THE INTERPRETATION OF ADVERTISEMENTS BY ENGLISH NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS AS VIEWED FROM A SCHEMA-THEORETIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study attempts to explore the effect of awareness (on the part of readers of varying levels of proficiency in English-native speakers, English university instructors, English government school teachers, and senior English majors belonging to two different cultures) of the contextual domains of advertisements on the communicative acceptability of the interpretations put forward. The results of the study show that the percentages of appropriate interpretations varied relative to level of proficiency in English and degree of exposure to the culture in which such texts occur. In this respect, the study shows that there is a significant difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by the native and non-native speakers, and between those provided by the university instructors and the school teachers. The study also reveals that distorted, deviant, and culture-specific interpretations were rendered more frequently by the English majors and the school teachers than by the native speakers and university instructors. The present paper further indicates that a good percentage of the English majors and school teachers activated more general and universal schemata, thus yielding interpretations other than those intended by the text.

1. Background

The linguistic competence of language users includes, in addition to the ability to understand the meaning of lexical items and the ability to parse the syntactic structure of a text, a schematic knowledge without which a host of texts will remain

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opaque to most language users. Schematic knowledge consists basically of content and formal schemata. Content schemata, on the one hand, consistutes the language user's background knowledge about the subject-matter of the text. Thus language users approach the text with a variety of background knowledge from differing specializations and/or cultures (for further information, see Stevens (1980, 1982), Anderson et al (1977), Steffensen et al (1979), Hudson (1982), and Carrell (1987)). Formal schemata, on the other hand, comprise the language user's background knowledge about formal, rhetorical, and organizational structures of different types of texts, for example, the schemata for letters and advertisements (for further information, see Mandler & Johnson (1977), Meyer & Rice (1982), Thorndyke (1977), and Carrell (1982, 1987). In a more recent study, Casanave (1988:298) introduces another kind of schemata-strategy schemata, which represent the generic knowledge the language user has of the routine monitoring and repair strategies available to him as he encounters texts.

Schemata have at least three major functions. Firstly, schemata utilize the cultural background knowledge to orientate the receiver's interpretation in a specific direction rather than another, thus constraining his interpretation of an ambiguous message (Reynolds et al (1985), Steffensen et al (1985), among others). Secondly, they provide the basis for filling the gaps in a text, thus triggering a workable interpretation through inferential elaboration (for examples, see Schank & Abelson (1977), and Rumelhart (1984)). Thirdly, schemata establish what Casanave (1988) calls 'meta-cognition' or a correspondence between pre-existing schemata and the givens in a text through which language users monitor their interpretations.

In order for a text to be duly interpreted, the receiver must be able to work out the Discourse Topic (DT), thus basically satisfying the Relevance Requirement, i. e., Relevance is viewed as a relation between a proposition or a set of propositions and a DT (Giora, 1985). The process of working out a DT in order to meet the Relevance Requirement results in bringing coherence to the text. Brown & Yule (1983: 225) assert that this process involves three major facts: computing the communicative function (how to take the message), using general sociocultural knowledge (facts about the world) and determining the inferences to be made. To resolve the ambiguity of texts, receivers consult their schematic knowledge of space of presentation and form of presentation, for instance, to distinguish between an advertisement and a road sign when the verbal message is ambiguous (for further information, see Randquist (1985)).
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The receiver checks the foregoing criteria against two types of context: Linguistic and Physical context, when interpreting a text (Yule, 1985). In some cases, the linguistic context is straightforward and self-sufficient, thus leading to appropriate interpretation of texts. In most cases, however, the linguistic context is not enough, for there is a missing link which can be provided only by the physical context. Moreover, sometimes there is a conflict between the linguistic message per se and the socio-cultural knowledge where the competent reader gives priority to facts of the world over the encoded linguistic message.

2. The Present Study:
2.1 Purposes of the Study:
This study aims to investigate
a. The effect of existing world knowledge (i.e., schemata) on rendering communicatively acceptable interpretations of ambiguous (contextless) texts by subjects of different cultural backgrounds and varying proficiency levels in English;

b. The extent to which interpretation of the target texts can vary relative to the proficiency level in English and the cultural background of the intended subjects (readers);

c. The role of lexis in triggering off schemata representative of the readers’/interpreters’ experiences invoked by certain lexical items in the target texts.

2.2 Subjects:
The population of this study comprised four groups:
Group A: 21 American graduate students doing a course in Arabic as a foreign language during the summer of 1989 at Yarmouk University, Jordan.
Group B: 19 instructors of English, English literature and/or linguistics at the Language Center and the English Department at Yarmouk University (a mixture of M. A. & Ph. D. holders).
Group C: 39 junior and senior English majors at Yarmouk University.
Group D: 29 English school teachers who graduated from junior colleges in Jordan and who are pursuing a B. A. degree in English at the Higher College for the Certification of Teachers.
2.3 Materials:
Each subject was required to provide a written interpretation of each of the two texts below:
Text 1: HEATED
        ATTENDANT
        PARKING
Text 2: FALL
        BABY
        SALE
(Source: adapted from Yule 1985).

As is clear from their form and structure, the two texts are advertisements frequently encountered in a down-town shopping area. The subjects, however, were provided with no verbal or graphic contextual clues as to the context or function of each text other than the general sign-format and the syntaxless encodings displayed. Each subject was required to advance an interpretation that would reflect what each text meant to him.

2.4 Methods:
2.4.1 Methods of Evaluating Interpretations:
The subjects' interpretations were studied, analyzed, and categorized as follows (see section 2.5 for operational definitions of the terms that appear in this section):
a. appropriate as opposed to inappropriate interpretation;
b. distorted interpretation;
c. deviant interpretation;
d. culture-specific interpretation;
e. no response.

2.4.2 Statistical Methods:
A frequency count was made of each case (2.4.1), depending on its occurrence in the interpretations provided for each text by the subjects in each group. That resulted in proportions/percentages of the different types of interpretations. In order to investigate whether the frequency of occurrence of each of the above cases varied significantly or insignificantly with regard to cultural background and level of proficiency of the subjects in the different groups, a Z test for investigating the significance of differences between two proportions of cases (in 2.4.1) in two independent samples was used. Thus, the proportions obtained for each case in the
interpretations provided were statistically compared (Tables 2-7). Comparisons included pairs of groups in the following order:
  Group A vs. Group B
  Group B vs. Group C
  Group B vs. Group D
The rationale behind this ordering of comparisons is:
1. Groups A and B represent subjects who (presumably) are the closest to each other (as compared to Groups A and C or D) with regard to fluency in English and exposure to the culture of the target language, i.e., English, as most, if not all, of Group B graduated from either British or American universities and spent at least 2 years there.

2. Groups B and C represent subjects assumed to be far apart with respect to proficiency level in English and exposure to the culture of the target language, as the subjects in the latter group have access to English (and its culture) almost only through the medium of textbooks, teachers and T. V.

3. Groups B and D represent teachers of English, keeping in mind that the former have an advantage over the latter in that they graduated from either British or American universities; hold higher degrees; and have had closer exposure to the culture of the target language.

For a fuller investigation of the implications of the data obtained in connection with 1, 2 and 3 above, the researchers tabulated the related interpretations in tables (2and 3) and referred to them as 'distorted' and 'deviant'.

2.5 Significance of the Study:
Research on the effect of formal schema (see section 1) on comprehension and retrieval of content by L1 and L2 readers has focused mainly on extended stretches of written discourse whose content lends itself to conventional rhetorical organization or structure. The aim has been to find out the effect of awareness (on the part of the subjects from different cultural backgrounds and proficiency levels in TL) of the rhetorical structure of such texts on the subjects' ability to comprehend and, consequently, retrieve key content elements.

The interpretation of advertisements, as a text type in their own right, has not received due attention from the researchers in the fields of socio- and/or
psycholinguistics. In addition to its international spread and appeal, and in addition to its pragmatic orientation, this type of text bears, as inherent in its form and content, cultural as well as linguistic traces of the culture it exists in. This, of course, does not mean that this type of text, like any other type of text, does not embed universals, whether these relate to form, content, or pragmatic orientation. Hence, the ability to understand written advertisements and, consequently, to respond accordingly, should not be overlooked, as it assumes, in the first place, a pragmatic function closely related to various aspects of our daily affairs.

This study, therefore, addresses itself to investigating whether familiarity (i. e., the existence of relevant schema) with the form of some types of written advertisements can have an effect on the degree of appropriateness of interpretations provided by subjects belonging to different cultures and of varying proficiency levels in the target language.

The texts used for the purposes of this study differ in many ways from those used in the studies reviewed in section 1. First, they are the shortest possible stretches of discourse where each word in each text counts and contributes towards the shaping of the intended message. And in this respect, they are not untypical of advertisements, as these are characterized as being, on the whole, verbless, subjectless, and, what is more, syntaxless. Second, in order to negotiate the structure, meaning, and function of each text, readers need to be aware of the conventional structure of such texts, and of the contextual elements (e. g., the location of such texts) that tend to determine the form, size, and content of each.

2.6 Operational Definitions of the Terms Used in this Study:
A number of terms have been used in this study. These are:
a. Appropriate vs. inappropriate interpretation:

An interpretation is considered appropriate if it configurates both the extra- (i. e., contextual) and intra-textual elements (i. e., the key component elements) that combine to realize the communicative purpose for which the text under consideration has been generated. On such a view, an interpretation is appropriate if it is communicatively acceptable, and it cannot be endorsed as being so unless it renders the pragmatic function motivating the construction of the text in question.
b. Distorted interpretation:

An interpretation is considered distorted if it suffers either omission of some of the key elements of the text, or some additions to the constituent elements of the text and which, in turn, figure as alien material imposed on the text in question. It will be argued in this study (see section 3.2) that advancing a distorted interpretation can be considered a strategy interpreters, especially FL speakers, resort to as they encounter difficulties, be they due to linguistic proficiency or cultural specificity.

c. Deviant interpretation:

A deviant interpretation is one in which the focus of the text is twisted, thus producing a version of the text with an intention other than that intended by the producer. This happens when the rhetorical function of the text is misunderstood and, thus, misinterpreted in a way that goes against the expectations of both the addressee and the intended addressee (audience). (For a fuller discussion, see section 3.3).

d. Culture specific interpretation:

This applies to cases when an ambiguous (contextless) text is interpreted by subjects (interpreters) from different cultural backgrounds and where an unanticipated interpretation is advanced by a good proportion of subjects belonging to culture A while no comparable interpretation is provided by any member of those from culture B. In this case, such an interpretation can be traced back to aspects specific to culture A which have been reflected, as part of the interpreter's experiences, in the interpretation in hand.

3. Discussion:

In the preliminary stage of classifying the data, it was found that the interpretations provided do not completely lend themselves to a dichotomy of right vs. wrong, or appropriate vs. inappropriate. Some interpretations (see Tables 8 and 9 and Figure 2) were not complete (i. e., they did not include some of the key items in the text); others missed the intended purpose of the text, though all key items in the text are included; while some others reflected worlds other than those intended in the texts in question. This being so, the researchers came up with four typologies of interpretations (which may well be extrapolated to comparable cases).
3.1 Appropriate vs. inappropriate interpretations:

A look at table (1) shows a steady decline in the percentages of appropriate interpretations arranged in a revealing order: the highest percentage being scored by the group of native speakers; while the next highest by the group of university instructors; and the lowest by the groups of students and school teachers. This decline is, however, not unexpected as Groups A and B have an advantage over Groups C and D where Group A consists of native speakers of English, and Group B represents university instructors who are highly proficient in English, in addition to the fact that the overwhelming majority of them have had closer contact with native speakers of English. Unlike Groups A and B, groups C and D represent EFL students whose proficiency in English is still being developed; besides, their exposure to the English culture is very limited.

Table (1) also reveals an ascending order of percentages of inappropriate interpretations of both texts (1) and (2). The smallest percentage of inappropriate interpretations was scored by the group of native speakers, followed by that of the university instructors, with the highest being scored by Groups C and D.

| Table 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Percentage of appropriate and inappropriate interpretations of the texts | | | | | | | |
| Text 1 | Text 2 | | | | | |
| Group | total no. | No. Of | | | No. of | | |
| of Ss | interpre | interp. | interpre | interpretations | % | % | % | % | % | % | % |
| A | 21 | 20 | 85 | 15 | 15 | 20 | 95.2 | 4.76 | - |
| B | 19 | 11 | 45.4 | 54.5 | 10.5 | 17 | 94.1 | 5.8 | - |
| C | 39 | 19 | 15.8 | 84.2 | 10.25 | 24 | 62.5 | 37.5 | 33.3 |
| D | 29 | 18 | 16.6 | 83.3 | 3.4 | 20 | 25 | 75 | 13.7 |

However, a closer look at Table (1) discloses a gap between Group A's and B's subjects with regard to rendering appropriate interpretations. Whereas 20 out of 21 interpretations of Text (1) were complete (undistorted) by Group A's subjects (i.e. 95.2%), only 11 out of 19 interpretations (i.e. 57.8%) were advanced by Group B's—
a statistic indicating that a good number of subjects in Group B skipped or, perhaps, avoided interpreting certain lexical elements in Text (1) which, most probably,
proved opaque when approached only from within the verbal (linguistic) context in which they occur.

The gap gets even wider as we consider the statistic recorded in Table (2) where the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations given by groups A and B proves to be highly significant (Z score for proportions of independent groups = 2.32 at \( \alpha = 0.05 \)). This finding reinforces our argument that certain elements in Text (1) are cognitively and culturally opaque as, it seems, they do not consistute a part of the givens of a relevant schema that can be mapped onto the components of the text for purposes of negotiating its potential function. Hence, one could argue, when encountered with Text (1), around 55% of the subjects in Group B called upon existing schemata for clues, but not much relevant information was evoked. (See section 3.2 for a fuller discussion of this point).

**Table 2**

**Significance of the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by groups A and B (Text 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group No. of interp.</th>
<th>frequency of approp. interp. (f)</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pp</th>
<th>Standard error of the difference</th>
<th>Z score</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>Significant at ( \alpha = 0.05 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: P=proportion of appropriate interpretations of groups A and B.

Pp=ratio of total frequency

However, this gap almost entirely disappears when we consider the performance of Groups A and B on Text (2). Table (3) shows that the difference is negligible (Z=0.14 at \( \alpha = 0.05 \)). This indicates that
a. the text as a/an sign/advertisement is familiar to the subjects in both groups with regard to content, form, location, and function.

b. the cultural and pragmatic load of the component lexical elements is transparent for the majority of the subjects in Group B.
Table 3
Significance of the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by groups A and B (Text 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group No.</th>
<th>frequency of interp.</th>
<th>frequency of interp.</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pp</th>
<th>Standard error of the difference</th>
<th>Z score</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>insignificant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>at $\alpha=0.05$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The influence of this notion of familiarity with form, location, and function of a text (an advertisement, in our case) can be further traced in the results recorded in Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7. Looking at Tables (4 and 5), we can see that Group B's subjects, whose contact with L2's culture is closer than that of Group C's, performed significantly better on Texts (1) and (2) ($Z=4.11$ and 2.34 respectively) than Group C's, whose access to L2's culture is limited mainly to textbooks and television.

Table 4
Significance of the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by Groups B and C (Text 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group No.</th>
<th>frequency of interp.</th>
<th>frequency of interp.</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pp</th>
<th>Standard error of the difference</th>
<th>Z score</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.072</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>at $\alpha=0.05$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Significance of the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by Groups B and C (Text 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group No.</th>
<th>frequency of interp.</th>
<th>frequency of interp.</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pp</th>
<th>Standard error of the difference</th>
<th>Z score</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>at $\alpha=0.05$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The influence of familiarity with form, location, and function of a verbally and physically contextless text in promoting sensible interpretation of such a text is further evidenced by the data presented in Tables (6 and 7) where the performance of Groups B and D is compared. Though the subjects in both groups are teachers of English, yet those in Group B have an advantage over those in Group D in that the former received their higher education in English-speaking countries, and, therefore, their contact with different cultural aspects of L2 was closer; not to mention their higher proficiency level in L2, as compared to that of Group B’s subjects.

**Table 6**

**Significance of the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by Groups B and C (Text 1)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No. of interp.</th>
<th>Frequency of approp interp</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pp</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>Z score</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>-2.09</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>at α=0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7**

**Significance of the difference between the percentages of appropriate interpretations provided by Groups B and D (Text 2)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No. of interp.</th>
<th>Frequency of approp interp</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>Pp</th>
<th>Standard error</th>
<th>Z score</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.162</td>
<td>-4.32</td>
<td>Significant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>at α=0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Distorted interpretation:

As explained in (2.6), an interpretation has been considered distorted when it suffers either omission of some key elements of the text in question (i.e. the reader has skipped some elements), or addition of some irrelevant material with regard to a certain element in the text.
Table (8) below reveals an ascending order of percentages of distorted interpretations provided by Groups A, B, C and D respectively, with the smallest percentage being scored by Group A (the native speakers in the sample). The notion of distorted interpretation will be discussed in terms of (a) omission and (b) addition in Text (1), as it is in this text that most of the instances related to (a) and (b) are encountered.

a. Omission:
A record of the lexical elements of which no mention was made in the interpretation of Text (1) shows that the items "heated" and "attendant" were frequently skipped by most of the subjects in Groups B, C and D, with the word "heated" scoring a higher percentage. Skipping these lexical items can be taken as an avoidance strategy adopted by the subjects concerned in an attempt to break through the impeding effect the presence of such opaque elements may have caused to their (the subjects') deciphering of the communicative function of the text hosting such elements.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>No. of Cases</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No. of Cases</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31.57</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Viewed from a cultural perspective, the word "heated", with its intended sense in the text, is not an item frequently (if ever) encountered in connection with parking lots in Jordan. Car parks may or may not have attendants, but being centrally heated is something which is not familiar in our environment. In other words, the existing schema for a car park in our Jordanian environment is one with or without an attendant, but being centrally heated is an input which has not yet been entered into our car-park schema. "Heated", therefore, seems to have triggered off no latent experiences and, consequently, remained opaque as to its service within the limited and condensed linguistic context it occurs in. Observe, for example, some instances of omission being referred to:
1. "It's a place where drivers can park their cars";
2. "There is a car park nearby";
3. "There is a garage where people can park their cars safely".
4. "A driver can park his car here";
5. "Private parking place for cars";

b. Addition:
Additions in this experiment can be referred to as a strategy which the riders/interpreters seem to have resorted to in order to fill in a gap in their world experiences in connection with the semiotic, pragmatic, and, consequently, communicative function of a verbal text of the kind dealt with in the present study. The gap seems to be effected by the presence of a textual element (a lexical item) whose contextual meaning (i.e. sense) proves to be opaque to the interpreter, though he does not fail to activate schemata related to the text in question albeit irrelevant as viewed from the semiotic, pragmatic, and communicative contextual dimensions of the text.

Being aware of his failure to grasp the intended sense of the lexical item in question, the interpreter seems to explore his semantic memory for meanings that may fill in the gap and, at the same time, correspond with the schemata related to the text as a whole. In such a case, interpretations seem to be engineered to suit what the interpreter knows about the text in hand, not what the text stands for in the world outside the interpreter's existing knowledge. See, for example, the interpretation of Text (1) as provided by a subject in Group D:

6. "People cannot park their cars here because the parking is burnt"

In (6), the word "heated" seems to have activated a warning schema, and this is effected by the interpreter's failure to grasp the intended sense of the word, thus "heated" is interpreted as "catching fire".

In (7), below, the word "heated" assumes another meaning for another interpreter in the same group:

7. "A place where people can park their cars in hot weather".

Here "heated" invites experiences related to weather. Whereas "heated" in (6) and (7) is associated with fires and weather conditions, it takes on an emotive function in (8).

8. "Do not park your car here because the attendant is angry".
3.3 Deviant interpretations:

An advertisement is a text type which is characterized by a set of features (lexical, syntactical, and stylistic) the totality of which is what gives such a text its identity and marks its social function. In such a text type, each element assumes a discoursal value which cannot be perceived unless processed within the contextual world (which is mainly a physical one) in which it figures as a sign configuring a message. Failure to identify or grasp the discoursal value of the advertisement concerned is in other words failure to react in accordance with the intended message. Such failure may be attributed to factors (from within and from outside the text/advertisement) which alienate the resulting response from the intended one. Such factors could be incongruity between the givens in the advertisement in question and those in the interpreter's existing knowledge of comparable texts in comparable contexts.

Failure to grasp the discoursal value of the major elements in a given advertisement may yield a response (an interpretation, in our case) which proves alien (i.e., irrelevant) to the anticipated response of the target audience who judge it from the perspective of their frames of reference, viz., function, form, and location of such an advertisement. And due to the condensed nature of advertisements, in addition to their culture-bound orientation, their informativity and functionality are only discernible when a link is established between their content and the context they occur in.

Viewed within their social and physical contexts, the two advertisements in this study are intended to inform and persuade. Yet, 31% of Group D in their interpretation of Text (1) came up with a warning sign in which component elements take on an imperative rather than a persuading role. It seems that, lacking familiarity with both the social and physical contexts of such an advertisement, the subjects concerned called upon their sign schema—a schema which is more general and more universal, and, consequently, more accessible than the advertisement schema (see Figure 1). The sign schema, due to its universality and commonality, figures as long-term knowledge stored and retrieved by members from different societies in different cultures. The advertisement schema, on the other hand, does not seem to enjoy the universality and ease of accessibility as does the sign schema. Variation, therefore, in the form and content of an advertisement may lead to miscommunication which, in turn, may be attributed to cultural idiosyncratic handling of the message intended.
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Viewed in the light of the varying interpretations provided by Group D, and in the light of their being culture-bound, the advertisement schema can be considered a sub-schema of the general sign schema which takes on a variety of functions, all of which are presumably accessible to subjects from different cultures. It may take on a warning function, e.g.,

9. SLOW
   CHILDREN
   AT
   PLAY
or an informative and warning function, e.g.,

10. DE TOUR
or a purely informative function e.g.,

11. RESUME SPEED

A taxi driver would not miss the message the above signs convey, regardless of the culture he belongs to.

Unlike the signs with the functions above, an advertisement is intended to persuade and invite. And the way such functions are realized in each culture may not be the same. Component elements of an advertisement perform functions perceivable only in the context they exist in. This being so, Group D subjects, in their attempts to interpret Text (1), seem to have assigned certain elements in the text functions other than those intended in the advertisement schema. Table (9) below shows an ascending order of percentages of deviant interpretations, with Group A scoring the lowest and Group D the highest.

In order to further investigate how the warning sign schema came about, one can trace the argument here back to our argument in (3.2): strategies of omission and addition, where lack of proper context-motivated interpretation of certain key elements, e.g., "heated" triggered off "fire", "electrification", "danger", etc., associations which all derive from more general and more accessible schema, viz., the warning sign. Hence we have Text (1) interpreted as:

12. "Don't park your car here; the place is on fire".
13. "Don't park your car in this park because it is too hot".
14. "Don't park your car for a long time. It will be too hot".
15. "Don't touch anything in the park; everything is hot because of electricity".
16. "Don't make fire in the park, the attendant will punish you".
17. "Don't park when the attendant is angry".
Figure 1
A suggested cognitive representation of the process of interpreting advertisements

ADVERTISEMENT

Specific Location  |  Specific Form  |  Specific Function  |  Cultural Load

familiar with the above dimensions
relevant schemata invoked
elements assigned intended functions
message interpreted as intended

unfamiliar with the above dimensions
available & accessible schemata invoked
elements assigned unintended functions
message misinterpreted
Table 9
Percentage of deviant interpretations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Text 1</th>
<th>Text 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Type of resulting deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>1. Warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>1. Warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>1. Warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>1. Warning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus the examples (12)-(17) (and other comparable ones) show that when a key element in a contextless text proves opaque as to its contextual function, it seems to take on a dominant role in gearing the process of interpretation and, consequently, to be responsible for the malfunction of the interpretation endeavors made by the subject.

3.4 Culture-specific interpretations:

Two strategies seem to be called upon when we encounter an ambiguous text: Reference and Representation. The first seems to be invoked if the text in question-form and content-can be fitted into our frame of reference to the world around us. And in this case, disambiguating the text, whether completely or partially, becomes a matter of establishing a link between the elements of the text and our frame of reference which can include experiences comparable to those aimed at by the target text. Thus, our interpretation of a text turns out to be a sort of REFERENCE to what we store of experiences and facts that converge with those intended in the text we are dealing with.

However, if the text as it stands (ambiguous and ambivalent) forms no part of our referential knowledge, another strategy comes into play, viz., REPRESENTATION. This has to do with psychological realities which seem to be deeply rooted in our cognitive mechanisms which come to the fore only when aroused by some experience-activating stimuli. Interpretation in this case tends to derive not from what we know about the worlds the text represents (as these have proved opaque); rather, it derives from what experiences and associations the text, or
some of its components, may arouse. And in this case interpretations are apt to vary relative to cultural and personal experiences. Content in such a case is internally created, and a text world which is more accessible to the interpreter takes shape.

Looking at Figure (2), we see that a number of interpretations (34%) provided by Groups C and D derive from personal and cultural experiences—such experiences were not aroused in Groups A’s and B’s subjects. Though such interpretations may sound unfeasible and impossible, they are not, however, nonsensical. They represent experiences and afflicions undergone by a group of subjects of culture A (Arabic culture, in our case), but did not cross the minds of any of those in culture B (American culture).

**Figure 2**

A record of interpretations which derive from culture-specific experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The following interpretations recurred 15 times (out of 44 complete responses)—an equivalent of 34%—in the responses provided by Groups C and D in their interpretation of Text 2.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Refugee children from Sabra and Shateela are now for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Refugee children who lost their parents in Palestine are for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Fatherless children in Iraq are for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Palestinian children in Intifada are for sale in Israel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lebanese children for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Children who lost their parents in Lebanon are now for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Refugee children for sale.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lebanese and Palestinian children are for sale now.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And this is why the present researchers did not include such interpretations under the categories of appropriate or inappropriate interpretation.

4. Implications:

The results recorded in this study and the discussion conducted throughout reveal how contextual domains and textual elements interact in a way that shapes the identity and function of the text under consideration. They also show that identifying such identity and function can be contingent upon the text recipient's (the reader's) familiarity, not only with the general or core meanings of the textual elements, but also (and perhaps more importantly) with contextual domains in response to which
textual elements assume functions and develop senses a reader equipped only with common core meanings may fail to grasp.

The study also implies that advertisements (fraught with cultural elements as they are) presented in L1 can be a rich area for the teaching of communicative reading to L2 learners who can discover how unfamiliarity with the textual domains of the text in hand can lead to alienating them, as interpreters, from the L1 audience whose interpretations of the same text can wholly diverge from theirs. FL reading teachers can, therefore, make use of texts (advertisements, in our case) stripped off their contextual aspects and involve their students in a process of exploring what such texts may stand for. In such an exploration process, students can discover for themselves how and why their interpretation may be communicatively unacceptable. Further, they can also see how lexical items in such short and condensed texts can perform functions determined by factors other than those available in dictionaries and grammar textbooks.

Besides, assigning such types of text for reading (and interpreting purposes) can create useful opportunities for the reading teacher to discover what strategies (e.g., omission, addition, reference, etc.) the learners may resort to in their attempts to handle the task. Identifying such strategies may offer clues as to what the teacher needs to focus upon in the process of teaching.

The way the interpretations discussed in this study have been treated also has its implications for classroom practices in connection with evaluating student’s comprehension (interpretation) of texts of comparable nature. Such a treatment leaves room for justified or justifiable interpretations which digress from the ones intended by the text in question. In such a treatment the right-wrong dichotomy tends to step aside, thus leaving room for introspective views deriving from and bearing traces of culture-specific experiences.

Last, but not least, FL materials are often criticized for being over-explicit. In this spirit, Sinclair (1981) states that it is a characteristic of a competent discourse to be inexplicit or context-dependent. As a consequence, L2 learners are at a serious disadvantage because they are always taught to be explicit. Thus the introduction of texts comparable to the ones used in this study significantly contributes to the authentication of FL materials by opening the doors for highlighting the importance of physical context and world knowledge on top of linguistic context which often fails to lead the readers to the intended message.
References


