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Identity and the emergence of South African advertising *esperanto*: an interdisciplinary approach to multilingualism and the visual in advertising and information copy

A*BSTRACT*

There is no formal regulation of language use in the advertising industry to correspond to the declared commitment to multilingualism in the South African Constitution. A trend in television advertising, where language diversity, translation, and/or reconceptualisation are circumvented by conceptualising a visual message devoid of voice-over, is the subject of this article. The purpose is to consider the extent to which this practice undermines or contributes to the perception of a homogeneous marketplace and advertising language/esperanto. Visual texts provide a rich alternative, but carry the inherent burden of the intermingling of text and subtext not conveyed by means of language. The suggestion is that this global homogenising trend for target audiences, developed in advertising copy, has since transcended advertising parameters to include all kinds of copy. Language as marker of culture is being written out of the definition of cultural specificity as one of the primary means of identifying target audience. By merging their expertise in critical linguistics, document design and cultural and media studies, the authors offer qualitative and quantitative data in support of their argument.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1983, Theodore Levitt (1983:92-93) announced the advent of globalisation in the marketplace in his seminal article in *Harvard Business Review*, "The globalization of markets":

> The globalization of markets is at hand…The multinational and the global corporation are not the same thing. The multinational corporation operates in a number of countries, and adjusts its products and practices in each – at high relative costs. The global corporation operates with resolute constancy – at low relative cost – as if the entire world (or major regions of it) were a single entity; it sells the same things in the same way everywhere.

The authors set out to explore the possibilities of a multi-disciplinary approach to the assumption of a monolingual, globalised South African marketplace, where English is seen to predominate. Of particular interest was the evident move in favour of language – absent television advertising copy that seemed to circumvent or avoid the demands of multilingualism in a country with eleven official languages. In our preliminary survey of the literature, we soon discovered that this trend had transcended advertising copy to pervade information copy, presumably in the interests of guaranteeing access to the semi-literate and illiterate constituency of the population (Gangirir, 2005:111) or to save on the expenses of multiple translations.[1] Our purpose was to combine our specialisations in media and culture studies, critical linguistics, and document design[2] in order

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[1] The average literacy rate in South Africa for males in 2000, was 86% and for females, 85%, according to Unicef's education assessment of 2000. "Adult literacy rate" is here defined as, "percentage of persons aged 15 and over who can read and write" (Unicef, 2005). There is therefore evident discordance between the perceived high illiteracy rate and the reality.

[2] Critical linguistics provided the theoretical underpinning of a general hermeneutics of suspicion as to advertising and information copy, especially in the matter of critical language awareness (see Fairclough, 1992). Critical linguistics differs from stylistics in that it does not concern itself exclusively with literary texts, but that it extends the critical eye to include any kind of text. No language is considered neutral, objective or value-free. In fact, language is believed to reproduce ideology and may therefore be inextricably tied to the socio-political context in which it functions (Simpson, 1993:1-10). We should like to take this argument one step further by also arguing that the choice of language in text or the absenting of verbal language in favour of visual language in text is also ideologically driven. And that the collective and individual persona of the encoder of message may be in conflict, as Fowler and Kress (1979:196) proclaimed in their groundbreaking article on critical linguistics: "We suspect that often people do not consciously recognize the purposes they encode in language, and that the aims which they mediate in their 'professional capacities' may not coincide with their beliefs and sympathies. … So the resistance which critical linguistics offers to mystificatory tendencies in language is not resistance to language itself, nor to individual users of language, but to the social processes which make language work in communication as it does. It is a critique of the structures and goals of a society which impregnated its language with social meanings many of which we regard as negative, dehumanizing and restrictive in their effects." In this article our concern is with the socially constructed meanings imbedded in the choices made to avoid multilingualism in advertising and information copy.

Document design (otherwise referred to as "information design", "communications design", etc.) stems from a post World War II concern with the interface between reader and text and effective transfer of information: "… document designers are devoted to solving practical problems of organizational communication," (Hunter, 2000/2001:28-29). Document design fuses art and science (Schriver, 1997:11): "The science of document design involves judging 'what works' by assessing documents in the context of their use by the people expected to use them. … Document design, then, is not characterized by genres or subject matters, but by the ways its practitioners envision the reader as an active participant and major stakeholder in the design and evaluation of documents." It is this particular emphasis on the audience and the explicit recognition of the visual as language that particularly interested us for the purposes of this study.

to provide a multidisciplinary approach to the research problem at hand, hence crossing the apparent divide between qualitative and quantitative research approaches.

Our concern is that verbally devoid advertisements seem to pander to a worrying global trend towards cultural prescriptivism and what Naomi Klein (2000:21) terms the "spiritual homogenisation of the target audience". This results from a previous collaboration on multilingualism in the South African advertising industry (Cawood & Du Toit, 2006). We have come to realise that this trend also impacts dramatically on the conceptualisation and presentation of information copy: scarce resources and the need to translate into and/or reconceptualise in a variety of languages and for many age groups often leave the copywriter with the impression that visual language may have a greater transcending quality. The questions we needed to ask ourselves, in the wake of the identification of this trend, were derived from Paul Messaris' work (1997:90) on visual persuasion:

> If images can bring us closer than words to the appearance of reality, are they also an effective means of communicating across cultural boundaries? Does the iconicity of visual communication make it a vehicle for the sharing of meaning between people who are separated by linguistic or cultural differences?

In other words, can South African copywriters claim that visual language and the effective use of causality, contrast, analogy, and generalisation (Messaris, 1997:182-203) transcend linguistic and cultural (age, gender, race, etc.) boundaries? Global advertising trends seem to indicate that at least global corporations have reached an affirmative answer to this question. The danger would be that the brand (and thus, indirectly, the advertising industry) starts to prescribe to its target cultures as to what are typical markers of culture and identity, national and otherwise.[3] As Klein (2000:115) suggests, free trade, accelerated deregulation and the reality of the global marketplace led to new questions: "What is the best way to sell identical products across multiple borders? What voice should advertisers use to address the whole world at once? How can one company accommodate cultural differences, while still remaining internally coherent?" Her answer is ominous: "… force the world to speak *your* language and absorb *your* culture" (Klein, 2000:116). And the language of choice is visual. Or, according to Bourgery and Guimaraes (Messaris, 1997:92):

> Advertising agencies today are trying to create a 'visual esperanto': a universal language that will make global advertising possible for virtually any product or service. The new visual esperanto is based on the idea that visual imagery is more powerful and precise than verbal description, which leaves too much room for personal interpretation. Moreover, all people can comprehend the messages of visual imagery.

It is the central premise – the idea that anyone can understand a picture, that we here set out to question within a South African context.

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[3] As the advocates of critical language awareness points out: "… modern advertising offers potential consumers membership of imaginary communities based on consumption, as much as offering actual commodities for consumption: i.e. buy this and you will become a certain kind of person, buy this and be one of us. All we have to do to belong to these communities is buy and consume," (Talbot, 1992:175-176).

The principle underlying a similarly emerging South African advertising *esperanto* is that language is not necessarily indicative of cultural specificity and can therefore be circumvented by a homogeneous mode of communication – whether it be the unilingual English of the marketplace or a visual vocabulary devoid of linguistic expression. As will be indicated in this article, this trend has since insinuated itself into information and print copy as the proverbial silver bullet to address both the difficulties presented by our multilingual society and the promulgation of linguistic diversity as demanded by our constitution.[4] We fear that South African advertising has become enamoured of the visual as alternative to English in the one-size-fits-all approach. However, as will be clearly indicated in this article, visual alternatives have their own communicative limitations. Messaris (1997:xiii) succinctly summarised the copywriters quandary under such circumstances:

> … as soon as we go beyond spatiotemporal interpretations, the meaning of visual syntax becomes fluid, indeterminate and more subject to the viewer's interpretational predispositions than is the case with a communicational mode such as verbal languages, which possesses an elaborate set of explicit indicators of analogy, causality, and other kinds of connections between two or more concepts. It is argued … that this relative indeterminacy of visual syntax plays a central part in processes of visual persuasion. In fact, in the context of advertising, this seeming 'deficiency' of visual syntax is arguably one of its principal strengths.

But, for the copywriter working with a predominantly visual text, especially for information copy, the quandary lies in merging the need for an unambiguous and focused transfer of information with the indeterminate, yet persuasive nature of advertising copy. Although visually predominant copy may therefore transcend multilingual and cultural boundaries, it does not necessarily, in our opinion, pose a universally viable alternative for a determinate, focussed transfer of meaning. The myth of "universal appeal" has to be refuted, as even visual language is culturally, and quite often linguistically, determined.

1. THE BENCHMARK

In South Africa, the benchmark for language – absent television commercials was undoubtedly set by the Sasol advertisement of 1991 (Russouw, 2005:11), of a little boy pretending to fill his toy car with Sasol fuel after which the car takes off with screeching tyres, leaving the child to shake the toy petrol pump in amazement. According to Jill Merrifield (former client service provider for the Sasol Account at TBWA Hunt Lascaris, Johannesburg), Sasol's latest endeavour in this tradition, of a little boy and his grandfather at an upmarket, black wedding was intended neither as a sequel nor a reconceptualisation of the commercial of fifteen years before, as it would have been "impossible to live up to South Africa's best-loved commercial".[5] Sasol nevertheless required the advertisement to have the same "universal appeal" to people in the 6-10 LSM bracket. It should

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[4] The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) recognises eleven official languages and grants special privileges to a number of other languages. Article 6(1) of the Constitution, reads: "The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu." Article 6(5) furthermore grants the Pan South African Language Board the authority to promote the development and use of Khoi, Nama and San languages, as well as Sign Language. It also makes provision for special privilege ("respect") for languages used for religious purposes.

[5] Personal communication with Stephanie Cawood, 20 June 2005.

be remembered, however, that the LSM 6-10 constituency changed significantly in the intervening years between 1991 and 2005.

Clive Simpkins on Marketing Web (Penstone, 2005b) called this Sasol advertisement a "cultural hand grenade". Marketing guru, Louis Seeco (2005), found the advertisement offensive in that it portrayed disrespect towards the elderly, which he deemed uncharacteristic of children growing up in self-respecting South African families and communities. By focusing on the elusive universal appeal, the Sasol advertisement may have succeeded only in alienating the individual, Louis Seeco. He reiterated that South Africa is still grappling with the need to understand the values that could be described as "commonly South African". Despite scoring an average liking of 84%, across LSM 6-10 (Penstone, 2005a), with the core message interpreted and understood across the board by pre-tested focus groups, the Sasol advertisement had therefore not fostered unanimous approval and was altered to show the grandfather's complicity in the child's play, thereby presumably underplaying the perception of disrespect towards the elderly. (The advertisement has since disappeared from our TV screens).

The two Sasol commercials, spanning a significant fourteen-year divide in South Africa's cultural and political history and identity formation are excellent examples of a global trend to emphasise visual language in advertising, sometimes at the cost of verbal content. Both address issues of cross-cultural identity markers in different ways, and both do this by absenting language from the cultural equation. They both illustrate the copywriter's quandary as to whether language-absent copy is an acceptable alternative means to address the multilingual South African population in any medium. Language diversity, translation, and/or reconceptualisation are apparently being circumvented or avoided by conceptualising a visual message devoid of voice-over (VO). Does this practice undermine or contribute to the perception of a homogeneous marketplace where all South Africans (irrespective of their specific cultural and linguistic backgrounds) conduct their commercial activities by using a single language, English? As already suggested, we have observed a trend towards homogenising South African target audiences for advertising copy, which has since transcended the confines of specifically advertising parameters to include all kinds of copy. In the process, language as marker of culture and as primary means of target audience identification is written out of the definition of cultural specificity.[6] This, in turn, may be the first indicator of a cultural manifestation of non-specific or language-absent national identity formation in the offing for South Africa, as De Mooij (1998:43-44) believes advertising to be the reflection of "all manifestations of culture".

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[6] According to De Mooij (1998:52), there are two ways of looking at the language-culture relationship: "Language influences culture, or language is an expression of culture." The latter approach is what interests us most for the purposes of this study: "The approach is to realize that only the ability to speak is universal for humankind. Which language a person speaks is part of the culture in which she or he grows up. The language reflects all manifestations of culture, the expressions and the values. Language illustrates culture," (De Mooij, 1998: 52).

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The commitment to multilingualism in the South African Constitution is not resonated by any formal regulation of language use in the advertising industry.[7] Rather than external regulation by government, regulatory control in the industry is achieved by a long tradition of self-regulation. In a survey of advertising agencies, Cawood and Du Toit (2006) found that despite South Africa's multilingual society, English, unsurprisingly, proved to be the predominant mother tongue and preferred professional language of most of the respondents, while 53% of all respondents thought that multilingualism was adequately reflected in South African advertising.

In order to test this result in context, the researchers conducted a content analysis of advertisements during evening prime time on SABC 2 over a given period in 2004. The channel was specifically chosen because of its multilingual content and excellent reception across the country. Results indicated that English is, even on a so-called multilingual channel, the dominant advertising language. Results also indicated the emerging trend, earlier alluded to, of advertisements that contain no verbal language content in favour of predominantly visual language. The authors were keen to test the presence of this trend in other media such as print advertisements in monthly women's glossy magazines. This medium was chosen specifically for the prevalence of advertisements contained therein as reflected in the substantial annual advertising expenditure in this medium (Advertising Transformation Index Report, 2005). Printed information copy was chosen because of the prevalence of the visual and because of a perceived shared predilection for visual persuasion (especially in social issue campaigns) to influence reader response.[8]

In an attempt to merge qualitative and quantitative research methods, we set out to incorporate an array of multidisciplinary approaches to research taken from the fields of communication studies, critical linguistics (especially critical language awareness), document design and even advertising and information copy. Content analysis and visual language analysis were therefore used as methods of analysis.

3. POPULATION AND METHOD

Krippendorff (1980) describes content analysis as a method by which to study the symbolic meaning of texts. Texts are a very broad concept and can include any meaningful entity with content, thus referring to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, themes, or any conveyed message (Mouton, 2001). Gunter (2000:60) views this method as being ideally suited to describing the content of media texts in a replicable manner to reveal prevailing media patterns and trends.

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[7] See Sinclair (1997:66). This contradicts De Mooij's (1998:265) explanation for the curious predominance of the "announcement" format in television advertising in South Africa in a 1996 study: "The large presence of the announcement form in South Africa was explained by the fact that, since the end of apartheid, all advertising has to be translated into the numerous local languages. As a result, messages are short and simple and cannot easily convey values or other elements that carry a deeper meaning." Contrary to De Mooij's suggestion, formal regulation of multilingualism in advertising in South Africa has never existed, pre- or post-apartheid. For a detailed discussion, see Cawood & Du Toit (2006).

[8] For a history of the shared history of social issue campaigns and commercial advertising in preferencing the visual, especially photography, see Messaris (1997:137-141).

Content analysis is a systematic research tool applied by means of including and excluding categories according to consistently applied rules and procedures (Holsti, 1969).

An integral part of document design is the ability to analyse visual language, as this will sharpen the designer's skill and enlarge her visual vocabulary (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998:80). Visual language analysis is closely related to content analysis in that the object of inquiry is described in terms of the broad concept of text as posited by content analysis, and analysis is also done in terms of categorisation. Where visual language predominates, as in print advertisements designed for glossy magazines and certain types of information copy – visual language analysis inherent to document design is most appropriate because it is based on the design principles that underpin the production of the text.

Content analysis: A total of 255 spots were screened during prime time on SABC 2 (Wednesday, 17 November 2004 – Friday, 19 November 2004). A clear distinction was made between an advertisement and a preview of other programmes on the channel. The number of ad breaks was coded, while the total number of advertisements and previews were combined to give a total number of spots. The advertisements were coded in terms of product, brand, type of advertisement, implied promise, language, and cultural identities present. The time frame included evening prime time, which was specifically chosen because it encompassed news bulletins in various South African languages (seSotho, XiTsonga, TshiVenda and Afrikaans). The researchers were interested in determining whether the advertisements were more linguistically representative when it came to their screening during the language-specific news bulletins.

Visual language analysis: The ad content in the July 2005 issues of eight monthly glossy women's magazines was analysed according to the 12-cell visual language matrix adapted from Kostelnick (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998:86). The visual language matrix distinguishes between the intra-, inter-, extra- and supra-levels of design, each representing the design elements in the textual, spatial and graphic coding modes (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998:87). The entire population consisted of 301 advertisements.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Wednesday, 17 November 2004, to Friday, 19 November 2004, 181 advertisements in total were coded, of which 79% were exclusively in English while only 12% were in Afrikaans and a mere 2% were in African languages. Seven percent of all advertisements were entirely devoid of language - the third largest single category - while only 2% of advertisements were in any of the three other indigenous languages also offered by the channel. Where visual language was dominant, the content clearly indicated indigenous target audiences.

Apart from the benchmark advertisements by Sasol discussed earlier in this article, the trend can also be illustrated by an advertisement that was screened repeatedly during the period in question, a Sunlight Dishwashing Liquid advertisement. Antony Segal (2005)[9] of the parent company, Unilever, summarises the advertisement:

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[9] Antony Segal, of Unilever, was kind enough to agree to an interview conducted by e-mail correspondence on this commercial on 1 March 2005 with Stephanie Cawood. Segal was responsible for this advertisement.

> A boy sets off to a neighbour to borrow a teaspoon of Sunlight for his mother. On his return, he crosses a river, a field, climbs a fence and arrives home without spilling a drop. He is no sooner home than there is a knock at the door – a neighbour's son holds out a teaspoon, asking for some Sunlight. The mother shares the Sunlight from her spoon, pouring half into the other spoon. The payoff is "Sunlight Liquid – a little goes a long way".

The advertisement has no voice over (VO); and visual language thus clearly predominates. According to Segal (March, 2005), the objective of the advertisement was simply to make a commercial that was distinctly South African while also demonstrating the brand's "warm functionality", and to reinforce the brand's USP value (unique selling proposition). The advert was initially conceptualised to have a VO element. Yet after qualitative testing, Unilever decided that the intended VO did not add anything to the commercial (the storyline was moreover understood well enough without it). The intended VO was of the boy asking the Gogo for some Sunlight and his mother thanking him for it (Segal, 2005).

In 2004 – 21 years after the thought-provoking article – the *Harvard Business Review* (Holt, Quelch & Taylor, 2004:69) revisited Levitt's argument in favour of a worldwide unified market with standardised products and it explained how the article had influenced thoughts on branding:

> Although Levitt did not explicitly discuss branding, managers interpreted his ideas to mean that transnational companies should standardize products, packaging, and communication to achieve a least-common-denominator positioning that would be effective across cultures.

Managers apparently took the idea of standardised products one step further by touting the perceived generic universal appeal of products that would ostensibly effectively serve the growing homogeneous market place where a "commonality of preference" would prevail (Levitt, 1983:93).

This plays into the general assumption indicated by De Mooij (1998:31) that,

> … in the dialogue on the standardization of advertising, three misconceptions are common: (a) that advertising concepts based on strong image cues are able to cross borders more easily than campaigns based on copy [read: verbal language]; (b) that, if the associative values are universal, image strategies can be used cross-culturally; (c) that advertising themes or concepts can be standardized, while only the execution may need adaptation.

De Mooij (1998:31) continues by identifying "the most described problem of international advertising" as the so-called "translation-problem". The fallacy in circumventing cultural difference by excluding language specificity is to forget "that visuals can be as strongly related to culture as language." There are few universal associative values, and the universal ones are usually not very strong.

The Sunlight advertisement might be devoid of verbal language, but the subtext is rich in content that presupposes a literate, and for advertising copy, preferably westernised audience. The

parallel with Little Red Riding Hood inherent in this advertisement is immediately evident to a western, literate viewer. On the surface, this advertisement appears to be simple, quaint and a successful way to circumvent the perceived financial outlay and reconceptualisation problems involved in a multilingual advertising campaign. Naomi Klein is indeed right: despite lifestyle claims of cultural diversity, the branding trend is in favour of a one-size-fits-all approach (Cawood & Du Toit, 2006).[10]

The ad content of the July 2005 issues of eight glossy magazines revealed that almost 24% or a quarter of all advertisements in this medium type consisted of texts in which visuals predominated to the total exclusion of supplementary persuasive or explanatory verbal text. The visuals were meant to speak for themselves. In many instances, visual cultural clues replaced language as identity markers, especially when models or celebrities were employed to present a stylised brand image. The model or celebrity visually represented the ideal values and image connected to the brand, making accompanying persuasive text seem to be obsolete. All of the advertisements that contained predominantly visual language were of high-end branded and luxury products and designer items, such as perfumes, beauty products, fashion houses, jewellery, and French champagne – the so-called lifestyle products. A typical example of this phenomenon is an advertisement of *Moët et Chandon* that appeared in *Top Billing Magazine* (noted for its high LSM bracket of 8 – 10) (Top Billing launches magazine, 2005).

Here the branded product has replaced the celebrity as visual focus. The composition ascribes to conventional product placement, where figure/background contrast is created by means of colour and the use of light and shade, creating depth and dimension with a resultant strong emphasis on the evocative sensory experience. The dominant visual element in the Moët advertisement is the conventional product placement in the centre on a dark background where pink rose petals create a sense of movement and dimension.

Figure 1: Top Billing Magazine, July 2005

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[10] Ironically, the latest Sasol and Sunlight Dishwashing Liquid advertisements were both intended to appeal to an audience in the LSM bracket of 6-10. Nevertheless, these two advertisements conceptualise what is essentially the same audience, quite differently. For Sasol, "[t]he idea was to create an advert that crossed boundaries and dispelled the stereotypes about black communities," (something certainly perpetuated in the Sunlight Dishwashing Liquid ad). According to Paul Warner (Penstone, 2005a) of Hunt Lascaris, and perhaps best illustrated by the Sunlight Liquid advertisement, "[a]d agencies usually portray black people as being only rural or living in shebeens … This is very derogatory and that's why we chose an upmarket and urban black wedding for this ad. Everyone in South Africa will be able to relate to this ad, regardless of where they come from".

The rose petals become the visual vocabulary, which informs the sophisticated reader of the product's unique selling proposition: that it is a rosé champagne from the celebrated house of Moët et Chandon.

Kostelnick and Roberts (1998) recognised the need for awareness training in the power and reach of visual language by insisting on the often subliminal quality of our visual sense as communication medium, and hence an evident lack of awareness of the need for visual literacy in a text's audience. In communication, the visual functions in partnership with the act of speaking, listening, writing, or reading and visual literacy are consequently presumed: "Amid all the speaking and listening, reading and writing, we can easily take vision for granted. Seeing comes too naturally to most of us, that amid the busyness of our lives, we often overlook its importance – and its power" (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998:3). Visual literacy therefore becomes a necessary skill for the successful transfer of meaning and should not be underestimated. The phenomenon of visually predominant advertising, whether televised or in print, is an excellent example of a presumption of an often extremely high level of visual literacy and sophistication existing in the audience, which is, alas, not always realised.

Within the advertising industry and the design fraternity, the debate about the role of the visual vis-à-vis globalisation continues. Fiss (2006) takes a look at this discourse by exploring the use of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity adapted for corporate design and branding. She questions whether hybridity, as interpreted in design trends where the local is represented by the "exotic other", is a true reflection of postcolonial discourse, which calls for the "natives" (Bhabha, 1994:169), in our case the target audience, to challenge, "the boundaries of discourse and subtly changing its terms by setting up another specifically colonial space of the negotiations of cultural authority." This is clearly the opposite of what we have so far found.

Since the inception of our study in 2004, we also observed a similar preference for the visual in the production of information copy. We thus decided to extend our investigation into the visual beyond television and print advertisements, and also to include informative texts.

4.1 Information copy

Information copy is created for a different kind of audience and emanates from the entire range of private and public institutions. It is created to inform, instruct, educate, and explain, but also shares with advertising copy the element of persuasion. Especially in instances of health and environment education, where the copywriter wants to move readers to change their lifestyles for preventative, conservation, or containment reasons.

Whereas the trend towards predominantly visual content for print advertisements is motivated by a sophisticated, exclusive, and extremely discriminating audience, the exact opposite apparently applies in the case of informative texts. Here, the often limited budgets and the indiscriminate reach to a multilingual, multicultural, and multigenerational and often semi-illiterate or functionally illiterate audience (in South Africa) seemingly necessitates visual copy.
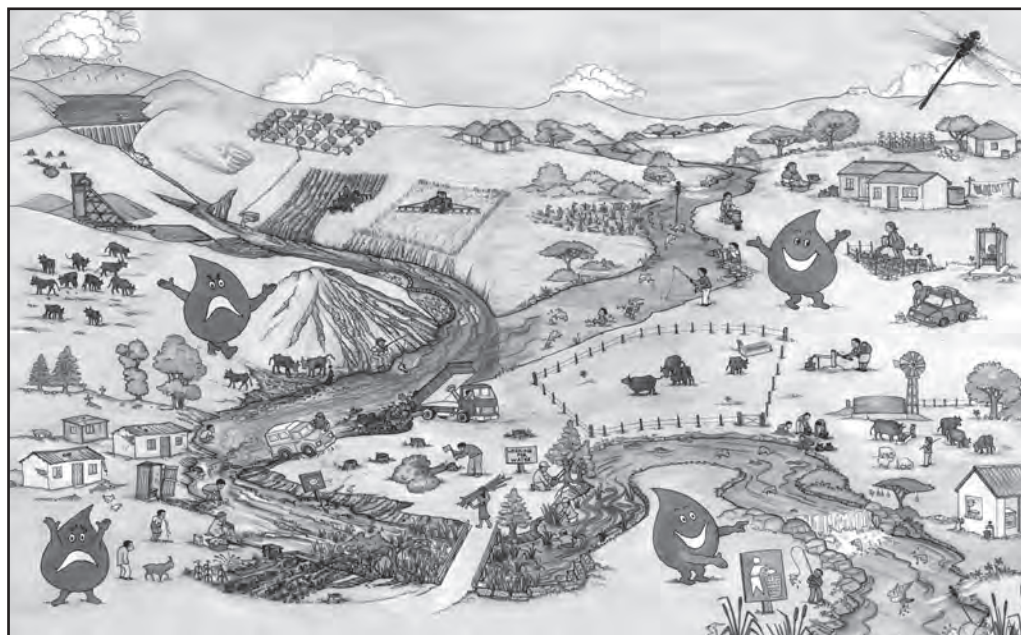
Figure 2: Fun Poster for the River Health Project in the Free State (2004)

A prime example is the "fun poster" for the River Health Project in the Free State (2004). This poster is a summary of the State of Rivers Report for 2004 (G. Venter, June 10, 2005), and was designed to make information accessible to primary school children and to the illiterate in order to foster practices that will promote river health, irrespective of the language or the cultural background of the audience. The poster juxtaposes "good" environmental practices on the right-hand side of the poster – that promote healthy rivers – with "bad" practices – on the left-hand side – that are conducive to polluted rivers. The direction of good vs. bad is right-left. Originally, the opposite was the case. The direction was changed to accommodate the visual convention current in our culture to associate *right* with good and *left* with bad. This is reinforced by the fact that we, by convention, read from left to right. Thus, by following the flow of visual information from left to right, the good side as preferred outcome is put in a position of emphasis. In its initial flouting of this visual convention, the original version was found to be unsettling and disturbing to the unprepared audience in that it placed undue emphasis on the bad. The designers of this poster clearly wanted to generate awareness of "chains of agents leading to environmental effects" (Myers, 1994:166) in order to compel them into action.

Health literature, including HIV/AIDS material, has at its core the same impetus to redefine agency and emphasise action:

In South Africa, basic instructional material on health issues is generally pitched at the level of plain English (a readability level of 60, or Grade 9), yet more than 70% of the South African population have only marginal reading skills. Given this situation, the question one should ask is what strategies should be used to convey important health information. The answer has often been sought in the use of visual media. However, in the literature on using pictures to communicate with verbally and visually less skilled readers, a number of problems are mentioned, including the interpretation of a range of symbolic meanings (Gangirir, 2005:111).

In personal interviews with health counsellors (T. Mngengwana at Montana Clinic, De Aar, January 11, 2006; J. Hermanus, January 11 2006)[11], these respondents emphasised the dependent nature of visual understanding. HIV/AIDS literature relies heavily on visual explication, but cannot function independent of facilitation by a trained counsellor. Myers (1994:170) identified the same principle: he points out that in spite of there being huge advertising and public health campaigns, bigotry towards HIV-positive people persists – because there is continued ignorance about the basic facts of HIV transmission. The problem lies in the intractable misconception that a surfeit of visual language educates independently. Not so, say the counsellors: visual copy is only successful because of its assistive qualities, the reason being that visual copy is indiscriminate in range and cannot effectively be tailored to race, culture, age, or literacy levels, unless the demands of the bottom line are ignored.

The following illustration indicates inability of visual language to cross generational boundaries. The counsellors were adamant about the across-the-board offence taken by the older generation when exposed to the explicit nature of such material. This is conducive neither to acceptance and comprehension, nor to the changing of attitudes and action.
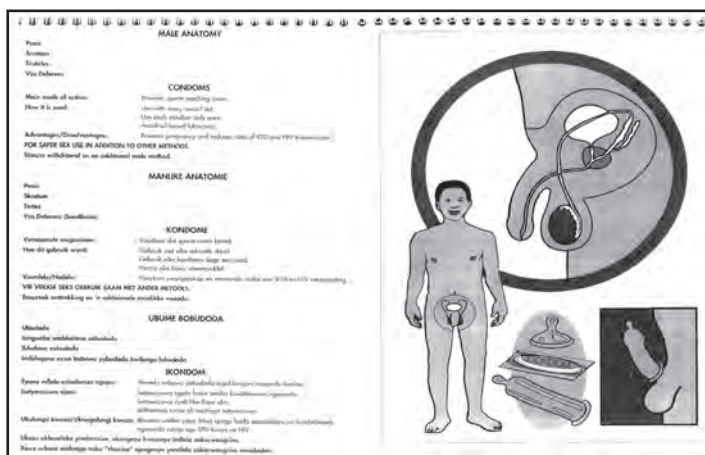

Figure 3: An example of information contained in a flip chart on contraceptive choices designed by the AVSSA (n.d.)

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[11] T. Mngengwana intervuewed at Montana Clinic, De Aar, on January 11, 2006; J. Hermanus, interviewed on January 11 2006

To indicate that visual emphasis also translates into a more sophisticated version of informative literature, note here an example of a *Lexmark* instruction manual completely devoid of any verbally equivalent text. Again, note the left-right direction of the flow of visual information, which will be foreign to a non-western audience or writing system with conventions calling for contrary directions in the flow of information.
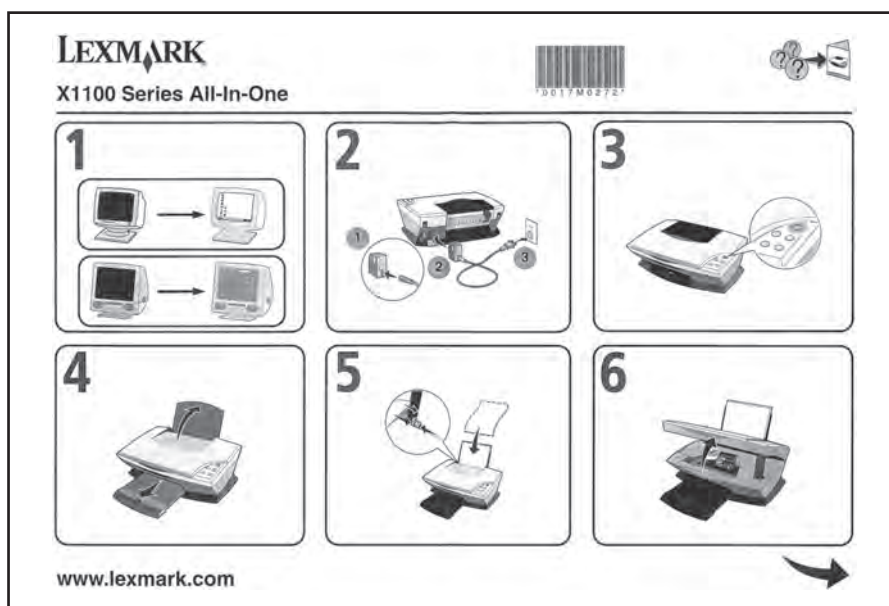

Figure 4: Lexmark X1100 Instruction Manual (Lexmark, n.d.)

The belief in the power of images to convey meaning (Green, 2000) has even reached the military sphere. The reliance on visual language in information copy for military purposes is yet another case in point. A company called, *Kwikpoint* (Kwikpoint, 2008), is marketing visual language "Military Translators Kits" and "Survival Guides" for Iraq, Afghanistan and the Andean Ridge countries of Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela. These booklets rely on illustrations to facilitate interpersonal communication. On the internet forum, *Tools for a Changing Battlefield*, Laura Madonna (2008), a *Kwikpoint* consultant, explains:

> All responses are communicated via pictures, making *language training unnecessary* [our emphasis]. Visual recognition of images such as weapons and human physical characteristics overcome technology and language barriers.

Given the exponential rise of US intelligence agencies' funding for language training at expert language schools, we consider such claims suspect.

Nevertheless, this study would be remiss in not mentioning instances where the effective transfer of information copy depends entirely on the visual, although, ironically, not absenting language. The best example of this symbiotic co-dependence of textual and visual content is the newly developed, PanSALB (Pan South African Language Board) – funded Student Manual and Teacher's Curriculum Guide for South African Sign Language (SASL), entitled, "*Signing naturally*," (Akach, Aarons & Matabane, 2007a & 2007b). Philemon Akach, one of the authors and a senior lecturer in SASL explains this best:

> This is a visual language, so we need to represent the cognitive concepts visually and in print that can only be done through pictures. Because SASL is visually dynamic, we also indicate movement by use of arrows (Personal communication, March 5, 2008).
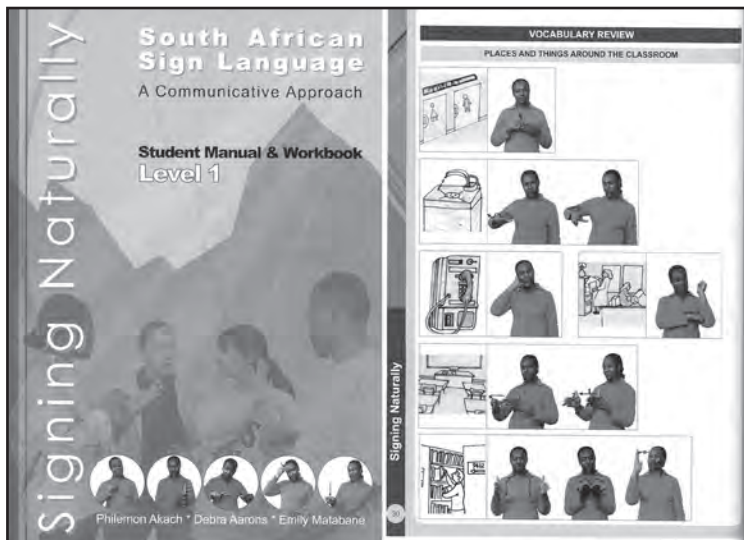

Figure 5: Signing naturally (Akach, Aarons & Matabane, 2007a)

We argue that this textbook, as example of information copy (meant to educate) is also aimed towards the same broadly defined multilingual, multicultural, and multigenerational often semi-illiterate or functionally illiterate audience (although in this case rather SASL uninitiated). In other instances, this broad undiscriminating definition of the target audience, best illustrated by our example of the health text, has inhibited rather than contributed to information transfer and usability. In document design, a document's value is measured solely by the usability imperative. The SASL textbook passes the usability test. Although seemingly undefined, the target audience of the textbook is governed by one common denominator: language (SASL), or rather, the common will to acquire the language. This yet again emphasises the inextricable and irreplaceable role of language in the cultural equation and therefore also in the definition of target audience.

5. CONCLUSION

Although causality and contrast may therefore be effectively communicated in information copy through visual language, grave concern has been expressed by Messaris and others (1997:219) about absenting verbal language: "Because of the lack of explicitness of visual syntax, arguments made through images often need to be supported by words."[12] Kaplan (1990:43) found that as much as 24% of visual metaphors discovered in his sample of advertisements in general interest magazines could not be understood by the readership without the accompanying text. And in a multilingual society, this brings us full circle to De Mooij's (1998:31) "translation-problem" and to the question that first gave rise to this study: Is visual language able to solve the multilingual difficulties of copywriters in South Africa?

The research indicates a keen awareness among advertising agency staff of the need for linguistic sensitivity in targeting audience. Yet, because of the lack of transformation in the industry itself (Cawood & Du Toit, 2006) very few respondents in the industry were in 2006 able to use South African languages other than English and some Afrikaans. This was probably partly responsible for the results of De Mooij's 1996 study (1998:265) that indicated a keen predilection for the "announcement form" in advertising, explained by De Mooij as the result of an enforced necessity in the post-apartheid era to translate advertising into "numerous local languages". As a result, messages are short and simple and cannot easily convey values or other elements that carry a deeper meaning," (De Mooij, 1998:265). In order to respond to a greater need for sophistication, especially for the higher LSMs, the almost exclusively English South African advertising industry had little choice but to opt for the only other alternative: to circumvent the translation issue by means of advertising that was devoid of verbal language. The emergence of this trend in television advertising was documented from the benchmark-setting Sasol advertisement of 1991 to the present.

Advertising and information copy share the same persuasive imperative, and, because of a shared history in the utilisation of visual language – especially for social interest campaigns – we identified a similar predilection in the subsequent consideration of the visual in information copy. While television advertising and printed advertisements, catering for the high end of the market, may reasonably assume visual literacy among its readership, the same cannot be assumed for information copy. In most instances, the reason for the visual preference, in South Africa, is an indiscriminate audience and the assumption of a high rate of semi-literacy and illiteracy, combined with a general assumption that functional literacy equates to media and visual literacy. Yet, the official literacy rates are, however, in the mid-80s for men and women in South Africa, and verbally absent copy may therefore use illiteracy as an excuse rather than an actual encumbrance. What is required is a study of the readership of information copy to enable us to determine whether the information is indeed satisfactorily conveyed. Does the audience understand and fully appreciate visual cues in the absence of explanatory text? Are the visual cues responsive to cultural diversity in the target audience in the absence of language as marker of identity? These are all questions that we hope to address in future research emphasising the critical language awareness component as inevitable prerequisite for a visually literate audience.

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[12] See, e.g. Meyers (1994) and Kaplan (1990)

Even though present results are not yet conclusive and indicate only an emerging trend, we confidently predict that, as pressures from government mount for linguistic representativity, what is currently only a trend will become entrenched in advertising and information copy.

Can a visual *esperanto* in advertising and information copy therefore fully compensate for absence of language in the cultural equation? The answer is an unequivocal *NO*.

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