

English in Korean TV commercials and Linguistic Deviations

Hye-ryeong Hahn

Department of English Education, Seowon University

hyerhahn@seowon.ac.kr

Abstract

The present study addresses the deviant uses of English currently widespread in Korean TV commercials. In order to demonstrate how the use of English in TV commercials deviates from the norm shared by native English speakers, Korean TV commercials containing various errors were collected and classified into phonological, grammatical, and pragmatic deviations. In addition, an in-depth survey was conducted among two different language groups—Korean domestic viewers and native English speakers—in order to compare their perceptions of the seriousness of the deviations. Eighty-six Koreans and ten native English speakers participated in the survey, rating individual English copy in terms of its acceptability, intelligibility, and impact. While the survey results revealed that native speakers were much more sensitive to the grammatical and pragmatic errors in the copy, domestic viewers also tended to notice linguistic deviations and show negative reaction to them.

Keywords

TV commercials, English as an international language, linguistic deviations

Introduction

English today is indeed an international language. It is found everywhere in Asian countries, from street signboards to TV commercials. More interestingly, English users in these countries—at least South Korea—do not seem to be much constrained by the so-called “native-speakers norms.” We thus raised the following research questions: (1) How does non-native speakers’ English use of English in TV commercials deviate from that of native speakers’ at different levels of language use?; and (2) How are the deviations in TV commercials perceived by domestic viewers and by English native speakers?

1 Method

Korean TV commercials containing English text televised during the year 2015 were videotaped or downloaded from several websites on Korean TV commercials, and were transcribed for analysis. In addition, an in-depth survey was administered to 86 Korean adults and 10 native speakers of English. The survey asked the respondents to read a selected set of commercial texts accompanied by photo included in the commercial, and then rate each commercial in terms of its acceptability, comprehensibility, and impact on a 5-point Likert scale.

2 Results

The copywriters of TV commercials were frequently found to use English creatively, without much consideration of grammar or authenticity. As a result, many commercials included grammatical or pragmatic errors as demonstrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Error Types and Examples

Error type	example
grammatical	Think you very much New engine, but origin ReMake asset
pragmatic	Are you five?

The survey results showed that these erroneous texts are unintelligible to and have little impact on viewers. Korean viewers tended to notice and give low ratings to copies with errors (although with less confidence) in the same pattern as native English speakers.

3 Conclusion

The findings reveal that creative English copies lacking linguistic adequacy in fact hamper understanding and fail to impress either domestic viewers or native English speakers.