

# Idioethnic Features of Multimodal Advertising Texts: a Case Study of Coffee Commercials

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*The article considers the issues of multimodal advertising texts. Advertising being a universal means of cross-cultural communication, the purpose of the research is to determine the idioethnic features of multimodal advertising texts effective for the cross-cultural perception. To achieve the aim, the extended repertoire of research techniques has been used. The methodological basis of our research is the principle of multimodality. Multimodal advertising text combines the following non-homogeneous modes: a verbal (text, slogan) mode, a visual (gestures, symbols, signs, artifacts, and colors) mode, and an audial (jingle, sound logo) mode. Properly combined, these modes create the exact social and cultural effect needed to convince the consumers. The balance of the modes of a multimodal text depends on the cultural and linguistic background, as well as on the attitude towards the advertised product. Commercials of coffee brands were the material for the research. The verbal, visual, and audial modes of each advertising text selected by the multichannel method of collecting material have been analyzed. Such data collection is optimal for this research subject. The research results prove the fact that to make a pragmatic influence, advertising texts should contain verbal and non-verbal modes. The most effective are creative multimodal advertising texts that appeal to the national and cultural background of the target group, carry encoded idioethnic information, and preserve the traditions and customs of the nation. In a cross-cultural context, a verbal mode is difficult to interpret. Non-verbal modes, visual artifacts, in particular, are easier perceived and interpreted by the representatives of different lingo-cultural groups.*

**Keywords:** *cross-cultural communication, multimodal advertising texts, idioethnic features, verbal mode, visual mode, audial mode.*

## 1 Introduction

“Communication may be defined as the transmission across space or time of a patterned material or energy structure from a sender to a receiver, for both of whom the structure is meaningful” (Barham 1996: 235). At different stages of history, people found forms of communication that would correspond to their level of development and the peculiarities of the country. As a social process, communication forms society as a whole and performs the function of bringing together individuals or groups of participants in this process (Yartseva 2002: 233). Verbal communication is not the only form; another ‘dimension’ is non-verbal communication. Non-verbal messages are transmitted through non-verbal means of communication, which include paralinguage, gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact, communication objects, and artifacts such as clothing, hair, architecture, and symbols. Time and space are also non-verbal codes we can perceive and interpret.

Communication, regardless of its form, can occur between representatives of the same socio-cultural environment, as well as between people of different origins. Each participant in a communication act can interpret the language spoken by the others based on their lingo-cultural preferences and expectations (Trager et al 1954: 139). Cross-cultural, intercultural, or

multicultural communication is the process of communication and interaction between representatives of different cultures and cultural communities (Sadokhin 2004: 277). Each culture has its logic, its view of the world. What matters in one culture, can be considered irrelevant in another culture. Therefore, it is always important to respect your communication partner from a different culture. Your respect for him should not be based only on your interest but also on your awareness of some peculiarities of his country's life (Pocheptsov 2001: 601). Thus, communication between cultures requires caution, since not only a verbal component can be incorrectly translated; wrong interpretation of a non-verbal part of communication can lead to some failures or the failure of the entire communication act. Norms and rules of non-verbal behavior vary depending on the culture of origin (Golovleva 2008: 54).

Advertising can be considered a universal means of communication across nations. It has a huge cultural potential that can affect an individual, as well as society as a whole. To some extent, advertising speaks the language of the brand being advertised. According to Geoffrey Nunberg, "the great brands don't belong to any single language - they're part of a new global tongue, the Esperanto of the check-out stand. You may not know how to say "soft drink" or "athletic shoe" in Italian, but nowadays you can always get by in Rome by asking for a Coca-Cola or Nikes. From an international point of view, those are the real common nouns now. We're all drawn together under the international lingua branda, with only our separate verbs to keep us apart" (Nunberg 2009: 189). Advertising is creative, aims to entice and entertain the consumer, and is primarily associated with the selection of linguistic means, which are most suitable for the implementation of communicative goals (Movchan et al. 2017: 111). Advertising is also a carrier of multimodal texts, whose non-verbal component is the most difficult to interpret. Commercials (short advertising films) are a syncretic combination of verbal, visual, and audial modes.

Thus, the general aim of our research is to analyze multimodal advertising texts to determine idioethnic features effective for cross-cultural perception; the partial aim of our investigation is to identify verbal and non-verbal modes of multimodal advertising texts that interact to create a pragmatic impact in the process of brand communication with the target audience of consumers. We set forth the following tasks:

- 1) compile a corpus of commercials of coffee brands from different countries;
- 2) determine the verbal and non-verbal modes of each commercial;
- 3) analyze the elements of the modes;
- 4) identify idioethnic features of the advertising texts;
- 5) give comparative characteristics of the multimodal advertising texts under research.

## **2 Material and methods**

Taking into account a heterogenic nature of multimodal advertising texts, which is expressed in a combination of different semiotic resources: verbal, visual, and audial, we believe that multimodal analysis is the most effective tool for its research. Thus, the methodological basis of our research is the principle of multimodality. We see the expediency of the multimodal approach of analyzing advertising texts in studying characteristic features, ways, and means of their lingual and extra-lingual expression and the impact on the attitude formation of the potential consumer audience to the brand (product) being advertised.

Commercials of coffee brands were the material for the research. The study is based

on a corpus of 150 commercials of coffee brands in the UK, the USA, Canada (*Caffè Nero, Costa Coffee, Eight O'clock coffee, Folgers, Tim Horton's, Starbucks, etc.*), Ukraine (*Chorna Karta, Coffee from Lviv, Halka*) and the countries of the Middle East (*Ally Coffee, Overdose, Zaheb*). The material was selected by a continuous sampling method. The verbal, visual, and audial modes of each advertising text, selected from the official websites of coffee companies, official brand pages on *Facebook* and *Instagram* social networks, and *YouTube* video hosting were analyzed. The multichannel method of collecting material is optimal for this research subject since brand communications involve the integrated use of verbal and non-verbal elements. The choice of such research material gives us grounds to take into account both lingual and extra-lingual plans and involves the use of a multimodal approach to its analysis, which allows us to analyze communication as a unity of verbal and non-verbal elements.

There are several reasons we resorted to coffee brands. First, coffee is the second commodity in the world after oil. Therefore, advertising and promotion of the domestic coffee brands are of the top priorities in the countries either growing or producing coffee. Second, the attitude to coffee in different countries varies due to the history of the country, as well as to the history of coffee and the development of coffee culture in the country.

An integrated approach to the study of multimodal advertising texts has led to the choice of general methods (induction, deduction, hypothesis, analysis, synthesis, taxonomy, comparison, etc.) as well as purely linguistic ones, due to the need to study the interaction of verbal and non-verbal components of advertising texts.

The major linguistic methods we applied are the method of abstract analysis – for analytical processing of theoretical sources; identifying and highlighting the main areas of advertising research, research in cross-cultural communication and multimodality; the correlation method – to establish correlation and interdependence between lingual and extra-lingual phenomena; the method of contextual analysis – to study the extra-language factors that affect the specificity of cross-cultural advertising, to describe their functioning in context; the multimodal approach – to consider the features of different semiotic resources engaged in advertising texts.

### **3 Presentation of the main research material**

In our opinion, a universal means of cross-cultural communication is advertising. Advertising is a type of mass communication in which informative, expressive, and subjective texts are created and distributed, addressed to a group of people to encourage them to make a certain choice or act (Golovleva 2003: 7). Advertising provides us with information about identical products and services in all countries. Advertising, as one of the types of nonfiction style, has recently become an important social and ethical element of public life and belongs to the most important types of communication (Kochan 2008: 352).

#### *3.1 Multimodal features of advertising*

In terms of sociolinguistics, advertising is a valuable phenomenon as it is a carrier of multimodal texts, which non-verbal component is the most difficult to interpret. A multimodal text is a text that consists of two nonhomogeneous parts: verbal

(speech/language) and non-verbal (belonging to other sign systems, rather than natural language) (Sorokin & Tarasov 1990: 180).

In the light of the theory of multimodality, the term 'multimodal text' has many synonyms: video-verbal text, lingo-visual text, visually dependent text, isoverbal complex, transmedia text, paralinguistically active text, hybrid text, inter-medial (poly-medial) text, heterogeneous ( inhomogeneous) text, impulsively inhomogeneous, semiotically complex text (inter-semiotic), communicant, poly-code text and the most widely used term - creolized text. There are also such terms as syncretic text, iconic text, fenestration, contaminated text, semiotically enriched text, semantically complicated, multichannel, verbal-pictorial synthesis, syncretic message (Lylio 2015: 369). Creolized (poly-code, multimodal) texts differ in the number of interacting sign systems. Among the most complex are cinematic musicals, which are syncretic phenomena that combine audio and visual semiotic means (Shevchenko 2017: 197). Commercials (advertisements, ads, adverts) can be related to such cinematic musicals.

A multimodal text is a synthesis of modes – semiotic resources of different nature. Modules are not autonomous and permanent; they are formed through social processes; they are mobile and changeable. Modules are not universal; they are specific to a particular environment where there is a shared understanding of their semiotic characteristics (Ushchapovska 2017: 126). A verbal mode of the multimodal advertising texts contains a certain code (language), and native speakers of this language possess the code. Non-verbal signs do not belong to any code; they are universal and therefore poly-semantic (Bateman 2014).

### *3.2 Idioethnic issues of international advertising*

Every society has its approach to interpreting different codes. That is, the same visual information may be perceived differently in countries with different cultural and national backgrounds. A verbal text stops the chain of ambiguity. In practice, we still read the image first, not the text that forms it; the role of the text ultimately comes to what makes us choose one of the possible meanings (Pocheptsov 2001: 68). However, everything changes when a multimodal text is perceived in a different linguistic and cultural environment.

International advertising is undergoing intense changes, with the development of international relations, international marketing structures, and transnational corporations. In advertising, the world practice should be integrated as a whole, and at the same time, fundamental cultural principles should be preserved and respected. Modern society is characterized by an increase in national or ethnic consciousness as opposed to modern global communications. Namely, an ethnic group is a bearer of the language (verbal and non-verbal), the culture that originates from the historical past, and the modern traditions of the country. Therefore, the importance and the very existence of cross-cultural differences should not be ignored.

Advertising has a huge cultural potential that can affect an individual, as well as society as a whole. However, this activity is interactive: in its turn, advertising should reflect national and cultural features of a particular society. Almost all advertising promotes national character, even when the same product is advertised in different countries. Advertising is a mirror of the country. The most effective advertising campaigns include facial expressions, nuances, and other specializations of the area. Therefore, the importance of advertising cannot be discussed (Tungate 2013).

Most non-verbal codes are subconscious. Like the language itself, many non-verbal codes are perceived and interpreted depending on the culture of origin (Ushchapovska 2016: 171). They are inherent in the national identity – idioethnicity (Greek, *idios* ‘own, special, original’, and *ethnos* ‘people’). Comparative studies of non-verbal behavior by representatives of different cultures and ethnic groups suggest that one must abandon naive ideas about the universality of non-verbal components of emotions, feelings, attitudes, and treat non-verbal patterns as the formations of dynamic social and cultural influences (Makhnii 2009: 3). National and cultural factors have a significant impact on the elements of the language code, non-verbal components of communication, as well as on the ratio of verbal and non-verbal components (Batsevych 2009: 278).

Neglecting national and cultural characteristics, history, the mentality of the people of another country, and the specificity of cross-cultural communications greatly reduces the effectiveness of the advertising campaign and may lead to the failure. The same mistakes can occur while adapting non-verbal elements of multimodal advertising texts since the visual or symbolic culture of each nation is specific and authentic. Advertising text adaptation is not just a translation of words; it is also a translation of ideas. It is necessary to translate the spirit and context of the advertising appeal. Before creating an advertisement for the consumers of another cultural and linguistic background, one should acquire information about traditions, customs, and norms of behavior in this environment.

Cultural differences, different social and economic development and standard of living, consumer mentality, customs, and even household habits of different countries lead to a different perception of native and non-native advertising. Advertising is often just an outward display of the culture (Golovleva 2003: 113). In times of globalization, every country tries to preserve its national culture and a unique character. These factors find their manifestation in advertising. The most interesting advertisement is the one that uses its national peculiarities.

### 3.3 *A case study of coffee commercials*

A commercial promotes a certain brand, presents the cultural and material values of the country, and shows actual problems of society. Being a multimodal advertising text, it combines the following non-homogeneous semiotic resources: a verbal (text, slogan) mode, a visual (gestures, symbols, signs, and colors) mode, and an audial (jingle, sound logo) mode. Properly combined, these modes create the exact social and cultural effect needed to convince recipient consumers. The balance of the modes of an advertising text depends on the cultural and linguistic background, as well as on the attitude towards the advertised product in general.

We studied commercials from different countries to determine similar and different features of verbal and non-verbal modes to be perceived and interpreted by various lingo-cultural groups. Consider the advertising of English-speaking countries first. We start with the USA advertising. The United States is the leader in the global advertising industry. It is a land of copywriters and well-known catchy slogans. In the USA, advertising equals life itself (Golovleva 2003: 131). To some extent, advertising has become a way of life and coffee has become a national drink. *Starbucks* coffee commercial (Figure 1) we chose for the analysis depicts Christmas time.





Figure 1: Starbucks Flies the Holiday Snowflakes

A visual mode presents the green-grey background creating a calm and friendly atmosphere; American architecture not to be confused with any other; people with paper cups of coffee are flying paper snowflakes. To emphasize that the USA is a multicultural nation, people of different ages, genders, and racial backgrounds are featured. An audial mode naturally adheres to this composition with a light jingle *Snow days*. The combination of modes creates an atmosphere of relaxation and the anticipation of a coming holiday. A verbal mode of this multimodal verbal-visual-audial text contains a two-sentence slogan: *You know when the holidays are here. Share in the taste of the season*. The slogan is presented orally and in a written form. An entire multimodal composition is very harmonious and its parts are interconnected. The commercial delivers a clear message – one nation united by one idea; and the object of advertising – *Starbucks coffee* – is what unites this nation during these festive days.

Another example we considered is *Tim Horton's* – a *Canadian* coffee brand (Figure 2) commercial focused at Japanese consumers. This commercial is a combination of the Canadian national game of ice hockey and elements of Japanese culture. Japan is a country that combines technological progress with the conservatism of traditional society. In advertising, the Japanese are more symbolic than the Americans are. It is not the result that matters, but the process of transmitting the information. An advertised object is behind the scenes of the events that take place. Each commercial is a small movie (Colovleva 2003: 141). It is also worth noting that Japan is the country that imports the most expensive and popular varieties of coffee, such as *Copi Luwak* coffee. Coffee is a popular and prestigious beverage there.



Figure 2: Tim Horton's True Stories: Proud Fathers

This commercial is a story of three generations of one family: a grandfather, a son, and a grandson. The father feels guilty for not allowing his son to play hockey when he was a child, forcing him to study instead. Now, he attends the games of his grandson. The visual mode of this text is predominant. It presents movements, gait, postures, looks, the background is not bright with depressive monochromatic colors – everything indicates deep reflections and emotional experiences. The audial mode is a barely noticeable background and nothing disturbs a spectator from the ongoing events. Coffee is always present in the video as an advertising object; however, it is not the center, but rather the background of this story. A verbal mode, a *Tim Horton's* tagline *Every cup tells a story*, is the summary of the entire multimodal advertising text. The tagline is presented in a written form.

The next commercial under analysis is of *the United Kingdom*. Advertising of England is not only a tool of commerce but also an original form of art. The commercials are small plays (Golovleva 2003: 137). As for the coffee, this drink has never become more popular than tea, but it has a stable position in the consumer market and a long sometimes-contradictive history. As an example of English advertising, we have taken the *Costa Coffee* brand (Figure 3) commercial.



Figure 3: Costa coffee advert – monkeys and typewriters

The advertising is based on the theory: if a monkey is given a typewriter, eventually, it would be able to print one of Shakespeare's plays by hitting the typewriter's keys. The idea of this advertising is whether monkeys can brew 'real coffee'. Exploring the coffee machines, monkeys made a complete mess and destroyed everything, because 'real coffee' is not just a result of an accident or coincidence. The modes of this advertising text are interconnected. A visual mode is quite contrasting: on a deep dark background, there are light and bright colors. An audial mode is expressed by Strauss's classical work. The music produces a great effect because of the mixture of loud and quiet sounds. A verbal mode is presented by a text about the monkeys and a typewriter. The slogan of this commercial is *Not all coffees are created equal* meaning that real coffee is a result of hard professional work. The slogan summarizes the main message: *Coffee is created in a particular professional way*. Coffee, as an object, is present in various states from beans to ground coffee and ready-to-drink beverages. The commercial is creative with an unusual and even funny plot. To our view, it bears a specific English sense of humor.

Having analyzed the commercials of English-speaking countries, we can conclude that they contain some idioethnic codes, which are easy to perceive and interpret in the English-speaking cultures. They are: chronemics – the commercials are short and informative, every second is a new action; visual codes are also clear – colors, artifacts (coffee beans, coffee cups, coffee machines) are easy to interpret and exactly identify the advertised object; a verbal mode (a tag-line, a slogan, and an advertising text) is perceived and interpreted within English-speaking language group. However, if these commercials are presented for other lingo-cultural groups, a verbal mode would be hard to interpret. Thus, the goal of a commercial would be partially achieved: the advertised object is perceived but the values, which are verbally expressed, would be not be interpreted and the main idea would be unrevealed.

Next, we consider advertising of the Middle Eastern countries. The word *coffee* is derived from the Turkish word *kahveh*, which is rooted in the Arabic word for *qahwah*, mean-



ing wine, ('that which excites and causes the spirits to rise'). It became a popular substitute for alcoholic beverages that were forbidden under strict Muslim religious law. It moved from the sacred to the secular world" (Topic et al 2014: 6). Nowadays, coffee in these countries is a traditional beverage.

A commercial of the *Zaheb* coffee brand (Figure 4), an exclusive coffee brand in Saudi Arabia, is analyzed.



Figure 4: افضل قصيده عن القهوه

A visual mode of this multimodal text is a slideshow with national symbols and artifacts: national clothing (women's Hijab and men's attire), national architecture (minarets and bazaars), and tableware with cooking facilities for making authentic Arab coffee. Everything identifies national and cultural roots. An audial mode is also rather specific – it is folk music. A verbal mode is represented orally – a poem about coffee, which sounds in an Arabic manner, like a surah from the Koran, and in writing – a printed text in the Arabic language, which contains the poem and the information about the advertised coffee. There is no tag line or slogan. The only advertising elements are a visual-verbal logo presented in both Arabic and English, the telephone, and the address of the brand website (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Visual elements of Zaheb coffee commercial

We can conclude that this advertising is focused on Arabic-speaking consumers. The advertising text is harmonious, though it can be interpreted only by the representatives of the given language group. Unlike the previous examples, this commercial cannot be adapted for the cross-cultural perception. Its adaptation is practically impossible due to the complexity of translation of the advertising text, as well as due to the idioethnic code. The perception on time is typical polychromous: the movements are slow; every slide accompanied by the verse takes several seconds. The visual mode can be partially interpreted, as some idioethnic codes (architecture, clothing, as well as some coffee tools) are quite unfamiliar for the recipients of other cultural backgrounds. The only elements that could be perceived across cultures are visual – graphics (the brand name in English) and the coffee artifacts (coffee beans, coffee cups), which identify the advertised product.

Finally, we consider a Ukrainian coffee commercial (Figure 6).



Figure 6: ClipsVideoFile\_1.mpeg

Coffee, which was brought to Ukraine long ago, has a rather interesting and ambiguous history. In the Ukrainian consumer market, coffee is the product of growing demand. Ukrainian coffee culture is still being formed as a complex mixture of traditions from different countries. The *Halka* coffee brand commercial is analyzed. This multimodal advertising text is an animation (based on the well-known cartoon about three Cossacks), which is quite clear and nationally oriented. A visual mode contains clear codes as opposed to a photo or a video series. The colors are bright and vivid. An audio mode is in line with Ukrainian national traditions, adding spirit and movability. A verbal mode of this advertising text contains only keywords in Ukrainian, such as *coffee*, *Halka*, *Lviv* which identify the product, the brand name, and the city of origin. The tagline presented orally in Ukrainian combines these words into *Halka is the original coffee from Lviv*.

The analyzed commercial is focused on Ukrainian-speaking consumers. Idioethnic codes (national costumes, traditional haircuts, images of Cossacks) are hard to perceive and interpret by different cultural groups. The verbal mode (presented in Ukrainian) limits the perception of the commercial beyond the Ukrainian national language environment. Some visual artifacts (coffee beans, coffee sacks, and coffee packages) facilitate the perception of the advertised product, though, the brand mission and the values are not interpreted.

#### 4. Conclusions and perspectives

Thus, having analyzed multimodal advertising texts from different countries, we can conclude that effective advertising texts contain different modes (verbal and non-verbal), which are combined to produce a pragmatic influence on the target audience. Clear national and cultural features of domestic, as well as international advertising, adapted to a specific national and cultural consumer audience should be presented. Idioethnic codes should be clear and familiar to the national consumer; and the commercial should reflect the ethnic,

social, and cultural values of the lingo-cultural group. In a cross-cultural context, the perception of multimodal advertising texts containing idioethnic codes can be complicated or be a failure. Non-verbal modes are easier to perceive and interpret by different cultural groups. A visual mode containing artifacts of the advertised product is universal for the cross-cultural perception.

We see the prospects for further research in studying the convergence of verbal and non-verbal elements of multimodal advertising text.

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