A Study on the Syntagma & Paradigm by Repetition, Variation and Contrast in Ads

Choi Seong-hoon1)

ABSTRACT

This study is the academic work to explore the potential meanings of print advertisements. Linguistic features such as repetition, variation, contrast and phonological structure in the verbal texts of ads can give rise to shades-of-meaning or slight variations in advertising. The language of advertising is not only language in words. It is also a language in images, colors, and pictures. Pictures and words combine to form the advertisement’s visual text. While the words are very important in delivering the sales message, the visual text cannot be ignored in advertisements. Forming part of the visual text is the paralanguage of the ad. Paralanguage is the meaningful behaviour accompanying language, such as voice quality, gestures, facial expressions and touch in speech, and choice of typeface and letter sizes in writing. Foregrounding is the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. This paper focuses its discussion on the advertisements within the framework of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic relationship. The sources of ads have been confined to Malboro. The ads were reselected based on purposive sampling methods.

Key words: variation, paralanguage, foregrounding, syntagma, paradigm,

I. Preface

Every now and then we come across memorable metaphors that facilitate our understanding of complex concepts. One example used by Roland Barthes to explain the relationship between (1) the plane of syntagm and (2) the plane of paradigm ('system') is the restaurant menu that is a part of the food system. The paradigm is represented by choices we make from among similar or related dishes. The syntagm, on the other hand, is equivalent to the order or sequence in which the dishes are serve. A restaurant ‘menu’ actualizes both planes; the horizontal reading of the entries, for instance, corresponds to the system, the vertical reading of the menu corresponds to the syntagm [1]. Within the same analogy but this time in Saussurean language, ‘the whole menu represent the langue of the restaurant (and a sublanguage of the whole culture)’ while parole expresses our individual act, ‘a statement... in the language of food’ that is made ‘when we select from the menu and place our order’ [2].
Barthes exemplifies the system/syntagm distinction: the garment system, the furniture system, the architecture system, the car system, and other ‘complex systems’ including the press, cinema, television and advertising. Guy Cook’s analogy between syntagmatic-paradigmatic relations and the supermarket is equally appropriate. In a supermarket, we encounter all types of cheese in one place, of canned tomato in another, of pizza base in another, of wine in another and so on. We select one of each to fill a particular slot. If, however, the shop was arranged to mozzarella cheese, and one kind only of tomatoes, one kind of pizza base and one kind of wine occurred together, forming the combination ‘pizza margarita with chianti’ this would be syntagmatic. Recent experiments with syntagmatic marketing include manufacturer’s attempts to set up ‘product clusters’ - for example pre-shave lotion + razor + shaving soap + after-shave lotion [3]. In many nations, some sections in a few supermarkets are almost syntagmatic in terms of layout. The ‘baking needs’ section displays flour, cream of tartar, vanilla, other flavoring , cake decors, and confectioner’s sugar on the same if not on adjacent shelves. Nearby too are cakepans and baking utensils (e.g., sifter, spatula). Some vendors in the wet market have also turned ‘syntagmatic’ by putting together in one plastic bag assorted vegetables chopped/cut and ready to cook stew. But this is rigid adherence to a single grammatical rule. The plastic bag petrifies possibilities and limits creativity. Ambulant vendors can be more democratic in offering ‘syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices’. They peddle different kinds of seafood and vegetables that homekeepers could combine in ways suitable to their needs, tastes, and budget. In spite of these recent developments, the approach of both advertising and distribution as a whole remains paradigmatic. Products are presented as alternatives to their competitors, rather than as complements to their accompaniments [3]. In a capitalist environment where competition rather than complementation prevails, advertising is necessary adjunct to marketing. If a product is to sell, it has to be promoted. While advertising may seem to be restricted by purely commercial motives, its printed text is challenging for linguistically sensitive and culturally inquisitive scholar.

This study aims to explore the potentials of print advertisements as a linguistic code. It consists of three main parts:

Part II examines the verbal text of advertisements.

Part III deals with the pictorial text.

Part IV relates the verbal and the pictorial texts of the advertisements.

Part V is the conclusion.

The paper focuses its discussion on the magazine advertisements of Malboro cigarettes. The sources of Malboro ads have been confined to Time and Newsweek. The ads were reselected
based on purposive sampling methods.

II. THE VERBAL TEXT

The word comes first, then the visual [4]. A visual text without an accompanying verbal text would have no advertising impact. The purpose of advertising is defined and straightforward: to promote or sell products, programs, or services. The verbal text which identifies the product should stay in the mind of the consumer if the ad is to have the product promotion value.

The concept of visual imagery springing from words may sound odd, but in advertising (as in real life) this happens to be the strongest way to communicate a clear idea that will stick in people's minds and memories. To be sure a picture can be worth a thousand words. But if that picture also happens to be the spontaneous visual extension of a strong theme or slogan, its power is enormously enhanced. A visual by itself might be communicative and moving - but could still mean different things to different people. I want to permanently implant an image in your head and place words on your lips. I want everyone to receive the same message [4]. The verbal text of ads involves a communication situation. Roman Jakobson's act model can provide the framework for analyzing this linguistic text. Six factors constitute any speech event: addresser, addressee, context, code, contact and message. The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to (the 'referent' in another, somewhat ambiguous nomenclature), graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication [5].

Applied to advertising, some of these factors of communication may not be too simple to identify. In verbal communication, addresser easily refers to the speaker. However it may be somewhat difficult to name the addresser in an ad. Is it the manufacturer of the product being advertised? Or the copywriter whose job is to formulate catchy slogans? Some print ads may even present a persona who acts as the addresser, a specific character just like in literature. The addressee is the consumer, the buying public. The context is the referent. A code familiar to both addresser and addressee is used. Contact is established between the addresser and addressee. The message is transmitted. Each of these factors of communication correspond to 'six basic function of verbal communication' [5]:

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To Jakobson, ‘Two basic modes of agreement used in verbal behaviour, selection and combination,’ assume importance. From a wide choice of linguistic items and categories, addressers select their preference and these enter into combinations in the speech chain. The selection is produced in the basis of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy, while the combination, the build-up of the sequence, is based on contiguity. The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination [5]."While succeeding scholars have noted that Jakobson’s statement in ‘Linguistics and Poetics,’ on the surface confines itself to the study of poetry, it may, on the contrary, apply to the study of other texts, among them, advertisements. Prescriptions for effective advertising abound, as in how to write headlines that work. Thus, formulas like “Begin your headline with the word ‘announcing’” [6] are popularly adopted by several companies. Alternatives include ‘words that have an announcement quality’ like ‘Introducing...’ 'Presenting...’, 'Today’s', 'New,' 'Now', and 'At last', [6]. Because of these many option taken from an advertising “menu” or formula, the advertiser has to make a careful selection of lexical items to put into the headline.

In selecting which word to use, meanings are factored in. Synonyms aren’t automatically interchangeable. Words exist because they’re subtly different from other words whose meanings are almost the same. Often the differences are slight enough to make words interchangeable.
Example: The difference between ‘immediately,’ ‘at once’ and ‘right now’ is the most urgent; ‘immediately’ is the most arm’s-length. What’s the value of considering the difference of the three terms? ‘immediately’ is valuable when you don’t want the message recipient to think you are assuming he or she will perform an action automatically. ‘At once’ carries an imperious tone. ‘Right now’ is a hard call to action [7]. In other cases, shades-of-meaning or slight variations in terms of degree are not the sole reason for a particular choice. Often selection is based on prosodic patterns or on alliterative or phonological effects. Fifty print advertisements of Malboro cigarettes representing ten variations or groups are analyzed below. The grouping is based on the verbal texts contained in each ad.

[Table2] Print Ads of Malboro

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Verbal Texts</th>
<th>No. of sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Malboro</td>
<td>8 samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Flip-Top Box Malboro</td>
<td>1 sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Malboro Country</td>
<td>1 sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind.</td>
<td>1 sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And some men get to call it home. Malboro Country.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Malboro. Come to where the flavor is.</td>
<td>5 samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Come to where the flavor is. Malboro.</td>
<td>7 samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Come to Malboro Country.</td>
<td>14 samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Come to where the flavor is. Malboro Country.</td>
<td>2 samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Come to where the flavor is. Come to Malboro Country</td>
<td>8 samples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Merry Christmas from Malboro Country.</td>
<td>3 samples</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ads are assigned codes below to show how they relate to one another.

[Table3] The ads assigned codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Code No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What linguistic features may be found in the ads? Consider

A: Malboro. The name of the product – a noun. There are no other words accompanying it. There is no need for further elaboration. That is what is being advertised. Malboro is the message. As a single lexical item, it is directed towards the addressee from an addressee. Contact is established by a code which is the same in every language. The context is product promotion. And the addressee is expected to complete the message by buying the product.

B has no linguistic text but that inscribed on the cigarette box. Nevertheless, it is a message in itself. Malboro – but this time in a ‘FLIP-TOP BOX.’

C: Malboro Country. An added lexical item to this group is the word ‘Country’. It provides a setting, a context for the Malboro ad: the Country with its accompanying word associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Coded No.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>…1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>…1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>…3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>…3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 1, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>…1, 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and collocations - the open country, the wild country, a free country, etc. Through the device of association/collocation, the addressee is enticed to buy the cigarette. The word ‘Malboro’ has three syllables when articulated in isolation. However in combination with ‘Country’ the medial vowel weakens and ‘Malboro’ begins to be articulated as two syllables.

D has some interesting linguistic features in it. This ad exemplifies parallelism and repetition, two of the characteristics of the principle of equivalence. The first ten words may be rearranged into two lines with five words in each line.

No roof but the sky,
No walls but the wind.

Each word is monosyllabic. Stresses may be supplied.

No roof but the sky,
No walls but the wind.

The next part of the ad goes:

And some man get to call it home

The pronoun it has cataphoric reference; that is, it anticipates ‘Malboro Country’ in the last part of the ad. What is ‘it’? The first part of the verbal text ends with the period but does not have a surface NP VP structure, although one may interpret “No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind” as referring to Malboro Country. In a more conventional form, the structure may be shown thus:

[ Malboro Country has ] no roof but the sky.
[ Malboro Country has ] no walls but the wind.
or
[There is] no roof but the sky [and]
[There are] no walls but the wind [in] Malboro Country.

However, the ad has been arranged in an ascending climactic order ending with ‘home’ has
for its immediate environment ‘it’ and ‘Malboro Country’.

E equates ‘Malboro’ with ‘where the flavor is.’ Expressed in the imperative, it compels the addressee to ‘Come to [Malboro] where the flavor is.’ Phonological similarities may be observed in the words ‘Malboro’ and ‘flavor’.

Malboro: _ r l o r o
flavor: _ l _ _ o r

Two bilabial phonemes /m/ and /b/ are found in ‘Malboro’ while two fricatives /f/ and /v/ are found in ‘flavor’. ‘Flavor’, in a strict sense, is synonymous with taste. But ‘flavor’ can also mean spirit, essence or quality. This essence or quality is defined and enhanced through the visual text. This will be discussed in the next chapter.

F contrasts with E in terms of structure. Where one begins, the other ends:

E: Malboro. Come to where the flavor is.
F: Come to where the flavor is. Malboro.

G puts ‘Come’ and ‘Malboro Country’ in a contiguous environment.

C _ m _ t _
M _ _ _ _ _ c _ _ t _ _

The word ‘Country’ added to version F to form version H brings with a connotations of a specific yet open territory (a ‘country’) and image of an untamed, pristine environment. Of all Malboro slogans, I is the longest. Two sentences, parallel in structure, are presented.

Come to where the flavor is.
Come to Malboro Country.
Both have the same number of syllables.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Come to where the flavor is.
Come to Malboro Country.

The lines show a predominance of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables

```
Come to where the flavor is.
```

Come to Malboro Country.

J may be considered as ‘special releases’ intended only for the month of December. I functions both as a greeting as advertisement. The context is well-defined: Malboro Country, the likely addresser, wishes it addressee, the reader, a ‘Merry Christmas’.

### III. THE VISUAL TEXT

While the words are very important in delivering the sales message and making the point, the visual in advertising message is often the first thing seen and the last thing remembered [8]. The visual text cannot be ignored in Malboro advertisements. This is underscored by the fact that the ads come out regularly Time and Newsweek magazines. With only ten variations of verbal text including one which is a special occasion text (‘Merry Christmas from Malboro Country’) and therefore cannot alternate with the others in any other issues of the magazines, the advertiser has to rely heavily on the visual, specifically the pictorial, text. Foregrounding of Malboro Country is arrived at and achieved with the use of recurring images associated with the ‘country’ - wild stallions, rocky mountains, open spaces, panoramic vies, hardy cowboys, leather vests and gloves, cowboys’ lassoes, a golden sunset, a clear stream, an occasional blue sky, a generally untamed wilderness [9].

How do these function in the ads? The picture of the stallion/horse pervades most of the ads. In the absence of this visual image, though substitute images are used – a branding iron, riding boots, a cowboy hat, a buckle inscribed with a design of a man riding a horse. Within the given paradigm, the principle of substitution is effectively employed.

What norm do the ads follow? What message to the ads attempt to communicate? What image Malboro try to project? Malboro is ‘Country’; Malboro is rugged; Malboro is strength and
power. Hence, the pictures of wild stallions, the rugged countryside, the mountains minus the
gentle slopes, the rough hands, strong metal chains, the merciless whip, the burning fire, the
searing sands- images associated with the male strength and prowess. Thus, in every Malboro
ad appears the Malboro man, a cowboy in real-life situation, if not in a picture frame.

In all but twelve of the ads (three of them the Christmas ads), an iconic representation, the
characteristic pack of Malboro cigarettes, is found. The remaining nine are a ‘deviation from
normal usage’. Of these, two contain deviations from the ‘normal’ verbal text. One of these ad
(D) is the one that says ‘No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind. And some men get to
call it home. Malboro Country’. The other has additional NP; ‘Local cowboy hall of fame.’ It is
worth noting that the Malboro man, the ‘Local cowboy hall of fame,’ a picture gallery.

While the Malboro box repeatedly appears in the ads, variations of this iconic sign are
presented - some boxes are closed, giving an impression of stasis and stability; others are
open, suggesting movement and dynamism. Some are either standing upright to suggest
awareness, or reclining diagonally to suggest relaxation. At least two of the ads do not have a
verbal text except that which appears on the pack/box of cigarettes. The latter is a ‘clipped’
version of a bigger ad. In spite of the absence of a meaning-loaded slogans, the ad succeeds in
promoting the product through the ‘signature flip-top box’ and colors so identifiably Malboro
(red, white and black). Size and layout are also important in visual text. Some of the ads
appear on the centerfold; others on a one-page spread. Nothing is less than a page. The last
two ads, J2 and J3, depict the same scene though one is spread horizontally; the other,
vertically. Forming part of the visual text is the paralanguage of the ad. Defined by Cook,
paralanguage is the ‘meaningful behaviour accompanying language, such as voice quality,
gestures, facial expressions and touch (in speech), and choice of typeface and letter sizes (in
writing) [10].’ Of the fifty ads included in this study, not one contains a verbal text set in types
bigger than the name Malboro. The name always appears the bigger letter types than or the
same letter size as the rest of the verbal text. The language of advertising is not only language
in words. It is also a language in images, colors, and pictures. Pictures and words combine to
for the advertisement’s visual text.

IV. FOREGROUNDING ADS: THE VERBAL AND THE VISUAL

Foregrounding is thus the ‘throwing into relief’ of the linguistic sign against the background
of the norms of ordinary language [11]. Advertising aims to sell. In the case of a commercial
consumer advertising, much money is spent in order to increase sales. Because of the stiff
competition among manufacturers of consumer products, advertisements become an important ingredient in selling these products.

The word ‘advertising’ is derived from the Latin ‘adverto’ formed by two words: ‘ad’ meaning ‘toward’ and ‘verto’ signifying to ‘turn’. Thus advertising aims to turn the consumer toward a store. And a store or any business concern advertises goods, ideas, and services to make customers turn their attention to the store or business entity [12]. The public must be made to remember specific names or brands of products. Familiarization is a key concept in marketing. But the market is virtually saturated within the same products that come under different names. This atmosphere of competition makes ‘foregrounding’ in advertising a necessity. A seeming paradox begins to work in advertising. Familiarization is achieved through defamiliarization. What may be commonplace is made ‘strange’ to the consumer. An ordinary product takes on a new appeal. One brand name among so many of its kind stands out. The Malboro ad is one that relies on foregrounding, achieved primarily through repetition of and parallelism in the verbal and the visual texts. Gone may be the days of rodeos and American Western films but the ad refuses to be anachronistic. It is still relevant. In a world of automation, one cannot help but long for a pristine environment. One now sees the world in a new way through the old. The world has been ‘defamiliarized’ - through the Malboro ads.

V. Conclusion

Linguistic features such as repetition, variation, contrast and phonological structure in the verbal texts of ads can give rise to shades-of-meaning or slight variations in advertising.

Roman Jakobson’s act model can provide the framework for analyzing this linguistic text. Six factors constitute any speech event: addressee, addressee, context, code, contact and message.

While the words are very important in delivering the sales message, the visual text cannot be ignored in Malboro advertisements. Forming part of the visual text is the paralanguage of the ad. Paralanguage is the meaningful behaviour accompanying language, such as voice quality, gestures, facial expressions and touch in speech, and choice of typeface and letter sizes in writing. The language of advertising is not only language in words. It is also a language in images, colors, and pictures. Pictures and words combine to form the advertisement’s visual text. Foregrounding is thus the throwing into relief of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language. The Malboro ad is one that relies on foregrounding, achieved primarily through repetition of and parallelism in the verbal and the visual texts.
References


