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IMPLICATA IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS

SUMMARY OF
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Key words: print advertising, implicata, Relevance Theory, Paul Grice, Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson, cognitive effects, expert system, Exsys Corvid, pragmatics, presupposition, implicature, Great Britain, questionnaire, meaning, inference, ostensive-inferential communication.

Summary:

Advertising has long been the focus of research from multiple perspectives: cultural, sociological, economic, psychological, artistic and, our main area of interest, discursive and linguistic. Our research on advertising discourse is circumscribed within the domain of pragmatics, as the main tools that we will use to investigate advertising discourse are of pragmatic nature. According to the chosen domain of study, the research consists in revealing the mechanisms that lie at the foundation of implicata in British print advertisements.

Implicature is a term which was coined by Paul Grice to refer to the result of the pragmatic recovery of meaning through inference, in situations of communication where the explicit meaning of the speaker's utterance (*what is said*, in Grice's terms) is not enough to account for the speaker's communicative act. As for *implicata*, it is an umbrella term which groups all the phenomena of meaning recovery where pragmatic (sometimes combined with semantic) processes intervene.

Research Objectives

In order to achieve the expected goals, we have devised the following objectives which are subordinated to the main goal:

- studying the bulk of specialised literature in the fields of advertising discourse analysis and Gricean pragmatics, and consequently building up a database with information from different sources grouped according to essential topics;
- searching for British print advertisements on-line, in British magazines and newspapers;
- defining advertising discourse and presenting its main functions;
- distinguishing between the communicative functions of advertising discourse and its marketing functions;
- setting up a directory of specialised terminology which will be used in the research, together with their definitions (their acceptations in the research);

- analysing conceptually the different notions that are included in the category of implicata (presupposition, implicature etc.);
- researching the category of implicata from the comparative perspectives of (1) Paul Grice, and (2) Dan Sperber together with Deirdre Wilson;
- analysing several contemporary British print advertisements with the tools of investigation furnished by the two main theories that lie at the foundation of the research (Grice, and Sperber & Wilson).

Methodology

Our research method consists of reading in a critical-analytical way the bulk of the specialised literature in the field of the two theories mentioned above, choosing advertisements to be used as observation material according to clearly set criteria that we established prior to the study, and of applying some elements of the two reunited theories to the chosen advertisements.

The chosen advertisements are analysed with respect to the implicata that they convey, with the use of a special questionnaire devised by us. The questionnaire is meant to offer information on the most frequent implicata in a selection of five print advertisements, together with the cognitive effects that the advertisements might have had on their readers, and the readers' cognitions about specific topics before and after viewing the advertisements.

1 Advertising. Transdisciplinary Phenomenon

Chapter 1 studies the notion of advertising from the perspective of three sciences (marketing, consumer behaviour, discourse analysis), demonstrating that advertising is a phenomenon which exceeds the sphere of discourse and linguistics. Advertising is at the same time an essential promotion tool, a moulder of consumer behaviour, and a discursive technique resulting in a genre colony. Thus, each science has a distinct view upon advertising. On the other hand, the three sciences partly share and develop on the notion of advertising as communication, which acts as an interdisciplinary linker. Each science elaborates on the categories of advertising communication: the target, the advertised product or service, the medium, the function, its substance, the support, the author, the audience.

2 Theoretical Framework

Chapter 2 first tries to answer the question “How many types of meaning are there?”. The investigation into the realm of meaning starts by contrasting two functional uses of the verb *to mean*, which results in a distinction between natural and non-natural meaning. Then, non-natural meaning is broken down into further constituents, revealing such elements of meaning as what is said and what is implicated. A parallel discussion on explicit and implicit will provide further insights into elements of meaning whose analysis is a *sine qua non* condition for the study of implicata. The notions of what is said and what is implicated are divided into further types of meaning, among which utterer’s meaning. Utterer’s meaning serves as starting point to explain the notion of speaker meaning, from which Grice suggests that sentence meaning is derived. The theoretical discussion is accompanied by a practical demonstration of the process how sentence meaning is derived from speaker meaning in the field of advertising.

After deciding that speaker meaning, our object of study, is a type of non-natural meaning, part of what is also implicated, also referred to as utterer’s meaning, Chapter 2 considers two means for quantifying speaker meaning: intentions (on the part of the speaker) and inference (on the part of the listener). Sperber and Wilson’s informative and communicative intentions are under scrutiny, with reference to print advertising slogans. Afterwards, it is time for the process of inference to be analysed: inference is presented as a human feature by definition, whereby an individual forms interpretive hypotheses on the basis of an input (the utterance) with the use of a central processing device operating with elimination rules.

The discussion on meaning and on what can quantify it enables a more generic talk on what communication is. More specifically, the principles that are supposed to govern communication are analysed, first Grice’s cooperative principle and conversational maxims, and then Sperber and Wilsons principles of relevance. It is then pointed out that relevance is the ideal ration between cognitive effects and processing effort, and the different types of cognitive effects (strengthening, contradiction, and contextual implication) are explained in detail. It is also highlighted that one cannot speak of relevance in abstracto, but only as relevance to an individual. The process of communication is redefined according to the tenets of Relevance Theory, and an inferential model of communication is explained and adapted to a selected print advertisement. According to Sperber and Wilson, it is inappropriate to speak about a mutual or shared context, but rather about a mutual cognitive environment, where assumptions are mutually manifest to the communication participants, and where it is also mutually manifest that the same assumptions are shared by participants. Within this framework, the speaker engages in an act of ostensive-inferential communication to alter cognitive environments, while the audience's role is to construct and process relevant assumptions. After explaining the notion of ostensive-inferential communication in depth, the chapter ends in an analysis of the relation between cognition and communication, as well as of all the stages that intervene in the process of understanding an utterance, with a special emphasis on how a selected print advertisement is understood by the audience.

3 Implicata-Generating Language Phenomena

Chapter 3 is interested in studying theoretically and practically two implicata generating phenomena, namely presupposition and implicature. The first half is allotted to an investigation of presupposition in print advertisements.

The chapter demonstrates the semantic and pragmatic nature of presupposition and, from the analysed definitions, it is concluded that presupposition is a propositional attitude of a participant to conversation by which he acts as if she were taking for granted some assumptions. Presupposition is also defined by contrast to implicature, as the assumptions carried by presuppositions are significantly stronger and thus cannot be cancelled in subsequent discourse.

As a result of its double-fold nature, it is necessary to enrich the existing apparatus for semantic analysis (which identifies several categories of *semantic* or *potential* presupposition) with the tools of Relevance Theory, so as to also highlight the pragmatic side of presupposition.

The practical analysis of presupposition in print advertisements belonging to two campaigns (Tesco's *Every little helps* and *The Wrinkly Billboards* in Scotland) concludes that advertising resorts to presupposition not so much as to use conventionalised ideas that will form the ground for the introduction of new information, as presupposition actually works in usual discourse, but in order to conventionalise some formulas that are part of its newly transmitted message. Moreover, advertisements disguise the conventionalisation of their own linguistic formulas under the guise of presupposition for the mere reason that what is presupposed is usually taken for granted in normal conversation.

The other half of Chapter 3 aims at differentiating implicature from presupposition and at making the reader aware of the seminal importance of implicature in any act of ostensive-inferential communication. It is established that pragmatics is indebted to Grice for the notion of implicature, who sees it as one or several propositions implicitly communicated via what is said. He considered implicature as identifiable when cooperative exchanges appear to violate one or several of the conversational maxims.

As opposed to Grice, Sperber and Wilson argue that the only thing that regulates communication, be it implicit or explicit, is the principle of relevance. When the explicit content of an utterance does not guarantee optimal relevance (sufficient cognitive effects at a reasonable processing cost), it is necessary for the addressee to look for relevance elsewhere, i.e. in the implicit content of the utterance. Sperber and Wilson plead for a different compartmentalisation of meaning into explicature and implicature, where inference is present in the recovery of explicature as well during the disambiguation and meaning enrichment processes. For them, implicature is an assumption which is more or less strongly communicated via the utterance.

Then the focus shifts to distinguishing different varieties within the category of implicature, namely implicated premises and implicated conclusions, as well as strong and weak implicatures. Afterwards, implicatures are analysed with respect to their characteristics, the most uncontroversial being their indeterminacy. Some ink is also shed on the feature of cancellability, with important consequences on the validity of the cancellability test on the identification of implicature.

An important sub-chapter is allotted to the presentation of the tools that can be used to identify implicature, from both Grice’s and Sperber and Wilson’s points of view. After an additional theoretical parenthesis on promises according to Austin and Searle, two print advertisements are analysed singling out the implicated promises and elaborating on the conditions that need to be met for the correct production of a promise.

4 Questionnaire and Results

Chapter 4 presents the applied side of the research, with the stages that were followed until the questionnaire was built with the help of an expert system, and applied on a number of British and Romanian English-speaking subjects.

The chapter explains in full detail the design of the questionnaire and exploits its results. Relevance Theory is present in the questionnaire at the level of the relevance-theoretic cognitive effect that it tested as basis for reconstructing advertising interpretations.

It is explained that the study actually comprised two questionnaires, used in two consecutive periods, with different purposes. The first was a paper-and-pencil semi-free questionnaire applied in the first stage of the research, and which enabled us to narrow the number of possible interpretations of five print advertisements to 3-4 interpretations for every advertisement. The second was an expert-system aided empirical questionnaire, applied in stage two of the research, which was meant to provide different types of results for every advertisement in the study, namely the interpretation that the respondent makes of the advertisement, the cognitive effect that the interpretation might have achieved on the respondent, as well as the subject's beliefs before and after viewing the advertisement.

Much of the chapter is allotted to the second questionnaire (of which screenshots can be viewed in the Appendix), with the building of the expert system along the syntactic forms used by the Exsys Corvid software. It is insisted on how it was established what problem needed to be solved by the expert system questionnaire, as well as all the phases of encoding the system, and the evaluation stage.

In the end, the results of the questionnaire for the first advertisement in the study are discussed in detail. Firstly, an analysis of interpretations according to the three variables identified in the advertisement about McDonald's singles out the most frequent interpretation for every variable. The three most frequent interpretations, by variable, in the order of the variables, are the following 3 assumptions:

(1) McDonald's is environmentally responsible.
(2) It is possible to turn cooking oil into fuel.
(3) McDonald's recycles it used cooking oil.

The analysis also enables conclusions about the most frequent cognitive effects of assumptions (1)-(3) above. Thus, for all three interpretations, strengthening effects are the most frequent, with a frequency ranging from 50% to more than 80%. Contrasting effects were also significant especially for assumption (3), where almost 40% of the respondents who chose that interpretation had their beliefs changed as a result of viewing the advertisement.

Then the perspective on the results shifts to a global view, which enabled conclusions about the most frequent interpretations overall, and the cognitive effects that they determined on the respondents. Thus, (2) and (3) above are by far the most frequent of all interpretations, accounting together for more than 50% of them all. As for the cognitive effects of the three most frequent interpretations, it is not surprising that they are first and foremost strengthening effects, but what is unusual however is that, for interpretation (1), which is the third most frequent interpretation, there is a significant percentage of contradiction effects (almost 40%), which proves the success of the advertisement in changing beliefs according to advertiser objectives.

5 Conclusions

The questionnaire enabled a percentage view of the most frequent interpretations for every advertisement in the study, which, once integrated into the interpretation process along the lines of Relevance Theory, leads to new conclusions about the ratio between the frequency of interpretations and the number of inferences necessary to make those interpretations.

The findings, at least for the three most frequent interpretations of advertisement 1 (McDonald's), suggest that there is a very strict inter-dependence between processing effort and the frequency of interpretations. The most frequent interpretation ("It is possible to turn cooking oil into fuel") is also the easiest to arrive at inferentially, as it is presupposed by the validity of the main assumption carried by the advertisement. It is followed closely by the interpretation "McDonald's recycles its used cooking oil". The interpretation, it could be argued, is the same as the explicature of the text of the advertisement, after reference assignment and enrichment.

There is a significant drop in frequency between the second and third ("McDonald's is environmentally responsible") most frequent interpretations: the frequency rate of the third interpretation is only two thirds of the second most frequent interpretation. This fall in percentage is coupled with a higher processing effort needed to arrive at the third interpretation.

The most important hypothesis which was validated is as follows: the more frequent an interpretation, the more strengthening effects it has. In other words, the most frequent interpretations have a significant percentage of strengthening effects as opposed to the other effects. In relevance-theoretic terms, the most frequent assumptions associated with an advertisement are the ones that raise the strength of the assumptions previously held by the subjects.

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