

RE-CONTEXTUALISING ADVERTISING THROUGH RE-CREATION: THE RECYCLING AND TRANSLATION OF ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

María Cantarero Muñoz*

University of Salamanca

GIR TRADIC

ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 pandemic completely reconfigured the semiotic landscape. When the crisis was at its height, a whole series of words, images and sounds (or their absence) became representative symbols of the context we found ourselves in, not only in the media, but also in public and private spaces. This article analyses how these semiotic systems were renegotiated in order to acquire new meanings in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It takes as a case study two Coca-Cola brand advertisements based on the same creative idea, which circulated in 2002 and 2020 respectively. Through a comparative analysis of the elements that make up each version of this multimodal text, it shows how the original advertisement was semiotically translated in order to adapt it to the needs of a new target context (the pandemic situation). We conclude that concepts drawn from intersemiotic and audiovisual translation studies can help shed light on these processes of recontextualization and meaning reconstruction in the case of multimodal texts.

KEYWORDS: Advertising Translation, Multimodal Translation, Meaning Remaking, Intersemiotic Translation

1. Introduction: translating a new multisemiotic landscape

The coronavirus pandemic reshaped the multisemiotic landscape in a variety of ways, not only in the streets (by means of information, guidelines, and warnings on posters and billboards), but also in the media (TV news or advertisements, hashtags on social media, internet memes, and so on). As Adami et al. (2020) put it in the *PanMeMic Manifesto*, "The physical world that people inhabit and navigate has shrunk for those who are enclosed, while for all it has been re-regulated, often also marked visually by all kinds of signs and materially through the redesign of public spaces."

It is no coincidence that one place where these changes are most evident is in the domain of audiovisual communication. The use of digital devices significantly increased under lockdown; indeed, for many, such devices were their only means of contact with the outside world, and during the most extreme moments of the crisis, they were also used for school lessons, exercise classes, concerts, even for virtual visits to museums and socializing with friends. Hence, it is not surprising that the changes should have manifested themselves first and foremost in this domain.

Our hypothesis was that the renegotiation of semiotic regimes requires various kinds of translational processes that can be elucidated using the tools and concepts developed within Translation Studies. In the domain of audiovisual advertising specifically, it is postulated that the (re)creation of advertising campaigns for their insertion into a new context, such as that represented by the COVID-19 pandemic, can be analyzed in

* mariacantarero@usal.es

translatological terms, following the advances in multimodality within the discipline (see, for example, Boria, Carreres, Noriega-Sánchez and Tomalin, 2020).

Advertising, by definition, has to be relevant to current times, and for this reason often draws on news events to its advantage (Scott, 2011). It is thus interesting to see how brands have represented the pandemic and how they have used it in their advertising from a communicative point of view. Therefore, the research questions that were used as the starting point for this project were: how has the advertising landscape changed because of the pandemic? And, more specifically, what general themes, and verbal, visual, and oral elements have been used most?

In what follows, we will examine how one particular brand (Coca-Cola) reused its previous advertisements to make them relevant during the pandemic, and discuss the extent to which translation contributes to the construction of meaning.

2. Methodology

In order to explore how the construction of a particular advertisement draws on current symbols and themes to keep the brand and its values relevant at any given time, we decided to undertake a case study that would offer enough complexity to be a worthy topic for qualitative analysis. But first, a number of multimodal advertising texts were studied in order to extract the elements specific to pandemic advertising. This was done via the database on the *Ads of the World* webpage¹, which permits the filtering of results.

The criterion for the selection of the texts explored in the first instance was that they should belong to commercial advertising, thus omitting results pertaining to organisations and governments. Furthermore, they needed to have been published during the first few months of the pandemic and have the pandemic as their central theme. These texts would then allow us to classify the main verbal, visual, and oral elements that referenced the pandemic. The conclusions of this first stage are summarized in Section 3.

At this point in the research, it became clear that many of the elements in the advertisements had been used before under other circumstances and with a different meaning. As a result, the decision was taken to explore how these elements had been reconfigured (translated) for the new context and how new symbols (such as masks or quarantine) had been added to them. We found that one brand in particular (Coca-Cola) had re-licensed several previous adverts and translated them in a way that made them relevant to the context of the pandemic. Therefore, and because it is a sufficiently well-known brand globally, we decided to use this as a case study in which we could analyse the elements mentioned above.

3. Pandemic advertising: themes and elements when translating the context

As stated above, the multisemiotic landscape was reconstructed or, at least, greatly modified with the pandemic. Indeed, when the health crisis was at its height, most

¹ Available at <https://www.adsoftheworld.com/> (Accessed: 30 June 2022).

communicative acts, both physically and virtually, bore some kind of reference to it. Advertising messages, traditionally seen as a reflection of society, were no exception.

One marketing strategy that many brands used during the pandemic was to emphasise their dedication to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (He and Harris, 2020). While some companies demonstrated their CSR by adapting their factories to produce fans or hand sanitisers (Butler, 2020), others tried to show it through their advertising, such as through repeated calls for social distancing or the use of face coverings.² Many companies took advantage of lockdowns to represent their brands in a positive light and develop brand identity in a new way, often emphasising solidarity and "togetherness", the sense that everyone has a shared experience of the pandemic, despite being physically separated.

The survey revealed that the main pandemic themes covered in these types of advertising, either visually or audio-visually, were the following: (dis)connection, social distancing, lockdowns, face coverings, handwashing, social responsibility (directly related to marketing concept we have just explained), and heroes (such as the health service workers). One recurrent theme is summarized by Adami et al. in their "PanMeMic Manifesto" (2020) as *keeping people separate yet connected*.

How might brands transmit this message while continuing to promote their products at the same time? Well-known brands such as Audi, McDonald's and Volkswagen, among others, found an interesting solution. They all chose to produce new versions of their logotypes in which each element is separated from the rest as if in accordance with the rules of social distancing (see Valinsky, 26 March, 2020)– a form of "pandemic translation".³

Another result worth mentioning were some surprising products created *ad hoc*, such as the so-called "Social Distancing Whopper" (an advert created by Wunderman Thompson for Burger King⁴), in which social distancing is translated into a burger with a triple helping of onions. This slight variation in the product allowed the company to use one of the previously mentioned themes (social distancing) and reconfigure it to its advantage.

Other companies took the opportunity to tailor their products and services to the pandemic context. One neologism that arose in the context was "maskne" (i.e. acne caused by the use of face masks),⁵ which enabled skincare providers to adapt their products to the situation, generating new markets.

Another important trend that arose at this time was a particular use of the first-person plural pronouns, "we" and "us". These are often used in advertising to refer to the brand in question, or to the identity or nationality of the group being targeted. However, in many adverts produced during the pandemic, "we" refers to the world population and the shared experiences of the global crisis. As Sobande (2020, p. 1036) explains:

² It has also been argued that this kind of advertising is a form of "newsjacking", in the sense that current affairs are exploited by brands to gain visibility (Scott, 2011).

³ See research by Gupta and Hagtvedt (2021) on the effect of this trick upon brand perception.

⁴ See the campaign "Social Distancing Whopper" (Burger King by Wunderman Thompson). Available at <https://www.wundermanthompson.com/work/social-distancing-whopper> (Accessed: 30 June 2022)

⁵ See the definition of the term by the brand Camaleon Cosmetics. Available at: <https://camaleoncosmetics.com/en/maskne>. (Accessed: 20 June 22).

Brands' marketed notions of "we" which gloss over inequalities and (re)present everyone as being part of a unified mass of people who are equally susceptible to the negative impacts of COVID-19 do not simply function in ways that may propel their profit. Such a commodified construction of "we" dismisses the experiences of those who are most at risk and worst affected by COVID-19. This is a "we" that may also be nefariously weaponised by brands with an interest in painting a picture of places, and even the world, as being free from discrimination and differences between people, in order for them to target a broader market demographic than usual.

As for the aural dimension, in the pandemic context, silence took on a new meaning. Although often used in advertising to signify anything from tranquillity to loss, during the pandemic it appeared as an obvious reference to the absence of traffic or people on the streets. In many cases, it is not actual silence that we hear⁶ but a representation of it, such as the BMW advert that replaced the background music and/or noise of the car engine with ambient sounds of nature.⁷ Indeed, it is not necessary for there to even be a soundtrack for silence to be represented. In many images, it is translated visually, for instance, by the absence of cars or people in advertisements that would normally have them as their main focal point.

The features discussed above do not necessarily occur in isolation; indeed, as a general rule, they are combined in audiovisual texts. It is, therefore, more beneficial, and of more interest to us, to see how these elements have been re-signified in the context of a specific advertising campaign. For this reason, we selected a campaign in which the re-signification process is evident, due to the fact that there already existed an earlier version of the same campaign, brought out in an entirely different context. In this way, it was possible to ascertain how images or sounds that previously meant one thing could be reconstrued to mean something else.

4. Coca-Cola: not so "original"

Coca-Cola has been one of the world's best-known brands for decades; hence, it is no coincidence that much research has been carried out into the company from many different perspectives (Méndez Noguero, 1995; Taylor, 2000; Ran 2010; Sánchez Porras, 2013, among others). Its advertising strategy, which oscillates between global and local, and between internationalisation and personalised campaigns, has been the subject of much sociological, communicative, and translational analysis.

During the pandemic, Coca-Cola did not neglect its communication with its potential buyers, but surprisingly – for a company famed for its pioneering role in advertising (Méndez Noguero, 1995) – it did not tap into its many resources to produce a completely original campaign. Instead, the adverts it created at this time involved the recycling of several of its best-known campaigns from the past.

⁶ Some scholars (Abril, 2007; Vidal Claramonte, 2017) have argued that total silence cannot exist, because it is always full of meaning in whatever context it appears.

⁷ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MljNPMBSvo0> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

For the specific purpose of this paper, we will focus here on the “For Everyone” campaign (first launched in Spanish in 2002, then reproduced in 2020, see Gianatasio, 2020). The aim – as explained at the beginning of the article - is to uncover the processes by means of which this advert was invested with a new meaning in the context of the pandemic. We will argue that the second advert was re-created by means of a complex intersemiotic translation process. That is to say, it uses the same idea as the first ad launched in 2002, but by adding several new symbols and allusions to the pandemic, it was possible to recontextualise it while maintaining its (global) brand value.

4.1 “For everyone” campaign (2002)

The Coca-Cola “For Everyone” campaign was originally launched in 2002 for the Argentinian public (see Gianatasio, 2020), although it was later exported to Spain and elsewhere with slight variations. These were in response to the need to adapt one of the images which included the name of the country the campaign was launched in (e.g. “Argentina”, changed to “Perú”, “España” etc.) and the phrase “for us”, which had to be localised for the new audience.⁸ Some words corresponding to diatopic varieties of Spanish were also adapted, though in most versions of the advert, the speaker's accent is Argentinian. The success of the campaign, which was first intended to be local, led the company to subtitle it in English, and it still appears today on its global YouTube channel with these subtitles (uploaded in 2009). A later version of the same advert was uploaded in 2013.⁹ It was not able to find an official dubbed version (understanding “official” to be one uploaded by the company itself to its channel), and so an English version voiced by the same person who voiced the Spanish one was used here. This is the translation used for the analysis, and the speaker utters the following words:

For the fat, for the skinny, for the tall, for the short, for those that laugh, for the near-sighted, for those who cry, for the optimistic, for the pessimistic, for those who have it all, for those who have nothing, for the open, for the players, for the closed, for the families, for the anxious, for kings, for magicians, for the committed, for castaways, for the rockers, for those that go, for those who ride the train, for the well-mannered, for those who suffer, for bikers, for the ones who are there, for the ones who work, for the ones who are here, for the romantics, for those who love you, for those who love you not, for those who love you a little, for those who love you a lot, for the tanned, for nudists, for the superstitious, for the original, for jugglers, for the calculating, for the bald, for sportsmen, for those who read, for those who write, for astronauts, for twins, for the different, for clowns, for those who live alone, for those who live together, for the undecided, for kissers, for the first, for the last, for men, for the cautious, for her, for musicians, for the transparent, for the strong, for the ones who excel, for the ones who participate, for the ones who add, for the ones who won't be silenced, for us. For everyone.¹⁰

⁸ In the spot for the Argentinian market, for example, while the camera focuses on the word “Argentina” appearing on the can, the voice says “for us”, so the image was changed in each market, while the speech for that part of the spot remained the same.

⁹ Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPmP7lwbASA> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

¹⁰ English version. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcCSa77mzWk> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

The discursive strategy used is obvious: it involves a parallelism in which the name of the brand and the product are deliberately left elliptical – though of course it is understood that the title of the campaign, "For everyone", refers to the product ("a Coke for everyone"). Moreover, the idea is not only to create a list of parallel phrases, but also to create a series of contrasts: that whatever you are like, there is a coke for you. In this way, diametrically opposed words are used, such as "fat-skinny", "tall-short", "optimistic-pessimistic". Interestingly, these kinds of physical allusions were omitted in later versions.

On the verbal level, the first-person plural is not used until the end of the monologue ("for us, for the whole world"). This use of "we" as a reference to a global population is not new for Coca-Cola, whose advertising and marketing strategies oscillate between localisation and internationalisation (Méndez Noguero, 1995). Many of its campaigns, despite starting out with the same idea, are filmed with physically different protagonists in order to maintain the closeness with the target audience (see, for example, the different versions of the "Brotherly Love" campaign in 2017 for countries such as Spain, Thailand, and Ecuador, among many others).

The verbal plane is extremely interesting from a semiotic point of view. As the voice narrates people's different characteristics (see the list above), images of Coca-Cola cans, boxes and bottles (i.e. the product) appear. Sometimes the image focuses on specific elements, for example, the top or bottom of the can, the bottle top, or the labelling. These, in turn, are modified to take on a specific meaning (the bottle half full or half empty, the can open or closed) and new meanings are also created by means of techniques such as zooming in on the images (focusing on a specific word on the labelling, on a part of the brand name or on a symbol, such as the trademark or the recycling symbol).

As for the auditory aspect, the voiceover for the English version is performed by the same person who did the Spanish version. This voiceover is male and the tone he uses is lively, even cheerful, due to the speed of the delivery (particularly at the beginning). The background music is also the same in both versions. The combination of all these elements (visual, verbal, auditory) clearly transmits a message of hope.

4.2 "For Everyone" campaign (2020)

Although most major international brands created advertising that was relevant to the pandemic, often making direct reference to it, this Coca-Cola advert stands out for being a translation of the previous one. In that case, there were several local versions, but for this new advert, there are many more.

The idea behind both campaigns is the same: a Coke for everyone, no matter what they are like. However, in the pandemic context, what the brand represents is not the people's *characteristics*, but their *circumstances* during the pandemic.

The parallel structure of the text in the first ad is reproduced in the 2020 version by repeating the same idea with a slightly different meaning, namely that Coca-Cola is the drink for all who are suffering during the pandemic in different ways. In the Spanish version, for instance, the preposition in the campaign title has been changed from "Para todos" to

“Por todos”. This small variation in the preposition introduces a change of meaning: by using "para", the public understands that there is a Coke for everyone, no matter what they are (like); using "por" implies a toast to the people that struggled against COVID-19 in different ways.

In English, the 2020 version goes like this:

For those who are apart, for those who are together, for our friends, for our families, for those we know well, for those we barely know, for classmates, for workmates, for relatives, for neighbours, for those who share, for those with little ones, for those with older ones, for those who can't work, for those who can't stop working, for those who cough into their elbows, for those who don't gather, for those who don't kiss, for those who have facemasks, for those who don't have facemasks, for those who came back, for those in quarantine, for those who wish they could come back, for the elderly, for those who help the elderly, for the firefighters, for the sanitation workers, for the volunteers, for the first responders, for the doctors and nurses, for those in fear, for the fearless, for those who join forces, for those who sing from balconies, for the strong, for the fragile, for those who recover, for those who are no longer with us, for those who are struggling, for those who never give up, for those who believe, for what we love the most, we will get through this, for everyone.¹¹

It is clear that, on the verbal level, the overriding idea is the same as in the 2002 advert. There continues to be parallelism in the structure – short sentences that begin, for the most part, with "for those" – and, as in the previous version, a series of contrasts are made, for example, "for those in fear, for the fearless".

Regarding the auditory dimension, it is worth noting that the same music is used in both versions. However, in the new context, it seems to acquire a new meaning and evoke new feelings. This may be due to the tone of the voice that voices the new message. It is spoken by the same actor, but in a much graver, more dignified tone.

As for the visual aspects, some of the images have remained unchanged (for example, bottles of different sizes are used to illustrate “for families”), but in others, the same images are used but with new meanings (a cap bent in the shape of puckering lips which, in 2002, referred to the line “For kissers”, in 2020 becomes "For those who don't kiss"). There are also new images with new meanings, for instance, the icon representing “throw away in the trash can” is focused exclusively on the upper part of the body by the camera while the voice says “for those who cough into their elbows”.

In the context of the pandemic, not only do the words evoke specific situations, but the images, either explicitly or otherwise. For example, the phrase "for those who sing from

¹¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wktR1XjYtTQ> (Accessed: 20 June 2022). It is worth mentioning that another English version for the United States was launched (voiced by a different person) that is much shorter, but shares the same idea: “For those living together, and those living apart, for classmates, graduates, and teachers making the best of it, for the restaurants delivering to our doorsteps, for the frontline workers, putting it on the line every single day, for this great nation, determined to be stronger on the other side. Thanks to all of you. We'll be together again.” Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fd9G9MBdv2U> (Accessed: 20 June 2022).

the windows" could have been used in any context, and yet, framed by the pandemic, it takes on a whole new meaning, with indirect allusions to confinement, isolation, and so on.

5. Final remarks and new avenues

This study, though limited, has attempted to offer a first approach to the recycling of audiovisual texts for new contexts. As we have seen - from the verbal level (including lexis, pronouns and structures) to the visual (images and symbols) and the auditory (music, silence, tone of voice) - there are many possible analytical perspectives, each of which deserve their own special attention.

The complexity of our case study stems from the fact that it is a multimodal text (in which the meaning is constructed through the interactions of all these levels) that has been translated into another multimodal text with similar characteristics, but to which changes have been introduced (in the images, tone of voice, verbal mode) to create new meanings. In the field of cinema, this would be considered a remake. However, in advertising, there has been little theorization about the process of recycling or reusing audiovisual content to produce a new, completely re-signified advertisement (although, it must be said, there are many cases of it). The development of an analytical model for multimodal translation would be very useful for future research that seeks to explore the repurposing of advertising texts to generate different meanings.

Sounds, silence, and images are all social and cultural constructs that we can interpret in accordance with models that we have internalized during our lives. However, the way in which an image can acquire a particular value, or music can take on different meanings, are still hotly debated. In the words of Scott (1990, p. 226): "Understanding a complex message like an ad would involve evoking several symbolic schemata – a huge regression of past exposures to pictures, words, sounds, and ads– and the making and matching of many hypotheses according to learned conventions".

Translation Studies, now that it has moved beyond the interlingual to take in all kinds of symbolic transfer and is no longer fixated on the concept of equivalence, is an essential discipline for analysing these transformations. Indeed, the very fact that there effectively exists a source text (the first manifestation of the advertisement) and a target text (a new version, produced in response to a new environment) means that the concepts, tools and methods developed in Translation Studies can easily be applied in the advertising domain. The advances made in Audiovisual Translation in particular, along with the multimodal turn in different epistemological areas and its application to Translation Studies (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Dicerto, 2018; Boria et al., 2020) are likely to prove fundamental when analysing advertising translations.

The signage and symbols that arose during the Covid-19 crisis not only invited us to re-examine the relationship between language, materiality, and public space, but also offered our discipline an opportunity to broaden its scope by turning its attention to public health and communication. The concept of multimodal translation, understood here as the

re-construction of a given multimodal text for new audiences and contexts, could contribute significantly to this debate.

Recently, many adverts have been launched that bring new perspectives on the pandemic, such as the announced “return to physical contact”. This understanding that the pandemic is now something from the past will surely renegotiate the multimodal landscape once again.

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About the author: María Cantarero Muñoz is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Salamanca. She collaborates with the Research Group TRADIC (Translation, Ideology, Culture) at the same institution. Her research focuses on the study of multimodal texts - especially advertising discourse - and how they combine different semiotic systems to construct persuasive messages