

SEMIOTICS OF PRODUCT LABELING

YULIIA LUKIANOVA,

Sumy State University, Ukraine

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1005-5465>

Corresponding author: y.lukianova@gf.sumdu.edu.ua

Abstract. *This article examines the diversity of multimodality, that is, how different sign modes interact in texts. It highlights the importance of understanding the relationship between different modes of symbolic communication, especially in creating a connection between words and images.*

It examines how semiotics is closely related to visual communication and how it helps convey messages and engage the attention of an audience.

The article also considers the extension of semiotics beyond language and the importance of studying sign processes in a multimodal context. It outlines various theoretical approaches and concepts that help to understand the interaction of different types of signs.

Semiotics plays an important role in product labeling, where words and images are combined to convey meanings to consumers. Its importance in marketing strategies and understanding consumer behavior is also emphasized.

Keywords: *product labeling, semiotics, multimodality, brand packaging, semiotic resources, multimodal texts.*

Received: 18 May, 2024

Revised: 25 May, 2024

Accepted: 29 May, 2024

How to cite: Lukianova Y. (2024). Semiotics of Product Labeling. *Philological Treatises*, 16(1). [https://www.doi.org/10.21272/Ftrk.2024.16\(1\)-12](https://www.doi.org/10.21272/Ftrk.2024.16(1)-12)



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. For open-access publication within the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) (CC BY-NC)

СЕМІОТИКА МАРКУВАННЯ ТОВАРІВ

Лук'янова Юлія,

Сумський державний університет, Україна

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1005-5465>

Автор, відповідальний за листування: y.lukianova@gf.sumdu.edu.ua

Анотація. *Ця стаття вивчає різноманітність мультимодальності, тобто як різні знакові способи взаємодіють у текстах. Вона висвітлює важливість розуміння співвідношень між різними способами знакової комунікації, особливо у створенні зв'язку між словами та зображеннями.*

Досліджується, як семіотика тісно пов'язана з візуальною комунікацією та як вона допомагає передавати повідомлення та залучати увагу аудиторії.

Стаття також розглядає розширення семіотики за межі мови та важливість вивчення знакових процесів у мультимодальному контексті. Вона

© Lukianova Y., 2024

окреслює різні теоретичні підходи та поняття, які допомагають розуміти взаємодію різних видів знаків.

Семіотика виявляє свою важливу роль у маркуванні товарів, де поєднуються слова і зображення для передачі значень споживачам. Також підкреслюється її значення у стратегіях маркетингу та розумінні споживчої поведінки.

Ключові слова: маркування товарів, семіотика, мультимодальність, упаковка бренду, семіотичні модули, мультимодальні тексти.

Отримано: 18 травня 2024 р.

Отримано після доопрацювання: 25 травня 2024 р.

Затверджено: 29 травня 2024 р.

Як цитувати: Лукьянова Ю. (2024). Семіотика маркування товарів.

Філологічні трактати, 16(1). [https://www.doi.org/10.21272/Ftrk.2024.16\(1\)-12](https://www.doi.org/10.21272/Ftrk.2024.16(1)-12)

Introduction

Multimodality is an interdisciplinary approach that assumes that communication can take place not only with the help of natural language. Multimodality provides concepts, methods, and criteria for collecting and analyzing visual, auditory, symbolic, and spatial aspects of communication and society, as well as the relationships between them (Glossary).

Multimodality, a term borrowed from Kress' concept of modes (1997), refers to the combination of different types of modes, visual, sound, written, oral, spatial, etc., in human communication. Multimodality in advertising involves the use of different communication modes in one advertisement. For example, print advertising uses a combination of words, artwork, font, and color to send a message, and this mixing and matching of modalities represents multimodality. By conveying the messages and intentions of advertisers, these diverse but integrated modes operate interactively.

Materials and research methods

The material of the research is the texts placed on the packages (labels) of goods of English-language iHERB brands.

The main methods of linguistic research used in this work are the method of semantic analysis to study the semantic content of product labeling, structural elements of product labeling, non-verbal components of product labeling; the method of semiotic analysis to establish methods for integrating verbal and non-verbal means into the product labeling, to clarify the function of the image, color, and means of paragraphemics in the process of encoding and decoding information; the method of contextual analysis to study the impact of non-linguistic factors on the specifics of brand language implementation in a certain context.

Results of the research

While semiotic ideas on the nature of signs and meaning were developed in antiquity and the Middle Ages, a general theory of signs under the name of semiotics did not arise before the period of modern semiotics.

The major rival to the term *semiotics* has been *semiology*. For some time, these two terms used to be identified with the "two traditions" of semiotics (Sebeok, 1979: 63). The linguistic tradition from Saussure to Hjelmslev and Barthes was usually defined as *semiology*.

Within the framework of semiotics, scientists study signs as an integral part of the semiotic sign system (Eco 1984), that is, the properties of signs and communicative systems used in the process of communication are investigated. The science that studies any systems of signs used in human communities was formed thanks to the works of the American scientist C.S. Peirce, who proposed the name "semiotics" for it. Therefore, C. S. Peirce is considered one of the founders of modern semiotics.

Today, *semiotics* is generally accepted as a synonym of *semiology* or a more general term, including *semiology* as one of its branches. Semiotics deals with signs and how

they represent meaning, so it would seem in principle to be highly relevant to our research. deals with the signification of signs in all modes of signifying” (1970: 3

Benveniste (1969: 24143; 1974: 22425) opposes the semantic and the semiotic within general semiology (see also Malmberg, 1977: 19498 and Descombes, 1983: 14856). One is the domain of the system; the other is the domain of the text. Semiotics studies the sign as an element of the signifying system, “in the midst of a constellation or among an ensemble of signs.” Here, “the sign is pure identity itself, totally foreign to all other signs, the signifying foundation of language. [. . .] It exists when it is recognized as signifier by all members of a linguistic community, and when it calls forth for everyone roughly the same associations and oppositions” (Benveniste 1969: 242).

Semioticians have not yet agreed on a general typology of signs. The problem is only partly one of finding a common terminology. Partly it is also due to the multidimensionality of the criteria on which typologies of signs can be based. Some proposals for a typology of signs are an integral part of the semiotic theory of their authors.

Similar to Hjelmslev, Malmberg defines signs as those semiotic entities that are produced intentionally and are based on a system of double articulation (1977: 21). But in contradistinction to Hjelmslev, Malmberg opposes the sign to a different concept of symbol. To him, *symbol* is the general term for any semiotic entity representing something else (see also Eco, 1984: 18). Signs are thus a class of symbols.

Linguists have come to realize that language is neither the sole nor even the dominant sign system. Other sign systems such as gesture, images, graphics, and typography have been in use for centuries. Yet, they were marginalized by philosophic reflection and scientific research due to the influence of linguocentrism, the tendency of Western cultures to privilege language and downplay other sign systems and sign types. their environment.

Semiotics has traditionally investigated texts based on sign systems and their combined use (e.g. Saussure, 1916; Luccio, 1997; Nöth, 2000). Since the various sign systems used in multimodal texts are based on different sign types, media, and perceptual channels, their analysis is much more complex than that of monomodal texts. Semiotics has developed the means for describing many different aspects of these texts (an overview is given in Posner et al. 1997–2004), including uncoded sign processes with various degrees of intentionality (Posner, 1993).

In the last years, multimodal research has searched for new answers to this challenge. Currently, multimodality is investigating a range of theoretical approaches that concentrate on different aspects, problems, and text types, such as social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996), multimodal discourse analysis (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; O’Halloran, 2004; Royce & Bowcher, 2007; Bateman, 2011; Jewitt 2009, 2014), mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001; Norris, 2004; Norris & Maier ,2014), multimodal film analysis (Bateman & Schmidt, 2011; Piazza et al., 2011; Wildfeuer, 2012, 2014), and multimodal grammar (Fricke, 2012, 2013). In experimental psychology, the focus lies on the relation between various perceptual modes (Calvert et al., 2004). In conversation analysis, an approach has been developed that examines speech, gestures, facial expression, proxemics, and eye gaze behavior as part of embodied multimodal interactions between participants (Goodwin, 1981; Deppermann, 2010, 2014; Deppermann & Linke, 2014).

As a result, the socio-semiotic concept of multimodality deals with the ways in which the parties usually use it in their communication: visual, verbal, tactile, auditory, and olfactory. Thus, these methods interact and jointly form a complete message (Kress, 2003: 36; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 30–33). Kress defines multimodality as socially formed semiotic resources for the forming meaning (Kress, 2010: 79), which describes multichannel execution even in the simple act of ubiquitous conversation.

Before embarking on an investigation of intermodality, one basic terminological distinction should be made. There are two different meanings of “mode” that are currently in use:

(1) Multimodal texts and artifacts combine the use of various semiotic resources such as language, images, gestures, typography, graphics, icons, or sound. Used in this sense,

mode corresponds closely to the more traditional semiotic notions of “code” or “sign system”. Common misunderstandings about these terms should be avoided: sign systems are not simply sets of expression-meaning pairings. Such an understanding would be a grave misrepresentation of Saussure’s terminology, which stresses the fact that signifier and signified are substances only formed by the respective other dimensions. A sign system is rather a set of resources that often belong to a specific sign type and for which combination or application rules exist.

(2) Semiotic resources are transmitted via different perceptual modes (= sensory modes), namely visual, auditory, haptic, olfactory, and gustatory perception.

For multimodal research, understanding how semiotic resources work together in multimodal texts is of central importance. Although several approaches for describing and annotating relations between modes have been developed (Schriver, 1997; Royce, 1998; Oviatt, 1999; Marsh & White, 2003; Martinec & Salway, 2005; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Liu & O’Halloran, 2009; O’Halloran & Smith, 2011; Bateman, 2011, 2014), the mechanisms that underlie various types of relations between semiotic resources are still insufficiently explained. Current multimodal analyses often proceed either by concentrating on the separate semiotic resources or by assuming that meaning is produced by all modes together; the latter approach allows the analyst to focus on modes at will when explaining the overall meaning. Furthermore, interactions between expressions are often disregarded entirely.

In multimodal research, semiotic effects limited to one semiotic resource are sometimes called “intrasemiosis”, whereas relations between modes are termed “intersemiosis” or “intermodality” (cf. Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Wildfeuer, 2012, 2013).

A whole range of effects can be created by the interplay of semiotic resources, from general relations such as Similarity or Contrast, to more complex cases where the expression, meaning, or style of various modes interact.

Despite the original application of texture in language, as van Leeuwen (2000: 179) advocates, ‘semiotics should play off different semiotic modes against each other’. On the basic assumption of language as a social semiotic device (Halliday, 1978), it seems appropriate to employ Inter-semiotic Texture to identify the essential property of a multi-semiotic text. Following the definition of its linguistic counterpart (Hasan, 1985: 70-72), Inter-semiotic Texture refers to a matter of semantic relations between different modalities realized through Inter-semiotic Cohesive Devices in multimodal discourse. It is the crucial attribute of multi-semiotic texts that create an integration of words and pictures rather than a mere linkage between the two modes.

Forceville (1996: 73) suggests that images can anchor written text as well as vice versa and that the lines between anchoring and relaying are blurred. Furthermore, since more than two modes can interact in the formation of meaning, the concepts of anchoring and relaying deserve to be extended beyond word-image connections.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 177) suggest three principles of composition: Information Value, Saliency and Framing, which apply not just to single pictures, but also to multi-semiotic texts.

According to the teachings of F. de Saussure, language is a system of signs that expresses ideas, is a clearly defined object in a heterogeneous mass of speech facts, and can function in a limited segment of the speech chain, where images are connected with meanings. In his dual model of the sign, the scientist defined the sign as an interaction between the form chosen by the sign (signifier) and the meaning (signified). In language as a system of signs, their union, where both sides are psychological, is important (Saussure, 1986: 14-15).

Any system of signs consisting of a sign and a meaning is a semiotic or sign system. Each time we compose a secret code or a set of signals, our own notation system is created (Das, 2006: 8-9). According to C. Peirce, a “sign” is something that carries meaning for someone. The scientist believes that from the perspective of pragmatics, nothing is a sign

until it is used as such and interpreted by thinking and addressed to a certain consciousness (Pierce, 1998: 5).

A sign is a set of defined relationships between the three elements of “Pierce's triangle” (Cobley, 2001: 21). What is usually a sign in the everyday sense, C. Peirce calls a sign means (representamen). The sign method is that which interacts with its object, the second component of the sign. The third component of the sign is the interpretant, the method of conveying meaning or the effect of semiosis. In this context, the interpretant can be understood as the effect of the sign on the mind or on anything that acts as a mind, what Peirce calls the quasi-mind. The interpreter acts as a mediator between the sign and the object, strengthening the relationship between them, while in this way being in a relationship with them (Cobley, 2001: 28).

Semiotic analysis is an approach to the study of signs that exist in various forms: words, sounds, pictures, objects, gestures, smells, aromas, actions, etc. Semiotics investigates the meaning of signs, their use, and the formation of sign meanings both at the level of a single sign and at the level of sign systems. This is a qualitative approach to the study of the content of visual and/or verbal language, which helps to identify, understand, and interpret the main features, their interaction, and their systems as a process of creating meaning (Urboniene, 2016: 25).

Continuing the traditions of C. Peirce and F. de Saussure, C. Morris proved that the sign functions and is described in three dimensions (Morris, 1970). We consider it relevant to study the goods labeling in the following aspects:

1) Semantic (“sign - object”) - the connection of a sign with its meaning. Semantics is the study of the relationship between words and their meanings, or designations of things. The main issue of semantics is the meaning of words and other signs (Littlejohn, 2009: 585). We consider it expedient to conduct a structural and semantic analysis of the labeling (the sign “means” or “denotes”) and determine what each of its elements means.

2) Syntactic (“sign - sign”) - the interaction of signs within the labeling. The syntax is the study of relationships between signs, which in language means an emphasis on how sounds, words, and language structures are organized into larger semantic segments (Littlejohn, 2009: 586). Since labeling combines signs of different semiotic origins: verbal and non-verbal, it is important to investigate the convergence of marking elements (the sign “implies”);

3) Pragmatic (“sign - interpreter”) - the interaction of signs and the interpreter - the value of the sign from the point of view of the interpreter (the sign “expresses”) (Morris, 1970: 5–6). Morris's third category, pragmatics, goes beyond meaning to examine how language is used in human interaction. Pragmatics examines the higher levels of meaning: not only the meaning of words and sentences but also the intentions and goals that are the basis of the message and the attributes that are assigned to the intentions of others (Littlejohn, 2009: 586). It is necessary to investigate the functioning of goods labeling, that is, its pragmatics in various communicative situations.

Residing in academic research, mainly in disciplines such as linguistics, media studies, and sociology, the application of semiotics is taking off in the commercial world and providing enormous value in the area of brand packaging. More and more, the use of semiotics research is penetrating the sphere of packaging design, thus giving brands a tremendous head start in communicating their values, personality, and brand positioning to the market.

Consumers intuitively read and respond to the codes contained in brand communication, especially in brand packaging.

Understanding these semiotic codes and patterns of change does more than provide interesting historical dimensions. The codes create confident foundations for product labeling to be relevant, contemporary, and, above all else, appealing to consumers. By considering semiotics, a brand has a greater ability to pitch its labeling execution at exactly the right angle for consumers to read the desired message. For example, in this picture, we can easily read who these vitamins are intended for (*Fig. 1*).

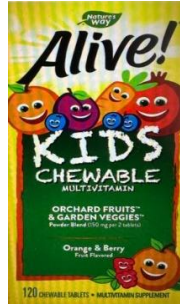


Fig. 1 Nature's Way Alive! Kids chewable multivitamin

Semiotics provides the framework for understanding the meanings and interpretations of signs and symbols within visuals, while visuals act as signs themselves, conveying messages and eliciting responses from viewers. By understanding and embracing this symbiotic relationship, visual communicators can create impactful and ethical visual messages that effectively engage audiences. Visual communication, on the other hand, refers to the use of visual elements such as images, colors, typography, and layout to convey information, ideas, and messages. It is a powerful tool that transcends language barriers and appeals to our visual senses.

The symbiotic relationship between semiotics and visual communication lies in their interconnectedness and mutual influence. Semiotics provides the theoretical framework for understanding the signs and symbols that are present in visual communication, while visual communication relies on semiotic principles to effectively convey meaning.

Despite not being able to offer us a movie or taste experience, packaging can do an amazing job of sealing the deal, by creating strong associations with something deep in our emotional memory.

(Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Smarty Pants Organics Kids Formula

Barth (1997: 32–51) anticipated the study of multimodality when he argued that a written text in a static discourse of words and images either draws attention to aspects of meaning that, although perhaps latently, are already present in the image it accompanies (that is, language anchors the image); or it represents information that complements the dimensions of meaning in the image (that is, the language conveys the image). In this picture, the language conveys the image *(Fig. 3)*.



Fig. 3 Naturelo Prenatal multivitamin

Product labeling can be considered a multimodal text because it consists of different elements such as text, graphics, symbols, colors, and other visual elements that interact with each other and between users. Goods labeling may include information on product name, manufacturer, composition, production date, expiration date, country of origin, and other important data that help the user make an informed choice when purchasing products. Marking can contain three elements: text, picture, and conventional designations or information signs. These constituent elements differ in the ratio and degree of availability of product information, the breadth of distribution, and various functions (Lukianova, 2022: 119).

The interest in semiotics is now spreading among brand developers, designers, advertisers, and packaging experts, making it worthwhile to take a closer look at what the semiotics research approach is all about.

All levels of language organization - from word to text - mark fragments of real reality, i.e. perform a semiotic function. The verbal component, which is a set of elements, should be studied under the semiotic function that the element performs in marking. Product labeling consists of signs of different semiotic systems: verbal and visual, which are equal elements of the text (Kovalchuk, 2015: 50).

The use of a functional-semantic approach to the study of the labeling text makes it possible to identify structures consisting of sentences in the form of description and narrative, which are built on a logical and semantic-grammatical basis.

If we take into account the volume of information that a person constantly receives, then the visual channel becomes the main one. The most important task of visual aids is to attract attention. It is considered an effective way to single out one element among others by any feature.

Visual means attract attention also because for people visual information is much more important for the perception of space than auditory or olfactory. What is important about visual structures is that they are more universal in nature than natural language statements, and therefore can be widely applied everywhere.

That is why the visual channel is so intensively exploited in advertising and when creating packaging. The structure of each goods labeling as an advertising message is created by certain combinations and transpositions of verbal and non-verbal components, their location relative to each other, and the possibility of passing this or that component. The semiotics of goods labeling involves a rigorous examination of signs, their meanings, and their effects on consumers. Researchers use various theoretical frameworks and methods to analyze how goods labels communicate information, create associations, and impact consumer behavior.

Semiotics, a field of study that focuses on how symbols and signs are used to communicate, has traditionally been associated with academic research in areas such as linguistics, media studies, and sociology. However, in recent times, the commercial world has realized the value of semiotics and its application in the area of brand packaging. By conducting semiotic research and incorporating its findings in packaging design, brands can effectively communicate their values, personality, and positioning to the market.

Conclusions

Product labeling is a unique system of signs that interact with each other and create a creative product – a “semiotic hybrid” of multimodal means. These tools can be verbal and non-verbal, and their use in product labeling requires new approaches and vectors of analysis of traditional linguistic concepts and phenomena that have undergone modifications in the information age.

Semiotics provides a toolkit for utilizing signs and symbols in terms of pack format (shape, size, texture), color, labeling, and copy. It can also help determine what enhances or detracts from the emergent expressions of a particular trait or ingredient and how this links back to what is emerging in society.

REFERENCES

- Kovalchuk, 2015 – Kovalchuk I. V. Verbalni ta neverbalni zasoby markuvannia tovariv u suchasnomu anhlomovnomu komunikatyvnomu prostori: dys. ... kand. filol. nauk: 10.02.04. K., 2015. 236 s.
- Lukianova, 2022 – Lukianova Yu. M. Markuvannia tovaru: vid mizhdystsyplinarykh do linhvistychnykh doslidzhen. Suchasni doslidzhennia z inozemnoi filolohii. 2022. 3-4. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32782/2617-3921.2022.21-22.114-130>.
- Barth, 1997 – Barthes, R. 'Rhetoric of the Image', in R. Barthes (ed.) *Image–Music–Text*. London: Fontana, pp. 32–51.
- Benveniste, 1969 – Benveniste E. The semiology of language. In Innis, Robert E., ed., *Semiotics*. Bloomington: <https://doi.org/10.32782/2617-3921.2022.21-22.114-130>.
- Barth, 1997 – Barthes, R. 'Rhetoric of the Image', in R. Barthes (ed.) *Image–Music–Text*. London: Fontana, pp. 32–51.
- Benveniste, 1969 – Benveniste E. The semiology of language. In Innis, Robert E., ed., *Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, pp. 22646.
- Benveniste, 1974 – Benveniste E. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard.
- Cobley, 2001 – Cobley P. (Ed.) (2001) *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics* / Ed. P. Cobley. London; New York: Routledge.
- Das, 2006 – Das L. Lecture notes on language and communication. Guwahati: Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. Indian Institutes of Technology.
- Descombes, 1983 – Descombes V. *Objects of All Sorts*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Eco, 1984 – Eco U. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press.
- Forceville, 1996 – Forceville C. *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. London: Routledge.
- Glossary – Glossary of multimodal terms. Available at: <https://multimodalityglossary.wordpress.com/>
- Hasan, 1985 – Hasan, R. The texture of a text. In Halliday and Hasan.
- Kress, 1997 – Kress, Gunther Before Writing: Rethinking the Paths to Literacy. London: Routledge.
- Kress, 2003 – Literacy in the new media age. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kress, 2010 – Kress, G. Multimodality. A semiotic approach to contemporary communication. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006 – Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd edition). London: Routledge.
- Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001 – Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. *Multimodal Discourse*. London: Arnold.
- Littlejohn, 2009 – Littlejohn S.W. (Eds) *Encyclopedia of communication theory* / Editors: S. W. Littlejohn, K. A. Foss. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Malmberg, 1977 – Malmberg B. *Signes et symboles*. Paris: Picard.
- Morris, 1938 Morris, Charles W. *Foundations of the Theory of Signs*. Chicago: Univ. Press (= Foundations of the Unity of Science: Towards an International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, vol. 1.2).
- Morris, 1970 – Morris, Charles W. Signs, Language, and Behavior. In Morris, C. W., *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*, pp. 73398. The Hague: Mouton.
- Pierce, 1998 – Pierce C. S. The Essential Pierce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol. 2 (1893-1913), edit. by the Peirce Edition Project. Indiana University Press.
- Royce, 2007 – Royce, T. Intersemiotic complementarity: A framework for multimodal discourse analysis. In *New directions in the analysis of multimodal discourse*, eds. Terry D. Royce and Wendy L. Bowcher, 63-109. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Saussure, 1986 –Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Harris, Roy. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court.
- Sebeok, 1979 – Sebeok T. *The Sign and Its Masters*. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press.
- Urboniene, 2016 – Urboniene A. Storytelling in Country Branding: A Semiotic Approach. *International Journal on Global Business Management and Research*. Vol 5., No. 2. P. 17–30.
- van Leeuwen, 2000 – van Leeuwen, T. Some notes on visual semiotics. *Semiotica* 129, nos.1-4: 179-195.