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IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE
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THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF PRESS ADVERTISEMENTS: THE PROBLEM-SOLVING SUPERSTRUCTURE.

Ramiro Durán

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the study of the means employed by advertisers to communicate with their audience. The main purpose of this article is to give an adequate analysis of the way in which advertisements select, organize and display the information they try to communicate in order to persuade their target addressee.

The advertising message is a subject of studies in different disciplines. Apart from *copywriters*¹ themselves, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists and semioticians are concerned with the analysis of the different factors involved in this particular mass medium. Linguists have always played an important role in this field. In the beginning, they were mainly committed to the analysis of the particular use of the language in the advertising text. Nowadays, linguistic disciplines such as Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics are concerned not only with the study of the language of advertising but also with the analysis of the main elements that condition the emission of the advertising message: i.e. the different functions of the elements that play a role in this particular kind of communication, the special relationship between the sender of the message and his audience, the different methods that are used in order to succeed in persuading the addressee, etc.

Before beginning to develop the core of our article, we should mention two different advertising techniques² commonly used by copywriters, because this distinction is extremely relevant to define the scope of our study. The first advertising technique we are going to refer to is known as *hard-sell* and it has been used from the very beginnings of the advertising phenomenon. Hard-sell advertisements rely on an explicit proposal: through

¹ In advertising terms, texts of ads are called copies and the writers of these texts are called copywriters.

² Guy Cook (1992: 10) considers that this is the most usual distinction, though he also mentions the following ones: reason - tickle, short copy - long copy, slow drip - sudden burst.

a direct appeal to the addressee the advertisement presents the solutions offered by a concrete product in order to solve a clearly defined problem: "My prototype of a hard-sell ad involves a man in a suit, standing in front of a pile of carpets, talking loudly and directly to the camera about low cost, limited availability and guaranteed reliability." (Cook 1992: 10)

The second advertising technique, known as *soft-sell*, is a relative modern one³ and instead of presenting the product with a direct appeal to the addressee, it chooses to modify the disposition of the audience to the product in an indirect way: instead of placing the advertised product in its own context, showing its qualities and its main function, copywriters try to relate it with certain values that the addressee perceives as "positive": elegance, beauty, tastefulness, success,... As Leech says: "It is often more practicable to represent a product in a way which will identify it with popular desires than to persuade the public into liking it." (1966: 27)

In this article we are going to deal with hard-sell advertisements because the message they send has a clearly defined structure. However, we have to say that Discourse Analysis can also provide a positive explanation for soft-sell advertisements. These advertisements have always been considered to be not susceptible to linguistic analysis due to the predominant role of the image over the written text, but Sperber and Wilson's *Relevance Theory* explains in a brilliant way the technique that soft-sell advertisements use to communicate successfully. Barbara Byrne (1992) and Keiko Tanaka (1994) revise the interpretation proposed by Williamson's semiotic model for the analysis of the communication process taking place in soft-sell advertisements (1978) and both of them show the exciting possibilities that Sperber and Wilson's theory offers for exploring the advertising message⁴.

We are also going to work exclusively with press advertisements and there is a reason for this: press advertisements do not extend in time and do

³ Vance Packard studied in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1st ed. 1957) the emergence of the cult of the "brand image" in American advertising.

⁴ Barbara Byrne's study argues that "Relevance Theory is an ideal tool for analyzing the effectiveness of communication through the creative linguistic style of advertising, which is geared to a large target audience often widely scattered." (1992: 5) Keiko Tanaka's main purpose is to "give an adequate analysis of the language of written advertising (...)" and to explain how communication occurs between the advertiser and the audience." (1994: xi)

not make use of the combined effect of sound and picture. The adverts we are going to discuss in this article were taken from the following magazines: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker* and the tabloid *News of the World*.

This paper will be divided into three sections that refer to the three main issues that concern us here. They will also describe the process we will follow in this research work:

- I - Traditional framework of press advertisements
- II - The problem-solving superstructure and its applications to direct response advertisements.
- III - Relevance Theory and the semantic structure of press advertisements.

I - Traditional framework of press advertisements

I shall begin this article with a revision of the traditional framework of the structure of press advertisements. In order to carry out this analysis, we will start from a piece of research that can be considered as the point of departure for the study of the language of advertising in English-speaking countries. We are referring to the book *English in Advertising. A Linguistic Study of Advertising in Great Britain* written by Geoffrey N. Leech (1966). In this book, three main parts are identified in the structure of press advertisements:

- HEADLINE (Illustration)
- BODY COPY
- SIGNATURE LINE

Leech distinguishes these three components by paying exclusive attention to their function and their layout. That is to say that this framework has been conceived with two objectives in mind: to explain the layout of press advertisements on the page and, secondly, to examine the main purpose of each of these parts.

A brief analysis of the typical layout of press advertisements indicates the following facts. The headline is highlighted by its preferential position on the page and by its size and print face. Usually, it is followed by an illustration. Under the headline and the illustration we find the body copy, which is the longest part of the advertisement. The body copy is usually printed in a standard print face. The signature line comes at the very

bottom of the advertisement, detached from the body copy and, as well as the head-line, uses a size and a print face that can be clearly perceived by the addressee.

The layout of the different parts is completely conditioned by the functions that they fulfil. The aim of the headline is to seize the interest of the addressee, the body copy explains the persuasive arguments attributed to the product and the signature line acts as a reminder of the most interesting part of the message: usually, the name of the advertised product. It also helps to round off the message, making communication easier.

We confirm, in this way, that the traditional framework in the structuring of press advertisements lends itself for the purpose of examining both the function and the layout of press advertisements, but is that division in headline, body copy and signature line equally valid in the study of the semantic structuring of press advertisements? In order to answer this question we shall focus on the analysis of different headlines, trying to check whether there is a common semantic content in this part of Leech's framework. The following analysis will show its variety.

The headline may limit itself to presenting the new product (in the following example, a new car): *Introducing the new Accord*. Sometimes, it presents the new product and highlights its main feature:

- *Introducing the tire that comes with a 35,000 \$ stamp of approval*
- *The new Canon N.P. 125: the small heavyweight*
- *Buick Lesabre. The most trouble free car built in America*

Some headlines just emphasize the most relevant feature of the product. For example, the headline for the new portable computers by Toshiba says: *The portability dimension*. The advert for the new camera by Olympus with a built-in flash specially designed to solve the "red eye" problem says: *Flash of genius*. The headline may also work as a summary of the issues explained in the body copy: *Lose weight on Hilton Head Island*. A similar example is the headline used by the Tobacco Advisory Council to defend their right to advertise cigarettes: *Cigarette advertising doesn't make non-smokers smoke. It helps make millions of smokers switch brands*.

Some headlines raise a problem that may occur if the advertised product is not used. Here we can read what we will hear if we try to telephone Russia with a phonecard that is not AT&T: *I'm sorry, sir. To call Moscow you'll have to use AT&T*.

Headlines are often used to make a distinction between the advertised product and other products on the market: *Some cars talk. This one listens*. Sometimes, headlines play with our expectations. Let us examine the following one: *British Petroleum helps to refine the world's most valuable resource*.

The previous headline refers to an oil company and it says that this company helps to refine the world's most valuable resource. Which is "the world's most valuable resource"? This particular context may lead us to think of the natural resources used by this kind of company as energy: coal, gas, petroleum-based products, and so on. Our expectations will be subsequently frustrated by the body copy when it explains that those natural resources refer to young people: *British Petroleum helps to refine young people (the world's most valuable resource) with its backing of educational projects*.

The aim of this brief analysis is not to show the most common contents in press advertising headlines. We simply want to show their diversity. We have proved that the semantic contents of the headlines are different and that it is not possible to find a common semantic component in them⁵. In conclusion, we have to say that the traditional framework proposed by Leech is valid for the purpose of examining the organization of press advertisements by paying exclusive attention to their function and layout, but this framework is not valid for examining the semantic structure of press advertisements.

II - The problem-solving superstructure and its applications to direct response advertisements.

At this stage of our research, we have a clear objective in mind: to look for a global textual structure that will help us to unveil the real organization of the semantic content that is typical of press advertisements. Disciplines such as Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics will help us to reach our objective.

Teun Van Dijk, an eminent researcher in the topic of global text structures, puts forward his theories about textual structures in his book *Macrostructures: an Interdisciplinary Study of Global Structures in*

⁵ Due to the structural coherence of advertisements, the semantic content of the headline will condition the content of the body copy and the signature line.

Discourse, Interaction and Cognition (1980). He distinguishes two kinds of global text structures: *macrostructures* and *superstructures*.

The innate ability of the speakers to differentiate (both at an implicit and at an explicit level) between local structures and global structures is one of Van Dijk's main arguments:

On the one hand they speak of the 'details' of what was said, on the other hand they use such notions as theme, topic, gist, upshot, or point to characterize the discourse, or larger fragments of it, as a whole. Thus, words and sentences are seen as the parts of the discourse, and the theme or topic is seen as a property of the 'whole'. When people talk about such a theme or topic, at the same time they imply that details of the discourse are disregarded or abstracted from this account at a more general level: 'I don't remember exactly what he said, but the upshot (his point) was...' At the same time these notions intuitively associate with that of relevance or importance: the point is the more relevant, important, central, prominent, or crucial aspect of what was said. (1980: 5)

These semantic global structures that organize local text structures and that are reflected, on the intuitive level, in the speaker's use of words such as "theme", "topic" "gist" will be called macrostructures. Starting from the same methodological principles, Van Dijk distinguishes a second text structure:

Besides these semantic global structures we also use terms to denote global structures of discourse and conversation that have a more schematic nature. In that case it is not the global meaning but rather a global schema that is involved, a schema that may be used to order or to assign other structures to the global meaning of the discourse. Notions such as outline, construction, order, and buildup are used in such cases. (1980: 5)

As we can see, apart from macrostructures, there is a different kind of global structure that works as a framework to help to put the text in order. This schematic global structure is called superstructure and, according to Van Dijk, it can be found in the narrative structure of a story, the

argumentative structure of a lecture, or the specific schematic ordering of a psychological paper.

Although concepts such as macrostructure and superstructure are relatively new, Van Dijk points out that similar concepts have been used in literary criticism: the literary notion of topic is similar to the concept of macrostructure and the literary idea of plot resembles the concept of superstructure.

In this article, we try to explain how advertisements organize their semantic information in order to fulfil their persuasive function. Consistently, the global text structure that concerns us here is Van Dijk's superstructure and the first general problem we have to tackle refers to the existence of superstructures in advertising texts: "Although many kinds of discourse have conventional schematic forms, it is not obvious that all discourses have such fixed superstructures." (Van Dijk 1980: 109) Van Dijk distinguishes between texts that have a fixed superstructure (church rituals, scientific papers, legal documents,...) and texts that do not seem to have any kind of fixed form (personal letters, modern poems, advertisements,...) After having examined different advertisements, Van Dijk reaches the following conclusion:

Advertisements may have nearly any form, and the importance of certain propositions is therefore not controlled by a conventional schema but rather by the pragmatic and sociocultural functions of the text directly. (...) The assignment of global meaning is geared toward this pragmatic pattern of practical argumentation: X is good, so buy/use X. (126: 1980)

We accept that the main purpose of the advertising message is to achieve the following pattern of argumentation: *X is good, so buy/use X*. We also believe that the "global content" of advertisements can be reduced to that of trying to persuade the addressee to accept the argument. However, we consider that this pattern of argumentation does not rule out the possible use of a superstructure to support it.

One of the most effective ways to illustrate the efficiency of the two propositions in Van Dijk's pragmatic pattern of practical argumentation is to "build" a situation where the need for a product (or service) is felt as essential in order to solve a specific problem. It is common for the

advertising message to resort with that aim to a superstructure that reinforces the macroproposition *X is good so buy/use X*. This superstructure exists in most traditional advertisements: we are referring to the problem-solving superstructure, which is composed of four main parts: the situation, the problem, the solution and the evaluation.

The situation explains the circumstances in which we find ourselves in a concrete moment. This situation gives way to a well-defined problem for the addressee. The problem is followed by a solution, given by the advertised product. The evaluation shows the beneficial effects of the product and invites the addressee to buy it.

Different linguists have been concerned with the study of the problem-solving superstructure⁶. In *Rhetoric of Everyday English Texts* (1984), Michael P. Jordan deals with this textual superstructure in a general way, highlighting its presence in most everyday English texts. In her book *Discourse and Language Learning: A relational Approach to Syllabus Design* (1985) Winifred Crombie emphasizes the following idea: superstructures should be used when producing a methodology for teaching a foreign language. Her approach to syllabus design is largely based on Discourse Analysis principles and in chapter four (titled *The functional patterning of discourse*) she distinguishes between *discourse relations* which are semantic relations whose domain extends over the limits of the sentence, and *discourse elements*:

Texts are divisible into discourse elements in terms of the way in which their parts function to convey various types or categories of information. Each discourse element is classified in terms of the communicative function which it performs in relation to the discourse as a whole. One discourse element (e.g. Problem) combines with another discourse element (e.g. Solution) to produce a discourse relation (Problem-Solution). The patterning of elements in a discourse is described as the discourse macro-pattern⁷. The macro-patterning of a text (that is, its overall

⁶ There are terminological differences when referring to this text structure. M.P. Jordan (1984) refers to Van Dijk's *superstructure* as *metastructure*. On the other hand, Winifred Crombie uses the term *macropattern* to refer to this same concept. In this paper, we will always use the terminology proposed by Van Dijk.

⁷ Crombie's concept of *macro-pattern* is equivalent to Van Dijk's concept of *macrostructure*.

discourse composition) is determined simply by listing, in the order in which they occur, each of the discourse elements. (1985: 58)

Crombie believes that the problem-solving superstructure is probably the most common one. She identifies some *general semantic relations*⁸ among the different parts of the superstructure:

- 1 - Concession-contradiction: this contrastive relation usually occurs between the situation and the problem.
- 2 - Result-reason: the solution and the problem are usually linked by this *general causative* relation.
- 3 - Grounds-conclusion: this normally occurs between the solution and the evaluation. It is also a *general causative* relation.

Let us now examine an advertisement in which we can clearly see the four different parts that constitute the problem-solving superstructure. The advertised product is a *wonder product*: an ionizer that is supposed to clean up the air in places where it is dirty.

This advertisement is composed of three parts: the headline, that tries to capture the interest of the addressee: *Clean up your space, make it pleasant and healthful, with RODELLEX PLUG-IN IONIZER only 34'95 \$*, the body copy (accompanied by a black and white illustration of the product) that persuasively explains the capabilities attributed to the product, and in the bottom left hand corner the signature line, which reminds us of the name and the address of the company that is offering this product.

This advert belongs to an advertising category that is called direct response advertising. In Shimp's book *Promotion Management and Marketing Communication* (1993) three main features are distinguished in this kind of ad:

- 1 - The advertisement makes a direct offer to the addressee.

⁸ Crombie explains the concept of general semantic relations in the following way: "when we communicate with one another through language, we do not do so simply by means of individual words or clauses or even of individual sentences. We communicate by means of coherent stretches of interrelated clauses and sentences, the meaning of each of which can be fully understood only in relation to the context (both linguistic and non-linguistic) in which it occurs." (1985: 21)

- 2 - The advertisement gives the addressee all the information needed in order to make a decision.
- 3 - The advertisement provides either a cutout coupon or a telephone number to facilitate an easy reply.

If we examine its body copy, we can clearly see the four different parts of the problem-solving superstructure:

Situation - At home or at the office, human activity and crowded conditions make it almost inevitable that the air we breathe is dirty, stuffy, full of stale smoke, cooking odors, pollens and pollutants.

Problem - It is unpleasant, debilitating, and detrimental to your health.

Solution - You can end all that with the RODELLEX IONIZER. Plug the unit into any 110 volt outlet. Within seconds, the ionizer will generate millions and millions of negative ions. These ions work like little "magnets". They attract and neutralize minute smoke, dust, dirt, odor and pollen particles. You won't have to breathe them any more. They get trapped inside the unit and restore the air to healthy freshness.

Evaluation - Feel better, breathe easier, and enjoy a more pleasant and healthy environment. Clean up your space and get the Rodellex Ionizer today.

One of the special features of direct response advertisements is that they display in the written text the four different parts of the problem-solving superstructure. This superstructure works as a schema that is completely independent of the kind of advertised product: the superstructure that direct response advertisements use is the same, even though the advertised products are completely different.

However, not every advertisement displays the problem-solving superstructure in such an obvious way. One of the main features of this text structure is its great malleability: its components may appear in a different order, sometimes the very situation is the real problem, we can often infer the evaluation from the solution, some parts of the superstructure may even be avoided, etc. Nonetheless, we have to say that when direct response advertisements send their message to the addressee, they always rely

(explicitly or implicitly) on the different elements of the problem-solving superstructure.

These elements have their own characteristics. The situation refers to a continuous period of time and not to a concrete point in time, it has a generic nature and it tends to come in initial position. The problem is essentially defined by its own negative nature while the solution is defined by the novelty and the positiveness of its content. The evaluation is characterized by its perlocutive function indicated either by the use of the imperative or by the use of indirect commands.

The four parts of this superstructure are complementary and they interact with each other. The problem always refers to an element that appears in the situation and in order to be considered as such, it needs to be followed by a solution (or an explicit attempt at a solution). Obviously, the solution needs the existence of an either real or fictional problem to perform the set task. The evaluation reinforces the validity of the solution and acts as a closure of the message.

We have chosen to study direct response advertisements because this kind of ad is the prototype of hard-sell technique. As Shimp says, they always have an immediate clear purpose in mind:

When an advertiser of inexpensive apparels runs an ad in the PARADE supplement to the Sunday newspaper announcing the availability of three pairs of slacks for a total price of \$29.95, the purpose is plain and simple: to sell tons of slacks. The purpose is not to create brand awareness or to enhance the company's image; rather, the objective is for thousands of consumers to place an order within the next week or so. (1993: 278)

They do not use soft-sell techniques because their only interest is to persuade the addressee to order the product as soon as possible. In conclusion, direct response advertisements prove the compatibility of Van Dijk's pattern with the problem-solving superstructure. Even though the main purpose of the advertising message is to achieve the following pattern of practical argumentation: *X is good, so buy/use X*, this fact does not rule out the possible use of a superstructure to support it.

III - Relevance Theory and the semantic structure of press advertisements

The usefulness of the problem-solving superstructure in the study of press advertisements does not end with the analysis of direct response advertising. This superstructure can also be considered to be responsible for organizing the semantic content of traditional hard-sell advertisements, though usually it is not as easy to perceive as in direct response advertisements. Nowadays, advertisements tend to send a message whose first objective is to attract the attention of the addressee. In order to do this, copywriters try to find messages that are exciting, surprising, innovative, shocking, etc. Even traditional advertisements tend to put the emphasis on the different devices used to attract and retain the attention of the addressee and they set aside the factual and informative elements of the product (the qualities of the product, its usefulness, its price, its guarantee, etc.) This approach goes against the presentation of the advertised product in its own context and that is why we do not find the four parts of the problem-solving superstructure explicitly displayed in most current press advertisements. How can we find them? Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory will be particularly helpful for our purpose.

In her book *Relevance Theory and the Language of Advertising* (1992) Barbara Byrne argues that Relevance Theory is an ideal tool for analyzing the effectiveness of communication through the creative linguistic style of advertising. Her study highlights the important relationship between the new information that the advertisement sends to the reader/hearer and the context of the addressee (*cognitive environment*) when engaging in communication. The cognitive environment of the hearer is formed by his/her personal experiences, beliefs, talent, personal circumstances, historical context, status, etc. and the addressee will place the new information he receives precisely there. If the addressee considers that the new information is not going to modify his cognitive environment, he is not going to make the necessary effort to interpret the message and its implications:

As with other types of communicated messages, advertising can only be relevant to the hearer when it interacts with existing information in his cognitive environment to produce contextual effects. (Byrne 34: 1992)

Let us follow this perspective in the analysis of an advertisement for a nutritional product for babies. We can all remember Nestlé's traditional

press adverts for baby food. There are only two elements in them: an illustration and the name of the advertised product. In the illustration we see a healthy and happy baby hugging a jar of Nestlé baby-food. The only text in this message is the name of the brand of this nutritional product.

At first sight, this advert doesn't seem to use the problem-solving superstructure, but if we re-examine it with Relevance Theory in mind, we will discover the four parts of the problem-solving superstructure:

Implicit situation - People who look after babies

Implicit problem - The feeding of children: babies don't eat products they dislike but they need a healthy diet

Solution - Nestlé baby-food

Evaluation - With Nestlé, feeding is not a problem. The baby is happy, strong and healthy and does not cause problems while eating

If we apply Relevance Theory to the analysis of this advert, we can conclude that the problem-solving superstructure exists in the communicative process conceived by the copywriter. The situation and the problem are not explicitly presented (contemporary advertising messages tend to avoid the explicit presentation of the problem) but the problem-solving superstructure exists because both elements are part of the cognitive environment of the addressee. The interaction between the explicit content of the message and the cognitive context of the addressee will produce communication. As we can see, the problem-solving superstructure also has a role to play in the analysis of traditional advertisements.

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