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# THE PERCEPTION AND COMPREHENSION OF AUDIOVISUAL ADVERTISEMENTS AMONG LEARNERS OF POLISH

## Abstract

The main aim of this article is to examine the extent to which international learners of the Polish language are able to understand audio-visual advertisements based on idiomatic phrases. To answer this question, research was conducted amongst students of B2 level or higher, according to the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2002). This paper joins two distinct but inseparable disciplines in this field of study — namely marketing and language — in order to demonstrate audio-visual commercial advertising as a language discourse.

**Keywords:** advertisement; foreigners; idiomatic phrases; Polish language

## 1 Introduction

Media advertising can be viewed from many different perspectives. Ordinarily, it is thought of as a commercial method of mass consumer product promotion or public relations (Wszolek, 2015). In this sense, an advertisement is a tool for achieving some previously defined marketing goal. On the other hand, regardless of purpose, advertising is a way of framing a particular language discourse from which to project prescribed goals. Whomever receives the message must also decode the message that is contained in the medium. As Goddard writes: “(...) advertising texts are seen as potentially involving complex notions of audience, where readers have to work hard to decode messages and understand different address relationships” (Goddard, 2002, p. 10). The success of the advert may only be achieved when the receiver of the advertisement decodes the message exactly as it was intended. However, this is not as easy as it seems for learners of a language, who will inevitably find it difficult to interpret more nuanced or layered meanings. For example, some idiomatic expressions are difficult to translate into other languages due to the fact that they may refer to different concepts or express a meaning that is culturally dependent and situated (Berko-Gleason & Bernstein-Ratner, 2005). The purpose of this essay is to investigate the extent to which international learners of the Polish language are able to understand Polish advertisements which are based on idiomatic expressions and cultural practices.

## 2 Results of the research

The research was conducted in 11 different Polish language classes in Cracow and Warsaw. 94 people from 25 countries took part in the survey and their level of Polish was B+, according to the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2002). The survey participants were organized into study groups and were asked to complete a basic questionnaire about themselves (information about nationality, age, gender, education, where they had studied Polish previously, reasons for studying Polish, whether they had Polish roots, etc.), which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. At this stage of the research, the participants were also asked about their level of interaction with the Polish language; how frequently they use self-service stores and watch Polish advertisements. In the second stage, two audio-visual advertisements were played twice. Both advertisements employed idiomatic expressions to convey meanings designed to affect the cultural sentiments of the consumer.

As mentioned previously, the groups were asked about their motivations for studying Polish and three main reasons emerged: 25% answered that they wanted to study in Poland; 20% declared that they planned to work in Poland; and a further 20% wanted to utilise the language for communication. The respondents were also asked about their frequency of contact with Polish and the results are illustrated below:

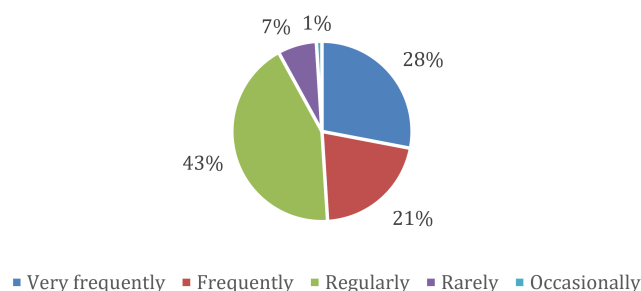


Figure 1: Frequency of contact with Polish language.

Most of the survey participants (92%) declared that they had very frequent or regular contact with Polish. This indicates that Polish is present in their everyday lives and that they are using it either passively or actively. The participants were all living in Poland at the time of the research so they are surrounded by the language in many different situations, including in omnipresent advertisements reinforcing the visual images of different brands and commercial logos. Whilst the participants declared their engagement with Polish society, it was of interest (and perhaps necessary) to understand their use of self-service stores in order to gain a clearer picture of their inclinations (see figure 2, p. 3).

As the present study was based on two advertisements for well-known self-service stores (the supermarket chains Biedronka and Tesco) it was necessary to understand the extent of the participants' knowledge of these brands. 70% declared that they shopped in these kinds of stores frequently or very frequently for two reasons. Firstly, these stores are very popular and highly accessible throughout Poland. Secondly, in this type of store there is less potential for problems caused by language barriers.

In the second part of the research, two advertisements were presented to the groups. The participants were asked to describe their level of understanding and their interpretation of the narrative, including the language components and elements which were utilised within the structure of idiomatic expressions. The results are shown in figure 3 (p. 3).

The results were promising, as the majority of the participants either understood everything or the key points of the message. The second advertisement produced better results than the first. Before presenting the results, it is important to describe the content of each advert in order to put the results in context.

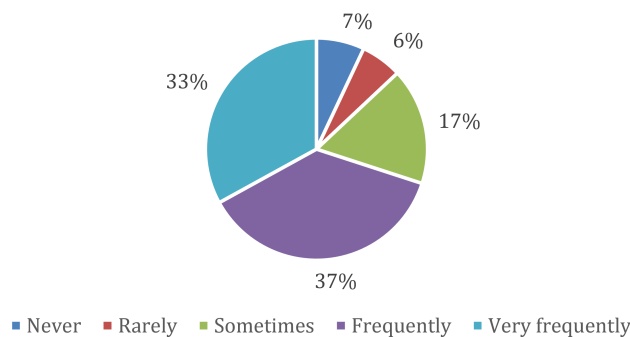


Figure 2: Frequency of buying in self-service stores.

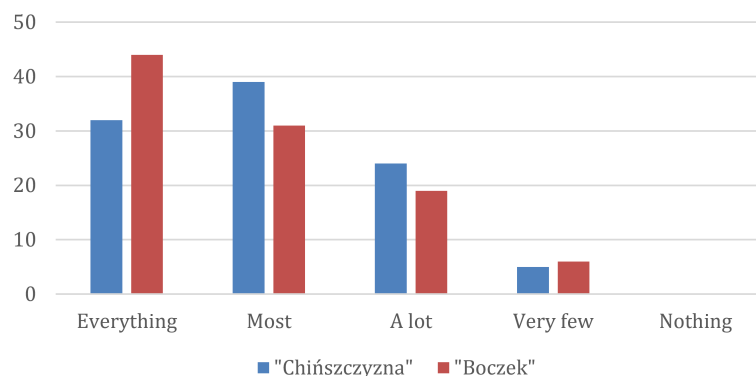


Figure 3: General understanding of the presented advertisements.

The first advertisement is called *Chińszczyzna* (n.d.) and was produced by the Biedronka supermarket chain. One of the images shows some animated vegetables which are standing on top of one another to form some sort of tower which reaches the top of a table on which there is a recipe book. The vegetables are curious what will be served for lunch. At the very top of the tower is an animated bulb of garlic in spectacles trying to read the recipe. When he finally reaches it, he says: “*Nic nie rozumiem, to dla mnie kompletna chińszczyzna*”. The advertisement is based on word play, which is used to enhance the brand and communicate a consumer message (Brierley, 1995, p. 172). Translated into English, the sentence from the advertisement would be: “I cannot understand anything. It’s all Greek to me”. This is an idiomatic expression that is used to highlight a lack of understanding. In Polish, the expression ‘it’s all Greek to me’ is translated as ‘*to dla mnie kompletna chińszczyzna*’ (literally: ‘It’s all Chinese to me’). After this phrase is uttered in the advertisement, a dish with delicious looking Chinese food appears in shot. The word play is based on the idiomatic and literal translation of the sentence, which can mean both a lack of understanding and typical Chinese food. The level of understanding of the whole message is presented in the figure 4 (p. 4).

21% of the participants understood the literal meaning (food from China), 36% understood the second meaning (something incomprehensible), and 28% grasped both meanings from the word play. A small amount of respondents did not answer the question or tried to make assumptions which were incorrect, but which were close to the main idea of the message. What these results prove is that a significant number of respondents, 80 out of 94, understood the message, which represents a very positive score.

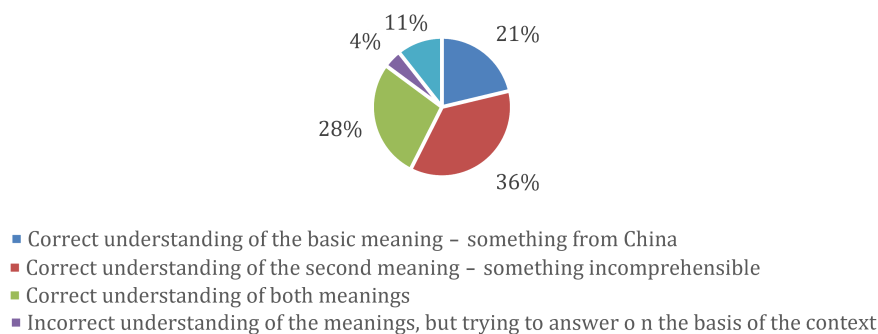
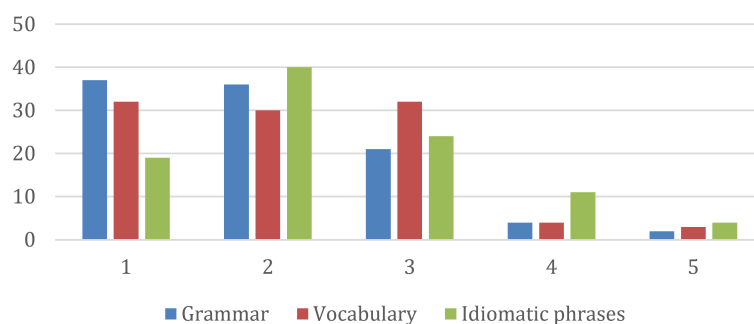
Figure 4: *Chińszczyzna* interpretations.

Figure 5: Estimated understanding of language components — Biedronka advertisement.

The figure above shows how people estimated the difficulty level of each language component (grammar, vocabulary, and idiomatic phrases) with a rating from 1–5 (1 meaning very easy and 5 signifying very difficult). Few respondents claimed that the language elements of the advertisement were difficult or very difficult. Grammar seemed to be the easiest to grasp, followed by vocabulary, with idiomatic expressions being the most difficult to understand. The word ‘*chińszczyzna*’ was indicated as the most difficult expression.

The second advertisement is called *Grill* (n.d.) and was produced by the Tesco supermarket chain. The first scene shows a woman in a kitchen talking to the audience about the necessary products for a barbecue. The woman, Krysia, then says loudly to her husband: “*Heniu, jak już się zarumienił to przewróć boczek*”. In the garden we see Krysia’s husband Heniu, who is sleeping on his side while taking a nap. On hearing his wife he wakes up, turns on to his other side and responds: “*Juz*”. The word play is based on the words ‘*boczek*’ and ‘*zarumienić się*’. The whole sentence means literally: “Heniu, if it is reddened, you can turn it to the other side”. ‘*Rumienić się*’ here refers to the meat and also to Heniu, whose skin has reddened due to the sun. The other word is ‘*boczek*’, which means ‘bacon’ (which can be seen on the barbecue) but is also the diminutive form of ‘*bok*’, meaning ‘side’. The word play is based on Heniu’s misunderstanding. He woke up and thought that his wife was taking care of him and wanted him to change his side in order to avoid being burned by the sun. Instead, she was referring to the meat, which was also about to get burned. Later, a photo of the meat is shown so that the audience can see that bacon is on offer in Tesco.

The results displayed in the figure 6 (p. 5) prove that the context was clear to 37% of the respondents, who understood both meanings. This is a very high percentage taking into account the fact that it was not a straightforward advertisement from a linguistic point of view. 44% understood the first meaning (a type of meat) and 9% understood the diminutive form of the word bok. Only 6% were unable to answer and 4% guessed.

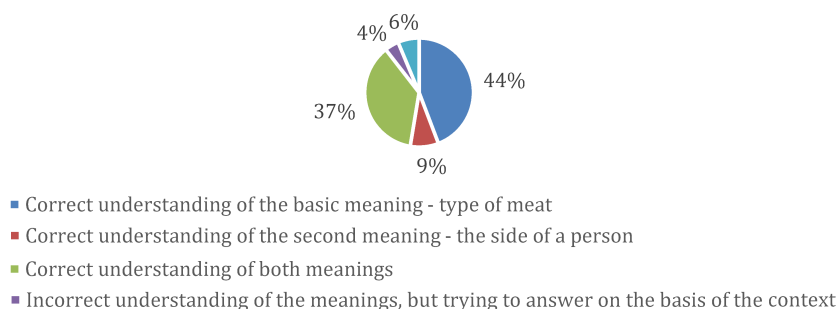


Figure 6: *Grill* interpretations.

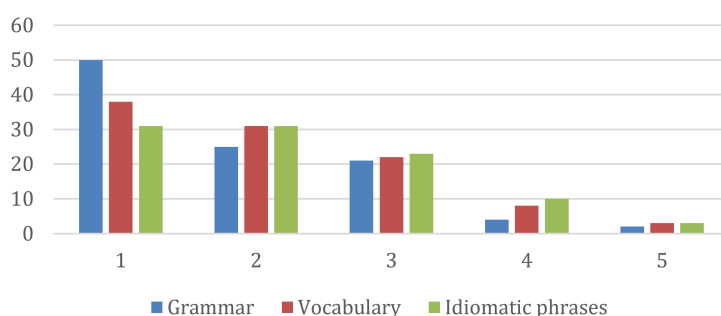


Figure 7: Estimated level of understanding of language components — Tesco advertisement.

In the figure 8 (p. 5) the estimated level of the understanding of the different language components is shown. In comparison to the first advertisement, the respondents seemed to understand the level of grammar more easily. The same is also true in the case of vocabulary. Almost 70% of the respondents declared that the vocabulary was easy or very easy to understand. In the case of idiomatic phrases, the results are comparable.

To summarise this stage of the research, the respondents were asked if both advertisements were attractive to them. The answers are shown in the figure below:

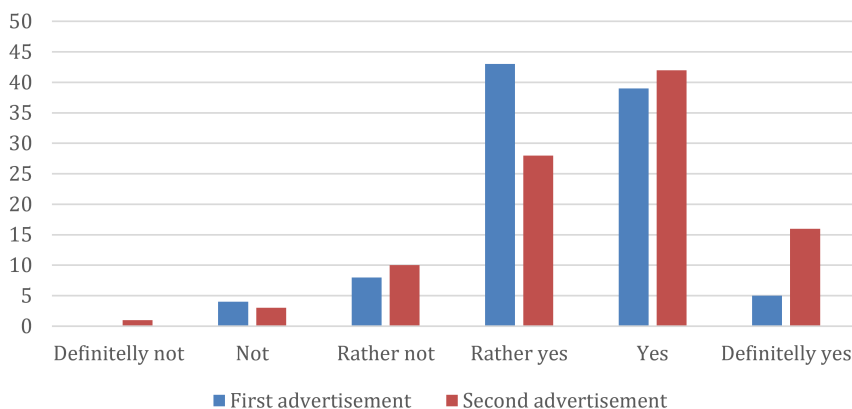


Figure 8: The level of attraction of both advertisements.

Based on this data, it can be concluded that the Tesco advertisement was more attractive for the respondents. This conclusion was reaffirmed by the visible reaction of the respondents during the research. The respondents generally liked the advertisements and felt that they would be positively inclined to purchase the products based on the messages conveyed.

### 3 Important factors in perceiving and comprehending an advertisement

The influence of advertisements depends to a great extent on the language, but also on the cultural aspects that underpin the kind of language that is used. The representation of the message that is created in the consumer's mind is based firstly on the recognition of the language register and secondly the ability to decode behavioural signifiers that reflect deep-rooted cultural practices and habits (Kubicka & Kołodziejczyk, 2007). The latter is more difficult for international learners of the language. This aspect becomes exaggerated in the context of a short advertisement in which the message needs to be snappy and multi-layered. As Leitner claims: "Whatever one thinks of this, media communication relies on and further develops language and other semiotic codes of society" (Leitner, 1998, p. 129). Advertising, which forms part of media communication, is governed by its own rules, language and values. Most often, the presentation of a certain lifestyle is also a reflection of the social and cultural traits that characterise a particular society. In the case of international learners of Polish, these semiotic codes are inconspicuous, as they may present unfamiliar values, rules, lifestyles and perceptions reflective of social issues and practices. Therefore, decoding advertisements may pose problems to people who are not familiar with the content and context. The selection of linguistic elements may also be problematic for the authors of advertisements. Some strategies may need to be used to help the receivers understand the planned messages more precisely. In the first instance, concepts should be presented to an audience who can identify with aspects of the message in order to identify the key elements that will be most affective (Milroy & Gordon, 2003, p. 199). It should also be emphasised that advertising has an impact on the consumer whether they understand it in whole or only in part (Pisarek, 2007).

One additional question that was posed in both cases was the role of audio and visual processes of interpretation. It must be highlighted that over 90% of the participants declared that the video facilitated meaningful interpretation. For audio only, the score was about 70%. This is not unsurprising since most language learners are able to understand audio-visual advertising a great deal more in comparison to newspaper advertising. A promising area of future research would be to understand how media advertising influences Polish language teaching and learning.

### 4 Conclusions

This interdisciplinary paper deals with the concept of decoding television advertising by international students of the Polish language. The conducted research shows that upper-intermediate students are able to understand Polish TV advertising based on idiomatic expressions. Additionally, the students seemed to be attracted to both visual and linguistic aspects. Given these results, it seems that an interesting and fruitful area of research would be to understand the influence of advertising on students during their educational pathway.

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## Advertisements

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*Grill* [Video]. (n.d.). YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpSoFD1QizM>

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