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## INFORMATION PROCESSING AND RECALL OF FOREGROUNDED ELEMENTS IN POLISH PRESS ADVERTISEMENTS

The slogans and pictorial elements of press advertisements contain the most important elements of the message communicated to the viewers by the advertiser. They have to be formulated and composed in such a way as to ensure the most uniform reading and interpretation among potentially diverse recipients. It is interesting to what extent such an effect would be reported by relatively homogeneous respondents. The present study investigates the interpretation and recall of advertising slogans and foregrounded information by a group of 60 young people, following a short exposure to 5 press advertisements. It also attempts to compare the results to a previous research on mental processing of hidden and inconspicuous elements in press commercials (Wojtaszek 2007b).

### 1. Introduction

Studies on the language of advertising have already reached the point when we can speak of reasonably extensive history, well-established trends and traditions in the description, clearly-defined fashions in the selection of materials and preferences for the use of particular instruments of analysis. When we take into consideration the linguistic bias in the approach, it may be assumed that the first major publication, both in terms of scope and thoroughness of coverage, was Geoffrey Leech's *English in advertising. A linguistic study of advertising in Great Britain* (1966). Subsequent changes and developments in the style and strategies of advertising, the available media, the linguistic and psychological theories used for description and the analytical tools applied to the research, yielded an impressive collection of publications on the subject, contributing to the more than forty-year-old tradition. It is not my major purpose here to enumerate all the prominent landmarks on this road, references will

be made only to those works which bear significant relevance for the purpose of the present study<sup>1</sup>.

The evolution of linguists' approach to the study of advertising messages is very well characterized in Crook (2004), especially in its initial theoretical discussion, where the author argues for the need of modification in the researchers' approach to advertisements. Commercials, in his view, do not try any more to persuade the consumers to buy the advertised products (which used to entail some covert forms of deception), instead, their major function has shifted towards much more subtle strategies aimed at 'gentle, mental biasing' (Sutherland & Sylvester, 2000: 8). The latter authors go even as far as claiming that 'of the many psychological mechanisms underlying most advertising, persuasion is often the least relevant', and if we have in mind the immediate effects of advertising messages it seems that their observation is not only convincing, but quite simply very true. Crook (2004: 723) observes also that 'a great deal of understanding exists between the advertiser and target audience, and this allows advertisers to be far more open, blatant and mocking, both of themselves and their audience'. The consumers have grown very much aware of more direct persuasive strategies which were employed in the past and have developed certain immunity to such practices. That is why, while not resigning completely from the more indirect persuasive elements, the advertisers were forced to change their approach and offer their audience some form of intellectual or aesthetic gain in return for a little bit of attention. The general public has become aware of the fact that information used to be presented persuasively in advertisements, and, as Crook (2004: 730) observes, 'an addressee equipped with a knowledge of advertising as a genre is less likely to expect a high degree of cognitive gain in return for his/her perseverance. Expectations of relevance are linked to genre, so that advertisers are constantly forced to overstep the boundaries in the hope of engaging with an audience that has seen it all before'.

In their quest for being noticed advertisements have developed numerous mechanisms aimed at drawing consumers' attention. This, however, is not the focal point of the present study, although it definitely constitutes a very promising area of investigation. The present paper concentrates on two aspects which are already dependent on the advertiser's success in attracting the attention of the audience. The first of them is the informational content of advertising messages, while the second is linked with the audience's reception and mental processing of commercials. The former aspect is within a high degree of control of the advertiser, and can be studied on the basis of selected advertisements alone, whereas the latter requires the participation of the audience and some form of collection of responses from a number of subjects. The section below presents some introductory observations pertaining to the content of press advertisements and the factors influencing advertisers' choices in its selection.

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<sup>1</sup> More extensive lists of references can be found, among others, in Chłopicki & Świątek (2000), Crook (2004), Doliński (2003), Fuertes-Olivera et.al. (2001), Heath (2001), van Mulken, van Enschoot-van Dijk & Hoeken (2005) and Wojtaszek (2002).

## 2. Presentation of information in press commercials

The present study focuses on press advertisements in order to secure a reasonable limit to the variability of potential contextual factors, which play different roles in different advertising media. Press advertisements belong to the type of commercials which we probably pay least attention to. When buying a newspaper or a magazine we do not normally have the intention to browse through the advertisements included there. If we take a short glimpse at them at all, it is due to some of their peculiar features which draw our attention and manage to keep it for a while. In all models describing the way advertising works, the first necessary element on which all the subsequent steps necessarily depend is noticing the commercial in the first place<sup>2</sup>. If it is not brought to our attention, no influence can be exerted and our cognitive environment does not receive the stimulus to be altered in any way (Wojtaszek, 2007b). This, however, is not the central focus of the present study, as I have indicated above.

When it comes to the content of an advertising message, it is the advertiser who has the major influence on the message included, both in its linguistic and pictorial aspect. There are, of course, certain limitations imposed by the law, social norms, genre characteristics and the like, but they never have absolute character and, given the possibilities created by linguistic and strategic innovation, it is always possible to stretch and circumvent such limits, often winning the audience's appreciation at the same time<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the advertiser is the one who can freely manipulate the kind and extent of informative content which he chooses to present to the potential customer, as well as the numerous ways of its presentation. The choice will always be maximally persuasive given his ultimate purposes, of course in the modified sense of persuasion discussed above.

Having in mind 'the gentle, mental bias' (Sutherland & Sylvester, 2000), subtle 'changes in cognitive environment' of the viewer (Tanaka, 1994) or 'the reward for paying attention to the advertisement' (Crook, 2004), the advertiser's first choice is connected with the kind of informational focus in the message, which boils down to the question of what is going to be presented in the commercial. Press advertisements should not be informatively overloaded, given the limited attention they usually receive from the viewers (Doliński, 2003:91). That is why the advertiser has to choose one of the possible focus types in order to achieve maximal involvement return from the audience.

A brief look at advertisements placed in various newspapers and magazines allows for the discovery of the most popular strategies employed by many different advertising agencies. Prior to the selection of advertisements to be used in the further part of this study, I have inspected the contents of more than twenty issues of different Polish weekly magazines from the period between May and September 2007, such as

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. White (1993, ch. 6) or Wojtaszek (2002: 29)

<sup>3</sup> For more extended discussion, see Wojtaszek (2002), Wojtaszek (2007a) and Wojtaszek (2007b)



*Viva, Polityka, Gala, Przekrój, Wprost* and *Świat Kobiety*. As a result, I have observed that almost all advertisements can be classified into four major categories in terms of their informational content focus. The categories can be named and characterized in the following way:

- **problem** – the point of focus is a certain existing or imaginary problem experienced by the potential customer, a solution to which is presented in form of the commodity or service being advertised
- **recipient** – the central figure is the recipient of the advertisement, the imaginary user and his self-image, needs, everyday life, comfort, ‘wanna-be desires’ and the like
- **product** – the advertisement is dissociated from the world of consumers, or their desire for the product is taken for granted, that is why such commercials focus entirely on the selected aspects and features of the advertised product which make it exceptionally attractive
- **humour/riddle** – the product and the consumer are placed in the background, the main attempt of the advertiser to reward the viewer’s attention with a certain form of entertainment is given prominence over other aspects of the ad, the focus is on the joke or on the brain-teaser

Obviously, those categories are quite often mixed and their boundaries escape attempts at precise location, but their applications are equally frequently recognizable without major effort. All of them possess advantages and disadvantages, for instance, the application of humour should not be overdone, no matter how attractive it might seem in the eyes of the advertiser. Jokes which are too hilarious have the tendency to overshadow the advertised product and often create the danger that no trace at all will be left in the consumer’s mind of the advertised brand. On the one hand, humorous advertisements offer the advertiser the obvious advantage of recipient’s favourable attitude and appreciation. Meyers-Levy & Malaviya (1999) claim that one route to persuasion is giving pleasurable experience, and presenting a joke definitely fits within such description. Taking yet another perspective, it has to be stated that attentive care has to be exercised in the choice of material and form of the joke, regarding the social constraints, transparency and humorous load.

In the description of the product the advertiser has the choice of selecting and presenting only those features which, in his mind, have the power of convincing the viewer of the product’s supremacy in the market and of inducing a maximally favourable attitude towards it, maybe even the desire of possession. The research shows that often one strong advantage is more convincing for the audience than a collection of weaker positive assets (Friedrich & Smith, 1998). This often goes together well with the necessity of abbreviation imposed on press advertisements by the unfavourable tendencies in the reception of press advertisements by the viewers, related to their inattention. On the other hand, however, the advertiser can rely on a number of contextual factors which facilitate correct encoding and interpretation of significantly abbreviated messages.

It is not difficult to notice that press advertisements are quite well-fitted with the topic content of the magazine or newspaper in which they appear. The limits are not inflexible, of course, but the advertisers are very careful in selecting the kinds of newspapers and magazines in which they place their messages. Each periodical is published with an aim of reaching a specific readership to whom it is addressed, and the advertisements placed in it should target the representatives of this group. The group of readers of a particular newspaper or magazine are expected to share certain values, needs and interests, and the commercials address them in the best way they can. Thus, in magazines directed to young, educated, middle-class women we can expect advertisements of health-care products, cosmetics, medicines, career-related matters, fashion, food or mobile phone networks. Advertisements of computer hardware or software, products for elderly people, technical appliances or horticulture are less likely to be found there.

Even inside the magazine the placement of particular advertisements is not accidental. It is easy to notice that food is being advertised within food-related sections of the magazine, and health care products next to articles related to the subject. Such placement further facilitates the reception of advertisements, which become very finely contextualised by the surrounding content matter.

The readership of particular newspapers or magazines can be also roughly defined in terms of their lifestyle, hierarchy of values, aesthetic preferences and the knowledge of the world. This allows for a high degree of indirectness in the communication of messages, as a large portion of background information can be presupposed or taken for granted. The role of indirect communication in advertisements has been already thoroughly discussed in the literature<sup>4</sup>, and it seems that due to the factors discussed above, press advertisements seem to allow for particularly high degrees of freedom in handling indirectness. One of the possible forms which this can take is relatively high exploitation of relevance, no matter if we apply the Gricean or Relevance-theoretic approach to its description. It may play a significant role in the creation of associative connotations which will be investigated in another study (Wojtaszek, in press).

Another important aspect of informational organisation of the message pertains to the items which have to be included in the ad but are, for various reasons, unfavourable for the advertiser of the product. The necessity of inclusion of certain pieces of information is dictated by the law, which enforces the regulations of fair competition and ban on deceptive practices by the advertiser. Thus, the main concern of the advertiser in such situations is either such presentation of the legally required messages that their reception is hindered or finding ways of circumventing the legal bans. Those matters were the main focus of my previous study (Wojtaszek, 2007b), where the effects of various ways of backgrounding and disguising the unfavourable claims were presented. The study proved relatively high effectiveness of application of such evasive mecha-

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<sup>4</sup> It is enough to mention such works as Crook (2004), Dyer (1988), Petty & Cacioppo (1985), Tanaka (1994) or Wojtaszek (2002)



nisms as the use of small print, high complication of pseudo-scientific language, indirectness and modal modifications. It has been observed that similar parts of advertising messages tend to be neglected by the viewers, non-declarative constructions are transformed into declarative ones, unconnected or misconnected parts of messages are modified into coherent sequences of information and favourable implicatures are often decoded on the basis of application of the Relevance Maxim.

The present study, in turn, investigates the degree of consistency in the decoding of the foregrounded messages presented in press advertisements. It seeks to establish whether high concentration of contextual clues described above, in connection with the appeal to commonly recognised norms, values or patterns of interpretation and the existence of “a great deal of understanding (...) between the advertiser and target audience” (Crook, 2004: 732) yields sufficiently unanimous interpretations of advertisements by people with different hierarchies of values and life experiences. Of course, the variability of the target audience has certain limits to it, it would not be very wise to include in the sample people who would be very unlikely to belong to the targeted readership of the magazine from which the advertisements have been selected for evaluation. This issue is going to be addressed in more detail below, in the description of the research methodology.

### **3. The framework of the study**

Since the study of responses to advertising messages involves a reasonably smaller control of the researcher over the gathered and analysed material than in the case of performing content analysis, the author has decided to limit the variability of the subjects of the study to avoid the danger of receiving data whose categorization and orderly presentation would prove extensively complex. Thus the profile of the investigated group of respondents was restricted to include 60 male and female students of English, all ranging between 21 and 28 years of age. It was interesting for the author of the study whether such a relatively homogenous group of subjects would report similar reactions to selected elements of the advertising messages used in it.

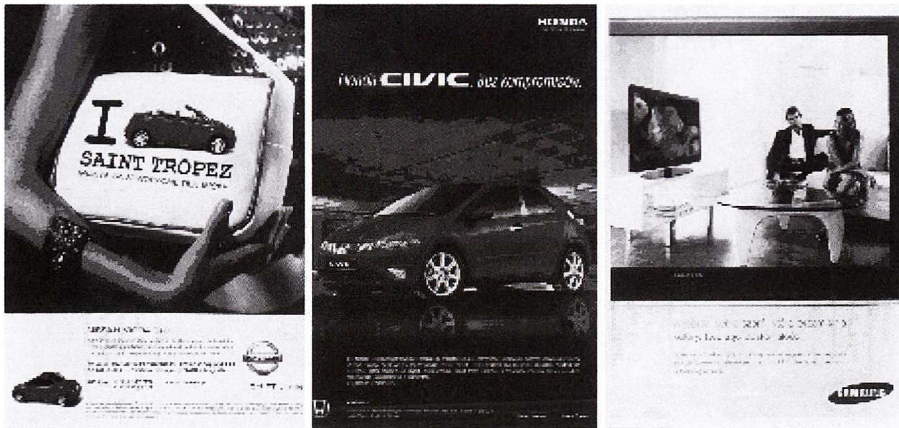
The data collection instrument selected for the purpose of the study was an interview, investigating particular aspects of 5 press advertisements taken from *Gala* magazine (issue 24, June 2007). The selection of an interview as the data collection tool constituted another important factor in the context of restrictions applied to the variability of the group. Being a qualitative rather than quantitative type of instrument, it promised to provide relatively variable responses; in this situation the choice of a homogenous group of respondents offered a counterbalance to such a tendency.

The points of focus for the present study were the product recognition, the identification and processing of the most salient informational content, the interpretation of the slogans and their retention in the memory of the subjects. Another study based on the same advertisements will investigate such issues as the perception of the target audience, perception of the features of advertised products and the cognitive effects

of the contact between the informational content of the commercials and the world knowledge and experience of the subjects. Those issues, however, require a slightly different construction of the process of data gathering, especially in connection with the exposure time. In the present investigation the time of exposure was relatively short, approximately 5 seconds per advertisement, which is close to the value reported for unbiased, natural contact with press advertisements. Doliński (2003: 91) maintains that the average is 2 seconds, this however encompasses both the ads which we just glimpse at, as well as those on which we focus our attention for a bit longer. What is more, the time of exposure selected for the present study seemed sufficient in the context of investigation of the most salient elements of press commercials, which were meant to be noticed and processed first.

The claim that some components of the message should be noticed and processed first is, of course, a certain methodological assumption, connected with deductive, top-down aspects of the study construction. Arguably, however, such methodological assumptions are indispensable in all scientific research, and the ones made here seem to be very well grounded. If we accept that the advertisers are well aware of the average time devoted to the mental processing of a single commercial, we can conclude that the graphic layout of the ad, the slogan and the most important informational components will be constructed and presented in such a way that the short time of 2 to 5 seconds should be sufficient for their intake, and precisely such elements as mentioned above constitute the focus for the study.

The commercials which were presented to the subjects are included below for quick reference, in order to enable better understanding and visualisation of the discussed data:



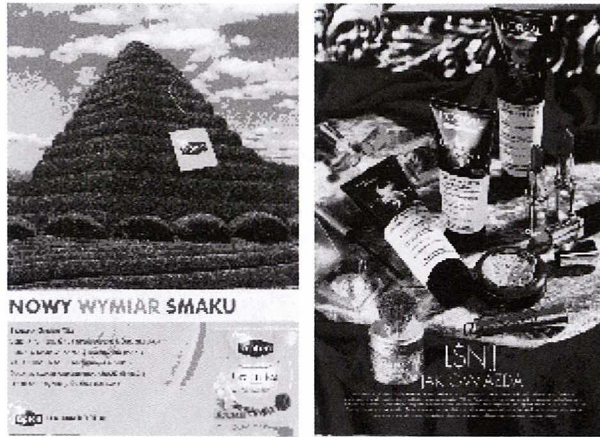


Fig. 1. The commercials used in the study: *Nissan Miera*, *Honda Civic*, *Samsung LCD TV*, *Lipton Green Tea*, *L'Oréal Cosmetics*

Following the presentation of each of the advertisements, the subjects were asked a couple of questions related to the investigated subject matter. Their responses were noted down and analysed, and the results of the investigation are presented in the following sections.

## 4. The findings

### 4.1. Product recognition

Arguably, the recognition of the product is the most important and desirable effect which the advertisers want to achieve. First of all, if the product is correctly identified, then all the positive connotations and associations are connected to the proper anchor. Secondly, the financial resources spent on the development of the commercials are given a chance to turn into profits. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the advertised product is placed in the foreground, relative to the competing products of other companies, and receives higher degree of recognisability and familiarity in the mind of the potential consumer, which may turn out to be the vital factor in the situation of purchase.

One of the issues investigated in the present study was the degree to which the subjects would be able to correctly identify the product being advertised. It turned out that fully correct recognition was observed in the context of two advertisements, with the remaining three there were certain problems. The correctly identified products were *Honda Civic* and *Lipton Green Tea*, owing to significant degree of foregrounding employed by the advertisers. The name of the car is mentioned in the main slogan and the effect is amplified by the placement of a large photograph of the car in the central part



of the ad and the manufacturer's logo in the top right-hand corner. In the commercial for the tea the characteristic label of the manufacturer can be seen in the central part of the illustration in a contrasting colour, and the logo is presented twice in the lower part of the ad: in the left-hand corner and on the photograph of the product package. Additionally, both products mentioned above belong to quite well-known and recognized brands.

The *Samsung LCD TV* commercial yielded almost perfect product recognition and there were only two subjects who had problems with correct recall. They thought that the advertised product was any LCD television and that the commercial highlighted the technology rather than any particular brand. This finding seems a little surprising, because the advertisement is not very complicated. Out of all the commercials used in the study this one contains the shortest text component, and the producer's logo is presented twice in it. Additionally, it does not confuse the viewer with complicated model symbols and advertises all *Samsung LCD TV's*. However, it can be stated that the percentage of incorrect interpretation is relatively low.

There were more problems with the *Nissan Micra* advertisement. Here as many as 5 respondents reported that the advertised car was *Suzuki Swift*, and 3 others did not remember at all what brand and model of car was advertised. The latter finding may be explained by the construction of the advertisement, in which the main slogan information takes precedence over the mention of the car. The biggest letter size is used for the manipulated *I love Saint Tropez* message, effectively reducing the salience of the subslogan, where the model of the car is mentioned. It seems that this commercial is the only one in the collection representing the type in which the potential recipient is the central element, not the product itself.

The former finding is at the same time puzzling and interesting. Why should as many as 5 subjects confuse *Nissan Micra* with another car, and, more interestingly, why was it always *Suzuki Swift*? One feasible explanation could be close similarity of the two cars, especially for someone not very much into the motor industry. This would not explain, however, why the advertised car was confused always with the same product of a competing company. A closer look at the advertisement seems to offer a satisfactory solution to the puzzle. In the bottom right-hand corner, below the *Nissan* logo, there is a slogo<sup>5</sup> saying *SHIFT – city life* (Fig. 2). It is very likely that, given the short exposure time, some respondents have noticed it without consciously processing and that the word *shift* was confused with *swift* in the process of recollection. Since the subjects probably heard of *Suzuki Swift*, they have accessed their world knowledge upon being questioned and took advantage of it in connecting what they thought they saw in the ad with what they knew about cars available in the market, reporting the name *Suzuki Swift* in their responses.

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<sup>5</sup> A very short slogan used repeatedly with a company logo in a series of advertisements for different company products, so that it becomes associated with the brand. A good example of a slogo is *Nokia – Connecting People*.

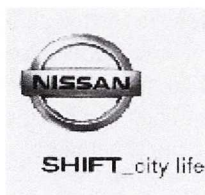


Fig. 2. The alleged source of the incorrect product recognition

The *L'Oréal* advertisement is a little incompatible with the discussion of product recognition, because it does not advertise any particular product. Focusing more on the brand, it also foregrounds the person of the potential recipient, suggesting in the slogan the potential benefits for the customer, resulting from the purchase and use of a whole range of products. Thus, although many subjects found it difficult to successfully enumerate the products which they could see in the photograph (they probably did not have enough time to read about them in the text), all of them correctly reported the brand name. It seems then that the question whether the product has been successfully identified cannot be answered in a straightforward and unambiguous manner, it all depends on the perspective from which we interpret the findings.

#### 4.2. *Slogan interpretation and retention*

Theoretically, the slogan should present the summary of the most important message which the advertiser wants to communicate to the target audience. It seems that in order to persuade effectively the slogan should be understood in a significantly unanimous way. This, however, is probably impossible to achieve, since the reading of a particular message depends on a large number of factors which lie beyond the advertiser's control. The most important of them are connected with the world knowledge base of particular recipients, as everyone interprets the informational input against the background of private experience. A logical choice in such a situation would be to employ items characterised by exceptionally high load of coresense (Kecskes, 2008): meanings related to word-specific semantic properties and culture-specific conceptual properties, contextualized in such a way that desirable additional aspects of consense (*ibid.*) result from well-controlled process of priming, minimizing at the same time the potential influence of addressee's 'private contexts'. In other words, the words chosen for inclusion in the slogan should exploit highly recognizable associations, strengthened by appropriate contextual embedding. In such a situation the meanings constructed by the recipients of advertising messages should yield maximal degrees of uniformity<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Kecskes' (2008) concepts related to the understanding of messages seen as dynamic mechanisms of meaning construction, based on the situational context and the 'core' meaning of words, seem to offer an attractive and promising analytical perspective.



It has to be acknowledged that in majority of cases such an effect has been achieved by the advertisers in the context of commercials analysed in the present study. There were small differences in associations evoked by particular elements included in the slogans, but either they were relatively insignificant or their ultimate perception turned out to be positive. The slogan which was understood in the most uniform way and which was remembered best was *Honda Civic. Bez kompromisów* (*Honda Civic. No compromises*). Almost everyone interpreted the message in such a way that the engineers did not compromise anything in the process of designing and producing the car and that the car offers the high-end level of comfort, looks and performance. Everyone understood the uncompromising attitude in a positive way, which has been claimed to be a Polish culture-specific feature (Wierzbicka, 1985). Almost everyone was able to report the exact wording of the slogan, often the respondents additionally remembered also the slogan (*Honda. The Power of Dreams*).

The recall level was also significantly high (86%) with the slogan *Lśnij jak gwiazda* (*Shine like a star*) from *L'Oréal* advertisement, although the typeface used was not too conspicuous. The slogan is, however, very short and its intended meaning is heavily supported both by the text of the body copy and by the illustration. Thus, there were no instances of identifying the meaning of *gwiazda* (*star*) as a celestial body, everyone constructed the denotation as referring to a celebrity (a female celebrity, to be more precise), although most of the subjects were not able to recall which celebrities were mentioned in the text below the slogan. If some of the names were reported correctly, it seems that this was more the effect of subjects familiarity with the company's advertising campaign and their knowledge of who endorsed the products in TV spots. Arguably, the subjects had too little time to read the body copy of the text and remember the names mentioned there.

Interestingly, the slogan was not interpreted as an imperative, although, strictly speaking, its grammatical form leaves no doubts about it. Its grammatical properties seem to have been completely overshadowed by the functional reading of the text. Thus, in the context of the advertising message, the meaning identified by all the subjects was a promise that thanks to the company's cosmetics the users will shine like stars. In addition to highlighting the functional reading of the message, the interpretation focused unanimously on the metaphorical rather than the literal sense of the phrase. No one understood shining in the sense of emitting light, but of acquiring attractive appearance. This is due to the high degree of fossilization of the metaphor in question in the language of the respondents, further supported by the contextual priming.

*Nowy wymiar smaku* (*New dimension of taste*) in the *Lipton tea* advertisement is another short, uncomplicated slogan. However, it was not remembered so well as the previous ones (75% recall). A possible explanation might suggest that the wording of the slogan has not got the status of a set phrase or a stabilized metaphor, although the references to new dimensions of something are not so infrequent in commercials, we come across such phrases from time to time. Another possibility is that the sense of the slogan creates a certain interpretative dilemma and constitutes a challenge for conceptualization. As far as the concepts are concerned, we deal here with a kind of synesthesia, because the sense of taste is not compatible with dimensions, which are




more directly related to seeing. In terms of interpretations, there are several possibilities, one related to the shape of the teabag graphically included in the ad, another one connected with the pyramid in the bigger photograph, sometimes metaphorically related to what the shape represents on the level of associations (ancient civilizations, mysterious knowledge), and still one more independent on the pictures but connected with the synesthetic connection outlined above. On the one hand, if something constitutes a puzzle and in this way engages the mind of the viewer, it should be well remembered, because the mental powers are highly stimulated. On the other hand, however, the activated mental processes may lead to subsequent forgetting of the original trigger, focusing entirely on the results of the interpretative effort.

When it comes to the associations evoked in the subjects by the slogan, they included all the facets described above, quite evenly distributed among the respondents. All of them agreed, however, that the main message of the slogan was that there was something new and intriguing in the taste of the new blend of tea. Thus, it seems that the ultimate mental effect of the ad is quite in line with the advertiser's expectations.

The *Samsung* commercial, although the shortest in terms of the text included, had the longest slogan of all. *Wyobraź sobie czerní, która przemienia kolory, tworząc doskonałość* (*Imagine blackness which transforms colours, breeding perfectness*) is both very long and difficult to conceptualize. The meanings which have been juxtaposed are very elusive, imprecise and highly abstract. Additionally, the blackness has been animated, if not personified, performing an indefinable action on other colours, producing an effect which is highly obscure in terms of its reference. All that can be related, of course, to the images on the screen of the advertised LCD TV, but this is not very helpful, either, because there are no clearly defined standards regulating what can be described as perfect. Such comments summarising why the slogan is difficult, if not impossible, to understand, could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. This is not, however the main concern here. The interesting thing is how the slogan was remembered and interpreted by the respondents.

First of all, it turns out that it was not remembered very well, only 10% of the subjects were able to report the exact wording. This does not seem to matter much, however, because the general impression was quite uniform, in spite of the very complicated stimulus. Almost everyone described the slogan as communicating that the new *Samsung* TV was capable of showing wonderful colours and that its screen was perfectly black. It seems that out of the whole slogan only certain catch words were remembered, and that the subjects used them to create the summary of the message. These words seemed to be *czerní*, *kolory* and *doskonałość* (*blackness*, *colours* and *perfectness*). In connection with the pictorial images, they created a significantly uniform message in the minds of the recipients.

The most problematic slogan was used by the advertisers of *Nissan Micra*. There were at least three major difficulties related to its recall and interpretation. The first one appears to be the complicated graphic form: the main slogan uses a mixture of linguistic and pictorial encoding. It reads *I  Saint Tropez*. The little red car after the pronoun is a symbol requiring two-level processing. Initially, the viewer should associate the construction of the phrase with the pattern *I ♥ X* and reinterpret it as

*I ♥ Saint Tropez*, which is only one step away from *I love Saint Tropez*. The first step is more difficult to make, that is why it is prompted both by the construction of the phrase and by the colour of the car. In spite of that, there were as many as 6 respondents (10%) who did not understand or could not report the main slogan. The second potential problem was the significance of *Saint Tropez* and reconstruction of the advertiser's intentions in evoking it. There were many subjects who associated *Saint Tropez* with Louis de Funès and the famous comedy series with the Saint Tropez cop. Such associations obscured the connections of the town with the advertised commodity and as a result many subjects had problems with stating what *Saint Tropez* had to do with *Nissan Micra*. Some others connected *Saint Tropez* with the French Riviera and a popular holiday spot. In this context the relationship with the advertised car was still difficult to establish. Only those for whom *Saint Tropez* symbolized a small city with many narrow streets and hardly any place to park were able to decipher the advertiser's intentions. This was easier for those respondents who have overcome the third potential difficulty in form of the division of the slogan into the main part and the less conspicuous one which read *miasta są stworzone dla Micry* (*cities/towns are created for Micra*). The second part of the slogan was not noticed by everyone, since it was written in a much smaller font, compared to the first one, and in a colour not so vividly contrasting with the background. Only 55% of the subjects were able to formulate the reading intended by the advertiser: *I love small towns such as Saint Tropez because I can easily drive my Nissan Micra through their narrow streets and park everywhere I need*. The slogan did not render impressive recall, either, when both parts are taken into consideration (45%).

#### 4.3. Salient information

Since the slogans allegedly encode the most important information and they are considerably foregrounded against the remaining elements of the commercial, much of the salient informational content is already communicated through them. In this section the discussion will be concentrated on information absorbed by the recipients from elements other than slogan, since the slogan content has been already presented above.

The most conspicuous observation was that the essential part of the respondents' informational input was derived from the pictorial elements in the ads. It comes as no surprise, as the subjects had too little time to read much beyond the slogans. Thus, when describing the cars, for example, the majority focused on the features which were presented in the pictures. *Honda Civic* was perceived as a car interestingly designed, with unique headlights, offering comfortable driving experience. Not many subjects reported the information included in the text, that the car was equipped with a powerful engine (13%) and hi-tech safety devices (13%). Likewise, when describing *Nissan Micra*, the respondents focused on the fact that the car was small and easy to park, that it was available in a convertible version and that it was comfortable. Only 7% noticed that the car was described as spacious and equipped with air-conditioning.

For the viewers of *Lipton Green Tea* advertisement the most conspicuous information was that the tea was available in newly designed teabags. Only about 40%



noticed the information in the text that the tea had mild taste, and 13 % remembered that there was some sweet-tasting ingredient. There was also a recurring comment that the tea seemed interesting, but that the respondents would not consider it a regular component of their everyday diet. The majority (70%), however, were eager to try the new product out.

The *Samsung LCD TV* advertisement was not textually overloaded, and the information included in the body copy was quite successfully recalled, with about 80% of respondents reporting the high quality, attractive design and fantastic colours reproduced by the device. Many subjects added to this list also the flat screen and good contrast, which was clearly derived from the photograph.

The *L'Oréal* advertisement posed the greatest problem in the context of the issues discussed here. This was the result of informational overload experienced by the viewers. The body copy itself was relatively long, and the pictorial elements did not render the recall any easier. There were too many products presented in the commercial for the viewers to be able to distinguish them. Some of them were identified more successfully, some less. It is impossible to evaluate the contribution of the textual information to proper recall, but given the exposure period it seems unlikely that the subjects had enough time to read much of the body copy. In this situation the most consistently recurring comments were related to such issues as the use of French on the product labels, which was associated with high quality, and the impression of affluence and prosperity derived from the photograph.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of the responses gathered by means of the interview rendered a collection of interesting conclusions pertaining to the processes governing the mental processing of advertising messages and the construction of feedback meanings in the minds of the viewers. It turned out, for example, that contrary to the mental processing of disadvantageous information and disclaimers (Wojtaszek, 2007b), the processing of slogans and major stimuli for associative connotations exhibits higher variability, although the differences were not as significant as expected. It seems that the advertisers are quite successful in guiding the reading of the commercials in such a way that the reception is highly unanimous. Even when there were certain differences in interpretation of details, the overall impression tended to be positive.

In situations of short exposure times available for the viewers, the visual stimuli play an important role in the interpretation of the message which is encoded linguistically. This speaks for the special care which needs to be taken by advertisers in the process of designing commercials. In many situations the visual elements, in connection with the slogans, will be the only carriers of the information communicated to the viewers, because they will not have enough time to familiarize themselves with the entire text. There are, however, certain dangers connected with it: too heavy stress placed on the graphic illustration or insufficient foregrounding of the brand name may



lead to lower than expected brand recognition in the viewers, which may translate into detrimental ultimate effect on the sales (e.g. *Nissan*).

It seems that the advertisers were also quite successful in ensuring the proper interpretation of the main message included in the slogans. Even when the respondents were not able to recall the exact wording, the keywords remained in the viewers' memory and were reported in the way most advantageous for the advertisers. The only problematic commercial in this respect (*Nissan Micra*) could be classified as an exception from the rule.

Finally, the last conclusion pertains to the instrument used in the study. Interview appears to be a very informative, but at the same time a very demanding research tool. The information gathered by means of this instrument allows for in-depth interpretation of the findings, on the other hand, however, it constitutes a considerable challenge for attempts at neat categorization of the data. Some of the numerical results are not direct, but have to be derived from reflective estimations on the part of the researcher. In this context many percentages reported in the present study should be treated as rough approximations, rather than absolute figures.

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