

The adjective “unique”: More than a buzzword in the language of advertising

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the adjective “unique” in car manufacturers’ websites. The presence of adjectives is generally acknowledged to be a significant feature of advertising texts; however, analyses often focus on issues relating to the statistical frequency of occurrence of such items. Based on a corpus of sixteen UK car manufacturers’ websites, the present study considers the adjective “unique” in order to extract lexical information about its use and possible interpretation. From a relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics, findings indicate that this item shows an extraordinary sensitivity to context, and a number of ad hoc concepts are identified. Results also show that the word “unique” performs a significant persuasive role in online car advertising, adapting perfectly to the defining characteristics of this medium, as well as to the distinguishing features of the automobile as a commodity product.

Keywords: adjective use, car advertising, Relevance Theory, lexical pragmatics, ad hoc concepts.

Resumen

El adjetivo “unique”: Algo más que una palabra llamativa en el lenguaje publicitario

Este trabajo analiza el uso del adjetivo *unique* en páginas web de fabricantes de coches. A pesar de que los adjetivos tienden a considerarse elementos destacados en los textos publicitarios, su estudio suele centrarse en cuestiones de índole estadística. El presente artículo ofrece un análisis del adjetivo *unique* basado en un corpus de 16 páginas web de fabricantes de coches del Reino Unido con el propósito de extraer información léxica sobre el uso e interpretación de esta palabra. Los resultados obtenidos, basados en la Teoría de la Relevancia, revelan que la interpretación de este adjetivo muestra una enorme dependencia del

contexto, lo cual permite identificar varios conceptos *ad hoc*. Asimismo, este trabajo pone de manifiesto el valor persuasivo del adjetivo *unique* en la publicidad del sector automovilístico en Internet, en perfecta sintonía con las características del tipo de canal empleado y de los rasgos distintivos del automóvil como producto de consumo.

Palabras clave: uso adjetival, publicidad del automóvil, Teoría de la Relevancia, pragmática léxica, conceptos *ad hoc*.

1. Introduction

Advertising, as a goal-oriented activity whose purpose is to sell a product, service or idea, naturally falls within the category of persuasive communication. Even though the intention to convince may be carried out through both verbal and non-verbal means (images, music, paralanguage), this study, in line with much other scholarly work in the field, is concerned especially with linguistic expression as a persuasive tool (Leech, 1966; Vestergaard & Shrøeder, 1985; Myers, 1994; Goddard, 2002, and many others). Among the words which may move the customer to action, adjectives, due to their highly informative meaning and descriptive value, are generally acknowledged as having a significant presence in an advertisement, be it a slogan or a longer stretch of text. It is somewhat surprising, then, that, to our knowledge, a detailed analysis of the adjective phrase (AP) in the language of advertising has yet to emerge in the literature. Unlike in the case of nouns (Rush, 1998; Ramón & Labrador, 2018), APs are discussed principally in terms of their specific role in a given advertisement, which limits the scope for commentary on them to short passages within longer texts, and considerably reduces the possibility of drawing overriding conclusions. Adjective frequency in the language of advertising, however, has attracted more interest; thus, studies often present lists of the most common APs used in advertisements (Leech, 1966; Goddard, 2002; Ke & Wang, 2013; Hakkarainen, 2016). Yet this seems to derive from mere statistical curiosity, with generalisations often contradicting those found in other studies. For instance, whereas for Goddard (2002: 73), adjectives such as “new” or “good” (terms that tend to rank high in such lists) can be labelled as “buzzwords” or “spin words” (words that cause a special impact on the reader), Leech (1966: 151, 152) deems them to be part of the general stock vocabulary that advertisers rely on, and, accordingly, categorises them as “all-purpose epithets”. Furthermore, Leech (1966: 153) notes “that

certain commendatory adjectives are preferred to others” and that this “is less easy to explain”. Several decades later, Ke and Wang (2013: 281), despite their arguments being perhaps more superficial than would be desirable, pointed out that adjective frequency in advertising only becomes meaningful when considered within the wider frame of “a relationship among human civilisation, advertising effect, [and] lexicology”. It is on these lines that the present paper has been conceived.

A sample of 124 texts from sixteen UK car manufacturers’ websites during the year 2017 was compiled: eight of these being luxury marques (LMs) (Aston Martin, Audi, Bentley, BMW, Jaguar, Lexus, Maserati and Mercedes Benz) and the other eight non-luxury marques (NLMS) (Citroën, Ford, Mini, Nissan, Renault, Vauxhall, Volkswagen and Volvo), with the aim of contributing to the study of APs in the language of advertising through focusing on the use and interpretation of the term “unique” in the corpus. Adjective frequency has been discussed in the literature, and in this context we can say that “unique” deserves attention, in that, according to the data extracted from the sixteen car websites examined in this paper, it ranks fifth in frequency after the APs “new”, “black”, “rear” and “blue”, with 116 occurrences, 76 in LMs texts and 40 in NLMS. The current paper addresses the following research questions: Can the item “unique” be categorised as an all-purpose epithet, a buzzword, or does it have some meaning of its own? What is the persuasive value of the lexical unit “unique” in the particular setting of automobile advertising? Might there be a relationship between the use of the term “unique” and the channel (the Internet) where it appears?

The study is structured as follows. Section 2 sets out the defining features of online advertising, along with a characterisation of the automobile as a marketing product. Section 3 introduces the theoretical literature employed to analyse the use and interpretation of the term “unique”. Section 4 constitutes the empirical part of the study, and is divided into seven subsections, these corresponding to seven different contexts of use. Section 5 then provides some final remarks.

2. Online advertising and automobiles

In order to address the research questions set out above, the first step is to specify the medium in which the adjective “unique” appears, as well as the product it is used to describe. Hence, this section first explains the

characteristics of the Internet as an advertising channel, then moves on to describe the automobile as a marketing product, its particular determining factors, and the relationship it has with the medium in which it appears.

While there is no doubt that online advertising is an example of persuasive communication, it is no less true that the advent of digital technology has transformed it into an interactive communicative act. First, digital consumers are in control not only of the amount of information they can gather before making a purchase (the expression “research-shopper phenomenon” (Verhoef et al., 2007) refers to the techno-literate consumer who uses the web to learn more easily and quickly about a product), but also of where, when and how they decide to collect such information. Second, manufacturers’ websites differ considerably from other forms of advertising (print advertisements, television and radio commercials, billboards). The difference lies not only in that the latter have been designed to attract attention in a matter of seconds by means of short, catchy phrases, but also in that these more traditional sorts of advertising are largely unsolicited. Web users, by contrast, have typically “landed” on the website. This may happen for a great many reasons, such as gathering specific information, keeping themselves informed about new developments and products, browsing casually and aimlessly, and so on. Finally, digital product reviews by consumers further reinforce the interactive character of online advertising.

The immediate consequence of electronic word-of-mouth behaviour (Steffes & Burgee, 2009) is that while the temptation by advertisers to use exaggerated claims might be minimised, consumers’ belief in the claims of copywriters might also be enhanced. All of this, it seems, goes some way towards explaining why website advertising content has been characterised as highly informative and exhibiting a certain length (Janoschka, 2004).

Turning specifically to the type of commodity advertised here, we can say that the automobile constitutes a product with considerable cultural and social repercussions. At a first approximation, it is responsible for changes in the morphology of the landscape (construction of road networks to manage the increasing flow of traffic) and the organization of our towns and cities (streets, parking spaces) (Inglis, 2004: 200). However, the significance of the car as a cultural and social element goes far beyond its function as a means of transport, and can only be fully appreciated when we consider how it embodies certain sign values, from its role as an instrument of freedom and leisure, as an opportunity for social connectedness (an interest in similar cars

may generate group membership), to a symbol of individuality (Gartman, 2004; Gossling, 2017). Since this last feature relates directly to the content of the present study, we will address it in more detail.

For the purposes of this investigation, car ownership and driving can promote individuality, as a minimum, through encouraging competitive behaviour as well as providing the possibility for (aesthetic) differentiation. Through the car, people take risks, feel in control, and express dominance; thus, it becomes a symbol of personal success, a way to "gain" respect, and a means for self-expression (Gossling, 2017: 1, 23). Simultaneously, the car as a publicly visible object reflects the aesthetic preferences of its owner. All of this can be at the base of the emotional and affective relationship that may develop between the car and its owner.

Interestingly, advances in manufacturing and information technology have made it possible to target differentiation at a cost comparable to standard vehicle prices, a phenomenon known as "mass customization" (Graessler, 2003), which greatly contributes to channel the individuality traits of owners. Thanks to the Internet and digital technologies, car manufacturers can offer their customers the option of participating in the design of certain features of the car, sometimes called "vehicle configuration" (Graessler, 2003: 568), a traditional prerogative of the wealthy that now becomes available to a wide variety of buyers. Empowering customers in this way has been seen as advantageous for brands in general (Acar & Puntoni, 2016): since customers spend more time considering the product, and thinking about what can make it different for them, they may eventually develop positive attitudes towards the brand in question. All of this can offer customers the opportunity to experience psychological ownership of the product, leading them to value and, indeed, to like and admire their own creations.

Arguably, then, because of all these advantages, vehicle configuration through customer empowerment on car manufacturers' websites can be seen as a persuasive strategy in its own right. Furthermore, we hypothesise that the use of the adjective "unique" in online automobile advertising not only contributes to an intensification of the cultural and social values of distinction and differentiation that surround car ownership, but also plays a significant role in vehicle configuration and customer empowerment, boosting the persuasive potential of the advertising message.

Yet in order to study the behaviour of "unique" in real examples of text and to draw valid conclusions, it is first necessary to describe the theoretical tools

that will make such an analysis possible. In the following section, then, we will outline a lexical-pragmatic account of meaning, framed within Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 2004; 2012), which aims to show how pragmatics, aided by encyclopaedic (or real-world) knowledge, has a constructive role to play in the interpretation of the adjective “unique” in online automobile advertising.

3. Lexical pragmatics and interpretation

Adjectives, along with nouns, verbs and adverbs, are classified as lexical or content words because they contribute to the meaning of the sentence in terms of its propositional content. However, lexical words do not always supply the same meaning here. For example, the adjective “empty”, widely discussed in the literature, well illustrates how different specifications can be acquired depending on the elements with which it is combined. Thus, the meaning of “empty” varies significantly in sentences like “Make sure your pockets are empty” (before putting your clothes in the washing machine) and “The theatre is empty” (uttered by an usher following a performance); while in the former example, the adjective “empty” means “empty of contents”, in the latter it indicates “empty of public”. Furthermore, we note that the encoded concept does not in fact apply literally in either sequence: whereas pockets might contain no easily identifiable objects, they might contain small traces of things (sand, dust, etc.), and the theatre will surely contain the stalls, scenery and stage, and indeed might still have people in it (ushers, performers). Thus, the encoded, literal meaning of a lexical item is always potentially elusive, and in these examples a more fine-tuned notion of emptiness is necessarily conveyed. The goal of pragmatic theory, then, is to explain how the message is interpreted so that the more specific, intended meaning is successfully communicated.

Taking as a starting point the idea that the meanings of words in context usually differ from the encoded or specified meaning that the grammar assigns them, a central concern for lexical pragmatics is to investigate the processes that are at play in this modification (Carston, 2002; Wilson & Carston, 2007; Wilson & Kolaiti, 2017). For RT, lexical pragmatics involves the construction of occasion-specific or ad hoc concepts. Carston (2002: 323) defines an ad hoc concept as either “an established component of the hearer’s conceptual repertoire” or “a new construction accessed in the

process of understanding a particular sentence, but that will never be employed again". The narrowing and broadening of the scope of the linguistically specified meaning are widely held to be the two possible outcomes of the ad hoc concept construction or lexical adjustment process. In the present study, however, we will adhere to the classical approach to lexical pragmatics.

To follow the traditional approach involves treating the encoded concept under examination, *UNIQUE*, with the meaning "being the only one", as an absolute concept that is in fact rarely satisfied in a strict sense. As Wilson and Kolaiti (2017: 167) explain, it then follows that "on almost all occasions of use, some broadening of the denotation of the encoded concept takes place". The resulting broadened readings will be represented, according to the notation used in lexical pragmatics, by small capitals with one or more asterisks to the right (*UNIQUE**, *UNIQUE***, etc.). One of the goals of lexical pragmatics is to explain how hearers infer the appropriate broadened interpretation. The relevance-theoretic view is that the construction of broadened concepts is influenced by contextual and cognitive factors; in particular, the encyclopaedic knowledge associated with the encoded concept and the goal of finding an interpretation that satisfies expectations of relevance.

The relevance-theoretic approach to pragmatics consists of a cognitive account of utterance interpretation, driven by two central claims. The first of these sees relevance as a matter of degree in an indirect relationship between processing effort and cognitive effects: the less effort (of perception, memory and inference) an input takes to be processed, and the more cognitive effects it yields (strengthening, revising or cancelling previous held assumptions or deriving contextual implications), the higher the degree of relevance of that input (Wilson & Sperber, 2004: 608). This is the Cognitive Principle of Relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 260).

The second central claim of RT is contained in the Communicative Principle of Relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 260). This states that an utterance creates in the addressee (who, by default, following RT, is taken to be male) the presumption of optimal relevance, that is, the utterance is relevant enough to be worth processing and should be regarded as the most relevant one that is compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 270). Consequently, the receiver's goal in communication is to find an interpretation that meets the expectations of relevance raised by the ostensive stimulus.

It is worth noting here that theorists of RT deny that there is a clear theoretical divide between literal and figurative uses of language. Rather, they support a unitary theory of utterance interpretation, this governed by the same interpretive mechanisms and principles, in which there is a continuum of cases, “ranging from those where there is a specific cognitive content the speaker wants to get across, to those where the speaker’s intention is much vaguer, and [...] might be best described as an “impression”” (Wilson & Kolaiti, 2017: 150).

So far in this section we have seen how lexical pragmatics looks at the processes that intervene in the modification of encoded word meaning in context. According to RT, this is explained through a combination of real-world knowledge associated with the word in question, along with pragmatic factors, that is, with the aim of finding an interpretation that satisfies expectations of relevance. These expectations are governed by relevance-based comprehension heuristics: testing interpretive hypotheses in order of accessibility, following a path of least effort, and yielding high contextual effects. The next step is to show the practical application of the theory for the analysis of our key term, “unique”.

4. The adjective “unique” in online automobile advertising: use and interpretation

This section addresses the empirical analysis of the adjective “unique” in car manufacturers’ websites. Aside from the issue of frequency of occurrence already mentioned, this adjective itself appears to be an interesting choice for several reasons. Grammatically, according to the etymologically encoded meaning of “being the only one” or “having no like or equal”, the item “unique” can be classified as an absolute or non-gradable adjective (Quirk et al., 1991). Thus, whereas it may sound strange in explicit comparative structures (“?My car is more unique than yours”), it is compatible with adverbial modifiers such as “completely” and “truly” (“Create a Bentley that is completely unique to you”,¹ “Make your [Audi] A6 truly unique”).² Second, because of its absolute meaning, “unique” seems to be in tune with the cultural and social values of distinction and differentiation that are attached to car ownership, as described in Section 2, above. Third, it qualifies as a positive adjective that enhances the laudatory description of the product, an essential characteristic of adjectives in advertising language. Finally, the issue

of uniqueness poses a genuine conundrum for sectors such as the automobile industry, which is often divided between the need for creativity (the quest for novelty, constant innovation, crossing established limits) and branding (building and maintaining a recognisable image, ensuring continuity and consistency) (Vangkilde, 2017: 179). Furthermore, for a large percentage of drivers, part of the charm of driving a vehicle lies in the ability to be recognised as belonging to a certain marque. Therefore, when car manufacturers claim that a model is “unique”, it can only be so to a certain extent.

Regarding methodology, the present paper adopts the approach of corpus pragmatics, which integrates the notion of vertical reading (the occurrences of forms), typical of corpus linguistics, with a horizontal reading (the functions of these forms in contexts), characteristic of pragmatic analysis. Initially, a vertical reading has been used here to identify the expressions that collocate with the item “unique” and the type of text, LMs texts and NLMS texts, in which they appear. Subsequently, the range of forms has been examined horizontally in terms of their pragmatic functions, this from a relevance-theoretic perspective. Such an analysis has led to seven different general contexts, and these will be discussed in the seven subsections below. However, in examining more specific adjective-noun combinations, some of these general contexts have been broken down into smaller groups, so that there are in fact thirteen lexical adjustments of the adjective “unique”.

4.1. Context of colour

The adjective “unique” presents eleven occurrences in the context of colour, nine of these in LMs texts and the other two in NLMS texts. They are distributed in the following way, with text type and token frequency indicated in brackets:

- (1) unique + colour(s) (LMs 4); unique + (colour) combinations (of colour) (LMs 1; NLMS 1); unique + colour split(s) (LMs 2); unique + colour name (LMs 1; NLMS 1); unique + paint treatments (LMs 1).

The interpretation of the encoded concept UNIQUE in combinations such as those in (1) will lead potential readers to consider how their expectations of relevance are satisfied in this particular discourse context, namely, colour in automobiles. Encyclopaedic knowledge about colour as a visual element for differentiation may give rise to more accessible assumptions such as “colour

is an outstanding, differentiation feature”, “automobile manufacturers launch new colours regularly”, “car colours symbolise aesthetic trends” or “colours require complex technological processes”. Through these assumptions, following a path of least effort, the reader may arrive at the activation of implications about colour as a sign of sophistication and distinction, as the result of difficult technological processes, as a conscious effort for innovation, and so on. All of this would originate the broadened ad hoc concept *UNIQUE**, which denotes aesthetic distinction, innovation and a certain degree of boldness (Ford uses the coinage “Metalicious” to describe a colour for its model S-Max).³ Thus, through colours, copywriters seek to entice potential consumers emotionally. Furthermore, it is possible that this lexical adjustment can be further enriched with a competitive interpretation of the adjective-noun combinations in (1): the (technological) difficulty and practical effort involved in attaining colours may favour a reading in which the unit “unique” indicates that the colour palette is exceptionally diverse and wider than that of rival marques. Thus, “unique” would exemplify an implicit variant of what is known as “an unqualified comparative” (Leech, 1966: 160; Goddard, 2002: 72), that is to say, incomplete comparative constructions of the type “X washes whiter”.

It should be noted that the imbalance in the use of “unique” between LMS and NLMS observed in (1), in favour of the former, may lend additional support to the interpretation of *UNIQUE** proposed here. Notably, this could be taken to reinforce assumptions and implications of car differentiation through colour as an element in the refinement and individuation characteristic of luxury products and, accordingly, desired by all consumers.

4.2. Context of personalisation

Consider the following sequences, with text type and token frequency indicated in brackets. The sample has yielded seventeen examples, thirteen from LMS texts and the remaining four from NLMS texts.

- (2) as unique as your fingerprint (LMS 1); unique automotive masterpiece (LMS 1); unique + car/marque (LMS 3); unique choice of text (LMS 1); unique finishing touch (LMS 1); unique style (LMS 2; NLMS 1); unique styling touches (NLMS 2); unique taste (LMS 1); unique to you (LMS 3; NLMS 1).

The concept “unique” in (2) continues to be associated with differentiation, typical of its encoded meaning, but, interestingly, the expressions that follow

the adjective seem either to cite the cause of the differentiation (choice of text, finishing touch, style, styling touches, taste) or the result of this (as unique as your fingerprint, automotive masterpiece, car/marque, to you). In fact, to get a clearer picture of what is going on here, the sentence situation should be extended to include the verbal units surrounding the sequences in (2). This group of verbs is formed by "add", "choose", "create", "customise", "personalise" and "tailor". Within this wider sentence situation, we can see that the adjective "unique" relates to the phenomenon of vehicle configuration and customer empowerment, as described in Section 2, above. How does this affect the interpretation of the item "unique"? In the world of the automobile industry, dominated as it is by highly skilled professionals, transferring part of the responsibility for decision making to potential buyers is likely to reinforce in these subjects assumptions about personal autonomy, a powerful and dominant personality, and narcissistic behaviour. Therefore, the reader may draw implications about how he himself has imaginative ideas, good taste and wise opinions, and, accordingly, is trustworthy. This would lead to the broadened ad hoc concept UNIQUE** with the meaning of personal and individual.

This section has shown how copywriters, taking advantage of two characteristics that define online automobile advertising, specifically, vehicle configuration and customer empowerment, use the lexical unit "unique" to flatter customers' self-esteem, enhancing through the use of this item an emotional evaluation of their own worth.

4.3. Context of innovation

The analysis in this section is based on twelve examples, eight from the LMS texts and the remaining four from NLMS texts. According to the sample, the adjective "unique" forms with the nouns in (3) a recurring structure of the type "a + unique + noun + of / between", where the prepositional complement (usually consisting of two noun phrases coordinated by the conjunct "and") helps in the recovery of the interpretation of the encoded concept "unique" that the copywriter may have intended. Thus, within this wider sentence situation, it is possible to read, for instance, that BMW claims "a unique combination of modern dynamics and timeless elegance",⁴ and that Mercedes describes a "unique fusion of dynamic coupé styling with four-door practicality".⁵ Likewise, NLMS, such as Ford and Citroën, describe, respectively, "the car's unique blend of usability and head-turning good looks"⁶ and "a unique balance between the needs of family motoring and

real driving pleasure”.⁷ All these extracts illustrate the shared assumption of the apparent difficulty in connecting two aspects that have traditionally been regarded as opposites or as difficult to bring together in car making, that is, modern dynamics *versus* timeless elegance, coupé styling *versus* four door practicality, usability *versus* head-turning good looks and needs of family motoring *versus* real driving pleasure. When automobile manufacturers report that they have been able to unite these pairs, the addressee, in his search for the relevance of such an assertion, is likely to trigger implications about manufacturers’ innovative design, originality, the use of new methods and techniques in the car manufacturing process, their overriding concern for improvement, and so on. This interpretation seems to be reinforced by the range of nouns that collocate with the adjective “unique”, in allusion to a successful connection of elements and a sense of far-sightedness:

- (3) approach (LMS 1); balance (NLMS 2); blend (LMS 1; NLMS 2); combination (LMS 2); features (LMS 1); fusion (LMS 1); harmony (LMS 1); vision (LMS 1).

All of this information may result in the broadened ad hoc concept UNIQUE***, which, in this case would denote innovation and challenge. As we have seen, this third lexical adjustment of the term “unique” relates to aspects of the manufacturing process. In the following section, the adjective “unique” combines with elements that seem to determine the extraordinariness of the product, and may ultimately justify the presence of such an adjective.

4.4. Context of brand identity

This section is based on thirty-one occurrences of the item “unique”, eighteen appearing in LMS texts and the remaining thirteen in NLMS texts, as reflected in (4). We hypothesise that the “unique + noun” combinations here present the noun as a special characteristic, typical either of the particular model of car described, or, more generally, the marque. Thus, *context of brand identity* refers to the desire of the automobile industry in general, and advertising practice in particular, to find either an outstanding feature that makes the vehicle different, or an element that consumers might like and, accordingly, for which they might develop empathy. This is not surprising if we take into account that automobile buyers are noted for their brand loyalty (Huber & Herrmann, 2001). Let us consider (4), where the sequences modified by “unique” are summarised:

- (4) décor inlays (NLMS 1); design (features) (LMS 2; NLMS 4); styling elements (NLMS 1); race-bred energy (LMS 1); light features (NLMS 1); finish (LMS 1); exhaust tail pipe finishers (LMS 1); door finishers (NLMS 1); pinstripe graphic (LMS 1); silk interiors (LMS 1); materials (LMS 1); perforation pattern (LMS 1); trim and material patterns (LMS 1); fascia plates (LMS 1); rear lights (NLMS 1); personalisation service (LMS 1); specification (LMS 1); steering wheel (LMS 1; NLMS 2); stitching (LMS 2); system (NLMS 1); wheels (LMS 2; NLMS 1).

As can be seen, the item “unique” accompanies some expressions that refer to design elements (inlays, finish, patterns, stitching) whose successful execution demands a degree of technical expertise. Assuming, then, that fine performance requires skill, the potential addressee can yield implications about the things carried out with skill as being exceptional, unconventional, outstanding, and so on. In other instances, the modified elements are constituent parts of all cars (rear lights, steering wheels, wheels), and thus unless the sentence situation is widened, it is not clear how these may be seen to become special features. By means of illustration, when prospective consumers read that Bentley’s Continental GT includes “unique 22” wheels”,⁸ that Aston Martin’s V12 Vantage S comes with a “unique ‘heat aged’ exhaust tailpipe finishers, produced in conjunction with Aircraft Restoration Company”,⁹ that Nissan’s “unique door finishers [are] inspired by a diver’s fin”¹⁰ or that Ford’s B-Max features a “unique [Ford Easy Access Door] system”,¹¹ they may trigger implications relative to the marque’s concern for innovation and improvement, its commitment to quality, safety and comfort, and so on. Therefore, all the nouns in (4) are paired with some extraordinary or unusual attribute that allows the reader, following a path of least effort, to arrive at an interpretation where the encoded concept “unique” is broadened to mean “special” or “unusually characteristic”, applied to a distinguishing feature included in the vehicle/marque. Additionally, because of this meaning of “identifiable differential feature” that the presence of “unique” attaches to the car/marque, potential consumers may also activate implications relative to the degree of exclusivity that the car thus advertised enjoys, which would make the adjective “unique” an example of an implicit unqualified comparative. All of this would result in a new lexical adjustment represented by the broadened, occasion-specific concept UNIQUE****.

The following section will examine further adjustments of the encoded adjective “unique” that can be related to the meaning of differentiation

deriving from distinguishing features such as those discussed in (4). This time, however, the term “unique” applies to the vehicle itself.

4.5. Context of the vehicle itself

We will explore here four additional lexical adjustments of the adjective “unique”, each highlighting the car or part of it as an extraordinary element: the car as a thing complete in itself (5), its metaphorical, human nature (6), its physical, exterior beauty (7), and its interior, as a space for comfort (8).

The first group is organised around eight examples, five from LMs texts and three from NLMs texts, as indicated in (5). Our main contention is that, as a consequence of some special feature, such as those in (4), the potential reader is encouraged to arrive at an interpretation of the extraordinariness of the vehicle as a whole.

- (5) vehicle + (absolutely/truly) + unique (LMs 5); unique + vehicle (NLMs 2);
name of model + unique (NLMs 1).

As we can see, common to all of these combinations is the presence of the noun “vehicle”, although this is replaced by the name of the model in one example. Enlarging the sentence situation, we can see how copywriters claim special features (similarly to those previously discussed, above) which, alongside the use of the structure “make the vehicle truly / absolutely unique” in four out of the five examples drawn from LMs texts, may lead the reader to perceive implications about the car thus described as an extraordinary, outstanding vehicle, one which has been carefully planned and designed. All of this information would originate the broadened occasion-specific concept UNIQUE***** with the meaning of “extraordinary”.

The relationship between the adjective “unique” and the vehicle as an outstanding element is further explored in the following group of examples. Consider the thirteen adjective-noun collocations in (6), seven from LMs texts and the other six from NLMs texts.

- (6) character (LMs 1); elegance (LMs 1); expression (NLMs 3); personality (LMs 2; NLMs 3); qualities (LMs 1); vitality (LMs 2).

These combinations show the vehicle characterised with human qualities. What is the relevance of this decision for the interpretation of the adjective “unique”? Encyclopaedic knowledge about human beings indicates that,

although similar in many respects, we can be distinguished from one another by (mental and behavioural) characteristics that make us entirely different from our fellow humans. Hence, when the addressee tries to recover the meaning that the copywriter has sought to transmit here, in accordance with relevance-comprehension heuristics, he is able to trigger implications about the automobile in question as having particular, defining characteristics that shape its recognisable individuality. This is the information that would originate the ad hoc concept UNIQUE*****.

Similarly, the set of nine examples in (7) below, seven from LMs texts and the remaining two from NLMS texts, also fall within the scope of the car's uniqueness as a distinguishing feature, as reinforced by the verbal elements that surround the collocations in (7), that is, "add", "create", "enhance", "give", "have", "produce", "set apart" and "select". It is worth pointing out that the item "face", whose single quotation marks are used in the original text to signal its metaphorical meaning, has been included in this group because it indicates the front of the car, and, hence, its physical aspect.

- (7) aesthetic (LMs 1); 'face' (LMs 1); look (LMs 4; NLMS 1); road presence (LMs 1); shape (NLMS 1).

In the case here, the nouns refer to the vehicle as it appears to the eye. The distinguishing feature, hence the use of the adjective "unique", seems to be the car's exterior beauty, which appears to derive from other notable elements. Consumers of products with high social visibility tend to attach a great deal of importance to their beauty or, more generally, their aesthetics (Hudders & Vyncke, 2008). Against this backdrop, possible readers may recover implications like "people enjoy looking at beautiful things/cars", "beautiful things/cars are a delight to the eye", "beautiful things/cars arouse admiration", "beautiful things/cars result from exclusive design", and so on. Furthermore, for Hudders & Vyncke (2008) aesthetics as a motive for purchasing occupies an intermediate position between a personal and a social motive. Thus, following a path of least effort, potential readers could yield implications such as that a beautiful car causes a good impression on people, that it symbolises its owner's good taste and refinement, it makes its owner look more attractive, it is a sign of prestige and status. Also, it is arguable that the interpretation of "unique" based on beauty can be understood as a further example of an implicit unqualified comparative: our vehicle is more beautiful than that of our competitors. All of this information would result in the lexical adjustment of the encoded concept

“unique”, originating the broadened, occasion-specific concept UNIQUE*****. It should be noted how the persuasive value of the item “unique” lies in its appeal to emotions and its ability to flatter the customer.

Finally, (8) is based on three examples, two from LMS texts and the other one from NLMS texts, where the adjective “unique” collocates with nouns that denote a setting:

(8) atmosphere (NLMS 1); environment (LMS 2).

Sociologists (Inglis, 2004) have identified a homely aspect of the car, whose interior serves as a kind of domestic arena or cosy cocoon adapted to the owner’s personal likes or needs. From such a viewpoint, the car becomes an alternative form of individualism and differentiation, a personal possession that rivals not only other cars, but also the house, as a space of comfort and freedom. Thus, the nouns in (8) might arguably lead the potential reader to activate implications around a new sensibility in which the car is a place of one’s own, an intimate space that can express the individuality of its owner. All of this information would lead to the encoded concept “unique” in order to yield the broadened ad hoc concept UNIQUE*****.

Thus far in this section we have seen how the adjective “unique” can acquire different meanings when it refers to the vehicle itself. The next section focuses on the feelings that can be developed around the car as an object of consumption.

4.6. Context of hedonism

This section explores six examples of the adjective “unique” with an even distribution between LMS texts and NLMS texts, with three occurrences in each, as shown below:

(9) driving experience (LMS 1); onboard experience (NLMS 2); pleasure (LMS 2); sense of well-being (NLMS 1).

We suggest that, through the adjective “unique” combining with the nouns in (9), copywriters employ hedonism as a call for action. Real-world knowledge tells us that people in general have a desire for happiness, and thus potential readers would have easy access to assumptions like “enjoying life is important” and “one should try to get as much pleasure and enjoyment out of life as possible”. Hence, a situation in which the vehicle has been

carefully designed, that incorporates innovation, and that can be adapted to the consumer’s particular needs and taste (all the various features that have been described and analysed in previous sections), can lead the reader to derive implications about that car as an instrument of pleasure, as an element that will make his/her life more agreeable and happier, as a well-deserved reward, and so on. All of this information would originate the broadened ad hoc concept UNIQUE***** with the meaning of enjoyable and pleasant. Because of its extraordinary sensitivity to the surrounding context, the item “unique” allows us to see how adjectives are sometimes not used to describe the product itself, but rather the feelings that it may bring about, a point noted by Ke and Wang (2013: 280).

4.7. Miscellaneous context

This final section consists of six examples which have been grouped into four sets. To begin with, the adjective “unique” appears twice, once in each text type, modifying an adjective of place:

- (10) Japanese ‘Omotenashi’ welcome (LMS 1); Scandinavian attitude (NLMS 1).

This sentence situation, with the inclusion of the Japanese word itself, is likely to lead the reader to access assumptions about the philosophy of Japanese hospitality (the great attention to detail in order to entertain guests, the importance attached to traditions and ceremonies) or about the Scandinavian lifestyle (their beautiful and functional design ethos, their pragmatism towards everyday life). With this information, following a path of least effort, potential consumers may arrive at the interpretation of the term “unique” as “genuine”, in what would be the broadened occasion-specific concept UNIQUE*****.

Two examples from Bentley illustrate another possible lexical adjustment of the adjective “unique”, that is, car covers which are stitched to the “unique contours of your car / the Mulsanne”.^{12, 13} The sentence situation here seems to guide the reader towards the interpretation of the term “unique” as “specific” or “particular”, with all the implications of exclusivity and luxury. This would originate the ad hoc concept UNIQUE*****.

The sample also contains a one-off occurrence of the element “unique” in the expression that introduces Volkswagen’s New Up!: “Always unique, never

ordinary”.¹⁴ In this sentence situation, reinforced by the opposition of the two adverbial forms, “always” *versus* “never”, the adjective “unique” can be regarded as the antonym of the word “ordinary”, and, hence, denote everything that is exceptional, exciting, imaginative, unconventional. This would originate the ad hoc concept UNIQUE*****.

Finally, consider the following example:

- (11) Aston Martin unveiled its most extreme roadster ever at the 2016 Goodwood Festival of Speed in the unique form of the one-off Vantage GT12.¹⁵

Arguably, this single occurrence of the adjective “unique”, coexisting with the noun “one-off”, has the encoded meaning of “being the only one”. Within the sentence situation in (11) it is the presence of this noun that may lead the reader to interpret the adjective “unique” as denoting exclusivity and individuality. All of this would originate the broadened ad hoc concept UNIQUE*****, with a meaning close to its literal sense, but possibly further adjusted to indicate an excellent, singular car and, consequently, an item of luxury.

5. Final remarks

This paper has argued that the adjective “unique” is an appropriate and effective word for the online advertising of automobiles. In the first place, with the help of RT, the results show the extraordinary sensitivity of this adjective to the surrounding sentence situation: the reader is provided with a wide range of information in constructing an overall interpretation and in originating various ad hoc concepts. Second, in spite of the different lexical adjustments, the meaning of the linguistically encoded concept as “sole” or “unequaled” is not automatically excluded. Along with the fact that, according to the sample, the term is more common in LMs texts, this can have a twofold consequence: the item “unique” serves to support and enhance the social values of differentiation and individuality characteristic of the automobile culture, on the one hand, and, simultaneously, it has an obvious application in salesmanship, contributing to the presentation of the product as (implicitly) the best among its competitors, which in itself can be a variant of the traditional unqualified comparative forms. Finally, the term adapts well to the online advertising medium, and thus helps to shape the

concepts of mass customisation and customer empowerment. Due to all of these features, the adjective “unique” qualifies as an emotionally motivating word, which undoubtedly elevates it from being a mere advertising epithet or gratuitous buzzword, making it instead an ideal candidate for channelling consumers’ potential notions of distinction and style about the vehicle that they would like to drive.

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- BMW: <https://www.bmw.co.uk/>
- Citroën: <https://www.citroen.co.uk/home>
- Ford: <https://www.ford.co.uk/>
- Jaguar: <https://www.jaguar.co.uk/index.html>
- Lexus: <https://www.lexus.co.uk/#>
- Maserati: <https://www.maserati.com/maserati/gb/en>
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- Volkswagen: <https://www.volkswagen.co.uk/>
- Volvo: <https://www.volvocars.com/uk>

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NOTES

¹ <https://www.bentleymotors.com/en/models/bentayga.html> [28/10/17]

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³ <http://www.ford.co.uk/Cars/S-MAX> [24/03/17]

⁴ https://www.bmw.co.uk/en_GB/new-vehicles/6.html [31/03/17]

⁵ http://www.mercedes-benz.co.uk/content/unitedkingdom/mpc/mpc_unitedkingdom_website/en/home_mpc/passengercars/home/new_cars/models/cls-class/_c218/fascination/design.0002.html [05/04/17]

⁶ <http://www.ford.co.uk/Cars/Fiesta/st-line> [20/03/17]

⁷ <http://www.citroen.co.uk/new-cars-and-vans/citroen-range/citroen-c4-picasso> [29/04/17]

⁸ <https://www.bentleymotors.com/en/models/new-continental.html> [05/10/17]

⁹ <http://www.astonmartin.com/q-by-aston-martin> [12/05/17]

¹⁰ <https://www.nissan.co.uk/vehicles/new-vehicles/juke.html> [07/04/17]

¹¹ <http://www.ford.co.uk/Cars/B-MAX> [22/03/17]

¹² <https://www.bentleymotors.com/en/models/flying-spur.html> [13/12/17]

¹³ <https://www.bentleymotors.com/en/models/mulsanne.html> [12/10/17]

¹⁴ <http://www.volkswagen.co.uk/new/up-pa/explore> [25/03/17]

¹⁵ <http://www.astonmartin.com/q-by-aston-martin> [12/05/17]

