

RELEVANCE, MEANING AND CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATION IN PRINT MODERN ADVERTISING¹

Abstract: *The present study aims to underline, first of all, the interdependent relationship between meaning and relevance, following a cognitive perspective. Secondly, we shall determine an exponential relation between meaning comprehension and conceptual representation in print modern advertising.*

We shall start by briefly introducing the Relevance Theory (Wilson and Sperber, 1986). We shall examine the central notion of the theory, the relevance as a feature and as a function. Then, we shall take into consideration the model of conceptual representation within the relevance theory, which we disagree with, and shall propose a space conceptual model instead (inspired by Gärdenfors, 2000).

At this level, we can establish the interdependent exponential relation between modern print advertising discourse, treated in terms of space conceptual model of representation, and its meaning comprehension process, emphasizing its optimal relevance.

Keywords: *cognitive, relevance, meaning, space conceptual representation, modern print advertising discourse.*

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the notion of *relevance* in connection with the meaning comprehension process of print modern advertising. A few remarks are to be made at this point: we shall follow the meaning comprehension procedure as it is exposed in relevance theory, but we shall not use the model of conceptual representation the relevance theory uses, since we consider it inconsistent with the claims of the theory. We shall also apply the principles of relevance theory to the domain of advertising discourse², although the theory was intended to describe direct communication in particular. We consider that the advertising discourse is a distinct act of communication, a multi-modal discursive structure which imposes multi-disciplinary research (we shall also submit findings of marketing and consumer studies). Our cognitive perspective differs from the perspective the relevance theory applies, in that we shall not exhaustively describe the comprehension procedures; we are rather concerned with a functional-cognitive perspective in the process of meaning determination and prognosis, from the socio-cultural dimension of the cognitive approach. Obviously, we do not believe that meaning is being encapsulated in the head of individuals. We are deeply concerned with the notions of “reasons” from J.B. Grize’s words: «Mais une inférence ne procède pas sans raisons» (Grize, 1997: 59).

The space conceptual model that we propose allows geometrical representation of concepts, more suitable for description in cognitive-conceptual terms than the model of conceptual representation integrated by the relevance theory.

As such, a print modern advertising discourse designed upon a central space conceptual representation bears a degree of optimal relevance since that central space conceptual representation illustrates the central concept of the discourse, consequently its meaning. We also took into account the risk factor, which we think that the modern print advertising built following our space central conceptual model minimises to the least

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² Tanaka (1994) exposed the advantages of relevance theory over the inferential model of communication in analysing advertisements.

possible extent. We state that a space central conceptual representation is able to offer pertinent inferential reasons which lead to the meaning of the discourse and such, the less involved cognitive effort, the easier the acquirement of the meaning – according to relevance theory.

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance theory is a cognitive-based theory: «Bien que la théorie de Sperber et Wilson concerne principalement des problèmes d'interprétation d'énoncés en situation de dialogue, elle n'est pas à proprement parler une théorie linguistique. (...) En d'autres termes, l'approche est fondamentalement computationnelle. Elle se base sur l'idée de système formel non complet, dans la mesure où la procédure de calcul doit être envisagée de façon automatique ou algorithmique. (...) Il s'agit en fait du paradigme des sciences cognitives et computationnelles, qui envisage la validité d'une description en termes de procédures permettant ou non d'obtenir le bon résultat» (Moeschler, 1996: 31, 34, 35).

Building upon the inferential model of communication, Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory avoids Grice's sophisticated structure consisting of four maxims governing truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity and a Cooperative Principle (GRICE, 1989) by promoting the notion of relevance and showing that it adequately explains how communication takes place without requiring any more maxims and constraints¹.

Relevance as a *Property*

The central notion of relevance theory is *relevance*. Relevance is a property of any *external stimulus* or *internal representation* which results in an input to cognitive processes. In other words, an utterance, or another type of external stimulus, such as a gesture, or of internal communication, such as an idea, which provides an input to cognitive processes (analysing, comparing, categorizing, understanding, etc.) may be relevant to an individual at a certain moment in time.

Such an input is relevant if, as a result of its processing, it is linked to existing information and from this connection, a pertinent conclusion yields.

Relevance as a *Function*

Achieving cognitive effects (pertinent conclusions in relevance theoretic terms) requires the processing of inputs (external or internal). This process involves effort, undertaken in the expectation of some reward (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 49), in the form of positive cognitive effects. Therefore, the relevance of an input may be assessed in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort or the relevance is a function of the input and the processing effort.

The Cognitive Principle of Relevance

Given the multitude of inputs available at any time, which may be relevant to an individual, it must be mentioned that “relevance is not just an all-or-none matter but a matter of degree”². Relevance theory argues that, given the way our cognitive system evolved, we have an automatic tendency to maximise relevance, i.e. to pick up the input that is more

¹ See Sperber and Wilson (1986), Wilson and Sperber (2002) for arguments concerning the relation relevance theory vs. inferential model.

² We also researched a html flowing version of the relevance theory, with no page numbers, available at http://www.dan.sperber.com/relevance_theory.htm

relevant than others, according to the individual's ability and preferences. The following statement constitutes the *cognitive principle of relevance* (Wilson and Sperber, 2003): "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance." This constitutes also the starting point of our hypothesis: print modern advertising is relevant if its meaning acquires relevance from all possible directions, at all levels. Relevance may arise from solid research in consumer studies, taken into account from the very designing stage, since "Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors moulding and reflecting our life today. They are ubiquitous, an inevitable part of everyone's life..." (Williamson, 2002: 11), we are subjected to hundreds of advertisements each day (Cacioppo and Petty, 1985, Harris, 2004), and since advertisements are like "feathers", which only tip the balance in favour of one product or another when other factors are equal (Sutherland, 1997). These are only few of the premises of our hypothesis concerning the interdependent relation between meaning and relevance. As we have already noticed, relevance is the key-word when discussing communication, particularly distinct acts of communication such as print modern advertising. We advanced the idea that print modern advertising maximises its relevance if conceptualised. The particular manner of conceptualising is to be further envisaged.

3. Criticism of Relevance Theory's models of conceptual representation

The matter of conceptual representation within relevance theory is a sophisticated one, mainly because its authors, Sperber and Wilson, stated – taking into account various conceptual representation models – that: "We do not want to argue for or against any particular one of these models." (Wilson and Sperber, 1986: 88). This position should be reconsidered, given the fact that relevance theory is a cognitive-based theory, which operates with the notion of *concepts* in most of its issues (concerning inferences, deductions, assumptions, contextual effects, concept mapping, etc.). Relevance theory's authors incorporate the notion of *ad-hoc concept* (originating with BARSALOU's notion of *ad-hoc category*, 1987), without taking into account the issue of a conceptual representation model these ad-hoc concepts belong to. A solution might be Barsalou's conceptual system, but he successively advocated two different models: his earlier account of ad-hoc categories (1992) involves a classic *amodal* frame-based representation system, where there is no correspondence between the cognitive structure of conceptual representation and the perceptual states that produced them. More recent accounts of ad-hoc categories (Barsalou, 1999) integrate them in a *multimodal* symbol system, where perceptual symbols are considered to reside in the same sensory-motor areas of the brain as the perceptual states they originate from. Therefore, which of the two representation models should be considered? Relevance theory does not adopt either of them, though it favours the earlier model. On the other hand, Barsalou (1999) strongly opposes amodal systems, including his earlier account, and offers pertinent arguments for perceptual symbols. However, he uses the same *frame structure* that allows the generation of ad-hoc concepts in both models.

Barsalou (1999) fails to give an explicit *perceptual* account to frames, which in his perceptual model emerge as a convenient way of abstract representation. While this may be explained by the fact that the same frame structure is inherited from Barsalou's earlier amodal systems, it is still surprising. Several previous proposals in amodal systems, for example Homqvist (1993), advanced *spatial frames* that would support perceptual grounding under Barsalou's model. Such spatial (and even temporal) relations between perceptual symbols could constitute the basis of perceptually grounded frames that have the capacity to

form “conceptual spaces”¹, which would allow a higher degree of abstraction and different levels of meaning abstraction. Such “conceptual spaces” would have a conceptual status much like the “image schemas” of cognitive linguistics, for example, Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1987). These image schemas would have both psychological and neural support.

On the other hand, Barsalou (1999:580) quickly dismisses the transduction process of perceptual states into amodal symbols as a fundamental problem of amodal systems. But, given the proposed frame structure, it is surprising that Barsalou does not consider the possibility that perceptual symbols originate in the perceptual states and then become amodal symbols through a process of abstractisation. This hypothesis is not only compatible with the proposed characteristics of perceptual symbols and simulators in the perceptual model, but it also seems to fit best the proposed abstract frame structure. Such a proposal may allow for a perceptual grounding of conceptual representations, and at the same time, accommodate the specific cognitive processes that are difficult to account for in sensory-motor areas of the brain. As a result, cognition would be acknowledged as being at least partially grounded in perception, conceptual representations would benefit from cognitive processes not encountered in the sensory-motor system, and last, but not least, relevance theory could be used to explain ad-hoc concepts generated by this framework.

Another problem with the perceptual account appears in the treatment of abstract concepts. Barsalou (1999: 599-601) advocates that abstract concepts are perceptually represented by identifying the entities and events that an abstract concept refers to and that the perceptual symbols produced by introspective states are central for the representation of abstract concepts. However, this strategy has some flaws when the concept to be simulated has little in common with the existing perceptual symbols, or lacks the perceptual symbols for these concepts, e.g. *square root of minus one*, *democracy*, etc. An amodal system that allows a distinction between perceptual systems and cognitive systems could solve this problem. Abstract concepts would definitely benefit from the cognitive processes in order to be properly represented. For example, relevance theory makes the distinction between the communicative system and the cognitive system and states that they are governed by different principles and operate according to different processes. As such, the distinction between the perceptual systems underlying communication and the cognitive system would be preserved in the case of conceptual representation model.

While these are only some of the problems of the perceptual symbol system, it seems to become evident why relevance theory prefers the amodal system as the host of ad-hoc concepts. However, the amodal system has its own weaknesses. The problems of amodal systems are reviewed by Barsalou (1999: 579-580) in his introduction to the perceptual symbol system. Without repeating Barsalou’s arguments, the main issues identified against the amodal systems are: lack of convincing empirical evidence that amodal symbols exist, the difficulty of representing spatio-temporal knowledge, implementation of comprehension, the grounding problem, the transduction problem, the excessive power² matter.

Thus, a new model of conceptual representation must be proposed to accommodate both relevance theory and ad-hoc concepts. This model should be able to integrate Barsalou’s contribution, such as the dynamic representation of concepts, their schematic and componential character, and their (partial) perceptual grounding. At the same time, it should be able to avoid the major problems associated with either the perceptual models or amodal

¹ See, for example, Gärdenfors (2000).

² Barsalou (1999: 580) argues that amodal systems are too powerful because they can explain any findings post-hoc, and are thus unfalsifiable.

ones, such as the frame structure problem, the grounding problem and the treatment of abstract concepts. The next section will propose a solution by discussing levels of representation and arguing that the representation of concepts must be approached at a different level than the one proposed by Barsalou's amodal and perceptual models.

4. Levels of representation

Gärdenfors (1997, 2000) discusses the issue of conceptual representation and proposes a distinction among three levels of representation. These levels are not mutually exclusive, but rather represent different perspectives on the representations of cognition.

The subconceptual level

The subconceptual level is the basic level of representation. At this level, representation is generated by inputs from sensory receptors. Inputs from different types of receptors are connected during the process of induction. Representation is *intrinsic*, i.e. the concepts are represented implicitly. In cognitive science and psychological research this level of representation is usually modelled using artificial neuron networks, also known as connectionist systems (Gärdenfors, 1997: 260).

The problems encountered at this level are similar to those raised for the perceptual symbols in Barsalou's perceptual system. Let us reiterate that, being generated by sensory receptors, representation occurs before conceptualization. This has several notable consequences. First, the information received by the sensory receptors is too rich and unstructured. Second, even by providing a reduction mechanism, and assuming successful representation at this level, because representation precedes conceptualisation, it is difficult to describe *what* the result of this process is. Barsalou attempts to avoid these issues in his perceptual system by using a frame structure. Nevertheless, this only opens the representation model to the problems of the symbolic level of representation.

The symbolic level

The symbolic level is the top level of representation. At this level, concepts are represented by symbols. Processing information and representation involves manipulating symbols, which can form the language of thought, or *mentalese* (Fodor, 1975). The content of sentences in this language is composed of thoughts and beliefs, which in turn are connected via their logical or inferential relations. The expression of logical relations is represented by propositions, resulting from modelling logical inferences. This level of representation is usually modelled in logical analysis.

The problems with this level of representation are among those enumerated above for Barsalou's amodal system, including the frame and the grounding problems. Moreover, evidence¹ showed that logical relations alone are not suitable for explaining inductive inferences. In this sense, Gärdenfors (2000: 37) states that: "Propositional representations are not well suited for representing causal connections or dynamic interactions."

Gärdenfors (1997, 2000) submits that conceptual representation should be modelled as a meso level representation that would link together the subconceptual level and the symbolic level. Gärdenfors refers to this level of representation as *the conceptual level*.

The conceptual level

¹ For example, Hempel's *paradox of confirmation* (Hempel, 1965).

Thus, the conceptual level is the middle ground that links subconceptual and symbolic representations and offers the mechanisms for explaining how symbols are derived from perceptual representations. It is this level which offers “tools for *explicit* representations of basic concepts” (Gärdenfors, 2000: 262). These representations are *references* for symbols. At this level, concepts are not independent, but organized in a structure. To account for the conceptual representation at this level, Gärdenfors proposes that this structure is made up of *conceptual spaces*.

Ontologically, this structure is a purely theoretical one. This instrumentalist position allows Gärdenfors to ignore the question of how real the space conceptual structure is (2000: 31). However, the model functions as a framework for cognitive representations, able to stand as a constructive model or an empirically testable theory: “(...) by filling in specific dimensions with certain geometric structures, specific measurement methods, specific connections to other empirical phenomena, and so forth” (Gärdenfors, 2000: 30).

The next section will introduce the conceptual model of representation based on conceptual spaces as a constructive model. This model is proposed as a framework for relevance theory and as such it should be able to account for ad-hoc concepts.

5. The space conceptual model

Gärdenfors (2000) advances *conceptual spaces* as a theoretical model of conceptual representation in which a concept can be represented as *region* in a *geometrical* structure called *conceptual space*. In this model, for example, the concept *red* could be represented as a region (the red region) in the conceptual space of *colour*. In a conceptual space, the particular instances of a concept, i.e. the concept exemplars or *objects*, are represented as *points* belonging to the region of a concept. As conceptual spaces have a geometric structure, the properties of an object may be represented with the aid of one or more integrated axes (*quality dimensions*) which belong to the conceptual space of the referring concept. Another consequence of the geometrical structure of the conceptual spaces is that two physical objects are assigned the same values in all dimensions of a conceptual space; the objects are identical within that space (Gärdenfors, 2000). While having such a precise model allows exact representation of all concept exemplars, in the case of cognition the conceptual representations are not that precise. Different individuals are likely to organize their conceptual spaces differently. Nonetheless, what is important within this model is not the exact representation of a concept exemplar, but the *relations* between different areas of a conceptual space (Gärdenfors, 2000: 26). The geometrical structure allows a representation of the relations between concepts in terms of distances between their representations in the conceptual space, fact which makes possible a discussion about objects being *close* to each other and objects being central representatives to a concept (i.e. displaying prototype effects), which cannot be done in a frame model (Gärdenfors, 2000: 105). It is this aspect which is the most important in relation to relevance and meaning of print modern advertising.

6. The conceptual space of relevance

The concept of relevance is the major concept of relevance theory. As such, it is important that the conceptual representation model proposed to the theory is able to accommodate the relevance notion.

As stated above, relevance is considered as a property and as a function. In the first account, relevance is a property of every internal representation or every external stimulus which provides an input to cognitive processes (Wilson and Sperber, 2003). Thus, relevance

should be a property that also applies to the internal representations generated in a conceptual representation model. In the case of the present model, relevance is a property that should apply to every representation in the conceptual space. As a result, relevance as a property should characterize each and every concept, category, object or property represented in conceptual space. As properties are represented in the conceptual space with the aid of one quality dimension or set of integrated quality dimensions, it follows that quality dimensions and domains should also be characterised by the property of relevance. Thus, relevance must be represented in conceptual spaces at the level of every quality dimension or domain, with variable assigned values since relevance is “a matter of degree”. Therefore, the property of relevance may be represented with the aid of the *saliency weights* (values included by the quality dimension or domain of an object in a given context), but we do not consider the two notions of relevance and saliency equivalent. In turn, we consider them both responsible for meaning achievement.

7. Conveying meaning in print modern advertising

According to relevance theory (Wilson and Sperber, 2003), during the process of positive cognitive effects achievement, assumptions are tested in the order of accessibility. Obviously, accessibility results from relevant inputs. Print modern advertising discourse needs optimal relevant inputs in order to be functional. Most of the advertising is offered to receptors in terms of conceptual representation, whether relied on intertextuality or other aggressive strategies. Print advertising can be regarded as the most deprived form of advertising: it lacks motion and sound. But, in our opinion, print advertising is a less aggressive form of advertising and it can be the least aggressive¹ and most efficient, at the same time, if it considers the model of space conceptual representation.

We have tackled print modern² advertising within this approach and we state that: print modern advertising, conceptualised upon a space representation – the representation of a single major concept, the most suggestive and most important to display for the commodity of the advertisement, built by following the geometric space model principles - , is the most relevant (thus, functional) non-aggressive form of advertising.

One may argue for aggressiveness under the form of the compulsory decoding: only one concept representation somehow forces all the individuals to decode it in the same manner. Still, there is freedom of choice, co-existing in the space conceptual representation and the conceptual level that makes it possible: these are dynamic and mobile structures, they allow different quality dimensions to be differently represented and perceived, it is the projection stage of the space conceptualisation model which bears this difficult task of exposing optimal relevance of each quality dimension of the representation. More exactly, different individuals can determine different positive cognitive effects, without altering the discourse message, they only take into account different particular quality dimensions, those they perceive as more salient and more relevant than others.

As for the interdependent exponential relation between meaning and print advertising discourse, we hope that it has already shaped itself: the more conceptualised reasons for meaning determination, offered by the space conceptual representation of a print modern advertising discourse, the easier the process of meaning comprehension.

¹ We are supporters of the “eco-publicity” trend as described by Teodorescu and Bejan, 2003.

² By “modern” we refer to Everaert-Desmedt’s publicity categorization (1984), not to a specific limited period of time.

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