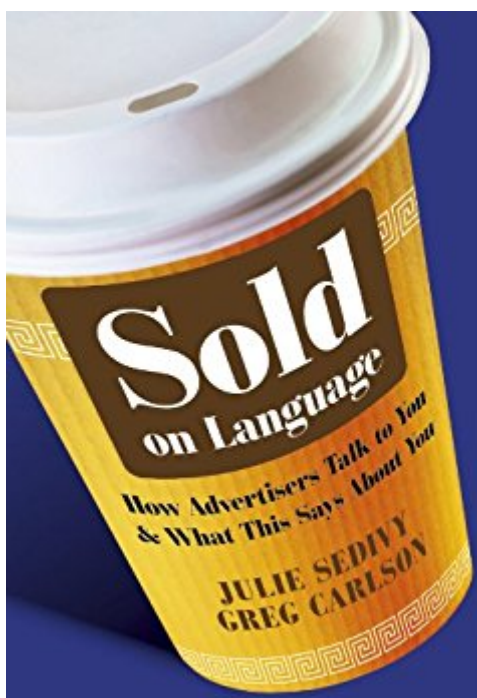


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Sold On Language: How Advertisers Talk To You And What This Says About You



Synopsis

As citizens of capitalist, free-market societies, we tend to celebrate choice and competition. However, in the 21st century, as we have gained more and more choices, we have also become greater targets for persuasive messages from advertisers who want to make those choices for us. In *Sold on Language*, noted language scientists Julie Sedivy and Greg Carlson examine how rampant competition shapes the ways in which commercial and political advertisers speak to us. In an environment saturated with information, advertising messages attempt to compress as much persuasive power into as small a linguistic space as possible. These messages, the authors reveal, might take the form of a brand name whose sound evokes a certain impression, a turn of phrase that gently applies peer pressure, or a subtle accent that zeroes in on a target audience. As more and more techniques of persuasion are aimed squarely at the corner of our mind which automatically takes in information without conscious thought or deliberation, does 'endless choice' actually mean the end of true choice? *Sold on Language* offers thought-provoking insights into the choices we make as consumers and citizens and the choices that are increasingly being made for us. Click here for more discussion and debate on the authors' blog: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sold-language> [Wiley disclaims all responsibility and liability for the content of any third-party websites that can be linked to from this website. Users assume sole responsibility for accessing third-party websites and the use of any content appearing on such websites. Any views expressed in such websites are the views of the authors of the content appearing on those websites and not the views of Wiley or its affiliates, nor do they in any way represent an endorsement by Wiley or its affiliates.]

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Interestingly, this book starts with a discussion of Edward Bernays, Sigmund Freud's favourite nephew and avid reader of his uncle's work. In this, it is similar to John Pilger's 'The War You Don't See' and Adam Curtis' 'The Century of the Self'. All three relate how Bernays effectively 'invented' public relations and also, as a first demonstration of the power of his uncle's theories, started women smoking in public in the U.S. So why this interest in Bernays? Because of the effects and effectiveness of the vast advertising and media industries that have grown up in this last century of 'extreme individualism'. This book is an attempt to unpack the mainly linguistic 'tricks of the trade' of these industries and, in doing so, to inoculate us against them. The book's main themes centre around the ways in which we are becoming aware of how our minds work and how they may be manipulated. To start with, the authors consider 'The Unconscious Consumer': 'According to Sigmund Freud...we live in constant danger of having our unconscious memories and longings grab us by the throat and lead us down a path of irrational choices...Freud probed these hidden motivators by having people lie on a couch and relate their dreams and memories. Today, scientists of the mind probe them with clever experimental tasks in labs and use expensive devices to measure the gaze patterns of eyes, and the electrical activity and blood flow in the brain. All this technological proliferation just emphasises how elusive our own minds are to us.' (P15) The authors are linguists and so the evidence they cite is largely linguistically based - but since we have so much of our being in language, this seems eminently justified. And the experiments are fascinating. They go on to consider the active role of the unconscious in 'The Attentional Arms Race'. It seems that overt attention is not a prerequisite for successful manipulation - in fact, in many ways, it's what you perceive peripherally that has more effect, as this is absorbed into the unconscious for further processing, while our conscious minds are taken up with the task in hand. Yet more experimental evidence backs up this proposition. The next chapter - 'We Know What You're Thinking' sounds ominously like an Adam Curtis documentary. The authors concentrate on

linguistic formulations that can radically alter perceptions of statements. The use of 'presuppositions', of leading questions, manipulation of memories and 'Mindless Agreement and Unconscious Individualism' (P120) make it appear that we have freedom and independence of action whereas in reality, even our much-vaunted individualism may be subverted. Slowly the book unpacks many of the tricks, traps and tips of the persuasive industries. It is all told in an informal and readable style, but it still packs a punch. However, much of it seems kind of 'anecdotal'. Apart from the initial references to Freud, there is no outline of a consistent theory here. It's as if this science is still in the 'gathering evidence' stage. It's still very interesting, but slightly frustrating at the same time. Finally, the authors turn their attention to the growing role of advertising-style practices in politics. This, for me, was by far the most interesting section of the book. Even if, after reading up to here, you think you're aware of the techniques used by advertisers, you can't help but feel that it is far too easy for those 'in the know' to manipulate and control us. Thus, it is no surprise to find the authors discussing Plato's reservations on democracy. They talk of 'Democracy in the Age of the Mackerel Mind' (P250) where the 'mackerel mind' refers, if you like, to a 'herd' or 'collective' mind. They examine the increasingly fragmented tribalism of society, the way that beliefs are perpetuated even in the face of completely contradictory and factual evidence (they don't mention it, but I can't help thinking of Obama's birth certificate). But, at the same time, they start to develop Freud's ideas of the unconscious. What they suggest is that, far from being at the mercy of our unconscious, the interplay between conscious and unconscious mind is a far more active, dynamic and two-way affair. As such - and this is really the crucial point - a conscious recognition of the ways in which the unconscious may be manipulated can go a long way in inoculating us against just this manipulation, making us all, perhaps, Philosopher Kings. All in all, an illuminating, readable and rewarding book.

I found this book to be a surprisingly captivating look at how advertising and advertisers today tap into our conscious and subconscious minds, and also how these persuasive methods apply to political ends. While I expected to be informed on how I as a consumer was affected by ads, I did not expect the level of entertainment I enjoyed while reading. *Sold on Language* focuses on choice in a consumer's mind, whether it is real, and to what extent. It touches on subjects within formal linguistics (such as basic phonetics, aspirated consonants, priming, presuppositions, etc.) in a way that makes them quite accessible to the average reader. The first 7 chapters focus on such subjects as subconscious messages, how advertisers compete for your attention and how this plays into how we divide our attention as humans, and how advertisers use indirect and emotional language to get their intentions across. The final chapter touches on politics, and how everything

from the “comfiness” of a politician’s name to the way they give speeches influences our opinions and how we vote. It’s hard to convey the breadth of this book in a single review. Instead, I will simply identify what appealed to me most. The authors seamlessly transition from and within topics in linguistics, as applicable to the chapter as a whole. The reader is given information that encapsulates their knowledge of the selected broad topics in numerous ways. Each section includes a title that helps guide the reader into what the following text is about and how it will inform the overall topic of the chapter. While each chapter flows in and out of the main topic, I found each section introduced me to new knowledge that was very often interesting, such as the extent of how presuppositions frame our idea of what previous knowledge we possess. This new information was at times almost shocking. I was, for instance, somewhat bamboozled at the idea of subliminal messaging, and how something that had previously felt so much like science fiction could suddenly be backed by scientific study. Sold on Language makes the reader take a good look at themselves in the process, and I found myself sometimes unhappy at the discoveries I made about my own brain’s interactions with advertising. In this way, the book brought unpleasant but important truths into my life, and created in me a more knowledgeable consumer. As I read Sold on Language, I found it to be at times unexpectedly humorous. From footnotes that indicate ironic ends to advertising campaigns (such as cars that advertise acceleration only to have to make recalls when the gas pedal is dysfunctional) to quotes from Clinton’s scandal or Stephen Colbert’s Colbert Report, the author finds ways to inject humor into a fairly dense body of text. These humorous details all suggest an undeniable fact about advertisements: that they have become an inseparable part of American culture. Overall, Sold on Language is a somewhat dense read and can certainly not be read through in one or two sittings. However it is a highly interesting and informative, captivating look at our brains, language, advertising and where all of those meet. It introduced me to invaluable facts about how advertisers take advantage of my fellow consumerist public and me. Having read this book, I now feel much more aware of the tricks of the advertising world and how to operate within it as a knowledgeable consumer. I would definitely recommend this book to anyone wishing to gain insight into themselves as consumers and how language and advertising interact.

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