

3

Marketing Discourse and Semiotics

Babak Taheri and Martin Gannon

In everyday life we are regularly exposed to, and interact with, many different forms of advertising. For example, through television and radio commercials, billboards, direct (or junk) mail, and carefully staged large-scale public relations exercises, advertisers draw upon different narratives and discourses to communicate the benefits of their brands, products, and services to us as potential consumers. Within the context of marketing, discourses serve as the places where the advertiser and the consumer communicate, interact and engage in choreographed events within the position of a particular semantic context (Oswald, 2012). Such advertisements are often comprised of several interactive elements which may draw upon images, photographs, music, societal observations, paralanguage, language, scenarios and situations, and the existing preconceptions of consumers in order to spread an advertising message in an effective and entertaining way (Cook, 2001).

There are often extremely strong relationships between the images used and the language employed in advertisements. This study of signs is called *semiotics*. Here, signs, text, and symbols serve as crucial elements of the consumer experience and are vital tools employed throughout advertising and marketing. Language, gestures, art, heritage, television advertisements, films, and even sales pitches and conversations, all contain signs that are used to convey specific meanings or are used to share a precise communicative purpose in marketing a product or service (Cook, 2001). For example, phrases such as 'your flexible friend' (Access credit card), 'naughty but nice' (fresh cream cakes) or 'it's the real thing' (Coca-Cola) have passed into British vernacular from advertising copy. However, contemporary marketing communication is not only concerned with catchphrases and levity, nor is it solely focused on furthering the commercial interests of organisations. Politicians and their advisers also utilise discourse

and marketing communication tools to appeal to their followers and voters. As such, this chapter aims to make sense of marketing discourse and semiotics within the context of advertising and promotion, and marketing management in general. It also explores political marketing discourse as a particularly revealing illustration of everyday marketing interactions.

■ Defining discourse

The use and importance of discourse and ‘texts-as-statements’ are well established within the field of marketing communications and advertising. Indeed, Said (1978: 167) notes the underlying power and ubiquity of text in discourse-building by stating that: “texts, in fact, are in the world ... as texts they place themselves – one of their functions as texts is to place themselves – and indeed are themselves, by soliciting the world’s attention”. Discourse is the primary way of reproducing and communicating ideas, and discourse provides a platform that allows individuals to interpret a range of cultural materials in an accessible and relatable fashion (Foucault, 2002). The way in which discourse is employed embodies the cultural importance of language and is linked to power relations and reality within any given social context (Fairclough, 1995). This is because actors perceive, and subsequently gain an understanding of, social phenomena by consulting and processing information in the form of texts, symbols, images and photographs (Berdychevsky et al., 2016; Gee, 2005). Some argue that ‘language-in-use’ exists everywhere and that typically “people construct situations through language by carrying out seven interrelated building tasks. These are: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems and knowledge” (Berdychevsky et al., 2016: 111). Table 3.1 demonstrates the interoperation of these seven stages, which Gee (2005) argues can be understood from both a micro- and macro-structure perspective within the marketing and advertising context.

Table 3.1: The ‘seven building tasks of discourse’ (Berdychevsky et al., 2016; Gee, 2005)

Building task	Example question
Significance	What situated meanings are evoked by or linked to some of the words or objects used?
Activities	What activities, actions, or undertakings are linked with the particular term(s) used?
Identities	What type of identity is being invoked by, or is consistent with, a particular term(s)?
Relationships	Which relationships are taken for granted or ignored?
Politics	What social, societal, or political connotations are relevant or irrelevant with regards to the term(s) employed?
Connections	What relationships or linkages are established between the particular term(s) used and existing texts or discourses?
Sign systems & knowledge	What sign systems are relevant or irrelevant with regards to the term(s) employed?

Exercise

Think about an experiential marketing situation, such as going to your favourite night-club, and consider it in relation to the questions posed by the 'seven building tasks of discourse' model.

Emerging from social constructionist psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), the utility of discourse has also been noted by scholars such as Elliott (1996), Thompson and Haytko (1997), Thompson (2004) and Fitchett and Caruana (2015) in marketing and consumer research. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997:15) describe the way in which discourse is used in fashion marketing: "Fashion discourses provide consumers with a plurality of interpretive positions that, because of their diverse associations, can enable them to juxtapose opposing values and beliefs. Consumers use these countervailing meanings of fashion discourse to address a series of tensions and paradoxes existing between their sense of individual agency (autonomy issues) and their sensitivity to sources of social prescription in their everyday lives (conformity issues)". However, Thompson (2004:175) criticises advertisement-centric analysis of text and suggests: "critical consumer researchers should study how power relationships operate and shift through institutional discourses and practices". Fitchett and Caruana (2015) also argue that the use of discourse in marketing and consumer research has been saturated and paradoxically conceptualised. They suggest possible ways of adopting a discourse perspective in a more robust and consistent fashion within market-based relations, as outlined in Table 3.2.

Consumers typically engage with advertising discourse for different purposes. This engagement can occur in both every day, general consumption situations and when communicating (either directly or indirectly) purposefully with brands (de Waal Malefyt & McCabe, 2016; Hackley, 2012). For example, de Waal Malefyt and McCabe (2016) discuss the use of discourse analysis when exploring advertising relating to women's vulnerability (i.e., menstruation) and its role in the consumer identity formation process, and suggests that advertising is influenced by gendered ideologies into producing different messages. Additionally, the source of cultural materials for evolving creative advertising is problematic, as advertising agencies showing the whole at one view in material located in culture (de Waal Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). Questionably, the ready and craft consumption is more than just customisation, since "for consumption activity to warrant being described as a craft, then the consumer must be directly involved in both the design and the production of that which is to be consumed" (Campbell, 2005: 31).