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Estate agent language

Jill Hadfield and Charles Hadfield

The commentator

Martin Andrew's bifurcated career has, to stage, straddled two areas of English. The first, in the nineties, focused on teaching and researching English Renaissance Drama and Early Cinema at the Universities of Otago and Auckland in New Zealand. He completed his doctorate, a thesis entitled Women and Enclosure: The Imprisoned Woman in Renaissance Drama from Kyd to Shirley, in 1991. More latterly, he has worked in applied linguistics, with specialization in Curriculum Development in English as an Additional Language (EAL) at Unitec in Auckland, New Zealand.

At a time when the term ‘property porn’ makes its way onto the pages of the newest dictionaries (‘a genre of escapist TV programmes, magazine features etc, showing desirable properties for sale, especially those in idyllic locations, or in need of renovation, or both’; Collins Dictionary 2005 edition), we thought it would be fun to look at some of the most lurid examples of real estate advertising we have encountered. Taken from the pages of New Zealand's Property Press, they make their UK equivalents with their restrained descriptions of ‘solid 1930's semis’ and ‘convenient townhouses’ look like very half-hearted attempts at persuasion.

Our commentator is Dr Martin Andrew, who has taught Renaissance Literature and Early Cinema at the Universities of Auckland and Otago and now teaches on the BA in English and Cultural Studies at Unitec, New Zealand, where his research interest is discourse analysis. This trilogy of interests come together in his commentary, making for an original and entertaining take on these adverts.

Language notes

Estate agent, or real estate, advertese comprises a range of idiolects, both individual (each agent may let his or her personality, or lack thereof, shine through) and institutional (‘house style’ for a particular company). In general, it includes a number of identifiable linguistic symptoms:

* short, choppy, often grammatically incomplete ‘sentences’, often marked by an excess of dashes (‘Cosy and comfortable and in zone for top schools—a real heart stopper’ ‘Wow! In the city.’)

* simple adjective/noun combinations wherever possible in both minimalist advertising for budget properties (‘real heart stopper’, ‘really good location’) and in purple passage advertising for featured dwellings (‘snazzy entertaining terraces’, ‘lush planting’, ‘sheer magnificence’, ‘soaring window walls’)

* propensity for adjective forms in ‘-ed’, emphasizing an action that has been done to the property (‘imbued with’, ‘softened by’, ‘bloned’)

* use of lush-sounding and trendy words borrowed from international languages, preferably Italian and French (‘sheer alfresco finesse’, ‘vogue vanities’)
* a combination of archaic language (‘smitten’, ‘A warm inviting belle I am’) with colloquial expressions (‘bliss out’, ‘funkiest’)
* abundant features of rhetoric—‘an artful deviation in the form taken by a statement’ (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996)—such as the rhetorical question (‘Want to turn your dreams into reality?’); attempts to address the reader directly or look him (usually him) in the eyes (the use of ‘you’ and ‘your’ as in ‘Turn your dreams into reality!’); the use of a persona (‘Irresistible ageing beauty’); everyone's favourite from the advertising world, the imperative (‘Escape to this inspired ... townhouse’, ‘Restore your sanity’, ‘Bliss out’) and, worst of all, the banal ejaculation/exclamation (‘wow!’)
* for upmarket properties, lots of alliteration and assonance with ‘vogue vanities’, ‘soaring window walls’, or ‘sheer alfresco finesse’.

The texts

From The Property Press: various issues, Auckland 2004

**Love, love me do**

‘A warm inviting belle I am, with 3 brms & study, 2 bathrooms, double garage and a nice wide view. I'm impeccable in timeless brick, my internals in fine modern form. No need to fuss over me on your precious weekends, I'm the low maintenance kind. When you're not with me, I won't be far. ... The city, beach, shops and schools are moments away. Enjoy me all to yourself or rent me out. I'll be sitting down the drive where it's unbelievably quiet. Come see me sometime, but don't wait forever. ... My heart can only belong to one.’

**Want to turn your dream into reality?** ‘The early 1900’s transitional villa has all the features you will be looking for. The traditional layout, including formal lounge and dining make the final transformation easy to see. Original features include fireplaces and scrim! The formally loved garden is waiting to be rediscovered, and includes nut and fruit trees. With 3 bedrooms, and all the potential you could wish for. This world is truly your oyster!’

‘This nest is nicely featured. Cosy and comfortable and in zone for top schools—a real heart stopper!’

**Affordable designer oasis** ‘Escape to this inspired townhouse. Exceptionally bright and spacious. A striking kitchen will impress entertainers and guests alike! The classy neat bathrooms feature vogue vanities and fittings. Through soaring window walls, French doors cleverly open to the snazzy entertaining terraces, spa pool, lush planting. Its sheer alfresco finesse!’

‘Possibly the funkiest house on the market!’

**Exquisite city sanctuary** ‘Restore your sanity in the tranquillity of an extraordinary, beautiful garden hideaway transformed for sophisticated, modern living, softened by
artistic stables theme—flagstones, sisal, blonded wood etc. imbued with the feel of a country lodge and extended into a stunning four-bedroom home. A heavenly escape. Owners have refined the interiors and further developed Italianate gardens, so as visitors enter they are smitten at the sheer magnificence. Bliss out in a little bit of country. Wow! in the city.’

Irresistible ageing beauty
‘I'm getting on in years and am in need of a face lift, but deep down, I'm a star. In the hands of a loving new owner my splendour, charm and character could be restored. I don't often brag but I do have all the criteria ... large level 809m section with a north-west aspect, an abundance of sun, shops across the road and a really good location’.

‘Please visit me soon.’

The commentary

Mae West meets the metaphysicals: the language of real estate advertising by Martin Andrew

‘Real estatese’, like ‘legalese’, comprises abstract jargon usually employed in transactional contexts and glossaried in popular texts such as Bell (2003). The power differential between the speaker and receiver of Real estatese suggests an inbuilt deceptiveness in the language, which obfuscates more than it clarifies. Advertising discourse, of which ‘Real Estate Advertese’ is a variety, functions not just to persuade, but, as Cook (2001) reminds us, also to ‘amuse, inform, misinform, worry or warn’ (ibid.: 10) and its ‘receivers’ are participants who belong to and participate in the context. Real estate advertese is a hybrid subgenre created, in Cook’s words ‘by advertisers’ frequent and ingenious attempts to disguise their ads as something else’ (ibid.: 13). Angela Goddard (2003) writes that ‘advertising copywriters regularly produce texts that are as highly wrought as any piece of literature, using fully the resources of language and inviting creative and subtle attempts from their readers’ (ibid.: 3). While the real estate advertese texts analysed here do not demand a subtle response and are so highly wrought they are over wrought, there is room for creativity in the response of the participant.

This analysis of these soft-sale, short-copy real estate advertisements from Property Press in Auckland, New Zealand, circa 2004, is an exercise in what Cook calls ‘reading in the context of tradition’ (op.cit.: 6), an exercise in locating that ‘something else’ by identifying intertextualities. Intertextuality—‘the way one text can point to or base itself on another’ (Goddard op. cit.: 51)—binds copywriter, participant, and text. Very often these texts are loaded with allusion so commonplace in cultural idiom that the copywriter merely knows its connotative echo, its culture-embedded meaning, and not its prototypical context. Real estate advertese tends towards ‘the ambiguous and the indeterminate’ (Cook, op. cit.: 103), adopting, sometimes disarmingly, the features of personal and even intimate interaction.

This analysis follows two lines of enquiry. First it re-evaluates the conceited discourse structure of Real estate advertese by drawing an analogy with metaphysical poetry, relocating the ‘poetic creativity’ that Cook sees in ads (ibid.: 17) in their subliminal
use of conceits. After that I will situate the five advertisements in twentieth-century cultural contexts to locate intertextualities hidden to the copywriter and examine the middle-aged-male-centric gaze of this sample of the subgenre.

Metaphysical poetry and real estate advertising
Metaphysical poets used a ‘conceit’, an extended central image or metaphoric equation, as the basis for extended discourse on a metaphysical notion, usually one incorporating both corporeal and supernatural elements. A key feature of the comparison is that its ‘ingenuity is more striking than its justness’ (Gardner 1972: 19). Conceits make incongruities seem plausibly similar. The idea of God as a landlord structures Herbert's ‘Redemption’, for instance. Real estate advertise also adopts conceits, centred around the slogan used to identify a particular property and developed, overdeveloped, in the waxing lyrical that follows in a pretty paragraph or two. A common conceit word here is ‘sanctuary’: property as a place of withdrawal and contemplation. Readers can imagine similar riffs on ‘dream’ (your fantasy as a transformative possibility, frequently collocated with ‘handyman’s’ or ‘entertainer's’), ‘oasis’ (property as a place of life amidst the urban desert), ’nest’ (the comfort and warmth of an insulated house) or ‘escape’ (refuge from the rat race).

The advertisements sloganed with ‘Love, love me do’ and ‘Irresistible ageing beauty’ both develop the conceit of the property as a female inviting an owner (male, presumably) either to ‘enjoy her’ or to ‘give her a facelift’. The conceits break down when hard facts like the square metreage or proximity to schools need describing.

Love, love me do’ extends the conceit further with the property’s declaration ‘I’m the low maintenance kind’ in contrast to the facelift-needing declared by ‘Irresistible ageing beauty’.

Although the discourse structure echoes that of a metaphysical poem, the intertextuality is coincidental, although English Literature majors do end up as real estate copywriters these days. The usage of imagery is less that of a clever conceit than a cliché from the stock-banks of real estate advertise lexicon, which itself borrows from the copywriter's own cultural consciousness. The issue is less the rhetorical ‘artful deviation’ commonplace in clever ads (McQuarrie and Mick 1996) than indiscriminate, magpie-like ‘borrowing’ of shiny objects’. For example, the advertisement climaxed with ‘This world is truly your oyster!’ uses a hackneyed metaphor that develops not very cleverly from the ad's opening conceit, implicit in the rhetorical ‘Want to turn your dream into reality?’ The two images are united by the metaphysical notion of ‘transformation’, which is clearly real estate advertise imagery for ‘This house needs work’. The alchemist is the handyman.

Popular culture and real estate advertise
You do not need to be au fait with the Beatles to recognize the catchphrase ‘Love, love me do’. Yet the discourse of the rest of the text is anything but 1960s lyric, imitating the one-liners of Mae West, specifically the well-known phrase ‘Come see me some time’, echoed politely by the ‘Irresistible ageing beauty’ as ‘Please visit me soon’. The effectiveness of this depends less on recognition of the utterance's original context (Mae West said to Cary Grant in She Done Him Wrong, 1932, ‘come up
sometime, see me’) than in recognizing the function (come hither invitation), the field of discourse to which it belongs (intimate banter between a potential couple), and being open to its tenor. The two copywriters are unlikely to have known the phrase's identification with West unless subliminally. Yet its popular meaning and its meaning in speech act theory as a sexual invitation is evident to all. Real estate advertese emerges from and continues to perpetuate the linguistic clichés of popular culture. This is why we should not be overly arrested to note that the final phrases ‘... but don't wait forever ... my heart can only belong to one!’ seem like trite lyrics from a Céline Dion ballad. If advertising language functions to ‘amuse, inform, misinform, worry or warn’, in this case I choose amusement.

The rest of the text purloins deliberately archaic poetic word order and lexis (‘A warm inviting belle I am’). It employs, disturbingly, a speaking persona where the property, conceited as a Mae West-style female, invites the participant variously to ‘Love me do’ and ‘Come see me’. The word ‘belle’ coincidentally brings to mind Mae West once more, (Belle of the Nineties, 1935), but she would never have uttered such metaphors as ‘I'm impeccable in timeless brick, my internals in fine form’. She did say ‘When I'm good I'm very good, but when I'm bad I'm better’, which might have been the effect the writer was striving for. The rather visceral use of the term ‘internals’, which I assume to be things like hot water cylinders and pipes, extends the equation of the property with the female body and is backed up by the physicality of the word ‘form’ as in ‘the female form’. The conceit overreaches itself with ‘I'm the low maintenance kind’ and ‘or rent me out’ which could mean ‘I won't cost you money’ and ‘I could make you money’. Suddenly it seems as if the whore is addressing her proprietor. It is clearly at odds with the demure wifely image of the promise ‘I'll be sitting down the drive, where it's unbelievably quiet’.

The conceit depending upon the tacit male gaze of the ‘viewer’-cum-potential proprietor reappears in ‘Irresistible ageing beauty’. Again the house speaks to a male overseer in the guise of a once-attractive female: ‘I'm getting on in years and am in need of a facelift, but deep down, I'm a star’. This appears to come right out of a childhood game of riddle-me-ree, where inanimate objects exhort children with clues to guess what they are. The hands of a ‘loving new owner’, arguably a middle-aged, white, DIY stereotype, would restore her ‘splendour, charm and character’. The attempt to prolong the illusion that the property is a speaking woman breaks down when ‘she’ begins to brag about her ‘section’, ‘location’, and ‘aspect’ with a marked lack of metaphysical erotic topography but a sound knowledge of the dull abstract nouns taught in real estate advertese 101.

References


