

COMMODIFIED RELATIONS (A SYSTEMIC-FUNCTIONAL AND MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE OF ADVERTISING)

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RESUMO: Textos multimodais tem sido cada vez mais utilizados nas últimas décadas, para permitir que os leitores tenham uma melhor visão do quadro todo. A presente análise, baseada na gramática sistêmico-funcional (GSF) e na gramática do design visual, busca apresentar uma investigação mais profunda, ainda que não exaustiva, do discurso publicitário.

ABSTRACT: Multimodal texts have become increasingly used in the last decades to give readers a better view of the whole picture. This analysis, based on the systemic-functional grammar (SFG) and the grammar of the visual design, attempts to present a deeper, yet not exhaustive, look into the discourse of advertising.

Just as knowledge of other languages can open new perspectives on one's own language, so a knowledge of other semiotic modes can open new perspectives on language (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, Preface).

Introduction

The quotation above shows the authors' argument in favor of multimodal ways of expressions, such as facial expressions, gestures, images, etc., for a better appropriation of the array of possibilities presented to subject while interpreting and/or representing the individual's views on the world and experiences. Saussure's theory of the signifier and signified has served as a foundation for a number of other linguists, such as Pierce and Barthes, for example, to take a step further in the investigation of language as a means to refer us "to the world of things, people and events outside language in the 'real' world" (HALL, 2010, 34).

Semiotics, the field of study known to connect signs and culture, has as its main argument the belief that "once cultural objects convey meaning and cultural practices depend on meaning, they must use signs, which leads to an analytical approach that makes use of Saussure's linguistic concepts" (HALL, 2010, 37). This makes us interpret signs on a wider realm of social ideology. We go beyond the text and its forms to search for the cultural aspects and social practices that foster the production of meaning. Hence, further

developments started to take into consideration ideological aspects — questions of power and social practices — underlying the ways people represented things and experiences. According to Hall, one of the main exponents of this system of representation is Michel Foucault, “who focused on the discursive practices as a form of representation instead of language” (HALL, 2010, 42). Foucault viewed discourse as a set of rules and practices regulating the use of language for the production of meaning, which took place at specific historical periods. Discourse to Foucault didn't only take a linguistic connotation, but, rather, involved language and practices.

This contextualized view of discourse makes its participants subject to the rules and practices that govern the context within which discourse and social practices are produced, in a dialectical relation where individuals determine and are determined by the social context. However, in order to be a member of such context the individuals “must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world and interpret it in similar ways” (HALL, 2010, 4). Then, it is essential that the codes and language that underlie these discursive situations be of everyone's understanding so that the representation of things and events may have the effect intended.

The Commodified Self

A typical context in which we identify the theoretical concepts discussed above is that of Advertising. Firstly, let's take the signifier/signified system. As with language, images also rely on the sign system to convey meaning. In the advertising industry, products are replaced by signs. Benwell & Stokoe state that:

Commodities and objects, rather like words, constitute a system of signs – a system that replaces values and classifications with needs and pleasures. The use value of objects is replaced by 'sign value': commodities achieve meaning, not from their utilitarian value, but from their relationship to a whole system of signs (BENWELL & STOKOE, 2006, 168).

Thus, it is crucial that the codes belonging in this context be understood and grasped by the target-public so that the advertisers' message may be effective enough to make consumers buy the product being advertised. Individuals' position as consumers is limited by the codes and rules shared by both sides, which make them passive social actors in the

system. Another strategy used is to present products as a solution to problems. More than just a simple item to be acquired, advertisers convince their public, through the right lexicogrammatical choices, that they have the solution to their problem, which, according to Benwell & Stokoe, “can be physical, emotional, or lifestyle” (BENWELL & STOKOE, 2006, 177). Secondly, let’s look at the advertiser-consumer relationships and how they contribute to the subject’s identity construction. Through a careful choice of words, advertisers make consumers feel they are special, being individually addressed. The techniques employed by advertisers to achieve this are:

- assertion
- implicature
- presupposition

In the first case, we find propositions stated about the reader in a direct and unmitigated way. Implicature, the second strategy used by advertisers, is the additional meaning that arises between the surface form of the utterance and its underlying intention, being inferred by the reader as a result of a particular language choice. Presupposition, according to the authors, is an even more powerful device, since it refers to meaning embedded in one part of the text that must be understood and accepted in order for the whole proposition to make sense. The power of implicature is that once it is rejected, so is the whole proposition. Finally, the authors argue that presupposition of a broader cultural kind is at work constantly in consumer advertising, serving to construct ideological discourses to be subscribed by the reader to make sense of the text. Whether individuals will give in to the desire of buying the product or not will determine their role in the social practice as active/passive actors.

In their book *Reading Images - The Grammar of The Visual Design*, Kress & Van Leeuwen defend that “the term ‘visual grammar’ refers to a social resource of a particular group, the implicit and explicit knowledge about this resource, and its usage in the practices of that group” (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 3). This grammar, they say, should range from oil painting to comic strips and scientific diagrams, in an effort to include all kinds of visual representations. We see this grammar, as well as the systemic-functional language (HALLIDAY & MATTHIESSEN, 2004) as instruments that come to reinforce the focus on

the social context and practices within which people are enabled to make sense of their experiences and outlook on the world. Both resources are contextually and culturally specific.

Set within the theoretical framework of social semiotics, Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar is about signs, or, as they rather put it "about sign-making" (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 6). Elements such as color, perspective and lines (signifiers) are used to create meanings (signified) in the making of signs. To sum it up, the authors see representation as a process in which someone (sign-maker) "represents any kind of object, material or semiotic, focusing on specific aspects whose relevance arises out of the individual's cultural, social and psychological background" (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 7).

Visual Representation and SFL

Kress and Van Leeuwen take a clear position consonant with Halliday's systemic-functional theory, by arguing that:

visual design performs three major functions: (a) ideational – representation of the inside and outside world; (b) interpersonal – enactment of social interactions as social relations, and (c) textual - a function that coherently binds together all the forms we use to represent our engagement in any activity, be it of interaction with others or the production of an advertisement (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 15).

Thus, we next brief the reader on the steps (chapters) developed by the authors in order to guide people in their analysis and interpretation of visual representations, which we use to interpret our advertisement in the present article.

Language and visual communication

In this step, Kress & Van Leeuwen look at the importance of the text-image relation as a meaning-making resource. While semioticians defend the dependence the meaning of images have on the verbal text, describing relations such as image-text where the text comes to extend or elaborate the image and vice-versa, the authors argue in favor of the view that:

language and visual communication can both be used to realize the 'same' fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, but each does

so by means of its specific forms, does so differently, and independently (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 19).

They say, then, that visual communication is coded, and that we need to share these codes in order to make sense of the images we analyze. Though image and text each has its different ways to represent culture, both are valid, however, with their respective limitations and possibilities.

Narratives representations: designing social actions

In this step, the visual image is depicted by means of elements that are crucial to our understanding of what is going on - the narrative. It is important to make out, for instance, the static/dynamic atmosphere in the picture, if it is conceptual or dramatic, with lots of action, its personal/impersonal character, and the location of its elements: symmetric/asymmetric, at/of (un)equal distance, size, etc. For instance, we have that the lines linking the elements, the ones to define the transaction taking place between them, are called vectors; participants, by their turn, are represented in terms of size, place in the composition, color saturation, contrast against the background, etc.

A systemic-functional description, for example, could grammatically present a picture where we would have subjects, *actors*, in charge of carrying out actions, verbs denoting the *processes* taking place, and the objects to which the action is directed, *goals*. On the other hand, representations could be analytically made, where participants would have the role of a *carrier* with an *attribute*. In these cases, they would not be *doing* something, but *fitting together* to compose a larger picture.

Processes can be either non-transactional, only one participant, or transactional, two participants – subject-object/beneficiary. Besides, they can also be unidirectional or bidirectional. If the vector is created by the glance of one or more of the represented participants, we have a reactional process, with reactors doing the action and the phenomena, those receiving the glance. A different kind of participants, circumstances, are those which are considered secondary, as they relate to the main participants not through vectors but other ways such as location (setting – which requires a contrast between background and

foreground), means (tools or other elements used by the doer of the action in the process), and accompaniment (the presence of other participants together with the actor or carrier).

Classificational Structures

This step defines the position of participants in relation to one another. Here, symmetric/asymmetric relations will determine who has the power and control of the situation. Representation, in this case, can be made by means of vertical/horizontal orientation. Analytical processes, for example, relate participants in terms of a part-whole structure. Here we have two participants: the *carrier* and the *attributes* possessed. Symbolic processes refer to what a participant means or is. If we have two participants then we have a symbolic attributive process. In cases where there is only one participant, the process is symbolic suggestive.

Representation and Interaction: the position of the viewer

Kress & Van Leeuwen state that “images involve two kinds of participants – the represented participants and the interactive participants” (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 114). The former refers to the places, people and things depicted, while the latter refers to the people who communicate through images, that is, producers and viewers. Furthermore, images show three types of relations considering the above participants:

- (i) relation between represented participants;
- (ii) relation between interactive and represented participants; and
- (iii) relation between interactive participants.

In the second case we have the interactive participants’ attitudes towards what is being represented; in the third case, the things interactive participants do to or for each other through images. Interactive participants usually don’t know one another, being absent from the image represented. Therefore, once the producer sets out on an advertising campaign, he has in mind what is called the ‘ideal’ audience (viewer or reader), who, as with the rules that govern the production of the advertisement itself, is subject to the social and contextual practices and codes.

As for the represented participants, they can be pictured looking directly at the viewer, in a position of demand, which creates a visual form of direct address, making the viewer feel special (as mentioned in the introduction) or responsible and guilty, depending on the message conveyed, or they can be totally oblivious to the viewer's gaze, making the latter play a role of an invisible onlooker. The represented participants are involved in their transaction, which happens independently of the viewer's participation, who is set up as a mere voyeur.

Another aspect that directly impacts the relation between the represented participants and the audience is the size of the frame and distance. These two aspects will determine, however limited by social context, how close or intimate the represented participants (including objects) are to the viewer. In a way, this will represent how socially familiar/unfamiliar the viewer feels towards the social relation/product being advertised. Finally, the position of the represented participants will determine the relations of power between them and also between them and the viewer.

According to Kress & Van Leeuwen, “angle also plays a very important role in the relation between participants” (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 140). Seen from a high angle, a represented participant enters into a relation in which the interactive participant (producer or viewer) has power over the former. From a low angle, then the relation between the interactive and represented participants is depicted as one in which the represented participant has power over the interactive participant. If, finally, the picture is at eye level, then the point of view is one of equality and there is no power difference involved.

Modality: models of reality

The authors also affirm that “a social semiotic theory of truth cannot claim to establish the absolute truth or untruth of representations, but, rather, it can only show how reliably it is represented against the values and beliefs of a given group ” (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 154). A picture can be more or less realistic depending on color, how glossy it is, focus, possible or impossible. The more it is taken away from color the lower the modality. Contextualization, absence or presence of detailed background, is also another aspect defining

the level of modality. The absence of detailed background lowers modality, while a detailed background presents a high level of modality.

In sum, the authors argue that visual modality depends on culturally and historically standards of what is real or not, regardless the objective correspondence of the visual image to a reality defined in some ways. Such a position comes to support our view presented in the introduction as to the socio-historically contextualization of discursive practices and relations.

The Meaning of Composition

Composition, as defined by Kress & Van Leeuwen, makes reference to “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, 176). Here, again, focus, color, location and positions determine who is the more or less salient element. Besides, composition also entails framing and angle.

In considering multimodal texts (realized through more than one semiotic code), what interests us is the focus on how the parts interact and affect one another, instead of an analysis of separate elements. For example, in the case of given and new information, when elements are placed on a horizontal level, those on the left are considered as given, while those placed on the right are the new elements. Also, on a vertical level, we have the ideal-real (top-down) information. In these texts, the upper section is the promise of the product (see introduction), the glamour it can give its users, or the sensory fulfillment it can bring, and the lower section of the text visualizes the product itself and the factual information about it. Saliency and framing, two other aspects of composition, also determine the level of importance and hierarchy between the represented elements.

The Analysis

Figure 1 below is an advertisement of liquor, Grand Marnier, which I came across while using an English course material for teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). However, after some research, I found it was taken from the January 1999 edition of the *Out100* magazine, page 11. As part of a coursebook unit on publicity, I found the

advertisement particularly interesting for analysis, due to its richness in terms of the elements that can be used to illustrate the theory presented in this article.

Despite the fact that we'll analyze this multimodal text separately, visual text and written text, such distinction is just for the sake of the analysis itself, as we understand that, as mentioned above, both texts are integrated in the composition of the whole picture in order to convey the message. For the visual analysis we'll base our interpretation on the *Grammar of Visual Design* (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) just presented, and for the written text will base our analysis on the *SFL* (HALLIDAY & MATTHIESSEN, 2004).

Figure 1



Analysis of the visual meanings

The picture depicts a scene in which we have a couple indoors, most likely her place, after a day's work or an outing, for the nightcap. We believe it to be her place as culture dictates that the man should take the woman back home after a night out, when, then, she'll invite him 'upstairs', should she like him or feel like doing so. The man's expectations run high as he is invited up and even higher when she blindfolds him, which is supported by the motto below the picture. Following the steps presented above, we have that the narrative is dynamic and personal, where participants are represented in a transactional system. The woman is the actor who carries out the material process of giving the man (beneficiary) the glass of liquor (goal). The secondary participants include the setting (circumstance of place) and the instruments used to convey the idea of a good ending to the evening, the blindfold and the glass of liquor. In terms of classificational structure, there is an asymmetric alignment with the woman represented as being on a superior position in relation to that of the man. While she is standing, in a position of control and power, as the one who is in charge of the process, the man is represented as submitted to her directions, being depicted in a lower (sitting) position.

The relation between represented participants and the viewer is one of distance, with the participants totally absorbed in their situation and oblivious to the viewer's presence. This one is, thus, assigned a role of voyeur. Although the represented participants are placed in a very close and intimate distance, appropriate for the occasion, and take the center of the picture, drawing all the attention to themselves in the foreground, the viewer is placed at a considerable distance, due to the participants' unawareness of his/her presence, as they face one another producing a second process.

The second process is a reactional process in which the woman is the reactor who gazes and smiles (reaction) at the phenomenon (the blindfolded man who sips the drink she gives him). The represented participants are connected by means of two vectors that make up our narrative: a first vector that goes from the woman's eyes to the man's lips at the glass, and a second vector that goes from her arm (more precisely her right elbow) to the glass and, consequently, the man's mouth. The picture is, thus, geometrically closed in a triangle, where the woman's higher position denotes control of the situation and decision-making power.

In terms of locative relation, we find color saturation in contrast with the blurred representation of the vase of flowers in the opaque and ethereal background. Another aspect to mention is the clear division line between the ideal and the real relation. With both participants above the line that separates them from the bottle of liquor down right, they are represented as the ideal, the possibilities brought about by the drink. As for this one, it is placed closer to the viewer in an attempt to show an attainable and affordable item that will lead him/her to the fulfillment of his desire.

Finally, the last visual consideration to be made regards the representation of the participants as elements of an analytical process, in which both the woman and the man are depicted as carriers with their respective attributes – lipstick, black, evening dress, suit, dark, straight hair - which make us infer that they either come from the upper classes or are successful young executives.

Analysis of the written meanings

The analysis of the written text reveals that the text comes to support the image, which has a strong salience here. On the basis of the Systemic-Functional Grammar (HALLIDAY & MATTHIESSEN, 2004), the sentences were analyzed as follows:

- 1) Grand Marnier. Straight up: This is a nominal clause whose head is an epithet (straight up).
- 2) In a snifter, on the rocks, or any other way you find tempting: here, we have circumstantial elements that make up two prepositional phrases and one nominal group.
- 3) The last clause is a mental process where we identify the following elements:

Senser	Process	Phenomenon
You	Find	Tempting

- 4) A slightly unexpected finish to the evening: this is the case of an adverbial group serving as a modal adjunct, having as its head an adverb denoting an assessment of

intensity, *slightly*. There's also the nominalization of a material process through the verb finish, which, otherwise, could be stated like: *Grand Marnier 'finishes' your evening in a slightly unexpected way.*

- 5) The last clause is a material process in which the product is represented as a promise of complete change:

Actor	Process	Goal
It	Changes	Everything

Conclusion

As we could see from the theory and analysis above, all kinds of texts (written, oral or visual) can be and are used to convey our ideologies and also to reinforce and sustain relations of power. Dependent on socio-cultural contexts, discourses are ruled by the codes shared by a given group, without which communication would not be possible to take place. In the advertising industry, producers play a remarkable role in helping their audience to construct their identities as consumers, by attaining to the rules that govern the commodification of the self. By presenting consumers with products that will make them feel members of a group, advertisers not only sell their products but mainly the dream, glamour and all the possibilities those products bring with them.

Finally, we hope to have given readers a good example of how the Systemic-Functional Grammar (HALLIDAY & MATTHIESSEN, 2004) together with the Grammar of the Visual Design (KRESS & LEEUWEN, 2006) can turn out to be useful and practical instruments in the analysis of multimodal texts which goes beyond the structural study towards a more social and contextual approach.

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