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## The semiotics of contemporary advertising messages: Decoding visuals

Within the discourse analysis, semiotics identifies how signs are used to represent something. In the discourse of advertising it can be a wish, a need, a desire or a worry to be solved, for instance. In this sense, the paper deals with the switch from denotative to connotative meanings of contemporary ads. The approach is based on the assumption that communication is achieved via decoding and encoding messages. The connotative meaning represents the overall message about the meaning of the product which the ad is creating by the use of the image (e.g. the photographed model). The ad functions by showing us a sign with easily readable mythic meaning (e.g. the photographed model is a sign for feminine beauty) as well as by placing this sign next to another, potentially ambiguous, sign (e.g. the name of the perfume) (Barthes 1972).

**Key words:** semiotics; print ads; denotation; connotation; images; decoding.

### 1. Introduction

Advertising, as a linguistic phenomenon, has become entrenched into social discourse by means of its widespread diffusion throughout societies all over the world (Beasley and Danesi 2002: 15). Cook (2001: 22) points out that in the contemporary society advertising is everywhere; it is “both part of, and has helped to create, a new global culture which ignores national boundaries”. According to McLuhan, advertising has become the ‘art of the modern world’ (qtd. in Danesi 2004: 273). In all media, both electronic and print, in newspapers, magazines, information materials of all kinds and texts in a general sense, there is a complex network of written text accompanied by images and other non-linguistic elements, designed as coherent entities (they are often more visual than verbal) ‘by the means of layout’ (Kress



and Leeuwen 2006: 17).

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## 2. Targeting human insecurities

Critics of advertising, as Leiss et al. (1990: 34) put it, tend to perceive advertising as a highly powerful discourse, claiming that it is has become so manipulative and persuasive that consumers are often unable 'to decide rationally what exactly their real needs are or how best to satisfy them'. This brings us to another issue to address: the question of human needs.

In the psychological sense, advertising power relies on people's weaknesses i.e. the never-ending human need for a range of solutions, advice, magic products or object that provide (or at least promise) a hope. A hope in this context may refer to, for example, obtaining self-confidence or better looks, earning a lot of money, achieving popularity or personal prestige, better health, security against the hazards of old age and illness, more comfort, erotic stimulation, emotional security, and so on (Beasley and Danesi 2002: 18). In other words, advertisers will always try to offer some product or service in a way which satisfies some consumer's need or desire (Melchenko 2003: 6).

Targeting people's insecurities is a frequently exploited strategy for making an ad work (Goddard 2005: 76). Naturally, as different target groups clearly require profiles they might want to have for themselves. Furthermore, if we add the image to the text of an advertising message, advertisers try to show the image of consum-



ers as they strive to be, something they want to accomplish. Language plays here an important role as well as a certain image which is imposed on people and which is usually a stereotype shown through certain models of how, for example, a successful and happy man, should look like. For instance, it can be achieved either via promoting a certain product (a product image) or by showing a celebrity using a certain product, which is one of the stereotypes supposed to show the quality of the product.

Accordingly, advertisers have to choose the words carefully in order to present the object of desire in an appropriate and most efficient way (Goddard 2005: 74). From the above it can be concluded that the consumer is the central figure in an ad's structure. The discourse of advertising today focuses on so-called image-creation which has become one of the leading persuasive techniques. The product itself is no longer in focus, nor is its description used as a primary persuasive means. Image-creation centers on the consumer through creating product-imagery with which he or she can easily identify.

### 3. How images work – theories

Barthes tried to show how the cultural constructedness of ads' meaning is concealed in the production of signs as well as to prove how signification of any kind is used in order to turn culture into nature. According to Barthes (qtd. in Botterill et al. 2000: 72), ads 'use tricks of imagistic arrangement in order to claim for their products meanings which they have no right to attach to them'. In this sense, Barthes points out that advertising, using connotative associations, provides readers with what they themselves try to be or achieve (Botterill et al. 2000: 72). A successful advertising technique may have to consist of more than one element, i.e. plain text is rarely used today. As it was mentioned above, advertisers, as an effective attention-seeking strategy, frequently use images that accompany the text. One of the explanations for this is that the readers are not likely to read images in isolation from the verbal text that accompany them nor are they likely to read the verbal text without reference to the accompanying image (Goddard 2005: 13). Written ads, 'despite being page-bound, often use aspects of spoken language in order to achieve their effects' (Goddard 2005: 31) and these aspects are best illustrated via accompanying images.

Advertising discourse in this thesis, thus, refers to *text* and *context* of written ads together. An ad is, accordingly, an interaction of elements in which genres merge into each other. For example, textual part is no longer the key element in many ads.



There are ads without text or in which text plays a subordinate part. A discourse analysis therefore needs to describe both texts and their contexts, including physical substance, e.g. images (Cook 2001: 7). According to Jefkins and Yadin (2000: 17), messages are said to be more readily seen than heard, and visual images have greater impact than those which require the effort of reading. It can be noted that writing (i.e. print advertising in particular) is a form of image-making. As Goddard (2005: 13) points out, writing has its own paralanguage, as a result of 'the type of *clothing* copywriter has chosen for it'.

In this sense, Kress and Leeuwen (2006: 18) also emphasize that images function as 'the book of nature', as 'windows on the world', as 'observation', while the textual part of an ad usually identifies and interprets the image or, as they put it loads the image, 'burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination'. When it comes to so-called products ads, the sender's basic aim is to push the product, which is most frequently done through the worlds of fiction and fantasy, into the real world of the consumer. According to Cook (2001: 181), this movement is effected by 'those elements and participants which seem to belong to more than one world at once: the product itself, the characters and the addressee'. Furthermore Cook (Cook 2001: 181) points out that:

...the product can exist in all four worlds; real celebrities (for example) and manufacturers appear in the fictional world, as do apparently real consumers. All receivers inhabit both real and fantasy worlds – though if it were not for ads, it would be unlikely that mundane objects such as beer cans and shampoo bottles would appear in our fantasies complete with specific brand labels. What an ad seeks to achieve is enough contact between fiction and reality, sender and receiver, characters and consumer, fantasy and fact, for the passage of the product from one world to another to be feasible.

Following the above-mentioned points, the paper primarily deals with the importance of images and representation in the construction of ads, i.e. how images form a part of the way consumers 'read' the text, as Goddard puts it (2005: 79). It used to be the text that dominated ads, however today it is often images that play a more powerful role in suggesting how the interaction occurs. According to Cook (2001: 42), images are often the essence of the communication as they create mood, impart information, persuade and make claims so strongly. The use of images makes the reading more complete and the message sent becomes strengthened and thorough. Ads thus become interactive in the sense that they represent target groups advertisers want to address (Goddard 2005: 81). These may include, for example: age, gender, sexuality, occupation etc.



In addition, advertising is not just about the promotion of certain branded products or services, but ‘can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of an individual, group or organization’ (Goddard 2005: 8). However, having in mind that advertisers have to deal with various cultural preferences and assumptions, various expectations have to be met in order to make an ad work.

Barthes (1977: 15) in his essay *The Photographic Message* noted that both the emission and the reception of the message lie within the field of a sociology: ‘it is a matter of studying human groups, of defining motives and attitudes, and of trying to link the behavior of these groups to the social totality of which they are a part’. The images and the text communicate with their addresses, meaning that they are not just static pictures. Therefore, advertising is not just about the promotion of certain branded products or services, but ‘can also encompass the idea of texts whose intention is to enhance the image of an individual, group or organization’ (Goddard 2005: 8).

Although both pragmatics and semantics do assume that meaning is reached by the application of rules such as conversational principles and sense relations (and other pragmatic and semantic rules), neither of the rules completely describes the meaning to participants in discourse, although the procedures are clear-cut (Cook 2001: 103-104). Advertising, however, uses the type of language which is often beyond those rules and produces a less-bound type of meaning. Cook (2001: 104-105) points out that advertising, unlike pragmatics and semantics, ‘does not seek to steady the ground of meaning beneath our feet, but to make it sway’. Furthermore, it resembles a dialogue, addresses the consumer in colloquial language and exploits most private and intimate human subjects which make the whole interaction quite personal, emotive and indeterminate.

In this sense, it can be said that although the pragmatic conditions of communicative tasks are universal, in theory the realizations of these tasks as social practices vary from culture to culture (Yule 2002: 113). According to Yule (2002: 113) this cultural variation can be analyzed from several different viewpoints, all of which co-occur in the actual practices which have to be observed by advertisers:

1. different cultural assumptions about the situations and about appropriate behavior and intentions within it;
2. different ways of structuring information or an argument in a conversation;
3. different ways of speaking: the use of a different set unconscious linguistic conventions to emphasize, to signal local connections and to indicate the sig-



nificance of what is being said in terms of overall meaning and attitudes.

## 4. Decoding the messages

The Saussurean concept of the linguistic sign says that it consists of a signifier (the vehicle for the meaning) and the signified (the meaning being conveyed). Barthes goes a step further and introduces another layer of meaning in each sign, i.e. the mythological meaning or cultural subtext that underlines the primary linguistic meaning (Barthes 1977).

### 4.1. Ideologies



Figure 1. Paris Match Magazine cover (1950s).

Barthes (1972: 58-59) deconstructs a photo (Figure 1) of a black boy saluting the French flag and explores the layers of meanings in the following manner:

1. signifier – is the physical image of the boy;
2. signified – is the literal reading of patriotism in terms of a loyal citizen saluting the flag, and



3. the deeper – mythological meaning of the entire sign, which becomes a reinforcement of French imperialism, by implying that French non-white citizens are satisfied in the Empire in question.

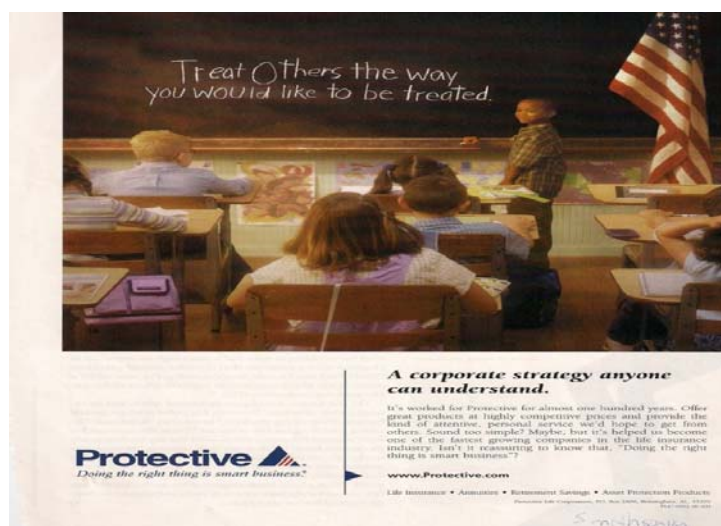


Figure 2. Contemporary Mythologies (Smithsonian Magazine 2003).

On the other hand, in this contemporary ad (Figure 2) we see a black boy in a classroom, with his white classmates, standing next to the blackboard on which the linguistic part of the advertising message says: *Treat others the way you would like to be treated.*

Therefore, both messages can be decoded as follows: France (or the USA) is a great country (Empire) and all her sons, without any colour discrimination (black boy(s) who stand for all the blacks, who are a symbol of ill-treatment...) faithfully serve under her flag; accordingly, the flag symbolizes the policies and practices essential to French/American culture. These include, among other things, justice, freedom and prosperity. If these values are connoted here, it is to be implicated that company/ideologies advertised/promoted will do their best to protect, through its services, all people, regardless of their age, gender or race. Myth therefore reflects in both examples the power structure in a society at a given time.



## 4.2. *Feminine beauty*



Figure 3. The concept of feminine beauty (Opium perfume ad from 2000s).

Bignell (2002: 32) uses the following example as an illustration for the above: an image of a beautiful girl in a perfume ad is more than a sign which denotes a particular person who has been photographed; that sign also connotes youth, beauty, slimness, health etc. As the sign has several positive connotations, it can work as a signifier for the so-called mythic signified feminine beauty. Bignell (2002: 32) points out that such concept belongs to our society's stock of positive myths concerning the attributes of a sexually desirable woman. The ad presents a photo of a model (a sign) which signifies feminine beauty (a concept). Barthes describes this concept of feminine beauty as mythic meaning (qtd. in Bignell 2002: 32). The following example illustrates the above (Bignell 2002: 32):

Yves Saint-Laurent's ad campaign for Opium perfume in 2000, for example, featured a female model reclining on her back with her knees raised and legs slightly apart, one hand on her left breast and her head thrown backward. She was completely naked except for heavy gold jewelry, and her pale skin, emerald green eye make-up, fuchsia lipstick and red hair contrasted with the deep





blue fabric on which she lay. Clearly the sign 'Opium' has connotations of indulgent pleasures which derive from the codes for representing drug taking and sexual abandonment, and the connotations of the ad's visual signs supported them. The mythic meaning of the ad connected the perfume, feminine beauty, and exotic sensual pleasure.

The analysis of the signs includes the switch from denotative to connotative meanings. The connotative represent the overall message about the meaning of the product which the ad is creating by the use of the image (e.g. the photographed model). The ad functions by showing us a sign with easily readable mythic meaning (i.e. the photographed model is a sign for feminine beauty) as well as by placing this sign next to another, potentially ambiguous, sign (i.e. the name of the perfume). Bignell (2002: 32) argues that 'the mythic meaning *feminine beauty* which came from the photographic sign (the model) is carried over onto the name of the perfume, the linguistic sign which appears in the ad; so the name of the perfume becomes a linguistic sign that seems to connote feminine beauty as well. The product has been endowed with a mythic meaning'.

## 5. Conclusion

The products or services advertised are, implicitly or explicitly through the process of denotation or connotation, symbolism or iconicity, presented as 'the ultimate' solutions to a number of problems people may experience or as the embodiment of their wishes and something that makes one's dreams come true. In this sense, persuasion is defined as 'the process of inducing a voluntary change in someone's attitudes, beliefs or behavior through the transmission of a message' (Melchenko 2003: 8). Accordingly, persuasion primarily acts on an individual's beliefs about an object, his evaluation of it, and his intentions towards it. This may, but does not necessarily affect his behavior towards the object (Melchenko 2003: 8).

In this sense, advertising has been criticized, because it exploits the arbitrary manner in which goods are presented to have socially desirable attributes. The focus is placed not on goods themselves but on consumers as an integral part of the social meanings of goods. In addition, persuasion as a mode of presentation dominates the language of advertising. Consumers are persuaded (and manipulated) that the product or service advertised can provide them a desired thing, whatever that may be (Leiss et al. 1990: 25). In doing so, products become living things. They perform anything that people do (talk, walk, sing, act etc.) and thus direct human actions with the ultimate aim to sell the product. Leiss et al. (1990: 26) argue that, at the same time, 'because human personalities are correlated with specific qualities



ascribed to products, people become more like goods’.

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## SEMIOTIKA U REKLAMNIM PORUKAMA: DEKODIRANJE SLIKA

U okviru analize diskursa, semiotika istražuje kako znakovi predstavljaju pojave. U diskursu reklamnih poruka to naprimjer mogu biti želja, potreba, žudnja ili briga koju treba prebroditi. Rad se u tom smislu bavi prijelazom s denotativnog na konotativno značenje suvre-



menih reklamnih poruka tiskanih medija. Teza se zasniva na pretpostavci da se komuniciranje odvija putem kodiranja i dekodiranja poruka. Konotativno značenje, ostvareno putem upotrebe slike (naprimjer fotografirani model), predstavlja poruku koju je oglašivač htio poslati u cjelini. Reklamna poruka funkcionira na način da nam prikaže lako razumljivo mitsko značenje (fotografirani model kao znak ženske ljepote) zajedno s prikazanim, potencijalno dvoznačnim, znakom (ime parfema koji se reklamira) (Barthes 1972).

**Ključne riječi:** semiotika; tiskani oglasi; denotacija; konotacija; slika; dekodiranje.