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Interdisciplinarity and the analysis of multimodal discourse: The case of TV ads

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I would like to talk about interdisciplinarity as a framework for academic research in the field of discourse studies. I shall focus on multimodal discourse in the form of TV ads' discourse, though the framework could equally apply to other types of discourse as well.

The three questions I shall discuss are, 'what is interdisciplinarity?', 'what is multimodality?', and 'what is particular about the discourse of TV ads?' The paper includes a brief analysis of an Algerian TV ad as an illustration.

2. Interdisciplinarity

Klein (2005) notes that the dominant trend in higher education for much of the twentieth century was the growth of specialization. However, in the latter half of the century, a historical reversal of this trend began with interdisciplinarity gaining momentum. Witness is the growing numbers of new researchers who are active in interdisciplinary research. It is the sciences which took the lead first. Then the way was paved for the humanities to follow.

The term interdisciplinary is applied to describe studies that use methods and insights of several established disciplines or traditional fields of study. That is, interdisciplinary research integrates perspectives and methods from two or more disciplines to investigate a topic or an issue. In the words of Horowitz (2005):

an interdisciplinary model, humanistic or social scientific or more compellingly erosive of that divide, requires a shift from largely contained and constrained, field-specific themes and methods to problem- or issue-based objects of analysis, more or less unbounded questions, and multifaceted methodologies. (Horowitz 2005:1127)

There are three models of interdisciplinarity according to Van Leeuwen (in Wodak & Chilton 2005): the 'centralist', 'pluralist' & 'integrationist' where the third is the most recent. Furthermore, interdisciplinarity has been distinguished from multidisciplinary research in which individuals and teams trained in different academic traditions focus on a common problem but are not charged with integrating concepts and methods to address that problem. It has also been distinguished from, or regarded as a subtype of, transdisciplinary research where diverse researchers attempt to transcend disciplinary boundaries to create novel ways of thinking about the topic of interest and to advance methods of investigation.

However, beyond this distinction and the terminological differences that exist in the literature (interdisciplinarity, cross-disciplinarity, multi-disciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, antidisciplinarity, postdisciplinarity, etc.), interdisciplinarity involves researchers and students in the goals of connecting and integrating several academic schools of thought in the pursuit of a common task. Since now there is an estimated total of more than 4,000 academic specialties, this offers a big potential for synthetic perspectives on research.

Interdisciplinarity is most often called upon as a means of solving research problems. This stems from the realization that, quite often, applied research problems do not originate with science and do not correspond to one discipline. An interdisciplinary approach, then, focuses on transcending the boundaries of single academic disciplines. The added value of interdisciplinary approaches has been demonstrated in research on a range of complex questions. Nissani (1997) sums up the arguments for interdisciplinary research as:

- enabling creative breakthroughs
- developing objective outsiders' perspectives
- discovering disciplinary omissions
- helping to solve complex applied problems
- promoting a unity-of-knowledge ideal
- developing flexible research
- contributing to communication and mobilisation of resources
- facilitating the defence of academic freedom

(Nissani 1997 cited in Karanika-Murray & Wiesemes 2009:2)

3. Multimodality & TV Advertising Discourse

According to Cook (2001), the term mode is used to refer to “the choice between three means of communication: music, pictures and language. Each may be further subdivided in various ways” (Cook 2001:42). However, multimodality is defined by Bargiela-Chiappini (2009) as “the combined utilisation of different semiotic resources within a single communicative process” (Bargiela-Chiappini 2009:155). It is worth mentioning that multimodality is not exclusive to TV advertising. There are other areas such as, cinema and internet where a whole range of multimodal resources – language, image, sound - is used extensively as noted by Bargiela-Chiappini (2009), for example.

For the study of advertising discourse, the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996/2001); van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001), for instance, initiated an approach in which “discourse analytical tools, originally conceived for the analysis of language use above the sentence, were further extended to make them suitable to the dynamic and complex semiosis of multimodality” (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996/2001 cited in Bargiela-Chiappini 2009:156). In the same vein, Cook (2001) notes that in spite of language being the main focus of discourse analysis, “it is not concerned with language alone”. He adds that discourse analysis also “examines the context of communication” (Cook 2001:3). So, in case there are modes other than language (e.g. image, colour, music, etc) in the structure of a given discourse, they must be taken into consideration as well.

From a semiotic standpoint, discourse can be defined as a "structured semiotic operation which at one and the same time localizes the meaning in time and space"(Johansen & Larsen 2002:56). Nowadays, advertising is no more considered a remote and specialized

discourse. It has become a prominent genre in contemporary society, of which people have vast and daily experience. This can be explained, at least partly, by the technological advance that has made satellite television available almost for everyone. But the advertisement discourse challenges the analyst more than any other discourse because of its very nature and the multitude of elements that constitute its existence. It is multimodal, condensed and highly complex, hence the difficulty of its analysis. For instance, the difficulty of “assigning it neatly to any one of the three macro categories of discourse [i.e. cognitive, affective, or conative]” (Cook 2001:102) is but one among many difficulties. Another is that, quite often the discourse of advertising works intertextually; and as rightly noted by Matheson (2005), “intertextual analysis is not about identifying sameness and regular patterning...but about the cultural work a text is doing in relation to wider structures” (Matheson 2005:36). The analysis of this kind of discourse must be done taking into account the cultural context into which it is used.

The analysis of TV ads (which are, as already mentioned, multimodal texts *par excellence*), is difficult especially if one is bound within the paradigm of a single academic discipline. Accordingly, interdisciplinarity, for example, in the form of a semiotic-discursive approach offers itself as a useful analytical framework for such complex texts. This is much so because a multimodal text is characterized by the co-presence of modes other than speech or writing. The assumption here is that all modes have specific parts to play in the making of meaning. The different modes (image, color, music, etc.) present in the text are not merely replicating what language already does. They play a full role in *representation*. And an interdisciplinary approach seems more appropriate for the analysis of their structure and discourse. For example, from semiotics we can draw the ideas of sign and text; whereas from discourse analysis we can take the idea of interaction between text and context. Thus, the analysis of a TV ad can benefit from the insights provided by both disciplines in order to shed light on all its aspects.

4. Nedjma TV Ad

The Nedjma launch TV ad is an example of Algerian TV advertising. It is an ad using the football celebrity Zidane as an endorser to advertise the mobile telephony services provided by the company Nedjma. It is a good example of a multimodal text where language, image, music and color are combined to create a persuasive discourse.

(Video available at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xs8sc_zinedine-zidane-pub-nejma_music, accessed September 1, 2011).

4.1. Four Major Modes of Signification:

The discourse of the TV ad is built on the combination, to different extents, of four modes of signification: image, language, music and color.

Image:

Image is the most important semiotic mode in the TV ad of Nedjma. This is seen in the great number, and rich variety, of shots used in the TV ad and in the part played by image in the structure of its discourse. The signs sometimes are simple and work either as icons, indexes or symbols. Sometimes they are more complex and simultaneously belong to more than one category.

e.g.

- Zidane: operates on several semiotic levels. It is an iconographic element at the simplest level of reference (Zidane as a footballer), but at a more complex level it carries a rich variety of symbolic meanings (masculine symbol, metaphor for success, etc.).

Language:

Language is powerful and omnipresent in this TV ad's discourse. There is language in both spoken and written forms.

e.g.

- The lyrics of the song (spoken)
- Nedjma, the brand name (written)

Music:

The music used in this TV ad is popular, typical of the music found generally in the centre of the country (Algeria). More particularly, it is found in Algiers and its neighborhood and known as '*chaabi*' in Algerian Arabic.

Color:

The important colors in this TV ad are white, green and red (the Algerian national colors), along with orange (the color of Nedjma).

4.2. The Discourse of the TV Ad:

The discourse of the TV ad has a number of characteristics. It is:

- Heterogeneous in form: combining image, language and sound.
- Homogenous in content: expressing a subtle, yet clear selling message.
- Condensed: lasting 66 seconds.
- Rhetorical: using metaphors and metonymies (e.g. Logo for company as a metonymy & Zidane for celebrity as a metaphor)
- Adapted to the Algerian context: using cultural elements inherent to the Algerian society (e.g. Algerian Arabic, traditional cultural elements such as the *hayek* & *koffa*, etc.)
- Highly connotative: relying more on connotation than on denotation.
- Intertextual: the brand name Nedjma evokes the literary work *Nedjma* (1956) of Kateb Yacine.

5. Conclusion:

As exemplified by the Nedjma TV ad, language is just one of a number of modes of communication, all of which are culturally and socially shaped. Furthermore, nowadays verbal language is being displaced as communicational mode by image, in many sites of public communication, especially advertising. Though language is present, and important, in the discourse of the Nedjma TV ad, yet it is superceded with image. This seems to go in line with the general tendency in advertising discourse. Also, the TV ad identifies clearly the setting as being Algeria and the target audience as the Algerian society with all its fringes. It uses linguistic and non-linguistic strategies to attract their attention and persuade them to buy the services of Nedjma. It is the adoption of an interdisciplinary framework for research, in the field of multimodal discourse, that enables researchers to look closely at sign systems, methods and practices of representation and how they are created, constituted, maintained,

and challenged. In this respect, English Departments may also profit from the results of interdisciplinary research by creating interdisciplinary research labs for example.

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