

# CHAPTER ...

## BILLBOARD POSTERS

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### 1. Introduction

In this paper I discuss a specific type of carrier of visual culture and advertising, namely, billboard posters. A billboard poster is a message carrier and medium of advertising with a variety of functions. As a form of advertising, its main function is to attract attention and to persuade and manipulate. As a cultural medium, however, it also transmits artistic and social phenomena and problems, as well as entertains. The billboard has been examined primarily from the point of view of advertising and marketing (cf. Somló 1999, Móricz 1999), but its peculiar communicative situation and linguistic devices have not been analyzed in depth, only as part of the characteristics of the language of advertising (Sas 2007b). However, billboards represent a communicative situation which is very different from those of other forms of advertising, and, according to advertising experts, they present the greatest challenge in marketing communication (Papp-Váry – Bonyhádi 2009).

In the paper I overview the visual and linguistic characteristics of Hungarian and English language billboard posters. I analyze Hungarian language posters through examining advertising posters as well as cultural content posters included in the annual ARC poster exhibition. The main goal of my paper is to demonstrate that, even though these two types of posters represent very different communicative situations (sections 2 and 3), they still use the same devices for capturing attention and persuasion. Since the average time span for the observation of a billboard poster is enough for only few elements, it is important for such a poster to be effective and readable from a distance. The posters which are best at capturing attention are those that exploit humor (Dyrel 2009) provided by the play of images and on words. The basis of this play of images and

words is most often homophony, homonymy, and polysemy, but examples of figures of sounds, play on names, lexeme change, and collocations also abound. The creators of posters often use the referential role and multiple connotations of emblems and trademarks as well. After discussing examples of the different types of billboard posters in section 4, I analyze them with the help of various pragmatic models (section 5).

## **2. Billboard posters**

Billboard posters serve as the cave drawings of the modern era. Although posters refer to their objects by being similar to them, we cannot talk about pure iconicity in their case. Most posters employ symbols in fact: on the one hand, the connection between the signs on posters and their objects is based on convention, on the other hand the text and the image function jointly as a sign, which not only substitutes the notion, but also recalls related moods and trains of thought. This symbolicity gives the expressive force to billboards.

Every billboard contains some kind of image. Even though the image has a great emotional force, it has multiple meanings in itself, and, thus, its meaning usually has to be made unambiguous (Móricz 1999: 19). According to Roland Barthes (1977), unlike language, every image is polysemous, and the viewer or reader selects some interpretations out of an enormous set of possible candidates, while rejecting other meanings immediately. During this process of interpretation, in addition to the context, the text that goes with the image, i.e. language, helps anchor the meaning, thereby directing the interpreter to the expected interpretation.

Every billboard poster is characterized by visuality, but its creators do not leave the interpretation of the visual images to chance: in addition to the image, text also appears on the poster, either supporting or changing the primary meaning suggested by the iconic image. The attention attracting force of posters, however, is provided by the image rather than the text, since the former triggers faster understanding, easier recall as well as deeper imprinting and emotions than linguistic signs, since images are stored in memory for longer periods of time (Móricz and Téglássy 1999: 159–60). Thus, billboard posters can be regarded as complex texts: according to Dyer (1982 cited in Gardner and Luchtenberg 2000: 1809), these texts are semiotically “thick”, since they use several means and channels at the same time.

Billboard posters are of two main types: advertising posters and cultural content posters. The two types of posters represent different

communicative situations: people look, or rather just glance, at the former while in motion, whereas they read consciously through the latter in a stationary position. This calls for different imagery and linguistic features – even though the two types of posters use almost the exact same rhetorical and stylistic means of persuasion.

As a medium of advertisement, the billboard poster is practically omnipresent in public places, reaching large numbers of people. It can be considered a friendly medium since it operates in a public domain rather than our private sphere. At the same time, it is also a very aggressive medium, since, unlike other forms of advertising, the poster cannot be avoided, discarded without reading, turned the page over, switched off or muted (Somló 1999: 128), and its message affects us unawares. In some cities billboard posters proliferate so quickly that attempts are made to decrease their numbers through social or judicial means. More than a thousand 12 square meter posters have to be taken down in Paris by the end of 2009, and the size of newly posted posters has been maximized in 8 square meters, while billboards have been completely banned from neighborhoods frequented by tourists as well as in the immediate vicinity of schools (MTI Hungarian News Agency Corporation 2007: [http://www.mfor.hu/cikkek/Betiltottak\\_az\\_oriasplakatokat\\_Parizsban.htm](http://www.mfor.hu/cikkek/Betiltottak_az_oriasplakatokat_Parizsban.htm)).

Since we see advertising billboard posters while we are on the move, in vehicles or on foot, they have to be effective and readable from a distance. They affect their moving viewer in a short period of time, cannot carry messages rich in information, and, thus, usually contain only a small number (5-6) of words. Billboard posters are not read but rather glanced at (Móricz and Téglássy 1999): according to experimental measurements, drivers spend the average of 1 second looking at a billboard poster (cf. Papp-Váry and Bonyhádi 2009), which means that the text and the image have to be immediately understandable, since there is no time for re-reading. According to findings, this 1 second of observation time is enough for processing seven words and two graphic elements (Móricz and Téglássy 1999: 106). These numbers are in agreement with general memory limits: 7 +/- 2 elements or groups of elements can be stored in memory easily. Thus, the greatest challenge to tackle in the creation of a billboard is to place as little as possible text in it such that this minimal linguistic message achieves maximal effect.

The placement of image and text on a poster is carefully planned: some forms of image editing have been demonstrated by experiments tracking eye movement and using thermographic images to be more effective than others (Sas 2007a: 119).

One of the basic rules is the rule of thirds, according to which an image is to be divided into thirds horizontally as well as vertically, and the four intersections of the lines are the points with the greatest visual force (Móricz and Téglássy 1999: 75). If the poster is not divided into parts of equal size, it is a good idea to follow the rule of golden ratio in doing the division, that is, the smaller part should be commensurable to the larger part exactly like the larger part is commensurable to the whole. In directing the reader's attention, the direction of the reading should also be taken into consideration: the eyes of a person reading from left to right follow a Z curve (ibid. 76), so a person like this will glance at the upper left corner of a poster first and proceed from there to the lower right corner.

The aim of advertisements is to attract attention, elicit interest, and imprint in memory (Móricz and Téglássy 1999: 36). According to advertising experts, the successful advertisement is believable, simple, readable, and able to transmit a positive emotion. If these conditions are met, the targeted viewers will spend time to read the advertisement. The motto "Good advertising doesn't always sell more than bad advertising. But at least it's good." appears on a copper plate by the gate of a large advertising company (Sas 2007b: 18). But what is good advertising transmitted by a billboard poster like linguistically? Linguistically, there is only one good answer, regardless of sales statistics: good is what complies with Leech's (1983) Interest Principle ("Say something which is unpredictable, and hence interesting"), that is, something which ingeniously and successfully uses the creativity of language and whose polysemy and multiple meanings can be solved by the target audience.

The same ingenuity and linguistic creativity is used in cultural content posters, which use the means of advertising to focus on social, political or philosophical issues. I have investigated cultural content posters included in the exhibition of the ARC billboard poster competition, organized annually in Budapest, Hungary, by the company Arc Kft. since 2000. According to the basic concept of the event, "beyond commercial content, billboard advertising can also convey social messages" (see, in Hungarian, <http://www.arcmagazin.hu/magunkrol>). The posters exhibited as part of the event are on display in a public place are concentrated at one venue, namely, Budapest's Felvonulási tér (Parade Square). Viewers look at the exhibition consciously and standing in front of the posters rather than by chance and in motion, and, accordingly, the number of signs in the posters is not limited to seven words and two graphic elements either. Beyond conveying topical, socially relevant messages, the ARC posters often

parody advertising billboard posters and borrow their imagery, linguistic devices, and strategies of manipulation.

So, even though advertising billboard posters and the ARC posters are created with a different purpose, convey different messages, and the circumstances of their reception are different as well (attention is passive with the former and active with the latter), they use the same linguistic means to capture these different forms of attention. Because of this, I will discuss the characteristics of the two types of posters together.

In my analysis I rely on the following corpus of posters: my own collection of advertising billboard posters which I have been putting together since the summer of 2008, and the material of the ARC poster exhibitions from between 2000 and 2006, available electronically (<http://www.arcmagazin.hu> and <http://kep.tar.hu/arcplakat>). For collecting a corpus of English language advertising billboard posters and cultural content posters I have used the Google search engine for images (<http://images.google.com>).

### 3. The language of billboard posters

In their linguistic devices, billboard posters aim, most importantly, to employ means of capturing attention and of differentiation from other posters. This is achieved through exaggerated statements, playful comparisons (*Gut, besser, Gösser*), words referring to novelty, quality, and excellence (*newest, biggest, only*), unique word formation (*jegeslegjobb jeges+legeslegjobb* “icy”+emphatic superlative “best”, meaning “best and iciest”, *Tibiverzum* Tibi+univerzum “Tibi [chocolate brand name] universe”, *energiadetektív* “energy detective”), the use of complex meanings of words (*Suzuki – Jól jár vele*, meaning both “Suzuki: you’ll go well with it” and “Suzuki: a good deal”) and language games (*Yodafone*) (Szikszainé 2000). The imagery and text of the posters create an effect together, and poster viewers usually like interactive posters, that is, those which involve them in the communication process, in the play of images and words. This is also evidenced by numerous blog<sup>1</sup> and forum entries posted on the internet, discussing witty vs. annoying (advertising) posters and slogans.

The linguistic characteristics, exaggerations, and language use of advertising billboard posters are well illustrated by two ARC posters from 2004. Both of them bear the title *Add el magad!* “Sell yourself”, and both

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<sup>1</sup> <http://addict.blog.hu/tags/brief>

show a smiling young woman against a colorful background, next to a list of contradictory, cliché statements. One has the following text:

(1)

*Válassza ön is Taba Ágnes!* “Choose Ágnes Taba”

*Jobb, mint a hagyományos* “Better than the traditional”

*Megéri az árát* “Worth its price”

*Nem habzik* “Doesn’t foam”

*Jó barát a konyhában* “A good friend in the kitchen”

*Ajándékozni öröm* “A pleasure to present”

*Megőrzi a színét* “Colorfast”

*Rendkívül egészséges és még fogyaszt is\* (\* nyomokban mogyoródarabkákat tartalmazhat)* “Extremely healthy and excellent for a diet\* (\* may contain traces of nuts)”

*Hűtés nélkül is hosszán eltartható* “Does not require refrigeration”

*Jól bírja a vizet* “Waterproof”

*Öröm vele az étel.* “Life is a joy with her”

The other poster has the following text listed:

(2)

*Válassza ön is András Virágot!* “Choose Virág András”

*Rendkívül jó a tisztítóereje* “Extremely good cleansing power”

*Értékálló* “Preserves value”

*Élmény vele a borotválkozás* “Great for shaving”

*Dús hatást kölcsönöz* “Adds volume”

*Többrétegű* “Multilayered”

*Szinte magától kitakarít* “Cleans almost without help”

*Könnyen mosható* “Easy to wash”

*A gyermekkor ízeit idézi* “Will remind you of the tastes of your childhood”

*Kutyája imádni fogja.* “Your dog will love her.”

These two posters parody advertising messages that are incapable of differentiating between products due to the fact that the stereotypical characteristics listed are true for all members of a set of products (e.g. laundry detergents, food, or hygiene products). As we can see from these examples, the keywords connected to a brand or a topic become empty and are no longer capable of functioning as elements of differentiation. Both listings contain faulty arguments or arguments not supported by evidence, contradictions of content, false promises, appeals to emotions, and misinformation, i.e. all those strategies of manipulation that characterize written advertisements (Árvay 2007).

Differentiating a billboard poster from all the others is achieved by playing with images and on words, unique and surprising effects. This,

however, has to be achieved as economically as possible, since the available space and circumstances of reception by the viewers present limitations to expression. Thus, posters are characterized by compression and condensation in both imagery and language, which can be achieved most easily through the use of figures of speech, linguistic imagery, and language games. A figure of speech is usually defined as a deviation from the linguistic norm (Szikszainé 2007), and a deviation from the usual always has a considerable stylistic effect. In the case of advertisements, figures of speech are often used to sneak a brand name or product name into the advertising slogan, or as a source of linguistic humor. Thus, language games become an indispensable requirement of billboard posters, since they can attract and maintain the attention of their target audience only through it, due to the extremely limited conditions of their reception.

The defining characteristics of the language games are specified by Ulrich (1999, cited in Forgács 2007) in the following four rules, which have become almost normative for creators of billboard posters:

“1. Violate deliberately and consistently a generally used and valid linguistic rule.

2. Aspire to be ambiguous. Do not be quick to make clear and complete your meaning, that is, what you want to achieve with your utterance.

3. Word the text such that it does not become understandable immediately, instead word it such that curious viewers expect a message that makes sense and want to find this message by solving the puzzle presented by the text.

4. Express yourself such that there is a secondary message behind the primary one.”

That is, instead of explicit, spoonfed, “reason” type messages, billboard posters usually carry implicit, emotion based “tickle” type messages that require thinking and use language games. The main difference between the “reason” vs. “tickle” types, according to Simpson (2001), is that “reason” type advertisements contain the brand name and company logo, and provide a clear and unambiguous motivation for the purchase of the advertised product. Such advertisements follow very similar conclusion patters (e.g. if – then) and the beaten track of persuasion. A typical slogan of this kind is *Buy one, get one free*. In contrast, “tickle” type advertisements attempt to affect emotions and the imagination, and their message is indirect, often condensed into narratives or containing a puzzle or a language game, persuading peripherally. Since the message is not directly presented, the slogan often omits to even name the brand, requiring from the viewers a greater operational effort to

understand them, but also having a longer impact due to the “aha!” experience. Simpson’s (2001) example of a “tickle” type advertisement is, for instance, the *If you want to drink whiskey, drink whiskey* slogan.

Even though the two types of advertisements are easily differentiated theoretically, they are not necessarily differentiated in real life, since, as Bernstein (1974: 118, cited in Simpson 2001: 591) stated, “Reason and Tickle ... every advertisement contains both. Some advertisement are almost all reason. Some are almost tickle. But no advertisement can be all one or the other.” Among the posters I analyze the tickle type is more dominant, so I will discuss these in more detail, below.

#### 4. Language games in posters

A language game usually means playing with words, so language game and wordplay are often treated as synonyms. However, language games include games other than wordplay. Wordplay is defined as unexpectedly connecting words of identical or similar phonetic form but of different meaning, also including distortions of words, sentences, sayings and proverbs (Szathmári 2008: 570).

Language games appearing in billboard posters can be categorized in various ways (cf. Partington 2009). Depending on how many words are used in it, wordplay can be a one part wordplay (e.g. *Tibiverzum*) or a polynomial (more than one part) wordplay (e.g. *Canon you can*). If we take realization into consideration, a language game can be based, for instance, on repetition (e.g. *A kevesebb több, a kevesebb jobb, a kevesebb zseniálisabb* = “*Less is more, less is better, less is brilliant*”), although a single word can also constitute wordplay (e.g. *Hejnekem*). The former type is considered horizontal wordplay, the latter vertical (cf. Hausman 1974, cited in Forgács 2007). In horizontal games words follow one another in a text, whereas in vertical games one linguistic element has more than one meaning, i.e. horizontal games are explicit, while vertical games are implicit. Billboard posters use vertical games more often, since due to the limited availability of space and short time for reception, the greatest possible amount of information is conveyed through the use of a minimal number of signs. Due to the implicitness, however, the decoding of the message requires a greater mental activity.

Language games can also be categorized on the basis of whether they contain exact pun or near pun elements (Partington 2009: 1795). Billboard poster texts can also be analyzed semantically and categorized as containing polysemy, homonymy, paronymy, and antonymy. Language



games can be based on various subsystems of language (cf. Forgács 2007), i.e. be phonemic, grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic games. The various categorizations, however, include overlaps and cannot be used completely systematically.

In my paper I categorize language games by subsystem of language they operate on, starting with the phonemic level and progressing, via the grammatical level, to language games involving pragmatics. I do not discuss all subtypes of language games, my aim, instead, is to discuss the most frequent communicative strategies of billboard posters. Except for the horizontal wordplay all types of language games are frequent on billboards.

Among the Hungarian advertising posters and ARC posters investigated by me, language games were most frequently of the phonemic kind. Since these are, with a few exceptions, untranslatable and do not go through in another language, I will not be citing Hungarian examples for this type. Phonemic language games use insertion, deletion and exchange of phonemes especially in names of brands and products inside slogans or in creating a slogan with a poetic or musical effect.

An advertisement of the Culver fast food restaurant chain provides an excellent example of homophony: their billboard poster depicts a hamburger and a milkshake, plus the words *Two Tasty*. The use of the word *two* elicits the homophonous *too*, evoking the interpretation in the viewers of the poster that both of these advertised products are tasty, as well as the one that they are *too tasty*. An ARC billboard poster is also based on similar phonetic forms when the brand name *Heineken* is distorted to *Hejneken* (*hej nekem* “whoa to me”). The basis of the language game here is the Hungarian folk etymological interpretation through a reinterpretation of the morphological boundary, evoking a wish in the viewer to possess a beer.

Designers of advertisements often use the identity of a brand name and a common noun, even if the identity of the two is only realized in pronunciation. The entire advertising campaign of Absolut Vodka is based on homonymy in pronunciation. The name of the vodka is used with the adjectival meaning of *absolute*, in absurd or even nonsensical combinations and situations: *absolut fantasy*; *absolut perfection*; *absolut Berlin*, *absolut time*, *absolut book*; *in an absolut world*, etc. (for further examples, see <http://www.absolutad.org>).

Recent billboard posters of Watt energy drink in Hungary employ homophony and transliteration into Hungarian (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

The slogans use the identity of the name of the drink (*Watt*) and the English interrogative pronoun *what* as well as transliteration of English into Hungarian orthography: *Wattdujuszink?* “What/Watt do you think?” (Figure 1); *Wattdujudrink?* “What/Watt do you drink?”; *Watteparty* “What/Watt a party”. Another billboard poster (Figure 2) evokes two meanings at once due to the homophony and transliteration: *Watt iz mój név?* “What is my name? / Watt is my name.” Homophony due to Hungarian voicing assimilation (where an obstruent assimilates to a following obstruent in voicing) is also used on other posters with the slogan *Természetes wattság* (literally, “Natural watt-ness”, homophonous with *természetes vadság* “natural wildness”). In the latter poster the language game is reinforced by the imagery of animals acting “wildly”: one poster shows a frog with a crocodile mask, another a fish with a shark fin tied to its back with a belt. The element *természetes* “natural” is also ambiguous with the meanings “matter of fact” and “made without additives”. The same language game is used on another poster of the product, where the question *wattdujudrink?* “what/watt do you drink?” has *Ez csak természetes!* “It’s only natural!” written underneath it. So, as the examples illustrate, almost all of the Hungarian ads of this brand use multiple language games, most of them employing homophony as a device.

Various sound figures are also used often in billboard posters: lexemes are modified by exchanging, adding or deleting letters, and it is usually the job of the pictures in the poster to help decode the lexeme distortion. A case in point is a m&m advertisement from 2000, whose main text only said *illeniu*. Underneath it in small print the following text appeared: *It just won't be complete without*, followed by two m&m’s. That is, the two letter *m*’s of the word *millenium* were missing from the main slogan, and the smart reader could insert the two m&m’s in their place to complete the word. This example shows well how the active participation of viewers is required in deciphering advertisements containing sound figures.

Homonyms, that is, the use of words of the same form, are often used in billboard posters. From the point of view of attracting attention,

homonyms are very economical linguistic units, since they can evoke multiple meanings without repetition, also giving the viewer the joy of discovering the language game in it. For instance, the hotel chain Coast Hotels & Resorts uses the advertising slogan *Enjoy the coast at Coast*, employing the homonymy of their name and the common noun.

In addition to homonymy, polysemy – the use of words with more than one meaning – is also frequently used in billboard posters. Polysemy is realized in such a way that not only a literal meaning of the word being used is recalled but also an abstract meaning. This can be observed on *Suzuki: Jól jár vele* (“Suzuki: you'll go well with it” and “Suzuki: a good deal”) slogan. The slogan of Watt energy drink analysed above (*Természetes wattság* = ‘Watt, naturally’ and ‘Naturally wild’) uses the polysemy of the word *természetes*. It happens with billboards that the literal meaning is represented with the image, while the abstract meaning is represented with the text.

Billboards often contain language games involving interpretation where a word is connected to another word or words through an opaque etymological or folk etymological relationship (Forgács 2007: 129). This may happen through semantic reinterpretation, folk etymological subtraction, folk etymological reinterpretation of pseudo-compounds, or reinterpretation of morpheme structure. The *AdHere* poster (Figure 3) is an example of the latter, playing on separating two elements in the verb *adhere*. The language game here serves the purpose of transmitting two meanings: first, informing the viewer about the possibility of their own ad appearing in the same space, and, second, ascertaining that such an ad would adhere in the prospective ad’s viewer’s memory.



Figure 3



Figure 4

A reinterpretation of demotivated elements is also a possible language game. In the poster *Vizet találtak a Marson* “Water was found on Mars” (see Figure 4), reinterpretation happens through combining the visual and linguistic planes. The image, however, reinterprets the first meaning generated in the interpretation process.

Antonymy can also be the basis of advertising slogans. *We warmly recommend cold* – says the poster of the Columbia clothing company, next to a picture of a winter coat. The slogan is built on the antonymy of the words *warm* and

*cold*, and the stylistic value of the oxymoron is increased by the literal interpretation of the collocation *recommend warmly*. The antonymy of the meanings of words and the surprise stemming from this is used in the advertisement of the Hungarian chocolate bar Chokito, where the poster uses the slogan *Chokito, ronda és finom* “Chokito – ugly and tasty”. The word *ronda* “ugly” emphasizes a negative characteristic of the product, but a presupposition that can be connected to it (namely, that whatever is ugly is also probably bad) is immediately overwritten by the next adjective.

An exchange of stems lies at the base of a recent advertisement of Škoda car manufacturer: *Szerelem első váltásra* “Love at first change”, where *change* can refer to either a change of gears or a change of a previous car to a Škoda.

A visual way of expression is transmitted linguistically most easily by figures of speech. Billboard posters often contain metaphors, symbols, similes, examples of metonymy, allegory, synesthesia, and personification, since these can communicate a lot of meaning in condensed form. Transfer based on similarity occurs in an ARC poster from 2006: *Birka vagy? Pörkölt lesz belőled!* “Are you a sheep? You’ll be made into stew.” The poster depicts a sheep on the left and a plate of mutton stew on the right, but the intended secondary meaning is that the poster talks about sheepishness as a characteristic of humans and intends to provoke. A transfer of features of animals to humans is very frequent in posters. The Gillette company advertises its razors with a poster showing a completely shaved cat and the slogan *Gillette – The best a cat can get*. In addition to transfer based on similarity, the effect of the poster and its imprinting in memory are also increased by the slogan internal rhyming of words.

Billboard posters also sometimes occur with no text at all, where everything is expressed by the imagery. The most successful text free posters employ only visual metaphors, where the advertised product or a



Figure 5

typical characteristic of it is depicted together with something which is typical, can be easily recognized visually, and allows multiple connotations. For instance, the Gibson guitar is compared to a female leg in one poster and to a nuclear mushroom cloud in another (Figure 5). Personification is also a frequent device used in billboard posters, attributing a human characteristic to a non-human being or depicting one as a human. Personification occurs, for instance, in one of the posters of the Hungarian grocery store chain Plus using the slogan *Kicsi Árak* “Little Prices”: large sized numbers with faces, arms and legs refer to people in it, and the

capitalizing of both words in the slogan makes it look like a person's name.

The most important part of a poster with text is its slogan. A good slogan carries a simple, brief, rhythmical, condensed and fitting message, has a transferable meaning and a wide association range, and is easy to remember (Sas 2007a: 150). Cases in point are beer advertisements *Girls rule. Guys drool* and *Gut, Besser, Gösser*, where the latter employs a pseudo superlative of the German adjective and its comparative form, which, due to its untranslatability, is used in this form in every language. This slogan is imitated by the Hungarian advertisement of Karpackie beer in their slogan *Beer, Bier, Birnád* "Beer, Bier, you would dig it", which is not very successful, partly due to the mixing of languages (English, German, and Hungarian), and also to possibly generating an irrelevant meaning for viewers with good English proficiency, who might interpret *bier* (as "a movable coffin frame") in English. The last word of the slogan, *birnád*, is a Hungarian conditional form of a verb with several meanings, almost all of which could be interpreted as part of the slogan. The verb's primary meaning is "able to hold or carry", but it also means "bear" as well as has the slang meaning "like, appreciate" and the archaic meaning "possess". The *Gut, Besser, Gösser* slogan generated a poster entered for the ARC competition, advertising tap water in the pseudo-advertisement with *Gut, Besser, Wasser*.

Collocations, phrases and sayings are also used in billboard posters in both the original as well as distorted forms, since, due to the fact that they are widely known, they are easy to recall and entertaining to recognize, and whose accompanying message, thus, is not seen as overly pushy (Forgács 2007: 194). For instance, the well-known phrase *Make love, not war* was used by a large vodka manufacturing company in their billboard poster using the slogan *Make cocktails, not war*. The well-known credit card is advertised with the slogan *La dolce Visa*, clearly making a reference to Fellini's movie "La dolce vita" and using a picture of strawberries with cream, thereby strengthening the statement that life can be only enjoyed with the advertised credit card. Distorted sayings and proverbs are also often used in billboard posters. JET gas stations currently use the following slogan in Hungary: *Minden út a JET kútra vezet* "All roads lead to the JET gas station", playfully distorting the well-known phrase *All roads lead to Rome*. The picture in the poster reinforces the language game, showing several cars going into the gas station. The playfulness of the text is increased by the fact that in Hungarian the words *út* "road" and *kút* "gas station" have a similar phonetic form, and the latter can even be interpreted as having gone through the insertion of a word-

initial consonant. The use of sayings in billboard posters is mocked in the slogan of a pseudo-advertisement of the ARC exhibition, changing Latin *Ora et labora* to *Cola et labora*.

Creators of posters sometimes use the literalizing function of the visual image (Forgács 2007: 180), where the picture that goes with the slogan elicits the compositional meaning of the slogan rather than its figurative sense. A good illustration of this point is the poster of a company manufacturing windows (see Figure 6), where the slogan *great taste in windows* uses the word *taste* with the meaning “tendency to like”, while the picture of the child licking a sheet of glass illustrates the word’s meaning “sensation of flavor”. Since we do not only think in linguistic categories, pictures accompanying polysemous slogans make the message more graphic and help understanding it as well as aid imprinting and recall.



Figure 6

Advertising slogans appearing on posters also have an affect on language, and if they are supported by a television commercial, they may become trite phrases or clichés. This is what happened with several of the Fanta soft drink advertising slogans: in 2005, the word *bamboocha* entered the Hungarian language via the advertising slogan *Inni Fanta, élni Bamboocha* “To drink Fanta, to live bamboocha” and became synonymous with “good” and “special”. Another Fanta advertising slogan, *Haverok, buli, Fanta* “friends, party, and Fanta” became a cliché in Hungarian. It also inspired an ARC poster with a historical connotation using the phrase *Haverok, buli, Jalta* “friends, party, and Jalta”.

Well-known emblems and trademarks used on posters have such a strong recall power that they often replace text entirely, as the examples below (Figures 7 and 8) show. According to Sas (2007a: 70), these emblems do not function as icons any more but become a part of collective thinking patterns as memes. The golden arches of McDonald's are recognized even when turned upside down. The tire marks in the other poster shape the McDonald's logo, and this connotation is further strengthened by the inscription *McDrive* in the lower right corner, creating the association to the drive-in fast food restaurant.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Famous trademarks are recognized in any context and any language since the “if – then” logical connection has become conditioned in us. “Advertising symbols that have become icons are readily quoted, changed and parodied by the audience as well” (Sas 2007b: 270, my translation):



Figure 9

the best known Hungarian example of this is the Miska poster from the ARC collection (Figure 9), using Milka’s coloring, typesetting and a few other details, but changes the cow and its background as well as mutates the brand name achieving multiple connotations: *Miska* is a typical Hungarian male nickname,

the cattle in the picture is a Hungarian breed, and the background also shows a typical landscape of the Great Hungarian Plain.

Shapes, forms and colors play a very important role in well-known trademarks, and the linguistic message and brand name could even be omitted. The dominant shapes and colors of well-known trademarks can be used for other purposes with a different message, since viewers often skip the linguistic information in posters. Many posters from the ARC exhibition use this effect of the psychology of forms.

Both advertising billboard posters and cultural posters sometimes form series, relating a story or series of actions in several posters arranged next to each other or following each other in time. Short stories have a stronger persuasive power, are easier to recall, and stay in memory longer (Sas 2007a: 66). The triple poster of WWF is such a narrative paradigm: all three have the text *Ocean levels are rising faster than ever* on them. The posters differ from each other in that the first one shows only a few waves at the bottom of the poster, in the second the water level reaches the middle of the poster, whereas in the third the entire poster is under water. The series character and visual story telling, thus, supports and further reinforces the message of the poster.

In the case of billboard posters, graffiti and other changes introduced by the audience have to be taken into account. The symbols, drawings or text introduced post hoc by viewers form an important part of the linguistic messages of this genre. That is, even such a fixed form of communication can become interactive through viewer added messages and graffiti-like expressions of opinion. But such additions can clearly be recognized as not forming a part of the original message, although recent poster manipulators have become careful to add genuine looking modification.

In the last days of the 2008 ARC exhibition, mysterious emoticons appeared on some posters after an unknown artist added smileys to them. The cheerful and unhappy drawn faces of originally electronic communication changed the original messages of the posters and became an integral part of them. The accepted and well-known meaning and emotional content of the emoticons added something extra to the message of the given poster, which clearly demonstrated that the latest forms of communication also have to be taken into account when analyzing the linguistic characteristics of billboard posters.

## **5. Pragmatic aspects of billboard posters**

The visual and linguistic characteristics of billboard posters can be analyzed also from the point of view of pragmatics as well. For the sake of attracting attention, posters often violate principles of ideal communication. All of the Gricean maxims (1975) are sometimes violated or flouted. It should be emphasized that both processes can be involved. However it can be useful to distinguish between violating and flouting, because violation rather belongs to manipulation, but it does not mean that flouting can not be used for manipulation.

The violation of a maxim is liable to mislead. The violation is consciously introduced by the creators of posters with the aim of manipulating. The most spectacular violation is of the supermaxim and the two specific maxims under the category of Quality (supermaxim: “try to make your contribution one that is true” and the two maxims: “do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”) since billboard posters manipulate exactly through false promises, contradictions and misinformation. However it may happen that the creators of posters flout a maxim in order to generate a certain message by means of conversational implicature. Linguistic games often produce two independent meanings of poster texts, both of which cannot be true at



the same time (Mulken 2005: 709). ARC posters contain more valid information, although inaccuracies can be found in these as well. The Gricean maxims under the category of Quantity (“make your contribution as informative as is required; do not make your contribution more informative than is required”) are not fulfilled in posters completely either. Even though verboseness is not a characteristic feature of posters due to the limitations of space and characteristics of their perception, lack of information is frequent, especially in the case of advertising billboards. Purposeful suppression of information or partial withholding of it serves the purposes of manipulation but violates the expectation regarding the quality of ideal communication. The supermaxim under the category of Manner (“be perspicuous”) and its various maxims (“avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief, be orderly”) is not fulfilled completely in billboard posters – it would call for understandability, terseness as well as avoidance of ambiguity as well as opacity. Almost all posters analyzed by me flout this expectation since posters containing visual and language games, homonymy and polysemy attract attention exactly by not providing an unambiguous reading.

In addition to consciously violating the Gricean maxims, other communication strategies are also used in posters to create effect. Since the goal is to win over viewers, it is important for posters to be polite towards them. This is in accord with Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principle (“minimize the expression of impolite beliefs, and maximize the expression of polite beliefs, all other things being equal”). One of the most salient elements of Leech’s proposals is the foregrounding of the interests of the communicative partner – which is exactly what is exploited in posters: they manipulate the target audience by seemingly focusing on their interests. Leech’s Tact Maxim (“minimize the cost to others and maximize the benefit to others”) is being seemingly observed in the posters of one supermarket chain in Hungary (*Kutya vigye a számolgatást!* “Skip all the additions” and *Velünk látványosan több marad a zsebében* “With us you’ll save visibly more”) where low prices and special sales are emphasized while the real goal is selling more products and making more profit. A frequently used strategy is praising the advertised product, which is usually used in conjunction with making a positive impression on the consumer, i.e. the viewer is praised indirectly through the product, thereby observing the Approbation (or Flattery) Maxim (“minimize dispraise of others and maximize praise of others”) and, at the same time, attempting to win viewers’ agreement and favorable reception. Unexpected things, unique word formations and the use of various levels of meanings of words satisfy the Interest Principle. Another principle, the Pollyana

Principle (“avoid unpleasant topics and favor pleasant ones”) manifests itself in the two types of posters under analysis: while the main strategy used by advertising posters is concentrating on pleasant topics (happiness, success, youth, beauty, wealth), ARC posters also focus on problematic issues of society and politics. Sometimes, however, posters attempt to attract attention with a conscious violation of the Pollyana Principle: posters depicting a child and saying *Rain changes everything. Please drive to the conditions.* have been used in New Zealand along roads in an attempt to call drivers’ attention to a change in driving conditions due to heavy rains. Since this combination of picture and text in itself is not very effective, rain sensors have been added onto the posters which omit red paint which looks like blood when it rains. In this poster the linguistic message does not evoke any negative thoughts or emotions and can be regarded as a simple attention attracting message, which, however, is changed dramatically by the accompanying visual message.

In comparing billboard poster messages with everyday communication, even Leech’s Phatic Maxim (“avoid silence” / “keep talking” and “engage others in conversation”) can also be investigated. Since billboard posters are present almost everywhere in public places, they “engage others in conversation” in an unsolicited way. Since the information presented by them cannot be avoided, the politeness principle is violated and posters become an aggressive medium of communication. This forcible communication is what posters try to mitigate by employing language games. But are these linguistic devices really economical and effective?

Most billboard posters contain some kind of language game. Language games help advertisers develop a positive attitude towards the product in viewers: the decoding of the message is a pleasant experience since it involves solving the linguistic puzzle (Mulken 2005). The effectiveness of wordplay has been recognized for a long time. The Latin author Quintilianus (cited in Mulken 2005: 708) already distinguished between wordplay where only one of the possible interpretations is relevant (such as in Figure 4: *Vízet találtak a Marson* “water was found on Mars”) and wordplay where both meanings are (*Kutya vigye a számolgatást!* “Skip all the additions”), regarding the latter more effective. Analyzing experimental results, Tanaka (1992) and Mulken (2005) both demonstrated that wordplay with two relevant interpretations is more enjoyable than that with only one. However, wordplay requires more operational effort than simpler rhetorical forms such as rhymes, associations or similes (Mulken 2005: 709). Interpretations condensed into one word can be considered economical from the point of view of the communicator, while the viewer spends additional effort decoding them. This extra effort has to be

rewarded: the virtual reward is the meaning achieved at solving the linguistic puzzle, the intellectual satisfaction (Tanaka 1992: 95), the “aha!” experience and the happiness it provides. The extra operational effort and the solving of the puzzle means that the viewer looks at the poster for a longer time, thinks about it, and will remember it longer.

The language games of billboards are worth analyzing from the point of view of the theory of relevance as well. According to Sperber and Wilson’s (1986) Relevance Principle, every act of ostensive-inferential communication guarantees its own minimal relevance. In their theory, an utterance is optimally relevant if and only if the ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for the partner to feel it worth processing, or if the ostensive stimulus is the most relevant stimulus that can be expected based on the communicator’s abilities and preferences. Let us now see how relevant, economical and effective wordplay in billboard posters can be regarded to be. The Hungarian insurance company Generali’s recent poster has the following text written in white before a red background: *Az élet gyorsan repül, minek megelőzni* “Life flies fast, why pass it”. The first interpretation that lends itself at first reading is that this is a philosophical statement. However, this interpretation has to be rejected since it is inconsistent with the Relevance Principle and since it occurs in the advertisement of an insurance company. After the rejection of the first interpretation and the recognition of the context of the text (an insurance advertisement placed by a busy road) the relevant interpretation can be generated. The poster exploits the polysemy of the Hungarian word *megelőzni* “pass” and its real message is that life is short and it is not worth ending it with a high speed pass on the road. Such a concealed communication of the message is seemingly uneconomical, however, it fully complies with claims of Relevance Theory: the ostensive stimulus transmitted by the poster, that is, the text of the poster, is the most economical device to achieve the intended effect. If the poster bore the message *Do not drive too fast*, probably nobody would take any notice of it and it would be completely ineffective. The price of attracting attention is the extra operational effort.

The main question is, however, which meaning is activated first in decoding polysemous posters. According to Giora (1997, 1999), the process of interpretation is controlled by the salience meaning of expressions. The salience meaning is more often used, more usual, more prototypical and more conventional than the other meanings. It can be a literal or figurative meaning. In Giora’s theory of gradual interpretation, context has only a limited role at an early stage in the interpretation process, since first the salience meaning of the expression is elicited, and

its comparison with the situation is only done next. For instance, in the earlier example of *Vízet találtak a Marson* “Water was found on Mars” (Figure 4), the salience meaning is that Mars means the planet. After this meaning is elicited and the viewer cannot reconcile this meaning with the picture in front of them, the context overwrites the lead meaning, that is, the situation becomes important in identifying the relevant meaning if the lead meaning does not fit into the context or if more than one salience meaning is possible.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper I have described the linguistic characteristics of advertising posters and ARC posters. The analysis of the corpus of data has demonstrated that even though the two types of posters represent different communicative situations, have different goals and messages, and differ in the circumstances of reception as well, they still use the same strategies of language use to attract the attention of viewers. In case of advertising billboards, humor was the most frequent manipulating tool, while in case of ARC posters irony is mostly used for persuading.

The posters are characterized by visual and linguistic compression and condensation, achieved by means of figures and images of speech. The basis of play of images and words is most often homophony, homonymy, and polysemy, but examples of figures of sounds, lexeme change, and collocations also abound, and the strong recall power of emblems and trademarks is also often used.

Even though the messages of billboard posters violate or flout Gricean maxims of ideal communication, they do so in order to attract attention and achieve manipulative or persuasive effect. In winning viewers over, an important strategy is to seemingly maintain politeness (Leech 1983), however, since this is only a pretended goal, posters can be regarded as an impolite and aggressive medium. Experimental results (Tanaka 1992, Mulken 2005) show that, of linguistic games, wordplays with two relevant interpretations are more effective and more enjoyable than those with only one, even though decoding posters with wordplay requires extra operational effort. From the point of view of the communicator, the ostensive stimulus transmitted by the poster is still the most economical one since the poster’s message would be completely ineffective without the language game. The greater operational effort keeps the viewer’s attention attracted longer, resulting in longer storage in memory. The

solving of the linguistic puzzle involves intellectual satisfaction as a reward, which compensates the viewer for the extra effort.

In conclusion, billboard posters are colorful, creative, playful, and good at attracting attention, their language is full of figures of speech and other stylistic devices as well as wordplay. These devices, beyond being attractive, are used because they are entertaining, economical, terse and effective as well as aiding understanding. Their functions are manipulation and persuasion: as the discussed examples showed, in case of advertising billboards it is rather manipulation, while in case of ARC posters it is rather persuasion which could be observed.

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