SYNTAGM AND PARADIGM: Repetition, Variation, and Contrast in Marlboro Ads

Ma. Milagros Carreon Laurel

Every now and then we come across memorable metaphors that facilitate our understanding of complex concepts.

One example used by Roland Barthes to explain the relationship between (1) the plane of the syntagm and (2) the plane of the paradigm ("system") is the restaurant menu that is a part of the food system. The paradigm is represented by the choices we make from

Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature
Vol. 6 No. 1 January - March 2000

among similar or related dishes. The syntagm, on the other hand, is equivalent to the order or sequence in which the dishes are served.

> A restaurant 'menu' actualizes both planes: the horizontal reading of the entries, for instance, corresponds to the system, the vertical reading of the menu corresponds to the syntagm (Barthes 1967).

Within the same analogy but this time in Saussurean language, "the whole menu represents the langue of the restaurant (and a sublanguage of the whole culture)" while parole expresses our individual act, "a statement... in the language of food" that is made "when we select from the menu and place our order" (Scholes 1974).

Barthes exemplifies the system/syntagm distinction: the garment system, the furniture system, the architecture system, the car system, and other "complex systems" including the press, cinema, television, and advertising.

Guy Cook's analogy (1992) between syntagmatic-paradigmatic relations and the supermarket is equally appropriate.

> In a supermarket, we encounter all the types of cheese in one place, of canned tomato in another, of pizza base in another, of wine in another and so on. We select one of each to fill a particular slot. If, however, the shop was arranged so that mozzarella cheese, and one kind only of tomatoes, one kind of pizza base and one kind of wine occurred together, forming the combination 'pizza margherita with chianti' this would be syntagmatic. Recent experiments with syntagmatic marketing include manufacturer's attempts to set up 'product clusters' — for example pre-shave lotion + razor + shaving soap + after-shave lotion.

In the Philippines, some sections in a few supermarkets are almost syntagmatic in terms of layout. The "baking needs" section displays flour, cream of tartar, vanilla, other flavoring, cake decors, and confectioner's sugar on the same if not on adjacent shelves. Nearby too are the cakepans and baking utensils (e.g., siffter, spatula).

Some vendors in the wet market have also turned "syntagmatic" by putting together in one plastic bag assorted vegetables chopped/cut and ready-to-cook pinakbet style. But this is rigid adherence to a single grammatical rule. The plastic bag petrifies possibilities and limits creativity.

Ambulant vendors can be more democratic in offering "syntagmatic and paradigmatic choices." They peddle different kinds of seafood and vegetables that homekeepers could combine in ways suitable to their needs, tastes, and budget. In spite of these recent developments

> the approach of both advertising and distribution as a whole remains paradigmatic. Products are presented as alternatives to their competitors, rather than as complements to their accompaniments (Cook).

In a capitalist environment where competition rather than complementation prevails, advertising is a necessary adjunct to marketing. If a product is to sell, it has to be promoted. While advertising may seem to be restricted by purely commercial motives, its printed text is challenging for the linguistically sensitive and culturally inquisitive scholar.

This study aims to explore the potentials of print advertisements as a linguistic code. It consists of three main parts:

Part I examines the verbal text of advertisements.

Part II deals with the pictorial text.

Part III relates the verbal and the pictorial texts of the advertisements.

The paper focuses its discussion on the magazine advertisements of Marlboro cigarettes. The sources of the Marlboro ads have been confined to Time and Newsweek. The ads were selected based on purposive sampling methods.

I. The Verbal Text

The word comes first, then the visual.

- Lois 1993

A visual text without an accompanying verbal text would have no advertising impact. The purpose of advertising is defined and straightforward: to promote or sell products, programs, or services. The verbal text which identifies the product should stay in the mind of the consumer if the ad is to have a product promotion value.

> The concept of visual imagery springing from words may sound odd, but in advertising (as in real life) this happens to be the strongest way to communicate a clear idea that will stick in people's minds and memories. To be sure a picture can be worth a thousand words. But if that picture also happens to be the spontaneous visual extension of a strong theme or slogan, its power is enormously enhanced. A visual by itself might be communicative and moving — but could still mean different things to different people. I want to permanently implant an image in your head and place words on your lips. I want everyone to receive the same message (Lois 1993).

The verbal text of ads involves a communication situation. Roman Jakobson's verbal communication act model can provide the framework for analyzing this linguistic text.

Six factors constitute any speech event: addresser, addressee, context, code, contact, and message.

> The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to (the "referent" in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee (or in other words, to the encoder and decoder of the message); and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication (Jakobson 1960).

Applied to advertising, some of these factors of communication may not be too simple to identify. In verbal communication, addresser easily refers to the speaker. However it may be somewhat difficult to name the addresser in an ad. Is it the manufacturer of the product being advertised? Or the copywriter whose job is to formulate catchy slogans? Some print ads may even present a persona who acts as the addresser, a specific character just like in literature.

The addressee is the consumer, the buying public. The context is the referent. A code familiar to both addresser and addressee is used. Contact is established between the addresser and the addressee. The message is transmitted.

Each of these factors of communication corresponds to "six basic functions of verbal communication" (Jakobson 1960):

CONTEXT
Referential

ADDRESSER
Emotive

MESSAGE
Poetic

ADDRESSER
Conative

CONTACT
Phatic

CODE
Metalingual

To Jakobson, "Two basic modes of arrangement used in verbal behaviour, **selection** and **combination,**" assume importance. From a wide choice of linguistic items and categories, addressers select their preferences and these enter into combinations in the speech chain.

> The selection is produced on the basis of equivalence, similarity and dissimilarity, synonymy and antonymy, while the combination, the build-up of the sequence, is based on contiguity. The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination (Jakobson 1960).

While succeeding scholars have noted that Jakobson's statement in "Linguistics and Poetics," on the surface, confines itself to the study of poetry, it may, on the contrary, apply to the study of other texts, among them, advertisements.

Prescriptions for effective advertising abound, as in how to write headlines that work. Thus, formulas like "Begin your headline with the word `Announcing'" (Caples 1974) are popularly adopted by several companies. Alternatives include "words that have an announcement quality" like "Introducing...," "Presenting...," "Today's," "New," "Now," and "At last" (Caples). Because of these many options taken from an advertising "menu" or formula, the advertiser has to make a careful selection of lexical items to put into the headline.

In selecting which word to use, meanings are factored in.

> Synonyms aren't automatically interchangeable. Words exist because they're subtly different from other words whose meanings are almost the same. Often the differences are slight enough to make words interchangeable...
>
> Example: The difference between "immediately," "at once," and "right now." "At once" is the most imperative; "right now" is the most urgent; "immediately" is the most arm's-length.
>
> What's the value of considering the difference of the three terms? "Immediately" is valuable when you don't want the message recipient to think you're assuming he or she will perform an action automatically. "At once" carries an imperious tone. "Right now" is a hard call to action (Lewis 1992). In other cases, shades-of-meaning or slight variations in terms of degree are not the sole reason for a particular choice. Often selection is based on prosodic patterns or on alliterative or phonological effects.

Fifty print advertisements of Marlboro cigarettes representing ten variations or groups are analyzed below.

The grouping is based on the verbal texts contained in each ad.

A	Marlboro	(8 samples)
B	Flip-Top Box Marlboro	(1 sample)
C	Marlboro Country	(1 sample)
D	No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind. And some men get to call it home. Marlboro Country.	(1 sample)
E	Marlboro. Come to where the flavor is.	(5 samples)
F	Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro	(7 samples)
G	Come to Marlboro Country.	(14 samples)
H	Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro Country	(2 samples)
I	Come to where the flavor is. Come to Marlboro Country.	(8 samples)
J	Merry Christmas from Marlboro Country.	(3 samples)

The ads are assigned codes below to show how they relate to one another.

1
A Marlboro

x x x 1
B Flip-Top Box Marlboro

1 2
C Marlboro Country

x x x x x x x x x x
D No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind.
x x x x x x x
And some men get to call it home.
1 2
Marlboro Country.

1 3 4 5 6 7 8
E Marlboro. Come to where the flavor is.

3 4 5 6 7 8 1
F Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro.

3 4 1 2
G Come to Marlboro Country.

3 4 5 6 7 8 1 2
H Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro Country.

3 4 5 6 7 8 3 4 1 2
I Come to where the flavor is. Come to Marlboro Country.

x x x 1 2
J Merry Christmas from Marlboro Country.

In summary, the texts as coded appear as:

A		1												
B	...	1												
C		1	2											
D	...	1	2											
E		1		3	4	5	6	7	8					
F				3	4	5	6	7	8	1				
G				3	4					1	2			
H				3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2			
I				3	4	5	6	7	8			3	4	1	2
J	...	1	2											

What linguistic features may be found in the ads? Consider A: **Marlboro.** The name of the product — a noun. There are no other words accompanying it. There is no need for further elaboration. That is what is being advertised. Marlboro is the

message. As a single lexical item it is directed towards the addressee from an addresser. Contact is established using a code which is the same in every language. The context is product promotion. And the addressee is expected to complete the message by buying the product.

B has no linguistic text but that inscribed on the cigarette box. Nevertheless, it is a message in itself. Marlboro — but this time in a "FLIP-TOP BOX."

C: Marlboro Country. An added lexical item to this group is the word "Country." It provides a setting, a context for the Marlboro ad: the Country with its accompanying word associations and collocations — the open country, the wild country, a free country, etc. Through the device of association/collocation, the addressee is enticed to buy the cigarette.

The word "Marlboro" has three syllables when articulated in isolation. However in combination with "Country" the medial vowel weakens and "Marlboro" begins to be articulated as two syllables.

D has some interesting linguistic features in it. This ad exemplifies parallelism and repetition, two of the characteristics of the principle of equivalence. The first ten words may be rearranged into two lines with five words in each line:

No	roof	but	the	sky,
No	walls	but	the	wind.

Each word is monosyllabic. Stresses may be supplied.

x	′	x	x	′
No	roof	but	the	sky,
x	′	x	x	′
No	walls	but	the	wind.

The next part of the ad goes:

x x ' x x '
x '
And some men get to call
it home.

The pronoun **it** has cataphoric reference; that is, **it** anticipates "Marlboro Country" in the last part of the ad. What is "it"? The first part of the verbal text ends with a period but does not have a surface NP VP structure, although one may interpret "No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind" as referring to Marlboro Country. In a more conventional form, the structure may be shown thus:

[Marlboro Country has] no roof but the sky.
[Marlboro Country has] no walls but the wind.

or:

[There is] no roof but the sky [and]
[there are] no walls but the wind [in] Marlboro Country.

However, the ad has been arranged in an ascending climactic order ending with "home," which is Marlboro Country. Moreover, "home" has for its immediate environment "it" and "Marlboro Country".

E equates "Marlboro" with "where the flavor is." Expressed in the imperative, it compels the addressee to "Come to [Marlboro] where the flavor is."

Phonological similarities may be observed in the words "Marlboro" and "flavor."

_ _ r l_ o r o
_ l _ _ o r

Two bilabial phonemes /m/ and /b/ are found in "Marlboro" while

two fricatives /f/ and /v/ are found in "flavor." The /b/ in "Marlboro" contrasts with /v/ in "flavor."

"Flavor," in a strict sense, is synonymous with taste. But flavor can also mean spirit, essence, or quality. This essence or quality is defined and enhanced through the visual text This will be discussed in the next chapter.

F contrasts with E in terms of structure. Where one begins, the other ends:

E Marlboro. Come to where the flavor is.
F Come to where the flavor is. Marlboro.

G puts "Come" and "Marlboro Country" in a contiguous environment.

C _ m _t_
M _ _ _ _ _ _ _ C _ _ _ t_ _

The word "Country" added to version F to form version H brings with it connotations of a specific yet open territory (a "country") and images of an untamed, pristine environment.

Of all the Marlboro slogans, I is the Longest. Two sentences, parallel in structure, are presented.

Come to where the flavor is.
Come to Marlboro Country.

Both have the same number of syllables.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Come to where the flavor is.
1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Come to Marlboro Country.

The lines show a predominance of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables.

' x ' x ' x '
Come to where the flavor is.

' x ' xx ' x
Come to Marlboro Country.

J may be considered as "special releases" intended only for the month of December. I functions both as a greeting and as advertisement. The context is well-defined: Marlboro Country, the likely addresser, wishes its addressee, the reader, a "Merry Christmas."

II. The Visual Text

> While words are very important in delivering the sales message and making the point, the visual in an advertising message is often the first thing seen and the last thing remembered.
>
> Moriarty 1991

The visual text cannot be ignored in Marlboro advertisements. This is underscored by the fact that the ads come out regularly in Time and Newsweek magazines. With only ten variations of the verbal text including one which is a special occasion text ("Merry Christmas from Marlboro Country") and therefore cannot alternate with the others in any other issues of the magazines, the advertiser has to rely heavily on the visual, specifically the pictorial, text.

Foregrounding of Marlboro Country is arrived at and achieved with the use of recurring images associated with the "country" — wild stallions, rocky mountains, open spaces, panoramic views, hardy cowboys, leather vests and gloves, cowboys' lassoes, a golden sunset, a clear stream, an occasional blue sky, a generally untamed wilderness.

How do these function in the ads? The picture of the stallion/horse pervades most of the ads. In the absence of this visual image, though, substitute images are used — a branding iron, riding boots, a cowboy hat, a buckle inscribed with the design of a man riding a horse. Within the given paradigm, the principle of substitution is effectively employed.

What norm do the ads follow? What message do the ads attempt to communicate? What image does Marlboro try to project?

Marlboro is "Country"; Marlboro is rugged; Marlboro is strength and power. Hence, the pictures of wild stallions, the rugged countryside, the mountains minus the gentle slopes, the rough hands, strong metal chains, the merciless whip, the burning fire, the searing sand — images associated with male strength and prowess. Thus, in every Marlboro ad appears the Marlboro man, a cowboy in a real-life situation, if not in a picture frame.

In all but twelve of the ads (three of them the Christmas ads), an iconic representation, the characteristic pack of Marlboro cigarettes, is found. The remaining nine are a "deviation from normal usage." Of these, two contain deviations from the "normal" verbal text. One of these ads (D) is the one that says "No roof but the sky, no walls but the wind. And some men get to call it home. Marlboro Country." The other has an additional NP; "Local cowboy hall of fame." It is worth noting that the Marlboro man, the "local cowboy," is absent in this ad. In his place is the "Local cowboy hall of fame," a picture gallery.

While the Marlboro box repeatedly appears in the ads, variations of this iconic sign are presented -- some boxes are closed, giving an impression of stasis and stability; others are open, suggesting movement and dynamism. Some are either standing upright to suggest alertness, or reclining diagonally to suggest relaxation.

At least two of the ads do not have a verbal text except that which appears on the pack/box of cigarettes. The latter is a "clipped" version of a bigger ad. In spite of the absence of a meaning-loaded slogan, the ad succeeds in promoting the product through the "signature flip-top box" and colors so identifiably Marlboro (red, white, and black).

Size and layout are also important in a visual text. Some of the ads appear on the centerfold; others on a one-page spread. Nothing is less than a page. The last two ads, J2 and J3, depict the same scene though one is spread horizontally; the other, vertically.

Forming part of the visual text is the paralanguage of the ad. Defined by Cook, paralanguage is the "meaningful behaviour accompanying language, such as voice quality, gestures, facial expressions and touch (in speech), and choice of typeface and letter sizes (in writing)." Of the fifty ads included in this study, not one contains a verbal text set in types bigger than the name Marlboro. The name always appears in bigger letter types than or the same letter size as the rest of the verbal text.

The language of advertising is not only language in words. It is also language in images, colors, and pictures. Pictures and words combine to form the advertisement's visual text.

III. Foregrounding Ads: The Verbal and The Visual

> Foregrounding is thus the 'throwing into relief' of the linguistic sign against the background of the norms of ordinary language.
>
> -Wales 1989

Advertising aims to sell. In the case of commercial consumer advertising, much money is spent in order to increase sales. Because of the stiff competition among manufacturers of consumer products, advertisements become an important ingredient in selling these products.

> The word "advertising" is derived from the Latin "adverto," formed by two root words: "ad" meaning "toward" and "verto" signifying "to turn." Thus, advertising aims to turn the consumer toward a store. And a store or any business concern advertises goods, ideas, and services to make customers turn their attention to the store or business entity.
>
> - Miranda 1991

The public must be made to remember specific names or brands of products. Familiarization is a key concept in marketing. But the market is virtually saturated with the same products that come under different names. This atmosphere of competition makes "foregrounding" in advertising a necessity.

A seeming paradox begins to work in advertising. Familiarization is achieved through defamiliarization. What may be commonplace is "made strange" to the consumer. An ordinary product takes on a new appeal. One brand name among so many of its kind stands out.

The Marlboro ad is one that relies on foregrounding, achieved primarily through repetition of and parallelism in the verbal and the visual texts. Gone may be the days of rodeos and American Western films but the ad refuses to be anachronistic. It is still relevant. In a world of automation, one cannot help but long for a pristine environment. One now sees the world in a new way through the old. The world has been "defamiliarized" — through the Marlboro ads.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barthes, Roland. Elements of Semiology. London: Jonathan Cape, 1967.

Caples, John. Tested Advertising Methods. Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

Cook, Guy. The Discourse of Advertising. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics." In Style in Language. Ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T., 1960.

Lewis, Herschell Gordon. Power Copywriting. Chicago: Dartnell, 1992.

Lois, George. What's the Big Idea? New York: Penguin, 1991.

Miranda, Gregorio S. Advertising. Metro Manila: National Book Store, 1991.

Moriarty, Sandra E. Creative Advertising Theory and Practice. 2nd ed. Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991.

Scholes, Robert. Structuralism in Literature. New Haven and London: Yale University, 1974.

Wales, Katrie. A Dictionary of Stylistics. London: Longman, 1989.