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The active role of the recipient in decoding an advertisement respectively a poster

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Abstract

From a structural point of view, an advertisement can be analysed on textual and visual level. The texts as well as the pictures as a sign have a denotative and connotative meaning. Furthermore, there are communication models like the Shannon–Weaver model and semiotic methods like Roland Barthes and John Fiske theories, which not only analyse the structure and the forwarded messages but also bring the role of the recipient to the fore, because an error in decoding would lead to failure in an intended reaction. In this paper, cultural parameters will be illustrated with the help of chosen German and Turkish advertisements.

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1. Introduction

Before tying the advertisements with the communication models in this work, some definitions of advertisement, which can be conferred on a communication model, will be made. Behrens defines advertisement as “*an intentional and non-coercive type of influencing, which should encourage people to meet the advertising objectives*”, Haseloff as “*a public, targeted and planned communication of information, motivation, persuasion and the manipulation of a defined group of potential recruits for the benefit of the market potential of a product or a company's image*”, Schweiger/Schrattenecker as “*a communicative influence process with the help of (mass) communication mediums in various media, which has the aim of changing the addressees market-related attitudes and behaviours in line with*

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corporate goals”, (Behrens, 1985). Based on these definitions, the intentions of advertising are specified as an influence/ persuasion, manipulation, and as a target. For the purpose of promoting the success of communication is self-evident.

2. Approach of Communication Science and Semiotics

After the foregoing definitions, the question of how the process of a communication in a broad sense is structured arises, because even the choice of terms can indicate from which perspective it was considered. John Fiske, who occupied himself in his cultural studies with the question what communication is, tried to accent two different starting points. The first, which sees communication not only as a transfer of information, but also as an influence on behaviour, rates this process as a failed communication and checks for its causes. The second sees the communication as a production and altering of meanings and analyses its role within a culture (Fiske in Ivan, 2003, p.16). A mistake, which occurs during a communication, is to be explained by the cultural difference of sender and receiver. The methodical approach here is based on the semiotics. For the first starting point of Fiske the Shannon-Weaver Model, which was used as a messaging medium in times of war, depicts a simple build-up of communication:

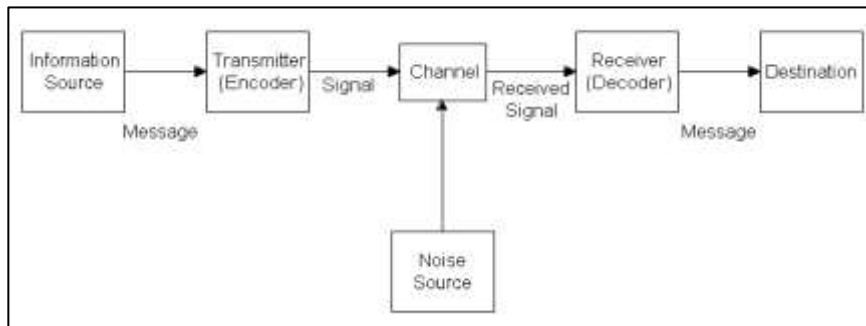


Fig1. Shannon-Weaver Model

In consideration of an advertisement, the information source is perceived as an advertisement giver, which sends an agency a message for them to create a commercial. The sender uses the code (its character set) and sends the signal (commercial) by way of a medium (television). During this process, sources of interference can affect the communication and reception. The information has reached its goal when the message is received. It is obvious here that the communication science calls for a reciprocal understanding process between partners on a common basis (character set). The code offers the sender a choice to use the relevant characters from the linguistic register. But Fiske questions the semantic aspect here, because a meaning problem is indeed easy to locate, but not the decoding, because the cultural aspect is not defined in this model (Fiske in Ivan, 2003, p.23). However a communication in broad sense is based simply on coding and decoding and calls for a reciprocal acting instead of “*giving*” and “*taking*” (Maletzke, 1998, p.38) The verb “*to communicate*”, after Wahrig from Latin *communicare* “*do together, unite*” (Wahrig, 1972, p.2097), expresses an intention and a goal. In a sentence like e.g. “Switch off the lights!” the sender can either switch of the lights or show no reaction, because he might not want to react due to personal reasons or he might not know the language and the necessary linguistic codes are missing. These data give a feedback within a communication. The interpersonal communication shows us, that sender and receiver play an active role. In an advertisement, e.g. a placard the sender is passive while the receiver gets an active role and shows interest as soon as the medium reaches its eye, or in other words,

the role is assigned to him. It is remarkable that the attention period for a placard is only 2 seconds on average (Temath, 2011, p.28) in which the receiver determines its participation in this process.

After Hall, who also gives the receiver a role, the position of reading is divided in three groups: the hegemonic-dominant reading, in which the dominating ideology is reproduced, the negotiated reading, in which the depiction is partly accepted and partly refused by the reader, and the oppositional reading, in which the denotative and connotative message is exposed utterly by the recipient (Dağtaş, 2003:28). Stuart Hall and John Fiske criticize the conceptual notion of mass communication analysis, which determines the process of communication as a transfer from A to B (Fiske 2003:61) and because of its linearity of direction on the level of communication and the lack of a structural connection of the different moments it is being criticized (Hall, 200, p.105).

The semiotic approach after Fiske uses different terms, which are necessary in such studies (Fiske 2003:61): Sign, signification, icon, index, denotation and connotation. Through the introduction of Semiotics it becomes clear, that the communication studies, which at the beginning did not deal with personal, but with mass communication, later comprehend a complex interpersonal communication, which cannot describe the background of an interaction (Maletzke, 1998, p.18). The linguistic sign, which is a human product, is defined by De Saussure as something in mind that is really existent and which has two sides. These two constituent parts (of sound image and concept) are closely connected together and accord each other (De Saussure, 2001, p.78). The sound image equals the signifier and the concept equals the signified. The sign approach of De Saussure is more in relation to other signs than to the reference object. The signified is a mental image, which is equal for every individual in a related linguistic community (Fiske, 2003, p.67).

The sign definition of Peirce says that the sign itself is a sign and every sign stands for an object independent from it (the human): But it can only be a sign of this object, when this object has the nature of a sign or idea, because the sign does not affect the object, but it is affected by it (Simon, 1989, p.47). It is alike an idea and an idea is a sign process after Peirce. The signified in the model of Peirce affects the sign and not vice versa. This results the sense, that only sign affects sign and by this interaction determination is created. From this, it results that a sign without an interpretant does not make any sense and is dependent from the context. The context, in which they stand to the other signs, determines and relates them to what he refers to. The following figures show De Saussure's and Peirce's sign models comparative and shows the fundamental difference of their accentuation. The physical attribute (the sound image) of the sign with the concept, which is equal for all individuals of the same linguistic community, has after De Saussure, whose social perspective was affected by Durkheim's sociologic works, indeed a priority:

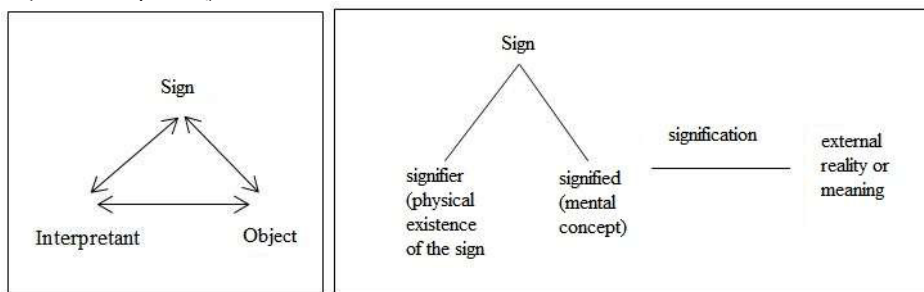


Fig 2. (a) Peirce's sign model; (b) Saussure's sign model (Fiske, 2003, p.64/67)

The form of expression of a sign is based on the arbitrariness of a sign, for which De Saussure gives the example of the sound image sister, which is through no inner relation tied to the concept sister (De Saussure 2001, p.79). The arbitrary character of a sign results from the signification. A signification can get different signifiers within a culture or subsystem: While for mathematicians the word “*fraction*” represents a part of a whole or any number of equal parts, for medics it is a medical condition in which there is a break in the continuity of the bone (Klausnitzer, 2001, p.13). Beyond that in a close sense, it can be said that De Saussure understands the sign under the relation between signifier and signified. In Peirce triadic approach there is an interaction between sign, object and Interpretant. The sign or a *Representamen* that stands for something else – like an image, a footprint, the red traffic light – is widened out in Peirce and sees the interpreter central for semiosis, which is on one side some kind of a thought of the interpreter, which is triggered by the sign and on the other side is a sign itself (Kjørup, 2009, p.18).

After Müller, Peirce concept of law is not only “*situated*” but also beyond this also “*historic*” and dynamic. For Peirce even the simple triadic relation of the sign has a processive character. The content of the sign is not simply given law but is the result of an interpretation process (Müller, 1999, p.214). Here Müller differs in Peirce direct and dynamic Interpretant, which firstly builds a relation and acts later: First the sign provokes hypotheses, which stimulate acts of our inner sense (Müller, 1999, p.215). The categorisation of the object related sign by Peirce can be depicted like following:

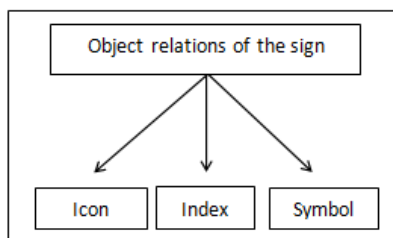


Fig 3. The set-up of the sign after Peirce (Cruse, 2005, p.373)

There are three components, icon, index and symbol of the object related sign in the foregoing figure. The term symbol is after Peirce linked neither to the signifier nor to the general meaning of the symbol as depiction of the image. Peirce approach of the symbol is based on a conventionality, which is related to a certain object through general rules and equals the De Saussure definition with the title “Arbitrariness of the Sign”. Furthermore, this approach accents that the arbitrary signs or symbols compose a big part of the linguistic interaction.

The next object related sign is index. Index is used as orientation and anchorage in time and space. It is related to the deictic, the specific linguistic unit on persons, things, time and space in context. Pronouns like that, adverbs like here and today and its composites belong to this. Peirce also points to non-lingual indices, e.g. the weathercock, which shows the wind direction in direct dependency on the wind, or smoke which indicates a fire (Cruse, 2005, p.374).

The icon in contrast is not based on plain conventionality. The sign is connected to the object by similarity, like the words in frame of the onomatopoeia. The iconic sign is not arbitrary. The icon of Peirce can be divided in three sub groups: The image, diagrams and the metaphor. The image equals the colloquial expectations of the icon. There is a simple, sensual perceptible relation. The visual part of photography, which builds up a complete and consistent relation and arranges the onomatopoeia as the

strongest example for the iconic variant in linguistic field, can be named as an example. In the second sub category of icon there is the diagram. In non-lingual field there are traffic signs e.g. a no passing zone, pictograms e.g. a smoking ban, maps, colour pattern, scores etc. (Cruse, 2005, p.374)

Umberto Eco on the contrary to De Saussure and Peirce designs no sign model. His theory is mainly influenced by Peirce and adds culture to his theory of signs, which was not attended by his forerunners. One can enthusiastically see Eco's theory in newer literature as follows: *"The all-embracing concept of signs by Charles Sanders Peirce is followed by university professor and author Umberto Eco, who popularized semiotics and put it in the public eye like no other."* (Körber, 2009, p.115). *"The relation between culture and communication is put as follows by Eco: Culture as a whole has to be analysed as a communication phenomenon; and all aspects of a culture can be analysed as contends of communication."* (Eco 2002, p.33). In his first hypothesis Eco states that culture is a communication. But if you think of the communication without the culture, then communication is just factorised in its mechanisms. The culture is ascribed on the communication, but does advert that the material live is not to be ascribed on mental processes. So other processes must be seen under these points of view after Eco: *"[...] and that objects, attitudes, relations of production and values function socially because they obey the semiotic laws."* (cf. Eco, p.36). In the second hypothesis whole culture phenomena are determined as subjects of communication. The view of culture at the same time depicts the unity of culture, which analyses all aspects of culture in his meanings. In the second definition Eco's hypothesis states: *"[...] that the meaning systems (understood as systems of cultural size and units) build structures (semantic fields and axes), which obey the same law like significant forms"* (Eco, 2002, p.36). According to this statement, a sign is valued in relation to other signs, just as De Saussure stated. Both hypotheses point to each other. Each element of a culture can become a semiotic phenomenon. The laws which are determined for communication are also valid for culture. An interpretation of the cultural phenomena and accentuation of an interaction in the process of communication was also mentioned by Fiske and Hall. John Fiske, who criticized De Saussure due to the omission of the socio cultural relations of the receiver, points at Roland Barthes, who did not only accent the signification on the level of denotation and connotation but also the interaction between sign and receiver by means of a demountable model. In a photography the *"what"* is the denotative and the *"how"* is the connotative meaning (Fiske, 2003, p.115). For example, the denotation of a term is mostly all that, what can be subsumed under the term, while under connotation the content meaning, i.e. the associations or evaluations of a denoting sign are understood. (Kjørup, 2009, p.17). In relation to the advertisement the connotation is used to reconstruct specific, cultural coded meanings of a sign (Temath, 2011, p.68), which are also understood as medium, which are *"[...] embossed as unquestionable knowledge, language and culture horizon in individuals"* (Hall in Dağtaş, 2003, p.27). In the following figures the mythic or ideological way of thinking on the connotative iconographic level after Barthes, who got popular especially with his advertisements, is depicted. Its sum of the connotative links builds the component spectrum of the cultural unity or rather the totality of the Semen:

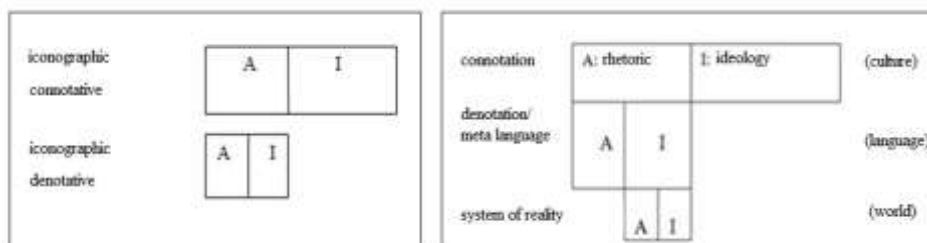


Fig 4. (a) The iconographic level after Roland Barthes (Brügger/Vigso, 2008, p.62), (b) Rhetoric and ideology after Barthes (Barthes in Er, 2011, p.54)

The iconographic message of a picture is, if you watch the categorization signifier/signified of the denotative to the signifier of the connotative in Fig. 4 (a), inseparable read. From Barthes differing of the denotative and connotative level it can be derived that the decoding of the connotation of the visual message is dependent on the knowledge and cognition of the Interpretant (or the receiver), because the ideology, as you can see in Fig. 4(b), is readable from the term side of the picture. Saussure's theory is modified here and even if the expression substance consists neither of sounds nor of lettering, but instead of this consists of colours and forms, the codes, with whom help we can "read" a picture, can be considered like a linguistic structure, which has a structure with regards to content and an expression structure (Brügger/Vigso, 2008, p.64).

3. Methodical Approach and Analysis of the Advertisements and Placards

In this part of the article the semiotic aspects, which were mentioned in the theoretic introduction will be analysed by means of some German and Turkish advertisements or placards. In the analysis the content of the advertisements and placards will be divided in visual and verbal signs, which stand in a mutual relationship. The visual signs, e.g. icon, symbol and index, and verbal signs, e.g. slogan, text, brand name and the likes, are the linguistic attributes. The denotative message, the rest message of the connotation, can be disregarded for this reason. The knowledge of the receiver, which is of great importance for the advertising success and must be activated to a certain extent, is categorized under the connotative picture message. If applicable it is aimed to reveal the ideology or power structure, which is transferred by a meta-language. During the analytic approach or reading the role which is assigned to the receiver and in which he must create meanings will be unsheathed. Disregarding a communication model, in which sender and receiver are in a synchronic interaction, the decoding is the receivers work in an advertisement and the sender does not take part in this process. Furthermore, the analysis of the advertisements and placards needs an oppositional way of reading, because the structure must be deconstructed in the whole.

In the following, there are two German and two Turkish advertisements under analysis. The advertisements will not be compared in regard to the formal differences and sameness, but the function which is affected by the cultural specifics will be described.



Fig 5. (a) Advertisement Mainz – City of Science (www.stroer.de), (b) BMW 7 Series (www.stroer.de)

The advertisement 5 (a) with its title "A City is Hungry for Science" can be seen as verbal and the slogan "E=MC²" as verbal and visual sign, which is depicted as an iconic visual out of pretzel. If you look closer the receiver can realize that formula "E=MC²" which symbolizes the theory of relativity, the myth of Einstein, the disclosure of the secret of the world (Brune, 2003, p.76), was replaced by the

licence number of the city of Mainz “MZ”. The message of the verbal sign must support the connotative message of the iconographic connotative, in which, apart from the pretzel as a food requirement, the necessity of scientific agitation is accented.

In advertisement (5b) on the other hand there is a relatively long decoding process. The picture as an iconographic sign consists of a couple of objects, which have indexical sign characters in their wholes: The black car, a sailing boat in stormy waters and the dark clouds forebode bad conditions. Symbolic signs in the placard are depicted relatively small. The textual message gives the receiver the message that he can move forward with the “New 7 Series” safely even under bad conditions. If the receiver decomposes the iconographic connotative message, it points to an “elitist pleasure” with its three objects (boat, car and beach) and states, that BMW is an elite car among the other cars. This myth identifies the ideology of its class.



Fig 6. (a) Audi advertisement (www.reklamtoplulugu.com), (b) Istanbul-Capital of Culture (www.mediakat.org)

In the denotative iconographic picture of the advertisements (6a) the ring on the little finger and the tasbeeh connotes a masculine form of expression, which ignores the cultural high-grade ideology that comes from the rhetoric of the advertising text “Equipment, you will never find in an Audi!” and is replaced by it. The connotative message of the verbal sign points to the rich equipment of the brand, which is sufficient for the consumer without any individual accessories. Furthermore, the advertisement affects the attitude of the consumer through its meta-language. To restate this: through the iconic picture, in which a cultural natured live style is depicted, a specific social rank is addressed to build a necessary communication with its receivers.

From the advertisement (6b) at first sight, one can see an iconic picture of Istanbul. The receiver, who is familiar with Istanbul, would recognise a mistake in the linear arrangement of the visual signs: The Galata Tower is one of the historic buildings of Istanbul, but was set in place of the Maiden's Tower. With a link-up of the textual message, a connotative message is transferred by a visual illusion to call the attention to the rediscovering of Istanbul. In order that the receiver does not overlook this connotation on the figurative level, the picture of the Galata Tower was put big in the foreground. From the advertising message it can be extracted that the Galata Tower does not serve as a plain sign (signifier/signified), but its role as a symbolic sign in a Capital of Culture should be considered as well.

4. Conclusive Reflection

The connotative messages in Turkish and German placards, which diverge due to cultural differences, on the other hand prove that the advertiser can either send international or country specific messages. Country specific picture messages require a culture specific interpretation. These attributes, which were tried to be depicted through examples, can be accented in regard to semiotics and didactics to point to the difference of the cultural knowledge. Starting from the semiotic aspect, which compared to the communication scientific base is put foreground in structure decomposition because of the necessary

cultural knowledge, it can be accented that Peirce theory of signs, Barthes analysis approach and the cultural studies of Hall and Fiske provide the necessary means. So i.e. a DaF (German as a Foreign Language)-Student or a German Philology Student can efficiently and effectively develop its theoretic basis knowledge through this praxis or test its connotative knowledge of the placard message as an active receiver.

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Figure Sources

Fig.1: <http://www.shkaminski.com/Classes/Handouts/Communication%20Models.htm>

Fig.5 (a): http://www.stroeer.de/2011_Januar.2011_januar.0.html

Fig.5 (b): http://www.stroeer.de/2009_September.2009_september.0.html

Fig.6 (a): <http://www.reklamtoplulugu.com/2010/11/audide-asla-bulamayacaginiz-aksesuarlar/>

Fig.6 (b): <http://www.mci.com.tr/yarismalar/kazananlarDetay.aspx?WinnerID=296&id=3&Year=2010>