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Applications, implications and limitations of the semiotic square for analyzing advertising discourse and discerning alternative brand futures

Abstract:

The semiotic square has been heralded as one of the foremost semiotic devices for analyzing multifarious textual genres, from literature to advertising to broadcast news. By virtue of its ability to account for how semio-narrative structures transform into concrete discursive structures, thus paving the way for fleshing out virtual possibilities inscribed in achronic narrative structures, it attains to translate what appears on a surface textual level as loosely connected narrative sequences into a coherent metatext. At the same time, it manages to furnish a trajectory of alternative scenarios for streamlining future actantial possibilities of a brand's becoming with its past by overlaying axiological frameworks and establishing complex homological equivalences among their constituent terms, thus nurturing interpretive coherence among variable advertising executions. This paper aims to lay out the distinctive usefulness of the semiotic square as a positioning platform, viewed as a dynamic, rather than static portrayal of a brand's alternative futures, as well as to compare and contrast its heuristic value vis a vis existing models in advertising development. Its applicability will be discussed in the light of actual case studies, while addressing implications for the ongoing management of a brand as a living and constantly mutating text. However, given that no method is free from limitations, the paper will also adopt a critical outlook towards the validity of the semiotic square for analysing advertising discourse and moreover for utilizing distinctive typologies that emerge from the process of reducing the signification of a text through the semiotic square, while rendering redundant the richness of a surface textual structure. The exposure of the limitations of the semiotic square will in turn feed into a potential recontextualization of the focus of its application from semionarrative to discursive structures, thus contributing to the potential closure of ad textual meaning.

Keywords: structuralist semiotics, advertising account planning, semiotic/veridictory square, brand personality, semiotic trajectory of signification

Introduction

The semiotic square has been heralded as one of the foremost semiotic devices for analyzing multifarious textual genres, from literature to advertising to broadcast news. By virtue of its ability to account for how semio-narrative structures transform into concrete discursive structures, thus paving the way for fleshing out virtual possibilities inscribed in achronic narrative structures, it attains to translate what appears on a surface textual level as loosely connected narrative sequences into a coherent metatext. At the same time, it manages to furnish a trajectory of alternative scenaria for streamlining future actantial possibilities of a brand's becoming with its past by overlaying axiological frameworks and establishing complex homological equivalences, thus nurturing interpretive coherence among variable advertising executions. This paper aims to lay out the distinctive usefulness of the semiotic square as a structural platform for constructing a brand personality and projecting a user personality, as well as to compare and contrast its heuristic value vis a vis existing models in advertising development, while addressing some of its methodological limitations. Additionally, insofar as it constitutes a dynamic modeling device, over and above a static portrayal of a brand's states-of-being, it is capable of envisioning alternative brand futures. Its applicability will be discussed in the light of actual case studies, while discussing implications for the ongoing management of a brand as a living and constantly mutating text.

What is the semiotic square and what kind of role it performs in the Greimasian structuralist system?

The semiotic square, as concisely laid out in *Du Sens I* (1970: 135-156), constitutes the elementary unit of signification in the Greimasian structuralist system and an elaboration of the simple semantic axis reuniting two contrary semes or semantic poles, as initially laid out in *Sémantique Structurale* (1966). The concepts that make up the semantic micro-universe of a semiotic square consist in object-terms, that is elementary semes that exist by virtue of their partaking of a relational structure.

«We designate by the name of elementary structure such a relational type» (Greimas 1966: 20). Object-terms are not equivalent to elementary signifying units outside of a structural frame, as, for example, would be the case of a lexeme's definition in a lexicon. They are relational entities and assume signification only by entering in various modes of relatedness with other object-terms. This very fundamental principle of the Greimasian semiotic approach sets it apart from the majority of semiotic theories that assume the «sign» as their point of departure. Greimas is not primarily concerned with the nature of elementary units of signification, but with the structuralist conditions of the possibility of signification.

The semiotic square, as Floch points out, is a representation of what takes place at the semio-narrative level, hence it is concerned with signification at the depth level of the generative trajectory. The locus of the square in the generative trajectory is succinctly portrayed by Floch as follows:

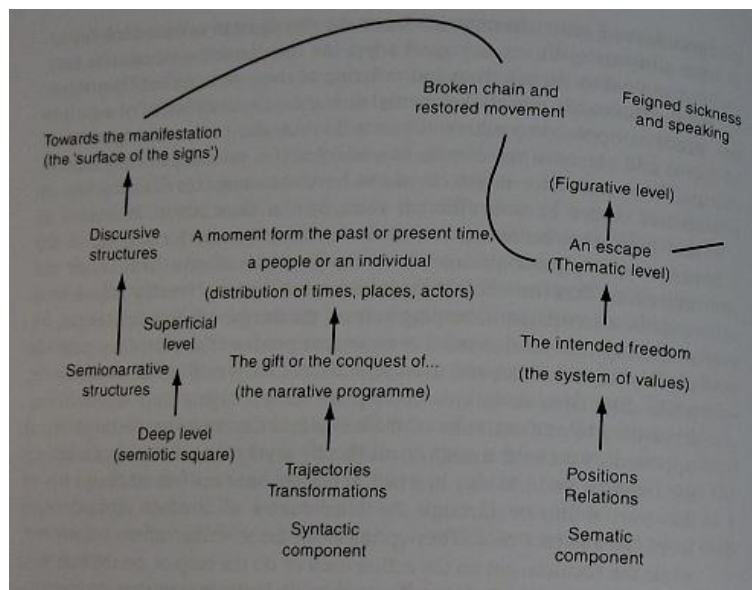


Figure 1. Floch's reconstruction of Greimas's generative trajectory (Floch 2001: 114)

In order to present the generative trajectory in as complete a way as possible, it is appropriate to divide the semio-narrative structure into two

levels. At a fundamental level there is a positioning of the differences that give rise to signification as well as the rules of the trajectory between the various positions that are established. This level is unquestionably the *ab quo* domain of the generative trajectory; the semiotic square is then a representation of what takes place on this level. At a more superficial level, the positions are converted into values that ultimately will be desired and pursued by the subjects, while the trajectories are transformed into narrative programmes (Floch 2001: 113).

The roots of the semiotic square can be traced back to the Aristotelian *Organon* (spanning *Metaphysics*, *Prior and Posterior Analytics* and *On Interpretation*), as well as contemporary to Greimas's approaches, such as the logical hexagone of Blanche, Klein's group of mathematics and Piaget's group of psychology (cf. Nef 1976, Greimas 1970 and Greimas 1987).

In order to understand how the semiotic square functions as an elementary structure of signification or as a topographical approach to the logical organization of a semantic universe, the fundamental concepts of contrariety, contradiction, implication, schema and deixis must first be defined.

Contrariety, which forms the fundamental building block of the semantic axis in *Sémantique Structurale* (Greimas 1966) and the vantage point for the construction of a semiotic square (Greimas 1970), is the relation of mutual presupposition between the two terms of a semantic axis, where both terms are either present or absent. Two terms are contrary iff (= if and only if) the contradictory of each term implies the contrary of the other, for example death vs. life. In essence, contrariety constitutes a deflected or fuzzier form of contradiction. For example, the terms /beauty/ and /ugliness/ as the two contrary poles of the semantic axis «looks» are not exact contradictories, as there are multiple semantic layers in between, such as quasi-beautiful and quasi-ugly, as against the strict contradictory relationship between ugly vs non-ugly. However, if non-ugly is present as the contradictory of ugly then by implication beautiful as the contrary of ugly is also present. This

qualifying feature of contrariety, as multiple semantic layers in between of the two contrary poles echoes the Aristotelian law of the excluded middle, viz. that “nothing can exist between two contradictories, but something may exist between contraries” (Metaphysics 1055b2).

Contradiction (Greimas and Courtés 1979: 69-70) denotes the relationship between terms of a binary logical category of assertion/negation. The presence of one term in this relationship presupposes the absence of the other¹. Contradiction defines the two schemas ($S1-\overline{S1}$, $S2-\overline{S2}$) of the semiotic square. For example, beauty and non-beauty are contradictory terms, where the presence of the one presupposes the absence of the other.

Implication (ibid: 182) consists in the assertive conditioning of the presupposing term, resulting in the appearance of the presupposed term. The relationship of presupposition is thus envisaged as logically anterior to implication.

Deixis (ibid: 87) constitutes one of the fundamental dimensions of the semiotic square, its «inner logic» (F. Jameson’s foreward to Greimas 1987: XX) that reunites through implication one of the terms of the axes of contrariety with the contradictory of the other contrary term. There are two types of deixis, positive and negative, which are not qualified as such axiologically prior to their placement on the square and the interpretation of the relationship between the terms ensuing thereupon. For example, beauty as the contrary of ugliness is in a relationship of deixis with non-ugliness as the contradictory term of its contrary. Deixis denotes an act of pointing and in terms of enunciation a spatiotemporal positioning of the object pointed to. In the above example, beauty points to non-ugliness as the least assertoric condition by virtue of which the presupposing term of beauty allows the presupposed term of non-ugliness to be posited as such.

Schema (Greimas and Courtés 1979: 322) is the dimension of the semiotic square reuniting two contradictory terms. A sharper distinction is drawn between a positive schema, where the first term belongs to the positive deixis and a negative schema, where the first term belongs to the negative deixis. A more expansive

¹ According to Aristotle, “the opinion that opposite assertions are not simultaneously true is the firmest of all” (Met. 1011b13–14, quoted in Horn 2010).

definition of schema has also been furnished by Greimas, designating the «open semic combinatory» as a plenum of virtualities on which a culture draws for its constitution. Insofar as object-terms constitute on a metalinguistic level virtualities to be actualized on a narrative level by assuming concrete forms as actors, acts, determinate objects of desire, the notion of schema is of instrumental interpretive value as it unites the depth grammar consisting of a semic universe with discursive sememic constellations and narrative surface structures as the horizon of potential actualizations of semio-narrative schemas constituting a priori or deductive semic categories. It is by virtue of the schema that the purely abstract, formal logical relationships among object-terms may be semantically invested.

Pursuant to the exposition and definition of the key terms making up the semiotic square let us now proceed with further elaborating the model, which is formally portrayed as follows:

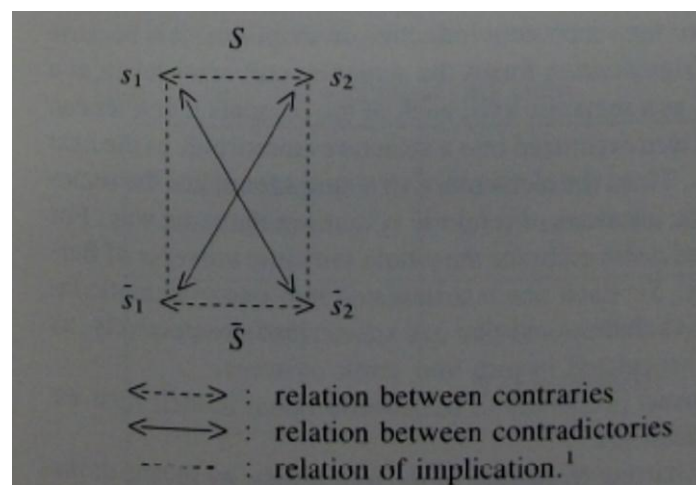


Figure 2.The elementary structure of the semiotic square (Greimas 1987: 49)

Actually, based on the explanatory notes of Figure 2, the inverse description should hold for the lines denoting a relationship of contradiction and implication. The middle of the square diagonal lines denoting relations of deixis constitute relations of logical implication and thus should be denoted by dashed lines, whereas the lines joining vertically the angles of the square should be continuous (not dashed) as they

denote relationships of contradiction. This description in the English translation resulted apparently from the restructuring of the original semiotic square (cf. Figure 3), by portraying contradictions by vertical instead of diagonal lines, while maintaining the original explanatory legend.

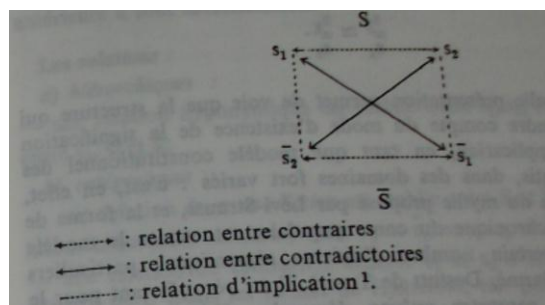


Figure 3. The original portrayal of the semiotic square (Greimas 1970: 137)

The elementary unit of the semiotic square, as put forward since the introduction to *Sémantique structurale*, is the semantic axis reuniting two contrary semes (let's continue with the example of beauty and ugliness that was introduced above), where (S1) stands for beauty and (S2) for ugliness, which constitute the semantic microuniverse (S) «looks» made up of the contrary poles of the semantic relationship $S1 \leftarrow \dots \rightarrow S2$. Assuming the object terms S1 and S2 as our point of departure², their contraries, viz. non-beauty and non-ugliness would be rendered as -S1 and -S2 (henceforth contradictory terms will be denoted by using the symbol «-» (eg. -S1) interchangeably with « $\overline{\quad}$ » (eg. $\overline{S1}$).

Having thus far yielded definitions for the key terms making up the square and the different types of relationship amongst the four elementary terms denoted by the three types of dashed and continuous lines, the square may be portrayed anew as follows:

²The fact that contraries constitute the point of departure for a semiotic analysis poses the question of how such contraries are chosen, not simply regarding the choice of a pair over another, but the very logic of pairing. For example, Derrida stresses that the play of contrasts in which language produces meaning is an arbitrary play of contrasts arbitrarily chosen (cf Pettit 1975: 45). This arbitrariness is further emphasized and explored in modern semantics. For example, Jeffries (2010) calls them oppositions in context or unconventional oppositions.

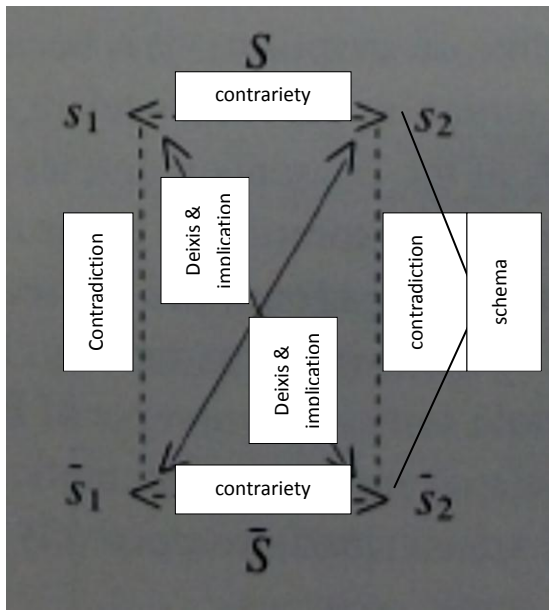


Figure 4. Relationships among semiotic square terms

Thus, the semiotic square may be summed up as six systemic dimensions or three systemic pairs (cf. Greimas 1987: 51):

1. The contrary terms or semes S_1 and S_2 falling hyponymically under the semic category S that organizes them into a semantic micro-universe and the contrary terms \bar{S}_1 and \bar{S}_2 under the inverse semantic micro-universe \bar{S} . This is the neutral axis, whose terms are organized in a neither/nor relationship.
2. The relationships of deixis denoted by the intra-square diagonal lines uniting by implication S_1 with \bar{S}_2 and S_2 with \bar{S}_1 .
3. The schematic relationships denoted by the vertical lines reuniting in categorical terms the contradictories S_1 with \bar{S}_1 and S_2 with \bar{S}_2 .

These distinctive semiotic dimensions are portrayed concisely by Greimas in the following table:

<i>Constitutive Relations</i>	<i>Structural Dimensions</i>	<i>Semic Structures</i>
contrariety	S axis (complex) \bar{S} axis (neutral)	$s_1 + s_2$ $\bar{s}_1 + \bar{s}_2$
contradiction	schema 1 schema 2	$s_1 + \bar{s}_1$ $s_2 + \bar{s}_2$
simple implication	deixis 1 deixis 2	$s_1 + \bar{s}_2$ $s_2 + \bar{s}_1$

Table 1. The fundamental dimensions of the semiotic square (Greimas 1987: 51)

Table 1 constitutes the formal exposition of the semiotic square. Matters are complicated when it comes to applying it in discrete narrative or discursive instances, or during its particular semantic investment and the application of axiological frameworks. In its application the semiotic square rarely appears as a single model or system or semantic micro-universe. Depending on the narrative situation at hand, multiple squares need to be constructed, coupled with a process of establishing relations³ and homologies⁴ among the squares' respective terms. Greimas (1970: 142) offers the example or the theme of sexuality, in the light of which the following three semantically and axiologically interdependent squares are furnished, which are founded on the elementary pairs of contrariety «cultural vs natural sexuality», «economically profitable vs harmful sexual relationships» and «desired vs feared sexual relationships». The approach of the same theme through

³ The term relation is used by Greimas in a Hjelmslevian sense, denoting an «and...and» relationship in contradistinction to the term correlation denoting an «either...or» relationship between two terms (cf. Greimas and Courtés 1976: 75). Correlation in the sense adopted by Greimas should not be confused with the statistical method of correlation, whereby the level of strength between two variables (eg market share and share-of-voice) may be established, albeit in a non-causative manner.

⁴ Homology in the Greimasian system is used as another word for analogy (ibid: 174). Three conditions must be met for the establishment of homologies in a relationship among object-terms, such as A:B::A':B' viz. (i) the terms must be sememes decomposable into semes (ii) terms in the pairs A/A' and B/B' must have at least one seme in common (iii) the relationship between A and B must be identical to the relationship between A' and B' and recognizable as one of the elementary logical relations of contrariety, contradiction, deixis.

different dimensions affords to tie up individual perceptions with wider societal values, while the ensuing pairing of object terms enables an enunciator to draw ever ramifying and more complex relations among elements constitutive of a semantic universe in a methodical fashion.

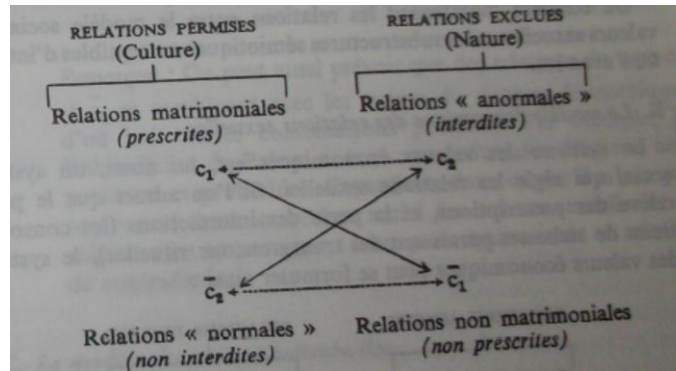


Figure 5. Semiotic square «cultural vs natural sexuality» (Greimas 1970: 143)

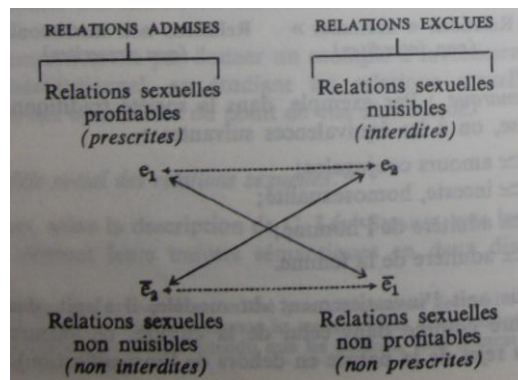


Figure 6. Semiotic square «economically profitable vs harmful sexual relationships» (Greimas 1970: 144)

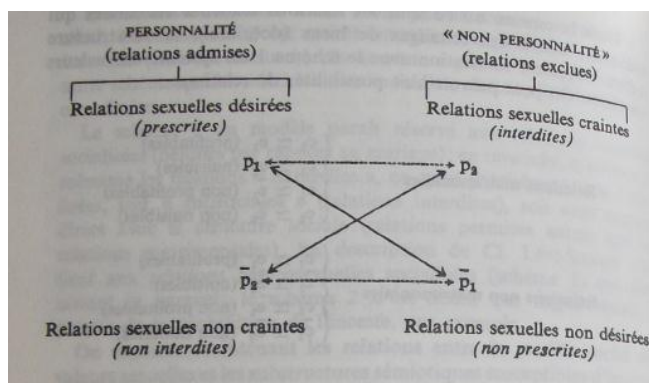


Figure 7. Semiotic square «desired vs feared sexual relationships» (Greimas 1970: 146)

Greimas further yields the following relations amongst the first two squares' (Figures 5 and 6) terms, which are interpreted based on profitability and harmfulness:

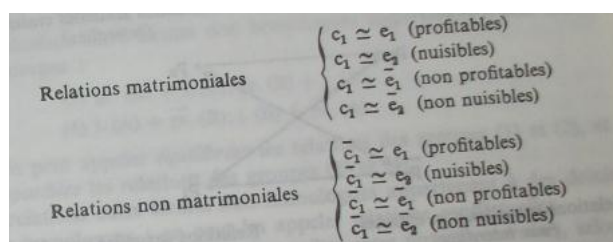


Table 2. Inter-square relations (Greimas 1970: 145)

At this juncture the following limitations may be noted:

First, by virtue of the fact that during the semantic investment of the square, formal object-terms assume particular axiological values by recourse to a wider societal value-system, the model assumes a contingent character. The aim of the square is not to portray semic relationships in a universally binding and logical manner, but, as Patte (1982: 64) puts it, «the way in which a culture (in a sociolectal semantic universe) or an individual (in an idiolectal semantic universe) perceives the relations among certain entities».

Second, the relation between a contrary and at the same time deictic term from square 1 and a contrary and at the same time deictic term from square 2, as in the example of $c_1 \sim e_2$ from the above list of inter-square relations, is ambiguous, both as a result of cultural contingency, as well as a result of the terms' relative value initially assumed in the inner logic of each square. This ambiguity stems from the fact that whereas the value of c_1 is determined by its relative position in the semantic axis S vis a vis c_2 , the value of e_2 is determined by its relationship to all other terms of its square. This semantic interdependency of e_2 emerges due to its relative position, not only as the contrary of e_1 , but also the contradictory of $-e_2$ (in which case it is interpreted as non-non- e_2), as well as the implied term in the deictic relationship with $-e_1$ (in which case it is interpreted as the contradictory of e_1 's contrary, but not necessarily e_1 's contradictory term). Thus, when drawing a relationship between c_1 and e_2 it should first be qualified in what sense e_2 should be used from a set of three alternative choices viz. (i) « economically harmful» as the contrary term of e_1 (ii) «not «*nor*» economically harmful» as the absolute contradictory of the neutral term $-e_2$ (*nor* economically harmful), which is not equivalent to a strict double negation, hence equivalent to (i), (iii) «not absolutely economically harmful» as the deictically implied term of the contradictory of its contrary e_1 , viz economically profitable. Given these three semantic nuances, the relation $c_1 \sim e_2$ presupposes three different meanings of e_2 based on its mode of relation with the rest terms of the second square, which should be qualified prior to interpreting the relation.

A further limitation that emerges concerns the risk of reading into as against reading from the text or the respective risks of over and under-interpretation. As difficult as it may be to make such judgments given the above hypothetical example employed by Greimas it is not hard to foresee instances where during the logical reconstruction of a surface narrative or its reduction to an elementary semic structure, axiological judgments will be responsible for imbuing unintended semes (on behalf of the enunciator or addresser of the message or brand owner), especially where the ex post facto analysis of advertising texts is concerned. This is an inevitable outcome of the opening up of an advertising text to the plane of

connotation. Nevertheless, such a connotative opening up is useful in terms of scenario planning and risk management in the face of unprecedented communicative side-effects.

Having stressed the above potential limitations of the semiotic square, let us now proceed with the exposition of the three typologies of homology, stemming from different combinations of pairs between object terms. Thus, Greimas furnishes the following (where A and B denote the two main systems or the two squares as above displayed in Figures 5 and 6, (pr.) denotes prescriptions and (i.) interdictions):

1. Relations among homologous terms (balanced relations)

1.1 pr. (A) + pr. (B); i. (A) + i. (B)

1.2 $\overline{\text{pr. (A) + pr. (B); i. (A) + i. (B)}}$

2. Relations among non-homologous terms belonging to a homologous deixis (compatible relations)

2.1 pr. (A) + $\overline{\text{i. (B)}}$; pr. (B) + $\overline{\text{i. (A)}}$

2.2 i. (A) + $\overline{\text{pr. (B)}}$; i. (B) + $\overline{\text{pr. (A)}}$

3. Relations among non-homologous terms belonging to non-homologous deixes (conflictual relations) between contrary terms

3.1 pr. (A) + i. (B); pr. (B) + i. (A)

3.2 $\overline{\text{pr. (A) + i. (B); pr. (B) + i. (A)}}$

and between contradictory terms

3.3 pr. (A) + pr. (B); pr. (B) + pr. (A)

3.4 $\overline{\text{i. (A) + i. (B); i. (B) + i. (A)}}$

Complementary to the ability to extrapolate three distinctive patterns of homology based on different combinations of terms, what emerges as an instrumental feature of the combinatory of terms is the delineation of potential narrative structures, as

overarching themes that emerge through the combinatorial procedure, such as transgression and alienation, as pointed out by Greimas. «It is, thus, not difficult to imagine how a very small number of semic categories may generate, with the aid of a combinatory, a considerable number of larger semantic units or sememes» (Greimas 1970: 40).

How and at what stage in the development of an advertising text can we apply the semiotic square?

From an applied marketing perspective Floch argues that the semiotic square «is the commercial basis for semiotics, particularly the active role it can play in marketing and communication. Its central task and its (relative) competence are to be found in the *transition from the apprehension of differences to the definition of relations*» (2001: 9-10; italics in the original). Moreover, «it can serve as a common topography for the discourse of brands in addition to that of targeted groups or markets» (ibid: 131). Floch's postulate resonates the basic Saussurean premise that language is a system of differences and oppositions, a principle that is reflected in the structural presuppositions of the semiotic square. «no object is knowable in and of itself. Only through its determinations can it be known. That its determinations could be apprehended only as differences etched against the object and that this differential nature gives to these determinations the status of linguistic value» (Greimas 1987: 86).

The fact that the starting point for constructing a semiotic square rests with contrariety and not contradiction attests to the primacy of semantic differences, rather than strict oppositions, between concepts. The concepts or semes making up a pair of contrariety succumb to a conventionalist binarist paradigm and their relative stability as contraries in a given langue depends on the diachronic depth of their use by members of a linguistic community. There is nothing inherent in the semes «natural sexuality» vs «cultural sexuality», as above referenced by allusion to Greimas's example, that allows them to stand as contrary poles in a semantic axis, save for a cultural rationale that sanctions their function as contraries. The stability

of a system of langue based on contrarities, as against plain differences and certainly not strict oppositions, is maintained by their relative frequency of instantiation in narratives.

The applicability of semio-narrative structures to advertising, as a different mode of discourse to the original field of application of the Greimasian generative trajectory is valid insofar as the model was envisaged as a generic platform encompassing the conditions of possibility of textual signification and given that advertising discourse, prior to its manifestation as surface text, is conceived of as a concept and a script, with a clear and concise combinatorial rationale between concept and script and among surface narrative signs. In this paper the focus lies with the first stage of development of an advertising execution, viz. the development of a concept and secondarily the linkage of a concept with a script, but not with the provision of a combinatorial rationale whereby surface level signs interact with view to furnishing the intended brand signification. More precisely, it will be demonstrated how the semiotic square may yield a robust account planning tool for constructing brand signification.

Planning for brand and user personality by taking account of fundamental differences between depth and surface structures in the generative trajectory

Two of the basic functions in advertising account planning consist in carving a distinctive brand personality and the projection of a brand user's personality through an advertising concept. «Brand personality is simply the human character attributes of the brand. By this, we mean that if you were describing the brand or company as a person, what are the adjectives you would use to describe it? Some companies have very clear and calculated personalities, while others are very muddled» (Kelly & Jugenheimer 2006: 64). «A brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics as gender, age and socioeconomic class, as well as such classic human personality traits as warmth, concern and sentimentality» (Aaker 1995: 141). A strong brand personality is the key to brand differentiation, hence such a list of

adjectives⁵ is not just a matter of fanciful tagging, but the very way whereby brands assume distinctive roles in consumers' mindscapes. Now, what is the difference between a word functioning as an adjective and as a nuclear seme and what is the difference between a brand as a personification and as a depth structure? The difference lies in levels of depth of signification, which is something not explicitly recognized by traditional account planning and consumer research and an area where semiotics may make a significant contribution. An adjective predicated of a human is a lexeme attributing a property to that person. Greimas distinguished in *Sémantique Structurale* between nuclear semes and classemes, the key point of differentiation being, following Hjelmslev, that of semantic invariance versus variance. Semes constitute the elementary units of signification in an elementary semantic relational structure, irrespective of contextual use, whereas classemes constitute contextual semes, that is concepts that assume signification largely due to their context. The combination of nuclear semes and classemes furnishes sememes, based on the well-known formula $Sm=(Ns+Cs)$ (cf. Greimas 1966: 78). A lexeme is the surface discursive manifestation of a sememe, thus containing both the nuclear semic kernel and the contextual classematic signification. For a brand to function diachronically, that is in order to be recognized as semantically invariable, in a wider discursive langue, which may be conceived of as the wider product category discourse of which it partakes, the Ns part of the equation must be invariant and not overdeterminable by Cs's of which it may be variably predicated in different communicative contexts. «What changes in specific textual representations of the product are the signifiers that deliver the same signifieds» (Danesi & Beasley 2002: 66). For example, in the context of an advertising pretest, the predication of the lexeme «trustworthy» of a brand should be qualified as to whether it is a Ns or a Cs, that is whether it is a logical reconstruction of the synchronically ordered surface elements of the particular execution or a diachronic brand value (and at this stage we are not examining whether such semes constitute key category perceptual drivers or brand specific points of differentiation, but simply pointing out the need

⁵ A comprehensive list of brand personality traits may be found in Aaker 1997: 355.

for hierarchizing them semantically). Moreover, such a seme should be explored diachronically in the context of past brand related executions (should the same positioning apply) in order to discern whether a deep semantic structure is operative through time, as well as be qualified through probing which surface level stimuli contribute to the recognition of such a seme. In this manner a semiotic inventory may be built whereby brand owners will be capable of distinguishing not only between the strength of various semes in maintaining a uniform brand identity, but also the source of this recognition at the level of the surface structure of an execution. Such an analysis is of particular importance to a brand owner or enunciator of a brand discourse insofar as a brand discourse is not a dominant discourse, in the sense of a lexicon. Ad signs are highly motivated signs, while the planes of content and expression are «arbitrarily conjoined» (Floch 1989: 73), which is why assuming the example of «head» and the nuclear seme of «spheroidity» employed by Greimas in *Sémantique Structurale* (1966: 47) as the point of departure for making sense of a depth grammar is not sufficient in the langue of brands. In fact, the langue of brands is built progressively through acts of parole and the solidification of a brand's langue takes time (in the same vein as a «natural language» is the outcome of millennial endorsement by members of a linguistic community). Thus, predicating spheroidity of head and safety of Volvo are two completely different cases of a sign's manipulation and this may be attested by applying a quick commutation test and checking whether the extraction of an element from the form of the plane of expression affects directly meaning in terms of the form of content. Thus, if we remove the eyes from a head, which are subsumed hyponymically under the concept «head», head will still carry spheroidity as its nuclear seme, but if we remove the windshield from a Volvo or if we assume that no easy-ride shots are featured in an ad execution, then the entire concept of safety is likely to fall apart. This example attests to the fact that branding discourse is highly contrived and that the relative stability or homology of elements between the planes of content and expression encountered in «natural language» do not apply in

the case of branding discourse, which is why a robust brand personality is a necessary prerequisite for the maintenance of diachronic signification.

Another reason why in the process of attributing personality to a brand through advertising discourse adjectives should be differentiated as to whether they constitute nuclear semes, classemes, sememes or haphazard lexemes is that diachronic signifying stability is maintained through iterativity. Given that in an advertising execution there is limited time for communicating an utterance or a message to an enunciatee or a receiver, unless a clear semantic segmentation in terms of the above fourfold classification of adjectives has been envisaged and controlled for during the encoding phase on behalf of the enunciator, then the limited attention span of the enunciatee is likely to waver semantically among surface level elements. However this does not imply that controlling against such semio-narrative diffusion is a risk-free enterprise. Yet, as Greimas and Eco stress, the homologation between the levels of content and expression is a matter of probabilities, thus by planning for semantic coherence minimizes the risk of dissonance (at least at the level of concept/script/intended positioning, which is our focus).

Now, what is the difference between a lexeme and a sememe? On a surface manifestation level there is no difference. «Head» is a lexeme, but in different contexts of use (eg. idiomatic phrases) it is invested variably with classemes. As a sememe it partakes of the plane of immanence, whereas as a lexeme it is a mere sign of manifest discourse. Greimas deems that classemes are responsible for the semantic enrichment of a lexeme, which enrichment in terms of «rich brand associations» is also recognized by K.L.Keller (1998) as a building block for successful branding. However, this is a double-bind situation insofar as, on the one hand, the overdetermination of a brand's discourse by classemes at the expense of nuclear semes undermines iterability and by implication diachrony, which is of paramount importance for instituting a brand's discourse as differentiated in a system of contrarities making up a product category's langue. On the other hand, given that the more abstract a concept, the more invariant (Floch 2001: 111), the more

abstract, as a downside, the less brand-differentiating it tends to be. Planning meticulously an advertising campaign with view to creating brand personality as a hierarchically ordered set of adjectives against the fourfold classification of nuclear semes, classemes, sememes and lexemes, addresses different levels of a brand's depth grammar and by implication its diachronic value in a langue as system of differences. Distinguishing not only between types of adjectives, but also between levels of depth in the generative trajectory affords to dispel planning mistakes, such as subsuming in a direct hierarchical relationship a nuclear seme and a lexeme.

Pursuant to putting the so-called brand personality traits in semiotic perspective and explaining why they should be addressed on different levels of depth in the semiotic generative trajectory our analytical focus will now turn to locating the «human» aspects of a brand in the generative trajectory. In order to do this a preliminary overview of Greimas's actantial model is called for and more specifically the communication model of enunciation that stems from it.

Preliminary overview of Greimas's actantial model and the communicative model of enunciation

In order to make sense of Greimas's concept of narrative structures, and by implication the creation of advertising concepts and scripts as narrative structures aiming at fleshing out a brand personality and a brand user personality, one must start with the exposition of the communication model of enunciation, within which these structures are embedded. Courtés (1976: 71) qualifies the Greimasian model of enunciative communication as «*communication participative*» insofar as both sender [destinateur] and receiver [destinataire] are bound in a structural relationship delineated by the object of desire, which is transferred in an act of doing, thus rendering the former in a state of dispossession and the latter in a state of appropriation. The concept was taken on board by Greimas in *Du Sens II* (1983: 44-46). As is the case with various concepts in the Greimasian model, enunciation is an umbrella term spanning various aspects of narrative structuration. Thus, enunciation (see Greimas & Courtés, 1979: 123-128) may be defined as the general

«communication predicament» or the «psychosociological context» allowing for the production of énoncés [utterances] and at the same time as the virtual horizon of language allowing for its actualization in particular énoncés.

The notion of virtuality is critical for understanding not only the function of enunciation, but also, at a more fundamental level, for making sense of how narrativity, as «various transformations resulting in (con) or (dis)junctions of subjects with their objects» (Courtés 1976: 72) coheres with deep linguistic structures in the context of a deductive metalinguistic theory. The space of semiotic virtualities that enunciation is summoned to actualize is the locus of semio-narrative structures. This conceptualization of semio-narrative structures as horizon of actantial possibilities bears concomitantly on the conceptualization of the subject of enunciation or the human as actor. «The actants possess a metalinguistic status compared to actors» (1966: 174), whereas the actor is a particular anthropomorphic rendition of an actantial structure in a particular narrative. In traditional branding linguistic currency, the anthropomorphization of a brand under the rubric of brand personality bears great resemblance to the actorial aspect of a narrative, whereby the metalinguistic actant assumes definite characteristics. However, the actorial aspect of a narrative constitutes the surface manifestation of a semio-narrative actantial structure, which is located at a deeper semantic level. In the same fashion as a fundamental distinction was drawn earlier with regard to the various semiotic strata whereby an «adjective» must be approached with view to maintaining the diachronic value of a motivated sign, the mode of the ascription of these adjectives and the axiological frameworks in which this ascription takes place must be determined on various levels of semantic depth.

The subject, from a structuralist perspective, is not the intentional actant of an act of enunciation, but an instance and instantiation of semio-narrative structures that await to be activated as virtualities. «From our point of view, the subject is but a virtual focal point (a space ab quo), or more precisely a logical subject whose enunciative act may be semiotically constructed from his presence in the utterance, with the help of a corresponding logico-semantic simulacrum» (Greimas 1976: 435),

or the object/brand as a locus of values and personality traits, as a «semiotic simulacrum» (Greimas 1987: 87). How does this translate in communication terms? «[...] the construction of the simulacrum of truth is greatly conditioned, not directly by the axiological universe of the receiver, but by the sender's view of what the axiological universe is» (Greimas 1989c: 657). The conceptualization of semio-narrative structures as plane of virtual possibilities merely points to the deductive nature of the structural model insofar as it is capable of predicting the plenum of textual actualizations as a series of relations and transformations from depth to surface structure and vice versa or in the context of actualization of virtual possibilities as the outcome of a transformative syntax (see Greimas 1970: 169). The approach is metalinguistically constraining (a «collective system of constraints», as E. Benveniste put it), not deterministic at the level of manifestation. Moreover, the act of enunciation is responsible for producing semiosis, and the semiotic act is responsible for textualization. This qualification between the actantial and actorial aspects of the respective surface narrative and depth semio-narrative structures as a difference between a plane of virtualities and their partial actualizations is key in understanding the role of the semiotic square as a mapping out of potential signifying relations, as well as adding dynamism to traditional brand personality traits, that seem to rest with actualized virtualities and surface level actorial structures.

Resuming the earlier discussion regarding the basic function of advertising account planning concerning the creation of a brand personality in the light of the enriched semiotic perspective including the actantial model we can now see that personality from an actantial point of view is immanently at the level of a brand's depth grammar a set of unrealized virtualities, prior to its manifestation under a concrete actorial structure. This is the crux of the argument pursued thus far and at the same time the critical point for unraveling the applicability of the semiotic square in its full-blown potential for advertising account planning.

Three basic notations designate the respective modes whereby the énoncé functions in a narrative structure, as follows:

1. $F(A1, A2...)$ or $EN = F(A1, A2...)$ (Greimas 1971: 799)

At the level of the surface narrative syntax the elementary unit of the énoncé is postulated, along with actants as its immediate constituents, related to each other by a function. According to this notation⁶ the relational function of the énoncé is constitutive of the actant-terms A1, A2 and so on, in the same manner whereby the deep metalinguistic structure or the semantic axis reunites two object terms. The modes of relationality among actant terms (subject, object, predicate) at a deep level are determined by what Greimas calls an actantial grammar, which is antecedent to surface syntax and different to categorical grammars, which are concerned with morphological typologies and syntagmatic grammars, which are concerned with distributional categories. By the same token that the semic microuniverse and the principles of its organization constitutes the depth grammar of signification, the actantial grammar determines the organization of actants in a narrative space.

The actant is the one that accomplishes or sustains an act. It is a type of «syntactic unity» prior to being invested with any formal properties (recalling that the subject is an empty vessel awaiting to be invested with signification during the spatiotemporal enactment of a semio-narrative structure). The actant may be anything, including persons, objects, animals, concepts, companies, etc.

2. F junction (S;O) either in a conjunctive (S/\O) or disjunctive (S\O) form

This notation designates that the énoncé functions primarily as an énoncé of being (or énoncé of state- énoncé d'état), that is a given state of affairs between a subject and an object. A further distinction to the function summarily referred to in the *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* was furnished by Greimas (1971: 800-801) between active and communicative doing or becoming. «Active doing [2.1] establishes the relation between two actants of which one is called subject and the other object, whereas communicative doing [2.2] establishes a relation amongst

⁶ Basic principles governing Greimasian notation (eg hooks, parentheses, low/upper case letters, symbols (+), punctuation marks (:)) may be found in Greimas, 1966: 156 and throughout Greimas and Courtés 1976.

three actants, called respectively sender D1 [destinateur], receiver D2 [destinataire] and object» (ibid), which are rendered notationally as follows:

2.1 EN1= F doing (S → O)

2.2 EN2= F doing (D1 → O → D2)

A brandcomms cue or set of narrative features and syntagmatic sequences of utterances making up brand personality and projected user personality assumes meaning only once O has been received by D2, however the mode of inscription as a set of brand associations must be anticipated by D1 during the encoding phase of O.

3. F transformation (S;O), which yields F[S1 → (S2/\O)]

This notation designates that the énoncé is also responsible for the transformation from one state of being to another, thus it functions as an énoncé of becoming (or énoncé of doing- *énoncé de faire*, as is usually translated literally in the literature, which does not account fully for the dialectic between being and becoming), that is a transformation of the actant from an initial state of affairs to a new one.

The actantial structure of the narrative is complemented with the introduction of three actantial modalities, making up the modal syntax of the narrative's surface structure, functioning as qualifiers of the énoncé viz. willing, knowing and being able⁷ (also see Greimas's Preface to Courtés 1976: 17). The first two constitute the competence of the actant or his ability to bring about the Narrative Program, while the third one constitutes the element of performativity. Even though some of these modalities may not be explicitly narrated, they are implied deductively as logical presuppositions. The deployment of the narrative essentially consists in manifesting the competence of the subject or its becoming competent, through transformations from a state-of-being to states-of-doing. All three modalities constitute

⁷ It should be noted that Greimas does not preclude the existence of other modalities (eg croire), the exploration of which rests with the genre of discourse under scrutiny. The modalization of a discursive structure in applied terms depends upon the subject of enquiry. Thus, for example, in the field of applied marketing research and more particularly in the context of mapping out ethnographically how the Paris underground passengers' perceptual orientation is formed while using the RATP services, Floch coined the modalities of the journey (the physical inscription or entry of the traveller into a designated space) and modalities of locating and identifying (the degree of mastery of the topography) (see Floch 2001: 17).

anthropomorphic classemes «that set up an actant as subject, that is, as a possible operator of the doing» (Greimas 2003: 56). In notation the modal utterance as a qualifier of descriptive utterance is rendered as

MU= F:wanting/S;O/

As an example, the sentences «John wants Peter to leave» would be rendered as
F:wanting/S:John; O(F:departure, A:Peter)/

A crucial qualification of the above equation regarding the interaction between syntactics and semantics in the field of branding emerges from the propositions

1. Peter wants an apple
2. Peter wants to be good

which linguistic utterances can be represented as

1. F:wanting/S: Peter; O(F:acquisition;A:Peter;O:apple)/
2. F:wanting/S: Peter; O(F:acquisition;A:Peter;O:goodness)/

Such descriptive utterances characterized by functions not of the order of doing but of the order of having (which are a subclass of the order of doing), are called by Greimas attributive utterances. The qualifying difference between the two types of utterance rests with the attributable object(s) and their values. Whereas the action in the first utterance is fulfilled by the possession of an external object, in the second utterance it is fulfilled by the possession of an internal object. «In syntactic terms this difference is expressed through the fact that the relation between the subject and the object of the attributable utterance is in the first case hypotactic and in the second hyponymic» (Greimas 2003: 57). Hyponymy designates the place of a seme in a semic category structured in a semantic axis, in which case the semic category would be healthiness and the seme /bad/ would be placed disjunctively on the opposite side of the semantic axis constituting the semic category. Hypotaxis (and its opposite hyperotaxis) designates the formal ordering of terms prior to any semantic investment, in which case «goodness» is hypotactic to «apple». However, what appears to be hypotactic (eg goodness) is actually hypertactic insofar as, upon a logical reconstruction of the argument, the deep meaning of the above surface discursive ordering attributes to the desire of goodness a causative status vis a vis

the manifestation of the desire for the object «apple». Thus, the actantial model attains to unearth the semantic relationships among the terms (subject, object) of a modal function, which are latently presupposed in the manifest syntax.

A further logical reconstruction of the relationships of the actantial terms in Aristotelian terms allows us to attribute a status of efficient causality (*causa efficiens*) to «apple» as capable of saturating desire, where desire functions as a particular generative mechanism in the above descriptive utterance, which posits goodness as a primordial driver behind the manifestation qua object of desire (or *small Other - petit objet a* in Lacanian terms). At an even deeper level, and given that «the number of levels of depth is heuristic in nature and depends on the strategy of discovery adopted» (Greimas, 1989 II: 540), one might ascribe the status of subject to desire (and we have already established that the subject of a narrative may be anything from a human to an animal up to an abstract concept such as desire per se) as the final cause (*causa finalis*) or an uber-desiring mechanism that demands of the surface syntax subject or of a particular narrative's actor to desire semes, such as goodness and by implication an apple. In such an instance the above descriptive sentences would be rendered as

1.1 Desire desires of Peter that he wants an apple

1.2 Peter wants an apple

1.3 Peter wants to be good

and sentence (1) would be rendered as

F:desiring;/S:desire;O(F:acquisition;A:Peter;O:goodness) ,

where the actant Peter is the instantiation of the final cause of the subject desire as actant behind the actant (which, according to Greimas, is a «virtual performatory subject»; *ibid*) and goodness a manifestation of a generalized desiring mechanism.

Of equal importance to the possibility of opening up semantic interpretation to ever deepening layers as a proviso of the actantial model is the introduction at this juncture in *Du Sens I* by Greimas of the concept of value, which was absent in his earlier work *Structural Semantics* (which is further developed in *Du Sens II*). Bearing in mind that the actantial model has a dual role, viz, that of translating semantically

the surface syntactic ordering of a narrative (irrespective of genre), as well as of yielding a communication model, the newly introduced dimension of value (cf. Greimas 1987: 86) as an axiological investment of the object would be constituted as such during the process of constructing the object at the interface between sender and receiver.

The axiological opening up of the actantial model

The axiological opening up of the actantial model essentially affords to lay bare the irrevocably semiotic existence of subjects and objects as purely structural terms, thus overcoming millennial discussions about the ontological status of subject and object. «It is only through the inscription of a value in an utterance of state, whose function is to establish a junctive relationship between subject and object, that we may consider subject and object as semiotically interdependent» (Greimas 1983: 27).

In the light of the axiological dimension of the actantial model the transformative function is rendered as

Virt= F transformation [S1 \longrightarrow O1 (S\O)], which denotes that the virtual subject is separated from the object that is invested with value, which value it seeks to recuperate during successive states of becoming.

The relationship between the actantial model and the Symbolic Order

«Our messages and texts become meaningful, or signifying, only if they are constructed with the semiotic substance of codes» (Danesi 1995: 41). Linguistic and cultural codes are part of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order. By stretching the actantial reconstruction of the argument a bit further and in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis, as well as the missing element of the Code (a notion which is not operationalized by Greimas up until *Du Sens II*; eg see Greimas 1983: 220) from the Greimasian communication model (which originally appeared in *Sémantique Structurale* as a truncated version of Jakobson's communication model- cf. Jakobson 1985: 149-150), one might argue that it is the Symbolic Order as plenum of socially

dominant codes that demands of Peter that he desires goodness (or any other nuclear seme inscribed in a brand personality structure) and by implication apple (or a brand as an inscription of a value system making up the Symbolic Order), thus transposing the subject of the actantial function from Peter to the Symbolic Order, rendering Peter a «virtual performatory subject», demanding as a primordial modality underpinning desire, and goodness/apple as the objects of desire. In this case the final cause would be the demand of the symbolic order for goodness and the efficient cause the apple. This nexus of relationships may be mapped out in the semiotic square. Also, by the same token that the semantic investment of the object of desire may be opened up axiologically from a concrete object to an abstract value, the actantial subject may be opened up from its concrete instantiation (eg Peter) to Code of which Peter is an instantiation qua desiring subject or what desires through Peter, viz the Code demanding its homeostatic stability. «The subject is an effect of the Symbolic» (Lacan 1998: 279). By implication, the text that emerges as a reconstruction of the surface structure narrative through the actantial model may be likened to Genette's archi-text, that functions as depth grammar irrespective of genre, discourse and style (see Genette 1992: 81-84). On a similar note, Derrida's conceptualization of archi-text (or «general text»)⁸ as a radical embeddedness in social networks and systems of value, bears a striking resemblance to Courtés' elaboration of the Greimasian actantial subject as archi-subject, while abridging it with the notion of the Code as a system of values. The same holds, isotopically, for the relationship between two actors conversing in the context of the surface narrative of an ad, where the one assumes the role of the subject of enunciation as the Code demanding of the receiver or the conditioned/suggestible subject that he affirms the legitimacy of the Code qua desiring subject. It is the Code that speaks through the destinateur and suggests to the destinataire that he enters a relationship of conjunction with the object of desire as semantically and axiologically invested object. At the same time the narrative affirms that the subject's becoming or being actualized from an initial state of pure virtuality essentially consists in

⁸ See Caputo 1997: 77-82

returning to the originary locus whence stems the demand, that is the Symbolic Order. The subject must be what it has always been, a phantasm, a progeny of an originary demand manifested through a desiring mechanism. However, the constitution of a knowing subject does not occur automatically.

The truth of the advertising text: between persuasion and interpretation

While elaborating on how the modality of knowing functions in a narrative structure, Greimas further splits it into two modalities, that of persuasive doing [*faire persuasif*] and interpretive doing [*faire interprétatif*]. «The components involved in the act of interpretation- the interpreter, the text, the context, the code, the culture, the product etc.- are inextricably intertwined» (Danesi 1995: 42). These modalities constitute cornerstones in Greimas's communication model, the former relating to the sender and the latter to the receiver. The truth of what is communicated essentially consists in an overlap or conjunction between what is communicated as persuasive act and what is interpreted as the being of communication, or the outcome of the interpretive act.

Another crucial distinction that qualifies this knowledge is that between truth [*vérité*] and truth-telling [*veridiction*]. The different combinations of these modalities, as portrayed in the following veridictory square, bring about different states of being (true, false, secret, lie), while pointing to the transformative acts that take place during this cognitive doing [*faire cognitif*].

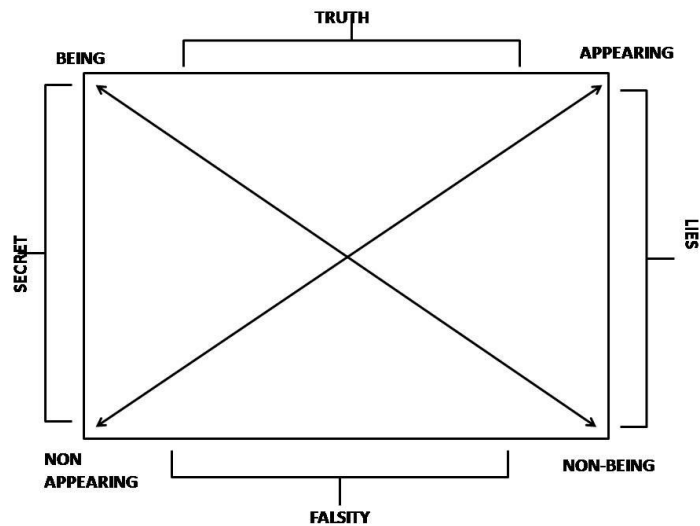


Figure 8.The veridictory square (Courtés 1976: 78; my translation)

The main reason why I deem that this distinction is of paramount importance is because, following Courtés, the equation of epistemic knowing as the outcome of narrative structures and therefore as equivalent to believing [*croire*] reveals the inextricable interdependency between actantial structures and truth as a function of the internal logic or «truth of the text» (Greimas 1983: 54), thus positing veridiction as the necessary precondition for conferring judgments about the truth of a text, echoing the fundamental Derridean position «il n’y a rien hors du texte». Not only does veridiction afford to reinstate the primacy of narrative structures and a text’s structuration over and above any purportedly disinterested truth seeking approach, but, as Greimas stresses, it liberates the text from any extra-semiotic referent or «external designatum» (Greimas 1983: 441), while positing an «independent narrative isotopy» (ibid). This self-referential relationship between the purely «linguistic acts» and the truth they bring about through successive transformations of states-of-being constitute the essence of a text as «simulacrum» (Greimas and Courtés 1976: 433) or «logico-semantic simulacrum» (Greimas 1976: 435; also see Greimas 1983: 23). As Maddox (1989: 664) points out, veridiction is not just another function, but instrumental for the very coherence of the text. The veridiction contract marks the aforementioned conjunction between persuasive doing and

interpretive doing or an agreement between sender and receiver of the narrative. But what is the case in a competitive market where more than one brand players vie for the same level of narrative agreement? «two rival discursive forms [...] have the same goal: the trust of the receiver. This trust alone can certify the veridiction contract» (Greimas 1989c: 658). This kind of trust does not concern solely the impression the receiver has of the sender, or a consumer of the company that owns and communicates a brand, but also the communicated object. This sort of contractual agreement implies a mutual recognition of the value of the communicated object that is verified in an act of exchange. However, from a semiotic point of view and this is a crucial juncture in the argumentation about the relationship between surface and depth structures, what is exchanged in a contractual agreement of trust is not just the value of the communicated object, but the truthfulness of the exchange value of the communicated object with the syntagmatic features of the surface narrative plot. And insofar as these syntagmatic features have been drawn from the inventory of a cultural order and sequenced in a narrative in such a fashion as to enhance this bond with the receiver, then they are assumed by the sender to be isotopic with the receiver's valued cultural inventory, given that s/he partakes of the same cultural order.

Projecting a user personality and an axiological framework through the semiotic square

Floch stresses that one of the functions of the semiotic square, as we have already explained, is the projection of consumer values or an axiological framework. This axiological framework stands for the projected user personality, insofar as it refers to a system of valorization. By reference to the automotive product category Floch distinguishes between instrumental and base values, their qualifying difference consisting in levels of abstraction from functional benefits sought from the possession of a car brand to more abstract values, of symbolic, hedonic, experiential nature, which often stand in a relationship of contrariety, based on Floch's analysis of the automotive category's advertising utterances. The axiological framework of

the automotive category is split into two pairs of contrariety and their opposites, viz. practical valorization corresponding to instrumental values as the opposite of base values (eg durability), utopian valorization corresponding to base values as opposed to instrumental or existential values (eg adventure), ludic valorization or the negation of utilitarian values and critical valorization or the negation of existential values (Floch 2001: 117,120). This axiological framework is portrayed in the following semiotic square:

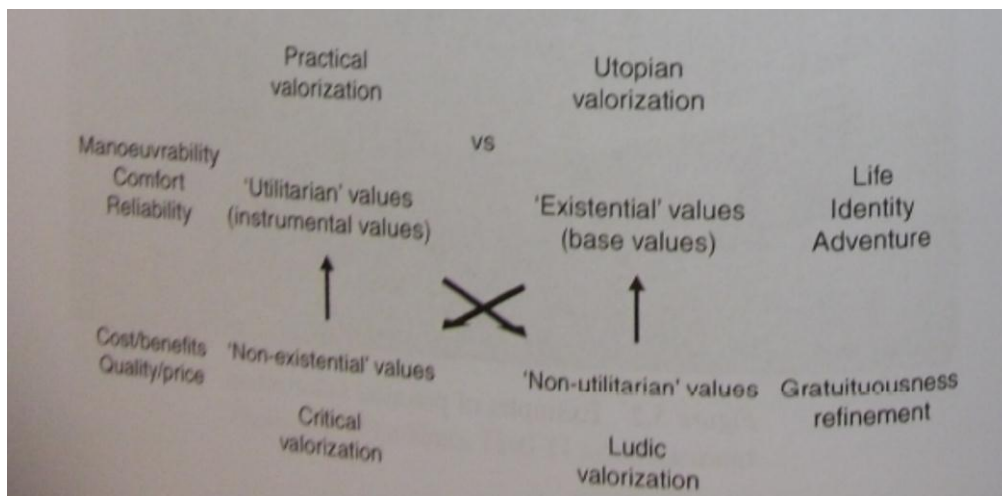


Figure 9.The axiological framework of the automotive category (Floch 2001: 120)

Three points raised by Floch vis a vis the above semiotic square are of particular value in understanding how the projection of distinctive value territories as reflective of the valorizations placed by different consumer segments on the automotive product category impacts on and is reflected in advertising. First, how a brand maintains its personality vis a vis the different axiological relations as reflected on the square or the «coherence of its discourses» (ibid: 124), given that a distinctive brand personality as a set of nuclear semes and classemes is communicated in each different execution, which must also be interlocking with terms of the axiological square. In short, how the contrarities and the ensuing relations making up the brand personality square interact with the contrarities and the ensuing relations

making up the axiological square. This issue has already been addressed by Greimas in terms of the aforementioned typologies of homology and non-homology among the terms making up distinctive squares. Second, how do the interlocking squares afford to not only portray historical transitions of a brand's personality (cf. Floch 2001: 128-129), but also map out alternative routes of becoming. This issue was also tackled by Greimas insofar as by virtue of the squares' dynamic modeling orientation (cf. Lagopoulos 2004: 7), alternative brand futures may be envisioned by reconfiguring the relations among the squares' terms. Third, how can the elements of a bespoke advertising concept/script be tied up with the squares' object-terms, in which case it has already been illustrated that by virtue of the actantial model, individual surface elements may be reconstructed in such a manner as to reflect the underlying relations of a surface narrative.

In concluding, Floch suggests that the contribution of the semiotic square to marketing communications is twofold. First, «it provides a way to position on the same topography what pertains to commercial communication, as well as what relates to product reality» (Floch 2001: 136). Second, it allows for «the recognition of pertinent expressive features in the production of a specific meaning effect» (ibid: 137).

Bringing it altogether : The «truth» of Pot Noodle

Pot Noodle background information

As an introduction, the following background information pertaining to Pot Noodle's internal and external environment, marketing mix, segmentation and consumer insights constitute essential features for making sense of the brand's strategy.

Launched in 1979 Pot Noodle is the 23rd largest food brand in the UK with a market share of 95% (£105m) in the instant hot snack market (Western Mail 2004). The brand is targeted to those who do not want preparation or to spend too much on a snack and would prefer a quick, hot and filling meal. The primary target market for Pot Noodle are males, 16-24 years old (Unilever Best

Foods). Within this group Pot Noodle has identified that its product supports the lifestyles of students living in halls of residence who are more inclined to purchase food which is inexpensive, quick to make and needs no special preparation or utensils (Western Mail 2004). Pot Noodle is claimed to be the favourite food by 44,6% of 11-19 year olds (Unilever Best Foods). It is a source of food on the go, popular with growing teenagers. Pot Noodle is a low cost, low value product, features that are exaggerated with the semiotic use of soft pornography. As stated by Unilever, «For our new advertising campaign we did quite a bit of research with our target audience. As a result we are talking some real truths about Pot Noodle- in the world of snacks it is considered to be cheap and dirty. This has led us to develop a true identity for the brand». The quirky connotation of humour and sex can invoke a memorable emotional response. This strategy has resulted in an ad recognition rate of 74% (Unilever Best Foods). Pot Noodle wanted to be differentiated and the 'dirty and you want it' message is particularly appealing to the target market. A Pot Noodle cup costs 69p. Pricing strategy aims to yield a competitive advantage against substitute snacks, such as packaged sandwiches⁹.

The brand and user personality of Pot Noodle

Pot Noodle is a logico-semantic simulacrum insofar as it constructs through its advertising discourse the very modes of valorizing alternative ready-made meals on behalf of its target-groups. Its extensive and constantly updated through relevant and differentiating NPD portfolio of flavors furnishes its consumers with «choosiness» within given socio-economic confines. The brand personality of Pot Noodle and by extension the user personality of Pot Noodle is polarizing, while leveraging consistently contrarities and oppositions with view to entrenching its positioning in an ever solidifying manner. The nuclear seme that stands hierarchically at the apex of its semantic micro-universe consists in «easiness», which also

⁹ «Overview of the marketing mix and analysis of the influences and patterns of consumption», Retrieved December 12, 2011 from <http://www.123HelpMe.com/view.asp?id=121419>.

constitutes its USP at its most abstract and encompasses both base and instrumental values, based on Floch's aforementioned distinction. In terms of base values easiness is in a hyperonymic relationship to handiness and readiness-to-cook, while in terms of instrumental values it stands in a hyperonymic relationship to a «no-frills», «laid-back» lifestyle. In terms of classes or contextual senses with which the brand is invested throughout time in the context of its multiple advertising executions, which enrich its semantic micro-universe, we also encounter values such as «peer-oriented», obviously of particular relevance for a demographic where peer pressure, but also a quest for individuality through group-sanctioned styles are highly operative in the psychodemographic's modus vivendi; non-feminine, as it exalts values of youthful male sleaziness; escapist, as it valorizes urban modes of entertainment (clubbing, fast cars, dance-culture etc).

Deconstructing the discourse of Pot Noodle



Picture 1. Pot Noodle «Fork down and fill up» promo poster



Picture 2. Pot Noodle «Give a flying fork» promo poster

The employment of highly motivated onomatopoeic lexemes in the brand's discourse, such as «tastified» (instead of testified, in the spoof *Highschool Musical* TVC <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=40rcJ68Y9kl>), «fork down» as a contrived directional proverbial phrase denoting the movement of the fork's descent in the plastic cup and complementing-cum- conditioning «fill up» in the same syntagmatic ordering enhance the self-referential nature of the brand's logico-semantic simulacrum.

The brand does not follow a rational persuasion route¹⁰, but an indirect affective/emotive route aiming to nurture positive associations about the brand to its target audience through a highly figurative discourse, whose signs impact synaesthetically on perception. The TVC in focus (*Moussaka Rap* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knZXMSr3YNI>) anthropomorphizes effectively through the employment of two conflicting actors / protagonists the contrariety between two actantial subjects at a semio-narrative level who vie for enforcing their

¹⁰ For a structuralist analysis of an ad text that relies more on rational claims by drawing on the actantial model see Everaert-Desmedt 2007: 187-196.

differential valorization of the same object of desire («meal»), of which the conjunction with the enunciatee or receiver of the utterance must be effected.

The script of the ad execution (TVC) runs as follows:

«Actor 1: What'r you doing?

Actor 2: Lick it

I'm making vegetarian Moussaka with cheese from Osaka
got some herbs from the market in a wicki wicker basket
mixing sugar and starches with my juicy pe-aches
snaps and I'm down with my Cinnamon sticks
T-glaze...and I'm slicin' and dicin' with my Tungsten blade
I got DOLPHIN friendly sea-bass that I got filayed (Filleted)
from the free range ORPHANS OF Belgrade
only three more hours...till it's made
What... what are you doing?

Actor 2: i got a pot an' a kettle an' a fork

Packshot: Pot Noodle says put the pan down»

The rooting of the mode of the ad execution's utterance in a rap music discursive genre aims apparently at enhancing the brand's appeal to its youthful target, while the deployment of the verbal discourse in rhyme parodies the reason for traditionally employing rhyme in advertising, viz enhanced memorability. The compact and complex discourse of Actor 1, coupled with an idiomatic employment of natural language (eg omission of consonants as in the case of slicin'/dicin', which is representative of the hip-hop discursive genre) functions alienatingly in contrariety to the simple and concise discourse of Actor 2, whose concluding utterance

constitutes the catalysis in manifest discourse that allows for the reconstruction of the ad text's meaning according to a fundamental contrariety. Thus, the paradigmatic relation of contrariety at the deep level is transformed at the surface level into an anthropomorphic syntagmatic polemic relationship between a subject or hero (Actor 2) and an anti-subject or anti-hero (Actor 1) and their respective relationship to Actor 3 (Pot Noodle) and Actor 4 (Moussaka). The contrariety that piles up progressively in the course of the deployment of Actor 1's discourse reaches its apex in the manifest utterance that his overly complex meal takes three hours to prepare. The polemic nature of the two actors' utterances establishes the syntagmatic series of performance, which ultimately valorizes the object of desire between two alternatives, having crossed the levels of confrontation

(NU1=F: confrontation (S1 \longleftrightarrow S2))

and domination (NU2=F:domination (S1 \longrightarrow S2)).

The user's personality is projected in the performative syntagmatic utterance series, which also construct the brand personality. «Indeed, to the extent that the elementary utterance can be defined as an oriented relation that engenders two end terms- the subject and the object- the value invested in the object in question in a way semanticizes the whole utterance, and thereby becomes a value of the subject that meets it upon seeking the object» (Greimas 1987: 87).

The contrariety is established primordially with regard to the nuclear semes /easiness/ and /complexity/ making up the opposing poles of the semantic micro-universe S or «mode of meal preparation» or the foundational dimension of the brand's semiotic square.

The punchline «put the pan down» or the «last utterance corresponding to the asserting instance» (Greimas 1987: 75) attains to effect not only the closure of signification, but, even more importantly, the closure of valorization in the face of two competing subjects and their quest for legitimating their respective discourses. Up until the point of the end of Actor 2's utterance, we are confronted with what Greimas calls a complex narrative state (Greimas 1987: 95), where both subjects are in a state of conjunction with the object of desire

$(S1 \wedge O1) \} (S2 \wedge O2)$.

By virtue of the enforcement of a disjunction through the imperative mode of the punchline's utterance the ludic oscillation between two contrary valorizations is ultimately brought to a halt.

$(S1 \vee O1) \} (S2 \wedge O2)$.

Complementary to effecting the closure of valorization, the packshot's punchline opens up the semantic universe of the brand's discourse on three parallel discursive levels. «Parallel discourse, by projecting a double reference, constitutes an original type of syntagmatic articulation» (F. Jameson's foreword to Greimas 1987: xxxix). First, as an imperative speech act or a synchronic act of parole embedded in the surface narrative of the bespoke ad text it mandates of the enunciatee to induce euthanasia to the frying pan («put it down») in favor of the kettle, thus adding up diachronically to the base level value territory of the brand's cultural capital or its langue in terms of the fundamental equipment required for the preparation of Pot Noodle. This base level territory is also equivalent to the endowment of the enunciatee with an epistemic modality. Second, on a purely phonemic level «pan» is metonymically substitutable with «pun», thus mandating of the enunciatee to induce euthanasia to the time-consuming word-play of actor 1 or the opponent actantial subject in Pot Noodle's semio-narrative structure, who stands in contrariety to the «no-frills» classeme with which Pot Noodle is invested. Third, «pan» also functions on a mythical level as god Pan or the excessive counterpart in the classical Apollonian/Dionysian binary opposition, revived in Nietzsche's Birth of Tragedy, thus mandating of the enunciatee to induce euthanasia to any excesses that may accompany the preparation of a meal in favor of the quick and easy Pot Noodle, which only requires a pot, a kettle and a fork.

Accounting for alternative brand futures through the semiotic square

Pursuant to the indicative illustration of how Pot Noodle's user personality and brand personality as diachronic image capital are structured across the generative semio-narrative trajectory encompassing both depth structures, that is elementary relational structures of signification and surface structures, that is surface discourse elements, and intermediate depth structures, as an actantial reconstruction of surface narrative syntax and actors' utterances, as well as having differentiated between elements that function as nuclear semes, as classemes, as sememes and as pure surface structure lexemes, let us conclude with portraying two semiotic squares pertaining to the inner logic of Pot Noodle's logico-semantic simulacrum, with view to establishing and interpreting potential relations on an inter-square level. The establishment of relations as virtualities of becoming in the brand's semantic universe, as already established, allows us not only to map brand communications diachronically, but also to point to alternative futures for a brand personality. In addition, by virtue of instituting an axiological framework that conjoins brand benefits with a projected user personality. «[...] the construction of the simulacrum of truth is greatly conditioned, not directly by the axiological universe of the receiver, but by the sender's view of what the axiological universe is» (Greimas 1989c: 657). At the same time that the receiver or enunciatee is conditioned axiologically (and not *represented*) in the narrative, he is also endowed with the modalities of wanting and being able to valorize the object of desire. By virtue of its ability to portray alternative brand futures as alternative configurations of elementary object-terms, concerning traits, benefits and values, the semiotic square constitutes a dynamic modeling approach. In order to set in motion the semiotic square and hence display its dynamic aspect, it must be approached from an operational perspective, according to which each operation corresponds to each relation of the taxonomic model, while the ordering of the operations is regulated by the square as syntactic model (cf Giroud & Panier 1979: 137-140). Thus, an operation of negation corresponds to the relationship of contradiction between S1 and -S1, which regulates the passage between the two terms and an operation of selection

corresponds to the relationship of deixis regulating the transition from –S1 to S2 (and from –S2 to S1).

The indicative semiotic squares produced *ex post facto*, that is pursuant to the launch of the finished campaign of concern assume as their point of departure the fundamental contrarities making up the systems of brand and projected user personality, which correspond to the classification of base vs existential values, adopted from Floch and following Greimas.

The system of brand personality is based on the semantic microuniverse made up of the contrary semic poles of /easiness/ vs /complexity/, which may be arranged under the semic category «mode of meal preparation». The ensuing relations consist in the contradictions S1 vs –S1 and S2 vs –S2, and the relations of deixis or implication between S1/–S2 and S2/–S1. The semantic axis –S is the «neutral zone» organizing –S1 and –S2 in a neither/nor relationship.

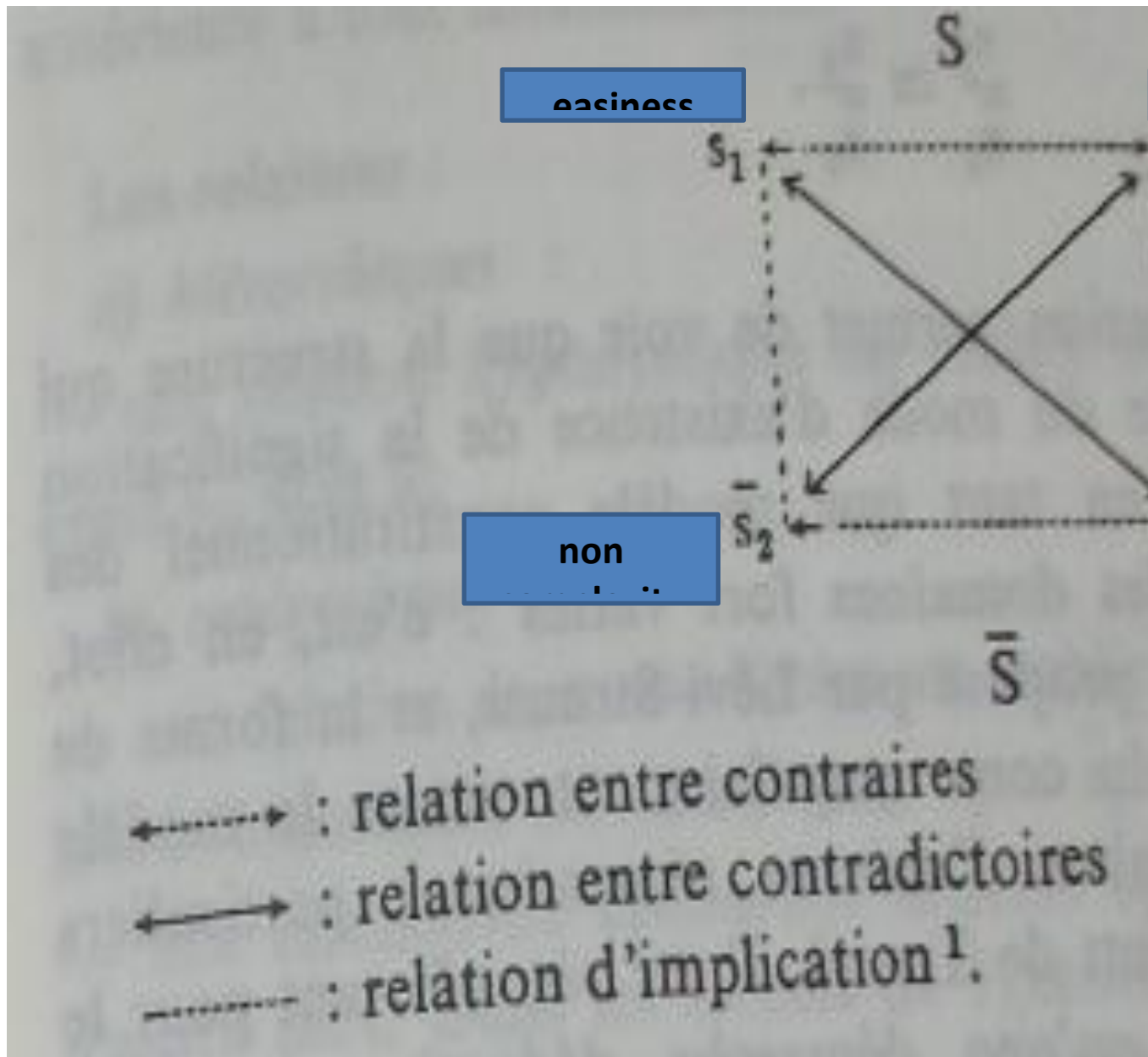


Figure 10. Semiotic square 1- Base values / brand personality

The system of projected user personality is based on the semantic microuniverse made up of the contrary classematic poles of /laid-back/no-frills / vs /angst /, which may be arranged under the semic category «lifestyle». The ensuing relations consist in the contradictions E1 vs -E1 and E2 vs -E2, and the relations of deixis or implication between E1/-E2 and E2/-E1. The semantic axis -E is the «neutral zone» organizing -E1 and -E2 in a neither/nor relationship.

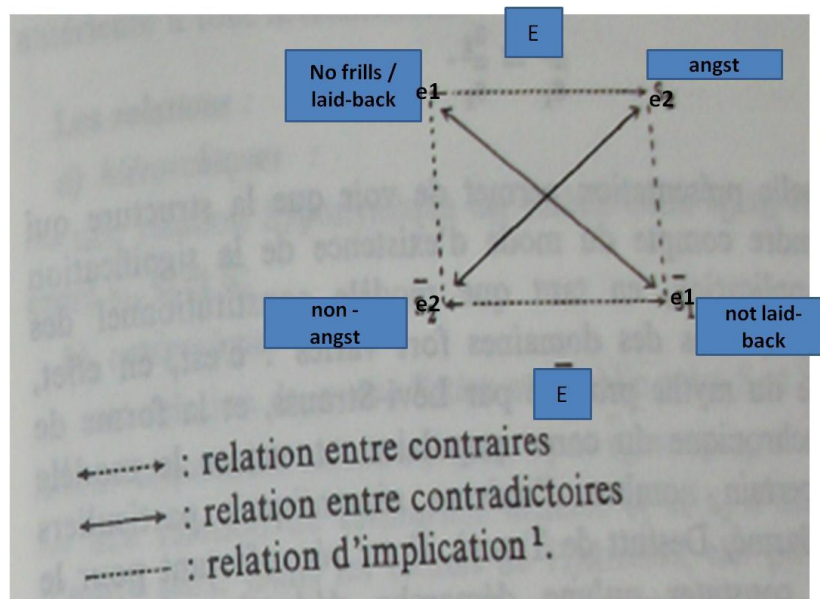


Figure 11. Semiotic square 2 – existential values / projected user personality

Based on the above squares the following relations may be drawn between the object-terms:

S1~E1 (easiness in meal preparation ~ laid-back lifestyle)

S1~E2 (easiness in meal preparation ~ anxious lifestyle)

S1~-E1 (easiness in meal preparation ~ non laid-back lifestyle)

S1~-E2 (easiness in meal preparation ~ non anxious lifestyle)

-S1~E1 (complexity in meal preparation ~ laid-back lifestyle)

-S1~E2 (complexity in meal preparation ~ anxious lifestyle)

-S1~-E1 (complexity in meal preparation ~ non laid-back lifestyle)

-S1~-E2 (complexity in meal preparation ~ non anxious lifestyle)

Based on the script of the campaign of concern what emerges as the dominant relation is S1~E1, that is an exaltation of easiness in meal preparation as the semic kernel of the brand personality coupled with a valorization of a laid-back/no-frills lifestyle, as the key trait of the projected user's personality and by implication the deictic relationship S1~-E2. This is a static snapshot or reconstruction of the

campaign's signification, whereby the utterance of the enunciator or brand owner through the interplay of an actantial opposition featuring two subjects and two objects who are initially both conjoined to the object of desire, which relationship is manifested on a surface textual level as a polemic between two pairs of actors (let us recall that for Greimas the actantial subject, as well as the discursive actor may be anything from a human, to an animal, a concept or a corporation), manifested in the syntagmatic ordering of two strings of utterance, is ultimately resolved through an imperative punchline. This closure of valorization also effects the desired adequacy between persuasive and interpretive doing, thus bringing about the brand's truth as veridictory contract between sender and receiver, while also instituting the brand's code. Veridiction as adequacy is not left open to the receiver, but resolved in the simulacral sublation of the polemic. Projectively, the repetition of the «truth of the text» that emerged through a veridictory contract assumes a character of background expectancy and hence the nature of a code. Over and above the static modelling merits of the semiotic square, a dynamic modelling route opens up. By virtue of channeling brand signification through the inner logic of the square as logico-semantic simulacrum of the brand's virtualities or potential states of being [états d'être], the rest unexplored relations present opportunities for a conceptual blueprint whereby the elementary semantic universe of alternative brand futures may be organized, while maintaining a latent, semio-narrative continuity with the brand's inner logic. Moreover, the exploration of homologous and non-homologous pairings as already illustrated, suggests specific points of transition through the trajectories of the interlocking squares, thus yielding a unique combinatory, which may not be replicated by the competition.

Conclusion

In this paper the relative merits of the semiotic square as a static logical reconstruction of surface advertising narratives, but also as a dynamic advertising

platform that puts brand and user personality in semiotic perspective were laid out. By focusing on the actantial model and the communicative model of enunciation in the Greimasian generative trajectory an attempt was made to demonstrate how brand signification emerges in advertising and progressively how a brand's image capital is formed through a reduction from surface to depth structures, alongside intermediate levels of the trajectory. Through the progressive opening up of the semiotic square to axiological dimensions and by a short detour in Lacanian terminology it was shown how a surface narrative actor in an ad text actually simulates a fundamental demand of the symbolic order placed on the receiver of the ad message and how the receiver is conditioned by the advertising text, not as a representation, but as participating subject in a brand's logico-semantic simulacrum. The projected user personality in an ad narrative coheres with a brand personality through an adequation between a persuasive and an interpretive doing, which is the moment of instituting the brand's truth as veridictory contract. The semiotic square, by virtue of its dynamic nature, is capable of furnishing directions for alternative brand futures, thus constantly renewing the veridictory contract based on its inner logic.

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