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SUMMARY

**THE CONCEPT OF *KAWAII* IN ADVERTISING DISCOURSE.
A CULTURAL-SEMIOTIC AND PRAGMATIC APPROACH**

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Keywords: Japanese advertising discourse, discourse analysis, advertising, educational poster, sociolinguistic strategies, advertising language, culture, cultural semiotics, cultural dimensions, pragmatics, Relevance Theory, ostensive-inferential stimuli, relevance, *kawaii*, *amae*.

The present study aims to analyze the connotations and meanings of the concept of *kawaii*¹ ('cute, adorable'), as reflected in Japanese print advertisements. The number of studies targeting advertising language and the media phenomenon in general is on the rise, therefore through this research I aim to contribute to the development of this field through a study on Japanese advertising discourse. The concept of *kawaii* has been the subject of study of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists in an attempt to understand the mentality (worldview) of the Japanese people. The analysis of pop culture elements, of which *kawaii* is part of, was not, until recently, an area of interest due to the fact that this kind of culture was considered inferior to high culture (classical arts and traditions), but the influence of this concept on culture and language, as well as on the way the Japanese (as members of the society) communicate and relate is significant.

I started from the following hypotheses:

- the way an advertising messages is interpreted depends on cultural conventions;
- the stimuli used by the advertiser guide the receiver towards a particular conclusion;
- the advertising message generally seeks to satisfy a wide range of "consumers of symbols"; in Japanese commercials, *kawaii* signs ('cute, adorable') play a key role, helping to overcome gender barriers and facilitate communication;
- in Japanese informative-educational posters the attention of the receiver is captured with the help of rhetorical figures, visual, linguistic and plastic signs meant to soften (e.g. animals, fantastic characters with an atypical appearance, etc.), affect words and expressions and also through the use of onomatopoeias, neologisms or pseudo-anglicisms (*wasei-eigo*).

Starting from a corpus of over 200 Japanese print advertisements, covering both commercial and social advertising (of public interest), I tried to highlight the main features of Japanese advertising discourse by focusing on the lexical, textual and stylistic features. Given the complex nature of this genre and the influence of culture on the way advertisements are

¹ 「可愛い」

constructed, I intended to explain the origins and evolution of the concept of *kawaii*, which seems to shape the Japanese sensibility and worldview since the second half of the last century.

The first significant scientific research on the concept of *kawaii* appeared in the late 20th century and developed only in the second decade of the 21st century. Among these, some of the most important studies are: Kinsella (1995) *Cute studies*; Riessland (1998), *Sweet Spots: The Use of Cuteness in Japanese Advertising*; Koga (2009), *Kawaii no teikoku* (The Empire of Kawaii); Sato (2009), *From Hello Kitty to Cod Roe Kewpie. A Postwar Cultural History of Cuteness in Japan*; Botz-Bornstein (2011), *The Cool-Kawaii: Afro-Japanese Aesthetics and New World Modernity*; Yano (2013), *Pink Globalization*, Okazaki & Johnson (2013), *Kawaii! : Japan's Culture of Cute Pink Globalization*; Dale (2016), *Cute studies: An emerging field*; Gn (2016), *A lovable metaphor: On the affect, language and design of cute*; Ohkura (ed., 2019), *Kawaii Engineering. Measurements, Evaluations, and Applications of Attractiveness*. Most of these studies focus on the global impact of "pink culture" (*kawaii*) and the Western view, or focus on its role in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Although the topic has gained more attention since 2000, researchers focus on describing the phenomenon in terms of cultural and / or social implications, but without including a practical application. For this reason, the purpose of this study is, in addition to analyzing the concept of *kawaii* in its complexity, to illustrate through concrete examples its functions and role in Japanese print advertisements (posters, leaflets, magazine covers, etc.).

The thesis is structured on four chapters, as follows: I. Concepts, theoretical and methodological framework, II. The concept of *kawaii* - origins and manifestations, III. Japanese advertising discourse and IV. Case studies.

The first chapter has a theoretical character, being focused on the terminology used in the study. It contains informations on the notions and concepts essential for the analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of semiotics and also for the analysis and interpretation of utterances. For this purpose I explained the importance of the principle of "minimal effort" (Relevance Theory), developed by Sperber & Wilson ([1986], 1996 , 2012). Starting from the idea that the viewer (target-audience) is likely to be convinced (persuaded) if using signs and symbols specific to the culture the viewer belongs to, I tried to explain the role of *kawaii* visual stimuli and affective language in Japanese advertisements. The cultural dimensions model developed by Hofstede (2001, 2003, 2010) was used to determine the fundamental values of the

society that influence the expectations and behavior of individuals. These dimensions look at the fundamental problems and struggles which all societies have to cope with and the correlation of the country scores highlight the defining characteristics, tendencies and predispositions of the members, thus reveal the cultural model. For the analysis of advertising discourse, cultural semiotics plays a key role in understanding how signs are used to represent the world in a specific cultural space, but I believe that without a pragmatic approach it would not be possible to explain how communication is achieved through advertising. Communication, however, implies, in addition to knowing the linguistic, non-linguistic and cultural code, the interpretation of the message and in this point the *stimuli* used play an important. Knowing the tendency of the speakers to pay attention to the most suggestive information, the advertiser will use in the advertisement particular *stimuli* to attract the viewer's attention and to maximize relevance. In this sense, *kawaii* signifiers facilitate communication, being a form of expression of the core values of the Japanese. *Kawaii* culture personalizes what consumerism has depersonalized, being a means to combat alienation (cf. Kinsella 1995). Starting from the idea that advertising interpretation cannot be reduced to a simple decoding process, I argued that inferential pragmatics complements the shortcomings of the code model of communication, by taking into account the intentions of the communicator and the role of (situational and, I would add, cultural) context.

The second chapter is dedicated to the origin and forms of expression of the concept of *kawaii* and begins with the presentation of the Japanese cultural model starting from two other essential concepts in Japanese culture, *aimai*² ('ambiguity') and *amae*³ ('voluntary dependence'). In subchapters 1.2.1. *The empty center theory* and 1.2.2. *Cultural memory and worldview*, we have shown that in Japanese language indirect expressions that support ambiguity are predominate, the speaker relying on the receiver's ability to "read between the lines" (*kūki o yomu*⁴) and to infer the rest of the information (*ichi o kiite, jū o shiru*⁵/ "learn one and infer ten"). We recognized this characteristic in traditional and modern cultural practices too, whose purpose and effect cannot be resumed to a singular significance. The concept of *kawaii* fits into this pattern because it involves expressing emotions, thoughts and experiences

² 「曖昧

³ 「甘え」

⁴ 「空気を読む」

⁵ 「一を聞いて十を知る」

in an indirect, ambiguous way, giving rise to various interpretations. Throughout the chapter I showed that it should be regarded as an "extension" of the other two concepts (*aimai*, *amae*), being a manifestation of the collectivist principles that define Japanese society and a way to maintain the harmony of the group (*wa*). In subchapter 2.4. *Kawaii representations*, I provided examples of *kawaii* visual and verbal expressions frequently used in advertisements in order to touch the viewer and facilitate communication. In the conclusion of this part I argued that through affect expressions and words attributed to "cute" characters with a special personality, atypical appearance and clumsy gestures the advertiser creates a positive atmosphere and the receiver is left with the impression that he/she belongs to the group.

In the next chapter, I discuss the first forms of advertising in Japan and focus on recurring symbols and themes in Japanese advertising. Using the estimated scores provided by the cultural dimensions and the observations made by Hofstede and de Mooji (2010: 92) according to which Japanese advertisements contain mostly symbols that induce a state of peace and comfort, I present the role and functions of *kawaii* mascots and that of affect words. In addition, I have shown that the large number of ambiguous assumptions and expressions such as '*deshō*' ('probably'), '*darō*' ('probably'), '*kamoshiremasen*' ('possibly') used in Japanese advertising indicate that in collectivist societies direct confrontations are not accepted and the members act accordingly in order to maintain the harmony of the group. Japanese cultural values also reflect in advertising discourse, perceived as "ritual" (cf. Hofstede 2010: 9). Since the second half of the 20th century, as a result of globalization and other changes, there has been a tendency to use more and more neologisms (*gairaigo*), combinations of Japanese words with Anglicisms to suggest novelty and exclusivity, as well as images with *kawaii* characters in order to diminish the feeling of alienation. In the advertising industry, efforts to eliminate risks are seen in the consistency of the actions taken and respect for tradition, both of which guarantee authenticity and quality. This case is illustrated perfectly by the policies of the companies Dentsu and Hakuhodo, which dominated the advertising market since the end of the 19th century and any other foreign companies could not implement major changes in their creative process (cf. Tungate 2013: 193). In this case, balance was maintained by "Japanizing" (not imitating!) foreign elements, a process that helps to avoid any aesthetic, cultural or communicative-linguistic conflict. Although conventionally the Japanese avoid expressing their true intentions and feelings (*honne*), often using only unanimously accepted opinions (*tatemaie*), in Japanese

advertisements are often used words and visual images with a strong emotional charge, which offer an escape from everyday life. Through the examples provided I have shown that this utopia is built with the help of *kawaii* characters and symbols, through childish language and behavior (reinforced on the basis of "*amae*" type of relationships) to release the "self" (*jibun*), but not in the Western sense of independence and defiance, but as a group-level freedom (see Doi 1981, Tanaka 2001). As in the case of other Japanese arts, advertising offers an alternative to the real world and aims to produce an emotion, an intense experience by extracting the Ego from the absurdity of life. Also in this chapter I discussed various rhetorical procedures (metaphor, personification, puns, onomatopoeias, irony) used in Japanese advertising, providing concrete examples. In another subchapter, I presented how these discourse figures are in a particular situation and in a given culture. Also, in order to show how cultural identity is constructed and transmitted through advertising, I analyzed some commercial and non-commercial advertisements. Based on these analyzes, I noticed that the adjective *utsukushii* ('beautiful') and traditional cultural elements are used, in most cases, to symbolize authentic Japanese beauty, whereas *kawaii* ('cute, adorable') and other derivatives to suggest modernity and freedom, but there are also cases in which they are used together to evoke a universe in which modernity and tradition intertwine harmoniously. On the same note, I tried to identify the linguistic specifics of Japanese advertisements and noticed that words and phrases from other languages are frequently used, but this tendency did not lead to the removal of native ones, but on the contrary, they often appear side by side in order to capture the attention and seduce the viewer.

In the last part of the third chapter I presented some possible solutions for solving the main problems that appear in the translation of Japanese advertising texts in Romanian language. If we admit that the role of the translator is to convey the essence of the text from the source to the target language, then, in the case of translation, it is necessary to take into account the particularities of the receiver and the cultural specificity. In the proposed study, the ambiguity caused by the absence of personal pronoun and plural ending, the overlapping of verb endings for the present-future tense, the use of final particles to express emotions, the abundance of onomatopoeias and mimetic words were the main obstacles.

In the last chapter, dedicated to case studies, I made a short comparative-contrastive study of informative-educational posters in Romania and Japan in order to highlight the fact that to capture the viewer's attention the advertiser appeals to the values and beliefs that define the

community. Starting from the estimated scores for the two societies provided by Hofstede's scale, I checked to see if the particularities and values identified by this model also reflect in advertising. In this first subchapter I chose to investigate only informative-educational posters because in this case there is no economic benefit, as a result this type of posters may reflect in a transparent way the values and norms of the society. The results indicated that the worldview, respectively the way in which social reality is represented and order is maintained, differs significantly, although both societies are considered collectivist and strongly focused on reducing uncertainties. The differences derive from the correlation of the estimated scores on the rest of the dimensions. Based on the analysis, I showed that in Japanese educational posters cultural values are suggested by affect words, vague expressions, allusions, anthropomorphization and puns which provoke humor and make the audience feel relaxed. Moreover, *kawaii* visual signs create a fantastic, utopian universe and bring the viewer closer, leaving the impression of absolute freedom, not compulsion, as happens in Romanian posters in which imperatives and images that suggest tension or fear are frequently used in order to maintain order.

From the corpus I selected and analyzed 30 posters created for different important transport companies in Japan such as Tokyo Metro, Keiō Corporation, Odakyū Bus or Hankyū and divided them into ten distinct categories:

1. "Pay attention!"
2. "Keep quiet!"
3. "Only take up the space you actually need!"
4. "Give up your seat to those in need!"
5. "Please refrain from applying make-up on public transport!"
6. "No eating and drinking on public transport!"
7. "Don't ride public transportation if you feel drunk!"
8. "Don't block entrances and exits!"
9. "Be careful not to disturb other passengers if you fall asleep on the train!"
10. "Wear a face mask!"

Based on the analysis made in this subchapter, I showed that the popularity of *kawaii* characters ('cute, adorable') is due to the possibility to indirectly express thoughts, feelings, attitudes. In this type of poster, affective language and anthropomorphization of the world

generate positive feelings and, implicitly, help to increase the degree of cooperation among citizens. *Kawaii* signs and childish language appeal to the individual's primary emotions and instincts and are used to encourage a responsible attitude and taking responsibility.

The main conclusions that emerge from the analysis are the following: in Japanese advertisements, the language of "cuteness" facilitates communication and helps to persuade the receiver by appealing to emotions. The analysis of the two types of print advertisements, commercial and non-commercial, showed that *kawaii* characters and language are a symbol of modernity, significantly contributing to the image of "cool" Japan abroad and locally, helping to maintain group harmony. Through these case studies, I have shown that *kawaii* characters and affect words and expressions instil in individuals a sense of security and a desire for cooperation, therefore are often used in advertising campaigns.

Regarding the peculiarities of Japanese advertising discourse, I noticed the following:

1. emotional/affect adjectives and nouns predominate, being used to stimulate people's fantasy;
2. neologisms (*gairaigo*), onomatopoeias and mimetic words are used to create an authentic atmosphere, suggest modernity and capture the viewer's attention;
3. colloquial words and phrases are used to create a friendly atmosphere (*uchi*) and to diminish communication barriers;
4. honorific (*sonkeigo*) and humble language (*kenjōgo*) is used to express respect towards the customer / citizen and usually these polite expressions are separated from the rest of the text by boxes or by using other fonts and colours;
5. *kango* (Sino-Japanese) words and phrases are used to suggest the seriousness of the problem and to make the message more official;
6. unique combinations of words;
7. vague expressions and words open to interpretation are preferred;
8. the most commonly used figures are personification, metaphor, puns and irony;
9. the text is often accompanied by suggestive *kawaii* ('adorable') images;
10. the message is addressed indirectly to the receiver.

The originality of this study lies in the proposed topic, the analysis of a key element of Japanese pop culture, *kawaii* ('cute, adorable'), as well as in the various theories and principles used to reveal the complexity of this particular discursive genre. Given that images are more

important than ever, the analysis of advertising discourse, which has the capacity to influence collective consciousness, is particularly important for broadening research perspectives in the field of language and culture. The ambiguity of the concept makes multiple interpretations possible, thus our analysis reveals only a part of its facets. Like a kaleidoscope, *kawaii* reflects Japanese culture and society in different lights and from different angles.

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