

M. Snyman

Using printed texts to communicate information in the South African development context: a reception study

ABSTRACT

Brochures are often used in South Africa to disseminate information to disadvantaged communities. This article is based on a research project in which the effectiveness of printed texts containing information about agricultural practices was tested among a target audience of small-scale farmers in deep rural areas. The methodology used was informed by reception theory. The historical development of reception study is traced and compared with recent trends in communication research. The findings of this study indicate that considerable interpretation gaps exist between sender and receiver. This is mainly caused by a lack of understanding about the life world of the end-user and results in the absence of a common codal system between communicator and receiver. Empirical studies based on reception theory can make a positive contribution towards improving development communication in the pluralistic cultural and lingual South African society. It may well be used as an instrument to test the effectiveness of messages aimed at a specific target audience.

INTRODUCTION

During the 1999 South African elections, masses of brochures, pamphlets and flyers literally descended on the unsuspecting public. An inhabitant of Mamelodi, a township near Pretoria, commented as follows on such a “delivery” of brochures dropped from a helicopter onto the township: “People stood watching the pieces of paper dropping from the air. Some were picked up, glanced at and then dropped again. For weeks afterwards the pamphlets were still lying all over the place”.

In South Africa, parastatals, the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and government departments produce a myriad of brochures and pamphlets to communicate information to the South African public. The question remains whether these mass-produced printed messages can disseminate information effectively in the culturally and socially pluralistic South African context.

A brochure created by the National Department of Health to disseminate crucial information about the dangers of Aids was analysed by a class of predominantly black undergraduate students in an informal research exercise. In the illustrations of the brochure all the people are depicted as being black. The students’ interpretation of this visual message was that only black people “get Aids” or that “Aids is an illness devised by white people to scare black people into not having children”. This points to serious interpretation gaps between producers of the text and the target audience.

In the discourse on the development of Africa, it is often argued that knowledge is the key to development because “‘knowledge is power’....‘the engine of growth’” (Adesida, 1998:1). There is, however, a difference between information delivered or communicated by mass-produced messages and the creation of knowledge. “True knowledge is more than information. It includes the meaning or interpretation of the information” (Panos Institute, 1998: 1). Knowledge, the prerequisite for power and growth, grows from the sense people make of information delivered to them. It may just be possible that attempt to bring “the light of knowledge” (Panos Institute, 1998:1) to South Africans, historically deprived of information, often fail or backfire.

It is the premise of this article that in many development messages disseminated to disadvantaged communities in South Africa, the target audience may attribute a different meaning to the message than the meaning the creators wanted to convey. It is even possible that the intended receiver does not understand it at all. Communication codes used to communicate development messages in South Africa should therefore be investigated in order to establish which meaning end-users find in messages created and produced by well-meaning individuals and institutions, and whether these messages

really bring about the desired action that could improve the target audience's quality of life.

These issues were investigated during a comprehensive research project conducted among two small-scale farming communities. Taking into consideration the bias towards printed material in development communication (Doak et al, 1996 & Leach, 1999), this study focused on printed matter as a medium to communicate information to emerging farming communities in deep rural areas. One of the research objectives of this comprehensive study was to establish whether the communication codes used in the specific brochures, booklets and pamphlets effectively communicated the intended information. Previous research has established a bias towards printed, media for the dissemination of information.

Aspects of reception theory were used as a theoretical point of departure to determine whether the information in the printed texts was received and interpreted as the communicators envisaged them to be received and interpreted.

WHY RECEPTION THEORY?

Reception theory originated in the 1930s as an approach to literary studies in which the role of the reader was (re)discovered. Mukarovsky was the first literary theorist to link the text to its social significance. The text is "directed to the audience. ... It is first by being read that the work manifests itself ... in the consciousness of the reader" (Vodicka, 1942:71).

In the 1970s, Jauss (1982) added the idea that the meaning of a text is determined by its context. Iser (1978) later reaffirmed the view that meaning does not reside in the text, but can be created only by a reader.

In America, Fish (1980: 10) added the important insight that "... it is interpretive communities, rather the text or the reader, that produce meanings ... Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies ... These strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read...". Interpretive strategies and communities imply, what is called by Petersen (1992:263), the existence of a "common codal system" without which communication is not possible. The absence of a common codal system, or codal incompetence, on both the part of the sender and the receiver inhibits the successful flow of communication.

Although born in the hermeneutic tradition, reception studies in the late eighties contributed towards the growing tension between the opposing hermeneutical and empirical approaches (Fokkema & Ibsch, 1992). Reader and researcher were no longer

the same person. Researchers began to study other readers' reception of texts by traditional empirical methods. Rodón (1993:79-80) expresses for example the view that reception studies should include all the domains of social life and should not only focus on a solitary receiver but should encompass a whole social or cultural group.

Within this climate, and under the influence of the systems theory, a conviction grew (Segers, 1998:143-144) that the total spectrum of communication should be the research field of empirical literary science and could be applied in media research such as advertising, literary criticism, creation of social images and cultural identity.

In a review on the impact of reception studies in South Africa, the interdisciplinary nature of reception studies also became apparent. Reception studies were proved suitable for the study of communication and many other related areas of research such as empirical studies where the actual reception of texts by various types of readers is manifested under controlled conditions. Lategan (1992:6) concludes that communication theory on the whole benefited from this development. Knight (1992:267) sees an advantage in the fact that reception studies is a radically open programme that is self-controlling, capable of "learning" and in conflict with other static models. This makes reception studies suitable for research in the ever-changing and dynamic South African society.

Reception studies: text and context

In reception studies, the relationship between text and context is crucial. Jauss's idea of the reader's so-called horizon of expectations is now seen as one component of an individual's cultural and social frame of reference (Segers 1978:27), which presupposes major overlaps between the knowledge bases ("encyclopaedias") of many people (including the sender), which form part of the (potential) common property of a specific social and cultural group without which communication is not possible (Van der Merwe, 1983:155). These words emphasise the importance of the social and cultural context in which messages are produced and received. The necessity of common ground (a common codal system) in communication is clearly stated: "We are never not in a situation... A set of interpretive assumptions is always in force" (Fish, 1978:637).

A text is always received within the specific social context of an interpretive community. The interpretive community provides the frame of reference that determines perception and interpretation. A receiver can only interpret a text according to the socially mediated knowledge and values of the interpretive community. Meaning is attributed to the text within a specific context.

It is, however, not only the reception and interpretation of a text in a specific context

that are important. The production of a text also takes place within a specific context (Lategan, 1992:8). "(I)nterpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as usually assumed, the other way around" (Fish 1980:10). Hansson (1992) addresses the issue of social pluralism in South Africa. She stresses the need for a correspondence between the receiver's norms of interpretation and the sender's norms of interpretation, and suggests that a greater correspondence between the receiver's norms of interpretation and the sender's norms of interpretation must be achieved for effective communication (Hansson 1992:183).

Reception studies and communication research

In communication studies, there is a similar movement towards a more audience-sensitive approach. In the 1970s, the study of media audiences focused on how audiences select media programmes according to their uses and gratifications. Since the mid-1980s, a growing trend towards an analysis of how audiences actively construct meaning of the media became evident. As in reception studies, this trend focuses on the receiver. White (1994:3) mentions that "'reception study' has been used by many to characterize the new approach to audience study, but 'audience interpretation' theory may be a more accurate term".

In audience interpretation research, the use of the media should be studied in terms of subjective constructions of meaning that are developed in response to the media. According to White (1994:3), the "'typical' research methodology working towards interpretative theories of interpretation is some form of 'audience ethnography' which demands that the researcher reconstructs the meaning of the media from the subject's perspective". Fiske's contributions (1987) in the late 1980s, although severely criticised, helped towards establishing the "new" theoretical perspective of the "audience's active construction of meaning" (the reader writes the text) and a methodology of audience ethnography. In his book *Television, audiences and cultural studies*, Morley (1992) states explicitly that audience interpretations cannot be separated from the influence of the social context in which they occur.

White (1994) mentions four approaches to, what he calls, audience reception / interpretation theory, namely the Anglo-American critical cultural studies approach, the symbolic interactionist approach, the consensual cultural studies tradition and the audience's construction of meaning as the result of "mediations" between logics of production and consumption. In his discussion, White never mentions reception

studies known in literary theory as a possible influence on this new trend in communication research.

Nevertheless, all four of White's approaches show commonalties with reception studies. These briefly include:

- focus on the receiver as a creator of meaning;
- the important role of context;
- the interpretive community, who according to Lindlof (1988:102) "share similar 'genres of interpretations', common codes or intersubjective agreements that are instantiated in ordinary acts of media selection, decoding and application";
- Morley's finding (1980) that people draw "upon a composite and often unrelated and even contradictory social and personal histories" in their interpretation of texts; and
- the fact that the audience's construction of meaning is often different from the meaning that the producers wanted to convey (White, 1994:25).

Servaes and Lie (1996:42) feel that "Research in the international communication area is still in its infancy" and they identify an urgent need for more qualitative research approaches in communication studies. They postulate that foreign mass media have "radically different effects and meanings in different cultural settings". Far from being passive recipients, people are actively involved in the construction of meaning around the media they consume. It is the socio-cultural framework of a receiver that defines interpretations of texts according to the "logical structure" of each culture and therefore cross-cultural communication is successful only when the above logical foundations are understood and accepted as "equal" by the people concerned.

Reception studies and development messages

If it is accepted that the context in which messages are produced and received cannot be ignored if effective communication is to take place, and that it is an even greater problem in a pluralistic society, it can be accepted that in the production of messages for development, the codes used, may exhibit major disparities or inadequate areas of overlap.

In a development context, greater sensitivity to these presumed disparities should therefore be exhibited to ensure correspondences between the norms and interpretations of both communicator and receiver. Messages produced to communicate development information should be structured in such a way that they communicate the intended information effectively. Only then can development messages assist in extending knowledge horizons that could lead to action that could improve quality of life.

The advocacy of participatory communication and Development Support Communication (DSC) as opposed to the prevailing top-down Development Communication practices (Agunga, 1997 and 1998) is, in effect, based on the principle of interpretive communities. Participation in the creation of development messages in essence ensures that the interpretative strategies of receiver and communicator overlap, that a common codal system is used to ensure a successful flow of communication.

Reception theory in an empirical, qualitative research project

Lategan (1992:10) postulates that the plurality of readers and receptions has important methodological implications for reception studies in South Africa. He distinguishes three main categories of reception:

- How a text *could* be read.
- How a text *should* be read.
- How a text *is* read.

This study described here focused on the third category. It attempted to establish how printed text was perceived, received and interpreted by the targeted end-users.

The research was participatory in the sense that the receivers of the texts were regarded as participants in the research process. The objectives of the research project were explained to them so that they understood that their input was important in the quest for the effective dissemination of information to developing communities. In this process, communication was regarded as "a negotiation and exchange of meaning, in which messages, people-in-cultures and 'reality' interact so as to enable meaning to be produced or understanding to occur" (O'Sullivan et al, 1994:50-51). In accordance with this view, the constituent elements of this project fell into three groups: the text its signs and codes; the people who read the text; and an external reality to which both text and people refer. These elements are relevant within the DSC paradigm and concur with the relation between context and interpretation in reception studies as discussed above.

In this study, "text" refers to printed texts such as brochures, booklets and pamphlets as primary texts as well as visual, oral, linguistic and other codes and signs. The people who "read" the texts are the targeted end-users represented here as individuals from emerging farming communities in two rural areas as well as the researchers. The "external reality" refers to the living environment of the targeted end-users, but also to the wider South African context.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research approach was qualitative, committed to seeing reality from the point of view of the research participants. This approach is in concurrence with the view of Taylor & Bogdan (1984:2) who state that "the important reality is what people perceive it to be" and Erlandson's contention (1993:81) that the meaning of events, occurrences and interactions can best be understood through the eyes of the actual participants in specific situations.

This research was therefore based on empirical evidence gathered by interviews and focus group discussions. Face-to-face interviews with individuals were used to obtain in-depth feedback. Initial responses were then further explored in focus group interviews. The data sets were then analysed and interpreted.

Structured open-ended interviews were chosen as the interview technique in this study. This meant that except for a few questions about factual information, open-ended questions were posed in a set order. The structured interview is a key component of qualitative data collection. "Interviews allow exploration of issues in depth in a face-to-face encounter" (Pratt 1980:85) and have the added benefit of the personal involvement of the researcher, which was necessary in this project, which was based on a participatory approach. Apart from being a conventional method of data collection in qualitative research design, it can be regarded as a way of triangulation (Howe 1988:307) by which the research process can be validated.

The purpose of the qualitative research interview in this project was to "gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to the interpretation and the meaning" (Kvale, 1983:174) of selected printed texts in an attempt to see the research topic from the perspective of the participant and to understand how and why he or she has a particular perspective.

Questions were formulated in a language register easy enough to be understood by the interviewees. Fieldworkers received training that enabled them to conduct successful interviews. It was fortunate that most of the fieldworkers could speak the vernacular languages. This created a closer bond between interviewers and interviewees. Interviewees recorded the responses by hand.

The advantages of focus group interviews in research have often been stated (Stage, 1992). By using focus group discussions, the researchers hoped to "obtain deeper levels of meaning, make important connections and identify subtle nuances in expression and meaning" (Stuart & Shamdassi, 1990: 47). The spontaneous interaction between participants in an informal focus group discussion often reveals data that might not

be disclosed in the more formal relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

The focus group discussions took place after the interviews had been conducted as a way to validate the data collected during the interviews. Although an interview schedule was used during the focus group discussion, it was not followed to the letter. The discussion often deviated. These deviations later provided valuable information. The discussions were conducted in an informal manner. Snacks and drinks were provided to establish an atmosphere of open and free discussion. This was an attempt to ensure maximum spontaneity and co-operation from the participants in the research situation. In one of the group discussions, an interpreter had to be used because many of the participants did not understand English or Afrikaans. All the focus group discussions were recorded on tape and later transcribed and analysed. Scribes also recorded the discussions.

After collecting the data, the researchers used the well-tested methods of discourse analysis to interpret the data collected via both the interviews and recordings of the focus group discussions. Two independent researchers followed an inductive process to interpret the data, which resembled the open coding method as described by Berg (1998:236). As the coding was being done, coding frames emerged and relevant theoretical perspectives and previous research were considered and tested against the data. Although profound latent analysis was not performed and did not form part of the research design, in some cases latent symbolic meaning did emerge, as will be shown in the discussion of the findings.

Although Fidel (1993:233) indicates that validity and reliability in successful qualitative research depend largely on the methodological skills as well as the sensitivity and integrity of the researcher, additional measures were taken in this research project to ensure credibility. During data collection, triangulation was used, while the findings of two independent researchers were compared after data analysis. According to Stage (1992:7), validity is also determined by the extent to which an observation describes what it has set out to describe. The process to determine to what extent agricultural information was effectively communicated by printed texts to end-users in developing rural areas in South Africa is described below.

The research process

Out of the vast array of printed texts targeting emerging farming communities, the first criterion was to identify texts that addressed themes that could generally be used by emerging farmers in most rural areas. These texts were then subjected to purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was chosen with the aim of selecting texts that would be "information rich": that is, providing as much information as possible for the

purpose of the research topic. Hence the term “purposive sampling” (Patton, 1990:169).

All the texts made available to the researchers had small-scale farmers and their support system as the target audience. The lingual code in all the available texts was only English. Since this research project wanted to determine whether development messages in printed texts communicate information effectively, it was necessary to select texts in which both verbal and visual signs were used. Both these two codes are commonly used in printed texts that target developing communities (Doak et al, 1996).

Three texts that showed promising variations regarding the use of the lingual code, the combination of visual and verbal signs and the nature of the visual signs were consequently selected.

- **Text 1** consisted mainly of visual signs, such as simple line drawings and photographs linked by arrows. Verbal signs were limited to captions and short explanations of the visual presentations in simple English.
- **Text 2** was a more scholarly text in which the predominantly verbal text was chunked by the use of headings and explained by line drawings and more abstract representations of processes and seasonal changes.
- **Text 3** was a pamphlet-like publication in which verbal and visual signs carried more or less the same weight. Visual signs constituted more complicated line drawings and photographs. The English used was on a higher level than text 1, but on a lower level than text 2.

The texts were tested in two small-scale farming communities near Bethlehem and Badplaas. Both are considered deep rural areas.

Because the selected texts are produced for extension officers, officials working with the extension officers and farmers alike, research participants were selected to represent all three types of end-users. In line with the participatory approach, extension officers acted in both areas as co-ordinators, and they recruited farmers and other officials to take part in the research project. They were included in the focus group discussions. Informal discussions with the extension officers were also taken into account in the analysis of the data. The interviews and focus group discussions were arranged to coincide with the regularly held farmers’ days in two selected areas.

A comprehension test designed according to the guidelines of De Jongh & Schellens (1997) was used to determine whether the essential information came across. Apart from general questions about language proficiency and preference and literacy level, specific questions were asked to establish how the interviewees understood and interpreted the texts. The interviewees were given time to read a text at their leisure. Questions were then asked to determine how they interpreted selected visual and

verbal signs in the three texts.

Analysis of the data

Interviews

From the coding process emanated the following summarised and systemised version of the analysis.

General questions about formal schooling status and language proficiency pointed once again to the importance of addressing problems of illiteracy and multi-lingualism in the South African society.

- The ages of the research participants varied between 34 and 59 years and their level of formal schooling between grade 5 and a Diploma in Agriculture. These responses were, however, questioned as the analysis proceeded. A high level of illiteracy was exposed when the participants had to read the texts. The focus group discussions also indicated a higher level of illiteracy than the analysis of this section of the interviews indicated.
- The first language of all the participants was Southern Sotho, Swati or Zulu. Zulu was the only vernacular language spoken by all. All the participants claimed that they could speak and understand English. One participant explicitly stated that he preferred English although his home language was Sotho. The language proficiency of most of the participants in English was, however, so low that an interpreter had to be used during one of the focus group interviews. The woman farmers, in particular, could not speak English at all.
- Most of the participants use their first language, or one of the other vernacular languages for professional purposes. The statements of those who professed that they used only English (mostly the extension officers) were later contradicted when they indicated that they communicated with the farmers in the vernacular languages.
- Although most of the participants indicated that they could read English, the fact that the interviewers had to read some of the texts to them questioned this claim. All the participants said, however, that they felt more comfortable reading in their first language.

Comprehension of Text 1, obviously created to target low literacy readers, was relatively high. This finding supports Zimmerman's claim (1998:120) that printed pictorial material prepared for illiterate or semi-literate users can be "practical, feasible and effective".

- Most of the participants understood the simple line drawings in this text. The photographed objects in the text were identified relatively easily. There were two exceptions. Some participants found it difficult to recognise the photographs of a paper bag and the lid of a dustbin filled with charcoal. In quite a few cases, the

latter was mistaken for a plate of food. This probably points towards differences between the receivers' and the communicator's frame of reference.

- The use of arrows to indicate movement or a process was generally well understood. Some participants who could easily interpret individual visual signs failed, however to integrate the visual signs linked together with arrows into a comprehensive signifying unit. In one instance, the meaning of the last step in the process of how to look after seed was incorrectly interpreted by three participants with answers varying from: "Where you put the seed", "When you are writing you must start from left to right" and "It means planting is continuing".

Text 2 was selected because of a preliminary assumption made by the researchers that the English used in the verbal text was too difficult for the intended target group to understand. The subsequent analysis proved this assumption to be true and indicated a total lack of correspondence between communicator and receiver, even with regard to something as basic as the lingual code. In this case, the communicator exhibited little or no insight into the life world of the target audience.

- The Interviewers quickly realised that the participants could not understand this text at all and resorted to reading the selected quotations from the text. The participants were not able to read the text themselves. This text remained mostly incomprehensible to them. Only four participants understood, for instance, a phrase like "the development of the maize plant". Most had no idea that "maize" is a synonym for "mealie".
- A question asked to explain the meaning of the phrase "mealies are less prone to diseases and fairly drought resistant" produced responses such as: "I think it is about nature" (participant 9) and "Because it is covered by the outside coat" (participant 1). Both these participants indicated initially that they could speak and read English.
- In order to test the overall comprehension of a section of the text, a heading in the text was formulated as a question: "What mainly determines the development of the maize plant?" The low level of comprehension and lack of understanding were suggested by responses such as: "hairs on the upper part of the mealie that determine its growth" and "determines if it is a good time". Although some participants did mention "temperature" as the main determinant for growth, the impression remained that most of these responses were based on the participants' general knowledge and not gathered from the text. The same impression was also formed during the analysis of the answers to the question "How can mealies on the cob be cooked?" The participants knew what the answer was, but did not find the information in the text.
- Here again, the visual signs were better understood. Most participants recognised a line drawing of the sun, although one participant said that it was "the flower that grows on the mealie plant". The participant with a diploma in agriculture

interpreted this sign as “an emblem star with a man’s face”. This answer reveals a total lack of contextual comprehension. He was also the only participant who did not understand why the sun was drawn next to the mealie plant. His reaction remains an enigma.

- Most of the participants knew that “250m²” had something to do with the size of a specific area. They were, however, not at all sure of how big the area was. Some translated this answer into a different code by responding that “a family of three or five could be fed from it”.
- A visual sign representing a calendar was interpreted as such by most participants. They knew that it had something to do with planting and harvesting or summer and winter. The intended message was to link the growth of the mealie to season/months in the year. This message was not decoded successfully by any participant.

Text 3 was a larger pamphlet-like text in which verbal and visual signs were used in equal measure. The reasons why it is good to keep goats are for instance represented in the text by illustrations of the products derived from goats as well as verbal signs used to explain the visual signs.

- To the question “Why is it good to keep goats?” most participants answered correctly according to the signs given in the text that goats provide milk and meat, and that one can use their “hair”. Some participants answered that “goats were part of our culture” and some said that goats provide meat. Not one of these two options is represented in the text. This reinforced the assumption that the participants answered from their own experience and did not gain the information from the text. One participant even personalised the response in the following way: “Meat; people buy it from me”. To answer a question on the feeding habits of goats, the participants had to read a few lines of verbal text. Although most of their answers contained an element of truth, it was clear that their comprehension of the verbal text was low and that they derived the answers from their own inherent knowledge base. Not one of their answers referred to the information supplied in the given text.
- To test this phenomenon, a question: “Did you know this answer because of your own experience or did you find your answer when reading on page 2?” was included during the second round of interviews. All the participants indicated that they answered from experience. This served as confirmation that the participants understood even less of the verbal signs presented to them as reflected in their responses.
- Most participants knew the basic meaning of the word “allergic”. Originally formulated responses include: “when a product doesn’t handle a person well” and “our body can’t understand something we have eaten”. This example proves that participatory message design may produce authentic and culturally appropriate ways to express ideas in correspondence with the “logical structures” of a target audience.

- All the participants could identify the objects in the photographs used in this text, but they did confuse a line drawing of an extended yard and stable with a house. When compared with remarks about the photograph of a solidly fenced pasture during the focus group interview, it can be concluded that the receivers are not familiar with the context depicted by these visual signs. These signs represent the farming context of the commercial farmer, and do not form part of the social and/or personal histories of the participants.
- In general this pamphlet was better understood than Text 2, probably because a lower level of English proficiency was needed to read it.

Focus group discussion

Apart from general questions about the information needs of the participants, the availability of printed material and their views on the research process, the interview schedule included the following questions that specifically pertained to the research objectives of this article:

1. Do you understand the language that is used in the brochures? Is it easy or difficult to understand?
2. What happens when the farmers do not understand difficult words?
3. How should new words be taught to the people?
4. In which language should messages be conveyed in your area? Why?
5. Do you prefer books with lots of words?
6. Do you prefer books with lots of pictures?
7. Do you prefer drawings or photographs?
8. Do you like the books big or small?
9. What do you not like about the books?
10. Are the instructions in the books clear enough?
11. What would you like to change about the books?
12. Should local and traditional knowledge be shown in the books?

During the analysis of the focus group interviews, the following aspects were highlighted.

- Participants had strong feelings about visual signs: "Pictures make a lot of things clear". It was felt that illiterate adults could read better from pictures than words. This view was substantiated by the analysis of the individual interviews. They did not like books without pictures. Pictures must be included otherwise the "books are boring". They preferred combinations of picture and text, because they "can learn to read when looking at the pictures". Photographs were preferred above drawings, but they asked that captions should accompany the photographs even though the analysis of the individual interviews indicated that illustrations were

easier to “read” than some of the photographs. Some participants insisted that photographs be taken in the rural areas and not on the farms of rich farmers. This concurred with the finding that visual signs representing an unfamiliar context do not ensure effective communication.

- All the participants, except one, felt that “all the books” must be translated into a vernacular language so that “their children and/or other farmers could read it to them if they can’t”. When asked what they would like to change about the text, the feeling was almost unanimous among both groups that the texts should be made available in the vernacular language of a specific community. When the extension officer who holds a Diploma in Agriculture said he would prefer English, he was met with nearly violent opposition. The participants became emotional. Technical terms in English were also severely criticised and the feeling was expressed that difficult terms should be translated or at least explained in an appropriate vernacular language.
- Even though the analysis of the initial responses about the formal schooling of the participants revealed that they all received at least some schooling, the analysis of focus group interviews concurred with later findings of the analysis of the individual interviews. Illiteracy was a bigger problem than initially presumed.
- Localism was strongly advocated. The general feeling was that the texts have to be written with local conditions in mind, e.g. language, climate and crop type.
- Contrary to the assumption that indigenous was important, they expressed no need to learn about the old traditional ways. They laughed and one participant commented that “old was good enough to keep the tummy full, now we want to sell and make money”.
- Although there was no evidence that the participants spontaneously went out to collect printed texts with the purpose of obtaining information on specific issues, they were excited when they saw the brochures. They grabbed them and said that they would like to take them home and use them if the need arose. They saw the texts as a potential source of information that could increase their knowledge so that “things (can) become easier for” them. The use of the word “book” when referring to the printed booklets and pamphlets suggests that these texts were treasured as substitutes for books, which are still regarded as signs of knowledge and education among rural people.

Findings

Since the project was a limited pilot study, the findings have obvious limitations, but do substantiate the need to overlap codal systems when communicating to developing communities, and they concur with similar studies (Zimmerman, 1982, Doak et al, 1996, Lyster, 1995, Wyley, 1995 and Malan, 1998). As in the studies of Leach (1999) and Megwa (1996), the participants exhibited a preference for personal communication and visual media. Nevertheless, printed texts have a place as a medium to communicate

development messages in the South African context. The following should, however, be considered when designing such messages:

- The fact that receivers did not understand the most basic message of, especially the verbal signs, in the texts can partly be attributed to the use of English. The impression remains that English is regarded as a status symbol, but not used or understood in daily living.
- The practice of mass-produced texts that target South Africa's population as a homogeneous whole is questioned by these findings. Texts should be written in the vernacular languages used in specific regions. The importance of using the local language in development communication is stressed by Robinson (1997: 1). He indicates that the use of the local language ensures that ideas from other contexts have to be expressed and understood in local terms. The use of the local language also puts the external agent in the role of learner where the local people are those sharing linguistic and cultural knowledge.
- There was ample evidence that visual signs are much better understood and liked than verbal signs. The participants could easily understand and interpret clear, big drawings and photographs. These findings concur with the findings of Lyster (1995) and Zimmerman (1982).
- Visual signs should represent the context of the receiver to ensure the effective communication of information. This can be achieved through audience participation in message design and the careful pre-testing of messages (Mody, 1992 and Doak et al, 1996).
- There was no clear indication that drawings were preferred to photographs. It was evident, however, that when photographs are used, they should be very clear so that the objects are well defined in order to be easily identified.
- The integration of visual and verbal signs with a predominant concentration on visual signs can be used effectively to convey information. Visual signs linked to one another by means of arrows to indicate a process or relationship between signs were generally well understood.

CONCLUSION

The research objective to establish how receivers perceive, receive and interpret the texts was greatly influenced by the low level of comprehension displayed by the participants. Their lack of proficiency in dealing with the verbal text in English had

the result that the intended meaning as communicated by the sender was not successfully conveyed to the receiver. There was virtually no indication that information communicated via the brochures played any role in empowering the target audience.

Vast differences between the social, residential and educational realities of South Africans remain a major impediment to effective communication. This problem is more severe in developing communities and can be translated as the absence of a common code or at least a negotiated code. A communal linguistic codal system is not, as often accepted, the only solution to this problem. A common code should - in the words of Petersen (1992:259) - include a "system of social roles and values, a system of natural knowledge and of historical knowledge".

The notion that the interpretation of both verbal and visual signs depended on the interpretive community of the target audience was reflected in the analysis of the data. The meaning of visual signs is, as in the case of verbal signs, determined by culture and frame of reference, and should be based on the interaction of "people-in-cultures" to ensure that meaning is produced and that understanding will occur (O'Sullivan et al 1994:50-51). If the receiver is familiar with the context in which the visual signs are presented, the interpretation of such signs correlates better with the intended meaning.

The central role of codal knowledge in communication requires that methods be devised for identifying the knowledge that is either presupposed or required for communication. This is not an easy task. While conducting this reception study, at least two possible solutions to this problem emerged, which could be explored further.

- The necessity to differentiate between target audiences with few overlapping areas in social and personal histories cannot be overemphasised. The production of customised messages should be encouraged. This would imply greater emphasis on audience research and pre-testing before producing development messages. Empirical research, based on reception theory to evaluate existing texts, could help to find common ground. This also concurs with the finding of Malan and Grossberg (1998: 165) that "South Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity makes it vital that facilitators" - and producers of development texts - "should relate the project to the community's socio-cultural context".
- Secondly, it seems as if participation with, or at least consultation of, end-users is a prerequisite in the production of any material with an objective to transmit information to developing communities. Participation between the producer and receiver of a message could prevent the misinterpretation of visual and verbal signs as well as layout and design conventions that are not well understood by the end-

users. It could also contribute to the development of a common codal competence that would minimise interpretation gaps between producers and receivers of development messages. This is stressed by Megwa (1996:61) when he says that "communication should be visualised as an interactive enterprise in which both the sender and the receiver of information actively take part in its creation, transmission and reception". Biernatzki (1994:32) also postulates that "all communicators, regardless of the medium they are using, must take account of the way the audience is receiving the message, if they hope to communicate effectively. Audience studies, using methods as widely as possible will help sketch the 'big picture' and make possible more effective communication".

In spite of overwhelming evidence that top-down communication campaigns are mostly ineffective, these practices prevail. The time has come to use audience interpretation studies in practice in order to empower people by the light of knowledge.

Notes

1. The original French quotation: "...la reception littéraire ne fonctionne pas seulement dans le cadre restreint de la création ou de la critique littéraire....Il s'agit d'un phénomène qui s'esitue au point d'intersection de toutes les données du domaine social, des conditions de vie et de culture, des préférences, des croyance, du sytème des valeurs. ...le destinaire ne serait plus un récepteur solitaire; ce serait tout le groupe social considéré comme une unité de fonctionnement culturel."
2. For examples of such studies see Flynn & Schweikart, 1986; Cooper, 1985 as well as Segers, 1984 and 1990.
3. The essays published in *The reader and beyond* (Lategan, 1992) are the outcomes of a research project undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council with the aim to explore and assess the impact of reception theory in South Africa.
4. Translated from the Afrikaans.
5. Logical structure is explained by Servaes & Lie (1996:43) as the so-called archetypes rather than the formal and often officially propagated manifestations of a culture.
6. De Jongh & Schellens (1997:419) describe a comprehension test as follows: "After having read the document, participants are presented with a (written or oral) questionnaire on the text. They are requested to answer these questions with or without the text, depending on the document's intended function".

References

- Adesida, O. 1998. Information, knowledge and Africa's development. *African Development Review*, 10(1): 1-9.
- Agunga, R.A. 1997. *Developing the third world. A communication approach*. New York: Nova Science Publishers.
- Agunga, R.A. 1998. Communication for development in Africa – a clarion call. *Communicare*, 17(1): 28-48.
- Berg, B.L. 1998. *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston & London: Allyn & Bacon.

- Biernatzki, W.E. 1994. Afterword. *Communication Research Trends*, 14(3): 32-33.
- Cooper, C.R. ed. 1985. *Researching response to literature and the teaching of literature. Points of departure*. Norwood: Ablex.
- De Jong, M. & Schellens, P.J. 1997. Reader-focused text evaluation: an overview of goals and methods. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 11(4): 402-427.
- Doak, C.C., Doak, G.D. & Root, J.H. 1996. *Teaching patients with low literacy skills*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company.
- Erlandson, D.A. 1993. *Doing naturalistic inquiry: a guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fidel, I.R. 1993. Qualitative methods in information retrieval research. *Library and Information Science Research*, 15C3: 219-247.
- Fish, S.E. 1978. Normal circumstances, literal language, direct speech acts, the ordinary, the everyday, the obvious, what goes without saying, and other special cases. *Critical Inquiry*, 4:625-644.
- Fish, S.E. 1980. *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Fiske, J. 1987. *Television culture*. London: Routledge.
- Flynn, E.A. & Schweickart, P.P. eds. 1986. *Gender and reading: Essays on readers, texts and contexts*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Fokkema, D.W. & Ibsch, E. 1992. *Literatuur wetenschap en overdracht*. Muidersberg: Dick Coutino.
- Hansson, D. 1992. Receiving testimony: To believe or not to believe? In Lategan, B. ed. *The reader and beyond*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Howe, C.Z. 1988. Using qualitative structured interviews in leisure research: illustrations from one case study. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 20(4): 308-324.
- Iser, W. 1978. *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetics response*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Jauss, H.R. 1982. *Towards an aesthetic of reception*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Knight, E.V. 1992. Can we make sense in the aftermath of reception theory? In Lategan, B. ed. *The reader and beyond*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Kvale, S. 1983. The qualitative research interview: a phenomenological and a hermeneutical mode of understanding. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 14:171-196.
- Lategan, B. 1992. The reception of reception theory in South Africa. In Lategan, B. ed. *The reader and beyond*. Pretoria: HSRC.
- Leach, A. 1999. The provision of information to adults in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, by non-governmental organisations. *Libri*, 49, pp. 71-89.
- Lindlof, T.R. 1988. Media audiences as interpretive communities. In: Anderson, J.A. ed. *Communication Yearbook*, 11. Newbury Park: Sage
- Lyster, E. 1995. *Research report on the new readers project*. Durban: Centre for Adult Education.
- Malan, C & Grossberg, A. 1998. The socio-cultural contexts of development communication in the Tswaing Crater – a South African case study. *Communicare*, 17(1):160-186.
- Megwa, E.R. 1996. Population information campaign in Swaziland: balancing individual values and national development goals. *Ecquid Novi*, 17(1):57-67.
- Mody, B. 1992. *Designing messages for Development Communication*. London: Sage Books

Morley, D. 1980. *The nationwide audience: structure and decoding*. London: British Film Institute.

Morley, D. 1992. *Television, audiences and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.

O'Sullivan, T. et al. eds. 1994. *Key concepts in communication and cultural studies*. London: Routledge.

Panos Institute. 1998. *Summary: The World Development Report*. [Online] Available: <http://www.oneworld.org/panos/> Cited 14 June 1998

Patton, M.Q. 1990. *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Petersen, N.R. 1992. Normativity, validity, and relativity reader-orientated methods and the South African