

**The following is a pre-proof version of a review that appeared as: Forceville, Charles (2002). Review of Lars Hermerén *English for Sale: A Study of the Language of Advertising* (Lund UP 2001). *Journal of Pragmatics* 34:3, 341-44. If you want to quote from it, please check the final, published version.**

Lars Hermerén, *English for sale: a study of the language of advertising*. Lund Studies in English 99. Lund: Lund University Press, 1999. 201 pp. + 53 b/w illus. ISBN 91-7966-576-4 (pb). Price: SEK 225 (excl. VAT).

Reviewed by Charles Forceville, University of Amsterdam. Department of Film and Television Studies, Nieuwe Doelenstraat 16, 1012 CP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-Mail: Charles.Forceville@hum.uva.nl

In the 1970s and 1980s applied linguists and linguistically-minded literature scholars produced a substantial body of analyses of literary texts, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Often these studies were conducted under the banner of "stylistics." The tradition is still a highly fruitful one, as transpires in the interdisciplinary articles in for instance the journal *Language and Literature*.

But the object of study has since then considerably broadened to other types of texts, many of which moreover are no longer exclusively verbal. A corpus that has attracted steadily more attention is advertising (e.g. Cook, 1992; Myers, 1994; Messaris, 1997; Goddard, 1998). Nowadays MA thesis supervisors in language departments are far more often presented with applications of linguistic theory to advertisements than to poems or literary fiction. Whether that is something to rejoice in or lament is a matter for debate; but at the very least it can be said that students' enthusiasm itself warrants scholarly interest in the topic. Lars Hermerén's *English for sale: a study of the language of advertising* clearly reflects this development.

In the abstract preceding the contents, Hermerén states that he proposes "to examine the various manifestations of advertising, what forms it takes and, more particularly, to consider its status as a genre" and "to investigate the persuasive strategies used in advertising, in particular those of a verbal nature." In seven chapters the author discusses advertising's generic aspects (chapter 1); its relation to the social context in which advertising functions (chapter 2); its communicative dimensions and the way ads address the audience (chapters 3 and 4); verbal and visual patterns aiding persuasive purposes (chapters 5 and 6); and "advertising as a cultural system" (chapter 7).

Hermerén's first chapter is of genuine general interest, since here he substantiates his claim that advertising (comprising newspaper ads, brochures, leaflets, flyers, billboards and TV commercials, most of them from the 1990s) constitute a 'genre' by exploring what characteristics are crucial to recognizing and labelling advertising as such. Collating various dictionary definitions, he arrives at five features: (1) they contain information relating to a product or service; (2) they intend to persuade an audience to do or believe something; (3) they originate from a specific source; (4) they are paid for; (5) and they are communicated via a medium. Although (3) and (4) are usually self-evidently linked, this need not be the case: distinguishing between them allows for intriguing speculations about the difference between sponsorship and advertising. (I submit that we would react differently to the notorious Benetton campaigns if Benetton were seen as 'sponsoring' debate on sensitive social issues such as racial relations, wars, capital punishment etc. than if, as we now do, we understand them primarily as promoting Benetton products.) Interestingly these criteria would

qualify a substantial number of books as advertisements as well: an academic study that promotes ("sells") the use of wind mills as a source of energy and that is heavily funded by environmental organizations fits all five criteria.

In this opening chapter, Hermerén makes useful and thought-provoking observations about the importance of function over form, the role of the physical environment in which an advertisement appears, and the analogies between advertising and news reportage. Drawing on work by Biber (1988) and Swales (1990), Hermerén makes compelling suggestions for considering advertising as a genre, thereby broadening the theoretical interest of this chapter beyond the domain of commercial messages alone. The second chapter goes on to position advertising's role in society at large, concentrating on such issues as the difference between commercial and non-commercial varieties; newspapers' dependence on advertising for their economic survival; and the way recontextualizing elements in ads affects their meaning.

After these opening chapters, the book unfolds as a decent textbook in the stylistics tradition. Slipping in rhetorical questions; parasitizing on other genres; iconicity; the use of incomplete sentences; the persuasive power of rhyme, rhythm, and puns; the non-comparative comparative ("Product X is better" [than what?]) -- it is all there, competently and accessibly discussed. The only objection one could raise is that it all sounds over-familiar: from such sources as Williamson (1978), or Vestergaard & Schrøder (1985), or even Leech (1966). In fact, this impression is reinforced by a closer look at the bibliography: of the 113 references, only thirty are from the 1990s, of which a mere eight pertain to the last five years before going to press. Thus, Hermerén's book can hardly be said to present the cutting edge of scholarly research in the field. Whether

this is to be seen as a problem depends on what is the target audience he has in mind. This issue of readership is nowhere explicitly addressed by the author -- somewhat surprisingly in light of the fact that 'marketing the product' is crucial for the advertising business whose texts constitute Hermerén's focus of attention.

The lack of innovative ideas and the recycling of the familiar is redeemed, at least partly, by two factors: in the first place the old approaches and angles are applied to a wide variety of (English-language) advertisements, which yield fresh analyses that are often stimulating in their own right. In the second place, Hermerén regularly cites from empirical investigations into the uptake and comprehension of ads and other texts -- a line of research that most of his predecessors (Messaris 1997 is an exception) largely ignored.

An interesting problem is the role of pictures in the book. Hermerén himself seems somewhat indecisive about what place to accord the pictorial elements (including fonts and other aspects of 'picturing the word'). On the one hand he thanks the advertisers for granting permission to reproduce the ads, since "a book on the language of advertising cannot do without reproductions of advertisements" (from the acknowledgments), while in the epilogue he expresses the hope that "although the importance of the visual element has increased considerably in recent years, this book has ... been able to show that the verbal side of advertising messages cannot and should not be neglected" (182). With the latter exhortation one cannot but concur, of course, but the effects of modern advertisements and billboards depend so profoundly on the interrelations of 'word & image' that an almost exclusively verbal approach remains somewhat unsatisfactory. But this is perhaps something for which it is not fair to blame

the author who, judging from the title of his earlier On modality in English (1978), works in a language department and might argue that pictures are not his job. Here surfaces a more general problem: word & image studies has no natural "niche" in the traditional university structure, while existing departments are often firmly fenced enclosures with intimidating 'no trespassing signs' to hold outsiders at bay (see also Forceville 1997) -- a situation that is not conducive to innovative research.

An additional difficulty is that practical, applicable theories of the pictorial are still scarce. Kress & Van Leeuwen's Reading images: the grammar of visual design (1996) provides exciting starting points that, however, are still far from living up to that title (see Forceville 1999). Still, in the long run, in the area of multi-media studies one should wish for the type of book that combines the best of the tradition in which Herméren works with approaches such as those being developed by Kress & Van Leeuwen.

To return to Hermerén's study, apart from the curious page numbering (the pages before chapter 1 are not numbered, and some right-hand pages have even numbers), the book has been pleasantly if modestly produced. While it does not (except where 'genre' is concerned) probe theoretical models in any detail, and thus holds no great interest for the expert, the book provides a fair insight in well-established approaches to advertising language, demonstrated via a host of engaging examples. I imagine that particularly students will benefit from Herméren's forays in various directions, and appreciate the accessible style in which he leads the way.

## References

- Biber, Douglas, 1988. *Variations across speech and writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cook, Guy, 1992. *The discourse of advertising*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Forceville, Charles, 1997. Making literary studies matter more. *Spiel* 16: 1/2, 116-20.
- Forceville, Charles, 1999. Educating the eye? Kress & Van Leeuwen's *Reading images: the grammar of visual design* (1996). *Language & Literature*, 8:2, 163-78.
- Goddard, Angela, 1998. *The language of advertising*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Hermerén, Lars, 1978. *On modality in English: a study of the semantics of the modals*. Lund: Lund University Press.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen, 1996. *Reading images: the grammar of visual design*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Leech, Geoffrey N., 1966. *English in advertising: a linguistic study of advertising in Great Britain*. London: Longman.
- Myers, Greg, 1994. *Words in ads*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Messaris, Paul, 1997. *Visual persuasion: the role of images in advertising*. Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage.
- Swales, John Malcolm, 1990. *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Vestergaard, Torben, and Kim Schrøder, 1985. *The language of advertising*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Williamson, Judith, 1978. *Decoding advertisements: ideology and meaning in advertising*. London: Marion Boyars.