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FOREVER YOUNG: TOWARDS A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE ULTIMATE ADVERTISING PROMISE

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ABSTRACT:

It is no longer enough for a woman to be beautiful, intelligent, a good mother, a better lover, cook, cleaner, executive and skinny, extremely skinny. Now, she must also exude eternal youth. After frenetic years spent footing, stepping, spinning to the point of vertigo, dancing batuka and battling with food free of fats, free of preservatives, free of calories, free of flavourings and free of flavours, in order to conserve the body of a teenager, they announce to the survivors that we also need the face to match: free of bags, free of blemishes, free of scars, free of wrinkles. Advertisers warn us that old age will suddenly arrive, bringing premature ruin to what should rightfully be our perpetual post pubescence but, as always, they also offer us the solution. All has been prepared clinically, scientifically, dermatologically. The phytoflavonoids, the phospholipids and the dermo-peptides will reaffirm, redensify and rejuvenate, liberating the microcirculation and reactivating the dermocontractions of the cutaneous fibroblasts to ensure eternal youth. But how does this type of advertising work? Why do we believe these 'miracle claims'? We will see that in great part it is achieved by the use of implied rather than asserted information, as well as the agile fusion of linguistic registers that succeed in elevating cosmetic products to the level of medical discoveries of the latest generation.

KEY WORDS:

advertising, women, identity, youth, ageing, science, jargon



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It is no longer enough for a woman to be beautiful, intelligent, a good mother, a better lover, cook, cleaner, executive and skinny, extremely skinny. Not only must she care for her children, adore her man, encourage her workforce, cosset her clients and maintain her home sparkling clean in between visits to the gym, she must do all this whilst exuding (in physical appearance, at least) eternal youth.

For some time now we have lived in a culture obsessed with the physical shape and state of the human body, a culture that tells the average woman, dozens of times per day, that the shape of her body is the most important thing about her, and that, in general, she should be disgusted by it. First they told us that everything should be lifted: the eyelids, the cheeks, the chest... everything upwards, when everyone knows that, sadly, age drags us slowly but inevitably in the opposite direction. It does not matter whether we are 17 or 70, any element left drooping will be seen as excess to requirements. But there is no need to worry, the adverts assure us, because there is always a way to achieve perfection. Hence the extensive and exotic array of physical instruction on offer and in the proliferation of 'diet', 'light', 'bio-organic', 'pro-biotic', 'reducing' and 'remodelling' agents on the supermarket shelves.

We have spent frenetic years of footing, stepping, spinning to the point of vertigo, dancing batuka and capoeira and battling on with food free of fats, free of preservatives, free of calories, free of flavourings, free of flavours, in an attempt to conserve the body of a teenager (with varying degrees of success and physical exhaustion). Now, however, they announce to the survivors that we also have to acquire the face to match: free of bags, free of blemishes, free of scars, free of wrinkles... Well, now there is nothing we can do. It is well and truly over, is it not?

Of course not. Advertisers bombard us with the message that old age is something that one day will suddenly arrive bringing premature ruin to what should rightfully be our perpetual post pubescence. But, as always, they also offer us the solution. It would appear that the secret of eternal youth, something that has eluded us since time immemorial, has at last been discovered. And how do we acquire it? By buying it, of course.

And in what form does it come, this miraculous rejuvenation? Well, we can no longer achieve our ultimate goal in life by swallowing yoghurts with biphilophidus or by scoffing vitamin-enriched diet chocolate whilst subjecting ourselves to mild electric charges in the comfort of our own living room. No, this time we have to put ourselves in the hands of the professionals. All has been prepared clinically, scientifically, dermatologically. The phytoflavenoids, the phospholipids and the dermo-peptides are going to take care of reaffirming, redensifying, remodelling and rejuvenating, liberating the microcirculation and reactivating the dermocontractions of the fibroblasts in order to



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improve cutaneous cohesion, as we are informed by the advertising messages for anti-wrinkle or anti-aging treatments to which we are exposed on a regular basis.

But why does this type of advertising work? How does it work? And it does work – or have we seen the professional trajectory of any of the giant pharmaceutical companies behind such campaigns end in bankruptcy? How can it be that we believe what we are told by this kind of advertising or, at least that we react favourably towards it? That is, by buying and using the products in question. In 2009, in Britain alone, over £600,000,000 was spent on anti-aging products. Do we really believe that we are going to ‘recover’ our youth or ‘reverse the visible signs of aging’ simply by smearing our tired features with miraculous potions costing £50 per gram? Surely, even the most deluded of consumers does not really believe that these amazing formulas are capable of offering us eternal youth. But, of course, to acknowledge this fact, even to ourselves, would put an end to the blind hope that by smothering our various parts with these ‘serums’ and ‘elixirs of youth’, miracles of modern science, we might somehow erase the tell-tale signs of age. We are addicted to hope and it would seem that, no matter what anyone says or how much it costs, we will continue to chase it.

The adverts insist that each ‘latest’ anti-aging formula is the miraculous discovery we have been waiting for and, of course, we try it, just in case it should be true. Moreover, we tell ourselves that if it did not work, neither the government nor the advertising authorities would allow it to be advertised and sold. It seems that we forget, at least during the time of our exposure to the advertising message, that genetic configuration, hormonal balance, diet and lifestyle all have direct and varying influence upon the condition and the appearance of our skin. The promises of rejuvenation or of reduction in size merely as a result of applying lotions, creams or unguents of any description, are inventions of the cosmetic industry, pure marketing strategy. When scientific proof is demanded of these advertising claims, it is very often discovered that the manufacturers are unable to substantiate them.

According to the CAP Code enforced by Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) a cosmetic is any substance or preparation designed to be put in contact with the various parts of the human body: skin, capillary system, hair, lips, nails etc. with the intention of cleaning, perfuming and protecting them, maintaining them in good condition and eliminating body odours. The category of ‘cosmetics’ consists of lotions and creams for the skin, including tanning products and make-up; products for the nails, lips and oral hygiene; deodorants, soaps, gels and shampoos; perfumes and colognes; foams and shaving lotions and anti-wrinkle preparations. Such products cannot claim any therapeutic properties. Furthermore, the Advertising Standards Authority holds that if a cream causes actual physiological changes to the skin, such as real, permanent removal of scars or wrinkles, then it is classed as a medicine and needs to be regulated as such.⁸⁹⁸

⁸⁹⁸As stated in the 12th edition of The UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising, Sales Promotion and Direct Marketing (CAP Code) came into force on 1 September 2010.



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I first became interested in the promotion of this class of product some years ago when my two office colleagues presented me with a birthday present of anti-wrinkle cream. I asked myself, at the time, why they had chosen to give me such a present when it was blatantly obvious that I was unaccustomed to using it... Well, I had clocked-up nearly half a century without ever having applied anything of this nature, was I really going to start to do so now? According to the advertising leaflet accompanying the diminutive recipient, the microencapsulated biomimetic peptides of its even more diminutive contents were going to re-educate my skin, neutralizing the cutaneous micro-tensions and optimising the life expectancy of my epidermic cells, to attenuate and smooth the lines of expression and remodel the shape of my face... and all in three weeks. Of course I was going to use it!

Why is it, then, that we believe these 'miracle claims'? Firstly (and perhaps above all), it is because we *want* to believe them. We need to believe that there is an element of truth, no matter how tenuous, in these encouraging messages. Beauty editor, Kathleen Baird-Murray explains:

[Anti-ageing creams]... will improve skin texture more than most, but they don't actually claim to remove wrinkles forever - it's we who assume this because we're paying a lot of money.⁸⁹⁹

Secondly, the linguistic ingenuity of the messages themselves leads us to assume objective information and scientifically proven fact where what is being expounded is, for the most part, subjective opinion and exaggerated praise. We will see that in great part it is achieved by the agile fusion of linguistic registers that succeed in elevating cosmetic products to the level of medical discoveries of the latest generation. We are no longer talking about frivolous or insignificant merchandise but of authentic scientific revelations. We are offered knowledge, experience and facts presented in the form of 'objective' reports full of medical terms, tables, percentages and graphs – full of science, or what we recognize as science, but devoid of meaning. As we shall see, the results of all these 'clinical' and 'dermatological' tests are measured by appearance, feelings and opinions: 'the results are visible', 'twice as many women expressed satisfaction', 'said their skin felt comfortable'.

It is not the intention of the present study to demonstrate that such advertisements tell lies or even that they deceitfully exaggerate the properties of the products in question. But it *is* the intention to show that, by means of implied rather than factual claims, as well as the 'scientific' register and visual imagery employed, advertisements are capable of misleading the public into arriving at erroneous conclusions about the properties and effects of the products in question that are not literally stated in the advertisement. The effect of such claims depends on consumers'

⁸⁹⁹Kathleen Baird in *How To Be Beautiful*. See http://www.jackandhill.net/jack_and_hill_a_beauty_bl/



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tendency to draw inferences from advertising messages – often inferring information beyond the literal content of the message. What are these linguistic constructions, and how do they work?

Firstly, we should clarify the general use of the terms 'implicature' and 'inference', as used here. Inferencing is a fundamental feature of information-processing. We often infer information that is directly implied, but not explicitly declared in statements. A basic distinction to be made, here, is that between logical implicature and pragmatic implicature. The first exists where an assertion necessarily implies certain information, whereas the second occurs when a statement moves the listener to expect something neither explicitly declared nor logically implied. For example:

- 1) Assertion: Lipiderm. Not all moisturisers are the same.
- 2) Logical Implicature: Some moisturisers are different from others.
- 3) Pragmatic Implicature: All moisturisers, except Lipiderm, are the same.

Although 3) is not logically implied, some receivers will infer it from 1), upon the supposition that the advertiser is following the cooperative principles of conversation (Grice 1975) (what Sperber & Wilson (1986) term 'contextual implicature' or the rule of 'optimal relevance').

Research indicates that the consumer will normally infer the strongest possible claim, despite it not being logically valid (Bruno 1980; Geis 1982; Harris 1977; Harris, Dubitsky & Thompson 1979; Preston 1967). Consumers tend to interpret advertising messages according to the same principles governing ordinary conversation (Grice 1975, 1978). Often, we read between the lines of explicit statements, using contextual clues to infer additional, implicit meaning. In the case in question, for example, (applying Grice's maxims of *strength* and *quality*) the receiver will reason that if 3) were not true, the advertiser would simply not have made the statement 1).

In some forms of interaction, such as ordinary conversation, this inferring behaviour may enhance understanding and provide for maximum speed and efficiency in the processing of messages. In persuasive communication like advertising, however, this is not necessarily in the best interests of the receiver and may lead to misunderstanding about the nature of the advertised product. Moreover, research in information processing (Brewer 1977) confirms that once inferred information is stored in the memory it is remembered as though it had been asserted fact. The receiver assumes more information from a message than is literally stated in the text.

There are many different ways to imply information in advertising messages. These are almost always used in conjunction and of course, depend on context. They include:

- Puffery
- Juxtaposition
- Hedge words
- Presupposition



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Claims of 'uniqueness' Jargon

Whilst jargon is to be the focus of our attention, we should give a brief explanation of the other categories mentioned above. The great majority of advertising claims are of a non-factual kind. *Puffery* refers to claims which praise the item to be sold with subjective opinions, superlatives or exaggerations, vaguely and generally, stating non-specific facts. Despite the fact that research shows that the receiver tends to process claims using puffery as though they consisted of objective facts, advertising regulators appear to remain unconvinced of the need for legislation against its use.

The *juxtaposition* of two unrelated statements is used to give the impression of a direct relation between the two. The implicature is, again, pragmatic rather than logical. For example:

4) Wish you could erase those wrinkles? Vitaline.

Hedge words are subtle qualifiers used to modify the stronger advertising claim. Common examples of the latter are the use of such terms as 'up to...', 'from' or 'after'. For example:

5) Up to **80% reduction** of fine lines.

6) Note the difference after **just three weeks!**

This is probably the technique of implying information most commonly used by the advertiser and, paradoxically, most recognised by the receiver. If it is so widely recognised, then, how is it that it continues to be effective? In theory, these modifiers should prevent the stronger claim from being accepted, thus preventing any misunderstanding on the part of the consumer. In practice, things are not so simple. Often, the modifier is overlooked or paid little attention. In audiovisual messages, use of volume, stress and intonation often diverts attention from the qualifiers whilst emphasizing the stronger claim words. In printed ads, similar effects may be achieved by the use of different type and fonts, as indicated in the above examples. Whilst they might appear impressive upon first glance, such claims have very little real meaning. Other terms used to modify strong claims, in the type of advertising in question, include: '*fighting against* the signs of ageing', '*is formulated specially* to reduce wrinkles'. The pragmatic implication (but not the logical one) is that they actually succeed at their task.

We have a strong tendency to accept the *presuppositions* of our interlocutors in everyday conversation. The advertiser takes full advantage of this in claims such as the following:

7) Now we are *even more advanced* in the field of anti-aging products.



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This type of structure implies that it is already widely accepted that the advertiser is a leader in the field of anti-aging products. Now it only remains for them to explain their latest 'discovery' and its unique qualities.

The 'uniqueness' claim is a common tactic. Examples abound: 'unique formula', 'revolutionary complex', 'first ever combination of...'. Then there is the kind of uniqueness suggested by the following claim::

- 8) There are no two types of skin the same. That's why Barbara Ward has created an anti-aging cream for different kinds of skin. Each one with natural ingredients micro-encapsulated for greater efficiency...

Before we set about discovering which of the tailor-made Barbara Ward treatments is ours, we should, perhaps, ask how many different kinds are there on offer. There are two. So, why doesn't the ad simply say 'we cater for two different types of skin? Because we are all different and unique and it feels good to have a manufacturer recognize this fact.

Often, the face creams in question are not only unique, they are 'intelligent' concoctions, capable of seeking out deficiencies in each individual skin type and of proportioning the necessary nourishment in just the right measure for the face and indeed, for the very wrinkle in question.

Jargon

Advertising messages for anti-ageing products are replete with terms like 'stimulating', 'reaffirming', 'transforming'. Products are referred to as 're-energizing', 'restructuring' and 'rejuvenating' formulas and these semantically vague terms are expressed in quantitative measures: numeric values, percentages, graphs, etc.

The names of anti-ageing products and their ingredients frequently consist of scientific or pseudoscientific terms. Pioneering technological formulas pulsate amongst our cellular telomerasa with their par-elastyl-enriched nanosomes reducing our wrinkles and regenerating our skin. And, whatever that might mean, we let them get on with it. Why is this terminology used if nobody understands it? The answer is that it is not used for its denotative value but for its connotative effect. The frivolous world of cosmetics is associated with the serious and objective realms of science. The use of scientific language (even when it is not understood) invests the product with significance and credibility.

Jargon is, of course, often used in the context of the laboratories where such tests are supposedly being carried out on the product in question. The rhetorical effect of this type of 'role borrowing' in ads lies in its seeming objectivity. Its purpose, it is argued, is to disguise the sales message (as far as is possible) and thus divert our attention from the fact that it is a loaded piece



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of communication (Bolinger 1980). The choice of language and tone of voice, the inclusion of statistical information, in verbal and visual form, and the particular filmic techniques employed all combine to strengthen the impression. This practice has the obvious potential of misleading the receiver (whether intentionally or not).

The use of jargon may also help to invest the advertisement with meaning beyond the literal meaning of the message. When both speaker and addressee understand the jargon it can be a useful and accurate means of conveying information. When jargon is used to an uncomprehending addressee the speaker violates two maxims of conversation (Grice 1975):

a) be as clear as necessary and b) be as informative as necessary.

Sometimes the jargon used is explained:

9) Dermopeptides, active components obtained from the latest research in biotechnology, dinamize the cells that redensify the tissues...

Sometimes the jargon is not explained:

10) Relipidising body cream...Lipids in laminar structure that reconstruct the intercellular bonding agents.

Then there are times when the jargon is explained, but it would, perhaps, have been better no to do so:

11) B-Neutrox, a unique combination of magnesium gluconate and a hexapeptide that limit the entry of calcium in the fibroblasts, thus avoiding cutaneous microtensions.

Why use 'scientific' terms, then, if the receiver is likely to have little or no understanding of them? The implication is that the scientific components or properties of the product in question are so significant that the advertiser could not have omitted mention them.

12) A new challenge for science: cosmetic surgery uses micro-injections to correct expression lines... A cream could never replace this technique, but Helena Rubinstein is inspired by it.

Here, we witness the use of the counter-expectation an advertising technique used to gain the confidence of the receiver, that is, openly admit that the product is not capable of producing the miraculous results achievable by other (superior) kinds of treatment. This apparent honesty in the first part of the message allows the advertiser to make posterior claims that are, as a result, much less likely to be refuted by the receiver as dishonest. In this case the advertiser acknowledges the

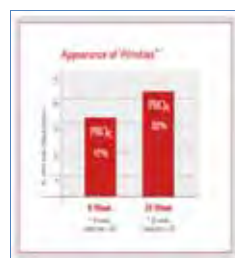
limits of the product in question as a face cream and not a surgical treatment. 'A cream could never replace this technique', admits the advert, 'but Helena Rubinstein is inspired by it.' And what, exactly, does this mean? (I was inspired by Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, but my living room ceiling is still an eyesore.) We suggest that, in response to the advertiser's apparent honesty, the receiver will benevolently infer the desired implication: 'Helena Rubinstein's face cream achieves results similar to those attained by cosmetic surgery.'

But whether or not such claims are misleading or not is not the complete issue here. There is another more subtle, more subliminal and more sinister aspect to such messages. They imply that subjecting themselves to surgery and/or cosmetic injections are natural, inevitable steps for women to take, as they get older, and that only by succumbing to such drastic and unnatural measures will they be able to 'face the future' (A1). Ageing is seen as something that has to be fought against and this fight should be the prime aim of every woman (A2). No matter what her age, she must strive to look younger (A3).

(A1) (A2) (A3)

The 'scientific' nature of these advertisements is reinforced by the inclusion of graphics and statistics, the results of 'clinical tests' and dermatological research. What exactly are the 'clinical tests' that are repeatedly referred to in the advertisements? Where are they carried out, and by whom? And what kind of 'efficiency' is being measured? We suggest that, for the average consumer, this term invokes images of clinics and laboratories with scientists in white coats, carrying out objective, technical trials under controlled conditions. That, at least, is the unspoken implication. What, then, is the real meaning of the term?

The dictionary definition of 'clinical' is 'dispassionate, cold and objective'.⁹⁰⁰ That is to say, it does not necessarily involve a scientific, medical or pharmaceutical centre of any kind. In other words, a 'clinical test' might just as easily be carried out in the street, in the local supermarket or in the living room of one's own home. In the very great majority of these advertising messages, neither the conditions of such tests nor the criteria for judging the supposed results are described. We are merely presented with this kind of 'objective' view of the results obtained:



(A4)

900



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By means of the graphic, we see immediately the impressive effect of the advertised cream. It is when we analyse the verbal message that we realise that it makes little real sense (A4). As in many other messages of this type, no mention is made of the number of women 'tested', or of the conditions under which the 'test' was carried out. The graph indicates a '17% wrinkle reduction' after 8 weeks, the graph tells us and the 'base size' of wrinkles = 95. After 24 weeks there is a visible '22% reduction in wrinkles' and the 'base size = 22'. There is no explanation of what exactly 'base size' means or of what unit of measurement is used.

The statistics of success for the many and varied anti-aging products on the market oscillate between the sincerely modest, such as the abovementioned ad announcing '17% reduction of wrinkles', to the frankly alarming, such as the ad for one cream using the claim:

13) Efficiency proven in 100% of cases tested.

Here, of course, there is no mention of the precise kind or degree of the 'efficiency' achieved, nor of how the results were obtained nor with what sample. Later, the advertisement expands upon the information:

14) In 100% of cases tested, the depth of wrinkles decreased after 4 weeks of application. The results are visible.

We might ask to whom the results are visible. As it transpires, they are invariably visible to the eyes of the product's manufacturers who concern themselves with the 'clinical testing' of their latest age-halting marvel. Furthermore, the ad invites the readers to judge the effect of the miracle moisturiser for themselves, in the same manner. The smooth and smiling face of beautiful teenager gazes confidently out at us above the verbal declaration:

15) Now my face has less wrinkles.

As to what 'now' refers, we offer two possibilities: 'now that I have used the liquid marvel advertised here', or 'now that I'm still only 19?' Of course, it is the former inference that is invited.

Up until now we have paid little attention to the crucially important question of the use of visuals as stimuli to inferencing behaviour in the decoding of advertising messages. Photographs of young women (often very young women) are frequently used in ads for anti-aging products. Many authors have now documented the persuasive power of the visual elements of advertising messages (Fairclough 1998, Dyer 1982, Williamson 1983). 'Where visual images are juxtaposed the receiver has to make the connection,' explains Fairclough (1998: 208). This type of inference is based on the belief that 'the camera does not lie'.

The adverts below promote the use of the products in question 'to make your skin feel younger, healthier and prettier' (A4, A6).



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(A5) (A6)

Could they be any younger, healthier or prettier, the young women pictured in these ads? And does it have anything to do with the wrinkle-ridding wonders on offer?

A further example is the ad for 'Design Lift' (A7):

(A7)

'Design Lift', reads the text: 'the secret of a firmer, smoother skin. The contours of my face are remodelled ... it looks younger, as if by magic!' As if by magic, or by using a still crease-free, twenty-something as the model?

Another ad reveals 'the secret of a young look' (A8).

(A8)

The secret is quite obvious to the advertiser, of course: use a young model.

Despite the often bizarre nature of the features measured by the dermatological tests referred to in these ads, the manufacturer always manages to arrive at a specific percentage for the diminution or augmentation of said feature. Let us take, for example, the ad for a product that boasts the following effects upon the skin:

16)	rosiness of tone	+53%
	luminosity of tone	+67%
	freshness of tone -	+84%

A similar example is the message for an anti-aging cream that concludes:

17)	Skin visibly reinforced for greater density:	82.5%
	Intense revitalising: for more uniform complexion:	87%

Of course, no explanation is given as to how the strength or density of the skin can be measured or even judged visually. But, of course, none of this really matters to the average consumer. It sounds as though the advertisers know what they are talking about, and the precise and impressive percentages quoted serve to reinforce this assumption.



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There has been no objective, scientific form of measurement whatsoever, of any kind of physiological changes to the skin of the subjects under scrutiny. The supposed results of tests carried out are presented in the form of figures and percentages, graphs and charts that, upon first glance, look convincing, but are never explained in detail. This is the perfect invitation to the receiver to infer all the 'information' that is missing but implied by the advertiser. And, as we have mentioned earlier, the average consumer displays a marked disposition so to do. We, as consumers, know exactly what the advertiser wants to say so we interpret these claims as though it had been said.

A wide variety of time scales are claimed for the results of different anti-aging products to manifest themselves, beginning with the cream that boasts visible effects in an incredible 5 seconds (A9). To be fair, the 5-second claim is only for a smooth and radiant skin. According to the same ad, it takes 5 days to 'challenge the first signs of ageing'.

(A9)

Among the advertising claims collated in the present study, the reduction of wrinkles can take anything from just seven minutes to 21 days. One manufacturer appears to diversify an entire anti-ageing range on the basis of the time it takes for each cream to result in younger-looking skin.

(A10) (A11) (A12)

The manufacturer's star product is that which is capable of stopping time altogether. 'Remain, forever, thirty years old', announces the ad for *stop time*.

(A13)

Perhaps the cleverest product of all, however, is that that can actually help us go backwards in time, taking off those unwanted years that have left their mark on our skin. '3 years? 5 years? 10 years?' begins the text. 'How many years less do you want to look?' (A14). Again, of course, the 'claim' is implied rather than stated literally.

(A14)

One of the most conservative claims for 'wrinkle reduction' is made by the following ad (A15).



(A15)

In addition to the 'explanatory' text, the ad comprises a full-page photograph with the declaration: 'Results after 21 days in clinical test under dermatological control.' The photograph is of the face of a young woman, with the percentages of supposed reduction in wrinkles situated in the corresponding positions of the face:

- 18) Reduction in wrinkles on forehead: 14%
- Reduction in crow's feet: 18%
- Reduction of nasal sagging: 17%

The method of measurement is that commonly favoured by these manufacturers – the visual appearance of the subject.

Nevertheless, compared to many other advertisements of its kind, the percentages of improvement quoted are extremely modest. In spite of this, or perhaps, indeed, because of it, they are very convincing. Nonetheless, both consumer and advertiser can be content with the results. Using the latest technology and basing our study on the results quoted, we have managed to create a visual representation that would correspond to the evolution of the improvements indicated after continued use of the anti-wrinkle product in question, over a period of 18 months:



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THE END

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