



Let's shop until we drop - but do we have the language to do so? (1)

by Axel Zafoschnig

This article looks into the fascination of shopping, the power of the language displayed in High Street shop windows, and into how we can teach our learners the language of shopping through grasping the meaning of many a stimulating slogan in the shops. Language awareness and the discourse of the world of selling and marketing are other key issues. The Brits have changed, they say, from a nation of shopkeepers to a nation of shoppers - an interesting notion, especially when we now stroll along the High Streets in British cities and study the clever advertisements we encounter at every step. Intelligent ideas, convincing imperatives, and a vast number of examples of playing with words, are only a few factors to enhance the realisation that, when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping, and that this cultural phenomenon can help us as language teachers to take a more lively and humorous approach to teaching British life and institutions.

So let's begin our walk and our search for mad ads in the hustle and bustle of a fictitious shopping spree to the centre of a medium-sized English city on a hot summer day. "Iceland", the inexpensive supermarket chain, seems "cool", and like a good place to start. Large windows, all plastered with posters for "Summer savers! - spend 15 £ - save ££ at 350 attractions - Kids go free!" tell you that it may be worth your while risking a quick glance, especially since the kids need to be taken out in the school hols. After reading another poster "Step inside, enjoy the ride - e.g. 6 golden Bernard Matthews drummers was £ 1.99, now 99 p", you decide to obey the friendly command to enter, and to buy some chicken, particularly since you must "hurry ... offer ends by .. August", and we really don't want to be amongst the late-comers, do we? By the way, if you feel like working for "Iceland", you should consider approaching their personnel manager and ask about their poster "Jobs: Part-time vacancies - Join the crew (Retail Assistants)", these stores always seem to be short of staff.

Outside the local "coop" (oh, yes, they do still exist!), your eye is not so much caught by the posters "Sale" or "Look out for this week's megadeal" in the windows (not very creative indeed), but by the more official, and very referential piece of information "Sprinkler stop valve inside", just in case you wanted to burn out after only 2 shops. Not very appealing, you think, and move on to the neighbouring stores: a "Zoom the loom", offering ½ price on curtains, quilts, and pillows; a "Baker's Oven", luring you with trivial, but effective "simply salad - eat well - feel great" slogans and pictures of their "New Filled Sandwich & Roll Range (which are : Tasty Fillings on Freshly Baked Bread & Crusty Rolls)" to either take away or eat in. This, and the fact that a "Delicious Roast Chicken Bake" costs £ 1.00 when taken away, and £ 1.30 when eaten in, teaches us that shopping in Britain must always go hand in hand with a delicious meal, even if eaten on a bus seat or a city bench.

Walking is exhausting, by the way the average Brit does not walk more than 140 m from his parked car, so let us look at "Shoe Zone", where the shoe sale is organised in 3 stages: stage one tells us that the "Sale (is) now on", stage two is a poster put across the stage-one slogan and says "Further reductions", and stage three warns us, again glued over the other two, that the sale is now in its "last week" - you only have yourself to blame if you don't rush in and grab your pair right away !

In case all the previous shops have been too expensive, try "Poundland", every shopping addict's paradise, guaranteeing you the "irresistible shopping experience", "extra value/ special offer 3 for 2 on ... (nearly everything)", and, "believe it, quality & value", as well as "final reductions", to which, they promise, "more lines (have been) added". It will please our learners to hear that the more they buy, the less they will have to run to the cash machine.

And run indeed you shall, if you are a dedicated shopper out for bargains : at "QS" they also tell you to „hurry while stocks last“, they offer "many items (for) £ 3", that, however, is rather shocking when you

look at their next window that bluntly proclaims kid sale, I wonder how they get away with this in a country that protects children's rights more strictly than any other!

Moving on, we come to a "WH Smith", after "Waterstone's" the second most significant book-selling chain in the UK. We read their ads and are happy to learn that for our "Summer reading" we can "buy one and get one free - all children's fiction, adult paperback fiction, travel books and maps". But the most sensational "WH Smith" offer awaits us in the last shop window: "Hungry? We now sell a range of crisps & snacks!" This is very reassuring for language students from abroad, in particular when on their first city shopping tour they find out that all the shops' shutters crash down at 5 pm, and that life in the shopping universe comes to a sudden end, although the sun may still be high in the sky. Interestingly, "BHS - British Home Stores" compete with "WH Smith" in this field, and offer Walkers crisps in the very next window: "Buy any 2 and get 1 packet of Walkers Mediterranean for only 20 p". This is just to tell us that, rather than enjoying British beaches, we should "get a taste of the Mediterranean" - I wish they would include this philosophy in their clothes range inside the store as well.

After all these exhortations to eat and drink, it comes as a refreshing change to read the following sign in a fashion store called "Escape": "No food or drink to consumed in this store!" So, after all, an escape from morbid obesity through food is possible, just find such a sign in a store and you can really make an escape. Banks, however, are also to be found in High Streets, and they always try to create a bad conscience at the back of the shopper's mind: "Are you saving in the wrong place? - Ask inside about the right place for your money." Well, why should I ask when I know exactly that the place to save my money at that moment is at home and not in the city centre among other shopping maniacs. To buy or not to buy here is no issue, I feel compelled to shop, even though "Woolwich" tries to tell me: "We'll beat your current monthly mortgage repayments or give you £ 100*" (I wonder what the small-print below the

asterisk would tell me if I bothered to read it).

Rather than being told off by a bank, I now want to indulge in travelling thoughts and "Thomas Cook" seem fair partners for my endeavours, especially since they promise me "unbeatable rates & 0% commission". They do, however, not inform me how well they have been doing with this strategy. Maybe they will end up in a similar state as the shop around the corner, with blank windows and no furniture inside, just a handwritten notice on the door, saying "This store has now ceased trading! Thank you for your custom." Considering the current economic situation in many countries around the world, this sounds like appropriate vocabulary to teach.

Exercises and tasks :

This collection of "best examples" of advertising language should be complemented by some tasks and exercises that encourage our students to store and recycle the newly encountered language items, as well as to become aware of the discourse applied in the sectors of selling and marketing.

Use your dictionaries and find binaries on shopping (contrasting: opposite pairs of adjectives, nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc. related to shopping).

Give a mini-presentation of an object (food, clothes, book, cosmetic or health product, book, or any other product for sale) thereby pointing out its positive sides.

Make up a dialogue between a customer/client and a shop assistant on a special item/service.

Design your own advertisement/slogan/logo/commercial for a product of your choice.

Try to compare the 2 registers of home language to shop language as displayed in the shop windows.

Examine the grammar of positive and negative imperatives, expand short commands into longer sentences.



Find your own ads (if no shops are available, take papers, magazines, etc.), choose any 3 of the same sector (food, clothes, homeware, etc.) and write a report about them for your marketing manager.

Choose as many ads as you like and categorise them in terms of degree of intensity, strength, power ...

Write a letter of inquiry / complaint / praise to a shop / an advertising agency asking for more information on a special ad.

Launch your own design / marketing / sales campaign for a product in an English-speaking country.

Professional profile:

Axel Zafoschnig has experience of nearly 25 years as a teacher of English, and as an EFL and ESP teacher trainer for many institutions, as well as more than 20 years as a pre-service and in-service teacher trainer, both in Austria and the UK.

He has been teaching at the HTBLA Ferlach and the PI Klagenfurt since 1980. Apart from that, he is a free-lance language teaching consultant and interpreter, now engaged in special courses for the Courts in Klagenfurt, for the Environmental Protection Department of the Carinthian Government, and for the WIFI.