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Semiotics, mythology and translation in the framework of commercial advertising

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Semiotics, Mythology and Translation in the Framework of Commercial Advertising

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ABSTRACT

This project sets out to investigate myth in commercial advertising by means of a semiotic analysis. For this purpose communication, culture and ideology are studied in relation to myth, since they all form part of commercial advertising. By way of actual advertising texts, various advertising techniques are investigated and the translation procedure described in this project is put to practice. However, the the work is predominantly theoretical, since it concerns itself mainly with the determining of criteria involved in commercial advertising in an attempt to formulate more suitable guidelines for the formulation of advertising textsas well as to gain a deeper understanding of advertising as a whole.

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

nfamedze

4th day of February, 19__.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

This project sets out to employ a semiotic approach in the investigation of myth as it manifests itself in commercial advertising and, on the basis of this study, to formulate guidelines for the translation of commercial advertisements from one language into another.

The focus of this work is largely theoretical with the practical component serving mainly as a means of testing the applicability of theory. The groundwork for this study is established by firstly outlining what the semiotic approach entails, and then explaining certain fundamental semiotic terms and concepts to be used throughout this work. Semiotics, which can in general terms be described as 'the study of signs', has significance only in the framework of communication, thus leading to the study of communication as a semiotic phenomenon.

Advertising is of course a form of communication and myth, being an important factor in advertising, is studied within the context of communication, largely by way of practical examples being given to illustrate the theory. The results obtained from this study of myth are then employed as criteria in the selection of an appropriate translation method for advertising texts, on the assumption that myth is to remain invariant in the translation process.

Myth exists within a socio-cultural framework and it is for this reason that the interrelationship of myth and culture is examined. The relevance of this examination for this project as a whole is to be found in the fact

that myth and culture both occupy a central position within the advertising context. Culture and myth are based on socio-cultural relations which advertising exploits for its own ends. These ends, however, go far beyond the extralinguistic aim of selling a commodity, they also promote an ideology whose socio-economic base provides the corner-stone upon the value system of bourgeois society is established.

The final part of this project is devoted to a practical approach to the translation of advertisements with emphasis placed on the extralinguistic aim of advertising.

2.0 THE DEFINITION OF SEMIOTICS AND SOME OF ITS BASIC TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The discipline of semiotics is being applied to an ever increasing number of fields and therefore, wherever possible, a general definition of terms will be given to avoid discrepancies.

Broadly speaking, semiotics is the study of signs and the interaction of sign systems. The groundwork of semiotics was done by the French structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure and many of the fundamental terms used were first coined by him. An American linguist, Charles S. Pierce, writing at the end of the 19th century, is responsible for developing many of De Saussure's ideas. Pierce proposed the following definition of a sign: "A sign or representamen is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Caprettini, 1978: p.70). This implies that the sign is purely symbolic in nature, and is not the actual thing or idea that is being expressed but rather, that it is relatable to it. The study of signs is therefore the study of relations within a particular framework.

A sign has to be interpreted or decoded for it to represent that which is being expressed. The interpretation of signs forms an integral part of **Semiotics as communication** (1)

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(1) c.f. Chapter 2.

For the sign to be studied, it has to be divided into its constituent parts. The way this is performed can vary but, for the purpose of this study, De Saussure's division of the sign will be adopted. De Saussure divides the sign into two separate components: the signifier and the signified. Thus sign = signifier + signified.

The signifier and the signified are a single unit but have to be understood as separate entities if any study of semiotics is to be possible. Louis Hjelmslev explains the different functions performed by the signifier and the signified in the following manner: the signifier expresses the sign and the signified is the content of the sign (Hjelmslev quoted in: Barthes, 1981: p.34).

The link between the signifier and the signified is described by De Saussure as being purely arbitrary. In other words, the signifier has no inherent quality which makes it convey the mental image of the particular thing which is signified. For example, the graphical representation for "dog", d-o-g, has no intrinsic relation to the mental image of a dog. If the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, what connects a particular signifier (or particular signifiers) to a particular signified ? De Saussure describes the link between the two components of the sign as a kind of "voluntary act" which is collectively sanctioned by a cultural community (De Saussure in: Caprettini, 1978: p.74). Claude Lévi-Strauss says that the linguistic sign is only arbitrary a priori but a posteriori it is not (Barthes, 1981: p.42). This means that before a sign has been accepted by a collective group of people, it is arbitrary; but after it has been accepted it ceases to be arbitrary because it now has associations. An individual cannot unilaterally decide on a particular signifier and make it refer to something in particular in the mind

of the community. The community can, however, be manipulated by the individual, but to do so he has to work within the community's cultural framework. Advertising makes use of this technique which will be discussed further in later chapters.

It is important to note that the signified is not a concrete thing, but rather the mental representation of a thing, that is, its conceptualisation. Furthermore, the levels of conceptualisation vary from culture to culture, thus causing difficulties for the intercultural transfer of semiotic sign systems (2).

Signs in themselves do not possess meaning, they only convey meaning, and only if they operate within a system together with other signs. A sign is defined by that which it is not. This is because a given sign will occupy a limited space within a given system [illegible] other signs are occupying the rest of the space; thus the o[illegible]gns define the space occupied by any sign operating within the same system. Caprettini states this more clearly when he says:

> nell'ambito del sistema, le relazioni fra segni assumono caratteristiche precise: sono negative, nel senso che il segno non ha una sua identità positiva stabilita una volta per tutte, ma un'identità negativa che si può accertare solo per via differenziale in relazione agli altri segni dello stesso sistema.
> (Caprettini, 1978: p.76)

The sign is therefore functional.

In semiotics, value is closely related to meaning. The value of a sign is defined by the network of relationships it has with other signs within the same system (Caprettini, 1978: p.77)

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(2) c.f. Chap.4, Section on **Myth and C[illegible]**

As regards language, it is both a social and an institutional phenomenon. It is social in that the whole body of language has to be accepted by an entire social grouping. It is also institutional because it constitutes a system and is part of an even larger system, namely society. There are two parts to language, the one part operating entirely within the other. These parts are known as langue and parole. Langue is the large body of language which incorporates all the grammatical, syntactic and lexical rules which have to be obeyed by any language user who wishes to communicate with others. It is therefore a rigid and autonomous structure which contains all the various linguistic combinations at a language user's disposal. In contrast to this, parole is the langue in action, that is, as it is used by the individual. Although the speaker has to obey the rules of language, he is still able to express his own personal ideas by skilfully combining parts of the langue. Caprettini clearly defines the parole when he calls it "l'assieme dei meccanismi che permettono di utilizzare la lingua" (Caprettini, 1978: p.24).

Since advertising constitutes a communicative act, it too must acknowledge the rules pertaining to the langue in order not to estrange the social community. However, language and culture can be manipulated and made to serve the language user's purpose by using myth and metalinguistic structures. This is because myth and parole influence the way people interpret signs (see Chap.3).

Particles of language can develop along two separate levels, these levels are known as the two axes of speech. The first level is that of syntagms. A syntagm is a combination of signs which link together to form a "chain". In speech this chain is linear and irreversible. A good example of a syntagm is the "zusammengesetzte Wörter" in the German language such

as "Rückzug" or "Aufschub". Even separate words following one another are an example of a syntagm, for example, "life on earth". In speech as well as in written language, every linguistic unit has value only in contrast to that which precedes it or that which follows it. Therefore speech and written language are syntagmatic in nature. Syntagms can be analysed by splitting them up into the smallest particles of meaning, that is, into sememes.

The second level is that of associations or paradigms. Words existing outside the spoken or the written sentence (syntagmatic level) group together because they have something in common. Therefore in semiotics a paradigmatic study of signs is the study of signs and other associated signs.

De Saussure differentiates between two different kinds of associations: association along the lines of sense and meaning, for example, the word institute lends itself to associations with words such as college, academy, etc.; and association along the line of affinity in sound, for example, institute is associated with words such as constitute, substitute, etc. Every associated group exists within a particular framework. In paradigms individual words are analysed separately and put into different classes (Barthes, 1981: pp.49-50). Paradigms are therefore easier to analyse than syntagms; syntagms have to be split into smaller units, whereas paradigms in themselves are separate thus already constitute units which can be analysed. Since paradigms are patterns and associations, they are closely related to language as a system (langue). Syntagms, in contrast, are continual and flowing, thus they are closely related to the spoken word (parole).

Advertising makes good use of the fact that components of a paradigm must have something in common as well as some dissimilarities. This is possible because paradigmatic oppositions (3) are only associated and not identical. Advertising can take one semiological system in which the product advertised is associated with a particular state of mind or ideal, and obscure dissimilarities between the product and that which it is supposed to represent by introducing a second semiological system in which myth operates. This technique can be explained by the fact that signs operating in one semiological system often link up with signs operating in a second system.

Denotation and connotation are key concepts in the study of sign relationships; a signifier is denotative if that which it signifies is to be found in the same semiological system. However, sometimes a signifier is not only relatable to signifieds present within the same system but also to signifieds operating within a second semiological system. This is because a signifier can refer to, as well as beyond, its own semiological system. This phenomenon is called connotation. A denotative relationship is thus always direct, and a connotative one, indirect.

Sign relationships (e.g. connotation and denotation) are the vehicle by which meaning is conveyed; it follows, therefore, that they operate within the communicative framework.

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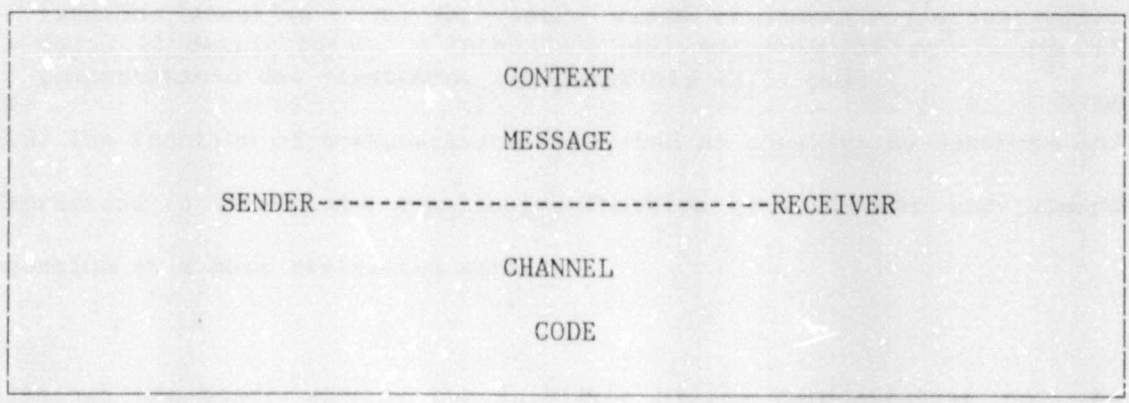
(3) Paradigmatic oppositions are components of a paradigm, c.f. Barthes, R. 1981: p.61.

3.0 SEMIOTICS AS COMMUNICATION

Communication can be understood as a highly organised structure through which a social individual (or social individuals) can transmit a certain quantity of information to another social individual (or to other social individuals) in such a way that the latter is influenced by this information (Caprettini, 1978: p.3). Communication therefore takes place within a social context and in any communicative situation there has to be a sender of information as well as a receiver of information.

Research conducted by Roman Jakobson led to the development of a model depicting the elements involved in communication. This model, which is given below, today serves as a general model of communication. The model is as follows:



(in: Caprettini, 1978: p.3)

The sender, who is the source of communication, encodes the message and transmits it. The receiver, in contrast, is the one to whom the message is addressed. His role is not a passive one - he interprets the message by decoding it. The message is the quantity of information transmitted

by the sender structured in accordance with particular rules dictated by a given code. It therefore follows that the code is the structured body of rules which is applied to the message, and which permits and determines communication. The channel is the instrument which serves as the vehicle for the transmission of the message. Any form of communication must take place within a particular context. The context is therefore the complex of phenomena appertaining to the real world in which communication occurs (Caprettini, 1978: p.4). The interaction of all the elements mentioned above constitutes the communicative act.

Roman Jakobson introduced the idea of every element in the communicative process linking back to a precise function. One of the functions mentioned by Jakobson which is of particular importance to advertising is the conative one. In the conative function of communication, attention is focussed on the receiver, in that the sender tries to change his behaviour. Caprettini gives a concise description of the conative function when he states:

> funzione conativa - si ha quando viene evidenziato l'orientamento verso il destinatario, l'intenzione del mittente di modificare il comportamento del ricettore. (Caprettini, 1978: p.5)

N.B. The function of communication described as conative by Jakobson and Caprettini is termed the appellative function by Reiss who understands conation in a more restricted sense.

Although the sender may be the initiator of the communicative act, he alone cannot guarantee the understanding of his message by the receiver. The reason for this is that the receiver is always an active agent in the communication process because he must interpret and understand the message, in other words, he must decode it - and decoding is always an active process. In any communicative act, therefore, a common code, or at least,

a code partially common to them must exist between the sender and the receiver; this is termed a system of intercomprehension by the Argentinian semiotician Luis Prieto (4). Paul Gillaerto states that comprehension cannot be but partial because of the different structuration of the code as regards the sender and the receiver. He carries on to say:

> Encoding (performed by the sender) is based on a paradigmatic operation of selection, whereas decoding (performed by the receiver) [departs] from the syntagmatic combination of the message.
> (in: Borbe, T. 1983: p.832)

In Chapter 1 it was pointed out how a paradigmatic function is an associative function and is relatable to the langue. In the same way, a sender who encodes a message has an entire language structure, together with its rules and norms at his disposal. He can thus select from the body of language all the elements he needs for the message (Caprettini, 1978: p.17). When the receiver receives the message, the linguistic elements chosen have already been combined and encoded. Therefore the various sign systems contained in the message are already linked up in a chain-like fashion and each individual sign can only be be interpreted or understood on the basis of the sign preceding it and the sign following it. From this explanation it is clear that the message reaching the receiver takes the form of parole.

When the message is received in the form of parole its interpretation and comprehension must be immediate which is why several codes and subcodes are used. An example of a code is language, that is, a natural language like English or French. A code constitutes what is known as a primary modelling system. An example of a subcode is a language sub-category such

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(4) see Caprettini, 1978: p.11.

as slang, legal and commercial language. The secondary system constitutes a secondary modelling system which is derived from and totally dependent on the primary modelling system. The concept of the primary and the secondary modelling system also has its relevance for commercial advertising. For example, an advertising text promoting fashionable wear for teenagers may well use a few expressions from the 'current lingo' to make the product more appealing. This 'current lingo' would then be a secondary modelling system to the primary one, which would be the natural language in which the text is written. Car advertisements which highlight certain new features of the product are another example of this, since they very often make use of simple technical language easily understood by the layman (thus enhancing the product's appeal by making it appear technically advanced and reliable).

Eco's analysis of the code is of notable importance in understanding semiotics as communication, especially with regard to written texts. Eco is of the opinion that the code follows a 'grammar' of its own and takes at least four different factors into consideration: the syntactic, semantic, extratextual and relational factors. The syntactic factor is composed of signals governed by laws which interrelate with one another within a given system. The second factor is called the semantic system which in Eco's words is: "una serie di contenuti di una possibile communicazione" (1975: p.55). The third factor (extratextual) is characterised by the code and is dependent on the receiver of the message - it can be defined as the series of the possible ways of responding open to the receiver. Advertisers try as best they can to limit the possible responses of the reader so that the latter may interpret the advertisement the way the advertisers want him to. Finally, the relational factor links up all the above-mentioned factors; it furthermore establishes how the

code operates in practice, for example, it determines that a given series of syntactic signals play a specific role in the semantic system, or that the syntactic and semantic systems, once associated, correspond to a given response on the part of the receiver (Eco, 1975: p.56).

In advertising texts, what Eco calls non-codified determinants of interpretation are also used. These phenomena arise when the message contains some kind of ambiguity which cannot be readily resolved . This ambiguity can be used in such a way as to intrigue the reader making him vulnerable to certain advertising techniques used by the advertisers to promote their product. The reader's intrigue can, by way of a semiological system of connotation, be transferred from the actual text to the product, making the latter desirable simply because it cannot be understood fully. Although such phenomena may exist, Eco has not shown convincingly that what he calls "le determinanti non-codificate dell'interpretazione" are not simply elements operating within a subtle form of code. Assuming that these determinants are in fact non-codified, their interpretation, albeit a relative one, can only be arrived at by way of a negative process, in other words, by interpreting all the other codes existing within a given communicative situation. Eco gives the following example of what he would call a non-codified context: "egli segue Karl" - this could mean either "egli è un discepolo di Karl" or "egli viene dopo Karl" (Eco, 1975: p.184).

Umberto Eco describes types of codifiers which have interesting consequences for a semiotic study of texts. One type of codifier he talks of is the hypercodifier which is an order of codification added to a preceding order of codification. An example of a hypercodifier is the rhet-

orical and stylistic rules operating within a language. Eco describes the operation of the hypercodifier in the following way:

> Un codice-base stabilisce che una certa combinazione grammaticale è comprensibile e accettabile e una regola retorica successiva (che non nega la precedente ma la assume come punto di partenza) stabilisce che quella combinazione sintagmatica deve essere usata in circostanze specifiche con una data connotazione stilistica.
> (1975: p. 188)

From the above it is clear that hypercodifiers constitute part of a system of connotation and are indeed an ever-present textual phenomenon.

Another type of codifier which operates in a less explicit way is the hypocodifier. This is a codifier which operates on the level of an assumed code which is capable of interpreting texts and conveying the content of the message in a vague but effective manner. The hypocodifier is brought into existence when the rules and norms governing a code are unclear if not undeterminable. Take, for example, an advertisement depicting a man smiling and holding up a mug of beer, the message is - "I like this beer" or "this is the best beer there is", etc. Even if there is no text to state clearly what the man thinks of the beer, it is readily apparent that he appreciates it in some way. Thus, like the hypercodifier, the hypocodifier operates on the level of connotation. There is also a marked similarity in the function of the hypocodifier and that of myth; the hypocodifier complements myth and they both operate on the implicit level of communication.

The types of codifiers mentioned above are all forms of overcoding; as such they are instrumental in the selection of a code most appropriate to the communicative situation, as well as in the identification of the subcode which will lead to the correct connotations being reached. Eco continues to say that the informative impact of signs may be changed by

means of overcoding techniques (Eco, 1975: p.196). This change in the informative impact of signs is best illustrated from the viewpoint of hypercodification, where the hypercodifier is understood to be constructed on a given code. The code (codice-base) must not, however, be fully given; it must be comprehensible but its uniformity of expression must be marred by one 'disturbing factor'. This 'disturbing factor' is the agent responsible for the change in the informative impact of the signs involved in a given communicative situation. Let us take the example of classic White Horse whiskey advertisement where a white horse is standing in a plush living room while a pretty woman is playing on the piano. The pretty woman, the plush living room and the piano constitute the basic code, and 'the disturbing factor' is provided by the horse which is 'the odd man out' in this scene. We find ourselves at a loss as to how to interpret the advertisement because the informative impact of the signs involved is placed in doubt and thus changed. It is the hypercodifier which brings us to an understanding of this change in the informative impact of the advertisement in the sentence: "You can take a White Horse anywhere". We now understand that the white horse symbolises White Horse whiskey which would blend harmoniously with the tranquil scene before us.

Another form of overcoding relevant to the study of communication in advertising is ideological overcoding. Ideological usage is very common in the promotion of products, for example, a certain product is described as being 'rare and quite inappropriate for the average man'; if the consumer has elitist sentiments, he will probably be very impressed by this description of the product because elitism (as inherent in capitalist ideology) encourages individual progress and competition against others.

From the various aspects of communication put forward in this chapter, it can be seen that communication is a continuous two-way process taking place between the sender of the message and its receiver. The sender has to be familiar with the socio-cultural background of the receiver if the coding systems contained in the texts are to be correctly interpreted. An advertising text cannot allow itself to be interpreted in an arbitrary fashion; its effect must therefore be foreseen by the advertiser. The various strata of codification thus focus on the same object (the product which is being advertised) using a vast array of linguistic devices. Although it is not essential that the receiver understand all the individual groups of codes contained in a message, he must understand all the levels of code (e.g. subcode and code) contained in a particular coding system. Myth is contained in one of these levels and forms a vital part of advertising technique.

4.0 MYTH

4.1 MYTH AND ITS ROLE IN ADVERTISING

Mythology is a rather confusing term; it may denote either the study of myths, or their content, or a particular set of myths. The word 'myth' is derived from the Greek word muthos which means a tale or something someone utters. The ambiguity of the term makes it impossible to define myth accurately. We can say, however, that myths have a socio-cultural base and can therefore be understood once the historical and cultural framework in which they operate is understood.

Since myth constitutes a kind of message, it can be viewed within the context of the communication model presented in Chapter 3. In **Mythologies** Barthes states that myth "is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system" (1972: p.114). In terms of the communication model, this would mean that myth is a form of overcoding constructed on the denotative level of communication. Thus mythical codes can only be grasped once the denotative codes are understood. Signifiers from the denotative system are appropriated by myth and grafted onto an alternative message (a mythical one); these signifiers are then related to signifieds operating in a second-order system. Myth can thus be understood as a mechanism which transforms sign systems from the primary semiological system to a signifying function. The meaning derived from the first system becomes impoverished but it is not discarded altogether.

The main aim of communication is to influence the behaviour of people (5); this is also the aim of myth. In our study we shall use the terms form and content employed by Barthes to refer to the signifier and the signified within the second-order semiological system. In this system the form is essentially an empty signifier devoid of meaning, but since it is linked to the primary semiological system, it in effect still carries the meaning derived from this system albeit in an impoverished form.

This quality of possessing, at the same time, an empty form and impoverished meaning from the denotative system is contradictory; it, however, best describes the content of myth. Myth plays a 'hide-and-seek' game with whomever is exposed to it revealing itself and concealing itself at the same time. Barthes gives a few examples illustrating the way in which myth functions. One of the examples he gives is a Latin sentence taken from Aesop or Phaedrus which reads: quia nominor leo. On the simple denotative level, this sentence states that my name is lion. No further information is given about the lion. However, the referent system of this sentence (that is, the context in which it operates, a Latin text book, the school environment etc.) makes it apparent that there must be another level of signification present. After a little reflection it becomes clear that the other level of signification is the connotative one in which the sentence now signifies a grammatical example illustrating the use of the predicate (1972, p.116). Both these levels of signification are present in the mind of the reader at the same time. It is through myth that a simple sentence becomes an example of Latin grammaticality. In this example the cultural specificity of myth is obvious since a person who has not been exposed to any of the classical languages at school level will

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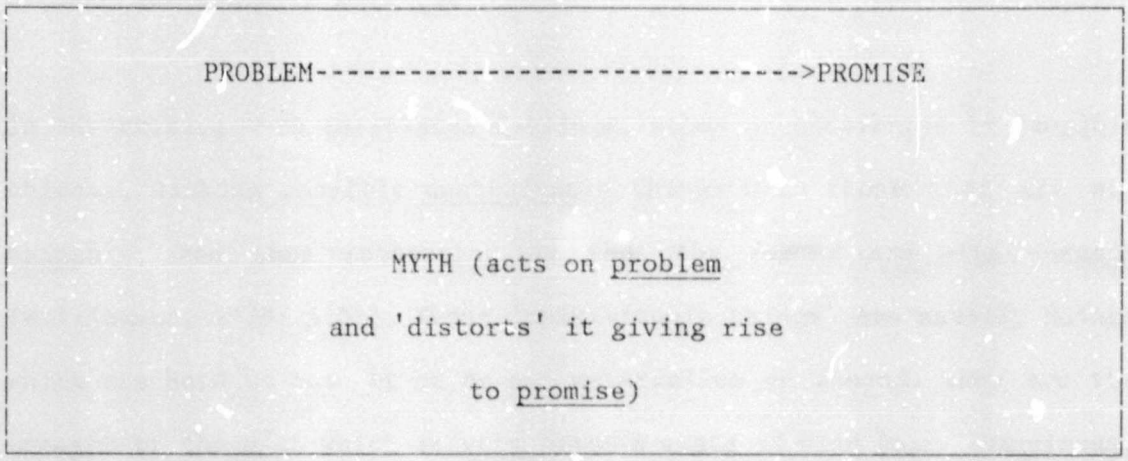
(5) see Chap. 3

surely fail to arrive at the concept of Latin grammaticality. Because the receiver of a message interprets it on the syntagmatic axis of communication (see Chap.3), the underlying codes of the message in the primary semiological system and then their subsequent 'distortion' by myth in the connotative system, have to be grasped immediately by the receiver. This point is of particular importance in commercial advertising. Myth in general can have a variety of functions; its purpose in advertising, however, is "to provide a model of thought capable of overcoming contradiction generated by society or the human condition" (Lévi-Strauss in: Davis & Walton, 1983, p.171). Advertising is today one of the richest sources reflecting the state of modern mythology. The truncated form that the former takes necessitates a concentration of various forms of overcoding such as the symbol, the metaphor and imagery for the sake of economy in communication (Davis & Walton, 1983: p.167).

Davis and Walton provide a schema for the decoding of advertisements which works on the basis of there being a problem to which the advertisement will need to offer a promise which will be energised or made salient by a myth (1983: p.169). The problem is characterised by the negative qualities or associations in the product as seen by the consumer, or, the negative qualities or associations in the user or the potential user of the product. The promise which is given to combat the problem highlights the positive aspects of the product as well as the positive aspects of the user of the product and the part played by the product in attaining these aspects (1983: p.169).

As we have already mentioned, myth is 'capable of overcoming contradiction'. On the schema devised by Davis and Walton, myth becomes a

problem-solving agent which leads to the manifestation of a promise (see diagram below).



The problem exists in the referent system within which the primary semiological system is situated. The promise is, however, to be found only in the secondary semiological system (N.B. the problem is not solved, it is glossed over). Since the meaning from the denotative level is impoverished in the connotative system, so too are the negative qualities of the product which, although present, are overshadowed by the concept proffered by myth. Thus in a way the problem ceases to exist and the myth supercedes the reality.

The function of myth becomes even more important in the promotion of products which try to satisfy the same consumer need (e.g. different brands of cigarettes - Peter Stuyvesant, John Player Special, etc.). The products are differentiated by providing them with different images or myths. Take, for example, two types of sport shoes (6); the first advertisement is for Reebock sport shoes (fig.1) and the second for Adidas

(6) c.f. Appendix A: figs. 1-2.

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