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# Interpreting advertisements with semiotic content analysis

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# Is structuralist semiotics relevant for interpreting and constructing advertising texts? From structuralism to deconstruction and back again

"This article introduces the application of deconstruction to consumer research by addressing three questions:

What is it? How does one do it? What contribution can it make?

It examines the key term différance (difference and deference) and demonstrates the role of deconstructive criticism as an agent provocateur by presenting interpretations of an advertising exemplar - Joe Camel

from the perspectives of the New Criticism and structuralism and then performing a deconstructive reading that subverts these interpretations."

(Barbara Stern (1996) Deconstructive strategy and consumer research: Concepts and illustrative exemplar. *Journal* of Consumer Research, 23 (2), pp. 136-147]

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#### Deconstructionist argument:

- Over-reliance on oppositional thinking
- As against deconstructionism that puts in the heart of a reading strategy the "playful movement that 'produces' the effects of différance".

#### Structuralist answer:

- The criticism reflects only one aspect of a structuralist approach to signification, that is
  the depth level organization of discourse. But even in this case, Greimas was explicit that
  figurative modes of connectivity cut across the entire trajectory of signification.
- Greimas neither underplayed the importance of 'playful discourse', as the effect of rhetorical tropes on a surface discursive level, nor the impact of rhetoric on the metalinguistic organization of a text.
- He actively sought to account for the 'vast distance' that sets apart (and unites at the same time) figurative discourse from an elementary structure of signification.
- Derrida's deconstructive strategy addressed structuralism by recourse to founding figures, such as Saussure and Levi-Strauss, while being largely oblivious to Greimas.

#### Deconstructionist argument:

Deconstructive readings shatter the structuralist system of self-enclosed language, rendering futile the possibility of unity as the end of critical inquiry.

#### Structuralist answer:

- This criticism reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of Greimasian structuralism, that is that structures constitute a self-enclosed language that is not open to alternative modes of structuration.
- On the contrary, Greimas (and Rastier, Fontanille among others) have emphasized extensively that different interpretations may be produced from a surface discursive text, which lead to pluri-isotopies or different and simultaneously operative structures of semantic coherence.
- It is specific ways of framing the organization of surface discourse that produce selfenclosed linguistic structures and not an absolute reduction of surface discourse to such and such structures.
- what Stern essentially affords by pursuing a deconstructive reading of the meaning of 'Camel', which is edified on an inherent undecidability, is not a criticism of structuralism, but a proliferating opening-up of semiotic structures to ever new interpretive possibilities.
- For Greimas, structures are constraining metalinguistically, and not as direct and immutable reflections of surface discourse.
- Hence, playfulness is recognized, but it is reduced for the sake of managing texts as structures of invariable elements beneath the variable expressive units that make up surface discourse.

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#### Deconstructionist argument:

Deconstructive readings focus on laying bare the so-called metaphysics of presence behind traditional philosophical texts in the Western tradition.

#### Marketing semiotic answer:

- This corpus of texts is utterly irrelevant to advertising research.
- Does a structuralist grammar and the topological ascription of a text peneath a text involve metaphysics for Greimas? NOT AT ALL
- Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence, launched against traditional philosophical texts, has a completely different focus and field of application than the Greimasian notion of depth structures (which are utterly discrepant with Chomskyan innatism, that posits that depth structures are innate in the human mind).
- The stratagem of différance that consists in laying bare how difference and deference are responsible for structuring a philosophical text that is edified on a metaphysics of presence is not relevant for interpreting and constructing advertising texts.
- If we are not concerned with the 'ontology' of an ad text, but with 'pragmatic criteria' about its structuration, then deference is nothing but a simple cataphora, that is verbal expressions or visuals that anticipate their subject.

analysis, no hidden unity to be grasped once the breaking-down process has been completed. Themes can be split up ad Infinitum" (Levi-Strauss)

"There is no real end to mythological

#### Deconstructionist argument:

Différance is Derrida's recommended strategy for disassembling hierarchies of submission (e.g., male / female, presence/absence) that permeate all texts, including those pertinent to consumer research.

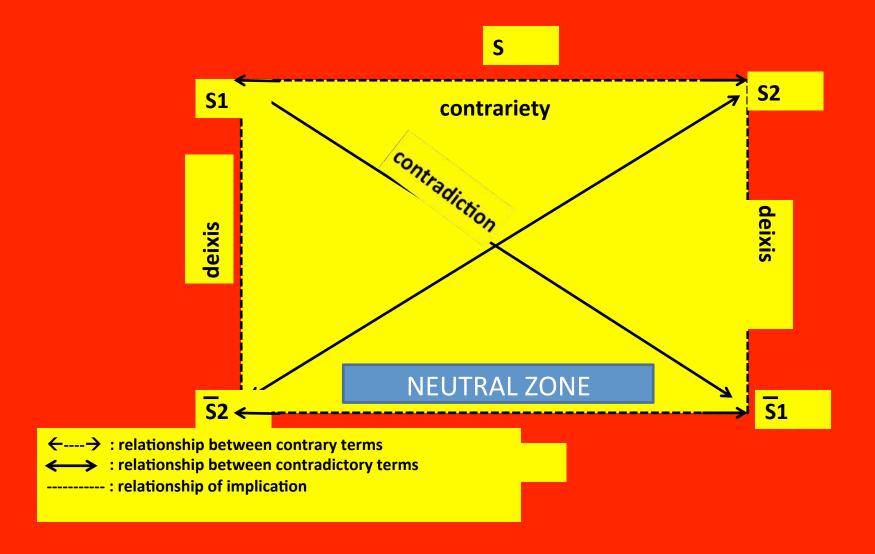
Structuralist answer: If this the case, based on Stern's reading of différance, then the hermeneutic task of deconstructionism is in fact the same as structuralism (in its traditional form), that is discerning underlying oppositional pairs (e.g., male/female) beneath surface discourse and exploring how these pairs are semantically invested with a given axiology.

Deconstructionist argument: Derrida argues against all binary thinking, for instead of accepting the structuralist notion that "X is the opposite of Y," he proposes a doubled elaboration in which "X is added to Y" and "X replaces Y".

#### Structuralist answer:

- It seems that the fundamental logical relations that underpin the semiotic square have slipped from this paradigmatic opposition.
- The starting point for constructing a <u>semiotic square</u> is not object-terms in a logical relation of contradiction, but of contrariety, that is quasi-opposition.
- In applied branding terms, a pair of contrariety may involve two semic terms that are
  posited as contrary within the contours of an elementary structure, e.g., ready-to-cook vs
  preparation-intensive.
- A strict oppositional pair would be ready-to-cook vs not ready-to-cook, which does not necessarily involve intensive preparation.
- Then, the criticism that X may not be Y (for structuralism) does not hold, as a provision has been made in the square for the possibility of X's being Y in the neutral zone of a square, which unites the strict opposites of the two terms of an elementary contrariety pair.

## Semiotic square



## Stern's 'structuralist' reading of Joe Camel

Argument: A structuralist reading focuses on a set of binaries, for difference in space rather than deference in time motivates the analysis.

Answer: This conflates surface with depth structures in a structuralist reading. Even though 'deference' is hardly an issue for advertising discourse (as against philosophical texts, where it may be used as an argument), 'time' is a facet of a structuralist reading, especially as regards the temporal reconstruction of a surface text at the semio-narrative level.

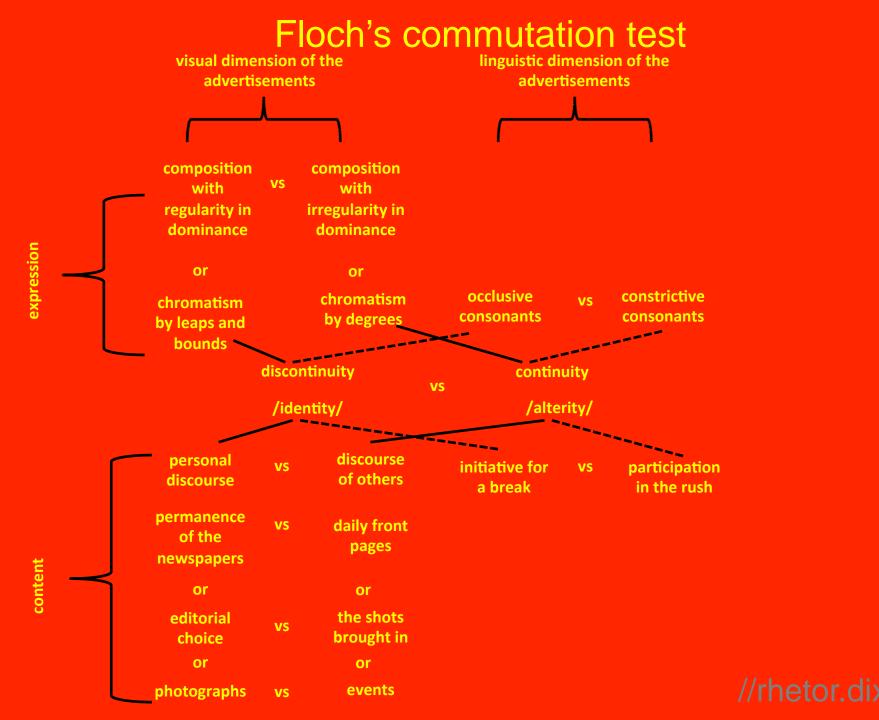
Moreover, binary structures in terms of surface discourse consist of reductionist reading grids for organizing expressive elements (e.g. <u>Floch</u>). Such reading grids may involve temporal variables with regard to ad texts, especially in the context of the moving image.

## Stern's 'structuralist' reading of Joe Camel

Argument: A finite set of binaries in the Camel cigarette advertisement is identified: margin / text, human / animal and male / female, in accordance with socially constructed hierarchies of representation, morality, and gender, characteristically found in Western cultural artifacts.

#### Answer:

- Binary structures in terms of depth grammar consist of semiotic squares for reducing the semantic content of expressive elements.
- There is no 'pre-determination' in the number and sort of semes that may enter semiotic squares.
- The example of 'socially accepted relations' offered by Greimas in the original exposition of the semiotic square did not seek to avoid 'critical readings' of widely held cultural oppositions, but to plot the depth structure of ordinary discursive formations.



#### Stern's 'alternative' deconstructive reading of Joe Camel

Argument: A deconstructive reading undoes all of the above by offering multiple and divergent interpretive possibilities.

Answer: According to Greimasian structuralism, there is no such thing as one and only possible interpretation of a text. If this is the case, then what is proposed as a deconstructive 'alternative' reading strategy is in fact the same with traditional structuralist readings. In this sense, what Stern essentially affords by pursuing a deconstructive reading of the meaning of 'Camel', which is edified on an inherent undecidability, is not a criticism of structuralism, but a proliferating opening-up of semiotic structures to ever new interpretive possibilities.

❖ Occasionally, new paradigms that seethe into marketing interpretivism enforce a judgmental, rather than critical reevaluation of existing ones, such as claiming that deconstructionist readings may unearth facets in advertising analysis, which have been suppressed by structuralism.

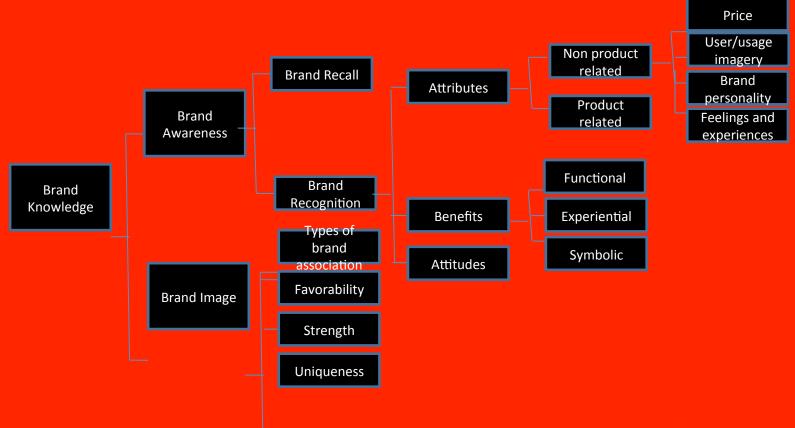
As Frank remarks, post or neo-structuralism essentially afforded to open up the concept of structure, rather than reveal 'suppressed meanings'.

# The value of structuralist semiotics in interpreting and constructing ad texts

- Offers reading grids for the systematic transcoding and inscription of surface discourse.
- But also a generativist pathway for the organization of brand meaning at a deep semantic level.
- It combines the 'logical' with the 'figurative'.
- Structures constitute first and foremost spaces ab quo that allow for the situational production and management of meaning, rather than an attempt at bringing forward 'archetypical' and 'innate' values

# Structuralist language is employed throughout standard marketing terminology and adjacent fields (e.g. discourse analysis)

Kevin Lane Keller: Brand knowledge structure

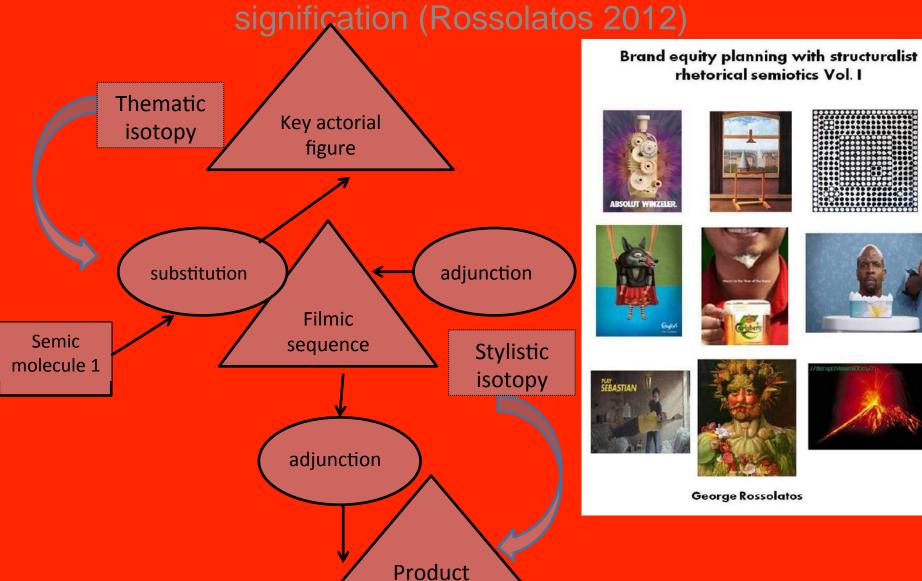


Teun A. Van Dijk: macrostructures, microstructures, surface structures, superstructural narrative schema

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#### But structures do not 'have' to be binary:

The connectionist approach to the brand trajectory of signification (Rossolatos 2012)



shot

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#### Local ad textual structure

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Systematic organization of figurative meaning



#### Figurative markers as components of ad textual coherence

- In advertising discourse, a logo, a product-shot or an endorser as key actorial figure, constitute figurative markers, as minimal units of signification.
- The same holds for key visuals that are juxtaposed through continuity editing techniques, e.g., two heterogeneous settings through montage.
- There is no 'single way' of delimiting figurative markers as minimal units of ad textual coherence.
- ❖A minimal unit may be anything, based on the context that is used for delimitation, from a subatomic particle of a line up to an entire text.
- A minimal unit is defined by pragmatic criteria in terms of textual encoding and by assumptions about the mode of a text's decoding (principle of pertinence).

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### Figurative markers as parts of an intra-iconic gestalt

Spatial juxtaposition

+

insertion in the temporal order of a brand's figurative logic =

Iconic similarity among heterogeneous expressive minimal units

How do these units hang together in a brand's intraiconic gestalt (Lindekens)?

## Reading grids as modes of organizing intra-iconic gestalts

- It is our reading grid (figurative markers + relata) that imposes iconic similarity between a visual object and what is iconically represented.
- Dislocation of a structuralist reading of visual signs from any contentions about a metaphysics of presence.
- "This shows the extent to which it is true that a semiotic object, instead of being a given, is the result of the reading that constructs it" (Greimas).

//rhetor.dixit// Accounting for ad textual coherence: From units to relata

The rhetorical semiotic approach of //rhetor.dixit//
prioritizes rhetorical markers as the

'figurative glue'

of ad textual coherence

//rhetor.dixit//: Semiotic content analysis case-study

- Sample of 87 TV ad texts from the world's most valuable brands (based on BrandZ 2012 report).
- A pool of 561 individual ad filmic segments.
- Extensive analyses of rhetorical semiotic strategies.

#### //rhetor.dixit//: Challenging the 'master tropes'

Rhetorical figure	% of ttl sample	Rhetorical figure	% of ttl sample
Anaphora	20%	Personification	2%
Pereikonopoeia	9%	Irony	2%
Accolorance	7%	Oxymoron	2%
Inversion	6%	Pun	2%
Metaphor	6%	Ellipsis	2%
Antanaclasis	5%	Expletion	1%
Epiphora	5%	Hyperbole	1%
Alliteration	4%	Parenthesis	1%
Rhyme	4%	Anacolouthon	1%
Reshaption	4%	Tmesis	1%
Metonymy	4%	Synecdoche	1%
Antithesis	3%	Asyndeton	1%
Antimetabole	3%	Litotes	1%

//rhetor.dixit// : 3 new figures for unlocking ad texts' rhetorical configuration

Pareikonopoeia: Employment of similar images with different senses; similarity is conferred by the employment of different actors in different filmic sequences/ syntagms with similar postures, usually enhanced by the employment of the same production techniques (e.g., all syntagms featuring close-ups or medium shots or alternating close-ups/medium shots), who repeat the same underlying theme under different manifest narratives.

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Accolorance: Repetition of the same color in the majority of visuals in a filmic syntagm or across syntagms. Usually employed with view to highlighting either a color that is part of a brand's visual identity or of an ad film's aesthetic orientation.



# accolorance



//rhetor.dixit// : 3 new figures for unlocking ad texts' rhetorical configuration

Reshaption: Repetition of the same shape in the majority of visuals in a syntagm or across syntagms.



reshaption









# //rhetor.dixit// : The benefits from using content analysis with semiotics

- Quantified view of modes of ad textual configuration, rather than just speculation
- Systematic organization of a large corpus of multimodal surface discourses, which is untenable through manual reading/coding procedures
- Detailed focus on ad filmic syntagms, rather than treating the entire ad film as a standalone unit of analysis

## The benefits from using //rhetor.dixit//

- Traditional copy strategies assume as their point of departure figurative markers (settings, actors, garments)
- //rhetor.dixit// emphasizes figurative relata
- By benchmarking brand communications against a competitive ad textual setting //rhetor.dixit// points to areas for building a first mover figurative advantage
- By analyzing and interpreting not only the incidence of individual figures, but even more importantly of configurations, that is combinations of figures that are responsible for a brand's textualization

# The benefits from using //rhetor.dixit//

- ❖ The model is scalable to other vehicles in an IMC mix
- A whole host of expressive elements (music, voice over typologies) are quantified with view to yielding a holistic picture of an ad text's textualization
- Rhetorical operations are matched with argumentation strategies and appeals, thus yielding a semiotic rhetorical cartography of advertising communications

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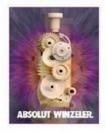
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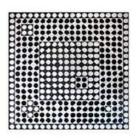
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## Brand equity planning with structuralist rhetorical semiotics Vol. I



















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