Implicatures derived through maxim flouting in print advertising: A contrastive empirical approach

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Advertising communication relies considerably on inferences and assumptions which help proceed towards eventual interpretation(s). Conversational implicatures (CI) remain a a persistently exploited pragmatic device in advertising since they represent inferences that go beyond the literal meaning of the utterance, arising from the hearer/reader assuming that the speaker/advertiser is being cooperative, and are “more likely to be remembered than direct assertions” (Brewer and Lichtenstein 1975). By examining the essence of CI, the types of Cooperative Maxims flouted (quantity, quality, manner, relevance) and the devices employed in English and Romanian print advertising such as tautologies, unfinished comparisons, and metaphoric expression, the paper will present the nature of advertising inferences at copy level as well as insights from contrastive statistical data at headline level.

1. Implicatures in Everyday Conversation and Advertising: Gricean Theory

According to the inferential model of communication, linguistic communication works because speaker (S) and hearer (H) share a system of inferential strategies leading from the utterance of an expression to H’s recognition of S’s communicative intent. By uttering an expression, S intentionally requires H to undertake a large inferential processing effort to decode what the message is intended to mean.

In advertising as well as in everyday conversation, more is communicated than is said:

1. The question “Can you tell me the time?” can have either a straight answer: “It’s 5 o’clock” or more indirect answers such as: (a) “Well, the tea has already been served” and (b) “It’s high time you were leaving”, which, depending on the context, mean considerably more, such as “I don’t know the exact time, but I can provide some information from which you may be able to deduce the approximate time, i.e. the five o’clock tea has already been served” or “I do not know the exact time but I know it is well past the time you are supposed to be leaving”.

2. Q: “Do you like the ice cream?” A: “Does a horse like oats?” Answering a question with another question which has nothing to do with the first can only be interpreted to bring a positive contribution within the cooperative framework: both interlocutors know the proverb that horses like oats, therefore this would be interpreted as an indirect positive and superlative answer to the first question.
(3) Advertising headline: “Wash your hair in sunshine” (Timotei shampoo). The headline is either non-cooperative and false or it intends to convey something more, such as brightness, liveliness, etc.

These examples illustrate the general phenomenon that a speaker or advertiser can say one thing and manage to mean something else or something more. Indirectness for politeness reasons (e.g. 1), uttering patent falsehoods for obtaining ironical effects (e.g. 2) and metaphors (e.g. 3) are evidence that in both conversation and advertising, the literal meaning and the communicated meaning can differ to a great extent.

Grice (1975) made a distinction between “what is said” (explicit meaning) and “what is implicated” (implicit meaning) and offered a theory of the latter sort of meaning, which he called conversational implicature, exploiting the fact that participants may be presumed to be cooperative, i.e. to be speaking informatively, truthfully, relevantly and appropriately.

The Cooperative Principle calls on a speaker to “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice 1989: 26). False or invalid inferences which the reader may draw represent in fact the borderline between the truth-conditional semantics (“what is said”) and pragmatics (“what is communicated”).

1.1 Conversational Implicatures versus Presuppositions

Conversational implicatures are inferences that go beyond the literal meaning of the utterance and arise from H assuming that S is being cooperative, i.e. is obeying the Cooperative Principle and the Maxims governing communication:

(4)  

a. **Quality**: Truth – Do not say what you believe to be false; Evidence – do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.  
b. **Quantity**: Strength – say no less than necessary; Parsimony – say no more than necessary.  
c. **Relation or Relevance**: Be relevant.  
d. **Manner or Clarity**: Avoid obscurity of expression, ambiguity, prolixity, be orderly.  
(Geis 1982: 31)

Therefore, conversational implicatures are different from conventional implicatures as the latter are non-truth-conditional inferences that are not derived from superordinate pragmatic principles. Whereas conventional implicatures (presuppositions) are determinate, negation-tolerant, non-cancellable, context-free and represent part of the conventional meanings, conversational implicatures represent a context-specific overlay in that they are indeterminate, calculable, cancellable, context-dependent and nonconventional.

Presuppositions (P)\(^1\) are inferences closely tied to the meaning of lexical items or constructions, and as such, even pragmatic theories of presupposition (Gazdar 1979) assume that they are part of the conventional meaning of expressions.

\(^1\) For the current study, the term *conventional implicatures* will be considered synonymous with *presupposition* since there is no sharp distinction between the two, although sometimes conventional implicatures can be cancelled. Both are not context-dependent in that they represent part of the conventional meaning of an utterance, and remain constant under negation.
Factual presuppositions appear where the information following certain verbs is treated as fact (presuppose the truth of their complements), as for the verb know: the sentence “Only you know what goes best with your genes” (Accu2 ad headline) has the following presuppositions:

(5) a. P₁: “Something goes best with your genes” and  
    b. P₂ regards the existence of P₁: “That something exists” plus assuming “your arbitration of reality”.

*Non-defeasibility test:* “Only you do not know what goes best with your genes” still has the same P₁ and P₂.

Moreover, conversational implicatures can originate either from obeying the maxims (standard I) or from maxim flouting (blatantly violating either one or several maxims). Implicatures deriving from maxim flouting are even more indeterminate than standard implicatures and usually give rise to figures of speech. In advertising, implicatures arrived at through maxim flouting are more interesting, though less definite, than those derived through filling in the cooperative maxims.

2. Corpus and Method

Implicatures derived through maxim flouting are exploited for different reasons: Quality flouting in metaphors is preferred for indirectness, Quantity flouting in unfinished comparisons is preferred for extraction of stronger claims, Manner flouting in puns or idiomatic expressions is preferred for avoidance of strong claims, and Relevance flouting is preferred for covertness.

The present empirical study was performed on a corpus of 60 print advertisement headlines and copies (30 Romanian and 30 English) with the following constant variables: medium and target consumer (women) as well as product (mostly cosmetics and jewellery). The data was extracted from women’s magazines: *Cosmopolitan* 2002, 2004 editions for the English corpus (Eₚ) and *Cosmopolitan, Unica*, for the Romanian corpus (Rₚ). As a procedure specification for the statistics, cases with any instance of flouting were counted, but not the number of inferences, as this would have been arbitrary (the process could have been continued endlessly despite the limited corpus).

3. Maxim Flouting in Advertising

3.1 Quantity Flouting

The maxim of Quantity is flouted when the writer obviously gives more or less information than the situation requires. The case of giving more information (parsimony) without communicating more is illustrated in the following advertisement for Revlon Speed Shine nail varnish:

(6)  
*Headline:* “We want what we want when we want it, even if we can’t decide what it is”  
*Body copy:* “Introducing Speed Shine. Sets in 60 seconds. High speed colour and high gloss shine. Get a quick and even coat with our patented flat brush”  
*Slogan:* “Revlon. Be unforgettable”

When we are told “we want what we want when we want it even if we can’t decide what it is”, parts of the utterance have no communicative import (parsimony decrees no more than is necessary). In tautologies like this, the assumption of cooperation, despite uninformativeness, leads us to interpret the headline as a problem of taking decisions quickly. Only based on this translation is the solution in the body-copy relevant. Leech (1983:30) argued that interpreting an utterance is ultimately “a
matter of guesswork, or to use a more dignified term, of hypothesis-formation”. Taking into account the premise that ads in general tend to ideologize the commodity by presenting it as a desirable attribute, we eventually understand the headline to mean “this product will allow me to take different decisions quickly, as it comes in different colours and sets in 60 seconds”, claims which are overtly made in the copy and which the advertiser can always substantiate.

The Strength requirement of the Quantity Maxim rules that no less than necessary be said. This requirement is outstandingly flouted through what is a most dear device to advertisers, the unfinished comparisons as in: “Your throat feels smoother when you suck a soother” (Soothers). The ad brings no other reasonable validation to the claim in “smoother” than the far-fetched subjective exclamation “waaaaahhh!” of some kids engaged in a thrilling race of a roller-coaster that the ad pictures. “Smother” than what, is left for the reader to decide.

Shimp (1983: 200) holds that such claims are potentially deceptive by virtue of being inherently susceptible to multiple interpretations, some of which are likely to be false. Some receivers would interpret a comparative to mean that X is better than Y with respect to attribute “a”, whereas others may infer that X is better than Z with respect to attribute “b”. Because it is unlikely that all interpretations are correct, some receivers must inevitably be misled (Shimp 1983: 205). In our case, “smoother” can be assessed against several closures: “than when you don’t suck a soother” (weak), “than when you eat chocolate”, “than when you drink cola”, etc. Derivation of the strong conversational implicatures above can further give rise to weaker, covertly transmitted implicatures regarding the absolute superiority of the product: “than when you suck/eat/drink/do anything else”, the claim strength ranging from weak to the strongest, although the ad has made no other linguistic substantiation, except for the exclamatory remark.

Closing an unfinished comparison indicates how easy it is for advertisers to make readers draw inferences beyond what was originally stated. Moreover, whenever the message leads the reader to expect something that was neither explicitly stated nor logically implicated, such implicatures may conduct to internalization of other ungrounded beliefs. These results are of utmost importance if we consider that according to psycholinguistic studies, readers are more likely to remember these pragmatic implicatures than direct assertions (Brewer and Lichtenstein 1975).

In five out of the 30 headlines (17%) in R, Strength was flouted through unfinished comparisons, in one sample alongside Manner flouting (Rama ad) where the closure takes the form of punning: “Rama, mai mare decât rama‖ / “Rama (brand name) bigger than the frame‖ – in Romanian, there is a pun on the word rama: product name and common noun (frame).

Rhetorical reasons may, however, occasionally reclaim comparison closure at least at a general level, as in the TV commercial for Mr. Propper: “Mai curat și mai ușor cu așa un ajutor” / “Cleaner and easier with such a help”.

3.2 Quantity/Quality

These two maxims work in competition, i.e. the amount of information the speaker gives is limited by his wish to avoid telling an untruth. In advertising this has to be interpreted as: “the strongest claim there is evidence for will be made”.

The relation obtaining is: if \( P^2 > Q \) \( \Rightarrow \) \( \neg Q > \neg P \) with implicatures holding between weaker propositions (Leech 1983: 86).

Advertisers are normally assumed to make the strongest claims they can defend. The fact that the advertiser of Maybelline (nail varnish) in the E, makes the weaker claim (not Q) suggests he believes P to be false: “Now that just polished wet look shine lasts for up to 5 days”. The range

\(^2\) P and Q represent two propositions.
covered by “up to 5 days” includes time spans from as little as a few minutes, a day, to a couple of days, four days, four days and 23 hours, etc., anything in this interval excluding “5 days”.

Geis (1982: 6) demonstrated how TV advertising blurs orally the distinction between “12 hours” and “up to 12 hours” because people cannot focus their attention on simultaneously presented oral and visual messages. It can be hypothesized that the idea intended to be conveyed is placed somewhere at the rightmost end of the meaning range in print advertising, whereas the truth of the assertion can as well be hosted within the lefthand constituents. It seems reasonable to conclude that advertisers intend for the readers to derive the strongest claim.

Stronger claims usually include shorter temporal spans of the above type, and are interpreted as “filling in” Quality with an overt assumption of an evidence-based, truthful claim: “24 hour protection. Because we understand how your body works” (Adidas).

Quality tends to outweigh all the other cooperative maxims (Leech 1983: 82), and in Grice’s (1982) theory, it is flouted in cases of metaphoric expression. The headline inviting readers “Wash your hair in sunshine” (Timotei shampoo) is blatantly false and therefore, assuming cooperation, the assertion is interpreted as intended to convey something else. Starting with the presumption of relevance of the Timotei shampoo, the basis of comparison for the two is worked out: blonde (hair) – yellow (sun); implicatures like “bright, shining, dazzling” are transferred onto the hair, with increasingly weaker and relevantly positive implicatures. Implicatures derived through maxim flouting can, however, be risky, since a more critical reader or a more sensitive consumer might infer metaphorically towards the negative end of the “dry, ...burnt hair” types.

3.3 Manner

Manner or clarity in advertising is flouted, as in the other cases above, in order to avoid making direct strong claims about a product’s efficiency. The ad for Super-Max3 razor blades has designed the following scheme:

(7) “3 blades to shave you
close, close, close.
A lubricating strip with
tea tree oil, vitamin E
and aloe vera, to pamper,
pamper, pamper you.
And, voila,
the smoothest you,
since you were a baby”

The avoidance of simple forms in favor of the prolix ones must be interpreted as relevant. Starting from the premise that the product is “the first triple blade disposable razor” and the repetition three times, once of the place adjunct (“close”), then of the verb (“pamper”) will foster implicatures of triple efficiency (three also connoting completeness). To assert that the product has triple efficiency would imply production of substantial evidence to pinpoint it. A more indirect approach is preferred instead, leaving it for the reader to extract the stronger claims. In flouting manner through the use of a vaguer expression, the advertiser avoided the strength of a claim and if requested to validate such pragmatic implicatures, he may argue that they were not meant literally.
3.4 Relevance

Floutings of Relevance alone are difficult—almost impossible—to find, since an ad which brings no relevance at all flouts its very commercial purpose. However, advertisers may undertake to convey information in a covert way when their communicative intention is not manifest, leaving it up to the audience to draw inferences that they want to be drawn and thus avoiding taking responsibility for them. This Schweppes ad is a notable case of frustrated relevance based on the reader’s onus to recover meaning. No reason for buying is conspicuously placed and the linguistic message is less salient, even absconded within the overall image-priming construction:

(8) **Headline:** “Sch…. you know it’s not really them”  
**Logo:** Schweppes. Since 1783  
**Slogan:** “Sch…. you know who?”

The logical form (LF) is informationally opaque due to the elided arguments, operator, and unassigned indexicals, leaving the reader guessing. Even after the stages of pragmatic processes in identifying the propositional form are pursued, such as disambiguation, reference assignment and enrichment, the linguistic message flouts product relevance.

This ad is an example that relevance can be exploited to its maximum negative end: it can be unclear and indirect, a parallel to uncooperative conversations where some participant is unwilling to bring forth a positive contribution to the other participant’s goals. The chain of means-ends is consequently extremely intricate with the linguistic constituent not bringing a contribution to the “conversational” goal of finding relevance.

However, the presence of the linguistic constituent and the narrative are assumptions of the intention to communicate and we, as readers, are summoned to create coherence by bolting together these assumptions. Specifying the right contextual values for the indexicals requires further anchorage into the “place” (P), “time” (T) and “speaker” (S) axes. The image “narrative” provides cues of refining the relevant interpretation as referring to 10 Downing Street and therefore the image actants are identified: Tony Blair and his wife captured by the candid camera with the wife’s funny, intimate, and inadvertently-advertising gesture of silencing him (“Sch…”) by pinching his back. In this case flouting relevance has been employed as an implicature-generating device, so the following weak implicatures are overtly communicated, since they are linked to the product in ways in which the ad’s textual representations are not:

(9) a. “Schweppes is a unique, tonic [Tony], traditional, humorous drink”;  
b. “Schweppes is a good drink”;  
c. “Famous brands do not need a hard, reasoned approach.”

Therefore, drinking Schweppes will provide you with some uniqueness, tonicity, tradition, fun, etc. (an array of weakly communicated implicatures), the implicated conclusion being that people who are unique, funny, respected, etc., will drink Schweppes. Probably because of this implicature-generating potential, relevance was attributed first-order importance to the detriment of all maxims in other communicative theories such as Relevance (Wilson 1986; Carston 2000).

3.5 Statistics

Statistical results regarding the nature of maxim flouting in Romanian and English in our corpus of 60 headlines reveal that English headlines tend to flout Quality to a higher degree (33% including floutings due to metaphors and rhetorical questions) than Quantity (23% including...
unclosed comparatives) whilst the Romanian corpus favored Quality flouting in a proportion of 46% rather than Manner (13% due to punning). This propensity is empirically translated into preference for metaphoric expression and/or what is known as figurative or “loose” uses in both corpora, followed by unsatisfied comparatives in English and plays on words or idiomatic expressions in Romanian.

4. Conclusion

Advertising communication relies considerably on inferences and assumptions which help proceed towards eventual interpretation(s). Conversational implicatures arising from flouting the cooperative maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance are employed by advertisers to make readers draw inferences beyond what was originally stated.

Unlike conventional implicatures which are present in the logical form, conversational implicatures, being cancellable, are easy to deny and cancel. Though calculable, they have an inherent indeterminacy which is attractive due to the abundance of honest and laudatory inferences with a heightening effect which cannot be otherwise supported.

Maxim flouting is an IC-generating device employed in order to: (1) make more indirect claims, which the advertiser either does not substantiate or is not willing/capable to, as in the case of Manner flouting where strong claims about the product’s superior efficiency are left for the reader to extract; and (2) to make readers draw inferences beyond what was originally stated, and thus sell more meanings at the price of one word:

(10) a. Several closures in case of Quantity flouting, with the claim strength ranging from weak to stronger, the strongest representing the ideal intended closure (“-er” than anything else/any other product);

b. Positive implicatures in case of metaphoric expression through Quality flouting, although for more critical readers, metaphoric inferences might go towards the negative end;

c. Exploitation of Relevance to its maximum negative end. Relevance can be unclear and indirect with well-established brands and traditional products. The presence of the linguistic constituent and the narrative imply the intention to communicate and we, as readers, eventually create coherence regarding the product’s superiority.

Finally, comparative statistics of maxim flouting in Romanian and English headlines testify to advertisers’ predilection for capitalizing on metaphoric expressions (Quality) followed by unfinished comparisons (Quantity flouting) and plays on words or idiomatic expressions (Manner).

References


