COVERT COMMUNICATION IN ADVERTISING: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Inferential communication is ostensive (overt) if it involves the extra-layer of communicative intention of informing about one's informative intention besides the informative intention. On the other hand information may be conveyed in a **covert** way when the communicative intention is not manifest, leaving it up to the audience to draw inferences that are expected to be drawn and thus taking responsibility for them is avoided. In the case of covert communication, inferences are less controllable, the reader being exposed and vulnerable to manipulation. An increasing number of Romanian advertisements, especially TV commercials and posters are designed in such a way that the transmission is dependent on the addressee's ability/failure to recognize the advertiser's intentions.

Based on the Relevance Theory (RT) the paper is a case study of exploitation of sexual innuendo in Romanian poster advertising.

Relevance Theory (RT)

Advertising communication relies considerably on inferences and assumptions which help proceed towards eventual interpretation(s). Based on Grice's (1975) seminal theory of cooperative communication (cooperative principles CP) and inferencing through maxim "filling in" or/and flouting, different interpretations could be accomodated by the linguistic theory. However, it has been advocated (Tanaka:1994) that cooperation is a misnomer for the marketing communication and hence the nature of the relationship between participants challenges the possibility of applying Grice's approach to the study of inferences in advertising.

Starting from Grice's view of communication as intention recognition, Relevance Theory (RT) developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposes a simplification of the maxims as assessment means, and distinguishes two types of intention:

- the informative intention,
- the communicative intention, i.e. of having the informative intention recognized.

The central claim of RT is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide the reader towards the speaker's meaning. Utterances raise expectations of relevance not because speakers are expected to obey a CP and maxims, but because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition, which advertisers may exploit.

Relevance is a function of effort and effect: the greater the positive cognitive effects, the greater the relevance; the greater the expenditure of processing effort, the more restricted the relevance. Consider, for example, the following three artificial illustrations of relevance for a student who tries to find out the examination date, illustrations which might be compared in terms of effort and effect:

a. The exam takes place at the end of September,
b. The exam takes place on the 30th of September,
c. Either the exam takes place on September 30th, or (7^2-3) is not 46.

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According to the definition of relevance, all the three utterances are relevant to the student but b) would be more relevant than either a) or c). It is more relevant than a) for reasons of enhanced cognitive effects as b) entails a) and therefore yields all the conclusions derivable from a), and more besides. It is more relevant than c) for reasons of processing effort: although b) and c) are logically equivalent and therefore yield exactly the same cognitive effects, these effects are easier to derive from b) than from c), the latter requiring an additional effort of parsing and inferencing in order to work out that the latter disjunct is false and the former is true. Thus b) would be the most relevant utterance for the student, for reasons of both effort and effect.

The universal tendency to maximise relevance makes it possible to predict and manipulate the mental states of interlocutors. In advertising terms, given the readers' tendency to pick out the most relevant stimuli in the environment and process them so as to maximise relevance, advertisers may produce stimuli likely to attract attention, to prompt the retrieval of specific contextual assumptions, and to point towards an intended conclusion.

Inferential communication is ostensive (overt) if it involves the extra-layer of communicative intention of informing about one's informative intention besides the informative intention. To exemplify, when a beggar stays at one side of a narrow street, casually leaving an empty box in my way, he's not engaging in inferential communication, he merely has exploited my natural cognitive tendency to maximise relevance. Noticing his empty box (the informative intention made manifest through the ostensive stimulus) I may be entitled to conclude that he might need some money, but if he deliberately waves the box about in front of me (communicative intention) I would be justified in drawing a stronger conclusion that he would like me to give him some coins. Consequently, the intention to inform is more likely to be fulfilled if it is recognized.

The processing effort is supposed to interrupt our continuous search for relevance at an optimal level, the optimal relevance (OR). To arrive at OR an advertiser may make an efficient, overt attempt to secure his audience's attention and make it mutually manifest that he intended that information (overtly communicated).

On the other hand the advertiser may undertake to convey information in a **covert** way when his communicative intention is not manifest, leaving it up to the audience to draw inferences that he wants to be drawn and thus avoid taking responsibility for them. In the case of covert communication, inferences are less controllable, the reader being exposed and vulnerable to manipulation.

Overt Communication

According to RT expounded above, advertisers may choose to communicate in ostensive ways when both the informative and the communicative intentions are revealed. Presuppositions and conventional implicatures are types of inferences that were intended to be recognized as intended. Besides these, Sperber and Wilson (1986) also introduce the idea of assumptions obtained by the logical form (LF) development, called **explicatures** (a different distinction between Grice's "saying"- LF and "implicating" – contextual implicatures).

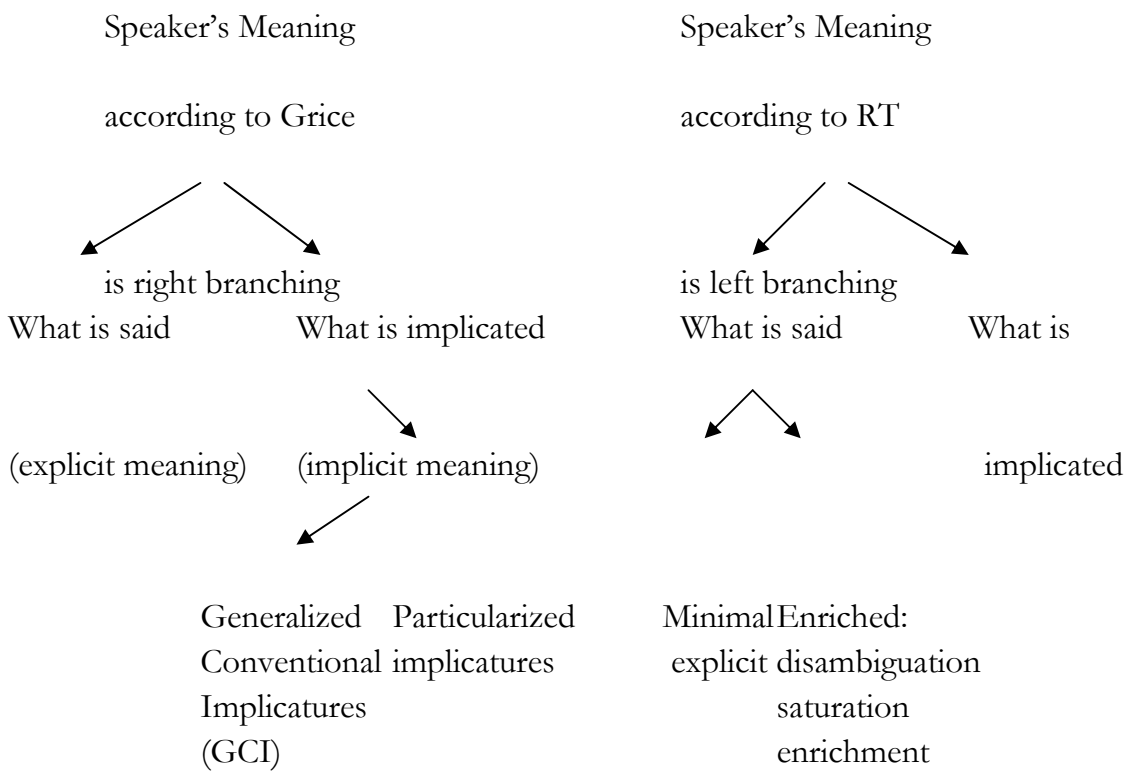
Explicatures in Advertising

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”An assumption is an explicature if and only if it is a development of the LF encoded by the utterance”(Sperber and Wilson, 1986:182). The following pragmatic processes are involved in deriving explicatures:

- disambiguation,
- reference assignment,
- enrichment which can involve:
  - narrowing or
  - loosening.

The difference between Grice and RT in meaning conveyance is schematically presented below:



According to the scheme above, GCI belong to ”what is implicated” in Grice's view and to ”what is said” in RT. A classical example to illustrate this difference can be observed in the sentence: ”He's meeting ***a*** woman”, GCI (what is implicated) = who is not his wife, mother, sister, belong to ”what is said” in RT.

The explicature loop in the meaning derivation of an ad.
„E timpul să ai Farmec”

The headline belonging to the Farmec ad is analysed within the RT framework:

„E TIMPUL SĂ AI FARMEC” (It's time you had Farmec/charm).

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Disambiguation. Unless the denotation of „Farmec" is narrowed to mean the advertised product, the intepretation does not satisfy the reader's expectation of relevance. Were „Farmec" taken to mean "charm", underlying the presuppositional content or rather the felicity condition on invitations, would be the reluctant idea that "You don't have charm", which is hardly probable for the advetiser to have intended. The meaning which narrows „Farmec" to the commodity is therefore activated, retained as intended, and represents part of the LF.

Reference assignment implies giving indexes to deictic expressions. In our case YOU has exophoric reference with realisation in the external situational context of the ad and is understood to define the addressee/s.

Enrichment is represented here by what is explicitly communicated through a higher order speech act description (even though enrichment may include different other processes). "The advertiser invites you, the addressee, to have Farmec" is a higher level explicature and is defined as indirect invitation.

Conversational Implicatures

The advertiser's intention to communicate the above is overt and, therefore, the derived implicatures are strong. He is readily willing to take responsibility for them and by choosing an indirect invitation, interpretation of sincerity as a contextual effect must have been presumed. Likewise, having made his sincerity intentions manifest, one takes this invitation to conversationally implicate that „Farmec" is something desirable. This is a strong implicature but other weaker implicatures which function as further implicated premises could be that, being desirable ("charming"), the product is good. The scheme can function as below:

Implicated premise: If you have made a sincere invitation → the product is desirable
Implicated conclusion: If something is desirable → it is good.

The implicated conclusion will further serve as a basis for additional premises and weak implicatures. What is extremely important is that implicitly communicated **strong and weak implicatures alike were based on the explicatures** which, as shown above, include lexical disambiguation, reference saturation (you = the reader) and a speech act description as part of what is explicitly communicated.

The concept „farmec" suffered a process of meaning narrowing in our example while other instances may require some degree of widening or loosening. Loose uses including figurative elements presented a problem for Grice's framework of interpretation. Strictly speaking, secrets do not have power („Descoperă puterea unui secret" - Secret Deodorant), products do not enchant our senses („Șampoane care îți încântă simțurile" – Herbal Essences), countries do not have spirits ("Descoperă spiritul Americii – LM), nor do medicines have targets („Nurofen. Ținta lui este durerea"). To describe them as such would be violating Grice's maxim of truthfulness ("Do not say what you believe to be false"). They are neither covert

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violations, like lies which are constructed to deceive the reader, nor jokes or fictions which cancel the maxims entirely.

Therefore, it is difficult to accomodate loose talk, metaphor and hyperbole under the cover of truthfulness violation and still distinguish among them.The Relevance theory perceives these aspects as merely alternative routes to achieving optimal relevance. If either the literal or the figurative interpretation fails to satisfy the expectations of relevance, then the other will be accepted.

To summarize, explicatures are essential meaning aspects in deriving implicatures in advertising. From the latter, it is only the strong implicatures that are strongly backed by the advertiser, the weaker are less determinate and derived by the reader on his only responsibility.

A CASE STUDY - *"You decide how hot it/she is"*

Starting from the premise expressed by Tanaka (1994:40) that "advertising is typical of a situation in which the speaker is not trustworthy and the hearer is not trusting" it is highly probable that advertisers will **employ covert strategies to overcome audience distrust**. Exceptions from attempts to overcome audience resistance through self effacement as in the "Think small" slogan (VW), humour, or other honest approaches such as understatement in „Adria îşi face singură reclamă", are also rife in both Romanian and English advertising.

Covert communication has been defined as a "case of communication where the intention of the speaker is to alter the cognitive environment of the hearer, i.e. to make a set of assumptions more manifest to her, without making this intention mutually manifest" (Tanaka, 1994:41). Therefore, it is contended that **exploitation of social taboos, sexual innuendo, etc., are likely to be bypassed by the use of a covert communicative approach**.

An increasing number of Romanian advertisements, especially TV commercials and posters are designed in such a way that the transmission is dependent on the addressee's ability/failure to recognize the advertiser's intentions. Different stimuli such as sex images, are persistently used in place of ostention (see annex II). The sexual innuendo seems to be the new millenium equivalent of the "blonde on the bonnet" syndrome several decades ago and functions as a means of making the informative intention manifest, but not mutually so. Sexual stimuli gain relevance in virtue of their being "basic needs" and it is not deniable that they function well as attention grabbers.

A poster found in the shop windows of my town, advertises gas distribution devices (Elsaco) according to the model of covert communication. The poster pictures a half naked woman touching the heater, whereas the slogan exploits punning at the reference level (more specifically grammaticalized reference – encoded in the morphology of agreement):

„Tu hotărăşti cât e de fierbinte" ("*You* decide how hot *it/she* is", Fig. 1)

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Fig. 1. „Tu hotărăşti cât e de fierbinte"

Two interpretations are activated:

1. You$_1$ decide how hot it is – where *you*$_1$ has text internal reference, i.e., to the woman in the picture, and *it* refers to the product;
2. You$_2$ decide how hot she is – where *you*$_2$ is true exophora, i.e. the reader, and *she* is the female in the picture.

Interpretation 2) is also supported by the employment of the term "fierbinte" which brings collocational (associative) shades of meaning from the "hot line". In Romanian, „fierbinte" is neuter gender, whilst another adjectival complement such as „cald" has marked gender and person. This would have been the proper choice had the advertiser not intended the punning. „Cald" is gender inflected, punning-disambiguating and would have channeled the interpretation unerringly towards 1).

The second meaning alone could antagonize many women due to its gender bias. On the other hand, if the advertiser had chosen a straightforward utterance based on interpretation 1) only, such as: "This device can give you as much heat as you need" we would have missed on the other weak implicatures covertly transmitted by the deliberate equivocation in the deixis:

"This product will also give you sexual satisfaction and your love life will improve".

Such further interpretations (and others) are derived through image contiguity, but the advertiser can always deny them and argue in favor of just proper heat environment. The readers are supposed to conclude that since a sexual interpretation is irrelevant to the product advertised in the poster, and as a strong implicature of any ad is that it makes a positive claim about the brand, the consumers believe that the advertiser cannot have intended it. Of course, ours is not the case of the famous Wonderbra ad renowned for causing chaos amongst the passing traffic, where the nature of the product was tied up with the use of a sexual image. Neither is this the case in many Romanian TV commercials which through sex-laden innuendo, covertly communicate a welter of weak implicatures about happiness, sexual satisfaction, self-esteem, etc., with such diverse and unsexually linked products as the following:

1. NesTea Ice Tea: „Plăceri *răcoritoare*"
2. Schlossgold beer: „S*atisfacţie* fără alcool"
3. Coca Cola: „Un gust care *mă priveşte*"

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Specific for the Romanian advertising is also the co-occurrence of punning at the linguistic level in the headline and/or slogan and weak sexual implicatures derived through image contiguity. In examples 1. and 3. above the italicized terms being ambivalent, raise the problem of equivocation and authorize double interpretations.

CONCLUSION

The distinction observed in the examples above can conduct us towards the derivation of a template overt/covert interpretations:

1. product claims rely on overt communication;
2. interpretations seemingly irrelevant or peripheral to the product, contributing to the reward for paying attention, such as sexual pleasure (see annex II), beauty, happiness, are likely to be covertly communicated through images.

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