

Stylising branded voices: A comparative analysis of corporate ventriloquism by advertising copywriters and social media influencers

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Advertising copywriters are nowadays often expected to help design a so-called tone of voice for companies; this is a technique for creating public communications with a uniform or standardized corporate “personality”. As new-generation copywriters, social media influencers (SMIs) are expected to do something similar – adhering to a corporate style – but must also lend their own personal style to the brand. Rooted in Bakhtin’s (1981) classic ideas about polyphony and Tannen’s (2003) work on ventriloquism, my paper examines how these two types of wordsmiths – i.e., high-end language workers (Thurlow, 2020) – work with/around the notion of voice. My analysis draws on 26 semi-structured interviews with copywriters and SMIs focusing on their reported production processes. This discursive material is supplemented by metadiscursive accounts from newspaper interviews, professional documentation, and/or social media platforms. The analysis centres on the different ways these old- and new-generation advertisers work with language for ventriloquizing the companies or brands they are required to represent. While copywriters must usually “disappear” behind the client’s brand, stylising what they call “tone of voices”, SMIs have a different juggling act to manage: working within the framework of their clients’ advertising briefs, they must also ensure that they sound sufficiently like “themselves”. These styled performances of an authentic self effectively require that SMIs are both branding and self-branding. Following Thurlow (2020), I argue that studies such as this help deepen critical-sociolinguistic perspectives on the contemporary political economy of language.

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After earning her PhD in critical Sociolinguistics from the University of Bern, Dr. Olivia Droz-dit-Busset currently serves as a research associate at the Pädagogische Hochschule Bern. Her doctoral research, a key component of the SNSF-funded "Elite Creativities" project led by Professor Crispin Thurlow, is situated in the fields of digital discourse and language work. Specifically, she explores the ways social media influencers craft language as new-generation copywriters. Combining her master's degree from Cardiff University with her bachelor's from the University of Bern, Dr. Droz-dit-Busset brings a multidisciplinary perspective to her work. In addition to her research, she shares her expertise by teaching seminars on discourse studies, creativity, and digital interaction.

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