THE PRAGMATICS AND SEMIOTICS OF JAPANESE ADVERTISING DISCOURSE

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Abstract: Through general and cultural semiotics we show that the advertising discourse can be one of the most powerful and meaningful types of cultural discourse due to its volatile form and the message it can convey. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the construction of the traditional (first half of the 20th century) and modern Japanese advertising speech (mid 60's-present) starting from acknowledged discourse theories. We argue that the context is the most important factor when dealing with discourse analysis and therefore, we cannot operate without cultural aspects too. A corpus of Japanese advertisements available online from three different industries (beauty, beverage and tobacco) has been analyzed by deploying Wilson and Sperber's Relevance theory (2012). By focusing on these various kinds of advertisements we have determined a connection between the nostalgia for old times (Japanese concept of nihonjinron) and the constant wonder at the new, coexisting in a perfect state of harmony in the Japanese society (Japanese cultural concept, wa). The main question that this paper explores is: are we assisting a paradigm shift in terms of Japanese advertising discourse? The results of this research show that the Japanese advertising discourse focuses more on implicit meaning than on explicit one and also that the usage of loan words is a dominant characteristic in this type of discourse.

Keywords: Japanese, advertising, discourse, pragmatics, semiotics

The study of advertising discourse as a particular genre offers insights on the culture and society to which it belongs to and also concentrates on several other aspects rather than pure linguistic ones. It can be said that while analysing an advertisement, a type of advertising discourse, every single element that creates the global image and meaning is playing a major role, therefore we cannot state that only linguistic or symbolic features are important. Advertising's main function was to persuade the receiver, but after the second part of the 20th century the basic economic one is surpassed and a new function encompassing values and ideological dimensions becomes more important[1]. Through pragmatics and semiotics, the study of this field has gained tremendous importance due to complexity of the relationships between elements belonging to different disciplines. Signs are the means for discovering different cultures besides our own and offer vital insights on discourse construction as well. Giving credit to all acknowledged discourse theories involving pragmatics and semiotics we think that it is vital to discuss in terms of relevance as well. That is why we will analyse a series of written advertisements available online by applying Wilson and Sperber's Relevance Theory[2] principles. We translated the advertisements from Japanese to English and the original background was

[1] Frențiu, R.: *Limbajul poetic – act creator si actualitate culturala. Modelul cultural japonez*. Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană 2017: 179-180.
[2] Wilson, D., Sperber, D.: *Meaning and Relevance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

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preserved with the help of an online application in order to keep it as close as possible to the Japanese version.

This paper is trying to offer a broad perspective on Japanese advertising discourse starting with linguistic constructions (conventions, adaptations) and moving on to cultural and social aspects which together form the global meaning. For Western learners, Japanese, a pro-drop language, becomes problematic when trying to assimilate native expressions or when trying to fully understand a discourse. Through this study we are trying to emphasize the importance of context in this type of language and in this particular type of discourse. Because of this lack of explicit subject and/or pronoun, the Japanese language tends to have that ambiguous aura around it, making it difficult for an "outsider" to understand it fully[3]. The context is the only means of acquiring the meaning of a discourse and works as a support for the receiver to select the most relevant messages in a certain case with a certain purpose. In order to fully internalize a text, message, discourse, the most important aspect is to be familiar with the language code and principles and the context which comes to differentiate one situation from another[4]. The goal is to observe how language along with symbols function in order to persuade and convince the receiving party and also to see the evolution of the phenomena in the Japanese society. We are interested in particular to observe how important were and are loan words in the Japanese advertising discourse as a mechanism of adaptation to the new, globalized world.

Firstly, we have to define the key concepts with which we will further operate in order to have a clear picture in mind of the society we are conducting an analysis on. The most defining concept for the post-war Japanese society we believe to be "*nihonjinron*" which can be translated as "discourse on Japaneseness". This concept targets in fact all Japan-related elements, starting with discourse construction, culture and traditions, music, arts, way of life, business culture, anthropology etc. Needles to say, one can argue that this kind of concept that symbolize all elements that define and differentiate one culture from another exists basically in every culture and society, but it is also true that ambiguity is the key element when trying to describe and analyse the Japanese society. *Nihonjinron* is an example that stands for the inside vs. outside spectrum which has governed over the society since the beginning of times. The idea that foreigners do not have the necessary capacity nor knowledge to comprehend the complexity of the Japanese society structure is one of the main characteristics of this idea. Shirley Ando displays in his article[5] some of the main ideas that shape the Japaneseness idea: unique race due to the geographical position, unique language structure which sustains discourse ambiguity, particular way of thinking, strongly sense of community, spirit of gathering together and therefore making Japanese language not fully accessible to "outsiders". Japanese society is described by native scholars as " [...] a society within which it is extremely difficult to search after the meaning of art itself on the individual level"[6]. Furthermore, this type of discourse on Japanese uniqueness tends to take different shapes according to the context in which it appears, therefore we cannot discuss about *nihonjinron* in terms of outdated or archaic discourse because

[3] Frențiu 2017, 17.
[4] Sebeok, Thomas A.: *Signs: An introduction to semiotics*. Second Edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2001, 8.
[5] Ando, S.: *A Look at Nihonjinron: Theories of Japaneseness*,日本人論への視点, Otemae University Essay Collection, nr. 10, 2009, 大手前大学論集 第10号（2009）, p. 35-36, ci.nii.ac.jp/lognavi?name=nels&lang=en&type=pdf.
[6] Ooka, M.: "The spirit of gathering together" in NHK Overseas Broadcasting, *Japan as I see it - Japanese Sensitivities*, Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1985, p.37.

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it has evolved in interesting manners. In order to observe some of the changes we will approach the *nihonjinron* "theory" in terms of discourse analysis, more precisely as seen in written advertisements.

Another central concept which plays a major role for this study is "*kawaiiron*", which can be translated as "discourse on cuteness". The majority of studies on this type of discourse place it in contrast with that of "*nihonjinron*", but the following statements will try to demonstrate that we should be considering these two types as coexisting, not in opposition with one another. *Kawaiiron* type of discourse places itself basically around everything denoting cuteness (and sometimes superficiality) and has rapidly become a glocalization "product", spreading across the globe due to the explosion of pop culture, whereas *nihonjinron* promotes sobriety, nostalgia for the Golden age and traditional values. Elements pertaining to the *kawaii* aesthetic applied on goods or products can be traced since 1970s[7] and representative symbols can be Hello Kitty, Pokemon, Sailormoon etc. Considering these aspects, what could be the common point which places these different types of discourse in perfect harmony (Japanese term of *wa* [和]) rather than in a continuous opposition? One simple explanation can be found in the Japanese way of being, more precisely in the Japanese society as a whole, constructed around the idea of the "empty centre" which defines the Japaneseness according to Barthes[8].

The extraordinary capacity and speed with which foreign customs and elements are adopted by the Japanese people seem to have roots from early times, starting 1300 years ago along with the introduction of Chinese culture and arts and continuing today without even realizing it too much with Western world elements. "There are elements from France, from Germany, from Italy, and from all the other cultures of the world as well. But we have come to accept it all as having become Japanized"[9]. The keynote here is the Japanization of all foreign elements, a process which can prevent aboriginal culture from alteration, preserving the traditional forms to which new ones are added. We can therefore say that the Japanese culture is in a continuous phase of "borrowing" westernized culture elements, integrating it in a perfect 和*wa* (en. harmony).

These phenomena can be seen not only at cultural level, but more interesting at linguistic one simply by looking closely to the amount of loan words that are used in almost every discourse (formal or informal). The *kawaii* aesthetic, "theory", discoursecan be one example of the power of the Japanese culture and society that has the capacity to create a "cute" version of everything it comes in contact with. This new paradigm guided by *kawaii* movement comes closer to the new generation rather than to the old one, but still when dealing with advertising discourse, we argue that sometimes there is an overlap between the two apparently opposed phenomena.

One of the hypothesis of the study is strongly connected with the idea that the construction of the Japanese advertising speech is trying to "westernize" itself as mush as it looks to promote and transmit cultural heritage, therefore we sustain the idea of duality not opposition of *kawaiiron* and *nihonjinron* discourse. We argue that the context is the most important aspect which provides essential insights when "decoding" the meaning of an

[7]Madge, L.: *Capitalizing on "Cuteness": The aesthetics of social relations in a new postwar Japanese order*, Japanstudien Journal, vol. 9, issue 1: Dienstleistung und Konsum in den 1990er Jahren, p. 155-156, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09386491.1998.11827119.
[8] Barthes, R.: *Empire of Signs*, New York: Hill and Wang edition, 1989, 30.
[9] Inoue, Y.: "A culture of the heart" in NHK Overseas Broadcasting, Japan as I see it - Japanese Sensitivities, Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd. 1985, 69.

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advertisement. Japan, the land of contradictions coexisting in perfect harmony has a particular way of conveying ideas and messages through media. "This diametrically opposed two-sided Japanese culture may well be difficult to grasp by people from foreign countries"[10].

Another important aspect to take into account is the Japanese society segmentation which clearly influence the construction of the advertising discourse. Giving the fact that advertising per se means persuading and convincing the receiving party which can differ significantly in matters of age and gender, in the Japanese advertising discourse we can observe these differences even more by simply observing the various forms of language use (e.g. masculine/feminine pronouns, way of addressing) considering age, gender, status of the audience which can be quite sensitive matters in a vertical society like in Japan. We can argue that in this respect the Japanese advertising discourse has not known significant changes over the past decades because this way of presenting respect is one of the guidelines in the society. More visible changes can be found in terms of aesthetic (prevalence of *kawaii*), shift from explicit to more implicit meaning, discourse length, abundance of loan words combined with Japanese words (*wago*, 和語) which resulted in the so-called "Engrish" words (referring to grammatical inconsistencies) used in the Japanese advertising discourse. Forwards, by analyzing three different Japanese advertisements from three different industries (beauty, beverage and tobacco) through the spectrum of the Relevance Theory we will try to offer a broad perspective of the mentioned changes in order to see the main features and language use in this type of discourse. Moreover, we strongly believe that it is not merely a matter of decoding, but one of interpreting the component elements in order to follow the closest path to an accurate interpretation from the hearer's position. In some cases, "the linguistic form of the sentence does not provide sufficient help for the hearer to be able to identify the speaker's attitude"[11], that's where the context comes to elucidate and diminish ambiguity.

The Relevance Theory is based on an ostensive-inferential[12] form of communication which surpasses previous studies by bringing in discussion the importance of relevance in the discourse theories. The Japanese scholar Keiko Tanaka conducted a study on Japanese and British advertisements[13] from random industries focusing on this theory's principles and draws attention to the role of covert communication, puns, metaphors and other linguistic instruments which cannot be understood without giving credit to the communicator's intention and thus to the "partnership" between the communicator and receiving party. The present study focuses on Relevance Theory principles and model analysis from Tanaka in order to offer further insight in the field of Japanese advertising discourse by targeting specific industries for a more accurate vision over the phenomena.

The Japanese beauty industry as any other industry has known significant changes and Western influences over the past decades. When talking about the beauty industry in Japan, the immediate association that comes into mind is that with the Shiseido brand, Tokyo's epicentre of fashion. Having over 100 years of tradition in the industry based on quality and innovations, the brand quickly came to be the symbol of all Japanese beauty products in the West. Shiseido was the closest brand to the Western beauty industry which also introduced the new culture of

[10] Nakane, C.: "Japanese culture within international society", in NHK Overseas Broadcasting, *Japan as I see it - Behind Japanese Culture*, Kodansha Bilingual Books, Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1985, p. 61.
[11] Tanaka, K.: *Advertising Language. A pragmatic approach to advertisements in Britain and Japan*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.15.
[12] Wilson, Sperber 2001, 37-38.
[13] Tanaka 2001.

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'modan bōi'(en. modern girl) and 'modan gāru' (en. modern girl)[14] therefore we will conduct an analysis on two Shiseido advertisements, one from the 70s, more precisely from around 1917s-1920s and another one from 2017 with a special centennial edition of the same product (Figure 1). We will try to create a parallel between the two advertisements created at exactly 100 years difference in order to see more clearly how the advertising discourse has shaped over the years and try to guess what are the perspectives. Before even analyzing the two advertisements, this "revival" of a revolutionary beauty product from a century ago into a new edition in 2017 may be considered a clear evidence of *nihonjinron*, a cyclical return to the origins.



Figure 1: Shiseido, 7 Colors Powder ad (≈ 1927)[15]



Figure 2: Shiseido, 7 Colors Powder ad (2017)[16] **Figure 2:** our translation

As mentioned previously, the theme in this advertisement seems to be nostalgia, recollection of the past. By bringing into the present symbols of the Golden age of Japan, the idea is to trigger in the mind of the receiver the recollection of the traditional spirit along with the archetypal beauty of the Japanese women through several means. The choice of words "limited edition", "after 100 years", "centennial edition" serve as linguistic means of conveying the

[14]'Inside an Archive of Shiseido's Japanese Beauty Magazines', AnOther Publishing Ltd, 31 January 2017, http://www.anothermag.com/fashion-beauty/9494/an-illustrative-history-of-shiseidos-monthly-magazines.
[15] Source: http://otona-stylemag.com/posts/today/18064.html.
[16]Source: https://ameblo.jp/gemland/entry-12240724016.html.

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feeling of deep emotion and creating that indispensable connection mentioned earlier. In particular this single construction "limited edition" works both as a memento for Shiseido's long-lasting tradition on the beauty market and also as a token of gratitude towards all Japanese women, the old and new generations who have the opportunity to try on a traditional beauty product adapted to modern times. Nonetheless, in terms of aesthetics the differences are visible, but the main theme is the recreation of the dearest old times, bringing back to the receiver a piece of the old traditional Japan with the help of *nihonjinron* elements and addressed to the *kawaii* feminine figure. In figure 1 even though the colors used are pale, there are some techniques that emphasize the name of the product and the brand, while in figure 2 the accent is on the symbol, the small cloth-covered box which has the capacity to trigger instantly nostalgia in the soul of the beholder. In the first advertisement, through the depiction of a Western-looking feminine figure holding a small cloth-covered powder box containing the 7 Colors Powder, the message may be understood as a connection between Shiseido, a Japanese national brand and the Western beauty techniques and innovations, thus creating in the collective perception the idea of an "exotic", "extravagant", "*kawaii*" brand. The accent is on the name of the brand which is written twice: first in big red and black colored characters on the top in horizontal alignment (from left to right) and afterwards at the bottom in black bold characters. The only binding element between the two advertisements separated by 100 years is the small cloth-covered box which is a symbol of beauty surpassing time and the *Hanatsubaki* (Camellia japonica) hot-stamp on top of the box which is still used today. As the product designer of Shiseido[17] mentioned, a lot of modern techniques were used in making the replica adapted to the needs of the contemporary women.

As for the beverage industry, we will focus our attention to an international brand, Coca-Cola, in order to see how a foreign product was introduced to the Japanese market. We are interested in particular to see how the advertising discourse differs from the American one and also to make a comparison with the contemporary one. The Coca-Cola brand has known a significant appreciation in Japan even before World War I, but only after the end of World War II we find important registers about Japanese Coca-Cola advertisements. Like any other brand entering a foreign market the process involves mainly adapting it to the local market and meeting customer expectations guided by local customs and traditions. That is maybe the simplest marketing strategy for promoting a foreign product.

As for Japan, the new beverage was associated with the Western way of life and was quickly integrated. Starting from the label, as seen in figure 3, the product name is written both in *katakana* syllable (used for loan words), Coca-Cola became *Koka-Kōra* (コカ・コーラ) and in Roman alphabet preserving the original name in order to emphasize the association with the West. This is the first step in the integrating process of foreign products and implicitly of loan words. The use of a traditional Japanese word, *oseibo*, encompassing one the oldest traditions along with a loan-word, *Kurisumasu* (クリスマス), word expressing the essence of Christianityis also a method through which Japan has adapted to the influences of the West. Also, we can see in figure 3 that only the product name is written in small letters under the picture depicting some puppets, the rest of the text is written in Japanese characters but not in traditional Asian alignment (right to left, vertical writing). Another interesting fact that has to be taken in consideration when analyzing the advertisement is that fact that celebrating Christmas is also a borrowed and adapted custom, therefore the Christmas edition advertisement for Japan does not imply the idea of spending the holiday together with the family or doesn't include

[17]Interview with Yasuhiro Tsukamoto, *The Revolutionary 7 Colors Powder, Revived a Century Later*, http://www.shiseidogroup.com/advertising/work/detail/nanairo-konaoshiroi.html.

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holiday spirit messages as seen in the American version. In fact, in figure 3 we can see there is indeed a cheerful winter mood implied by the puppets and the snowman, but at linguistic level there is not a single utterance implying the importance of the holiday, it seems merely a winter edition advertise. There is one utterance in figure 3 suggesting the idea of being generous and enjoying the beverage during this time of year: "Coca-Cola is the best for Christmas and end-year gifts", but even so, there is a significant difference in discourse construction between the Japanese version and a typical American one. "This "year-end gift" is a translation for the word "oseibo", which means "oseibo gifts are intended to be an expression of thanks to someone who has shown you kindness during the year. […]traditionally, the gifts exchanged as oseibo are consumables -- food or household goods such as soap"[18]. Due to this extra information on Japanese culture and traditions we can assume that the black, cold, crisp American beverage has made its way into the Japanese houses by being an alternative to the traditional *oseibo* gift. This is a clear example of two symbols representing two different worlds coexisting in *wa* (harmony) in one space without excluding each other. One representing the old, traditional Japan and the other one offering the promise of exquisiteness, a modern alternative of *oseibo* gifts. "Everywhere in Japan in December you'll see elaborate displays of Christmas decorations, and Christmas-themed treats intended for gift-giving. At the same time, you'll also see displays of the traditional *oseibo* items -- beer, ham, sausages, premium cooking oils and other fancy packaged foods"[19]. Also, usually a typical Christmas edition Western advertise will have commonly known phrases, sayings or catchphrases expressing cheer and joy like: "Have a Merry Christmas!", "Ho, ho, ho Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays!" etc. but we do not find an equivalent of these "cheering" phrases in the construction of the Japanese advertising discourse of the same product. Basically, in the case of this American product advertisement for a worldwide brand, the constituent elements of the original one have been adapted and perfectly integrated to match the



Figure 3: Coca-Cola, Christmas ad (1964)[20]

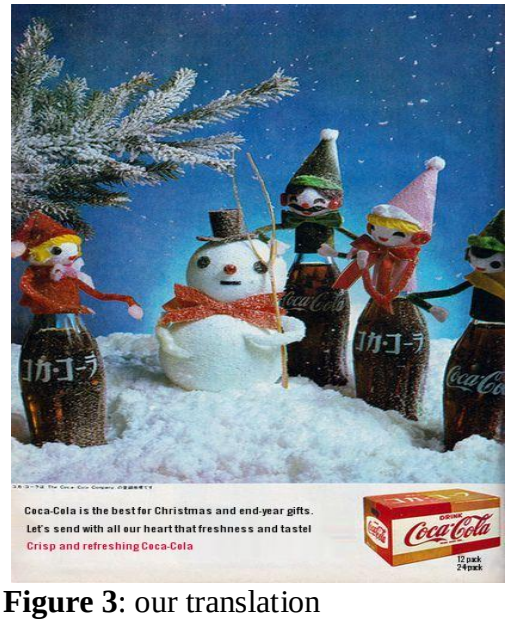


Figure 3: our translation

[18] Kopp, R.: " Oseibo winter gift-giving in Japan -- a fading tradition?" http://www.japanintercultural.com/en/blogs/default.aspx?blogid=156.
[19] Idem
[20] Source: https://www.pinterest.jp/pin/310396599292638654/.

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Japanese needs and expectations, therefore we do not find any typical Christmas holiday expressions; Moreover, the Christmas gifts are placed along *oseibo*, the traditional year-end gift adapted also to the Western world by offering a pack of Coca-Cola to the dear ones.

According to the Relevance Theory, the receiver is involved in a minimum effort process and "extracts" the most relevant inputs based on his expectations: "An input is relevant to an individual when it connects with available contextual assumptions […] human inferential mechanisms tend spontaneously to process them in the most productive way"[21], therefore, the receiver will "pick-up" the most relevant input considering contextual stimuli and will mentally make an association of *oseibo* with offering Coca-Cola as a gift during winter time, which does not even seem to be out of the ordinary giving the fast pace at which Japanese language and culture assimilates foreign/loan words and customs.

When analyzing Japanese advertising discourse, the keywords which encompass the Japanese spirit and soul are vital for understanding how the society works and how the discourse is structured. Forwards, we will analyze an advertising campaign run by the biggest cigarette manufacturing company known today as JTI (Japan Tobacco International). What is important to take into account is that starting with 1970s the tobacco laws and smoking policies in Japan began to change and the industry was led by a campaign under the slogan 'Smokin' Clean'(スモーキン・クリーン)in order tohighlight the company's environment-friendly production policies and also to raise awareness[22].

The example in figure 4, an advertisement for a very popular type of JTI cigarettes at that time (Shōwa Era, 1926 – 1989) called Cherrysold even now in Japan, depicts a simple pack of cigarettes on a red predominant background. The slogan 'Smokin' Clean' is written both in Japanese and in English at the bottom-right corner as part of the awareness campaign and it was mandatory for all tobacco manufacturing companies. The colors used are white and red, suggesting perhaps the idea of a national brand or maybe as a symbol, a correlation between the label and the product name. The skyscraper in the background seems to represent the economic boom in Japan, a symbol of prosperity and good wealth.

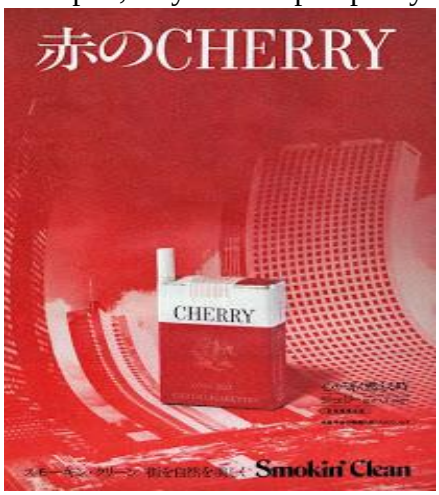


Figure 4: Cherry cigarettes, Japan Tobacco Inc. (1976)

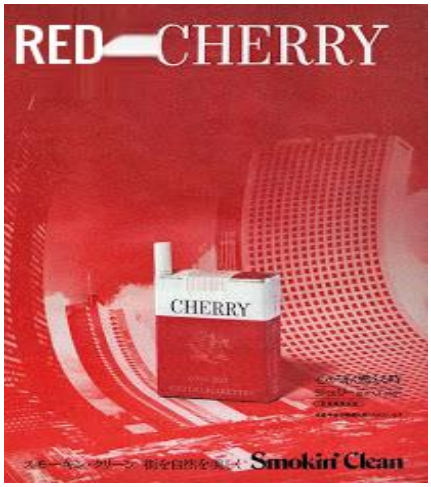


Figure 4: our translation

As the name suggests, 'Cherry' is a clear reference to one of the most beloved trees in

[21] Wilson, Sperber, 2012, 6.
[22] https://www.jti.co.jp/Culture/museum/exhibition/1996/9601jan/1974.html.

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Japan, the Japanese cherry, which is normally referred to as '*sakura*', not cherī, (チェリー). During war time and even after, words were divided into so-called 'patriotic' and 'enemy related' words and national movements emerged especially at community level. People were trying to refrain from using loan words and *nihonjinron* discourse was powerful at every level (political, economic, advertising, publicity) stressed out by a 'ban-English policy'[23]. As seen in figure 4, the advertising discourse in this case is constructed around the idea of a 'Western way of living', during a period of economic recovery in Japan (≈1970s). At the top of the advertisement we have a combination of Japan-English words, which together describe the product name, '*Aka no* cherry', where 'aka' means red. This word joining is not very unusual because it has to do with the idea of creating a westernized image of the products in order to increase sales. "Japanese advertisers believe that it is 'Westerness' and prestige which will sell […]"[24]. This advertising campaign implies through all the component elements the idea of modernization according to Western principles and simultaneously promotes traditional values.

The findings that we presented suggests that in the construction of the Japanese advertising speech both tradition and modern symbols coexist in perfect harmony. Moreover, the analysis of an advertisement is cyclical, it involves the interpretation of the word in relation to the image and vice versa. Sign conventionality is the basis for their proper interpretation in one sphere of activity or another, so the analysis of the advertising discourse must be adapted to the culture in question. An advertising speech makes use of those keywords that draw an overview of a society by facilitating the exchange of values and ideologies at a given moment; In the case of Japan, words like '*aimai'* (ambiguity), ,'*wa'* (harmony, niponicity), '*kawaii'* (cuteness) encompass the essence of Japaneseness, therefore need to be taken in account when analysing any discourse. Mixing Japanese with English and the presence of a significant number of loan words in the Japanese discourse seem to be like a 'cope*'* mechanism for influences from the West or simpler, a way of preserving traditions by having the advantage of selecting and keeping only some of foreign elements. Even so, the contribution of Western influences on lexic and artistic imaginary is considerable and we believe there is an upward trend in this regard. *Nihonjinron* and *kawaiiron* influences can be observed in a variety of ways in theJapanese advertising discourse, therefore attention must be paid firstly to context and cultural aspects in order to 'select*'* the most relevant input available.

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[23]『英語の使用は禁止!! 戦時中の「敵性語」を調べてみた』, http://billionaire-wolf.com/2017/04/17/tekiseigo/.
[24] Tanaka 2001, 99.

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