Visual and verbal text elements in French magazine advertising

Introduction

A large number of early linguistic analyses of magazine advertising focus on the verbal elements (generally referred to as 'text') without taking into account visual signs (usually referred to as 'images'). For instance Römer (1971: 24) excludes the visual text elements in her book *Die Sprache der Anzeigenwerbung* when she claims that 'die Sprache [ist] das Hauptmedium der Werbung [language is the main medium of advertising].' The 'image', compared with the 'text', it was assumed, communicates only redundant and even superfluous information. Studies of this type based on a strict dichotomy between the sign systems are not, however, able to account for the entire communicative effect of an advertisement if one accepts the now apparently self-evident postulate that visual elements contribute significantly to the overall message (Janich, 1999: 184). Indeed, it is not possible to decode the message of the advertisement by analysing the headline without considering its close relationship to the visual text, because one sign system enhances and complements the other.

To underscore the importance of visual elements in the analysis of magazine advertisements, it is as well to recall the most salient characteristics of visual signs. In general, these are characterised by their semantic openness or indeterminacy, which means they are polyvalent, easy to perceive and to memorise. In the following sections, these characteristics will be discussed in detail.

Stöckl (1998: 76) claims that visual signs are 'lose Ansammlungen von diskontinuierlichen Zeichen' [loose accumulations of discontinuous signs] and in contrast to verbal signs, it is impossible to segment visual-sign complexes, to establish a 'syntactic' hierarchy between them. On the other hand, linguists can fall back upon different ways of segmenting verbal signs (phonological, morphological, syntactic or semantic levels), there are no analogous paradigms for analysing visual signs. The fact that you cannot adopt techniques of linguistic segmentation leads to serious problems for the analysis of visual texts. Further underlining the semantic openness of visual sign complexes, Stöckl (1998: 77) observes that in contrast to verbal meanings which are relatively and fixed and

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can be defined in dictionaries, there exists no comparable fixed, conventionalised meaning that could help to interpret and understand a visual message. As Doelker (1997: 22) has it, since there is no 'dictionary of pictures and visual meanings', it is therefore not feasible to treat visual signs as a simple parallel system to verbal ones.

Since visual signs are never determined explicitly with regard to time, space and logical interdependency, their semantic indeterminacy makes several interpretations of a message possible, which means that they are very effective tools for advertising. Moreover, visual signs have the additional advantage of what Stöckl calls the 'higher degree of information' (Stöckl, 1998: 77), i.e. they are able to communicate much more information than the verbal sign system in a given time. It is also generally accepted that visual signs are able to arouse readers' interest to a greater degree than verbal ones, a crucial point for advertisements competing with other messages.

In contrast to verbal signs where the relationship between linguistic form and content is based on conventions that hold good within a particular speech community, this relationship is motivated for visual signs since they bear resemblance to the entities which they represent (Doelker, 1997: 52). As a consequence, readers do not have to spend time transforming visual signs into more concrete representations on a cognitive level as is the case for verbal information.

Visual signs are also particularly suitable for communicating emotions. Emotions are, in addition to various bits of non-emotional and factual information, omnipresent in advertisements. As Kroeber-Riel (1993: 14) observes, they are able to transport readers directly into a world of emotion and fiction.

To achieve their aim (the purchase of products), advertisements do not only have to be perceived and understood but memorised for as long as possible. Again, the visual-sign system offers an advantage over the verbal. Stöckl (1998: 78) proposes the so-called 'duale Code-Theorie' (dual-code theory) to formulate the claim that the verbal and the visual system are in a permanent state of interaction within the reader's mind. Based on findings of the psychology of perception, this theory states that during the perception of visual signs, both the visual and the verbal system are activated while verbal signs require only the verbal system. As a

consequence, the redundantly processed visual information (as well as the verbal text) will be memorised much longer by readers.

For the reasons mentioned above, one has to consider each kind of advertisement as a 'multi- bzw. bimediales Gesamtkommunikat' [a combined multi- or possibly bimedial communication] (Spillner, 1982: 91). That is why the term 'text' is extended to both verbal and visual signs in order to analyse in which ways the sign systems contribute to the comprehension of an advertisement and which code-specific functions they fulfil (Doelker, 1997: 61). Extending these notions to magazine advertising, it follows that:

> '[...] die gesamte Werbeanzeige als ein Text aufgefaßt [wird], an dessen Konstellation sowohl bildliche [visuelle] als auch verbale Textelemente beteiligt sein können [...]
> [the advertisement as a whole is considered as a text. Visual as well as verbal text elements contribute to its meaning]. (Spillner, 1982: 92).

A number of researchers have sought to approach this visual-verbal interdependency in an integrative manner, e.g. Stöckl (1992;1998) and Geiger and Henn-Memmesheimer (1998), not to mention earlier studies such as: Barthes (1964); Bonsiepe (1965) and Victoroff (1978). It is not possible to present all these different approaches exhaustively, but it seems useful to outline the diachronic development, beginning with Barthes' pioneering approach in the 1960s.

Barthes' initial attempt to deal with the problem of the relationship between visual and verbal text elements was formulated in terms of French semiotics. Using the terms 'texte' and 'image' rather than 'visual' and 'verbal text', Barthes (1964) suggested that there exist two different techniques of decoding texts that are composed of visual and verbal elements: firstly, 'ancrage' which refers to the semantic openness or vagueness and the absence of 'syntactic structure' of visual signs which makes a clarification by verbal signs necessary; secondly, 'relais' which covers examples in which the sign systems complement each other. This approach highlighted the question as to which status can be attributed to the signs systems during the process of interpretation, but did not tackle the question of how the signs systems are linked with each other on a formal level and how they interact semantically (Barthes, 1964: 45 f.).

Another early attempt to explicate the semantic interdependency of visual and verbal information was that of Bonsiepe (1965) who applied the principles of

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classical (i.e. purely verbal) rhetoric to the analysis of visual-verbal texts thus making it possible to analyse their semantic linkage. He drew up a list of 16 different (originally purely verbal) rhetorical strategies, the effects of which derive from the interdependency of information borne by verbal and visual signs. The following catgories serve to illustrate his approach, i.e. visual-verbal comparison, analogy, metonymy, substitution, parallelism, metaphor, exaggeration.

Gaede (1981) modifies Bonsiepe's model by establishing 12 categories and a large number of detailed subcategories defining the semantic connection between visual and verbal elements in advertising messages. Like Bonsiepe, Gaede focuses on semantic (logical) linkage without considering formal strategies. In contrast to Bonsiepe, he tries to establish a link between semantic strategies and their effect on readers – a first step towards a pragmatics of advertisements made up of visual and verbal elements. Gaede's approach is undoubtedly the most detailed and later authors generally refer to his categorisation when dealing with the semantic interface of 'text' and 'image'. The 12 basic categories (Gaede 1981: 30 ff.) of his approach are: visual analogy, argumentation, association, synecdoche, relation of causality, repetition, gradation, addition, determination, connection, norm deviation and symbolisation.

Stöckl (1998) develops a semiotic model of analysis for advertising texts in the print media. For the first time a model does not only deal with selected and independent aspects but comprises different levels, i.e. formal and semantic interdependency, typography, the pragmatic effect of the visual-verbal interface. One shortcoming of his approach is that – like the authors previously cited – he makes no attempt to test his model by analysing a large corpus, but refers to only 30 English-magazine advertisements.

Geiger and Henn-Memmesheimer (1998) seek to comprehend the visual-verbal interface by applying the methods of text linguistics. The result is a classification scheme consisting of a) semantic strategies (albeit much pared down compared to that of Gaede) and b) formal/ structural techniques linking the text elements. This latter aspect in particular has to be underlined because this approach, although incomplete, was the first to tackle connection strategies at the surface level of the text, both verbal (deictic elements, lexical repetitions) as well as visual ones (colours, positioning). What Geiger and Henn-Memmesheimer do not take into

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account are the pragmatic aspects, but in contrast to earlier authors, their findings are based on a large corpus of German examples.

To summarise, these models, with the notable exception of Stöckl, focus on different and selected aspects of the interface between the sign systems, each approaching the problem from a different angle. They are thus unable to characterise the numerous relationships involved in their entirety. Another shortcoming of these approaches is that they remain on a purely theoretical level. A comprehensive empirical analysis of French-magazine advertising which attempts to evaluate the various models proposed, has yet to be carried out.

To overcome these inadequacies and to comprehend the numerous formal and semantic interdependencies of the 'text' and the 'image' in magazine advertisements comprising verbal as well as visual information, I have developed a model consisting of five levels that is based on already existing integrative approaches. By means of an empirical frequency analysis, this model has been applied to a corpus of 705 French-magazine advertisements published between 2000 and 2002 in general-interest magazines (e.g. *Télérama, Le Point, Le Nouvel Observateur*) in order to gain information about the frequency of the different techniques of interlinkage, i.e. with which frequencies they are used in reality. The wide range of magazines analysed is motivated by the desire to take as many different product categories as possible into account.

The outline of the article is as follows: in the next section, the analytical model is briefly described. Sections 2 to 6 present the basic empirical research results for each of the five levels of the model, and the findings are illustrated by examples taken from the corpus. The main focus of the discussion of the results and examples is on the one hand on the importance of both the visual and the verbal elements for the comprehension of the message which clearly show that 'text' is not necessarily dominant. On the other hand, the article concentrates on the semantic connection of the text elements because their interdependency on this level plays a central role in the creation of an effective advertisement. Moreover, the cognitive effort required to reveal a semantic relationship between the sign systems is much greater compared to comprehending the link on a purely formal level.
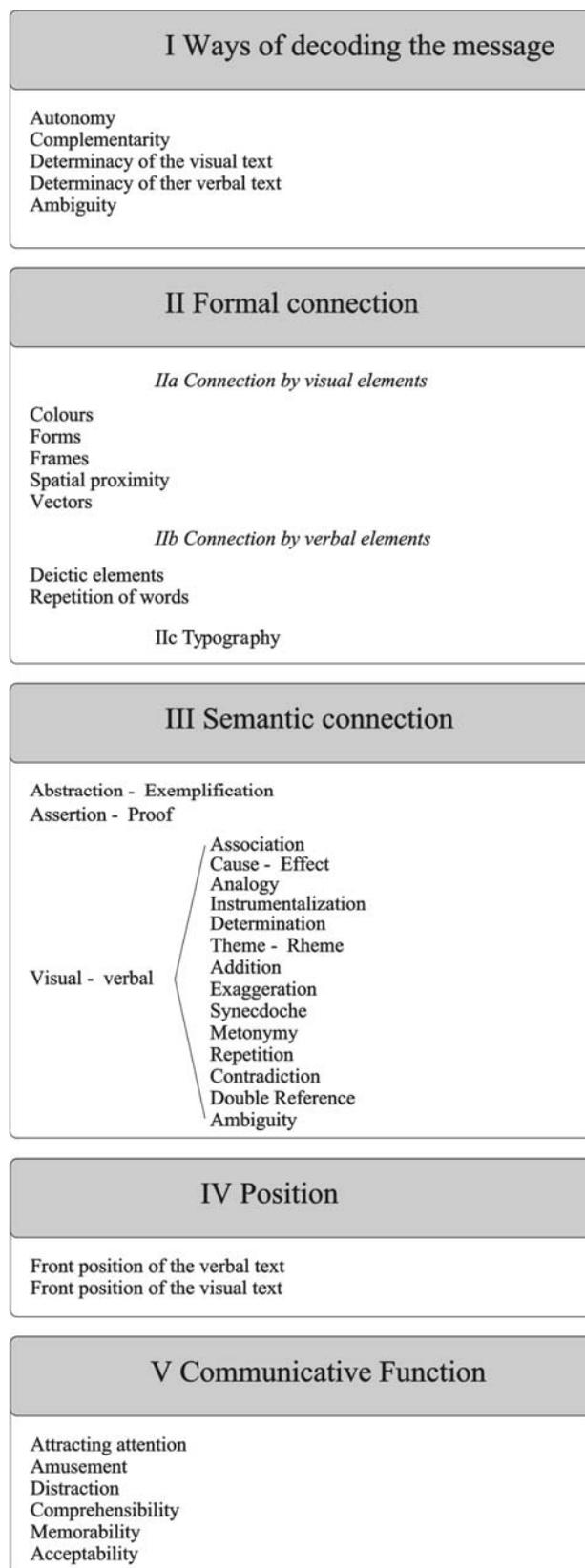
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1. The analytical model

This model integrating various aspects of the approaches discussed in the introduction consists of five levels covering formal, semantic and pragmatic aspects in order to analyse as exhaustively and systematically as possible all types of visual-verbal interdependencies.

As a first step, the process of decoding the advertisement is characterised by noting the dominance of one or other of the sign systems. It is of course important to understand the function of the non-dominant system, to ascertain whether both sign systems can be decoded autonomously, or whether they are completely or partially interdependent. One can distinguish between five different possibilities, depending on the comprehensibility of the visual and the verbal text, which are discussed in the following section (see Figure 1.I).

The analysis of the formal links between visual and verbal text elements is relevant because formal strategies operating at the surface level of the text help readers to identify which visual and verbal elements belong together (Figure 1.II). Within the framework of the analysis of the formal connection of verbal and visual text elements, a two-pronged approach is proposed. On the one hand, the formal interdependency is marked by certain linguistic means, such as verbs, deictic proforms etc. that can be found in the headline and in the body copy, referring to the 'image'. On the other hand, specific visual strategies such as colours, frames, arrows etc. can signal that there is a relationship between visual and verbal text elements. These strategies mark the underlying semantic connection at the surface level of the text and often have the function of guiding the reader's interpretation. Furthermore, it is interesting to discuss advertisements whose headlines are created typographically so that they lose their purely symbolic character and function as an icon or as an index.

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Figure 1. The analytical model

I Ways of decoding the message

Autonomy
Complementarity
Determinacy of the visual text
Determinacy of ther verbal text
Ambiguity

II Formal connection

IIa Connection by visual elements

Colours
Forms
Frames
Spatial proximity
Vectors

IIb Connection by verbal elements

Deictic elements
Repetition of words

IIc Typography

III Semantic connection

Abstraction - Exemplification
Assertion - Proof

Visual - verbal
Association
Cause - Effect
Analogy
Instrumentalization
Determination
Theme - Rheme
Addition
Exaggeration
Synecdoche
Metonymy
Repetition
Contradiction
Double Reference
Ambiguity

IV Position

Front position of the verbal text
Front position of the visual text

V Communicative Function

Attracting attention
Amusement
Distraction
Comprehensibility
Memorability
Acceptability

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Of great importance is the analysis of the semantic (or logical/ functional) connection of the sign systems in an advertisement (Figure 1.III). It is important to show the cognitive processes which are brought into play. Those listed in Figure 1.III are a modified version of Gaede (1981: 30 ff.).

The spatial relationship of the visual and the verbal text (Figure 1.IV) is relevant because fronting or post-posing can influence the semantic connection and consequently also the communicative effect of an advertisement (Straßner, 2002: 45). Depending on the communicative goal, fronting the verbal text may be preferable because this guarantees a 'schnelle gedankliche Verbindung' (Stöckl, 1998: 79), i.e. a strong (or quickly retrieved) logical connection between the sign systems. Furthermore, the verbal text can influence the interpretation of a following visual text. On the other hand, one can intentionally make use of the semantic openness of the image positioned before the headline. The embedding later in the headline can then give please to the reader as s/he decodes the message.

Based on the approach of Stöckl (1992 and 1998), an analysis of the effect resulting from the semantic connection of the sign systems is made, i.e. which communicative functions, e.g. the attraction of interest, or attempts to improve the comprehensibility or acceptability of the message, are realised by the various semantic strategies (Figure 1.V). The pragmatic effect is essential for advertisements which are intended both to arouse readers' interest and remain in in their memory.

2 Level 1

2.1 Ways of decoding the message

The central criticism concerning linguistic analyses of magazine advertising already mentioned in the introduction is the opinion that important contents are conveyed through the headline while the 'image' was not necessary for understanding the content. It is/was often assumed that the visual elements may be reduced to a simple photograph of the product that serves as an illustration but communicates no semantically complex message. Therefore, the visual sign system was not seen as functioning independently of the headline or other verbal elements (Baumgart, 1992: 6).

It is important to clarify the meaning of 'understanding' the verbal and the visual elements because different concepts and approaches can influence the results in a

significant way. When asking whether one part of the text can be understood without its complement, one has to take into consideration what text type is being analysed. Of great importance for an advertisement is the communication of the product name or the brand. Nowadays, it is by no means unusual to come across a large number of very similar products. Consequently, if one wants to distinguish, say, between 50 different brands of ice-cream, it is not sufficient if the reader can only discern what type of product is being advertised. In order to increase the turnover of one specific brand, the producers of an advertisement have to ensure that readers perceive the brand name in the hope that they will remember it.

In the next five subsections, the frequencies of the different ways of decoding the advertisements of the corpus are presented. The results can be revealing when discussing the role of the verbal and the visual text.

2.2 Cases where the visual text determines the verbal text

Advertisements in which the headline cannot be understood without the visual text elements can be found in around one third of the examples in the corpus (33.2 %). This underlines the relevance of visual text elements for the comprehension of an advertisement. Differences between various product groups can be observed. In particular, in contrast to books, cosmetics, food etc., advertisements for services constitute a very low percentage (7.7 %) of examples in which the visual text determines the headline. This can be explained by the structure of the visual text. While it is usually no problem to present a photograph of a car, a bottle of wine etc., it is very difficult to visualise the abstract service offered by an insurance company, for example. As a consequence, one often observes visual text elements that at first sight seem to have nothing to do with the service being promoted and the explanation is found in the headline and even possibly in the body text (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

In Figure 2, which is very complex, it is not immediately clear what product can be related to the various parts of the young man that are shown, be it his face, his chest or his scarred shoulder. Readers might even wonder about the depersonalised photograph, why the complete face of the man, his eyes or facial expression are not portrayed. The explanation is given by the headline which reports a short story of the young man who has been attacked and taken to hospital where the medical treatment is so good that the traces of the scar will not last very long. The headline closes with a question printed in bold face: 'Et

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moralement, ça va?' Suddenly, the advertising message becomes clear. GMF health insurance is different from other medical insurances because the service does not only include excellent medical treatment, but provides psychological help to their clients to recover from the trauma of serious accidents and diseases. GMF takes care of the overall well being of their clients and, unlike their competitors, does not leave them alone, once the physical ill has been dealt with – a message implied by the final question in the headline as well as by the anonymous representation of the man in the visual text.

Figure 2. GMF*, from **Le Nouvel Observateur***, 11 October 2001, p. 127**
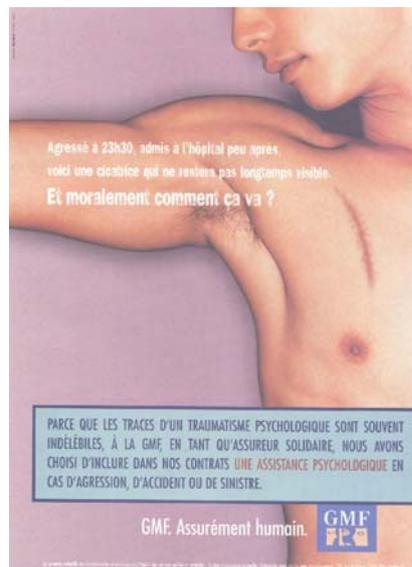
The visual text in Figure 3, showing a baby's feeding bottle stuffed with chips is nearly as enigmatic as Figure 2. The reader knows that chips are not suitable food for infants. When reading the headline, it becomes clear that the visual representation is designed to enhance and even exaggerate the verbal message: 'Arrêter le lait 2ème âge avant 1 an, c'est vraiment faire n'importe quoi.' Chips are one hyperbolised example for the underspecified 'n'importe quoi' that helps the reader to understand the importance of appropriate nutrition for young children.

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Figure 3:   **OAI, from *Enfants*, October 2001, p. 76**

In the following example, a car advertisement taken from the product category automobiles, the headline 'Oserez-vous?' is completely enigmatic without reference to the car which is presented in the visual text because the written text could refer to any kind of product (see Figure 4), although the top of the advertisement shows the logo, a now familiar slogan and the make and model of the car.

**Figure 4. Renault Avantime, from *Le Figaro Magazine* 5 January 2002,
p. 2/3**

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2.3 Cases where the verbal text determines the visual text

A number of examples were found where the visual text is not completely comprehensible on its own, but requires clarification through the headline (see Figure 2 and 3 of the previous section and Figure 5 and 6).

Figure 5. Côtes du Rhône, from *Le Figaro Magazine*, 1 December 2001 p. 29

Figure 6. Moutarde, from *Cosmopolitan*, November 2002, p. 169

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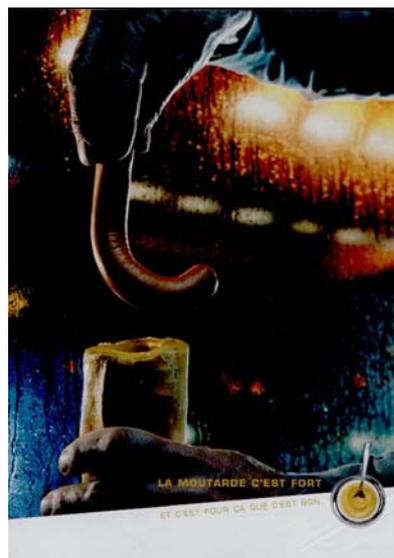
In Figure 5, it is not immediately clear what kind of product is being advertised. The representation of the woman's mouth can even mislead readers because such visual elements can often be found in advertisements for personal hygiene products. The visual text tells us that the mouth (the part of the human body, the concrete entity where the sense of taste is located) represents the (abstract) sense taste of people that is activated when they drink *Côtes du Rhône* wine.

Figure 6 also represents an attempt to arouse readers' attention by presenting a visual text that is again not immediately obvious. Readers searching for an explanation as to why the small sausage is trying to 'escape' from the baguette find it in the headline that tells us that the mustard is incredibly hot and spicy.

In fact, only about one fifth (19.9 %) of the advertisements in the corpus contained visual text which required clarification through the headline in sharp contrast to the opinion of the authors who claim that the verbal text is of primary importance. For advertisements promoting services, the percentage differs markedly (34.7 %) from the average because of the difficulty of presenting certain types of service purely in visual form.

2.4 Autonomy of the sign systems

In 22.4 % of the advertisements of the corpus, the headline and the 'image' can be decoded independently, without loss of comprehensibility or distortion of the message (see Figure 7). The headline in this case informs us about the type of car and its advantages, 'deux portes coulissantes' that are very practical for everyday life while the visual representation tells us the same in a more concrete and even a somewhat exaggerated fashion (no fewer than 15 children entering and leaving the car through its large doors).

As has already been mentioned in relation to headlines, a marked disparity between services, which constitute only 3.8 % of cases where visual and verbal text can be readily decoded independently and other product categories was noted. Again, the reason for this difference is the often abstract character of the services being promoted, that makes it difficult to create a visual text that is understandable without the support of the headline.

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Figure 7. Citroën Berlingo, from *Télérama*, 12 July 2000, p. 4
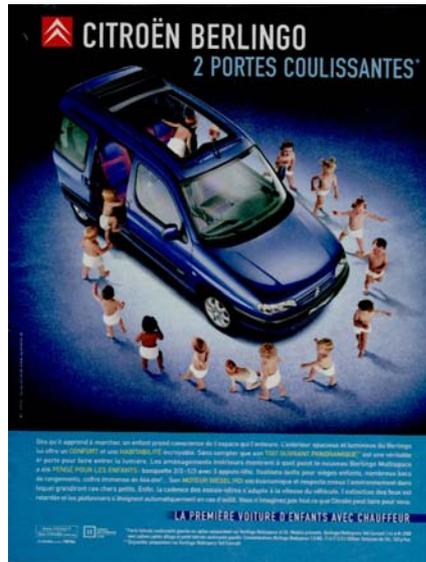
2.5 The sign systems in interdependency

In cases where neither sign system is able to support the understanding of the other, the advertisement is classified as having a strong reciprocal relationship between the text elements. To decode and understand the entire message, the reader has to take into account both sign systems simultaneously, which is the case in 14.9 % of the examples analysed (see Figure 8 and 9).

Figure 8. Ford Mondeo, from *Top Famille*, June 2001, p. 39

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Figure 9. Eau précieuse, from *Télé-Loisirs*, 10 November 2001, p. 127

Figure 8 plays with readers' perception[1], such that they may wonder a) what the car has in common with the photo gallery and b) why the photos showing tall objects like the Eiffel Tower or a giraffe that are usually looked at upright, are hanging on the wall so that you look at them from the left to the right. If one turns one's head, looking at the photos from left to right, one realises that 'Ce qui est grand et beau ne se regarde plus de bas en haut.', which is not understandable on its own because it is too abstract. This is due to the use of the deictic referent 'Ce qui' referring to the 'image', i.e. the photo gallery and the car at the same time without mentioning the brand name. To sum up, neither of the texts can be interpreted without the other, and only when the visual and verbal information are combined does the message become clear, namely that the Ford Mondeo is large and nice to look at from the back (left) to the front (right).

The same approach can be applied to Figure 9. The visual text clearly shows the product, but the function of the fuzzy face of a girl does not seem at first glance to make any sense. Readers may even wonder whether this was done on purpose. When decoding the headline, 'Vous n'aurez pas toujours la chance de tomber sur un myope', they do not get the slightest hint as to the nature of the product but are only informed that the young lady in the picture will not be so lucky as to

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[1] The advertisement is reproduced in the same way and format as in the magazine, even it becomes difficult to read the headline. This is important to understand its effect.

bump into a short-sighted guy on every occasion. Only after interpreting the visual and verbal texts together, does it become clear that if one does not use the product in question, one will probably not have beautiful skin. Potential consumers are thus confronted with the choice of hoping to meet only short-sighted people or of taking action, i.e. using Eau Précieuse to ensure that their complexion is as blemish-free as possible. While in the cases previously cited, where visual and verbal text may be understood independently, Figures 8 and 9 exemplify the cases where interdependence between the two systems is greatest. In other cases one sign system may guide readers to a completely different interpretation of the other than the one which seems to come most readily to mind at first sight. In 9.6% of cases analysed, one sign system assigns a completely different interpretation to the apparently most likely reading of the other, were it to be viewed independently.

3. Level 2

3.1 Formal links between the sign systems

While for the other points of investigation the body copy is excluded due to its complexity and its function in the advertisement and the focus is put on the connection of the headline and the visual text, the body copy is integrated in the analysis of the formal connection of the text elements. The question is whether the headline and the body copy refer in a different manner (with different verbal strategies and frequencies) to the visual-sign system and if they are referred to with different visual techniques by the 'image'.

As regards both visual and verbal linking techniques, it can be observed that in most cases both types of text elements may be considered essential for the comprehension of the message as a whole, i.e. the combination of headline and the visual text. This result supports the assumption of Janich (1999: 43) that these parts of the text are in a very close relationship of interdependency. Formal strategies indicate the functional affinity and the semantic unity of these text elements and serve as an aid for the reader to focus on them.

As far as visual techniques are concerned, the principle of placing related verbal and visual elements close to each other occurs frequently in the corpus (51.3 %), followed in second place by giving them the same colour (26.1 %). Producers make greater use of frame structures (12.8%) than vector structures (9.1%), i.e. visual strategies that point to verbal elements such as fingers, hands, arms, lines of

vision and parts of products. Figure 10 and 11 are examples that show how parts of the human body that are represented in the visual text can point to the headline, linking the sign systems and guiding the readers' interpretation by indicating explicitly which bits of information belong together.

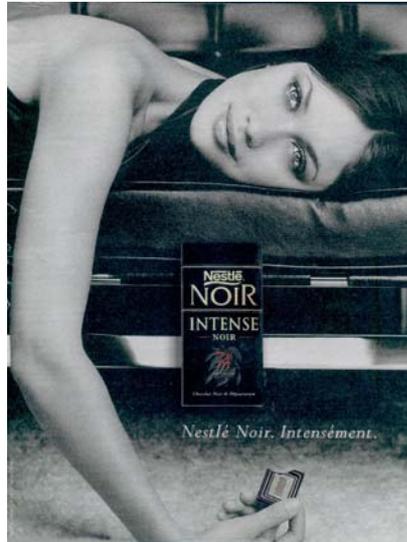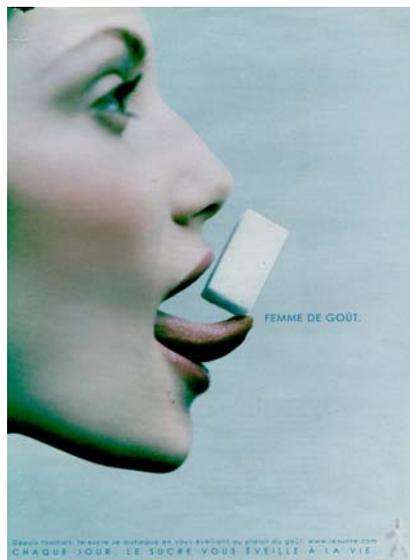**Figure 10. Nestlé Noir, from *Télérama*, 7 October, 2001, p. 57**

Figure 11. Sucre, from *Paris Match*, 2 May 2002, p. 23

Deixis too plays a not inconsiderable reference role linking the verbal to the visual text. The significantly greater frequency of deitics in headlines (16.6%) as opposed to a mere 1.4% for the body copy is more than suggestive, as is the case

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for the use of the the demonstrative pronoun 'ce' in the headline in Figure 12. 'Ce' refers clearly and cataphorically to the following visual part of the text.

Figure 12. **J'ai lu, from** *Le Nouvel Observateur* **11 October 2001, p. 147**
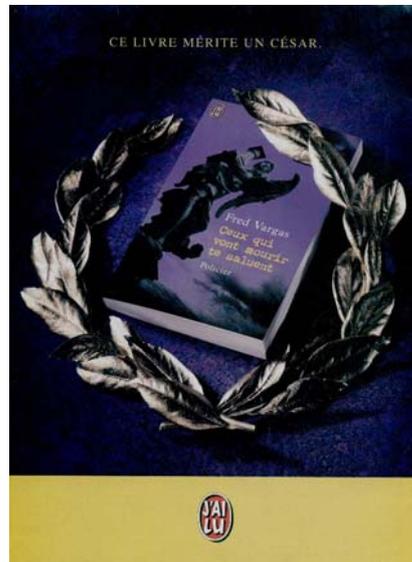
This use of deitics exploits the possibility of attracting the reader's attention by using them to refer not to the written but to the visual part of the text. This ploy intensifies the connection between the text elements, not only giving readers the satisfaction of being actively involved in the process of decoding by linking the verbal and the visual but also increasing the likelihood that the message will be remembered.

Despite the importance of the visual text for the comprehension of the advertisement, empirical analysis has shown that this sign system is not able to reproduce all the contents mentioned in the headline. A systematisation of the so-called 'blanks' that occur when verbal references cannot be reproduced by the visual text indicates that the following domains are primarily affected: sounds, smells, taste, touch, thoughts, feelings, movements, time and abstract concepts.

Finally, it has to be added that 'blanks' are predominant in headlines (71.1 % in contrast to 14.8 % in the body copy). This phenomenon can be explained by the different length of the headline and the body copy; as a consequence, the probability that one of the relatively rare lexical references of the headline has no visual reference is much higher than in the body copy that is often long and aims at a more detailed description of the product. Furthermore, 'blanks' can be left

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intentionally because they invite the reader to take a closer look at the advertisement in order to understand the connection on a deeper, semantic level. Although typography is a very effective method of arousing readers' interest and and enhancing their comprehension of the message (Sahihi and Baumann, 1987: 91), the percentage of advertisements created typographically in the corpus analysed,, like the one reproduced in Figure 13, is very low (2.97 %). Here the headline announcing the benefit (dynamic, energy and vitality) resulting from drinking Vittel mineral water ('Depuis que je bois Vittel, je trouve les escaliers plus rapides que les escalators.' ascends from the bottom left side of the advertisement to the top right forming a strong line that signifies force and vitality. Furthermore, it is very similar to the substantive 'escaliers' mentioned in the headline and reinforces the message of the advertisement. This example shows very clearly how headlines created typographically may lose their purely abstract, arbitrary and symbolic character and take on the characteristics of iconicity[2] usually ascribed to visual signs. The effect achieved in this advertisement results from the typological differences between the sign systems.

Figure 13. Vittel, from *Femme Actuelle*, 2 December 2001, p. 19

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[2] Iconicity is a term from semiotics designating the relationship of ressemblance between the sign and the entity represented.

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4 Level 3

4.1 Semantic links between the sign systems

Figure 14 gives an overview of the frequencies of the different semantic strategies. The following brief definitions of the 16 categories aim to clarify the semantic links between visual and verbal signs.

Abstraction – Exemplification: The message of the headline is, for various reasons, e.g. deictic elements or the abstract character of the product or service advertised, not specific enough to convey the necessary (product) information and requires specification through the visual text.

Addition: Part of the advertising message is communicated in one sign system and completed in the other.

Determinacy: One code determines the other, makes it clearer and easier to understand by selecting the most important elements of meaning.

Exaggeration: The entire message is hyperbolised, whether by one sign system or interaction between both. One can distinguish three main subcategories of exaggeration: a) the visual representation hyperbolises a factual verbal content, b) the verbal text exaggerates the visual content, c) both sign systems contribute to the exaggeration with neither being dominant.

Cause – Effect: This relationship can be subdivided in two main categories: a) the cause is provided in the headline while the visual text provides the effect, b) the cause can be found in the visual text whereas the effect is conveyed through the headline.

Theme – Rheme: Based on the positioning of material in texts, the information in an advertisement can be on the one hand described as the *given/ theme*, usually the product or further visual elements, and on the other hand as the *new/ rheme*, generally the relevant (verbal) information about the product.

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Assertion – Proof: In contrast to the relation of *cause – effect*, this strategy can be characterised as asymmetric because it functions only in one direction. An assertion about the product in the verbal text is confirmed in the visual text.

Association: Certain visual elements evoke the association of a lexeme/ verbal element in the headline (and *vice versa*) that they are closely and conceptually related to, but without designating it explicitly and directly, for instance when one sees CDs in the visual text while the headline does not mention the noun 'CD', but 'musique'.

Analogy: Advertisements are classified as analogies when there is, as in the case of metaphors, a certain similarity between visual and verbal elements. This similarity can refer to the content or to the form.

Instrumentalisation: The headline underlines the advantages of a product without mentioning it while the visual text provides the necessary information by representing the brand.

Synecdoche: One of the parts of the advertising text communicates an entity as a whole whereas the complementary text focuses on single elements or parts of this entity.

Ambiguity: The category of ambiguity is divided into two subcategories. In both cases, there is an activation of an unexpected meaning of an entity. As to ambiguity in the narrow sense, a homonymic interpretation is evoked that has nothing in common with the basic meaning. In the case of relexicalisation, the figurative or metaphoric interpretation found in the headline is taken literally, due to the visual representation. In contrast to ambiguity in the narrow sense, there exists a similarity between the two meanings, the figurative and the literal one. This strategy can concern single words or complex lexical units, such as idioms.

Repetition: The information that is provided by verbal and visual means is very similar, nearly identical, without adding or selecting/ leaving out elements meaning and without modifying it.

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Metonymy: Visual and verbal text elements stand in a metonymic relationship, i.e. container – content, producer – product etc.

Double Reference: Elements in the verbal text do not only refer to one but two or more (most often two) points of reference in the visual text. This can result in a meaning shift, e.g. the activation of homonyms.

Contradiction: The visual and the verbal information stand in a sharp contrast to each other.

Some product categories seem to be promoted most frequently by means of certain semantic techniques. In advertisements for personal-hygiene products, for example, a preference for instrumentalisations can be observed, while synecdoche is typical in the field of travelling. Ambiguity/relexicalisation and exaggerations, however, are characteristic of all kinds of services such as telecommunications, banking etc., in contrast to other kinds of products. Finally it has to be mentioned that the semantic techniques of connecting the visual and the verbal text generally appear in combination with other strategies. Only in a minority of cases does an advertisement correspond exclusively to one strategy, e.g. a visual-verbal repetition. When combining different techniques, such as an exaggeration with a relation of cause and effect, which can be interpreted in more than one way, the producers of an advertisement never know exactly the personality, the mood, the cognitive capacities and the preferences of the reader but wishing to reach the greatest number of people, they make sure that the message can be understood by the majority of the target group.

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Figure 14. Semantic links between the sign systems
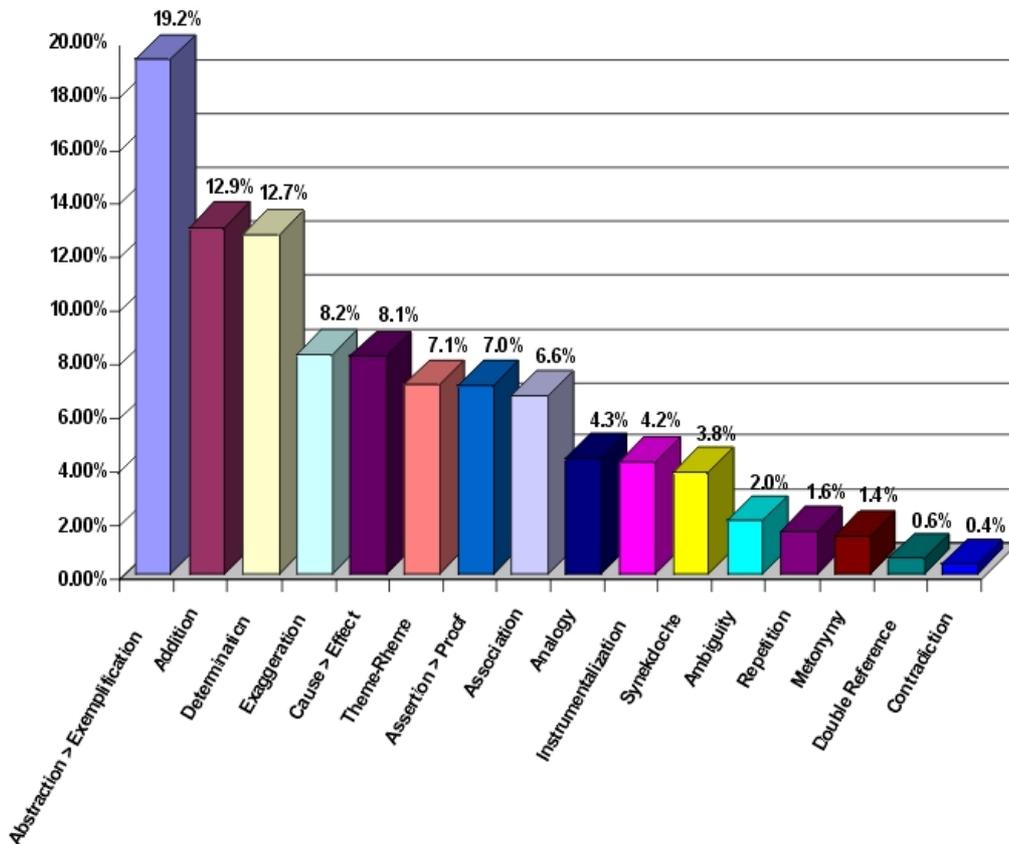
4.2 Ambiguity and Relexicalisation

This semantic technique of connecting the visual and the verbal elements of an advertisement can be found in 10.2 % of the examples analysed. This technique is used rather rarely because of its relative complexity compared to a more general strategy such as that of abstraction – specification. The interdependency of the 'text' and the 'image' can result in the relexicalisation of idioms, i.e. they are to be taken literally. For instance 'traîner quelqu'un dans la boue' (see Figure 15) would normally be interpreted in its figurative sense ('l'accabler de propos infamants' (*Petit Robert*, 1994: 246)). When decoding the visual representation of the all-purpose vehicle and the children spattered with mud, the reader will reinterpret the idiom and construe it in a literal sense, i.e. that the vehicle suits all possible and difficult road conditions and can be driven in every situation, even in deep mud.

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Figure 15. *Land Rover,* **from** *Famili* **October 2001, p. 22**

In other examples, one does not find a relexicalisation of idioms, but words acquire a completely different interpretation when the visual text is decoded (activation of a homonym: lexical ambiguity). In the context of an advertisement for personal hygiene products, the subject 'bouton' would be most readily interpreted as 'pimple' (see Figure 16). The image shows the sleeve of a blouse with several loose threads indicating the loss of a button. The play on the polysemy of 'bouton' is designed to provoke amusement, given that the literal connection between visual text and headline is absurd – what is the point of a lotion that damages clothes? – thus giving readers an indirect reminder of the benefits of Eau Précieuse for healthy skin.

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Figure 16. Eau précieuse, from *Gala* 23 May 2002, p. 79

4.3 Addition

In 67 % of the advertisements analysed, the verbal and the visual text are connected to each other by using an addition. A strict visual-verbal addition on the purely formal and syntacticl level exists in cases where the message starts with the verbal text and is continued with visual signs or *vice versa* (see Figure 17 and Figure 12).

Figure 17:   Fiat, from *L'Express*, 22 February 2001, p. 35

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4.4 Synecdoche

In advertisements subsumed under this category of semantic connection, one sign system represents the part of an entity (a person or an object) while the other text communicates it as a whole. Synecdoche is used in 19.7 % of the advertisements in the corpus. The visual text in Figure 18 shows only the keys as parts of a telephone while the headline mentions the telephone as a whole. The example reproduced in Figure 19, although advertising a service, functions in a comparable manner. The headline refers to a 'génération' but the visual text shows a girl as a representative for a whole generation. Another example shown in   Figure 20 works the other way round. While the visual text represents the car as a complete entity, the headline refers only to certain parts of it, e.g. the air-conditioning, the airbag and the protection against the sun.

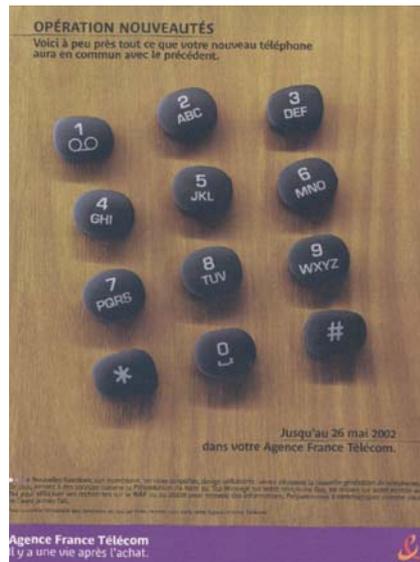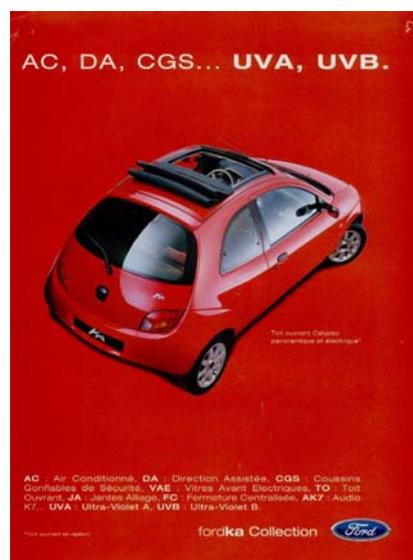**Figure 18. France Télécom*, from *Télérama*, 15 May 2002, p. 241**

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Figure 19. Assurance Maladie, from *Télérama*, 29 May 2002, p. 71

Figure 20. Ford Ka, from *Atmosphères*, 7 August 2000, p. 51

4.5 Instrumentalisation

When this type of functional connection is established between the visual and the verbal text of an advertisement, it is generally the case that the headline underlines the positive characteristics and effects of a product without mentioning the product name, promising the impossible, while the product or   the means to

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achieve this state of satisfaction, is represented by the image. In the corpus, instrumentalisations are used in 21.7 % of the examples (see Figure 21 and Figure 22).

Figure 21. Clinique, from *Cosmopolitan*, December 2001, p. 17

Figure 22. Evian, from *Parents*, October 2001, p. 6

The promise in Figures 21 ('Une peau superbe en 3 temps') and 22 ('Donnez vie à votre beauté.' can purportedly only be achieved by the use of the personal-hygiene products in the advertisements.

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4.6 Exaggeration

Strategies of exaggeration, either realised reciprocally by the interaction of the sign systems or by the hyperbolisation of the headline through the image, occur frequently in the corpus (42.4 %). This tendency is of course reinforced by the fundamental aim of advertisements which is to show the distinctiveness of the product in relation to other brands. In Figure , the image exaggerates the message of the headline which, decoded autonomously, conveys an apparently factual and objective content ('Nouveau moteur diesel 1.5 DCI. Silencieux'). In the visual text, the reader finds an Indian in a desert, lying on the ground with one ear pressed on the road obviously having been run over by a car. While the cartoon presentation allows a humourous interpretation of a potentially tragic accident, it is obviously absurd that an American Indian who used the ear-to-the- ground technique to detect noises at a great distance would not have heard the approaching vehicle.

Figure 23. Renault Kangoo, from *Femme Actuelle*, 25 February 2002, p. 29

5. Level 4

5.1 The positioning of the sign systems

The positioning of the verbal and visual texts, as already shown, can be used to create different effects. This section concentrates on the first position, which in 60.9 % of the advertisements in the corpus is taken by the 'image'.

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The placement of an enigmatic visual text in front of the clarifying headline can, for instance, arouse readers' interest to find an interpretation for the unclear 'image'. In this case, they are forced to spend some time looking at the advertisement (see Figure 6 as an illustrating example) and may derive satisfaction from finding the link between the visual and verbal elements. In other cases an apparently clear visual text needs to be reinterpreted in the light of the following verbal text. Sometimes a visual text placed before the headline may be used to mislead the reader intentionally, evoking an ambiguous interpretation of the following headline e.g. as in Figure 15.

These examples cover only a few of the effects that can be achieved through the positioning of visual and verbal text elements. Further examples for the post- or prepositioning of the text elements can be drawn from the advertisements already presented and discussed.

6. Level 5

6.1 The communicative function of the semantic connection

Overwhelmingly (98.5% of cases) the semantic strategies of advertisement aim at the memorability of the message. Of great importance too is comprehensibility (94.8 %), while an attempt to increase the acceptability of the message being communicated is made only in 8.1 % of the examples. Furthermore, a strong relationship between the specific kind of semantic strategy and the communicative function can be observed. Exaggerations often arouse readers' interest to distract them from the persuasive intention of the message and to present it in an amusing or agreeable fashion. Compared to this, repetitions contribute primarily to the comprehension and the memorability of the message while acceptance can only be facilitated by three techniques: cause – effect, assertion – proof and analogy.

Conclusion

The analysis has shown that visual and verbal text elements in advertisements occur in numerous formal and semantic relationships of interdependency. In particular, it turns out that the 'image' contributes, at least to an equal and sometimes greater degree as the headline to the message as a whole. Many advertisements can only be understood when decoding both sign systems simultaneously, and one can find numerous examples in which the 'image' determines the headline, i.e. it assists to comprehension of a verbal message that does not make sense on its own.

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A marked difference was observed in advertisements for services, due in most cases to their abstract nature, as opposed to other types of product with regard to the semantic links between the sign systems. It therefore may be argued that the formal strategies of linkage function as indicators for underlying semantic interdependencies and thus serve as guides for their interpretation. Both verbal and visual techniques frequently combine the central elements (headline and visual text) of an advertisement that have similar functions, i.e. to arouse readers' interest and to communicate the main part of the message. This is also reflected in the use and the distribution of deictic elements that feature strongly in headlines, but not in the body copy. In spite of the apparent effectiveness of type face for advertisements, producers do not make extensive use of this technique (only in 2.7% of the examples in the corpus) to attract readers' attention. Despite the relevance of visual elements for understanding the message, this sign system comes up against limiting factors when reproducing sounds, tastes, feelings, tastes, abstract concepts etc. Nevertheless, this does not have to be considered as a shortcoming but as the manifestation of the typical characteristics of the sign systems that are best suited to conveying certain types of content.

The variety of the examples discussed illustrating the semantc/ logical connection of the text elements underlines the strong interdependency that goes beyond purely formal connection. The semantic relationships that are used with quite different frequencies manifest themselves generally in combination with other strategies. This offers the reader several options as to how to decode and the advertisement, e.g. in a neutral and objective or in a more creative manner. In this way, the producers of the advertisement ensure that the addressee understands the message. The analysis has also shown that the use of semantic strategies varies according to the type of product advertised. Exaggerations, for example, are more frequent in advertisements for services than for other categories of products.

With regard to the communicative functions realised by semantic strategies, it has to be emphasised that it is more important that the message is understood and memorised as opposed to being accepted.

Seen from a practical point of view, the results may serve as guidelines for future producers of magazine advertisements, by presenting systematically how verbal and visual text elements can be combined, what effects can be obtained and what strategies are more or less frequent, thus assisting product managers to show the

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distinctiveness of their brands in relation to those of the competition, by deliberately using strategies that are at least relatively unusual for the type of product being promoted.

Further research can be done by extending the problem of the interface between visual and verbal text elements to other text types composed of different sign systems, for example articles in dictionaries and encyclopedias, newspaper articles etc. to bring out strategies and techniques specific to different text types.

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