

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO LEXICAL CHOICES IN NARRATIONS OF AMERICAN CARTOON TRAILERS

## NGHIÊN CỨU CÁC CÁCH DÙNG TỪ VỰNG TRONG CÁC LỜI TƯỜNG THUẬT CỦA CÁC ĐOẠN PHIM QUẢNG CÁO HOẠT HÌNH MỸ

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**Abstract** - Thanks to the rapid spread of the Internet, the process of advertising forthcoming cartoons has become easier and more impressive. Apart from using posters, filmmakers make use of another effective and attractive tool—trailer, which is commonly known as a short video about an upcoming film shown in advance for the purpose of advertising it. To convince viewers, appropriate strategies of using language are employed. Therefore, the copywriter must pay great attention to choice of words in narrations of trailers. This paper is aimed at examining the striking lexical choices employed in the transcriptions of narrations of American cartoon trailers (NACTs). These cartoons cover a variety of themes which are love and sacrifice, youth and beauty, friendship, nature's beauty, adventures, science fiction, etc. It is hoped that the findings of the paper, to some extent, will be useful for creating English texts advertising animated films as well as for writing English for Vietnamese learners.

**Key words** - narrations of cartoon trailers; lexical choices; proper names; time expressions; descriptive adjectives; pronouns denoting first and second persons

### 1. Rationale

Nowadays, cartoons have become one of the essential sources of entertainment. Considered as an effective tool of advertising cartoons, trailers, also known as “coming attractions” or “previews”, bring great help in forming, impressing, and persuading audience. Let us take the example of a narrative transcription of the trailer in “The Smurfs” (2011) which is a beloved cartoon centering on a fictional colony of small blue humanoids who live in mushroom-shaped houses in the forest:

“In a faraway land, there is a village filled with *mysterious* creatures who have lived happily for hundreds of years.

Until today,

Now those have to escape to a world they never imagine.

*This summer,*

From *Columbia Pictures* and *Sony Pictures Animation*,

The chase is on the first true blue 3D adventure of the year.

The *Smurfs* in 3D *Summer 2011*”

(<http://www.sonypicturesanimation.com/...smurfs>)

It can be seen that in a short text, there are a lot of lexical choices illustrated in italic words. Proper names (e.g., *Smurfs*, *Columbia Pictures*, and *Sony Pictures Animation*) are indispensable in narrations of American

**Tóm tắt** - Nhờ sự phát triển mạnh mẽ của Internet, việc quảng cáo các phim hoạt hình đã trở nên dễ dàng và ấn tượng hơn. Ngoài việc dùng các áp phích, nhà làm phim còn sử dụng một phương pháp hiệu quả và hấp dẫn, đó là trailer, một video ngắn để quảng cáo cho phim mới. Để thuyết phục khán giả, các nghệ thuật sử dụng ngôn từ phù hợp cần được vận dụng. Do đó, người viết phải hết sức lưu ý đến cách dùng từ trong lời tường thuật của trailer. Bài viết này trình bày các đặc điểm từ vựng nổi bật của bài tường thuật trong các đoạn quảng cáo phim hoạt hình Mỹ. Chủ đề của những bộ phim này rất đa dạng, bao gồm tình yêu và sự hi sinh, tuổi trẻ và sắc đẹp, tình bạn, vẻ đẹp thiên nhiên, các cuộc phiêu lưu, khoa học viễn tưởng, v.v... Hi vọng rằng các kết quả của bài báo này sẽ giúp ích cho việc áp dụng tiếng Anh trong các bài tường thuật quảng cáo phim hoạt hình cũng như trau dồi kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh của học viên người Việt.

**Từ khóa** - bài tường thuật trong đoạn quảng cáo phim hoạt hình; các lựa chọn từ vựng; tên riêng; từ ngữ chỉ thời gian; tính từ miêu tả; đại từ ngôi thứ nhất và ngôi thứ hai

cartoon trailers (NACTs). The copywriter also uses descriptive adjectives to describe and highlight striking features of characters to make the new film more attractive. Besides, the phrase *This summer* and *Summer 2011* are employed to inform the time for the film release.

There have been several studies on trailers and the language for advertising films. Nevertheless, to the best of my knowledge, there has not been any research on lexical choices of narrations of American cartoon trailers. Therefore, I have decided to conduct this research in an attempt to clarify the choices of lexical items used in advertising cartoons to achieve filmmakers' goals.

### 2. Theoretical background

#### 2.1. Cartoon

Cartoon is also called *animated cartoon*. *Animated* and related words, *to animate*, *animation*, and *animator*, all derive from the Latin verb, *animare*, which means “to give life to”. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> [1], *cartoon* is defined as “a film/movie made by photographing a series of gradually changing drawings or models, so that they look as if they are moving”. Discussing the notion of cartoon (or animated film or animation), the author of the book *Understanding Animation*, Wells [9, p. 10], argues that an *animated film* largely means an artificial creation of the illusion of movement in inanimate lines and forms.

In this paper, *cartoon* is viewed as a film/movie for

cinema, television or computer screen, which is made by playing a series of gradually changing drawings or models in a quick succession, so that they look as if they are moving.

## 2.2. Trailer

Katz [3, p. 1145] regards a *trailer* as "... a short publicity film, shown as part of a regular program at a theater, advertising the merits of a forthcoming motion picture..." and "the trailer consists of highlight scenes appropriately cut to create an impression of excitement...". Kernan [4] claims that trailers or previews of coming attractions are both praised and criticized by film scholars and regular moviegoers alike.

Following the concepts mentioned above, I take the view that a *trailer* is a short publicity film shown as part of a regular program at a theatre, which advertises the merits of a forthcoming motion picture to attract the spectator's attention. A trailer usually consists of two main parts which are images and narration.

## 2.3. Narration in Cartoon Trailer

According to Longman Academic e-Tutor 2<sup>nd</sup> [6], narration is a spoken description or an explanation that someone gives during a movie, play etc. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 8<sup>th</sup> [1], *narration* is "a description of events that is spoken during a film/movie, a play, etc. or with music".

In this paper, a narration which is an explanation of the film's story or a description of background information such as the name of the film, the place and time the action is set, characters, the names of narrators, the director or the producer and their previous works, the film's release, etc. is orally presented during a cartoon trailer. Some parts of a narration are in written words showed on the screen.

In brief, a narration is a combination of spoken and written form which appears along with animated pictures in a cartoon trailer.

## 2.4. Lexical Choices

Fundamentally, a language is composed of several lexical items. A writer must have wide knowledge of language and is able to exploit those vast linguistic resources for his compositions. Lexical items help the writer to create images and convey his/her thoughts and emotions. That is the reason why the writer must take extreme care when making lexical choices so that he/she can effectively express the intended meaning and thus achieve the writing targets.

In short, lexical choice is the way writers choose the appropriate words to obtain their communicative purposes in the best possible way.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Data Sources

The data of the study is written forms of narrations from official trailers of American cartoons. These trailers came from the official websites of six major American cartoon film companies which are Walt Disney Animation Studio,

Dream works Animation, 20th Century Fox Animation, Warner Bros. Animation, Sony Pictures Animation, and Universal Pictures. The trailers were released in the period of 2010-2015. The number of narrations of trailers employed in this paper is 83. For the sake of convenience in doing the research, the narrations were transcribed into written forms.

### 3.2. Research Design

The paper is carried out based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The qualitative approach is employed to highlight the core lexical choices in NACTs.

The quantitative approach is useful for measuring the frequencies, percentages of lexical choices in NACTs.

### 3.3. Research Methods

In this paper, descriptive, analytic and inductive methods are employed simultaneously.

The descriptive method is a useful tool to describe and characterize the lexical choices of NACTs.

The analytic method is also essential in this research; it helps the researcher clarify and justify certain lexical choices.

The inductive method is helpful in drawing out the generalizations from the findings.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Proper Names

Proper names are some of the most popular lexical choices in NACTs. According to Huddleston and Pullum [2], proper names are expressions which have been conventionally adopted as the name of a particular entity or a collection of entities. They include the names of particular persons or animals, places of many kinds, institutions, historical events. Most proper names, in their primary use, are noun phrases. The category also covers the names of days of the week, months of the year, and recurrent festivals, public holidays, etc. In this paper, the proper names denoting time are analyzed in part 4.2; therefore, they are not mentioned in this part.

In the light of Huddleston and Pullum's theory, in this paper, an examination of the usage of proper names is conducted. The table below illustrates the distribution of proper names in NACTs:

**Table 4.1.** Proper names in NACTs

Proper names		Occurrence	Rate
Names of particular persons	Names of characters	168	56.6%
	Names of staff members	46	15.5%
Names of places		23	7.7%
Names of institutions (Names of film companies)		60	20.2%
<b>Total</b>		<b>297</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 4.1 shows that proper names are primarily used

to refer to the names of particular persons. The use of proper names denoting the names of film companies ranks second in NACTs. Lastly, proper names referring to the names of places take up the lowest rate.

It is obvious that in trailers the producers must inform audiences of the names of main characters in the new movies introduced in trailers so that spectators can know who the films talk about. Here is an example:

(4.1) *This summer, **Hiccup** and **Toothless** are back.*

(<https://www.howtotrainyourdragon.com/....trailer>)

In addition, the usage of proper names denoting places is important in narrating the plots in trailers to inform audiences where the stories take place. Here is an illustration:

(4.2) *Summer in the city **Arendelle**, it couldn't be warmer, it couldn't be sunnier but that's about to change forever.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch.....index=3>)

The names of film companies producing forthcoming films are common elements presented in NACTs. Let us take a look at an instance taken from the samples:

(4.3) *20<sup>th</sup> **Fox Century** presents **Schoeder**, **Sally Linus**, **Peppermint Patty**, **Pigpen**, **Lucy Snoopy** and **Charlie Brown**.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch.....6u5g>)

In some cases, if the upcoming cartoons are produced by well-known staff, the names of these famous producers or directors, or talented narrators are often presented in NACTs to exert positive effects on viewers' psychology. For instance:

(4.4) *Come an all new movie that will take from other space to the jungle of Africa featured with the voices of **Angela Bassett** and **John Goodman**.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch.....index=1>)

[24]

In brief, the proper name is one of the most crucial lexical choices of NACTs. They are mainly utilized to express names of the cartoons, the characters and places in introduced films as well as the names of film companies and staff members making the films. By using proper names, the producers provide audiences with the core information about the new cartoons.

## 4.2. Time Expressions

In "Cognitive English Grammar", Radden and Dirven [8, p. 332] state, "time expressions are used to specify a situation's location in time or its duration". As mentioned above, trailers are used to advertise the merits of a forthcoming motion picture to attract the spectator's attention. Therefore, it is very important that NACTs include time expressions. In NACTs, time expressions are considered some words or numbers presenting the time when the films are released. By using time expressions, the advertisers can create anticipation and expectation about the films. The employment of time expressions is presented in the table below:

**Table 4.2.** Time Expressions in NACTs

Time Expressions	Occurrence	Rate
Nouns/noun phrases denoting holidays	14	18.4%
Nouns/Noun phrases denoting seasons	16	21.1%
Nouns/Noun phrases denoting dates	17	22.3%
Nouns/Noun phrases months, months and years	16	21.1%
Noun phrases "this year"/Adverb "soon"	13	17.1%
<b>Total</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>100%</b>

The percentages for which types of time expressions account are quite equal. There are no types which are more dominant than the others. It can be explained that the time expressions chosen in NACTs are deeply affected by the time when filmmakers create trailers. In other words, the choices of words expressing time depend on the fact that if the filmmakers have decided the releasing time of the full films or have not yet.

The following are some examples of time expressions collected from NACTs:

(4.5) ***This Christmas**, experience the adventure so real you believe you're there.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch...BDqeS>)

(4.6) *Disney Pixar presents a new world of adventure. **Disney** **Pixar** **The Good Dinosaur** **Thanksgiving**.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch...Y3ev3TY>)

In the above examples, the copywriters utilize noun phrases denoting holidays or vacations as time expressions. They indirectly express a message that the movies are produced for the purpose of serving these special occasions. The existence of such time expressions as **this Christmas** and **Thanksgiving** make audiences tend to think that the movies are the most suitable for relaxing on days off.

In some cases, the expressions of time are the words expressing seasons. Sometimes, these words are combined with numbers denoting the years. Below is an example:

(4.7) ***This spring**, join the crew and kick some booty.*

*The Pirates! Band of Misfits in 3D*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch...F02WvY>)

(4.8) *The **Smurfs 2***

***Summer 2013.***

(<http://www.sonypicturesanimation.com/...murfs2>)

More specifically, the copywriters use expressions of month, or month and year to notify spectators of the time when cartoons are available as in the instance below:

(4.9) *Disney **Tinker Bell Legend of the Neverbeast** in Cinema **December 2014.***

(<http://www.disneymovieslist.com/....neverbeast>)

In case the producers have decided exactly when the movies are published, expressions of date are shown in NACTs. Let us take a look at the following example:

- (4.10) *The Croods in Cinemas **March 22** in 3D*  
(<http://www.thecroodsmovie.co.uk/>)

Let us consider other examples:

- (4.11) *Dreamworks Home in 3D coming **soon**.*  
(<http://www.dreamworks.com/home/>)

- (4.12) ***This year**, take a chance and chase your dream.*  
*Dreamworks Turbo.*  
(<http://www.turbomovie.co.uk/#/videos>)

In the above instances, the expressions **this year** and **soon** are commonly found because the time for the film release has not been fixed yet. The advertisers only inform audiences that the cartoons are about to be published in the near future.

### 4.3. Descriptive Adjectives

Leech [5] claims that language used in advertising is marked by a wealth of adjective vocabulary. Because the trailer is also a type of advertising, the copywriters utilize descriptive adjectives as essential devices in almost NACTs to make their advertising more persuasive and impressive to audiences. Let us take a look at the following instance:

- (4.13) *In an all **new** original movie, an all **new** feature live musical: Scooby-Doo! Music of the Vampire.*

*The legend lives on this **awesome** musical adventure.*  
(<https://warnerbros.com.au/titles...vampire>)

In above examples, the descriptive adjectives **new** and **awesome** are used to highlight the salient characteristics of the coming movies. Particularly, the adjective **new** is used as the most popular one. It occurs in a large number of NACTs and is repeated many times in order to emphasize that the movies advertised are completely different from the previous ones. This evokes audiences' curiosity and urges them to find out more about the films.

Let us consider other examples:

- (4.14) *He is **handsome**. He is **charming**.*  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch...SHPk>)

- (4.15) *Welcome to the **magical** world of the Boxtrolls where one **lucky** boy grows happily with his **unusual** family.*

(<http://www.theboxtrolls.com/page/trailers>)

In the above cases, the copywriters employ a variety of descriptive adjectives such as **handsome** and **charming**, when revealing striking features of characters or events in trailers. Moreover, in example (4.15) such descriptive adjectives as **magical**, **lucky**, and **unusual** carry an important function in helping narrate a detailed and vivid story designed to introduce the movie. In short, all of those descriptive adjectives play a crucial role in creating impression and attracting audiences' interest.

Apart from the base form, in NACTs, descriptive adjectives are sometimes used in comparative form to

increase audiences' attraction. Below is an example:

- (4.16) *It is **more hilarious**, **more exciting**, and filled with even more minion's fun with 3 all mini-movies.*  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch....3k5e>)

In these examples, the copywriters make use of comparative form so that they can convince the audiences that these new movies are better, more fascinating than previous movies.

In particular, another dominant lexical characteristic in NACTs is the use of superlatives. Let us review some examples collected from data in this paper:

- (4.17) *Get ready for **the most irresistible**, **funniest**, completely feeling Madagascar yet.*

(<http://madagascar.dreamworks.com/...madagascar>)

- (4.18) *All of words for **the funniest** adventure.*

*The Little Engine That Could*

(<https://www.youtube.com/...qaGE>) [73]

- (4.19) *This March, **the most amazing** dog in the history is taking family time to a whole new dimension.*

(<http://www.mrpeabodyandsherman.com/>)

By using superlative forms of descriptive adjectives, the copywriters convey the message that the movies introduced in trailer are the best ones as in example (4.17), the characters in the movies are unique and interesting ones as in example (4.19), and the contents of the movies are more excellent than ever before as in example (4.18). The copywriters want to convince audiences that it is worth spending time and money watching these movies because there is no other alternative film that is better than these ones. As a result, the advertisers can create good effect on viewers' psychology and establish a positive attitude toward the upcoming movies.

The distribution of the descriptive adjectives in base form, comparative and superlative form is illustrated in Table 4.3:

**Table 4.3.** Forms of descriptive adjectives in NACTs

Descriptive adjectives	Occurrence	Percentage
Base form	192	82.7%
Comparative form	10	4.3
Superlative form	30	13%
Total	232	100%

As can be seen from Table 4.3, the base form of descriptive adjective appears with very a high frequency in NACTs. This means that the copywriters have a great tendency of using descriptive adjectives since these adjectives carry a significant role in helping the advertisers narrate the content or the plot and highlight striking features of the forthcoming cartoons to attract viewers. The use of comparative adjectives accounts for a low frequency whereas the superlative form takes up the higher percentage. Although comparative and superlative forms do not occur frequently, they belong to notable lexical features that contribute to the success of NACTs.

#### 4.4. Pronouns Denoting First and Second Persons

According to Quirk et al [7:345], “personal, possessive,

and reflexive pronouns may be called the central pronouns” which come in various forms in the table below:

**Table 4.4.** Personal, reflexive, and possessive pronouns

	PERSONAL PRONOUNS		REFLEX-IVE PRONO-UNS	POSSESSIVE PRONOUNS	
	Subject-ive case	Object-ive case		Determinat-ive function	Independ-ent function
<b>1<sup>st</sup> person</b>					
Singular	I	me	myself	my	mine
Plural	we	us	ourselves	our	ours
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> person</b>					
Singular	you	you	yourself	your	yours
Plural	you	you	yourselves	your	yours

In NACTs, the use of pronouns denoting first and second persons is very common. This use can be interpreted as an imitation of a dialogue because they create the impression of an individual interaction between the advertisers and audiences. The distribution of first and second pronouns is tabulated as follows:

**Table 4.5.** Pronouns denoting first and second persons in NACTs

Pronouns	Occurrence	Rate
First	24	28.2%
Second	61	71.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100%</b>

The total number of first and second pronouns found in data of the paper is quite large. However, it can be seen that the copywriters of NACTs tend to use second pronouns. The presence of second person pronouns occupies a dominant percentage while first person pronouns take up a small proportion. Although they appear with different frequencies, both first and second pronouns are important devices in introducing new cartoons. They make the NACTs sound warm, cordial, and more convincing and help to narrow the distance between the filmmakers and spectators.

Here are some examples:

Pronouns denoting first persons:

(4.20) *This holiday, get ready for us.*

(<http://www.barbie.com/en-us/video....Trailer>)

(4.21) *Moms have inside voices. Dads have them too. We all have little voices in our heads.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch....Vg7pgd>)

In NACTs, pronouns denoting first persons are employed in plural forms in most cases. They only appear in the forms of personal pronouns and possessive pronouns (determinative function). By using first person pronouns, the advertisers create texts in their own voice. The producers emphasize that they are personally placed in the stories. Besides, they also include or engage the audiences closely with the events in trailers. In the above examples,

the first person pronouns are utilized to integrate the filmmakers and viewers, thus there is no distance between the senders and receivers.

The singular forms of pronouns denoting first persons sometimes occur in NACTs when the narrators play the role of one character to brief his/her stories and introduce the cartoons. For example:

(4.22) *It was the time of giants, when dinosaurs like **me** ruled the earth. **My** dad is the guy that everyone looks up to, to protect the herb, but **I** was the smallest. **I** had no way of knowing that **my** whole world was about to change. One day that was **my** turn to protect **my** family and to lead the herb.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?....mBDqeS>)

Pronouns denoting second persons:

(4.23) *Imagine if **you** heard a real fairy, **you** saw a real fairy, **you** caught a real fairy.*

(<http://www.disneymovieslist.com/movie....fairy>)

(4.24) *Start **your** digital collection today and all the fun will be **yours***

(<http://www.epicthemovie.com/epic.....-dhd>)

(4.25) *Now prepare **yourself** for something even scarier.*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch....FsS-0>)

In these examples, the pronouns denoting second persons are used to address the audience personally and are therefore more persuasive. Using this type of pronoun, the advertisers engage the audiences and ask them to participate in the feelings or events in trailers. The art of using these pronouns creates friendliness between the advertisers and viewers. Pronouns denoting second persons in NACTs include all three forms which are personal, reflexive, and possessive pronouns (determinative function and independent function). The use of such terms as “**you**”, “**your**”, “**yours**” and “**yourself**” makes audiences feel that she/he is the particular person that the advertisers are talking with and the NACTs are friendly conversations between close friends. As a result, the forthcoming cartoons are more acceptable because they seem to be recommended by friends of audiences.

## 5. Conclusions

The main lexical choices of NACTs can be illustrated in the following table:

**Table 4.5.** *Lexical choices of NACTs*

Lexical choices	Occurrence	Rate
Proper Names	297	43,1%
Time Expressions	76	11%
Descriptive Adjectives	232	33.6%
Pronouns Denoting First and Second Persons	85	12.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 4.5 above shows that there are a large number of descriptive adjectives, time expressions, proper names and first and second pronouns utilized in NACTs. Among them, proper names appear with the highest proportion. Thanks to these proper names, the filmmakers can notify to audiences essential points of the new films. Moreover, we can see that the copywriters use descriptive adjectives as an important tool to create convincing and impressive NACTs. They occupy a relatively high percentage in that of main lexical choices. In order to make NACTs friendly and reduce the gap between the producers and audiences, the copywriters make use of pronouns denoting first and second persons. Expressions of time, which contribute to creating the anticipation about the upcoming cartoons, take up the lowest proportion.

The results of the study indicate that in NACTs there are four commonly used types of lexical choices with different functions, namely proper names, time expressions, descriptive adjectives and pronouns denoting first and second persons. As a whole, they all play an important role in helping the copywriters make fascinating NACTs.

It is hoped that this paper can provide Vietnamese learners with some useful knowledge about lexical choices in order that they can apply this effectively to their writing as well as enhance their English writing skill.

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