GIVING MEANINGS TO THE ADVERTISING MESSAGE – HETEROGENEITY OF INTERPRETATION AND HOMOGENEITY OF THE INTERPRETIVE MATRIX OF INTERPRETERS

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The subjects of this research project are the interpretations of selected advertising messages. The main aim of this work is to discover ways of reading the advertising messages in the context of the common semantic field of their receivers. It is worth noting that despite the fact that such messages are always accompanied by certain intentions and motives of their creators (broadcasters) – they are not the object of authors’ interests in this particular text. The object of interest is the key role played by the interpretations of the advertising text made by its receivers. They are viewed from the perspective of common cultural ground of members of community the interpreters come from. In the opinion of the authors, cultural community significantly determines the approach of interpreters towards the advertising text, and also determines its final interpretation. This means that the interpreters of advertising messages are seen here as a specific interpretive society, actively participating in the culture, as well as having similar cultural habitus. Interpretations carried out by its members form a multilayer network of culture, spoken in different languages which provides instruments for subsequent interpretations. According to Richard Rorty, it is possible to define a common measure (rationality) reflecting the conditions that have led to the creation of a specific culture text. Neo-pragmatist approach to the interpretation is combined with communitarian perspective that draws attention to the importance of social traditions and communities in shaping people’s beliefs, opinions, evaluations or judgments, being a basis for all the interpretive ventures. Patterns created by these communities serve as a kind of protective buffer against unbridled hyper-interpretation, defining culturally constructed tolerance limit for interpretation. The advertising text, which is the subject of our interest, is therefore treated here as a special kind of cultural text in which interpreters find relations with the world around them, and also with other texts creating their cultural reality (such as media reports, television, print, Internet or more complex cultural texts connected with history, tradition and well-established archetypes). It is worth noting that this way of interpreting the advertising text draws its inspiration from cultural reality, but at the same time it creates meanings which become clear and understandable for users of the given cultural resource.

Keywords: Interpretations, Advertising message, Heterogeneity, Homogeneity.

Introduction

The starting point of the research plan is an attempt to identify culturally determined context in which people interpret texts/advertising messages. Therefore, the right thing to start with would be to explain the
underlying theoretical orientations adopted by the authors, being the basis for the analysis of gathered empirical material which consists of students’ interpretations of selected texts/advertising messages. It should be noted that while speaking of advertising messages, the authors mean their broad understanding, as a representation of meaning of culture, consisting not only of verbal language but also of meanings transmitted through non-verbal language (the language of images, signs, colors, shapes, sounds, etc.) This is due to the fact that contemporary philosophy of interpretation recognizes the text widely, as a cultural/social text, including each character, each significant object that contains possible readable meaning.

**Interpretation – The Theoretical Basis of the Research Project**

Since the analysis consists of interpretations of respondents, the theory and the basic term of interpretation adopted by the authors should be explained, as they seem to be very ambiguous notions, backed up by a long philosophical tradition. In lexical terms, to interpret means to obtain and explain the meaning of the text, or to assign some kind of significance to it compare: Skorupka (1968).

In the first approach, we are sent back to the modernist tradition, according to which the structure of the text and words that form the text, as well as the sentences and their interaction reveal the author’s true intention that is treated as equivalent to the true meaning of the text, see: Schlink (1993). As one can see, the neo-positivist approach leads to such an analysis of the issue of reading comprehension that finds its solution in terms of truth and falsehood. In this context, interpretation is the art of reaching the real meaning of communication.

The second approach draws a broader perspective of text analysis in terms of its indeterminate construction by the reader. The source of this tradition should be looked for in structuralism which had a significant impact on contemporary semiology. It treats the understanding of the text as a kind of inquiry which is to examine the components of the text as something more than the sum of its elements, their interrelationships and their functioning. Thus, the whole consists of form (structure), and the meaning (the dynamics of symbols) - see: Sziklay (1987), wherein the latter indicates the importance of culturally constructed meaning of symbols the text operates with, for the final result of the interpretation process. In this context, structuralism made an important contribution into the studies of interpretation process by drawing attention to “determining the process of cognition through mental structures, forms somehow applied to the object of cognition”-see: Kruk (1998). It therefore directs attention towards this aspect of cognition that became the focal point of phenomenological approach of interpreter who “intentionally relates” to the text – see: Husserl (1974) and hermeneutical approach to reading comprehension that is read repeatedly in successive rotations of hermeneutic circle- see: Heidegger (1994). Their most important task is the orientation of interpretation process on the interpreter and his/her cultural background called by hermeneutics the historicity of the process of interpretation, that is its rootedness in a particular culture and its semantic resources. Hermeneutic tradition, thanks to such notions as superstition, tradition and historicity calls into question the Enlightenment claims to truth and objectivity of reading cultural texts.

Similar conclusions were drawn by neo-pragmatism, represented by Richard Rorty, who exposes the circular nature of the process of understanding, but at the same time gives it a different meaning, considering the fact that there cannot be grasped any distinction between “the accurate representation” and “effective action”: “the concept of “effective action” cannot be eliminated in favor of “accurate representation”. It is rather an understanding of the mode of action that determines what we consider as elements than its “rational reconstruction” out of elements determines that it is “eligible”- see Rorty (1994). Therefore, in Rorty’s understanding, the way of thinking about the interpreter changes – his/her main existential task is no longer reflection of the world, as indicated by the Platonic-positivist tradition, but giving meaning to the world in accordance with its own interests. Whereas understanding relies on uncovering measures common for different discourses, and in order to do it we need to reject the mirror of nature theory or cumulative nature of knowledge. The description of ways of knowing does not mean creating accurate performances in an objective and neutral space but it is a description of conditions that led to a specific shape of the exact picture, see: Rorty (1994). In his polemic with Umberto Eco, Rorty
defends the theory that the text is an autonomous creation, updated by the reader during subsequent readouts, and not a subject built in the process of interpretation. While it is true that meanings are generated by the reader, he/she does not create the text but attributes the meanings to the text according to his/her needs and objectives which constitute the context of the process of understanding, see: Rorty (1996). In Eco’s terms, in the communication chain running from the sender to the receiver, the signal is converted into the message, and its decoding requires not only knowledge of the code but also determination of the meaning of the text according to this code. Unlike Eco, Rorty draws his attention to the cultural code that has to be administered for the text to be able to speak, but he agrees with Eco that the message has the semantic/ideological meaning- see: Eco (1996), which is interpreted in accordance with the expectations and interests of different groups of receivers. This thread of analysis is developed in Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism. He builds an emancipatory program of constructing critical/deconstructive competencies that allow people to oppose the dictatorship of an authoritative description of reality, see: Derrida (1992). Returning to the question of interpretation, it should be noted like Eco did that the meaning of the text is the result of three components: the intention of the text, the author’s intentions and the intentions of the reader. While the first two prospects remain outside of the current field of authors’ interest, a key prospect here is the intention of the reader. Eco understands it as a range of the reader’s competences that can add to the text something that was not there originally, but in the authors’ understanding this aspect of interpretation rather expresses the intention conditioned by the reader’s facilities, consisting of intellectual matrices assimilated in the socialization process (like knowledge patterns, patterns of valuations and interpretations). These patterns, according to the intuition of Pierre Bourdieu, represent the derivative of social order, in context of which the specific templates of thinking are produced, see: Bourdieu (2005). Therefore, it should be emphasized that ways of interpreting the text/advertising messages which are the main interest of the authors are treated as being connected to the tools of thinking constructed socially and being available in a given culture. The importance of analyzing this issue seems to increase, especially in the context of growing interference of mass culture into the process of building human identity. If we assume that the texts of this culture are carriers of identity patterns, it becomes clear that an effort must be made to recognize cultural tools which are used by the given culture, and to recognize interpretive matrices that have been collected in the semantic field of culture because of the fact that they largely determine what and how we are able to understand.

To sum up, one could say that while interpreting the text of culture (in this case a text of advertising message) people have a multilayer substrate consisting of: subjective experience, individual sensitivity and other characteristics, features and dispositions, individual (though culturally constructed) tastes, preferences and canons, and cultural interpretive matrices constructed by given community. Therefore, interpretations that are the object of the studies will be analyzed in the intersubjective perspective relating to both individual dispositions and cultural competences of receivers/interpreters, compare: Wodak &Krzyżanowski (2011).

A Combination of Heterogeneity of Interpretation and Homogeneity of Interpretive Matrices of Interpreters – Analysis of Test Results

Results of research presented in this article are part of a wider project, connected with the faculty carried out at the University of Gdańsk, on Recognition of “hidden messages” in the world around us and dealing with them. Hence the analyzed data focus only on exposure of selected parts of the project carried out with the students, concerning the interpretation of sex shop window which referred to the celebrations of Saint Valentine’s Day on February 14, 2014. The task of the students/respondents was to look closely at the advertisement message and to fill out the survey with open questions.¹

¹ Selected fragment refers to the research carried out within the project in academic year 2014/15. The reason of the research was the picture taken by the student Dominika Prósinsowska-Zajadło that caused a heated discussion among
The first task of the students was to specify and describe all items in the photo and to assign meanings to them. In the context of this task, the students pointed out the figures of: two women: nurse/doctor and patient/bride; the disabled/sick; man/mannequin; items: wheelchair, white veil, stand for knives, knives, white clothes, band/cover on eyes, stethoscope, drip, blood, hearts, rope, Christmas tree lights, drip rack, elegant gloves, mannequins, nursing headband, laryngological lamp, and two colors: white and red. The following meanings have been assigned to the mentioned figures: unhappy and sad women, whores, cheap chicks, promiscuous girls, dressed up prostitutes, women from porn movies, etc. Students indicated a significant fact that the male figure is missing in the window, which they read as a manifestation of sexism. They asked themselves: Are men immune to love? Don’t they suffer? Don’t men tend to be disabled?

Respondents notice that the woman/bride sitting in the wheelchair took quite an ambiguous/provocative pose, she has bare thighs, which, in their opinion, does not fit properly in the presented context, and at the same time it vulgarizes it. What does not fit is also a general mood because, as noticed by the respondents, “a bride should be happy, cheerful, pleased, in love”. However, the woman in the picture is rather associated with sadness, resignation, depression and unhealthy, “sickly” and “sore”.

students and at the same time encouraged the authors to deeper analysis of the issue. 37 students were invited to participate in the research, using the “snowball” method.

Students answered the questions: *What exactly can you see in the presented photo? Highlight each of the elements that you notice (name everything you see: people, objects, colors, etc.) What do they mean to you? What relationship can you see between a verbal and visual record? What does such combination mean to you?*

Giving meanings is related to interpretation that determines how things are recognized and understood. Meanings can be individual, personal, as well as collective and cultural. In the process of socialization, people usually acquire meanings common to given community, expressed through language and its terms, compare Morreale S.P., Spitzberg B.H., Barge J.K., (2007).
eroticism. As a result, the message turns out to be unreliable and inconclusive to the receivers. Its inconsistency is emphasized mainly by two images incompatible to each other, compiling symbols of virtue, innocence with symbols of lust and promiscuity. Therefore, it is not surprising that this character evokes a series of ambivalent associations. Some observers associate it with someone who is sick, disabled or is a victim of a heartbreak, while others tend to associate it rather with characters from porn or erotic movies, believing that it only plays a specific role in the show. Yet one more kind of doubts is evoked by another figure from the sex shop window, often referred to as a woman with stethoscope, a doctor or a nurse. Respondents often have a problem with its exact/unequivocal setting in a specific role. It is most often associated with bringing assistance, first aid or rescue. On the other hand, in this message they recognize a series of inconsistencies, for example long gloves (usually associated with elegant outfit, assigned to great celebrations, balls) which clearly do not fit with the other elements and props, and at the same time they destroy/question the clarity/transparency of the message. Some see the blood on her apron, others say that her calves are bathed in blood as if she “had just participated in the rescue operation”, she looks as if she “was right after a medical procedure”. Some point out that the woman looks: frightened, surprised, thoughtful, tired, confused. The most controversial figure proves to be the one lying on the floor. In the opinion of majority of respondents, it cannot be simply determined whether it is a man or a woman, therefore it is most often referred to as a doll, a dummy, sex doll, phantom, mannequin, etc. Some respondents break the perception of such a scheme and assign specific attributes of gender to the figure. The statements of respondents indicate that this figure is most commonly associated with the suffering, indisposition, illness, dying, accidents, surgery, medical treatment, etc. The statements clearly highlight two basic yet common lines of interpretation, as evidenced by indicated elements of particular figures’ costumes, associated with typical sequences/templates of meanings, for example white veil-wedding-youth-happiness; or a stethoscope-doctor-nurse-care-disease-an accident. All the elements that break these strings/templates are interpreted as inconsistency, breach of conventionality or dissonance.

Among the items mentioned, the greatest potential for interpretation turned out to be hidden in the stand for knives in the form of a man pierced by blades. Students ascribed him various meanings: a wounded man, a dying or murdered man, or even a woman after abortion: “(...) On the floor lies a sore woman in a pool of blood, and next to it you can see a figure resembling a child who has been pierced with a knife – it makes me think about an abortion”.

In case of the objects, as well as in interpretation of figures, common and interrelated meanings are revealed: knife in the context of the presence of a nurse/doctor very often means a murder or crime in the eyes of respondents.

The colors predominant in the advertising message, like red, are associated with sexuality, eroticism, desire, love, blood, boudoir, sometimes (though much less frequently) with vehemence, aggression, violence and in extreme cases, even with crime and murders. In contrast to red color which is described quite one-dimensionally, white is associated in two ways. On the one hand, respondents associate it with sterility, hospital, disease, feebleness, lack of energy, and on the other hand with innocence, impeccability, chastity, virginity, purity. In the opinion of many respondents, using white color and the corresponding props (white veil, white tights and white apron) are in contradiction with other elements of the message, and above all do not fit in the formula of sex shops. The most representative example is a white veil around the bride/woman’s head which is a cultural symbol of chastity and purity.

Therefore, respondents again evoke associations typical for the given cultural context (white-innocence- virtue; red- eroticism- sexuality, libido) and again show dissonance resulting from tearing typical lines of interpretation.

It should also be noted that although all respondents describe the same visual message, some of the interpretations differ significantly from one another; for example, some associate the element of exhibition more with innocence, others with debauchery. It seems that this is due to the connection between the interpretation and the aspect that respondents consider dominant in this message. It is therefore difficult to talk about heterogeneity of interpretation due to the use of one of the two lines of interpretation dominant throughout the whole empirical material. Everyone uses similar interpretive
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patterns: *white color means innocence, the position of women with parted legs means promiscuity and provocation*. This means the presence of certain scripts\(^4\) in interpretation that are common to users of a given cultural context and represent a kind of semantic base for individual interpretation. Their role also involves providing members of given community with patterns of behavior, actions and communicating with each other.\(^5\)

Another task of respondents was to interpret the verbal message of the window display and to seek for its correlation with the visual message, which found expression in the question: *what relations can you see between the verbal record and the image? What does this relation mean to you?* While answering these questions respondents were extremely consistent and already at the denotative level of the message they perceived a clear discrepancy and they stressed the accompanying cognitive dissonance that results from the compilation of terms: sick and love. Respondents interpret this comparison as an unjustified treatment binding love with suffering, indisposition, sickness, disability, blindness, misfortune, infirmity, deficit, pain, etc. This is reflected in the following statement: “such a message indicates that it is better not to fall in love since love is a disease, disability, it makes us blind and handicapped.” The vast majority of respondents opposes such an antinomy/incongruence of notions, treating it as a kind of semantic misuse.

The respondents believe that the combination of words: love and disease is not appropriate for the further reason that it contains a hidden message *that love is a restriction of freedom, slavery, dependence on others, being sentenced for care and assistance of others, lack of autonomy, commitment to others, incapacitation*, etc. Respondents point out that love is here synonymous with disability, while the latter is shown as illness and addiction to others. A message about love is contrary, in the opinion of respondents, to the culturally shaped perception of love as a spiritual/emotional closeness, fulfillment, togetherness, unity, happiness, joy, connection of two souls, spiritual and physical fusion of people. As they note, the word “love” takes here primarily pejorative connotations, its captivating character is emphasized, as well as accompanying pressure, tightness, pain, suffering, oppression, coercion, violence (e.g. feet bound with a rope, a bandage). Thanks to these semantic procedures typical meanings associated with love are excluded, such as freewill, autonomous and conscious choice. Some respondents interpret the message in a very radical way, as a denial of existence of love, as we can see in the statement quoted below:

“(…..) The display’s creators tell us that true love does not exist. Such an exhibition around St Valentine’s Day is not accidental, in my opinion (after all, St Valentine is a patron of mentally ill and insane). And since true love does not exist and is only a figment of our ailing imagination, maybe we are not able to satisfy our eternal desires for real intimacy, commitment and fulfillment of true love? Therefore, maybe it is not worth pursuing something that does not exist and believing that desire can be fulfilled in a human manner? Maybe, instead, you should buy a few gadgets in a sex shop and satisfy your needs differently? (…) Well, then I’m probably crazy because I’ve been in a happy relationship for several years and I do not feel enslaved at all (…)”.

\(^4\) The script is a kind of scenario that refers to individual, collective and cultural patterns. There are several types of scripts: individual, family, cultural, etc. The latter refers to patterns adopted in a given society, based on the expressed or unexpressed beliefs that are considered true by the majority of community members. Such scripts tend to be passed on as a kind of cultural heritage from generation to generation. Psychologists also speak about scripts behavior which are generally controlled by a particular script, and not by rational premises and justification. It should be noted that although the scripts are triggered by various events, they usually end in a specific way, defined in a given scenario, compare, Berne (1998).

As we can see from the previous analysis, the respondents use combinations of meanings typical for their cultural context: love – goodness – beauty – happiness. Hence their opposition to its compilation with illness and its meanings.

In the context of general acceptance of the window display, students most often pointed to its provocative tone, risky and unauthorized collision of meanings. They justified their judgement primarily with the breach and cracks in characteristic for our culture sequences/templates of meanings that arouse in them a sense of dissonance and inadequacy, and sometimes anxiety associated with the precipitation of the typical patterns of thinking about recognized objects. The only example of unusual (in the context of collected empirical material) interpretation is the one in which students argue that both verbal as well as graphic message of the sex shop window is some kind of opposition against stereotypes established in our culture, resisting discrimination against people with disabilities and concealing their sexual needs. In their view, sexuality of disabled people is a taboo, uncomfortable and embarrassing topic in our culture. An analyzed window display, according to this group of respondents, is an expression of opposition against discriminatory practices. This is reflected in the quoted statement: “(...) Disabled people have the same sexual needs as people without disabilities. However, they are often neglected. It is shown in the figure of a woman in a wheelchair who shows that she is ready to love, but being confined to a wheelchair (attached to it with a rope) cannot carry out her desires. Society covered her eyes to isolate her from the world. It’s visible that the woman suffers and is miserable (...)”

Conclusion

The analysis of empirical material clearly shows the intertwining of the two title contexts: heterogeneity of individual interpretation and homogeneity of cultural background from which the interpreters derive ideas. Heterogeneity documents a number of interpretations cited in the analysis of the studies results which show that people looking at the same things see/perceive something completely different. This is evident in the interpretations concerning the stand for knives or the figure lying on the floor. This can be explained by the fact that perception is a complex process connected with registering certain events, objects occurring in the external environment which consists not only of their sensual/sensory perception but also their understanding and ability to recognize/identify them in a specific situational and cultural context, and then verbalize/characterize these experiences and giving them specific meanings. Equally important for the interpretation process are therefore individual characteristics and experiences of human beings which affect the perception of their world. These individual experiences, individual stories of life, and with them the individual interpretations of the world are, however, a kind of cultural resource, of which a common semantic field is woven. Therefore, a cultural habitus a man is equipped with in the process of socialization has a strong impact on its perception, and also on interpretation which always takes place in a specific social context. We see this clearly in the perspective of perception and interpretation by the respondents of a white veil around the bride’s head which is a cultural symbol of innocence, purity, virginity or one-dimensional characteristics of love to which respondents gave only positive meanings, mainly because they are constructed as such in our cultural consciousness. These interpretations point to the homogeneity of cultural background, determining certain visions of the world through interpreters, compare: Zimbardo (1999), Morreale S.P., Spitzberg B.H., Barge J.K., (2007). The impact of cultural habitus is also evident in the tendency of respondents to organize their indexation in a binary way, for example good-evil, beauty-ugliness, moral-immoral, innocent-promiscuous. Cultural habitus thus becomes a kind of ‘anchor’ that strengthens in man certain values, standards and even preferences – being an important point of reference and support while making individual interpretations.

References


**Other Sources**
