

INTERSEMIOTICS IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING. FROM SIGN TRANSLATION TO MEANING COHERENCEⁱ

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Abstract: The very informed contemporary advertising-reluctant consumer asks for coherence and transparency from the creators of the advertising discourses, who, on the other hand, try to be relevant using local and contextual features even if the brand is international (Pepsi uses a Romanian song within Shazam and the international brand Danone is “Made in Romania”). This paper explores a series of theoretical concepts, from intersemiotic complementarity and cohesion to a contextual model of social semiotics, from translation and adaptation theories to multimodality and intermediality, in order to find some simple instruments for the construction and adaptation of the advertising messages to the consumers’ social, technological and cultural context, able to better target an audience and to maintain coherence all along a discourse that uses from conventional print media and TV to very innovative mobile apps and other digital endeavors.

Keywords: intersemiotic translation, context, coherence.

1. Introduction

Our world is changing every single moment: technological advances far beyond imagination, war threats and terrorist attacks, health, bio-hazard and environmental concerns, all these and many more alike influence the ways we communicate, we act in society, we consume goods and cultural products. Commercial communication, be it an advertising or a PR tool, has already shifted from “happiness that can be bought” (Brune 2003) to new forms of consumption, more rational, based on loyalty to community, responsibility for environment and the future and so on. The consumer, influenced by the accelerated democratization of the access to information, has become advertising-reluctant and requires coherence and transparency from the creators of commercial messages, while, using the means of the global network, he engages in very critical analysis and dialogues when an advert or the brand itself do not meet his expectations. On the other hand, the need for local relevancyⁱⁱ (as known in the “glo-cal strategies”) implies contextualized messages: in Romania, for example, we are “consuming” daily an advertising discourse trying to bring local and contextual relevancy even if the brand is international. The American Pepsi uses a cultural context-based Romanian songⁱⁱⁱ within Shazam (the mobile app that recognizes sounds) while the French brand Danone mentions a social context based info (*Made in Romania*) on its packaging. The advertising discourse changes on all levels, from packaging to TV, from online to public events. International and local brands seem to understand the symbolic consumption of their audiences, the dynamism of sharing brand-stories with and by the consumers. For

example, in a 2011 mission statement, Coca-Cola sets its objective to dominate the “popular culture conversations” by 2020^{iv}.

It has been studied in the academics for some decades and it becomes a necessity in the professional field: the advertising discourse needs to adapt to the consumers’ specificities and has to be able to serve relevant and plausible content to its audiences, according to the time, the place and the support of consumption of that advertising discourse.

A series of theoretical concepts, from the intersemiotic complementarity and cohesion to a contextual model of social semiotics, from translation and adaptation theories to multimodality and intermediality are explored, analyzed and collected in this paper, drawn from the theoretical inquiry of a broader doctoral research through which I intend to find some simple instruments for the construction of advertising messages tailored to the consumers’ social, technological and cultural context, able to better target an audience and to maintain coherence with that context all along a discourse that uses conventional print media and TV and very innovative mobile apps and other digital endeavors.

2. Semiotics. Sign and meaning

An impressive literature deals with meaning, interpretation of signs, coding and decoding, moving of the semiotic material, in brief, the kind of works necessary for creating a commercial message or for adapting it to another market. Semiotic analyses, methods and models have been extensively used indeed in works related to advertising, either in academia or in the professional field.

Let us then find a common denominator for the meaning, the sign and the semiotics. Although very subjectively understood, the meaning is carried by the sign, which is the object of study of semiotics. “Old doctrine of signs”, according to Sebeok (1994, 5), “general science of signs and meanings” for Danesi (1994, 280) “study of the sign systems” according to Halliday and Hasan (1985, 4), semiotics is generally accepted under Saussure’s definition of “science studying the life of signs in society” (Saussure [1916] 1998, 41). A great variety of signs functioning in society or in communities have been researched in the last century: verbal, visual or combinations of these such as public discourse, theatre, novel, mime, comedy, painting, architecture, sculpture, myth, fairytale and folktale, comics, news and adverts, multimedia contents, commercial communication.

The sign evolved under the influence of two dominant paradigms. The first one, dyadic or dualistic, designed by Saussure and further developed by Hjelmslev, has influenced massively the European schools and its linguistic roots generated focused researches on the nature and role of symbolism and on the cultural relativism of communication and meaning production due to the arbitrary nature of the sign. Among the first ones to apply it to marketing, we can point out Barthes, with his *Éléments de sémiologie* (1964/67), Jacques Durand, in his article *Rhétorique et image publicitaire* (1970), and Georges Péninou, in his *Intelligence de la Publicité* (1972). A second major paradigm, Anglo-Saxon this time, was established by Charles Peirce. His triadic model comes with a complex set of distinctions, tags and ages of the three components and of the relations in between them. Theoreticians as Jakobson, Morris and Sebeok, amongst

others, have promoted Peirce's theory and its influences in the marketing and consumer behavior researches are felt especially on the new continent.

Largo-sensu, the fundamental concept of sign refers to a "natural or conventional semiotic entity that consists in a vehicle associated with a meaning" (Nöth 1995, 79). A sign is every object that stands for another object through its meaning. A sign can have any material manifestation as long as it can accomplish its representation function: a word, a novel, a gesture or a physiological reaction, even a city. The representation can also acquire various forms and shapes: mental, fictional or factual, fantastic or real, natural or artificial. What *is* a sign in one context *can be* a meaning or a representation in another context and the other way around. This functional perspective requires their existence to be connected to the integration in an actual process of meaning production based on codes, both for the production and then for the understanding of signs: the semiosis. (Danesi 1994, 280; Nöth 1990, 42). Multiple researches in semiotics derive initially from the "semiological program" of Saussure, from the extensions applied on it by Hjelmslev in his glossematics and from the applications developed by different schools of semiotics in the study of other non-linguistic modes of communication. Saussure's signifier is a material vehicle, the physical part of the sign, the substance of which it is made of – sound wave or alphabet letter – according to Danesi (1994, 24), while the signified is a mental concept which its pair refers to. This dichotomy is visibly simpler and easier to understand than Peirce's triadic sign (representamen - object - interpretant): one's signifier is others' representamen, while the signified becomes object and interpretant. The two models were developed by the fathers of semiotics in the same period and both were adopted and used in further studies. And they should be seen, as Leeds-Hurwitz (1993, 23) recommends, as complementing each other: the triadic model would in fact be an elaboration of the dyadic one.

2.1. Models and functions of significations in the advertising discourse

Having agreed on the simple semiotic truth that a sign can take many forms and that it carries a meaning, the theoretical journey goes on to the advertising field. And it starts with Barthes, notorious for his contributions in the semiotic analysis of myths, theology, literature and narratives as well as of various forms of visual communication. He proposes a systematic model of Saussure's signification defined as a "process – an action that connects the signified and the signifier, the product of which is the sign" (Barthes 1964/67, 48) and introduces two levels of signification, the denotation and the connotation. He extracts these dualistic terms from Saussure's pair and he uses them to create a simplified version of the glossematic model elaborated by Hjelmslev (Nöth 1995, 310). Barthes (1964/67) also explains the importance of the background knowledge, of the cultural codes and of possible associations on which the system of the connotation depends. Understanding a sign relies on the context, its interpretation depends of the cultural codes that unite the signified and the signifier and Barthes is the one to bring important clarification on these issues in his analyses on levels of meaning in the advertising images. The denotative level is the one of an un-coded iconic message while the connotative level is coded, symbolic and builds on the pragmatic, cultural, patriotic, historic or aesthetic knowledge of the reader or viewer. For Barthes, the advertising exists in a contextual world, explained by Gillian Dyer (*apud* Royce 2007,

129-130) as follows: “[a]ds, as a means of representation and meaning, construct ideology within themselves through the intervention of external codes which are located within society. The ad will use images, notions, concepts, myths, etc. already available in the culture.”

This third level of signification, the one of ideology, operates through the linguistic message that may or may not accompany the photography. Barthes (1977) challenges the nature of its two functions: anchorage and relay, a dichotomy operating on the field of the image-text relation as evaluated in a context. The anchorage function describes the need of the meaning of the image to be connected to the verbal message, without which the image could acquire too many interpretations. From this perspective, in the shape of a body-copy, a head-line, a title or a slogan (in advertising), the linguistic/textual message stabilizes the meaning of the image, elucidates the message in its ensemble working as a meta-language applied on some of its elements. The relay function implies a relation of text-image complementarity: in their association, the two modes contribute simultaneously to the production of the designed message. This function is more visible in messages as the moving images, in which the dialogue works together with the image. The two functions are not exclusive and they can for sure operate together in various types of messages.

Barthes major concern was to find if the image is the one to duplicate some of the meaning of the text through a phenomenon of redundancy or if the text is the one to add some new information to the image (Barthes 1977, 38). Nöth suggests that this simplification does not capture the fact that “the juxtaposition of picture and word usually results in a new holistic interpretation of the scripto-pictorial or the audio-visual message” (Nöth 1995, 453). As a matter of fact, the problem does not stand in the relation of addition or duplication in between the text and the image but in the ways in which both modes of communication work together to create a coherent message that, in the terms of Halliday and Hasan, is a „a semantic unit: not of form, but of meaning” (Halliday and Hasan 1976, 1-2).

2.2. Image-word tandem. Intersemiotic translation. Multimodality.

Adapting Barthes’ quest to present times, we are looking for semiotic elements of the advertising discourse that work together, signs (written words, images, sounds) carrying each its own meaning but transmitting altogether the same message. Well, that is the intersemiotic translation or its counterpart, the transmutation, terms proposed by Roman Jakobson (1959) as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems”. Extensively studied by Jakobson, the intersemiotic translation is successfully applied in the researches on advertising, where the main, visual message, is doubled most of the times by the textual message, made of words. Ideally, the synergy of various semiotic systems creates a singular message or, if required, convergent messages: most of the times, the slogan or the head-line of an advertisement is repeated with the help of the other systems involved.

As a *method*, the intersemiotic translation is used effectively in advertising especially when the brand and its message have to be “transported” into a new culture, along with the values it stands for. Ira Torresi (2008, 69) offers the example of the same print-ad of a face moisturizing cream translated for three markets: England, Italy and the United

States of America. The benefits are the same and the ladies in the prints are similar: Caucasian, dark hair and white complexion, the same age group, the same apparent weight. Yet, the three messages in their ensembles are quite different: those prepared for the European markets reflect a different brand positioning than the one prepared for the States. The textual-visual interaction targets the European cream to elegant and emotionally stable ladies while the American cream is addressed to women seeking a remedy as fighting their own neurotic and unbalanced nature. Torresi points out that we're not dealing with an inter-lingua translation, but with an intersemiotic one, used for creating a complex sign made of image and text and that can be traced back to market analyses and brand positioning strategies.

Multi-semiotic messages integrating image and text in semantically coherent unit were explored from the perspective of intersemiotic texture by Yu Liu and Kay O'Halloran (2009). Using the semantic integration of visual and textual elements, the researchers evaluate the intersemiotic translation and the simple duplication of meanings, the co-occurrence. They state that the texture of a message, a relation between its meanings, the registry and its cohesion configurations eventually construct a final meaning. Adding that "language is a social semiotic instrument" (Halliday 1978), we see an intersemiotic texture that determines relations of *semantic cohesion* in between different *modes of communication*. In the image-word relation, O'Halloran's intersemiotic cohesion reaches three planes: of the expression, of the content and of the context. The logical word-image relations are of major importance and the lexical-grammatical and logical-semantic interdependency in between sentences, as formulated by Halliday (1985), is completed with the expansion and projection thematic as formulated by Martinec and Salway (2005) in their article describing grammatically the text-image relation. This grammatical approach comes as an extension to O'Halloran's approach based on the relation principles of comparison, addition, consequence or temporization (O'Halloran 2005). In the same context, a set of composition principles (the informational value of the sign, salience and framing) are introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

But if the intersemiotic translation focuses on redundancy, the multimodal communication, as presented by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), focuses on the very co-existence of multiple semiotic systems. The area of multimodal research proposes an interdisciplinary approach of communication and meaning, while examining the changes influencing our society, changes produced or influenced by the technological evolution and the new media. The multiple ways in which communication occurs and which contribute to the production of meaning, the semiotic resources that are socially dependent, as well as the individual and subjective selection and configuration of communication modes in order to perceive meanings – these are just a few of the working concepts of the field.

Specific to multimodal research, a *mode* is a socially and culturally shaped resource for meaning making. A photographic image or a written text, a spoken speech, a press layout or a print-ad, a movie or a TV commercial – all these are modes in which meaning is produced, most of the times in combinations, especially in the contemporary technological era. Each mode has its modal resources: written text has syntactic, grammatical and lexical resources as well as graphical and aesthetical resources. Each mode has a specific contribution to the semiotic effort, certain *affordances*: potentials and constraints for meaning making (Bezemer and Kress 2008, 171). Modes and their

usage have to be considered together with the *medium* or the *media* on which the message will be distributed. Each medium has a material and a social aspect. Material is the substance through which the message becomes accessible, from ink on paper to TV or computer screen. From a social point of view, a medium is the result of semiotic, socio-cultural and technological practices. The material aspect of the support is reconsidered according to the intention of the producer and the audience. The *support* and the medium influence on their part the content and its meanings that are produced with an intention. Associating a sign with a meaning depends on the availability of the semiotic resources and on their capacity to construct the meaning desired by the creator. This *intention* (both of the creator and of the audience) is influenced by various *contexts* (social, cultural, economic, politic, and technologic) and the representation is a result of their interactions that has to take into account the media of distribution. The meaning is merely an effect, produced at the destination, once the sign has reached its audience, as a product of the semiotic potential of the sign (a text, for example) that allows for various readings and interpretations, unlimited in volume but in limited semantic area. From this perspective, the attention of the meaning producers should focus then on the raw materials and on the process. *Design* is important too, considering the multiple affordances of the modes, the various intentions to be covered and the large spectrum of variations of the social environment. Actually, we're witnessing a programmatic shift from composition to design, reflecting, as Bezemer and Kress point out, a change of focus from competence in a specific practice and in a conventional mode, like the writing, to focus on the interest and agency of the designer of complex signs (Bezemer and Kress 2008, 174). Design is what makes modes, media, frames and supports work together in coherence with each other.

This issue of design allows me to point to an experiment testing the accuracy of the codes introduced by Pierre Guiraud (in 1971, in his *Semiology*). According to Guiraud, a code, the same as a grammar, involves rules of combining the signs to form messages and rules of attaching signs to concepts carrying a meaning: logical codes that use the objective experience and the relation of the individual with the world, aesthetical codes that signify subjective expressions of the human spirit and social codes that express the position of an individual within a group, in a cultural and social perspective. According to David Glenn Mick, the experiment was performed by a German psychologist who created in 1992 a connection in between the product design and the consumer choice. The experiment, conducted on 39 subjects, asked these to sort the images of 50 watches and pointed out three dominant options to influence the perceptions of the subjects, corresponding to Guiraud's codes. The numerals versus no numerals option appeared to be a logical code reflecting the rational value of the watch, the jewelry versus plain watch option appeared to be an aesthetic code related to beauty while the gold versus plastic option suggested a social code related to status (Mick *et al.* 2004).

2.3. The impact of *Trans-*, *Inter-* and *Re-* on the semiotic material

Well, semiotics wasn't simplistic to begin with. And if charged in a multimodal approach, it may seem a very complicated self-centered spinning phenomenon. What if there were even more approaches?

Moving semiotic material usually happens from a mode or collection of modes to another mode or collection of semiotic modes. These moves are inevitable due to permanent changes in the environment and to re-contextualization, motivated by social, pedagogical or epistemological forces. Different interactions require different descriptions of objects, persons and activities – for these, different images, written words, modes and media are needed. The aforementioned Bezemer and Kress make a clear distinction between the generalist semiotic term of translation and the very specialized term of transduction, describing the carrying of semiotic material from a mode to another, whose substances vary and, depending on their cultural history, have different affordances. Thus, transduction cannot ever be perfect: an image has no words and a written text is seldom decrypted as an image. Content disposition (the syntax of the written text, for example), is different in modes whose substances is temporary or spatially realized and transduction will have a massive effect on the contents from this point of view. A text-to-image transduction implies that semantic relations expressed in written form through sentences and verbs be translated in vectors and lines, while semiotic relations between lexical-syntactic elements (such as prepositions: in, on, by) be translated with spatial means. Newer media involve a practice of designing the message and a substantial ability from their creators to move semiotic materials and contents from a mode to another: a novel into a CD, a print-ad into a mobile application or a TV commercial into an online interactive banner. Characters, objects and situations are described in the written mode so that the reader could fill in the blanks. But in a 3D animation, the blanks are totally different. Two boys on a bench in the park are just a few words in a written sentence – yet, the designer of an Augmented Reality 3D app will have to create 3D bodies for them, to associate a set a behaviors to each of them, to generate a motion, to set a direction and to calibrate their voices in a software so that they fit their physiognomies. Moving this semiotic material, performing the transduction involves modifications of the material itself and the decision regarding it is the result of an epistemological obligation, to quote again Kress (2003).

Transduction is part of human semiosis ever since drawing on cave walls. Yet, in the western cultural history of representation, the present times are marked by a permanent, intense and socially centric transduction. New media come with new semiotic modes that offer representation affordances unimaginable even as close back as 10 years. Computer software is able to assemble in virtual encyclopedias various types of content, from written text to still and moving images, from spoken speech to music and sound effects, and many more. Media, as means of distribution of the messages, have their own affordances; their changes have social and epistemological effects. Basil Bernstein's "recontextualization" is referred to (Bernstein 1996 *apud* Bezemer and Kress 2008), which, from a semiotic perspective, operates in the process of moving the signification material from a medium to another, from a context to another, requiring each time a social and semiotic reconstruction and implying an epistemological transformation.

Another type of semiotic material transportation, the intermedial translation, is described as the act of "translating across media" (Bal and Morra 2007, 7). This translation also involves working with various media-discourses and practices of intertextuality and intersemiotics, an interdisciplinary effort resulting in moving the semiotic material (blocks of information, subjects/characters, brands and products) over

genres and media. The nature of the content moving is explored also in the translations area of research where the creative rewriting of the text is the one that shows the real difficulty of the translators' job: when the content has to be translated from a medium to another, the text does not have to be repeated but clarified and improved. Susan Bassnett, a translation specialist, points out the transformation of the act of translation in a creative rewriting process (Bassnett 2002, 6). As Bassnett shows, Andre Lefevere "first developed his idea of translation as refraction rather than reflection, offering a more complex model than the old idea of translation as a mirror of the original" charging the translator to decode and re-code whichever of the complex signifying systems of texts is accessible (Bassnett 2002, 8). Henry Jenkins, former co-director of the MIT's Comparative Media Studies program, brings forth the term of *transcreation*, an improvement of the simple translation from a language to another, and mentions the Spider-Man comics that were adapted both in linguistic and narrative manner for India (figure 1): the hero born in the American fantasy gets to jump over buildings and motor-scooters in the crowded Bombay (Jenkins 2006, 111).



Figure 1. Spider-Man.

The character and the cover of the Indian issue of February 2005

From the field of cinema studies, Robert Stam comes with the issue of *adaptation*, explained from a text perspective as follows: "the text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating *intertext*, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (Stam 2000 *apud* Miszei-Ward 2013, 12-13). Text lives and develops through a series of interpretations across time and cultures, producing a complex narrative modified with each *adaptation*. From this angle, adaptation is a translation, not necessarily in between languages, but in between semiotic systems. A post-modernism theorist, Linda Hutcheon, shapes this kind of translation in the terms of *re-mediality*. Adaptations occur from a medium to another, they are "specific forms of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)" (Hutcheon 2006, 16). Another take on re-mediation comes from new-media studies – Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin use the term to describe a reuse of content in different media, "which appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 65). This acknowledgement of the new media derives not only from their use in and for the society but also from their inter-

linkage, from their individual and collective contribution to the creation and improvement of the present and future technological, social and economical context.

3. Towards a conclusion

The above intersemiotic saunter doesn't even begin to describe the massive amounts of theory already written on the matter nor the researches going on just as you read this paper. It couldn't and it is not my intention. As stated in the introduction, the purpose of my research is to find an easy to understand instrument of *coherent meaning making* in the commercial communication (advertising), that could be used both in the academic and the professional fields. And as the research deploys, I anticipate constructing it using:

- the primary and secondary research that will outline a cultural, social and economic context of the audience and its contextual model,
- the semiotic analysis of the meaning potential of a category of products and of the targeted brand (from that category), as shaped in the potential perception of its audience by the aforementioned context.

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ⁱ This work was possible due to the financial support of the Sectorial Operational Program for Human Resources Development 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund, under the project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/132400 with the title „Young successful researchers – professional development in an international and interdisciplinary environment”.

ⁱⁱ “Think global, act local”, a concept with various areas of applicability, from architecture to advertising, attributed in theory to Scottish sociologist Patrick Geddes (1854-1932).

ⁱⁱⁱ <<http://www.paginademedia.ro/2014/03/video-pepsi-realizeaza-prima-campanie-shazam-pentru-tv-din-romania/>>.

^{iv} <<http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2012/01/coca-cola-content-marketing-20-20/>>.