

https://dspace.org/

Semiotics, mythology and translation in the framework of commercial advertising

Gamedze, Nkosinathi Tebogo

2015-01-26
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/16770

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

is confronted with a foreign beer. Beck's is a popular German beer which is exported to countries all over the world. This in itself tells us that, even outside the German-speaking world, there are those who have 'discovered' Beck's. It must be borne in mind, however, that Great Britain also has a well-established brewing tradition of its own and promoting Beck's as the 'obvious' choice for a connoisseur might well offend the more 'patriotic' beer-drinkers. This would probably not be the case in a country less renowned for its local brews, for example, South Africa where Europe is still recognised as the centre of culture and civilisation, setting a precedent for the rest of the world. In this case, however, the source text concept of familiarity embodied by Beck's, would have to be substituted by a concept more acceptable to the target text culture. This could be quite effectively done by using the Englishman's conservative attitude to beer to affirm the superior quality of Beck's (i.e. by introducing into the target text the concept of superiority as a means of overcoming the initial suspicion with which the product is viewed). For example: "It may not be English but [...]" could make the Englishman aware of his preconceptions and make him more willing to acknowledge a 'good' beer with a foreign label. Such an advertising strategy would not, however, be complemented by the scene depicted in the German advertisement - a typical English 'pub' scene would be much more appropriate. We could, for example, have a picture of a 'self-respecting' Englishman, with an apologetic smile, drinking a glass of Beck's much to the amazement of his fellow- drinkers. In this way the product would be accommodated in the target text culture. An actual advertisement using this advertising technique is one promoting the German wine Steinweiler Kloster

Liebfrauenberg Spätlese (22). This wine is being marketed in Great Britain in a way which is most certainly very different from the way it would be marketed in Germany. In the promotion of this Spatlese, British priggishness about anything foreign is again being 'lightly mocked': "Despite its daunting collection of syllables, this Spatlese from Tesco is quite simply an extremely high quality wine". The typically British-style overcoding used in this advertisement (as in the phrase daunting collection of syllables) serves to place the product within the British setting, thus allowing it to be judged according to British values. Furthermore, the British consumer finds himself in the role of a 'student' who is being educated on German wines: "You'll notice the words Qualitätswein mit Prädikat". The concept of erudition is further reinforced by the picture of the product as well as a map showing where the product is cultivated. There is the marked contrast between British priggishness and British erudition as well as the tacit understanding that it is not 'correct' to be priggish at the expense of erudition. The third advertisement to be looked at in this practical section is one for a camera called the Polaroid Image System (23). This camera takes instant photographs, implied by the picture showing an instant photograph positioned on top of the camera. This type of advertising technique is used as proof of what the product is capable of doing. The text is very much a conative one, requiring a significant amount of paraphrasing. It does, however, also have incidences of straightforward 'one-to-one mapping' of source text material onto the target text, e.g. the words: "Mikroprozessor, computerberechnetes Quintic-Objektiv, integrierter

---

(22) c.f. Appendix E, fig.3.

(23) c.f. Appendix E, figs.4a and 4b.

Blitz" (lines 27-28) are simply substituted by the English terms: "microprocessor, computer-operated quintic lens, built-in flash" (lines 14-15) respectively. Paraphrasing has been necessary in the translation in order to avoid source text interference into the target text as well as to preserve the flowing quality of the text. The phrase "Ihre Elektronik sammelt" (line 15) which literally means "its electronics collect", has been paraphrased to "it electronically collects" (line 7). An example of a complete change of meaning is to be found in lines 8 and 9: "camera technology" is used to render the German "Scharfstellen" (lines 19-20) the literal translation of which is "focussing". This change is permissible because the focussing power of the ultrasonic auto-focus, a much vaunted feature of the Polaroid Image System, acts as a connotator of 'camera technology' and hence can be substituted by its own concept without any loss being sustained on the symbolic level. In addition, little loss is sustained on the informational level, since the function of the auto-focus device is further discussed in lines 9-12.

The last two advertisements which we shall discuss operate on a more international basis than the ones already discussed, since they both promote products of world acclaim. The international flavour of these advertisements would imply that the mythical symbols used to promote the product are familiar to the international community and are hence understood and accepted by it. The first of these advertisements promotes the Hoechst High Chem engineering company (24) which has a world-wide reputation in motor engineering. The effectiveness of the layout of the advertisement and of the wording of the text relies heavily on the

---

(24) c.f. Appendix E, figs.5a and 5b.

consumer's familiarity with the engineering company and its sphere of specialisation. For example, at the top of the advertisement an illustration of a Porsche design is shown, reminding the reader of the high quality motor engineering in which Hoechst is involved. The text itself is composed in the form of a brief lecture on Hoechst's activities in the motoring industry. The style is both conversational and concise, giving an impression of confidence in the product - a confidence born of a world-wide reputation for engineering excellence.

At the top the page appears the sentence: "Unser Beitrag zum Erfolg des Automobils" (line 1). "Automobile" in English is an outdated term which was used when motor cars first came into vogue, thus "Automobil" would have to be translated as "motor vehicle" or "motor car". The above sentence would hence be correctly rendered as: "Our contribution towards the success of the motor car" (line 1). This is an unequivocal claim, requiring substantial proof on the part of Hoechst. It is also clear from this claim that Hoechst has the full confidence of its promoters behind it. The words: "Das Auto ist, ohne Frage, des Deutschen liebstes Kind" (lines 2-4) evoke a very powerful 'mother-child' imagery, suggesting a strong bond between the German nation and the motor car industry. Within this frame of reference, Germany represents the mother and the motor car represents the child. Taking this analogy further, Hoechst becomes the mother of motor engineering. However, a literal translation of the German sentence would constitute source language interference into the target text. The sentence would be better rendered as: "The motor car is Germany's darling" (line 2). Here a loss is sustained on the symbolical level which is only partially compensated for by maintaining the concept of affection contained in the German advertisement. Nonetheless it could

be argued that the mother-child imagery is still preserved , since the term darling is frequently used by mothers when addressing their offspring. The translation continues as follows: "Since the beginnings of the motor industry 100 years ago, this relationship has remained unchanged" (lines 3-4). This is an extension of the mother-child imagery discussed earlier. Here it is suggested that the love relationship between Hoechst and the motor car has not slackered over the years.

This relationship between Germans and motor cars is to be considered as a digression from the subject of discussion, judging from the exclamatory phrase inserted by the advertiser immediately afterwards: "Dafür aber am Auto" (line 9). This p[illegible] be translated directly into English without becoming un[illegible] "Dafür" is a relative prepositional adverb and "aber" a filler or Formwort. Both of these expressions have the purely functional role of directing attention, in this case, from the relationship between Germans and the motor car, to the motor car alone. Hence in symbolic terms, the mother now ceases to boast of her relationship with her child, and begins to concentrate on praising the child's attributes (the mother's contribution being understood). An adequate rendition of the German phrase in English would be: "And now more about the motor car" (line 5). The overt admission of having digressed from the main topic of discussion lends an informal atmosphere to the advertisement, making it appear to be an oral rendition. The rest of the advertisement deals with the aspects of motor engineering in which Hoechst specialises, and hence the text contains many technical terms which have direct correlates in English (Kunstharzen [line 32] - synthetic resin [line 15], Glasfaser [line 33] - fibre glass [line 16]). In this case, German syntax is flexible enough to allow for variations in sentence

structure not favoured by English. For example, in the sentence: "Aus der Motorkutsche von damals ist längst ein Hochtechnologie-Produkt geworden" (lines 10-13), we have a prepositional phrase at the beginning, followed by a main clause. To avoid this clumsy sentence structure in English, we can change the prepositional phrase into the main clause rendering the sentence as follows: "The motor car of old has long been transformed into a Hi-Tech product" (lines 6-7). Symbolically speaking, a young suckling baby has developed into a strong and healthy child, nourished by Hoechst expertise. The English translation of this portion of text constitutes an adequate solution to the syntactical problem posed in the German version where the prepositional phrase is highlighted by the mere fact that it appears at the beginning of the sentence; this highlighting technique can be compensated for in English by making that which is highlighted the subject of the sentence. Another problem posed by the the German sentence is the use of the verb werden which can mean both to become as well as to be transformed These meanings may appear synonymous but, within the context of this particular advertisement, capturing the nuance is important; werden has been translated by the verb to be transformed in the English version in order to convey the idea of Hoechst's contribution to the modern design of the motor car.

The verb werden again poses a translation problem in the phrase: "Autofahren wird immer leichter, sicherer und wirtschaftlicher" (lines 26-28). However, this problem is due more to the fact that German does not have a continuous present, e.g. is going or is talking, than to any peculiarity of the verb werden. The English rendition of this phrase would be: "Driving is becoming easier, safer and more economical" (line 12-13). The German does, however, compensate for this lack by adding the adverb

immer after werden. Immer conveys the state of continuousness provided for by the continuous present. It is also worth noting that ,in the German, Autofahren is used and not fahren. This is to avoid the dual meaning of the latter which means both to drive as well as to go by car or any other transport vehicle. Hence Autofahren, which literally means car-driving, is the preferred term.

In the German language, compound constructions abound. These constructions are used to combine together two or more ideas into a single unit (i.e. into one word on the sentence level). In English compound constructions do exist but they cannot be as readily coined by the individual language user as they can in German, without running the risk of confounding the reader. Examples of nominal compounds in English are found in words such as postman and weekend. In the Hoechst text terms such as hochtemperaturbelastbar, which are used to describe the features of the motor car, have to be broken down into their constituent parts if they are to be readily understood by the English reader. The German text reads: "Neue Keramikwerkstoffe sind zum Beispiel hochtemperaturbelastbar und verschleissfest" (lines 39-42). An adequate translation into English of this portion of text would be as follows: "For example, the new ceramic construction materials can withstand extremes in temperature and are non-corrosive" (lines 18-19). The result of this difference between German and English grammar is that the English style tends to be 'wordy' where the German is more concise.

The German language has incorporated a significant amount of vocabulary from other languages, especially English. Many of these borrowed words have a German equivalent and are therefore used more to effect a different

language register than a change in meaning. For example, in the Hoechst text two different words are used for corrosion : Verschleiss, as in verschleissfest (line 42), and Korrosion (line 60) Since the Second World War the use of 'borrowed' words in German has become more widespread than ever before. This has had the effect of changing the register which borrowed words had in the past. Previously, they would signify a certain amount of sophistication and erudition on the part of whoever used them. Today, however, with English assuming an ever greater importance on the international scene, it has become a second language in German schools and is widely understood. Thus words borrowed from English now tend to signify up-to-dateness and advancement more than they do erudition. Viewed in this light, the reason that such words feature in the Hoechst text becomes apparent since Hoechst represents technological advancement.

The second and last advertisement which we will examine primarily from a language viewpoint, is one promoting the German Steigenberger hotel-chain (25). The reason for considering this advertisement to be international is that the Steigenberger hotels cater for an international clientele as implied by the picture and evident from the text itself. The picture shows men engaged in discussion in a well- furnished room with pieces of ornate silverware. Here business is being mixed with pleasure - a central theme throughout the advertisement. The international appeal of the text is further borne out by the fact that clients are encouraged to pay by American Express, a credit card used extensively the world over. The tone of the advertisement is professional and courteous as evidenced by the informative nature of the text and its frequent use of the passive mode.

---

(25) c.f. Appendix E, figs. 6a and 6b.

The text focuses immediately upon the major activities catered for by Steigenberger hotels; i.e. hosting meetings and conferences. In the first sentence we have an example of the use of modal verbs in German: "Tagungen oder Konferenzen sollen in guter Erinnerung bleiben" (lines 3-4). The modal verb sollen is used to signify either volition or assertion. In the sense in which sollen is used here, it is a discourse-oriented statement, i.e. "the reporting on an assertion with the speaker not passing his own judgement on this" (Townson in: Russ, 1981: pp.160-162). Sollen corresponds closest to the shall form in English but, for the sake of preserving the atmosphere of courteousness and detachment, is translated as should in English, rendering the first sentence: "Meetings and conferences should be occasions worth remembering" (lines 2-3). Here a selective translation has been performed: the first part of the sentence has been translated giving priority to the informational component, i.e. meetings and conferences, since this is an important service offered by Steigenberger hotels. The second part of the sentence, however, is intended more to create a certain 'impression' on the reader more than to provide him with any additional information, hence the literal translation: "Meetings and conferences should, on the part of the participants, remain in good memory", is changed to "[...] should be occasions worth remembering". The translation preserves the appellative function, since it incorporates a common turn of phrase familiar to the reader, rather than informational content. In addition, the above-mentioned phrase has a dual meaning: that which should be remembered is both the items on the agenda as well as the smooth running of proceedings, the latter being achieved with the help of Steigenberger hotels.

Further on in the text appears the phrase: "Dort kann man sehr gepflegt Geschäft und Gesundheit auf einen Nenner bringen" (lines 18-20). In order to translate this portion of text in a satisfactory manner, it must first be established what the invariant material is. Here reference is made to the "health spas and holiday resorts" (Kur- und Ferienhotels) mentioned in the previous sentence. "Geschäft und Gesundheit", meaning "business and health", is obviously mentioned in connection with these resorts and must be regarded as invariant on an informational level. However, "Geschäft und Gesundheit" is also an example of alliteration and thus has aesthetic value. Unfortunately, this aesthetic effect cannot be reproduced in English without compromising the informational value, consequently a translation loss is sustained. An adequate translation of the entire sentence would be: "In this congenial atmosphere, business and health are reduced to a common denominator" (lines 12-14). This is an statement of the theme of mixing business and pleasure alluded to in the picture. The expression sehr gepflegt literally means well cared-for but is rendered as in a congenial atmosphere, thus illustrating an example of the aesthetic component overriding the informational one. Kann man , which is a passive construction has been kept passive but the modal verb kann (can) has been substituted by the more affirmative is in the English version for stylistic reasons.

A grammatical construction prevalent in German but absent in English is the scalar particle.

> Scalar particles are not immediate constituents of the sentence in which they occur...[they] always enter into a special syntactic relationship with another constituent of the sentence [sister constituent]. Expressions of almost any major lexical or syntactic category may occur as a 'sister constituent' of scalar particles.
> (Koenig in: Russ, 1981: p.117)

An example of a scalar particle used in the text occurs in the phrase: "die Genüsse einer ganz exquisiten Küche" (lines 29-30) which would be rendered into English as "the delights of an exquisite cuisine" (lines 21-22). In the German version the scalar particle used is ganz, which serves a device reinforcing the exquisiteness of the Steigenberger cuisine. In the English translation it is probably more culturally acceptable not to reinforce the adjective exquisite, since it is already a superlative term. In this advertisement food, wine and work which are usually regarded as diametrically opposed to one another, are successfully married together by Steigenberger which can 'make the impossible possible'.

Certain German prepositions also cause translation problems in English, for example, the word bei which can be used in a variety of ways depending on its function in the sentence. In the turn of phrase: "Bei Steigenberger sorgen erfahrene Spezialisten", (lines 49-50), bei can be translated as at or, better still, left out thus rendering the phrase: "Steinberger has experienced staff who ensure" (line 35-36) instead of: "At Steigenberger experienced staff ensure".

Many of the other translation problems presented by the Steigenberger advertisement have already been dealt with in the previous one. The main difference between the advertisements is the type of translation which must be performed (the expression of the myths remaining unchanged in both translations). The Hoechst text concerns itself mainly with the improved aspects of motor engineering the terms for which have direct correlates in English. The stylistic devices used in this text are, in almost all instances, of less importance than the informational value. The same does

not hold true for the Steigenberger text the appellative component of which often cannot be rendered faithfully without sacrifices being made on the level of content. Rhyme, alliteration often overshadow the message which, although important, does not have as high a profile as it does in the Hoechst text. Since advertisements fall under the appellative text type, both texts give priority to the appellative function; however, in the one this function is better served by maintaining invariance on the informational level and in the other, by alternating from the informational to the aesthetic level.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter it was illustrated how advertisements can be translated in two different ways - the first method is to conserve the source text myth by using the appropriate symbols (which did not change at all in the case of Merfluan, and Steigenberger and only to a limited extent in the Hoechst advertisement), and the second one is to change the mythical framework of the advertisement entirely (as in the case of Beck's or Steinweiler Kloster Liebfrauenberg Spätlese). The first method is more difficult to use successfully, except when the source and target languages stand in close cultural proximity to one another (e.g. German and English). The reason for this type of translation being difficult is that both source and target text myths have to be investigated. The second method is easier and safer than the first one, especially if the socio-cultural gap between the source text and the target text systems is a large one; moreover the translator need only be familiar with the target text culture. Both translation methods do, however, have one factor in common - they both preserve the equivalent effect principle, in other words, they both fulfil the extralinguistic aim of appellative texts which, in the case of advertisements, is to encourage consumer spending.

In this project the invariant core of advertising texts was established on the level of consumer response upon which suitable translation guidelines were formulated. It was discovered that, even though myth is a key element in advertising, it does not have to remain unchanged in translation in order to ensure equivalence on the level of consumer response. However, the argument could be raised that if the source text myth is

changed and replaced by a target text myth with different associations, such a procedure cannot be considered as a translation but rather as an adaptation, since no textual material is mapped from source text to target text. It was also found that, if, in contrast, the source text myth is mapped on to the target text through the substitution of source text symbols by target text symbols, this process constitutes a translational act by virtue of the fact that a transfer of source text material to the target text has taken place.

The most important consideration is to encourage consumer spending in the most effective way possible. However, if an advertiser wishes to attract a specific market within the target language culture, it is essential that he gain an understanding of the workings of myth and the structures supporting it (e.g. society, culture and ideology). A semiotic approach to the study of myth proved effective in uncovering its underlying structures. Myth comprises a way of meaning, and meaning can be explained semiotically as the result of the linkage of the signifier to the signified This linkage is arbitrary and must be collectively sanctioned if it is to lead to the generation of meaning (hence the relation between myth, society and culture). It follows, therefore, that an advertiser cannot of his own accord dictate meaning; he can, however, manipulate it, either by gaining a structuralist knowledge of the target text mythology or by changing the whole mythical reference of the advertisement.

7.0 BIBLIOGRAPHY

BARTHES, R. **Mythologies.** London: Cape, 1972.

BARTHES, R. **Elemente der Semiologie.** 2nd ed. Frankfurt: Syndikat, 1981. Translated from the French by Eva Moldhauer.

BARTHES, R. **L'obvie et L'obtus.** : essais critiques 3. Paris: Seuil, 1982.

BORBE, T. (ed.) **Semiotics Unfolding.** Berlin: Mouton, 1983.

CAPRETTINI, G. P. **La Semiologia 2.** (Comunicazione e aspetti del testo) Giappichelli, Turin 1978.

CATFORD, J. C. **A linguistic theory of translation.** Oxford University Press 1965.

COHEN, Y. **Man in Adaptation: the cultural present.** Chicago: Aldine, 1974.

CURME, G. O. **A Grammar of the German Language.** 2. revised ed. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1970.

DAVIS, H. and WALTON, P. **Language, Image and Media.** Basil Blackwell Ltd. 1983. Oxford OX4 1JF, England.

ECO, U. **Trattato di semiotica generale.** Milan. Bompiani, 1975.

ECO, U. **The role of the reader: explorations in the semiotics of texts.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979.

KEESING, R. M. **Cultural Anthropology.** 2.ed.New York: Holt, 1975.

MATTELART, A. **Mass Media, Ideologies and the Revolutionary Movement.** Brighton: Harvester, 1980.

NIDA, E. A. and TABER C. R. **The theory and practice of translation.** UNITED BIBLE SOCIETIES by E. J. Brill, LEIDEN 1974.

REISS, K. **Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Übersetzungskritik.** Max Hueber Verlag: Munchen, 1971.

RUSS, C. V. J. **Contrastive Aspects of English and German.** Julius Groos Verlag, Heidelberg 1981.

WILLIAMSON, J. **Decoding Advertisements.** London: Boyars, 1978.

WILSS, W. **Semiotik und Uebersetzen.** Tuebingen: Narr, 1980.

7.1 BACKGROUND READING

BARTHES, R. **Le bruissement de la langue.** Editions du Seuil, September 1984.

COLASANTO, A. **Comunicazione umana.** Edizioni Dehoniane, Napoli 1978.

EAGLETON, T. **Literary Theory.** (An Introduction) Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd, Oxford, England 1983.

FISCHER-LICHTE, E. **Bedeutung: Probleme einer semiotischen Hermeneutik und Aesthetik.** Munich: Beck, 1979.

KIRK, G. S. **Myth: its meaning and functions in ancient and other cultures.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970.

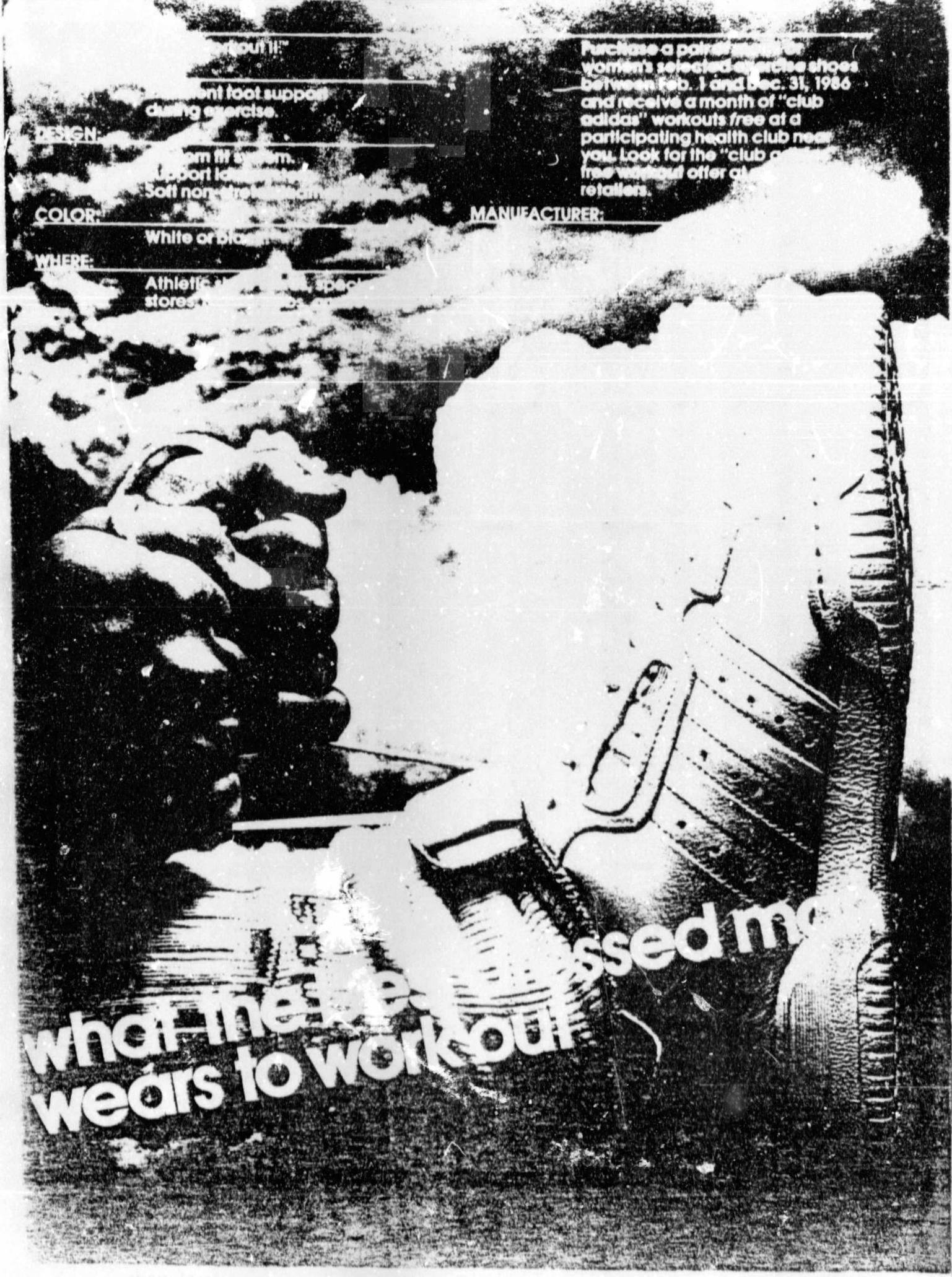
LÉVI-STRAUSS, C. **The Raw and the Cooked.** London: Cape, 1970.

LÉVI-STRAUSS, C. **Myth and Meaning.** Routledge & Paul, 1978.

APPENDIX A

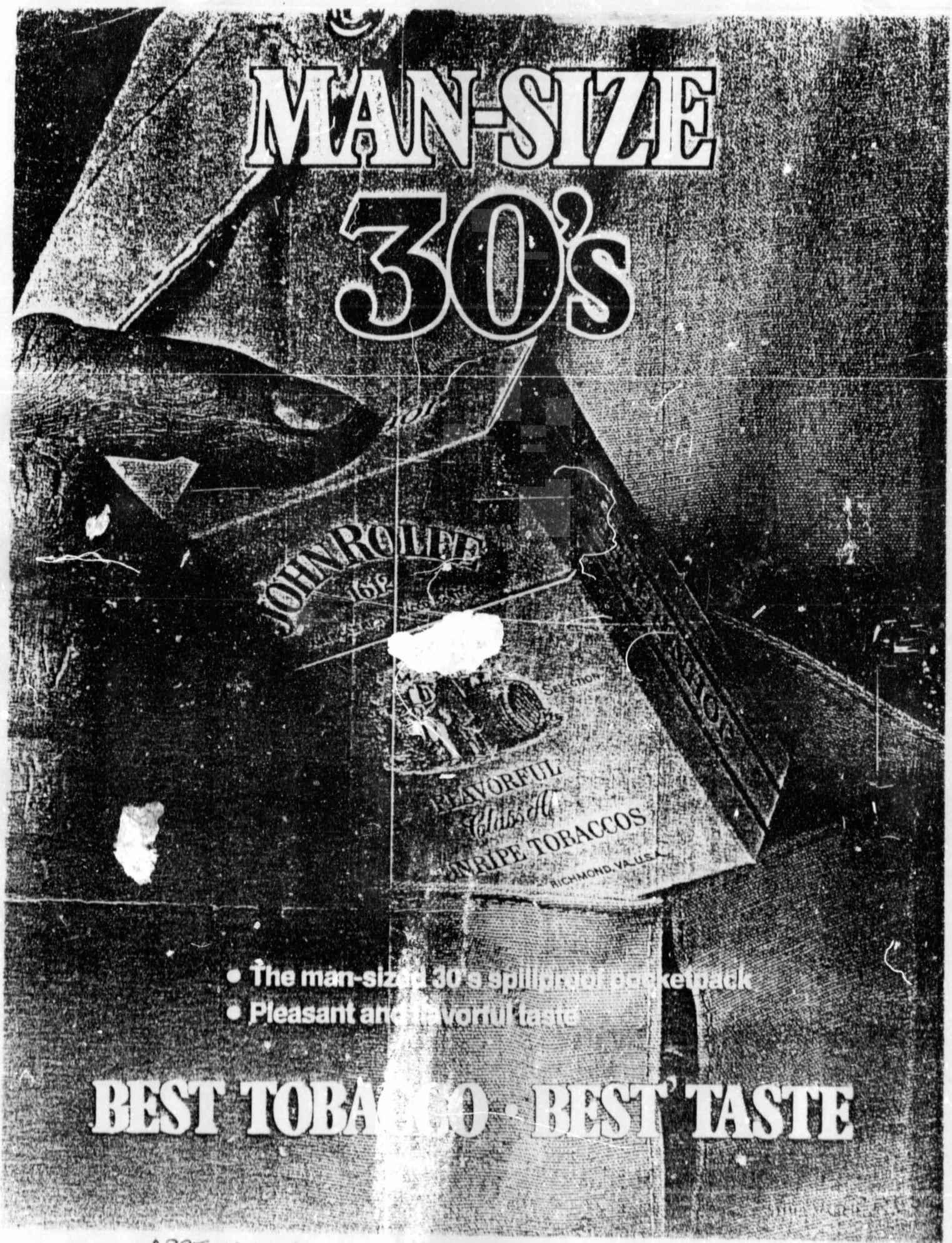


fig. 1



APPENDIX A

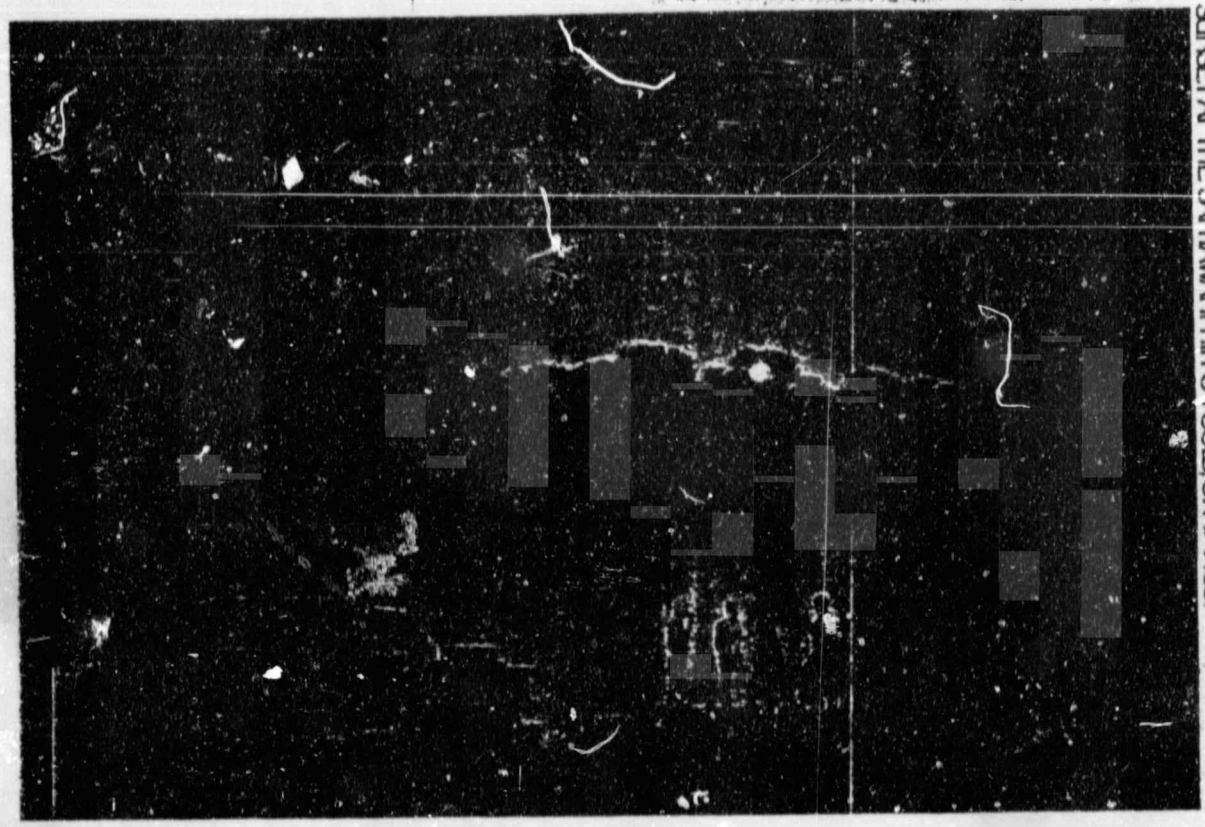
Fig. 2



APPENDIX A

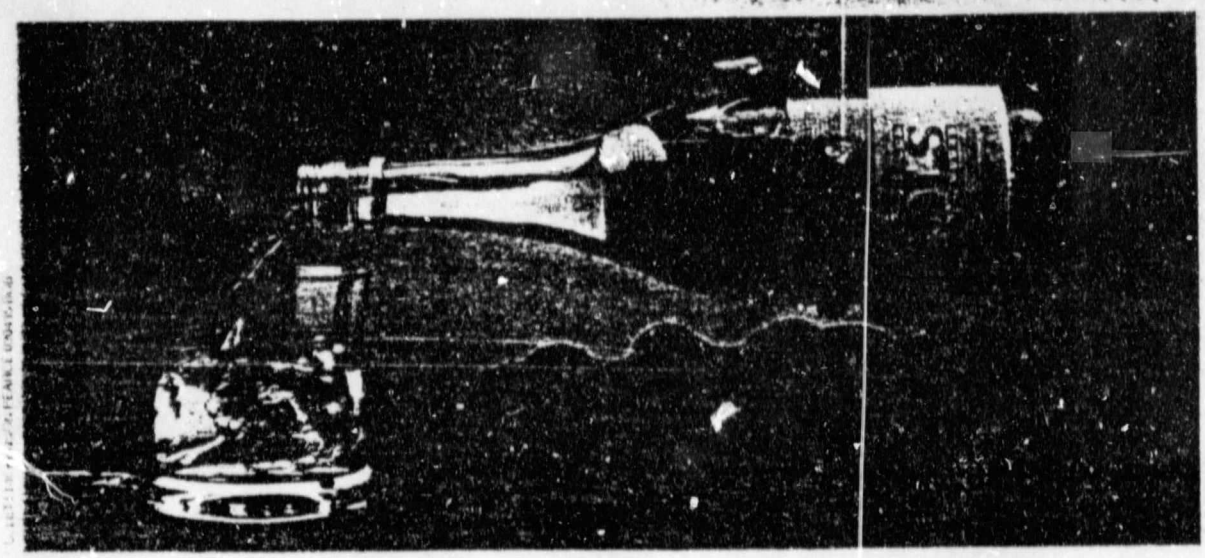
fig. 3

SUNDOWN



SUNSET AT THE SANTAWANI HERO POOLS OKAVANGO.

SLOWDOWN



BOLS BRANDY

SAVOUR THE TASTE OF FOUR CENTURIES EXPERIENCE.

fig. 4

Author Gamedze Nkosinathi Teboho
Name of thesis Semiotic, Mythology And Translation In The Framework Of Commercial Advertising. 1987

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.