
KNOWLEDGE, REALITY AND IMAGINATION IN ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

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Abstract: The paper deals with the ways of presenting reality in advertising discourse by exploiting familiar cognitive models based on human knowledge and on various ideas related to social constructions of the world. The issues discussed reflect the interrelations between knowledge and different versions of reality, on the one hand, and imagination, bordering with dreams and illusions, on the other. As the aim of advertising agents is to “wrap” the product in such a way so that it can sell the moment it appears on the market, they do it by adding extra values to the object of attention on the basis of already existing cultural values within the respective confines of consumers’ models of the world. It is not an easy task as people present and accept everything around them selectively according to the global knowledge patterns they have in their minds but also on the basis of their language map of the world, the last two being different for different people because of their views, beliefs, prejudices and way of thinking. While constructing these types of text copywriters take into consideration not only local and regional culture but their interrelations with global culture as well as their impact on representatives from various national, social and personal backgrounds. Advertising agents rely to a great extent on addressees’ imagination and on the human ability to connect the unreal and the imaginative with the qualities of the respective product or service on the subconscious level. Some cultural and social factors are brought to the fore exploited through the use of language and through reality expressed in a number of ways touching upon people’s feelings and emotions as well as upon their needs and demands which are more or less one and the same everywhere in the world. The role of text producers varies with different advertisements while constructing meaning as the centre of orientation is based on frames related not only to their knowledge about the world, but also to their personal experience and attitude towards the promoted goods and services and towards the way they are presented. In principle, people usually think in frames and if what fits in the text producers’ frames does not correspond to the text receivers’ ones the facts presented in ads will either be rejected entirely or will not be positively accepted which automatically means that the end result will be a complete failure. Moreover, if text receivers lack imagination, they will not be able to rationalize their experiences and connect their pre-existing knowledge about the world with the presented facts in the respective ads.

The paper discusses those issues by applying Critical Discourse Analysis and content analysis as methods for analyzing the different types of materials. The culture-specific aspects and the linguistic manifestations are dealt with against the background of the interrelations and juxtapositions used in advertising discourse.

Keywords: imagination, knowledge, reality, advertising discourse

1. INTRODUCTION

The main aim of advertising discourse is selling the product or the service offered successfully irrespective of the ways and means used for achieving it. In a number of ways advertising agents avail themselves of the knowledge they have about the world and the reality they face be it on a local and regional or on a more global level. But we as humans are well aware of the fact that in such types of text only presenting information in the purest possible way is not enough for the marketing goals set in advertising discourse. That is the reason why what appears as real facts is rendered with the help of some “tricks” provoking text receivers’ imagination, illusions, desires and fantasies thus leading to pleasant associations related to the object of attention. While reality and knowledge pretend to be objective, imagination is definitely subjective, and this merge makes advertisements intriguing and sensational.

2. PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL CHANGES AND METHODS OF STUDY

The principles for successful changes in advertising discourse and methods of study are usually connected with a variety of representations in which knowledge, reality and imagination are so intricately interwoven that in some cases it is difficult to differentiate between them. The reality presented in ads is often distorted because people in general like sensations and “juiciness” of information.

The methods of analysis applied in the study to the discussed advertisements from the corpus are Critical Discourse Analysis and content analysis. The culture-specific aspects and the linguistic manifestations are approached and treated with care as there can be more than one interpretation based on individual choices, preferences and pre-existing knowledge about the instances used for the presentation of the product or service.

3. STAGES FOR SUCCESSFUL CHANGE

3.1. Sensitizing the issues exploited in advertising discourse

The reason for choosing this topic is that it reflects text producers' ideologies concerning various outlines of the respective objects of attention. We take it for granted that human experience is more or less universal, but the way knowledge about it is used and exploited in these types of text makes them unique and provocative enough for all sorts of consumers. One of the reasons for this is that reality in ads is transformed and rendered in a peculiar way. On the other hand, perception of the presented information is related to imagination as the real object is often substituted by its advertising image as Barthes¹³³ has stated. In other words, every object contains in itself different cultural associations on the basis of 'structures of embodied imagination'¹³⁴.

In a number of cases, people may "consume" only the message and feel content as regards its construction on the basis of their value judgments, personal opinions and social and cultural experience. The presumption then is for those recipients to avail themselves of the goods and services offered as an end result.

3. 2. Emphasizing (un)awareness of the manipulation of text receivers

People in general are well aware of the fact that advertising agents manipulate their audiences in one way or another on the basis of a lot of imagination and (ir)reality or distortion of reality bordering with knowledge. There is always some implicit tension between these factors which is related to the overall idea that it is common practice for the media to construct reality that is different from the one people live in. The abundance of varieties in the representation of reality does the trick as it provokes text receivers' interest, curiosity, dreams, desires and the like irrespective of the fact that target audiences can predict and presuppose all of these in most cases. Yet, recipients are left to be tickled, tantalized, tempted and seduced by the information as it is presented, although most of them are not willing to admit it. On the whole, we can say that imagination and illusion as well as dreams are the wonders that do the trick in advertising discourse.

3. 3. Emphasizing pre-existing knowledge about the construction of ads and the reality implied in them

It goes without saying that there is no need for text receivers to have some knowledge about the process of constructing advertising texts as well as about the background information on the basis of which the respective message has appeared. However, there are cases in which it is beneficial for target audiences to have at least a vague idea about some facts around which the message is devised. And yet, the process of constructing and deconstructing meaning varies with every individual due to their personal experience and attitude towards the world they live in.

As a powerful tool advertising can influence the viewpoints of societies and alter people's perceptions towards various directions and goals. All this is done with the help of frames suggested implicitly or partially by advertising agents but identified or recognized by target audiences thanks to their own cultural knowledge. This means that text receivers should be quite observant and pay attention to the smallest details in the way the information is presented. Thus, for example, one of the Pepsi-Cola ads released for Halloween has the caption 'We wish you a scary Halloween!' in the nonverbal component (see <http://justsomething.co/pepsi-teases-coca-cola-with-this-halloween-advertising/>). The can of Pepsi is dressed with a red cape with the inscription 'Coca Cola' but written in a reversed manner or misspelled - ColaCoca. The way the brand name is presented has its reasons, namely that advertising agents do not normally use information related to a competitive company. The Pepsi logo is present as well. Addressees may not be able to identify the preliminary intentions of the text producers. What is mentioned on the web site is as follows: 'Playing on the fact that at Halloween you should wear a terrifying dress, they (Brussels based agency Buzz in a Box, author's addition) brilliantly conveyed the message that Coca-Cola represents the scarier beverage option you have'. Undoubtedly, the knowledge that everybody has about what Halloween stands for is not enough for the successful deciphering of the message. Consumers should have a lot of imagination as well, for example in respect to the word 'scary'. The message in the ad can have a number of interpretations, not only related to the celebration of Halloween and the costumes people are supposed to wear at such parties. What is evident is that the suspense and the mystery based on the unexpected are there thus provoking recipients' imagination and curiosity.

¹³³ R. Barthes, *Vaobrazhenieto na znaka*, Sofia: izdatelstvo "Narodna kultura", (1991), p. 12.

¹³⁴ M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, (1990), p. xx.

3.4. Emphasizing imagination and distortion of reality through some verbal and nonverbal considerations in ads

The language and the illustrations used in advertising discourse are very carefully planned well in advance so that they can have a strong influence on perspective clients. One of the reasons for this is that this ‘creates a mediational layer that can select and renegotiate aspects of the immediate content as well as define a completely different context, thus enriching reality and cognition’¹³⁵. What individuals actually do is associate the information they receive with something similar they already know or think they do. Thus, their past or present experiences can be activated due to emotions either presented or provoked in the text. The reason for this triggering of feelings and experiences is very well stated by McLuhan back in 1964 ‘Everybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet, it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behavior, especially in collective matters of media and technology, where the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effect on him’¹³⁶. In cases in which recipients do not have any experience in the respective direction, they can make predictions and presuppositions of what to expect as they make some progress with the information in the text. Although familiar frames are applied, they are presented in an unusual and unreal manner so that text receivers can use their imagination. According to Johnson, imagination is ‘a creative capacity to reorder representations and to generate novel structures’¹³⁷. Advertising agents do this all the time by skillfully transforming reality in one way or another. On the other hand, as van Gorp states ‘by implicitly suggesting a cultural theme, the frames can determine which meaning the receiver attaches’ to the information that is presented.¹³⁸ According to Reese,¹³⁹ however, ‘frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world’. Frames are also used to make some pieces of information that are presented in texts more salient and noticeable than others, which in advertising discourse is called *anchorage*. Cognitive models in these types of texts are built on the principle of absurd juxtapositions and non-standard ideas about the real world. In most cases, comparisons occurring through the use of metaphors are unthinkable of even in human imagination. Such usages are based on two-domain mappings as in the following advertisement: “Dreams are what happens when imagination wants to meet reality”, which also renders the idea of the symbiosis between imagination (and dreams) and reality (and knowledge). If the text producer’s intentions as regards culture specific aspects in advertising texts do not coincide with the recipients’ cultural orientations, then the message can be misinterpreted or not understood at all. In this way, the addresser’s preliminary intentions would remain implicit. It does not necessarily mean that there will be a breakdown of information if it cannot be decoded by all representatives of the respective language the text appears in. In such cases either knowledge or imagination are not sufficient for the comprehension of the ad. In principle, if text receivers lack imagination, they will not be able to rationalize their experiences, neither will they be able to figure out how much they know about and are familiar with the reality they live in¹⁴⁰. This fact is no doubt not the only criterion for the successful interpretation of the idea behind the message. As an example in support of those statements we can point out one of the numerous Milka ads, in which knowledge is not enough for the correct comprehension of the text. Target audiences should have a lot of imagination so that they can dream on while “devouring” the Milk chocolate. Before that moment of satisfaction and enjoyment they are supposed to have felt pleasure from the message itself, the predominant part being the nonverbal one. The verbal component reads: ‘Milka. So tender and so full of all the good things from the Alps. So good, you’ll feel you’re there. Milka. One piece and you’re there’ (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIVd0lazYas>). Here, only part of the knowledge one needs for the understanding of the information is explicitly presented: the Alps. Another part that is pre-existing

¹³⁵ Fusaroli, R. ‘The Social Horizon of Embodied Language and Material Symbols’, *Versus*, pp. 95-120, (2011). pp. 108-9.

¹³⁶ McLuhan, M. *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, (1964).

¹³⁷ See M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, (1990). p. xxxvi.

¹³⁸ B. van Gorp, ‘The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In’, *Journal of Communication* 57, International Communication Association, pp. 60-78, (2007). p. 63.

¹³⁹ S. D. Reese, ‘Prologue – Framing Public Life’. S. D. Reese, O. H. Gandy Jr., A. E. Grant (eds.), *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and our Understanding of the Social World*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 7-31, (2001), p. 11.

¹⁴⁰ See M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, (1990).

knowledge and is taken for granted has to do with the fact that cows grazing grass in the Alps produce milk which is much cleaner and healthier than other similar products used for other chocolates. The culture-specific aspect in the commercial is related to family values and is exploited and emphasized in the nonverbal component: a family of four is travelling in a hot-air balloon over the Alps. The idea of unity, happiness and enjoyment of pleasant moments together is more or less the same all over the world. As the narrative continues, target audiences suddenly realize that all this is actually dreams and imagination, as the mother appears to be at her desk working and at the same time having a Milka bar while the beautiful pictures of nature and her family are on her mind. There is a framed photo of her husband and children on her desktop next to the chocolate. Happiness is two-fold: warm family relationships and happier moments together with the family, on the one hand, and having a bite of Milka chocolate, on the other. These two aspects are interchangeable. The interrelation of the two-domain mappings is exploited to the full as well as the transfer of feelings and emotions. The advert ends with another scene from the Alps, the Milka cow on a meadow and the hot-air balloon in the background. Then the narrative goes: *Milka. One piece and you're there*. The same words appear as a tagline at the bottom of the screen. Obviously, the producers of this commercial target families and more specifically, working women who are married and long for happier moments with their families. In the discussed advertisement, the Milka chocolate is represented as a means by which one can escape from the monotonous rhythm of a job and go to a place they have always imagined and dreamt of, with the people they love. This particular commercial focuses on the family frame and it is definitely successful because people are willing to have a happy life within a perfect family and because of the fact that humans are prone to think in frames¹⁴¹ which if explicated well enough would lead to the desired effect, yet with a little bit of imagination.

An example can be given with yet another commercial, this time a Bulgarian one, about Tesy Cloud Family Products (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qCFVgAGdpg>), in which two frames are made salient. The juxtaposition is between humans (i.e. animate objects) and non-humans (i.e. inanimate objects) and it has its reasons as the issue behind the main idea suggested by the advertising agents is that the information about the products in question is related to smart technologies (and it goes without saying that they will be produced and controlled by smart people). The text goes as follows:

The smart ones warm up (pick up information) quickly

They themselves know when to begin

They themselves know when to stop

They themselves have a style of their own

They themselves know what they can

They themselves know what they want

They themselves understand you

Smart decisions for heating and hot water from Tesy¹⁴².

The teasing in the original Bulgarian version is based on the fact that one and the same word for heating and grasping information quickly is used for both, animate and inanimate objects, without any changes. The same holds good for *smart*. In the nonverbal component various technical appliances are presented. The other play on words is based on the brand name Tesy and the two words used *Te si* (they themselves). Both sound in exactly the same way; the difference in pronunciation comes from the pause that is made between the first and the second word in the second case. At this particular point imagination comes in and lets target audiences dream on, yet with the knowledge they have about the latest hi-techs.

These are just some examples which show that the borderline between reality, versions of reality and imagination is very subtle and that at times it is difficult for them to be differentiated. Cognitive patterns, frames and mappings are constantly brought to the fore and emphasized in one way or another, quite skillfully at that, for the advertising agents' aims to be fulfilled as fully as possible. Text producers expect target audiences to apply 'imaginative patterns of human understanding that are projected to connect up different cognitive domains' as Johnson has stated¹⁴³.

¹⁴¹ See W. Croft, D. A. Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2004).

¹⁴² The Bulgarian version reads: Umnite stoplyat barzo / Te si znayat koga da zapochnat / Te si znayat koga da sprat / Te si znayat kakvo mogat / Te si znayat kakvo iskat / Te si te razbirat / Inteligentni reshenia za otopenie i toplava voda ot Tesy

¹⁴³ M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind. The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, (1990). p. xii.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REMARKS

The findings proved that in cases in which knowledge, reality and imagination in ads are skillfully interwoven and played with, the results and the goals are fully achieved as such texts provoke target audiences' curiosity and interest and make them 'indulge' in the information with pleasure. What helps is the emotional stimulation behind the exceptional way of presenting information. Text producers are well aware of the fact that (shared) knowledge is power especially when accompanied by intriguing imagery in both components of these types of text. On the whole, it is taken for granted that media discourse, advertisements being an essential part, pretend to reflect reality as it is, but what actually happens is that these types of text present 'versions of reality' depending on the social situation and the aims of the text producers¹⁴⁴. In other words, advertising agents "play" with situations related to various social and cultural practices¹⁴⁵, values, beliefs and prejudices as well as to the existing norms and views about the world on which they rely while promoting and selling their goods and services. That is one of the reasons why advertisements which exploit the above mentioned factors are most effective on the psychological and the subconscious level based on human experience and knowledge about the world at large, yet with the idea that imagination would help a lot in the process of comprehension.

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¹⁴⁴ See N. Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: Edward Arnold, (1995), pp. 103-104.

¹⁴⁵ For 'practices' we accept Jensen's interpretation: 'meaningful events, or (...) forms of social actions which are recontextualised as meaningful in specific contexts' (see K. B. Jensen, *The Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications, (1995), p. 65.