

PhDr. Jitka Vlčková, Ph.D.

Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Filozofická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity

Love lines: personal advertisements in Australia and Canada

Seznamovací inzeráty v Austrálii i Kanadě

Keywords: postcolonial, media, sociolinguistics.

Annotation: Personal advertisements can be seen as mirrors of societal values and standards. They are written by laymen who attempt to show themselves in a most positive light and thus attract the ‘right’ person’s attention. The article mentions the strategy used in advertising and considers prominent phenomena which are present in the ads. Comparisons of frequencies of expressions and collocations give insight into the linguistic representations of the most recognized and desirable values in Canada and Australia.

Anotace: Na seznamovací inzeráty je možno pohlížet jako na zrcadlo sociálních hodnot a norem. Autory inzerátů jsou laici, jejichž cílem je představit se v co nejlepším světle, a následně upoutat pozornost žádoucí osoby.

Článek pojednává o textové strategii seznamovacích inzerátů a uvádí nejvýznamnější rysy těchto textových kolonií. Interpretace četnosti výrazů a kolokací umožňuje identifikovat a porovnat uznávané hodnoty v Kanadě a Austrálii

LOVE LINES: PERSONAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN AUSTRALIA AND CANADA

Introduction

Personal advertisements appear in a wide range of publications in columns with headings such as ‘Love Lines’, ‘Meeting Point’, ‘Lonely Hearts’ etc. Newspapers, journals, more recently the Internet and other media took over the role of the by-gone matchmakers. In a world that is getting more and more densely populated, finding a life partner becomes increasingly difficult. Though one may expect the urban environment to offer lots of opportunities for social life, contacts and interactions, which are decisive for a person’s self-esteem and

satisfaction in life, often remain superficial and only reflect the paradoxical phenomenon typical of places with dense concentrations of people - alienation. Being amongst dozens of other humans does not prevent individuals from feeling abandoned. In Australia and Canada it is also the vast distances between some settlements which may hinder the possibility of personal contacts.

Personal advertisements thus originate in people's need to find a solution to their loneliness. People therefore either turn with their problem to various agencies or they put an advertisement in a newspaper or magazine. By putting in an advertisement, a person enters an imagined market with the aim to sell one's qualities at the best price possible.

Strategy of personal advertisements

The presented paper is based on an analysis of 500 Australian and 310 Canadian personal advertisements both from serious newspapers and tabloids. In this study I only considered advertisements submitted by people who were looking for partners of the opposite sex.

The aim is to show what language can reveal about the characteristic features of an individual, of a community, and consequently, of a nation. While the extent, or length, of personal advertisements is more or less standardised all over the world, the same cannot be said about their structure and especially values and societal assumptions that are implicated in them.

The discussion will include advertisements submitted by white people born in Australia and Canada, people born outside these countries and people of other ethnic backgrounds, especially Asian. It will look at the values communicated by immigrants in their new country and compromises between (or adjustments to?) their ethnic and the new (predominantly white) culture which has its roots in British culture.

Unlike commercial advertisements, which are ingeniously created by advertising specialists and address a wide public, personal advertisements are produced by laymen in the field of advertising who wish to present themselves in a way which will attract the 'right' person's attention. In these pieces of phatic communication the writer (usually one person) addresses an unknown, 'ideal' reader (usually also one person). The main goal is not to provide information but to mediate contact. Everything that the text conveys is to serve this goal.

The advertisements, though designed by laymen who usually follow the conventions, reflect the strategy, which is current in commercials, AIDA:^{*}

ATTENTION -the reader is attracted;

INTEREST - the reader is tempted to continue reading

DESIRE - the reader wishes to meet the advertiser

ACTION - the reader answers

In other words, the text should stimulate the reader emotionally and selectively and motivate him/her to respond.

The first phase, i.e. attention drawing, seems to be the most important. The writers attempt to put ‘the most appealing’ aspect/s of their personality in the initial part of the advertisement. I considered male and female advertisers separately. The reason was that gender related studies, namely Deborah Tannen’s, found that women and men practise a sort of cross-cultural communication when talking to each other. Messages sent by a person of one gender are perceived through, what she calls, ‘an asymmetrical filter’. This means that the semantics of an expression can be different for men and for women; there may be different connotations and thus different aspects may be less appealing for one or the other sex. Tannen says that ‘men communicate in order to be respected while women do so to be liked’ (in: Virginia Langsdorf, 1994, 10).

Let’s have a look now at ways in which colonisation, immigration and different historical developments affected some accepted standards and recognised values and how these can be traced in personal advertisements both in Australia and Canada.

AUSTRALIA

Ex.1:

AUSSIE MALE 24yrs old, 6'3" blue eyes, brown hair, likes swimming, water sports drives, movies & a good joke. Seeks lady 18-25 with gd.sense of humour, for friendship, view relationship.

Ex.2:

ATTRACTIVE LADY 38, single, slim, 49 kg, 150cm, educated, reliable, romantic at heart and good sense of humour. Enjoys travelling, dining out. Seeks gentleman who has similar qualities.

The typical male Australian advertiser will mention his Australian nationality. My material showed that 33% of male advertisers put in the first position, which is usually in bold letters, expressions which refer to Australian nationality, only then come the age, physical attractiveness, professional career or a personal trait. In women, physical attractiveness comes first in 34%, nationality only in about 14%, 40% of which are other than Australian (usually Asian), making thus 5.6% of the total. The data suggest that ‘Australian nationality’, especially in men, adds to the social status of the advertiser by implying that he is a member of the dominant white group. The Australian National Dictionary from 1988, however, gives the following definitions of ‘*Australian*’:

1. AN ABORIGINAL
2. A NON-ABORIGINAL PERSON NATIVE OR RESIDENT TO AUSTRALIA

It is quite obvious that the ads do not even admit the first definition. This view may be supported by a report on an interview with white University students in Australia which revealed that ‘to meet an Australian’ definitely did not mean ‘to meet a Koori’, nor a non-Caucasian or Mediterranean but most likely someone of Anglo-Saxon background. If a person was Caucasian born overseas then the person was usually considered ‘a new Australian’ (cf. Langsdorf, 1994, 31).

Australians are believed to be rather laid back with not much respect for social ranks. Hardly any man in Australia would describe himself as *gentleman* while most of them are looking for *a lady*. Also women frequently describe themselves as *ladies*. One of my previous studies revealed that this phenomenon may be a remnant of the colonial past. Female convicts were always referred to as ‘*women*’ and not ‘*ladies*’. There was also the *Female factory* for convicted women in Sydney. A *lady*, on the other hand, was a woman of social distinction, a well-bred woman, it means it was a term connected with the English ruling class.

And how close do men and women from other ethnic backgrounds come to the standards suggested above? Most of them offer and wish qualities mentioned in other ads, the lexical choices, however, are different:

Ex.3

SRI LANKAN/Australian, handsome university educated bachelor, 34 years, 5'4" seeks attractive non/smoking lady for friendship/relationship. Age 19-49, nationality open.

While the most frequent reference to physical appearance in most male ads is words like *fit* and *attractive*, this advertiser uses *handsome*, which – if used by other Australians, appears in the older age groups (around 60). Also his self-identification *bachelor*, reminds the wording typical of advertisements in India. On the other hand he does not offer marriage and he is willing to accept a partner up to 15 yrs older than himself, something very unusual in his home (=Sri Lankan) culture.

Ex.4:

1. *MUSLIM LADY Australian, middle aged, slim, spiritually minded, intelligent, loyal, caring, homely. Seeks sincere intelligent Muslim, 40-50, or gent sincerely interested in Qur-an/Islam.*

This ad seems to have been submitted by a white Australian who converted to Islam. Normally, it is unusual for a Muslim woman to put in the ad by herself. Also the whole structure complies fully with other advertisements in the newspaper. But then the word *homely* gives out the ethnic background of the advertiser: in Australian English *homely* means ‘*not good-looking, plain*’ whereas in Middle-Eastern and Indian cultures the term is used to refer to a ‘*home-maker*’.

How different is then the following ad by an Asian female, which verbalizes values highly recognised in her culture. As in the case of *bachelor* above, *girl* may be suggesting chastity. She is looking for a legally confirmed relationship in which the husband’s position and age should provide for permanent security.

Ex.5:

ASIAN GIRL, very nice, 27 yrs., educated, seeks Aust. prof. gent, n/s, 28 – 37yrs, for marriage.

CANADA

Ex. 6:

COMMUNICATIVE

SWM, 25, I am tall, blond with blue eyes, outgoing and spontaneous. I like fishing, movies, walks and having fun. Searching for a SWF, 23-37.

The attraction drawing is done through the heading. This comes in many different forms, ranging from one-word descriptions (*Honest, Genuine, Handsome, Communicative*) to whole phrases, some of them in the form of direct appeal, that aim at encouraging the reader (*Let's mingle, Don't wait, Contact me*). In my materials, direct appeal never occurs in people of Asian background; it may sound too 'pushy' to them, which is not in compliance with the norms in Asian culture.

The initial part of the advertisement brings information about the ethnic background, or rather, the skin colour of the advertiser. This is usually white, abbreviated to, e.g. SWM (= single white male) complemented by a description of physical features which often make it obvious that the ad refers to a white person (blue eyes, blond hair). About 50% of male advertisers and 75% of women specify the desired ethnicity in their prospective partner, and this is usually again white. The ethnic background seems to be more important than any other physical feature. The abbreviations (SWF, SM, SEIM, SAM – single white female, single male, single East Indian male, single Asian male) include both self- and partner's identification, i.e., *male* and *female*. *Male* and *female*, according to Wierzbicka, are neutral references signaling equality. There was not a single case of a *lady*; and even the phrase '*a man who knows how to treat a lady*' found in Australian ads appears in Canada as *who knows how to treat a woman*'.

In women, more than 75% desire a partner, who is white. Other most frequently desired attributes are *honest, loving* and *humorous*.

Hardly any of the advertisers says something about their education or profession. Neither the listed interests suggest their secure job or position or good income. The advertisers refer to themselves and their prospective partners as *males* and *females*, which, according to Wierzbicka (1997) is a neutral reference, and signals equality.

How is it with people from other ethnic backgrounds?*

"The Canadian legislation does not favour any ethnic group. Native Canadians are no longer looked down on. On the contrary, being a native Canadian adds to their desirability by the opposite sex", is what I learned from the people I interviewed. But – is it really so? My

advertisements suggest that the identification of a native Canadian comes only in self-description and not in partner's description, i.e. no one advertises for a native Canadian. It seems therefore, that to be a Native Canadian is something that is happily accepted by Native Canadians themselves, rather than a quality desired by other ethnic groups. It remains a question why Native Canadians usually advertise for a white partner, and in my sample, never for someone of the same ethnic background. I would presume that – somewhere in their subconsciousness - there is still the heritage of the time when Native Canadians were seen as inferior. Dating, or even marrying a white person, i.e. a member of the dominant majority, may add to their confidence. Unlike other advertisers, most native Canadians do not describe their physical features (except age and height) but rather character qualities. It seems that they want to counteract some prejudices that may have its roots in the past. On the other hand, by advertising for a person of some other ethnic background they signal they do not want to follow the traditions of their culture, which may again signal that in their subconsciousness they still do not consider it equal.

Ex.7:

A FRESH START

N/S(=non-smoker) SNCM, 44, 5'5", a good person and very easygoing. I enjoy things such as carving, walks and jogging. If you are a SWF, 39-44, let's meet soon.

Ex.8:

EASY TO GET ALONG WITH

Compassionate, SNCF, 40, seeks compassionate and easygoing SWM, over 45. Enjoys walks, quiet evenings at home and the country life.

Similar preferences can be observed in people of some other ethnic background:

Ex.9:

HONEST

SAM, 33, 6', with dark hair and brown eyes. Interests are sports and all outdoor activities. Looking for a tall, SWF, under 30, who is open-minded and easygoing.

Ex.10:

BUBBLY & CLASSY

*SAF, 5' 7". very attractive and slim 44. Hobbies include tennis walking and good dining.
Looking for a SWM, 44-52 who is fit, and secure in his profession.*

These advertisers evidently want to blend with the white majority. They signal it not only by looking for a white partner but also the structure and wording of their ads. They stress their appearance (references to their hair and eyes) and interests that are popular among white Canadians. Asian women frequently look for protection and thus wish for a partner in a position which would secure constant income.

Australia and Canada: similar or different

When looking at the similarities and differences in Canada and Australia, it may be useful to mention a few theories as the starting point: 'Language strongly affects and maybe even determines one's view of the world' say some theories (Cameron 1992.6) and, as Wierzbicka (1997.31) adds, 'the meanings of words provide evidence for the reality of cultural norms and shared conceptions'. Considering the most frequent words used in the ads from the angle of the thesis that 'the frequency of words, i.e. repeated meanings give us a clue to the accepted standards' (Stubbs 1996,235), then:

In both post-colonial countries one's ethnicity as well as the partner's is important. While in Australia references to nationality (*Australian, Sri-Lankan, Greek*) and less frequently to race (*Asian, Caucasian*) are frequently, but not always, part of a person's description, in Canada the reference to skin colour abbreviated to a generally consented form (SWM,SNCF, SBM, i.e. *single white male, single native Canadian female, single black male, etc.*) is an inseparable part of a person's identification.

Other most frequent expressions are:

Australia: *1.attractive, 2. professional, 3.movies, 4.friendship, 5. relationship*

Canada: *1. honest, 2. caring, 3.movies, 4. travelling, 5.walking*

Attractiveness which is number one among the attributes in Australian ads may be connected with the so popular Australian beach culture and exposing one's body to the sight of other people. Canadians look more for character qualities (*honest, caring*) which may be thought a

presupposition for ‘friendship’ and ‘relationship’ advertised openly by Australians. Canadians only seldom mention the intended relationship.

Though the purpose of personal advertising is clear to all involved, *marriage* as a goal of the ad is almost a taboo. ‘Marriage is a legal union of a man with a woman for life’ (*Macq.Dict.*). Words suggesting life-long commitment are not popular today as anything that may sound as restricting personal freedom. In Canada, expressions carrying the connotation of freedom (*outdoors, walking, travelling*) rank among the top values.

Conclusion

Both in Australia and Canada the ethnic background of both the writer and the prospective partner is a strongly discriminative factor. Physical appearance is described in rather vague terms in Australia (*attractive, slim*) while in Canada the judgement is left with the reader who is provided with information on the colour of writer’s eyes and hair, their age and height. Other attributes and qualities mentioned in the ads rather support the stereotypical view of tall and well positioned men (hence the high occurrence of *professional*) and beautiful and slim women. Canada, on the other hand, favours more egalitarian attitudes both in identification (*male, female* in SWF, DBM, etc.) and in qualities and activities offered and searched for in the prospective partners.

Bibliography:

Australian National Dictionary. OUP Oxford, 1988.

The Macquarie Dictionary. Australia’s National Dictionary. (1997). The Macquarie University Sydney
The Macquarie Dictionary. Australia’s National Dictionary.

Sydney :The Macquarie University Sydney, 1997.

Vlčková, Jitka (1999).

Do They Mean What They Say? Nationalism and Racial Coding in Australian Personal Advertisements. In: Wimmer, Adi.(ed.): *Australian Nationalism Reconsidered*.
Stauffenburg Verlag Tuebingen

VLČKOVÁ, Jitka. Do They Mean What They Say? Nationalism and Racial Coding in

Australian Personal Advertisements. In: WIMMER, Adi.(ed.).

Australian Nationalism Reconsidered . Tuebingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 1999, pageXXX.

Walker, David et al.(ed.) (1994). *Bodies. Australian Cultural History*. No 13. Deakin University Geelong. ???

WALKER, David et al. (eds.). *Bodies. Australian Cultural History*. Geelong : Deakin University, 1994, No 13.

BAKER, Sidney J.. *The Australian Language*. Sydney . Currawong Publishing Co., 1996.

CAMERON, Deborah. *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. Budapest: CEU, 1992.

CLARK, Manning *A Short History of Australia*. Australia: Penguin Books, 1963.

Langsdorf, Virginia (1994). *The Language of Personal Advertising*. Unpubl. M.A. thesis. University of Melbourne.

LANGSDORF, Virginia. *The Language of Personal Advertising*.

Unpubl. M.A. thesis. University of Melbourne, 1994.

STOLT, Birgit *Hier bin ich! – Wo bist du?*. Kronberg: Scriptor Verlag 1976.

STUBBS, Michael *Text and Corpus Analysis*. London: Blackwell, 1996.

VLČKOVÁ, Jitka. *The Language of Personal Advertisements in Australian Newspapers*.

Unpubl. Ph.D. thesis MU Brno, 2001.

WIERZBICKA, Anna. *Understanding Cultures Through Their Key Words*.

Oxford: OUP New York, 1997.

Newspapers

The Province, November 2001

Vancouver Sun, June 2002

The Age , March-July 1996

The Daily Telegraph, March-July 1996

The Sunday Telegraph, March-July 1996

Weekly Southern Courier, March-July 1996

Programs used

Wordcruncher.(1989). ETC Provo.

TACT/tact1.html

The study is carried out as part of the research project GAČR 405/02/0349.

* (explanations adapted to the needs of personal ads)

• My interpretation of ethnic backgrounds is largely based on interviews of Canadians living in my country, i.e. the Czech Republic. All of them were white

Bibliografický údaj: VLČKOVÁ, J. *Love Lines: Personal advertisements in Australia and Canada*. In Mira Bucholz (ed.). Postcolonial Subjects : Canadian And Australian Perspectives, Torun 2004, s. 209-217.