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# Interpreting advertisements with semiotic content analysis

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//disruptiVesemiOtics//







# From structuralism to deconstruction and back again

## 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 self-enclosed 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.

# From structuralism to deconstruction and back again

## Deconstructionist argument:

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

“There is no real end to mythological analysis, no hidden unity to be grasped once the breaking-down process has been completed. Themes can be split up ad Infinitum” (Levi-Strauss)

## Marketing semiotic answer:

- This corpus of texts is utterly irrelevant to advertising research.
- Does a structuralist grammar and the topological ascription of a text beneath 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.

# From structuralism to deconstruction and back again

## 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.

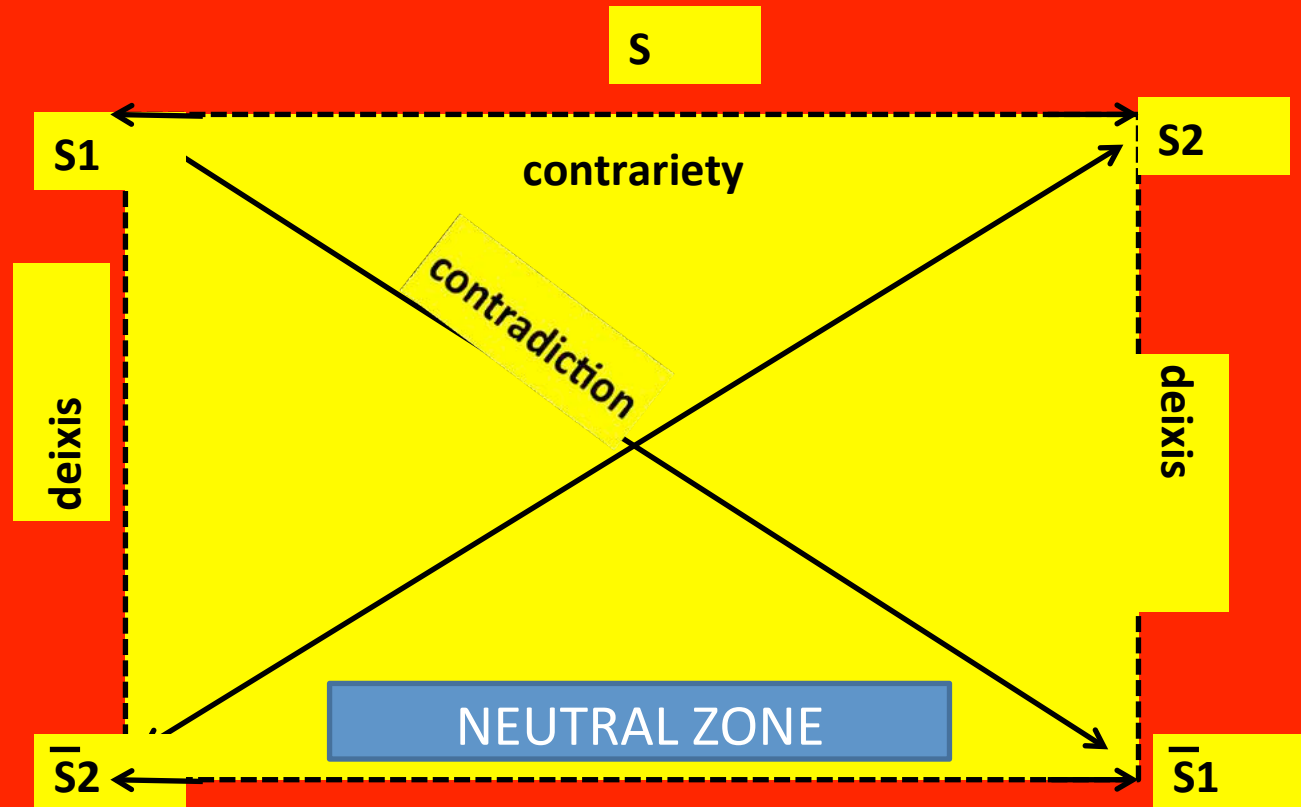
# From structuralism to deconstruction and back again

**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 [semiotic square](#) 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



- ←----→ : relationship between contrary terms
- ↔ : relationship between contradictory terms
- : relationship of implication



# 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. [Floch](#)). 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.

# Floch's commutation test

visual dimension of the advertisements

linguistic dimension of the advertisements

expression

composition with regularity in dominance

vs

composition with irregularity in dominance

or

chromatism by leaps and bounds

or

chromatism by degrees

occlusive consonants

vs

constrictive consonants

discontinuity

continuity

vs

/identity/

/alterity/

content

personal discourse

vs

discourse of others

initiative for a break

vs

participation in the rush

permanence of the newspapers

vs

daily front pages

or

editorial choice

vs

the shots brought in

or

photographs

vs

events

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

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

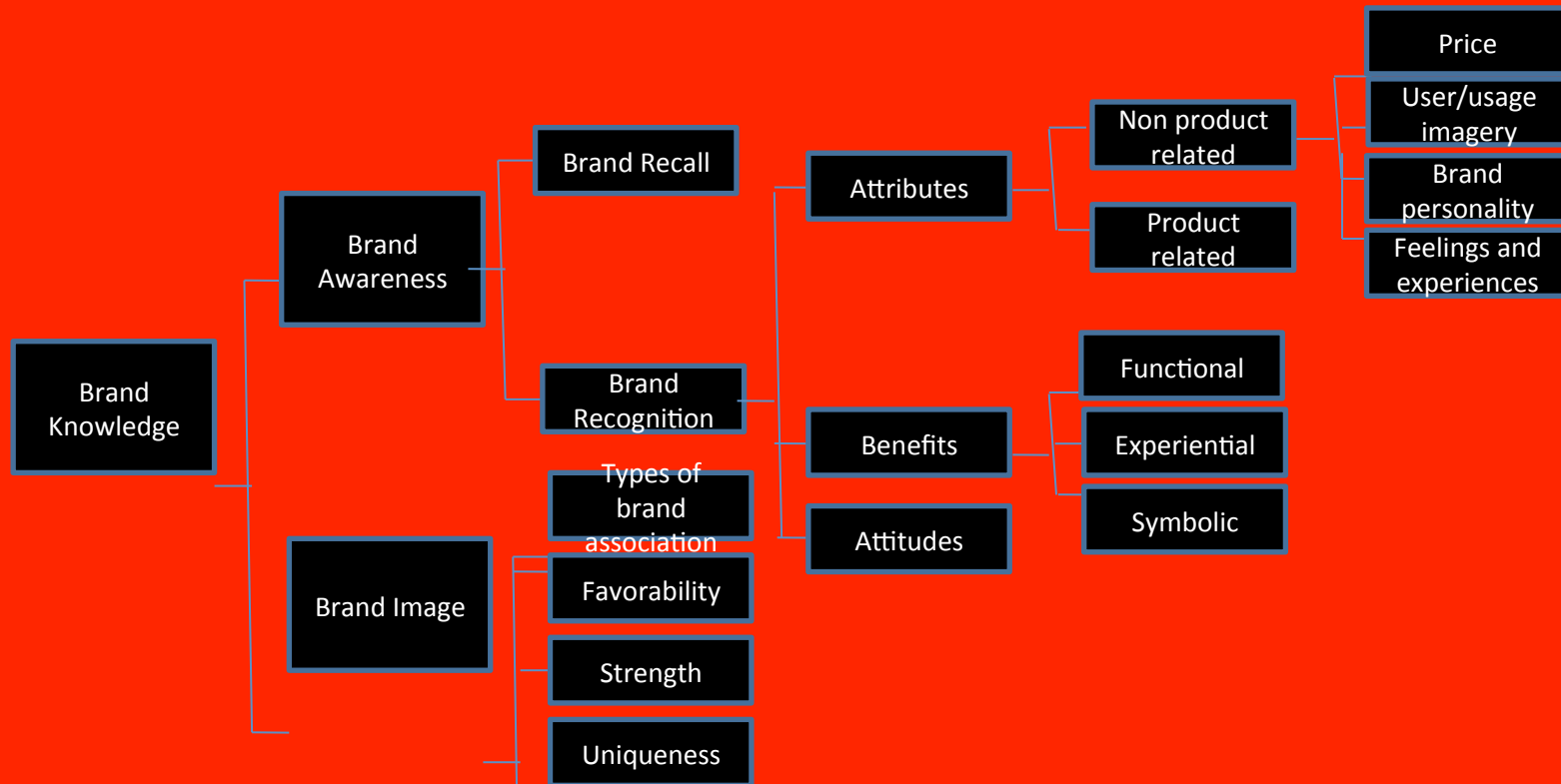
**Answer:** According to Greimasian structuralism, there is no such thing as one and only possible interpretation of a text. If this is the case, then what is proposed as a deconstructive 'alternative' reading strategy is in fact the same with traditional structuralist readings. In this sense, what Stern 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.





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

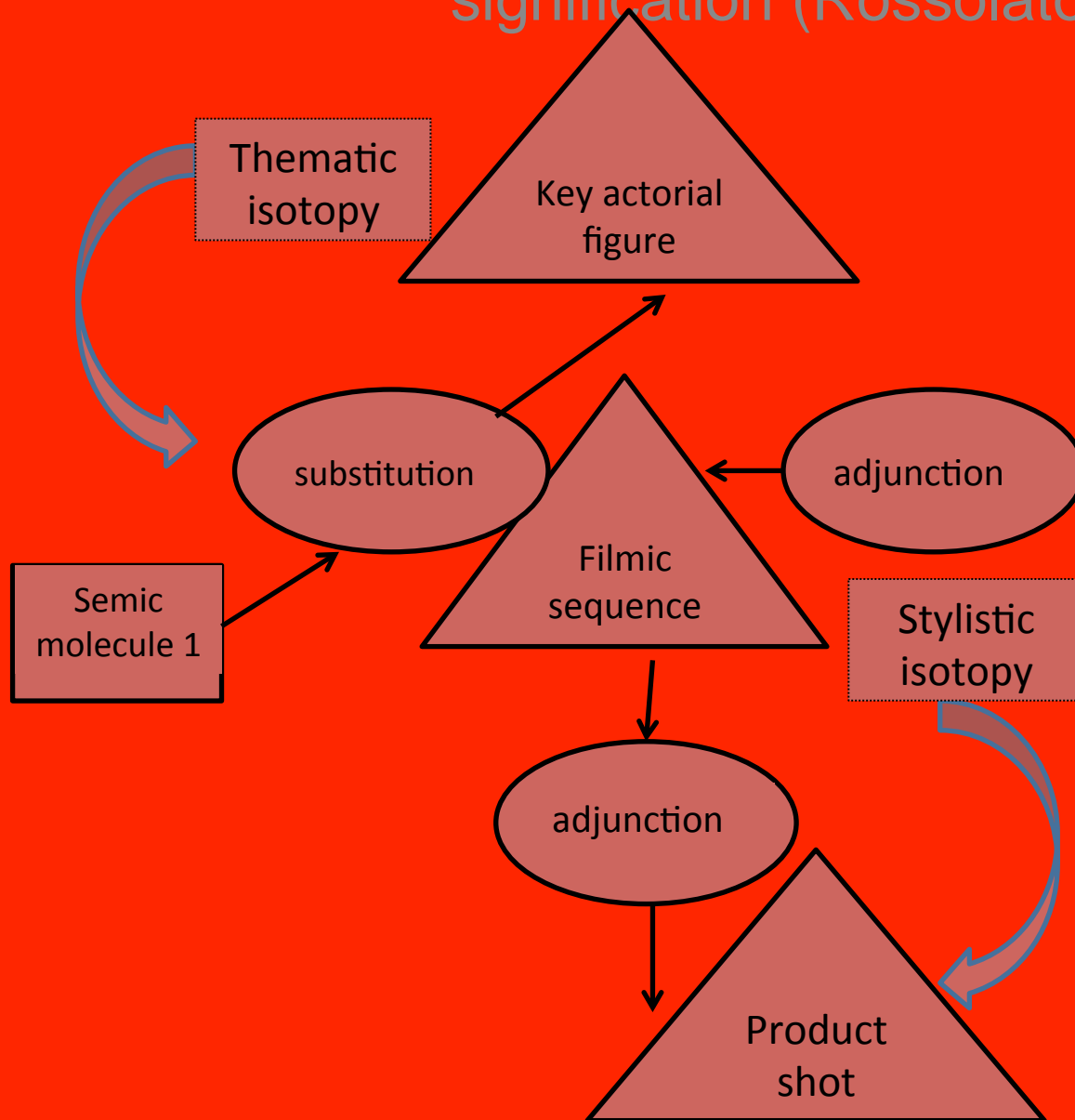
## ❖ Kevin Lane Keller: Brand knowledge structure



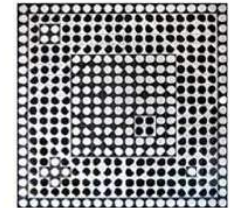
## ❖ Teun A. Van Dijk: macrostructures, microstructures, surface structures, superstructural narrative schema

But structures do not 'have' to be binary:

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



Brand equity planning with structuralist rhetorical semiotics Vol. I



George Rossolatos



Local ad textual structure

=

Systematic organization of figurative meaning













# //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%              |
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| Antithesis        | 3%              | Asyndeton         | 1%              |
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# reshaption











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