

# **A Comparative Study of Sino-American Language from the Perspective of High- and Low-Context Cultural Theory—A Case Study of Automobile Advertisements**

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**Abstract:** In the field of cross-cultural communication, cultural context is very important, the most representative of which is Hall's theory of high and low context. In-depth study of high and low context culture can help us to understand the information expression in different cultural environment. In view of the different cultural background of China and the United States, the use of automotive advertising language will also have a big difference. This topic will take the automobile advertisement language as the material, take the high and low context as the theory, through a large number of examples of analysis, Chinese automobile advertisements belong to the high context, it is vague and implicit; American automobile advertisements belong to the low context, it is straightforward and frank, and all of them highlight the characteristics of automobile

## **1. Introduction**

With the accelerating development of the globalization, China has enhanced and promoted all kinds of the areas including the communications with big countries such as America. Within this period, the advertising appears as a means for publicity and it has also rooted in every part of people's life. As a powerful tool in the advertising means, both of Chinese and English have shown their characteristics of high context and low context. However, accounting for the differences among the history, culture and the daily customs, the social functions of language also have their cultural differences, in this way, the context should be divided into high context and low context, which brings some problems during the communications between the eastern and western world (Beck 171-186).

Nowadays the advertising is everywhere, and it plays a more and more important role in this society. This topic will be based on the concept of high and low context which was put forward by Hall. The car advertisement language that comes from the high context has a profound cultural background. On the contrary, the advertisement language which roots in the low context provides so many detailed information and readers in high context think it doesn't have any tension, even much domineering (Mueller 31-45).

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Definition of High and Low Context Theory**

The context refers to a kind of form which adapts to a certain background and the environment. According to Hendon, the context includes two aspects and they are verbal and nonverbal aspects. Both of these two aspects reflect the meaning of the whole passage by focusing on a certain word-the context and the cultural reasons will affect the process of the communication (Judith and Thomas 18-27).

According to the theory of Hall, an American humanist, high context culture is a kind of information exchange in the context and a certain environment with the help of body language (82-95). Hence, a successful information exchange in the high context depends on a connected relation.

The low context culture means that the information and meaning of the communication and news

is very clear. The information and meaning is not included in themselves but they come from the context such as a certain situation or an event. In the low context culture, a large amount of information is delivered with a clear method and this kind of culture advocates a direct communication.

## **2.2. Functions of Automobile Advertisements**

The advertisement is a kind of information transmission which not belongs to a certain person, besides, it is an instruction and persuasion of products, services, and views by the payments of a definite advertisement. "The generalized advertisement language refers to all kinds of the language means used in the advertisement transmission, which includes the pure language means and the non-language means. The narrow advertisement language specially refers to the pure language and the word means used in the advertisement transmission" (Liu Jing and Feng Lin 18-32). Of course, the advertisement industry nowadays is becoming more and more complex, and its content has been spreading more and more widely, which is really difficult to define clearly (Lee 64-75). However, there is not a clear definition of the car advertisement yet. But we can refine the meaning of the cars and advertisements and make a definition from the angle of the basic meaning of the car advertisement language: the car advertisement is a kind of communicative method by the media means but not the direct information transmission, meanwhile, this method can provide the main knowledge of the cars as well as the car culture for the public as a certain way to communicate (Samovar 78-93).

## **3. Differences of Sino-US Languages in the Automobile Advertisements from the High and Low Context Theory**

The author collected a lot of car advertisements, and the author found that most of the car advertising from the brand, capacity, price, speed and comfort aspects to promote to the consumer. So the author divide into this five parts to comparison of differences between Sino- American advertising languages under the high-low context theory.

### **3.1 On Brand Promotion in Automobile Advertisements**

In fact, the brands of the automobiles play important roles in helping the cars to occupy the global markets. However, in the competitive global markets, in order to attract people's attention and to the consumers to have the initial recognition on the brand of the automobile, the automobile companies have paid more attention on designing the advertisement of the brands of the automobiles.

Example 1: I'm Polo. (Volkswagen Polo)

Example 2: Dare to be the first (Chinese: gan wei tian xia xian) (Cadillac)

Example 1 is the advertisement of Volkswagen Polo. It has introduced the brand of the automobile to the consumers directly. In fact, having been impact by the low context cultures, it is necessary for people to use the clear and obvious languages to deliver information to the others.

Example 2 is the advertisement of Cadillac in China. "Dare to be the first" has been reflected by its own generous attitude, it shows the idea of pioneering and innovation. But if you do not say it is a car advertising, you do not know it is a car advertising.

### **3.2 On Space in Automobile Advertisements**

The capacity of the automobiles is widely propagating by the advertisement designers in recent years. In fact, with the increase of the various requirement on the automobiles all over the world, people has paid more attention on the capacities of the cars as well.

Example 3: Think small. (Volkswagen Beetle)

Example 4: To enjoy oneself is less funnier than enjoy ourselves (Chinese: du le le bu ru zhong le le) (Mercedes-benz GL SUV)

Example 3 is the advertisement of Volkswagen Beetle and as it is known to all, the main feature of the Volkswagen Beetle is its small capacity. As we can see from example 3, advertisement designers have used the word "small" to give a direct impression of the feature of the capacity of

Volkswagen Beetle to the consumers. Example 4 is the advertisements of Mercedes-benz GL SUV. The advertisement designers have used the Chinese ancient poems to show the capacity of the Mercedes-benz GL SUV. In fact, it is widely recognized that the SUV has a large capacity by using the expression “zhong le le” in the poem.

### **3.3 On Price in Automobile Advertisements**

The dimension of price is one of the main part that consumers have considered in the process of buying cars.

Example 5: Quietly Elegant, Surprisingly Affordable. (Ford)

Example 6: Drive in a Citroën vehicle will satisfy you completely (Chinese: zuo fu kang che shi shi zai zai man zu ni) (Citroën)

Example 5 is the advertisement of Ford and as we can see from the example 5, the designers have used the “Elegant” and “Affordable” to show the features of the Ford to the consumers. The adjective “Elegant” can show the features of the design of Ford automobiles and the adjective “Affordable” can eliminate the consumers’ fear on the prices of the Ford automobile. Under the guidance of the high and low context theory, the diction of the vocabularies in the English automobile advertisements have strong features of the low context cultures. Example 6 is the advertisement of Citroën. The designers have also used the four-word structure and the abstract words to show the price of the cars. Having been influenced by the high context cultures, the price feature of the automobiles will be delivered to the consumers indirectly and implicitly by using the phrase “shi shi zai zai”.

### **3.4 On Speed in Automobile Advertisements**

In fact, in the English and Chinese automobile advertisements, dimension of speed is always laid emphasis by the advertisement designers. The stress on the speed of the automobiles will let the consumers to have a further understanding of the automobiles. Having been impacted by the high and low context cultures, the language design of the advertisement in English and Chinese will not be the same.

Example 7: SHIFT the way you move. (Nissan)

Example 8: qian li jiang li yi ri huan (Jiangling Motors)

Example 7 is the advertisement of NISSAN. In example 7, the advertisement designers have used the capital letters in the word “SHIFT”. To be more specific, NISSAN has laid emphasis on its features of speed in changing people’s ways in moving. By using the capital letters on the word “SHIFT” can highlight the speed of the automobile.

Example 8. in this advertisement, the designers did not introduce the speed feature of the car directly. With the words of “yi ri huan”, the fast speed of the Jiangling car can be shown to the consumers by using the adoption of the Chinese poem and it is also the representatives of the implicit language styles in the advertisement.

## **4. Conclusion**

The car advertisement language that comes from the high context has a profound cultural background and it always confuses the readers in the low context because of the fact that they possibly lose themselves in this unrelated information of high context. On the contrary, the advertisement language which roots in the low context provides so many detailed information and readers in high context think it doesn’t have any tension, even much domineering. Therefore, due to the differences in the way of communication between people in the context of high and low context, advertising designers should be more comprehensive and more reasonable to grasp the choice and use of advertising language in the face of different audiences.

Automobile advertising language, takes the language as the carrier, is the platform for the enterprise and the product exhibition, is the crucial link to realize the commercial appeal.

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