1. Aim and Method of the Study

The aims of this study are to give a principled description of a widely experienced register---Chinese display advertisements (henceforth CDA)----and to further explore the nature of register and register variation. The study postulates that while the demand for speed and efficiency of communication should result in language economy in the CDA register, an interplay of multiple linguistic and contextual factors can lead to variation from the economical convention.

In selecting the linguistic features for studying the CDA register, the principle of linguistic co-occurrence as developed by Ervin-Trip (1972) is utilized. The clusters of features correlating consistently with specific conditions of use constitute a register\(^1\). And the starting point for selecting function words as the linguistic features for this study is provided by Ferguson's (1982) typology of features of simple registers. Ferguson (1982:59) suggested the term "simplified register" could be expanded to include "economy register" such as sports announcer talk, telephone messages, newspaper headline, advertisements, and academic note-taking; and presented a typology of features of simple registers as a framework for description, which includes absence of function words such as copula, pronouns, and articles, etc. According to Chao (1968), Chu (1983), and Li and Thompson (1981), the following set of particles or words in Chinese are used more for syntactic functions rather than for semantic content and are thus selected for this study: pronouns, particle *de*, copula, aspect markers, sentence-final particles, and conjunctions.

The corpus for this study involves four hundred display advertisements which were drawn from two most popular newspapers among the Chinese community in the United States: *Chinese Daily News* and *International Daily News*. To further ensure the representativeness of the corpus and to avoid the individual preference of local ad writers, the New York edition of *International Daily News* was selected while the Los Angeles edition for *Chinese Daily News* was used. Table 1 presents the total number of ads and mean text length\(^2\) from the newspapers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Text Mean</th>
<th>Length Mean</th>
<th>S. D.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Daily News</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>245.175</td>
<td>196.39</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1027</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Daily News</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>238.615</td>
<td>209.71</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>967</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Language Economy in CDA

To gain a better picture of language economy in CDA, the study incorporates a comparison of the frequency of the function words in the CDA corpus with their frequency across a much wider spectrum of written Chinese, *Xiandai Hanyu Pinlu Cidian* (Frequency Analysis of Contemporary Chinese Vocabulary, 1986). The *Xiandai Hanyu Pinlu Cidian* (henceforth XHPC) corpus was collected and analyzed by a group of distinguished scholars in Beijing Language Institute, P. R. China. The corpus surveys data from one hundred and seventy-nine registers performed between 1949 and 1981, which are grouped into four major categories: press and political essays, science writings for popular consumption, everyday speech, and literary works. It contains 1,800,000 words, 31,159 word types, and 1,310,000 word tokens. Therefore, it serves as a rather representative spectrum of contemporary Chinese usage, which we term as the Chinese literary register\(^3\), against which we can compare the frequency of function words in CDA, and assess the extent of language economy in the CDA texts.

Table 2 is a summary of the distribution of the six sets of function words in the CDA corpus versus their counterparts in the XHPC corpus. As shown in Table 2, frequency of the function words in the CDA corpus is much lower than their counterparts in the XHPC corpus. In other words, it is largely the absence of the function words that gives the CDA register its characteristic appearance. Nevertheless, from Table 2, we can also observe that the absence of the function words is not absolute in the CDA register. In the following sections, we will further examine these features and the uses of each set of the function words in CDA.

Table 2: Frequency of function words in CDA vs. XHPC.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CDA</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>XHPC</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pronouns:</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>58755</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.1 Pronouns

Bruthiaux (1993:40) indicates that dispensing with pronouns is a wide spread strategy for achieving simplicity in American classified advertisements. Likewise, Leech (1966:90) points out that the situational factors afford so many clues to correct interpretation that the referential explicitness in advertising language can be dispensed with. Therefore, it is predicted that in CDA, temporal and/or spatial constraints of the interaction and the generally unproblematic identification of a referent must make the inclusion of pronouns largely superfluous. In other words, the register may waive some of the rules in the literary grammar that control pronoun use.

As predicted, the occurrence of pronouns in CDA is far less frequent, representing a far smaller proportion of all word tokens (0.74%) in the CDA corpus than in the XHPC corpus (4.47%). As seen in Table 2, the pronouns in the CDA register run at only about 17% of their level in the literary register. Moreover, the third person pronouns, which are taken as one of the frequent word types in Chinese literary texts and possess the highest frequency of all pronouns in the XHPC corpus, have the lowest frequency of occurrence (N=40, %=0.04) in the CDA corpus. On the contrary, the second person pronouns which possess the lowest frequency of all pronouns in XHPC
have the highest frequency (N=554, %=0.57) in CDA.

Evidence for missing pronouns in CDA can be observed in ad where one is included in a similar context, as seen in the difference between (1.a) and (1.b):

(1)  

a. **women** jing-ban:  
we excellently-handle  

  gongsi neibu zeren  
  company inside responsibility  

  shangye wei-yue.....  
  commercial break-contract.......  

"We specialize in handling cases related to responsibilities inside the company, commercial contract-breaking......."

b. jing-ban:  
excellently-handle  

  xin wu goumai jiu kuan chong-dai...  
  new home purchase old loan re-finance...  

"Specialize in new home purchasing and old loan re-financing..."

Yet identifying the missing referent(s) in CDA is often unproblematic, since, as Leech (1966:90) indicates, our pragmatic knowledge of the commodity situation enables us to assign the relevant referents. For example, for (1.b), we can easily infer that the agent of providing the service or product must be the seller while the agent for buying the product or receiving the service refers to the customer. Therefore, a characteristic feature of CDA is a large number of cases in which pronouns appear to be missing.

Nevertheless, as can be seen in (1.a), in spite of transparent semantics which makes referential assignment unproblematic, occasional inclusion of pronouns in CDA is possible. Of all the pronouns, second person pronouns, *ni, nin*, and *nimen*, occur the most often in CDA. As indicated by Chafe (1982 & 1985) and Bible (1988), second person pronouns create a high degree of involvement from the addressee. We can observe that in CDA, the second person pronouns occur relatively often in the headline and the body of an advertisement as well, addressing the reader as if in a conversational interaction and consequently creates active involvement from the reader. Illustrations can be seen in (2).
Furthermore, both *ni* and *nin* are also used in various ads to the customer that "YOU are very important and YOUR INTERESTS are well thought of when this product or service is designed". As a result, they also actively involve the reader in the interaction and invite them to buy the product or service. This use of *ni* and *nin* is distributed quite evenly in the corpus where incidents can be found quite evenly in the corpus where incidents can be found from various categories of the advertisements, as in (3).

(3) *mei de zaoxing rang nin shen xin yukuai*  
beauty DE modeling let you body soul happy  

*fa de sheji zengtian nin de wumei*  
hair DE design add you DE charm  

“Beautiful modeling makes your body and soul happy,  
and hair designing adds to your charm.”

To conclude this section, it is the absence of pronouns which gives the CDA register part of its characteristic appearance. Rather than relying on explicit pronouns as in the literary register, CDA readers have to use their pragmatic and/or conventional knowledge for the successful assignment of reference. Nevertheless, the deliberate insertion of second as well as first person pronouns in CDA to address and actively involve the reader suggests that CDA writers are not confined to set regularities defined by economy register and are adept at drawing on a wide range of strategies to meet the demands of each communicative situation.

2.2 Particle *de*

The particle *de* is the most versatile of all particles in Mandarin Chinese. It can serve as adjective marker, as nominalizer, as possessive marker, as relative pronoun, in introducing a manner or resultative adverb, as appositive marker, as potential marker and as adverbial marker. Nonetheless, the basic use of *de* is in subordination (Chu, 1983:108), and its ideational function can be identified as what Chafe (1982 & 1985) calls "integration and idea expansion”. In other words, it
is mostly used in expanding idea units and integrating information into fewer words.

As a function word, *de* is expected to have relatively few tokens in CDA, where the temporal constraints does not permit much expansion of the discourse. As expected, it has only 1158 tokens, representing only 1.2% of all word tokens in the CDA corpus. In comparison, the XHPC corpus reveals that the particle *de* is the most frequent word type used in Chinese texts, with 84,792 tokens and percentage of all word tokens reaching 6.45%. In other words, the frequency of *de* in CDA runs at only about 19% of its level in the XHPC corpus. Apparently, the absence of particle *de* constitutes another source for distinguishing CDA register from the literary register.

Evidence of missing *de* can be observed in ads where one is included in a similar context, as seen in the difference between (4.a) and (4.b).

(4)  

a.  

*zuihao de fauwu*  
Best DE service

"Best service"

b.  

*zuihao fawu*  
best service

"Best service"

Nevertheless, as the statistic shows, the absence of *de* in CDA is not absolute. Incidents for the various uses of *de*, though few, can be found in the CDA corpus. Illustrations are given in (5).

(5)  

a. As adjective marker:

"long zhi xing" dai nin youlan qian nian  
dragon of four" bring you visit thousand year

*wenhua de zhongguo mingsheng ji guji*  
culture DE China famous-place and historical-site

"Dragon Tour" brings you to China's thousand-year culture with places of historical interest and scenic beauty."

b. As nominalizer:

*nin liaojie xiandai de xin nuxing*
Do you know contemporary new woman

*xinzhong xiang de, ai chuan de, ai yong de*

heart-within think DE love wear DE love use DE

*ai kan de....dou shi xie shenme?*

love see DE....all be some what

"Do you know what today's women think about, what they like to wear, what they like to use, and what they love to read?"

We can observe that the use of *de* as in (4.a) may be optional and its inclusion in the clause simply create a more exact and explicit style. But the use of *de* as in (4.b) is rather obligatory and essential in connecting the units of ideas or information in the clause. In other words, despite being a function word with low lexical content, *de* is an essential element for expanding idea units and integrating information into fewer words. Under such circumstance, the inclusion of *de* also contributes to informational density of the CDA text, fulfilling the goal of informativity and conciseness in advertising language.

### 2.3 Copula

Leech (1966) indicates that British advertising language is comprised of clauses with minimal elaboration, and as a result, minor clauses without linking verbs predominate. Bruthiaux (1993) also finds that copula is a highly dispensable item in American classified advertisements. Given the limited time for CDA processing, copula *shi* is predicted to have low occurrence as well. As predicted, *shi* in CDA represents a far smaller proportion, with only 173 tokens and 0.18% of all words tokens. But in the XHPC corpus, *shi* is one of the most frequent word types in Chinese literary texts, with 21,831 tokens and frequently reaching 1.66%. In other words, *shi* in the CDA register is used at only about 11% of its level in literary register.

A typical structure for staging information in CDA is topic-comment structure without a linking verb, as illustrated in (5).

(6) *English Language Centre*

English Language Centre

*Yikuai zhu nin mai xiang chenggong de tiaoban*

one help you advance toward success DE spring-board
"English Language Center is the spring-board that helps you advance toward success."

Nevertheless, as seen in the use of pronouns and particle de, CDA writers are not deprived of the alternative of including the function words. Copula shi is included often to mark special affirmation, emphasis, or contrast of the information immediately following it. Such uses of shi take place in all the categories of the advertisements within this corpus, as in (7).

(7) "cheng" "xin" shi women fuwu de zpingzhi
"honesty" "credit" be our service DE goal

"zhuangye" "jingye" shi women pinzhi de baozhang
professional love-profession is our quality DE guarantee

nin de manyi shi women zuida de xinyuan
you DE satisfaction is our biggest DE wish

"Honesty and good credit are our service goals; being professional and loving the profession are the guarantee for our quality; and your satisfaction is our biggest hope."

We can observe that the use of shi here serves very well in catching the attention from the readers and emphasizing the merits of a product or service so as to attract the reader to buy the product or service advertised.

2.4 Aspect Markers

Leech (1966:123) points out that a prominent feature of British advertising language is the outstanding frequency of verbs in simple present forms. Bruthiaux (1993:40) also indicates that verb constructions in American classified advertisements contain little inflection. Nevertheless, while Bruthiaux (1993) attributes the lack of verbal inflection in advertising language as due to spatial constraints and the conventions of the economy register, Leech (1966) postulates that the absence of tense or aspect marking owes to the purpose of advertisements in trying to portray the virtues of their product or service as unbounded in time.

Sharing similar general purpose of advertisements, CDA is expected to have low occurrence of verbal inflection as well. As expected, the four major aspect markers in Chinese, the perfective aspect marker -le, the experiential aspect marker -guo, the progressive aspect marker zai-, and the
durative aspect marker -zhe, are almost totally absent in the CDA corpus. Their frequency of occurrence is only 37 in number, and 0.04 in percentage of all the word tokens. Compared to their counterparts in the XHPC corpus which are 26718 in number and 2.03 in percentage of all word tokens, the aspect markers in CDA run at only about 2% of their level there. Even in comparison with the other function words discussed earlier, i.e., pronouns, particle de and copula shi, the aspect markers are much less frequent in the CDA register, and moreover, at a much lower level than their counterparts in the literary register.

In describing a product/service and its qualities, CDA simply uses unaffixed form of the verb, even without elaboration of adverbs for time as it is the case in Chinese literary register. Typical verbal expressions or clauses in CDA can be seen in (7). The verbs are often uninflected just as what Leech (1966) has found in English advertising.

(8) xiuli hong-mu tan-mu ji gudong jiazu
repair red-wood sandalwood and antique furniture

"Repair redwood, sandalwood and antique furniture."

It should be noted that the near absence of aspect markers in CDA is not simply due to the fact that they are function words and are deemed as unnecessary to be included in such a temporally constrained register. More importantly, as it is also conjectured by Leech (1966:124), their absence owes to the purpose of the advertisements in trying to portray the virtues of a product or service as "unbounded in time", like the laws of nature. Givon (1984:272) points out that "aspects of various kinds involves our notion of the boundedness of time spans, i.e., various configurations of beginning, ending, and middle points". Both the perfective aspect and the experiential aspect are preoccupied with referring to antecedent states or events. Although the progressive and durative aspects may be selected with the present tense and be compatible with present reference, in their most important sense, they apply to "temporary" activity.

Another reason for the largely absence of aspect markers is that perfective aspect as well as past tense forms are often associated with narrative and descriptive texts (Quirk et al., 1985:189; Schffrin, 1981) whereas present tense forms deal with topics and action of immediate relevance (Biber,1988:224). In other words, given the context of display advertisements and the demand for efficiency in communication, CDA writers prefer not to use a narrative mode in describing a product, service or company. With unaffixed form of the verbs, like that of present tense verbs, they bring the reader to the immediate present.

Exceptions in using a narrative mode for introducing or leading the reader to a product or service in CDA are very rare, with the few occurring mostly in sufficiently large-size advertisements. When under the exceptional circumstance, i.e., with narrative style, the inclusion of relevant aspect markers for marking the boundaries of events becomes necessary. As seen in (9),
the perfective aspect marker *le* is used to signal the anteriority of an event in relation to other events in the narration.

(9) "xinghao you le Call Waiting….
Fortunately have LE Call Waiting….

*xianzai wo de mafan yijing jiejue le!*
Now I DE trouble already solve LE

*jinwan wo de chezi zai ban lu shang*
tonight I DE car at half way during

*paomao, jizhe xiang dadianhua qiu zhu.*
break-down, anxious want telephone seek help

*xin xiang bu miao, yinwei mei wan….*
Heart think not right, because every evening….

*zhege shihou, wo de baobei nuer dou hui*
This time I DE treasured daughter all will

*zuo malasong si de dianhua changtan;*
do Marathon manner DE telephone long-talk

*guoran bu-chu suoliao, nuer zheng*
sure-enough not-out expect daughter just

*zai dianhua zhong tan de buyilehu! xinghao*
at telephone in talk DE happy fortunately

*zuijin zhuang le taipingyang bei-er*
recently install LE Pacific Bell

*Call Waiting, shi wo de qiuzhu xinhao nenggou*
Call Waiting, allow I DE seek-help signal can

*tongshi jie tong, fouze jintian wanshang*
Same-time connect through, otherwise today evening
wo yiding ji cheng reguo shang de mayi le.”
I must anxious become hot pot on DE ants LE

“Fortunately, (we) have had Call Waiting, now my problem has been solved! Tonight, my car broke down on the way. I was anxious to telephone and seek help, but then I realized that every evening at this time, my darling daughter would be doing Marathon-like long talk on the phone. As expected, my daughter was just excitedly talking on the phone. Fortunately, we had recently installed Pacific Bell’s Call waiting, which made my call to go through at the same time. Otherwise, tonight, I would have been as anxious as the ants in a hot pot.”

2.5 Sentence-Final Particles

There are six major particles that occur in sentence-final position in Chinese: le as marking 'change-of-status', ne as 'relevance', ba as 'soliciting agreement', ou as 'friendly warning', a/ya as 'reducing forcefulness' and ma as 'question'.

It is assumed that economy register places emphasis on information at the expense of expression (Ferguson, 1982). In consequence, discourse particles may be deemed as largely superfluous in information exchange and may be excluded. Therefore, it is predicted that the incidence of these sentence-final particles in CDA must be relatively low. As predicted, in the CDA corpus, they consist of 0.04% of all word tokens, which is a far smaller distribution than those in the XHPC corpus (1.62%). In short, they run at only 3% of their level in the literary register.

Nevertheless, in the headline of an advertisement, we can note an occasional use of question particle ma, 'change-of-status' particle le, or 'friendly-warning' particle ou. Ma, together with the questions it occurs in, serves effectively in involving the reader to respond to the questions, which leads to the need to buy the product or service. Illustrations are as follows:

(10) nin you na bu huo zhi kunrao ma?
you have take not obtain goods of problem MA?

"Do you have problems obtaining goods?"

Similar to the function of ma, ou, which sends out a friendly warning, entices the reader to respond with an immediate action--buying the product or service, as seen in (11).

(11) cuo guo de, bu neng zai cuo.
miss GUO DE, not allow again miss

zhe ci cuo guo, keneng yao zai deng
this time miss GUO, probably need again wait

shiwu nian ou!
fifteen years OU

"(If you) missed before, you should not miss again. (If you) miss this time, (you) probably will have to wait for another fifteen years!"

But compared to *ma* which is a "positive appeal", *ou* as a "negative appeal" is used far fewer in the advertising language. In this corpus, only one incidence is found.

### 2.6 Conjunctions

Both Leech (1966:143) and Bruthiaux (1993:63) find that advertising language is characterized by parataxis. Similarly, CDA is also characterized by parataxis, i.e., phrases and clauses are often simply listed or coordinated without explicit grammatical connectives.

From Table 2, we can observe that the total number of conjunctions in CDA is 988 which is 1.02% of all the word tokens in the corpus, whereas their counterparts in XHPC have a frequency of 53073, representing 4.03% of all the word tokens in that corpus. In other words, the conjunctions in the CDA register run at only 25% of their level in the literary register.

Nevertheless, it should be noted among the function words discussed in this study, conjunctions in CDA have a relatively higher frequency of occurrence in comparison to their level in XHPC. Especially for conjunctions of additive relations, they are 34% of their level in XHPC. In an expanded version of the text, e.g., involving sets of noun phrases or verb phrases which are embedded within a large phrase or clause, additive conjunctions are likely to occur. Examples are as follows:

(12) a. *geren, gongsi huo tuanti jiankang baoxian*
individual, company or group health insurance

"Individual, company or group health insurance"

b. *zuzhi ji jiesan gongsi*
organize and disband company
"Organize and disband companies"

And when prose style instead of block style is selected for text organization of an advertisement, various types of conjunctions used in the literary register are also used in CDA. Illustrations are as follows:

(13) ...Jia lian yiliao fuwu wang
...California allied medical service network

shi zhendui guangda yayi jì qita shaoshu
be for numerous Asian and other minority

zuyi chengli de yiliao wang, you yi qun
group establish DE medical network, by a group

zhuanye shuiping jì gao er you neng
professional level both high and also able

liaojie butong wenhua he yuyan de
understand different culture and language DE

yisheng jiecheng de wei nin fuwu,....
doctor whole-hearted DE for you serve

"Allied Physicians of California (APC) is a medical network established for the numerous people of Asian and other minority groups. It consists of a group of doctors who have a high professional level and an understanding of different cultures and languages working wholeheartedly for you...."

3. Conclusion

The study lends support to the observation by Leech (1966) and Bruthiaux (1993 & 1994) that the demand for speed and efficiency in communication results in convention of language economy in the advertising register. CDA register is found to be characterized by lack of syntactic elaboration as manifested in the largely absence of function words. Furthermore, as CDA shares some of the features found across the range of simplified registers, it is impossible not to notice an
"overall family resemblance" among these registers (see also Ferguson, 1982).

Nevertheless, this study also indicates that an interplay of both linguistic and contextual factors can lead to variation in CDA from the economical convention among the simplified registers. For example, in the context of a prose-style text rather than block-style text for an advertisement, the convention of language economy in CDA is no longer applicable, and function words take place according to the need of the text context which follow the rules of the literary grammar. Furthermore, different from Ferguson's postulation (1983), function words are found not simply as a group linked to the notion of language economy or of syntactic elaboration, but each of them is influenced by the writer's reaction to the circumstances of a specific communicative situation and shaped individually or collectively to serve other communicative purpose(s). For example, second person pronouns, copula shi, and discourse particles are occasionally included in the headline or body copy of an advertisement to address the reader, creating a high degree of involvement and inviting active response from the reader to the advertising event. To achieve explicitness in communication, or to expand ideas and integrate information into fewer words, particle de and grammatical conjunctions are included in the advertising text whenever necessary despite the fact that they belong to the category of function words.

The findings of variation as well as of regularities in the CDA register in comparison with the other simplified registers further support the conception of "emergent grammar" (Hopper, 1987 & 1988). Different from the canonical attitude which sees grammar as consisting of a discrete set of categories or rules, being detachable from discourse and remaining constant across contexts, Hopper proposes that grammar is a real-time activity, in which any regularities are only provisional and are continually subject to negotiation, renovation and abandonment in the context they occur (1988:120). Grammar is hence not to be understood as a pre-requisite for discourse, a prior possession attributable in identical form to speaker and hearer, but is negotiable in the actual interaction in ways that reflect the individual speaker's past experience of the forms and assessment of the present context. In future register analysis, therefore, we should take into consideration not only the linguistic characteristics of register, but also the situational characteristics, and the functional and conventional associations between linguistic and situational characteristics (see also Biber, 1994).

Notes
1 Halliday and Hasan (1989) also indicate that it is the consistent matching of clusters of linguistic features with specific language use that constitutes a register.

2 Text length is measured by the number of words in each text. Each Chinese character was counted as one word, and each English word was also counted as one word. Abbreviations such as AT&T was counted as one word. Telephone numbers, e.g., 1(800)222-5454, dates, e.g., 8/10/1993, and pricing numbers, e.g., $15, were counted as one. All word tokens were recorded including the ones
printed on illustrations that were readable. Typographical forms such as slashes, hyphens, and periods were removed.

3 The term 'literary register' is adopted from Bruthiaux (1993) to refer to the general grammar representing various linguistic varieties or genres in a language.

References


