Evaluative Language in Online Product Advertising Discourse*

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Abstract

Recently, there has been growing interest in the study of language used for evaluation. However, little is known about the language of evaluation in online product advertisements. The purpose of this study is to investigate such language. Data comprise 100 product descriptions of best-sellers in the computer and accessories department of www.amazon.com. Data were analysed using an adapted analytical framework based on Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Framework and Pounds' (2010) classification of evaluative meanings of online property advertisements. The results indicate that there are five categories of evaluative meanings used to describe products. These are: 1) *emotive impact*, 2) *aestheticism*, 3) *quality*, 4) *convenience* and 5) *cost-effectiveness*. The most salient types of evaluative meanings are *quality* and *convenience*, indicating that these two are the most important features of computers and accessories.

Keywords: evaluative language, discourse analysis, online advertising, appraisal framework

1. Introduction

Evaluative language refers to language that is used to show opinion and stance towards a person, a thing or any entity (Hunston, 2011). Indeed, language is an important means whereby people express their attitude and convey their judgement or evaluation in terms of whether people or things are good or bad. To give an illustration of how language is used for evaluation, an example from the data of this study is given below:

> Designed with **the latest in networking technology**, the RT-N66U delivers **exceptionally fast** wired and wireless connectivity. What's more, it comes with a **powerful** detachable Wi-Fi antenna to further extend wireless range. (ASUS RT-N66U Dual-Band Wireless-N900 Gigabit Router)

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This excerpt is from a product description in an advertisement on www.amazon.com. In this example, the writer describes the product in a very positive manner. The writer evaluates the high quality of the product using the phrases 'the latest in networking technology', 'exceptionally fast' and 'powerful', all of which praise the product's good quality and state-of-the-art technology. Evaluating the product in a positive manner, this description aims to promote the product and persuade the reader to buy it.

In recent years, there has been growing interest in evaluative language, especially from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Research has investigated the interpersonal function of evaluative language which is used to establish and negotiate the relationship between addresser and addressee (Martin & White, 2005). When the addresser conveys a certain attitude using evaluative language, he or she interacts and negotiates the relationship with the addressee, inviting him or her to share the same attitude. Hunston (2011) argues that expressing an attitude via the use of evaluative language is a crucial tool of persuasion.

The link between evaluative language and persuasion gives rise to an interest in the evaluative language used in business and advertising discourse in which persuasion is a salient feature. Labrador et al. (2014) state that advertisements both inform and persuade the reader by evaluating the product positively, making it attractive and desirable. There have been studies to investigate evaluative language in business and advertising discourse. For instance, Pounds (2011) investigates the evaluative language used in online property advertisements. However, little attention has been paid to the evaluative language used in product advertisements published on online platforms, such as www.amazon.com, even though these platforms have become an important means of business transactions (Kuljitjuewong, 2012).

This research aims to investigate the evaluative language used in online product advertising discourse. Data consist of 100 product descriptions of best-sellers in the computer and accessories department of the www.amazon.com website. The first rationale for choosing this department is that computer and accessories industry is a very competitive business and the products have various functionalities. Therefore, advertisements need to use language to persuade potential customers and describe the functionalities of the products in a vivid and captivating manner, making them interesting data to be investigated. Secondly, electronic equipment is the top export goods of Thailand (Bank of Thailand, 2013). Consequently, the findings of this work can benefit a lot of computer and electronic businesses in Thailand that may need to advertise their products abroad. This paper addresses the following research questions:

1) What types of evaluative meaning are manifested in online product advertisements?

2) Which types of evaluative meaning are prominent in online product advertisements?

2. Literature review

According to Martin & White (2005: 1), the study of evaluative language deals with the interpersonal dimension of language use, focusing on 'the subjective presence of writers/ speakers in texts as they adopt stances towards both the material they present and those with whom they communicate' and 'the construction by texts of communities of shared feelings and values'. Also, Thompson & Hunston (2000) state that evaluative language is used to express a stance towards entities, evaluating them as good or bad, and is "both subjective and located within a societal value-system" (Hunston, 1994: 210). Evaluative language is an important means by which people negotiate their relationship with others and influence their opinion by inviting them to share the same evaluative stance (Hunston, 2011).

Hunston (2011) has reviewed studies on evaluative language and noted that there are two main approaches to the study of evaluative language. The first approach aims to develop a set of parameters based on semantic categories of words or phrases that have evaluative meanings. These semantic groups are claimed to be an underlying value system that is used to make judgements about whether people, things or entities are good or bad. The second approach investigates the linguistic strategies used to instantiate evaluative meaning. Since this paper is situated within the first approach, only literature related to the first approach is reviewed.

Studies within the first approach aim to investigate criteria or values used to evaluate people, objects or entities which are instantiated in words or phrases with evaluative meanings. These studies can be divided into those that develop broad categories of evaluative meanings, which can be widely applied beyond the context under investigation (Martin & White, 2005), and those that develop categories specific to the context under investigation (Hunston, 1994; Hyland & Tse, 2009).

In the first approach, an analytical framework that has been widely used is Martin & White's (2005) Appraisal Framework for analysing evaluative language. This framework consists of three main categories: *attitude*, *engagement* and *graduation*. *Attitude* is a stance or opinion towards people or things. *Engagement* is the way interaction between reader and writer is construed in discourse as in how certain the writer is when making statements. *Graduation* is the intensification or mitigation of the rhetorical force of the message. This approach has been

widely applied; however, given the broad classification of evaluative meanings, in some cases the categories are not meaningful to the context under investigation.

In the second approach, there are studies which develop semantic categories of evaluative meanings that are only applicable to the texts under investigation, leading to a classification scheme that is meaningful in context. One piece of pioneering work in this group is that of Hunston (1994) which analyses articles that critically review research articles published in the *Journal of Applied Linguistics*. Another study conducted by Hyland & Tse (2009) investigated journal descriptions. The categories developed by these studies are meaningful and applicable to the context of each study, but they cannot be applied to other types of data, thereby limiting their use.

In the domain of business discourse, several studies have used Martin & White's framework in their analyses (Fuoli, 2012; Magocha, 2010; Pounds, 2011). Consequently, this framework seems to be a viable analytical framework for this study. However, Pounds (2011) also notes that her Appraisal Framework needs to be adapted before it can be applied in the context of advertising discourse. In her study, Pounds focuses on the analysis of *appreciation,* a sub-category of *attitude*, and she makes changes to the categories. The categories consist of: 1) *Emotive impact*, 2) *Pleasantness*, 3) *Quality* and 4) *Intensification*. The adjustments make the framework more suitable for the analysis of online property advertising discourse, with new categories, such as *pleasantness* and *quality,* which are contextualized to property advertising discourse.

This study examines product advertisements with a focus on the evaluative meanings attributed to products, thereby corresponding to Martin & White's (2005) *appreciation*. As such, the scope of this study is limited to the *appreciation* expressed in product advertisements. This paper follows Pounds' (2011) analytical procedures and makes modifications to the original framework. The resulting classification scheme is discussed in Section 4.

3. Methodology

This study is based on 100 product advertisements (73,591 words in total) which were collected from the computer and electronic equipment department of the www.amazon.com website on 6 February 2014. The advertisements were selected from among the top 100 best-sellers because, given that these sell more than others, these product advertisements are likely to be more effective and widely read by potential buyers. In consequence, the discourse of these product advertisements is arguably more powerful than

other product advertisements. The analysis focuses on only a brief description of the product at the beginning and the product description section.

The product descriptions were uploaded into the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell, 2008), a corpus-annotation software program. Words or phrases which have evaluative meanings were coded using the coding function in UAM Corpus Tool. All instances of words or phrases which have evaluative meanings were retrieved and categorized according to their semantic groups. The categorization is motivated by Martin and White's (2005) classification scheme of *Appreciation* and Pounds' (2011) classification scheme which is based on online property advertisements. However, modifications were made to the classification scheme to reflect the semantic categories of evaluative meanings found in the data. The data were then recoded according to this new classification scheme, as discussed in the next section.

4. Results and discussion

This section first elaborates on categories of evaluative meanings and then discusses the prominence of evaluative meanings. The analysis indicates that words and phrases which have evaluative meanings can be categorized into five main semantic groups. These are: 1) *emotive impact*, 2) *aestheticism*, 3) *quality*, 4) *convenience* and 5) *cost-effectiveness*. The *quality* and *convenience* categories can be further subdivided as follows. The *quality* category comprises ten sub-categories: 3.1) *positivity,* 3.2) *speed*, 3.3) *power,* 3.4) *uniqueness*, 3.5) *security,* 3.6) *innovativeness*, 3.7) *suitability*, 3.8) *usefulness*, 3.9) *accreditation* and 3.10) *durability.* The *convenience* category consists of four sub-categories: 4.1) *size,* 4.2) *portability*, 4.3) *comfort* and 4.4) *ease of use*. Below, an explication and the frequency occurrences of each category are reported.

4.1 Emotive impact (39 occurrences)

This category corresponds to Martin & White's (2005) *reaction: impact* and *reaction: quality* and also Pounds' (2011) *emotive impact*. Here, it refers to words or phrases that construe the affective appeal that the product can bring about. The words or phrases which belong to this semantic category construe products as having an emotional impact on the user. Excerpts are provided below. The title of each product is given in brackets.

(1) Our most affordable Kindle Fire—now with a **stunning** HD display, faster processor, and longer battery life (Kindle Fire 7" Tablet);

(2) **Worry-free** data security with AES 256-bit full-disk encryption (Samsung Electronics 840 EVO-Series).

There are two ways in which emotional impact is presented: positive emotional impact and absence of negative emotion. Example 1 shows that the word 'stunning' conveys positive emotional impact in terms of amazement. Example 2 contains the phrase 'worry-free' which construes an absence of negative emotional. Another phrase which is used is 'fuss-free'.

4.2 Aestheticism (168 occurrences)

This category relates to the beautiful design of the product or graphic that the product shows. Excerpts are given below:

(1) The **sleek** design of the charger will complement your phone... (Motorola Vehicle Power Adapter);

(2) Hear it all more clearly with **finely tuned** volume boost technology that makes dialog and sound **crisp** and **easier on the ears** (Google Nexus 7 Tablet).

In Example 3, the word 'sleek' describes the aesthetic quality of the charger's design. In Example 4, the focus of the evaluative meaning is on the sound that the product produces. This example presents its superb sound quality, as shown in 'finely tuned', 'crisp' and 'easier on the ears'. The aesthetic quality of the product is related to the visual and auditory senses. In other advertisements, different words used for this function are 'vivid' and 'lifelike', which are employed to describe the visual appearance of the products.

4.3 Quality (997 occurrences)

This category relates to the functionality and capacity of products. This category consists of words or phrases that construe the products as powerful, useful or strong. *Quality* is further subdivided into ten sub-categories, as mentioned above. Below, two examples from and an elaboration of each sub-category are given.

4.3.1 Positivity (112 occurrences)

(1) Constructed using Samsung Grade A cells and **premium** microchips to ensure the **highest** quality (Anker Astro Mini 3000mAh);

(2) Exceptional Performance and Print Quality (Brother HL-2270DW Compact Laser Printer).

The first sub-category, positivity, refers to general positive terms used to describe the product, its quality or performance. In Example 5, the word 'premium' positively evaluates the microchips as being of the best quality, and 'highest' modifies 'quality', which further reinforces the message that this product is of high quality. In Example 6, the word 'exceptional' is used to modify 'performance' and 'print quality'. The words used in Examples 7 and 8 are general and vague but convey an outright positive evaluation of the products.

4.3.2 Speed (274 occurrences)

(1) Enjoy **lightning-fast connection speeds** whether you're using a Wi-Fi network or 4G LTE wireless from AT&T or Verizon (Kindle Fire HDX 7" Tablet);

(2) ...you'll experience **high speeds** with no drop in performance... (Crucial M500 240GB SATA 2.5-Inch 7mm Internal Solid State Drive CT240M500SSD1).

The second sub-category, *speed*, comprises words or phrases which construe the product as working very quickly. The phrases 'lightning-fast connection speeds' in Example 7 and 'high speeds' in Example 8 show how fast the products are. Moreover, Example 7 shows a figurative use of language. The word 'lightning' compares the product speed to the speed of lightning, i.e. of light. In other cases, the words 'blazing' and 'flash' are also used to compare the speed of the product to the speed of light.

4.3.3 Power (126 occurrences)

(1) What's more, it comes with a **powerful** detachable Wi-Fi antenna... (ASUS RT-N66U Dual-Band Wireless-N900 Gigabit Router);

(2) My Passport offers **high capacity** in a sleek portable drive (WD My Passport 1TB Portable External Hard Drive Storage).

The *power* sub-category consists of words or phrases that portray the product as powerful. In Example 9, the word 'powerful' is used for this purpose. In Example 10, the sense of power can be seen in the phrase 'high capacity', which indicates that it has a lot of power to process many demanding tasks.

4.3.4 Uniqueness (22 occurrences)

(1) The iX500 now offers the **unique** ability to link directly with your iPad, iPhone, and Android devices via a Wi-Fi connection (Fujitsu ScanSnap iX500 Scanner);

(2) TriPort acoustic headphone structure, another Bose **exclusive**, features tiny vents in the earcups... (Bose® QuietComfort® 15 Acoustic Noise Cancelling® Headphones).

The *uniqueness* category involves words or phrases that discursively construct the product as different from others or as having particular qualities that other products do not. In Example 11, the word 'unique' is employed to convey the sense that the product is different from others. In Example 12, the word 'exclusive' is used to present the product as having a 'Triport acoustic headphone structure', which other rival products do not. This category then adds value to the product by differentiating itself from others.

4.3.5 Security (81 occurrences)

(1) And the AirPort Extreme is easy to set up and **highly secure**... (Apple AirPort Extreme Base Station);

(2) Live Parental Controls – **Keeps** your Internet [sic] experience **safe** and **protects** all connected devices on your network... (NETGEAR Range Max WNR1000 Wireless Router).

The *security* category discursively constructs the product as safe to use and protecting potential customers from harm. In Example 13, the product is presented as safe to use, as shown in the phrase 'highly secure'. In Example 14, the product is claimed to be capable of protecting the user as it '**Keeps** your Internet [sic] experience **safe** and **protects** all connected devices on your network'. The issue of security is probably mentioned because Internet security is a critical issue for the users of products in the computer and accessories department.

4.3.6 Innovativeness (137 occurrences)

(1) A **new** and **improved** version of the world's most widely deployed DOCSIS cable modems (ARRIS / Motorola SB6121 SURF board DOCSIS 3.0 Cable Modem);

(2) Nexus 7 is the **first** tablet to ship with Android 4.3, the **latest** version of the world's most popular mobile operating system... (Google Nexus 7 Tablet).

This category presents the advances in the product or technology associated with the product. Alternatively, it may foreground the novelty of a product or an improved feature. Example 15 uses the words 'new' and 'improved' to present the product as something newer and better. In Example 16, the words 'first' and 'latest' are used to portray the system as being the newest and most advanced of its kind.

4.3.7 Suitability (119 occurrences)

(1) It's **for Everyone** in Your House (Google Chromecast HDMI Streaming Media Player);

(2) **Compatible** with all Apple and Android smartphones, tablets... (Anker® 2nd Gen Astro 6000mAh Portable Charger).

The *suitability* category focuses on presenting products as suitable for certain types of work or people, or compatible with many systems and equipment. In Example 17, the product is claimed to be 'for Everyone in Your House', indicating that it is suitable for everyone in the family, from parents to children. In Example 18, the product is '**Compatible** with all Apple and Android smartphones... ', indicating that it can be used with various systems.

4.3.8 Usefulness (27 occurrences)

(1) This **versatile** printer delivers the complete wireless solution (Epson Expression Home XP-410);

(2) This protective cover is **multi-functional** and lets you type just as you would with your laptop/netbook (SANOXY® 7" Tablet Stand with USB Keyboard – Black Faux Leather Carrying Case).

The *usefulness* category comprises words or phrases that present products as useful and functional. Example 19 contains the word 'versatile', which shows that the product has many uses. Example 20 contains the word 'multi-functional', thereby indicating that the product can be used to do various tasks. This category therefore focuses on the utility of products.

4.3.9 Accredited (34 occurrences)

(1) The Anker Astro external battery has been **voted #1** in class by thousands of online reviewers... (Anker Astro Mini Ultra-Compact Portable Charger);

(2) Corporate Stable Model and **EPEAT Gold Certified** (Asus VS247H-P 23.6-Inch Full-HD LED-Lit LCD Monitor).

The *accredited* category consists of words or phrases which show that a product has been praised or meets certain standards set by an authority. In Example 21, the advertisement cites the votes of online reviewers as its credentials. In Example 22, the advertisement states that the product meets the standards of Electronic Product Environmental Assessment (EPEAT) which measures the environmental friendliness of electronic products.

4.3.10 Durability (65 occurrences)

(1) Its single-piece aluminum casing is both attractive and **durable** (Bose SoundLink Mini Bluetooth Speaker);

(2) ...it's **shock-proof** and **withstands drops and bumps** (Kingston Digital 120GB SSDNow V300 SATA 3 2.5 with Adapter Solid State Drive).

The *durability* category accentuates the strength of the product. In Example 23, the word 'durable' is used to portray the strength of the product. In Example 24, the word 'shock-proof' and the phrase 'withstands drops and bumps' indicate the product's durability.

4.4 Convenience (595 occurrences)

This category refers to words or phrases that convey many aspects of a product's convenience. The evaluative meaning in this category presents the product as easy

and comfortable in use. As noted earlier, *convenience* can be further divided into four sub-categories. Below two examples of and an elaboration of each category are given.

4.4.1. Ease of use (397 occurrences)

(25) Kindle Fire HDX is **easy to use** right out of the box (Kindle Fire HDX 7" Tablet);

(26) If you know you'll want access to a file or photo offline, however, you can **easily** save it to the built-in solid-state drive (Acer C720 Chromebook).

The first sub-category, *easiness*, discursively constructs the product as easy to use or set up. The phrase 'easy to use' in Example 25 and the word 'easily' in Example 26 convey the sense of easiness when using the products.

4.4.2. Size (78 occurrences)

(27) **Small** size without compromise— **Space-saving** design; great performance (Epson Expression Home XP-410 Small-in-One All-in-One Wireless Inkjet Printer);

(28) The SoundLink Mini Bluetooth speaker delivers full, natural sound from an **ultra-compact** speaker that **fits in the palm of your hand** (Bose SoundLink Mini Bluetooth Speaker).

This category is concerned with how big or how small a product is, adding to the convenience when using the product. Example 27 contains the words 'small' and 'space-saving', while Example 28 contains the word 'ultra-compact' and the phrase 'fits in the palm of your hand', all of which indicate that the product is small. What can be observed in Example 28 is that an advertisement can simply state that a product is small or it can compare the size of the product to something that potential users are familiar with. This strategy is probably used to help potential users visualize the size of the product.

4.4.3. Portability (74 occurrences)

(29) Highly **Portable** (Kinivo BTD-400 Bluetooth 4.0 USB adapter);

(30) Fold-flat earcups rotate 90 degrees for easy storage and **portability** in the included case (Bose® QuietComfort® 15 Acoustic Noise Cancelling® Headphones).

Portability concerns how easy it is to carry the product around. Advertisements describe the products using the words 'portable' and 'portability' in Examples 29 and 30, respectively, conveying the message that users can take it and use it anywhere.

4.4.4. Comfort (46 occurrences)

(31) Two different height settings make this a laptop stand that **provides excellent comfort** (Cooler Master NotePal X-Slim Ultra-Slim Laptop Cooling Pad);

(32) Weighing just 12.2 ounces, Kindle Fire HD is lighter than ever, and **comfortable to hold in one hand** (Kindle Fire 7" Tablet).

Comfort refers to words or phrases which construe the product as providing comfort to the user or being comfortable in use. Example 31 explains that the product 'provides excellent comfort', whereas Example 32 indicates that the product is 'comfortable to hold in one hand'.

4.5 Cost-effectiveness (141 occurrences)

The last category is *cost-effectiveness*. Words or phrases in this category present the product as inexpensive or saving the user money. Two examples from the data are shown below:

(33) In addition to being **affordable** to purchase, the HL-2270DW uses… (Brother HL-2270DW Compact Laser Printer);

(34) Using high-yield replacement ink cartridges, the MFC-J870DW can help **lower your operating costs** (Brother Printer Work Smart MFCJ870DW Wireless Color Inkjet All-In-One Printer).

In Example 33, the word 'affordable' is used to describe the product as inexpensive. In Example 34, 'lower your operating costs' shows that the product can save the user money.

This paper now turns to the second research question, which asks which types of evaluative meaning are prominent in online product advertisements. In terms of the main categories, *quality* is the most prominent evaluative meaning (997 occurrences), *convenience* ranks second (595 occurrences), *aestheticism* third (168 occurrences) and *cost-effectiveness* fourth (141 occurrences), while *emotive impact* has the lowest frequency (39 occurrences). The ranking indicates that *quality* is the most important feature of computers and accessories. *Convenience* is also a prominent evaluative meaning. In fact, the frequencies of *quality* and *convenience* are much higher than the rest. In consequence, it seems that advertisers emphasize the quality and advancement of a product while also accentuating that products are user-friendly.

Moving on to the sub-categories, within the *quality* category, the top three evaluative meanings are *speed* (274 occurrences), *innovativeness* (137 occurrences) and *power* (126 occurrences). These constitute the three most important qualities of computers and accessories; i.e. products have to be fast, advanced and powerful. Regarding the *convenience* category, *ease of use* has the highest frequency (397 occurrences) and is in fact much higher

than the rest. Consequently, it seems that advertisers attempt to persuade potential customers by highlighting how easy it is to use their products.

When comparing with Pounds' (2011) work on evaluative meanings in online property advertisements, the findings of this study show both similarities and differences. *Emotive impact* is very rare in both studies. In both studies, *quality* is the most prominent evaluative meaning. However, when looking at the sub-categories, in property advertisements *size/quantity, age* and *location* are salient evaluative meanings, whereas in computer and accessories advertisements *speed, innovativeness* and *power* are predominant.

5. Conclusion

This paper develops a new classificatory framework for analysing evaluative language in product descriptions. Furthermore, this study makes a new contribution to the knowledge of evaluative language. By exploring a new domain of discourse, this study furthers our understanding of how evaluative language is manifested in a different arena. In addition, the findings can be used to develop training materials for the writers of product advertisements or to teach students who may work in advertising.

This study is not without its limitations. Data are based on product advertisements from the US version of the www.amazon.com website. Further studies can compare product advertisements from different countries to see if different cultures have an impact on the evaluative meanings used to describe products. After all, when developing training materials, the resulting materials should not focus solely on Anglophone culture but also demonstrate cultural diversity (Nomnian, 2013).

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