ads for computer products in English and Spanish

Before we look at the comparative analysis between the prominent discourse features in the two languages, we need to determine those characteristics that differentiate ads for this type of product from those of other product sectors and which are common to ads produced in both languages.

2.1. Overview of characteristics and communicative function

In general, we can say that in ads for this type of product, more than many others, two opposing factors are at play: linguistic economy and the need to supply the reader with as much information as possible about the product. The main function of these texts, that of persuading the potential user to buy, is achieved through the use of two strategies: involving the reader and exalting the product (Ferraz Martínez, 1993:28). The following table summarises the relationship between the strategies mentioned and the morpho-syntactic aspects used in these ads, the most relevant of which we will then go on to examine in more detail:

Brevity of text		Verb omission	
		Noun phrases	
		Juxtaposition	
Persuasion	<i>a. Involving the recipient</i>	Pronouns and determiners	
		Imperatives	
		Interrogative sentences	
		Exclamative sentences	
	<i>b. Exalting the product</i>	Technical features of the product	Comparative and superlative forms
			Coordination
		Cause-effect relations (produced by the use of the product)	Conditional, reason, purpose and result clauses

Table 1. Morpho-syntactic aspects and related functions

In order to keep the text short, juxtaposition, verb omission and condensed noun phrases are used. In order to persuade the recipients and lead them towards the decision to purchase the product, the advertiser uses personal pronouns and determiners, imperative, interrogative and exclamative structures to involve the addressee. In order to highlight the product's technical features, comparisons, coordination and present simple are employed; conditional, cause, purpose and result clauses express the cause-effect relationship produced by the use of the product.

2.2. Distinguishing features

We will now examine in more detail the principal characteristics of print ads for computer products, the combination of which make them differ from the advertising of other product types, as described by experts on the discourse of advertising such as Cook (1992), Dyer (1996), Block de Behar (1992), Ferraz Martínez (1993), and Rey (1996). The aspects that will be studied are the following: the role of the addressees of these particular adverts, the structure of these texts, the combination of image and written text and a series of linguistic features.

2.2.1. *Customers as users*

According to Dyer's classification of adverts (1996:4-5), we can include our corpus in the so-called "professional and technical adverts". This type of advertisement addresses the products being promoted to potential buyers who are viewed by the advertiser more as users than as customers. These ads appear in specialised magazines addressed to experts, professionals and people who are interested in computer technology. Potential purchasers can usually assess the price, technical features and performance of the product, and for this reason the advertiser considers them more as users than as customers.

2.2.2. *Structure*

Secondly, the information provided in these ads tends to be divided into a number of structural parts, presenting the content outlined below. Rey (1996) established the following structural component parts as common to advertisements in general:

- **the title: together with the image, this is the main element used to attract the audience's attention; it presents the principal idea of the advertisement;**
- **the subtitle: a bridge between the title and the body of the advert, which aims to clarify and complement the title;**
- **the body: an essential part in these texts given their descriptive nature.**

This section presents information regarding technical features and advantages of the product (e.g. user-friendliness, performance), latest technological advances of the product, problems which the use of the product can solve, price, comparison with similar products or previous versions of the same product and positive opinions about the product voiced by other institutions, publications, experts or well-known people;

- **identifying information: comprising the brand name and the slogan, and**
- **complementary information: this section provides the reader with the advertiser's contact details (telephone, fax, web page, e-mail address, etc.), supplied in order to enable the potential customer to request further information and locate or purchase the product.**

However, Cruz García (2001) added two further structural parts found, in conjunction with those described above, in ads for computer products, namely:

- **legal information: information about copyright and trademarks, and**
- **additional information: either in the form of a gift given when buying the advertised product or information about an event which could be of interest to the potential users of the product.**

2.2.3. Image and written text

Although there is currently a tendency in advertising in general to reduce, and even omit, the linguistic component of the text (Piñel and Beltrán, 1994:369) and address the audience through images, the written text is fundamental in adverts for computer products. The linguistic code supplies important and apparently objective information such as technical features, price and contact details, without which it would not be possible to make the distinction among computer products of the same nature. The detailed description of product characteristics, in

this case, plays a fundamental role in the purchase decision of the potential purchaser.

2.2.4. Linguistic features

In both languages, there are a number of purely linguistic features that distinguish these ads from those of other products. Here, we will distinguish between lexical traits and syntactical traits.

a. Lexical traits

This section looks at the most relevant lexical aspects of these ads, which are the terminology used, neologisms, numbers and causative verbs.

1. Terminology

The first, and most obvious, distinguishing trait in this sense is the use of terminology taken from the field of computing, including compound adjectives and nouns. Thus, we find examples such as *user-defined*, *quick-start*, *desktop*, *database*, *keyboard*, in English; and *alta velocidad*, *3D*, *videoconferencia*, *videocámara*, *ciberespacio*, and *disco duro*, in Spanish.

2. Neologisms

The rapid rate of technological progress in this field makes it necessary to name new devices and technologies as soon as they are produced, thus giving rise to frequent use of neologisms. Neologisms constitute one of the most important features of the discourse of both the field of computing and that of advertising, whose language must be original and accurate, as well as up-to-date (Bogucki, 1995:351). Some of the most common neologisms found in English are multitasking, multimedia, microprocessor, internet, ultra-compact, intranet, megabyte, ultra-high, interactive, interlace; and in Spanish, interactivo, multimedia, internet, multitarea, microprocesador, interfaz, multiplicador, infrarrojo, monocromo, antivirus, multiprotocolo, multifunción. In both languages we find, for example, ROM (read only memory), RAM (random access memory), ALU (arithmetic-logic unit), CPU (central processing unit), CD-ROM and LCD (Liquid Crystal Display). As these examples clearly show, many of the neologisms found in Spanish are actually loan words taken from English.

3. Numbers

In the description of the product in these ads copywriters use many numbers to refer to characteristics such as software versions, processor speed, memory, size of monitor, resolution, models, etc. These ads exalt these features as a way of persuading potential users.

(1) Making exclusive use of Trinitron technology, our new A-720, 92kHz, 17” Artmedia Trinitron monitor, (...).¹

Where *A-720* refers to the product version, *92kHz* to speed and *17”* is the monitor size. In Spanish numbers are used in the same way.

4. Causative verbs

The use of causative verbs is also very common in adverts for computer products as a way of establishing cause-effect relationships, examples of which can be found both in English and Spanish. Verbs often found in English include the following: *make*, *let*, *enable*, *make possible*, *permit* and *allow*, while Spanish examples include: *permitir*, *capacitar*, *posibilitar*, *hacer posible*).

(2) El nuevo servidor de impresión (...). Detecta de forma automática la velocidad de la red, y permite conectar de forma muy sencilla las impresoras (...). El AXIS PrintPoint (...) incorpora tecnología Web, lo que hace posible visualizar y realizar la configuración (...)²

In example 2, the verb *permitir* introduces the cause-effect relationship derived from the use of the advertised product, the *AXIS PrintPoint*, which enables the user to connect the printers in a very simple way. The expression *hacer posible* is then used to the same end: thanks to the advertised product, the configuration can be viewed and realised.

(3) Our latest release features Corel R.A.V.E™, a brand new application that lets you perform feats never before possible.³

¹ Byte, June 1998, Vol. 23, No. 6, p. 8.

² Byte, nº 36, enero 1998, p. 75.

³ PCWorld, February 2001, p. 24.

The verb *let* expresses the possibility that the user has to achieve an aim, which is the effect.

Other verbs used frequently in these ads are *improve, protect, create, help, need, can, change, give, make easy, provide* and *secure* in English, and *producir, necesitar, poder*, in Spanish.

b. Syntactical traits

However, we also found a number distinguishing syntactical features common to ads of this type in both English and Spanish, including the limited use of verbs in the imperative mode, the use of past tenses, and the frequent use of all types of subordinate clauses.

1. Imperative

Due to its appellative function, the imperative is frequently used in advertising discourse. However, in ads for computer products, where technical descriptions and product advantages play a fundamental role in the persuasive strategy, it is not so usual as in ads for other types of products and is usually limited to the complementary information, where the addresser supplies the advertiser's, manufacturer's or distributor's contact details to help the recipient either to obtain further information or to buy the product.

(4) Visita nuestro sitio en la web o tu tienda de informática habitual para más información.⁴

(5) Call a Kingstonâ representative at (800) 435-0670 to find out how Data Stacker can make adapting to change easier.⁵

2. Past tense

Regarding the use of past forms, although the present tense is the most frequently used in advertising in order to describe the product, these ads make significant use of the past tense both in Spanish and English. The advertiser sometimes presents a brief narration of the history or the evolution of the company

⁴ PC Actual, año X, n° 102, noviembre 1998, p. 299.

⁵ Byte, June 1998, Vol. 23, No. 6, p. 31.

or product since its origins, in order to show the progress made in comparison with earlier models or situations, as can be seen in examples 6 and 7:

(6) Cuando apareció por primera vez Ethernet, parecía que con un ancho de banda de 10 Mbps íbamos a tener más que suficiente (...)⁶

(7) Two years ago, the introduction of Java[®] software created a whirlwind of excitement and an explosion of coffee-oriented puns. Was it all hype?⁷

In this way, the advertising company highlights its role in the improvement of the product in response to new needs, as well as the contribution made by the product to technology. Experts and interested people expect particular visible enhancements in this field and want to feel that they are buying into the latest technology. By describing the progress made in the development of the product, advertisers draw attention to their key role in creating technology.

3. Sentence structure

In terms of sentence structure, compound coordinate and subordinate sentences are very frequently used in our adverts for computer products in English and Spanish. This contrasts with the simple sentences and juxtaposition so commonly-found in advertising in general, in accordance with the principles of simplicity and linguistic economy that rule the discourse of advertising (Ferraz Martínez, 1993). Of course, coordination is common in these ads, where a sequence of facts, features and advantages of the product is given, as in example 8.

(8) Our technology grows with your business and can help power protect your new applications as you roll them out.⁸

But subordination plays an important role in transmitting the message given the need to highlight the product's features and explain its possibilities through expressions of cause-effect relationships, which can be achieved with the use of conditional, purpose, reason and result clauses.

⁶ Byte, n° 36, enero 1998, p. 67.

⁷ Byte, January 1998, Vol 23, No. 1, p. 4.

⁸ Linux Journal, September 2000, 77, p. 119.

Conditional clauses

Both in English and Spanish, conditional clauses are the most frequently used constructions to introduce the solution to a certain problem or to achieve a particular aim.

In the case of computer products, which have a practical and well-defined function, users expect to be able to solve a particular problem or to make the most of their computer equipment (unlike other products such as drinks or perfumes, with aesthetic values).

(9) If your file transfers across the network are slow and time-consuming, Timbaktuâ Express is the remedy for you.⁹

This construction is also frequent in the complementary information in Spanish, which offers more information by contacting a telephone number, address or web site.

(10) Si desea más información llame al teléfono 902 197 198.¹⁰

It is interesting to note, however, that in English, instead of the conditional construction for this type of information it is more frequent to find expressions such as *For more information contact your nearest dealer*, which is influencing Spanish advertising, where it is becoming more common to find the literal translation *para más información (...)*.

Purpose

Advertisers use purpose clauses to explicitly mention either a function of the product or a specific advantage for the potential user. Thus, this type of subordinate clause acts as a persuasive element, as the following examples show:

(11) Además, para que puedan ser compartidos de manera más fácil, hemos incorporado una tecnología de chips inteligentes (...)¹¹

(12) Instead of flabby, wasted logic, IDT WinCgip C6 is bulging with muscular Level One Cache to accelerate the most often-used instructions.¹²

⁹ Macworld, December. 1997, p. 159.

¹⁰ Byte, nº 40, mayo 1998, p. 59.

¹¹ PC Actual, Año X, nº 102, noviembre 1998, p. 51.

¹² Byte, January 1998, Vol. 23, No. 1, p.61.

Reason

In computer adverts these constructions help to present the reasons why the user can obtain benefits and advantages from using the product and therefore also fulfil a persuasive role.

(13) Compaq Armada 1500 es el portátil al que no se le puede pedir nada más... porque lo tiene todo integrado simultáneamente (...)¹³

(14) Finally, a projector that gives you the power to present your ideas anywhere, under any lighting condition, using any kind of computer. Because only EPSON, the world leader in portable projectors, gives you SizeWise technology.¹⁴

3. Differences between English and Spanish ads

In this article we will focus on the morpho-syntactic characteristics identified in our comparative analysis of the ads in English and Spanish. Of course, the structures and elements studied have been analysed in relation with their pragmatic aims, as we will observe in the examples proposed. Our analysis shows the following morpho-syntactic features to be of particular relevance when comparing the use of discourse between the two languages: the imperative mode, subordinate clauses of result, the use of complex noun phrases; pronouns and determiners and the comparative forms of adjectives.

3.1. Imperative

As we have already mentioned, the imperative is not as usual here as in ads for other types of products. In advertisements for computer products in both English and Spanish, it is normally used in the complementary information, where the addresser of the message supplies his contact details. However, the imperative is also used in other parts of the ad in English adverts (especially in American publications), which employ a more aggressive and direct advertising style, infrequently used in Spanish ads. The following example illustrates this approach:

¹³ PC Actual, año X, n° 102, noviembre 1998, p. 41.

¹⁴ Macworld, December 1997, p. 74.

(15) Achieve perfect color balance in less than 3 minutes for around \$50.¹⁵

3.2. Clauses of result

As we saw in the above section on sentence structure, the use of subordinate clauses is a common feature in adverts for computer products. Clauses of result, focusing on the results obtained from using the product, are among the most commonly-used subordinate clauses in these ads in English to highlight the advantages of the product, while in Spanish purpose clauses are preferred to convey this idea. This can be seen in example 11 in Spanish and the following example in English:

(16) And we incorporate Rockwell's K56flex technology so you'll have the broadest Internet service provider support.¹⁶

3.3. Complex noun phrases

The use of noun structures becomes relevant when promoting computer products, since, as we have already said, these texts include a relatively detailed description including features and advantages of the product. Thus, we can see the following example in Spanish:

(17) Administración de soportes de información estándar del sector.¹⁷

But in English, the noun phrases used to describe the product are even more complex, as illustrated in the following examples:

(18) From the makers of Twin Turbo come the powerful, perfectly balanced graphics board solutions you've been hoping for.¹⁸

(19) The IBM PC 300® GL, Small Business Series comes with a blazing-fast Intel® Pentium® III processor, (...).¹⁹

¹⁵ Macworld, December 1997, p. 37.

¹⁶ Macworld, November 1997, p. 190.

¹⁷ PC Actual, n° 109, junio 1999, p. 17.

¹⁸ Macworld, December 1997, p. 63.

¹⁹ PC Magazine, September, 19, 2000, p. 3.

Examples 18 and 19 give us an idea of the extent to which the capacity of the English language to express complex concepts using a chain of nouns can shape parts of the discourse used in these ads. The nature of the Spanish language, by contrast, does not allow for such long or complex noun phrases and obliges copywriters to resort to less dynamic paraphrases.

3.4. Pronouns and determiners

The most commonly used personal pronoun in advertising in English is the second person singular *you* to address the recipient, as well as the corresponding possessive determiner and pronoun (*your* and *yours*). These elements are intended to establish a closer relationship between the advertiser and the recipient; and between the recipient and the product.

(20) All you need is Adaptecâ PowerDomain Plus — a Wide UltraSCSI card (...).²⁰

(21) The printer's advanced software keeps your colors bright, (...).²¹

In Spanish, although adverts resort to this strategy to approach the reader, there is an important difference due to the nature of the language. Unlike in English, in Spanish there is the distinction between the second person pronoun used to address the hearer in a less formal way and the courtesy second person pronoun.

(22) Esta nueva versión se parece a la herramienta de alta productividad que tú ya conocías (...).²²

The use of the less formal pronoun implies a certain degree of familiarity between the addresser and the addressee.

Sometimes the use of the courtesy second person conveys the idea of prestige and respect for the recipient in ads oriented to managers, businessmen or executives, as seen in example 23.

²⁰ Macworld, November 1997, p. 190.

²¹ Macworld, December 1997, p. 183.

²² PC World, nº 118, febrero 1996, p. 27.

(23) Mire, en confianza, si usted es empresario ya sabe el dinero que cuesta mantener al día la red informática de su empresa.²³

3.5. Comparisons

In the discourse of advertising comparative and superlative forms are used to highlight the features of the product. Comparative forms establish a comparison between the product promoted and others of the same type, and/or previous versions of the same product. Both in English and in Spanish they are used in the same way. However, while in English comparisons with competitive brands are explicit, advertising practice in Spanish tends not to make any such explicit references to competitors. Thus, we can compare the following examples, in which we can see that the Spanish ad (example 24) makes reference to earlier versions of the product, while the English ad (example 25) names a competitor's (Sony) product.

(24) (...) que además de superar la alta calidad fotográfica conseguida ya por los anteriores modelos de NOVAJET, ahora permite imprimir una gama de colores superior incluso al estándar (...) ha consistido en desarrollar unas nuevas tintas de cuatricomía que ofrecen unos resultados más brillantes, más vivos (...).²⁴

(25) Compared to Sony's 20sell, it's an inch smaller, but the Sony costs 74% more for comparable specs and performance.²⁵

4. Conclusions

Our study has lead us to conclude that the discourse of adverts for computer products in both English and Spanish presents a number of characteristics which differ from that used in other product sectors. We have also identified some features which are not shared by ads in both languages.

Features common to ads in both languages include addressing potential customers as users, who have a certain degree of expert knowledge; a particular

²³ Byte, n° 40, mayo 1998, p. 21.

²⁴ PC World, n° 118, febrero 1996, p. 133.

²⁵ PC World, n° 118, febrero 1996, p. 219.

structure in which two new sections (legal and additional) are included to complement the general structure outlined by Rey (1996), and the importance of the linguistic component of the text in the detailed description of product characteristics, which, unlike in ads for other product types, constitute a decisive factor in the purchase decision.

There are also a number of differentiating linguistic characteristics found in ads for computer products in both English and Spanish. These include both lexical traits like terminology, neologisms, numbers and causative verbs and syntactical elements such as use of the imperative, the past tense and subordinate clauses (of condition, purpose and reason).

As to the differences between English and Spanish adverts in this product category, we can see that, in spite of the similarities between them, a number of differences can be identified:

- **The imperative is more common in English than in Spanish ads, where the use of this form tends to be limited to the complementary information.**
- **Subordinate clauses of result abound in English adverts, but they are not so common in Spanish, where purpose clauses are preferred.**
- **Long complex noun phrases are common in English ads, while the nature of the Spanish language does not permit such complex structures.**
- **Regarding personal pronouns, we have to take into account that in Spanish ads, sometimes the courtesy form of the second person pronoun (*usted*) is used, and sometimes a more informal option is preferred (*tú*), depending on the way the addressee is to be addressed. The same difference is observed in the use of the determiners and possessive pronouns corresponding to each form of address. Since there is no such distinction in English, it is not necessary to make decisions in this respect.**
- **Although in both cultures it is common to use comparative constructions, in English competitors are mentioned, but in Spanish they are not.**

The use of imperative structures in English and comparisons in which competitor brands are named reflect a more aggressive sales approach. At the same time, the distinction made in Spanish between the informal second person and the courtesy second person has made it possible to address the user in a more formal way. These two points underline the way in which cultural factors are reflected in the discourse of parallel texts in different languages that serve the same communicative function.

The findings of our study are relevant in at least three fields: translation, the teaching of languages (in this case English and Spanish) for specific purposes, and translator training. If, as we have seen, advertising discourse differs depending on the product being promoted, and if different use of language is made in the source and target languages, the translator must be aware of these differences if he/she is to translate an advertisement for a given product adequately. These differences can also be used in the training of would-be translators, to help them understand both the need to consult relevant parallel documents in both source and target languages (in this case, ads from the pertinent product sector) and to analyse the discourse used in both languages, and the relevant cultural factors, as a way of ensuring appropriate language use in their translation. Both trainee translators and students of languages for specific purposes can also use these texts as a source of new specialised and semi-specialised technological vocabulary set in context. These texts are particularly valuable as didactic material for two reasons: firstly, they are authentic original texts, produced for a specific communicative purpose, and secondly, because, as ads, they are presented in a format which is familiar to the students and therefore acts as a motivating factor in the learning process.

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