Toward a Semiotic of Advertising Story Grammars

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Abstract

From its inception in the early 1970s, the concept of story grammars has developed into a powerful research tool in the study of story comprehension. Basically, these grammars incorporate rules that specify the canonical orderings of story components and the conditions under which they can be shifted and deleted. Although advertising textbooks and researchers have acknowledged redundancies in the scriptal characteristics of televised advertising, the insights have been mainly anecdotal. To their advantage, story grammars offer a systemic approach to understanding the combinatorial nature and pragmatic implications of the meaningful segments of television ads. This paper briefly reviews story grammar research and then follows a semiotic orientation in suggesting applications of story grammars to advertising research.

Introduction

Commercials are about products only in the sense that the story of Jonah is about the anatomy of whales. Miller beer commercials are not really about beer; they're about male bonding, they're about attitudes toward work, and attitudes toward women. That kind of propaganda will become more prevalent as media have more access to people and as they become more story oriented.

‘What is life? An illusion, a shadow, a story.’

Pedro Calderone De La Barca

_Life is a Dream_,
Act II, I.1195

The lives in the stories we recount and the stories of our own lives are indissoluble. They and we are suffused with common symbolism and myth, sustained by communication capacities and bonds both omnipresent and enigmatic. Stories serve a number of functions: They preserve culture by educating others (especially succeeding generations) about natural phenomena as well as social and moral codes; they serve to reorganize and interpret personal experiences by framing memory in an intricate but cohesive structure that incorporates socially shared knowledge; and, finally, stories have therapeutic value in their ability to reconstruct the past by helping to resolve current conflicts and restore personal priorities (Stein 1982a; Stein and Policastro 1984). In short, stories are more than mere entertainment vehicles. For instance, research by Levy (1981) and Sherry (1984) has demonstrated how consumer myths and oral traditions preserve the ethos of consumerhood through the structures and themes of communication. Sherry defines ethos as ‘the moral, aesthetic, and evaluative dimensions of culture which determine the tone, character, and quality of social life; it is the underlying attitude that life reflects’ (1984: 741).

Advertising serves a similar function in preserving consumer ethos (Sherry 1985). According to McCracken and Pollay (1981: 1), ‘advertising embodies and transmits cultural behaviors, beliefs, values in a manner not unlike myths, proverbs, metaphors, and rituals.’ Televised story ads are particularly adept at this, insofar as they synchronize settings, characters, and activities into repeatable patterns. Advertisers of food and restaurants, over-the-counter medicines and personal hygiene products, automobiles, and beer and wine are among those who often employ storylike scenarios. Unfortunately, recognition of these redundant patterns by advertising textbook authors is usually casual (often labeled slice-of-life ads) and rarely elaborated upon. A few empirical researchers have begun to study the stylized or script-like nature of some ad genres (Puto 1985; Thorson and Snyder 1984); that research is still in its infancy. One observer has proposed a typology of ad ‘tapes’ which he defines as life stories found in televised advertising (Blonsky 1983). While the typology is provocative, its anecdotal insights are insufficient as a theoretical basis for generating and testing hypotheses.¹

Postman’s (1985) forecast of more widespread use of story ads, in conjunction with recent acknowledgements of the import of consumer narratives, together point to the need for a systemic, theoretical perspective from which these related issues and their implications might be more productively examined. One relevant set of models, called ‘story grammars’ (from the literature on discourse analysis and text linguistics), has emerged explicitly from anthropolinguistic studies of the structure of folktales (Propp 1968 [1928]; Colby 1973). A story grammar is a rule-based system that specifies canonical sequences of story elements. As a theoretical account, a story grammar is envisioned as a key determinant of the manner and ease with which people ‘interpret’ stories. Put another way, a story grammar has an implied relationship to a knowledge or memory structure (story schema) which serves as the framework for story comprehension and recall. Both theoretical and empirical attention to knowledge structures has recently intensified in consumer and advertising research (Alba 1983; Bettman 1986; Crocker 1984; Mick forthcoming; Puto 1985; Sujan 1985). Thus, the potential contribution of story grammars to our understanding the nature and function of story ads appears significant.

A Brief Etiology of Story Grammars

Story grammars have a heritage in traditional natural language grammars, a grammar being the set of rules that specify the form and manner by which words combine into phrases, clauses, and sentences (Foss and Hakes 1978; Lyons 1971). This emphasis on theoretical structural descriptions in linguistics derives from the semioticist Saussure (1915). The ‘structuralism’ he advanced accentuated non-historical (synchronic) analyses of current language systems to assess their self-sufficiency; to do this he advocated the isolation of discriminable units and then the classification of those units into a taxonomy. His methodology was intended to provide
structural descriptions that reveal relationships between two or more units within the language system (Beaugrande 1982a: ch.2).

Propp (1968 [1928]) adopted structuralism to study Russian folktales. In particular, he sought to identify the typical structural components of folktale plots. Among the stories he studied, Propp identified commonalities such as ‘departure’ and ‘struggle’ and he noted how some components always followed a sequence pattern (e.g., a struggle before a victory) while others were less governed to a specific position (Beaugrande 1982b).

The emphasis on structure stripped of content and context has long been the Achilles’ heel of structuralist approaches. Specifically, they have tended to ignore how messages are created and used. Moreover, the structures identified have often been pure impositions by the researcher, rather than emerging more naturally through the informants themselves. Consequently, structuralism has evolved as a formal-deductive enterprise.

Despite these limitations, the influence of structuralism on modern linguistics, contemporary cognitive psychology, and ultimately story grammars has been enormous. Chomsky (1957) was the catalyst. Chomsky borrowed Harris’s (1951) seminal idea on ‘transformations’ as a new method for the analysis of discourse. Based partly on examination of advertising messages, Harris had developed transformations for modifying sentences in order to investigate sentence pattern equivalences. According to Beaugrande, however, Chomsky took over Harris’s idea of transformation for a different purpose. Here, structural relationships among sentences were construed as defining not the discourse, but the entire language. One would set up a grammar whose rules would both describe all the basic strings (phrase-structure rules) and transform those basic strings into any more complex structures (and back again). The grammar was thus a theory for establishing the well-structuredness of every possible sentence. (1982b: 386)

From this perspective, Chomsky promoted the influential notion of a transformational sentence grammar. The proposed rule system that mediated between the underlying sentence structure (and meaning) and the observed sentence structure was in essence a theoretical model of a speaker or listener’s conventional knowledge about sentences. To those who subscribed to Chomsky’s transformational grammar, sentence structures were the highest level of formal language. Within several years, however, it became apparent that paragraphs and stories posed processing capacity problems that were not as readily evident in single sentence processing. Compared to single sentences, listeners of stories had to hold some information in focus for a long time in order to integrate it with later information. Sentence grammars that stressed word or clausal processing strategies (e.g., noun phrases, verb phrases) were inadequate to account for the processing of more extensive texts.

A major breakthrough was Rumelhart’s (1975) paper in which he used the notion of story grammar and schema (knowledge structure) almost interchangeably, i.e., wedding text structure itself with the knowledge (thus expectations) people acquire through reading and listening to stories. The basic idea from this theoretical perspective is that the rules which describe the regularities in story texts (i.e., the story grammar) reflect the processing mechanisms embodied in people’s story schemas. That the story grammar rules and story schema mechanisms are identical is said to be neither necessary nor assumed by several story grammarians (Mandler 1982a). What these researchers do claim, however, is that the story grammar concept and its notational system are powerful tools to aid in the research of story processing and comprehension. Since the mid-1970s, several story grammars have been devised (Johnson and Mandler 1980; Mandler and Johnson 1977; Rumelhart 1975; Thorndyke 1977). The following discussion draws heavily from Johnson and Mandler (1980).

Proponents of story grammars assume that people acquire knowledge about the characteristic structures of traditional stories through their listening and reading experiences (Mandler 1982b). Particular story-states and -events are abstracted into a blueprint which guides interpretation when a new story is processed. Rumelhart (1980) has noted that many stories incorporate a problem-solving motif wherein a protagonist faces a dilemma requiring goal setting, strategy development, strategy implementation, and evaluation. Johnson and Mandler’s (1980) representation of the base structure of stories is meant to characterize the conventional knowledge people have about story plots. By conventional knowledge Johnson and Mandler (1980: 58) mean ‘a set of categories into which the various states and events expressed in the story statements can be divided and the
Table 1  Rewrite Rules for Base Structures. (Nonterminal Nodes are Written in Upper Case, Terminal Nodes in Lower Case. From Johnson and Mandler 1980)

**STORY** → Setting and EPISODE

**EPISODE** → \{ BEGINNING cause DEVELOPMENT cause ENDING \}

**BEGINNING** → \{ Beginning Event \}

**DEVELOPMENT** → \{ COMPLEX REACTION cause GOAL PATH \}

**COMPLEX REACTION** → Simple Reaction Cause Goal

**GOAL PATH** → \{ Attempt Cause OUTCOME \}

**OUTCOME** → \{ Outcome Event \}

**ENDING** → \{ Ending Event \}

connections between these categories. These story categories usually include a Setting followed by one or more Episodes. The Setting introduces the protagonist and Episodes normally consist of a Beginning which causes a Complex Reaction. The Complex Reaction includes two subcomponents, a Simple Reaction (affective or cognitive) and a Goal formed as a response to the Beginning. There is then an Attempt to achieve the Goal, an Outcome of the Attempt, and an Ending (affective or cognitive reaction) that concludes the Episode (Mandler 1982b).

Johnson and Mandler (1980) propose a short list of so-called rewrite rules for the base structures of simple stories (Table 1). These rules are used to convert the explicit surface structure of a story into a base structure. As a resulting tree diagram, some of the 'nodes' of the tree are considered terminal while others are nonterminal, i.e., the latter can lead to other branches and nodes. Table 2 provides the definitions and selection restrictions for simple story categories referred to in Table 1. A thorough discussion of the rewrite rules and story categories can be found first in Mandler and Johnson (1977) and then Johnson and Mandler (1980).

Table 2  Definitions and Selection Restrictions. (From Johnson and Mandler 1980, with minor changes)

**Setting** = introduces protagonist of first episode, including optional statements about time, locale, or props

**Beginning Event** = causes protagonist to react

**Simple Reaction** = represents protagonist's affective response or thoughts caused by BEGINNING

**Action** = represents nonplanful act(s) by protagonist caused by Simple Reaction

**Goal** = represents what protagonist plans to do about BEGINNING

**Attempt** = represents planful act(s) protagonist carries out to achieve Goal

**Outcome Event** = represents either success or failure of Attempt

**Ending Event** = represents long range consequences of DEVELOPMENT or response by story character to DEVELOPMENT or emphatic statement of or about consequences

To convey the application of the rewrite rules to story categories, consider a condensed Russian fairy tale referred to as the Hen story (Table 3). Johnson and Mandler (1980: 65) represent the structure of the Hen story as shown in Fig. 1. Without lengthy elaborations here, the reader can readily detect a rich structural formalism in the tree diagram unlike any currently
available in advertising research, especially with regard to the scriptal
characteristics of televised story ads. As apparent from Fig. 1, the major
constituent of a story is the episode, with some stories involving multiple
episodes, such as the Hen story, and others involving only one episode,
such as some of Aesop’s fables.

Table 3 Text of the Hen Story (From Johnson and Mandler 1980)

1. Once there was a hen and a cock who lived together in a barnyard.
2. One day, while they were eating their breakfast, the cock began to
   choke on a bean.
3. The hen was alarmed.
4. And decided to try to help him out.
5. So first she patted him on the back.
6. But he just kept on choking.
7. So then she pounded him on the back.
8. But still the cock sputtered and coughed.
9. So she decided perhaps she could get him a drink of water.
10. She ran to the river and asked for some water to give to the poor cock.
11. The river said, ‘I will give you water if you bring me a leaf from the
    lime tree.’
12. So the hen ran to the lime tree and asked for a leaf.
13. The lime tree said, ‘I will give you a leaf if you bring me some thread
    from the dairymaid.’
14. So the hen ran to the dairymaid and asked for some thread.
15. The dairymaid gave the hen some thread.
16. The hen gave the thread to the lime tree who gave her a leaf.
17. Then she gave the leaf to the river, who gave her some water.
18. But when she got back with the water the cock was lying there quite
    still.
19. He had choked to death on a bean!

Since many stories can be told in slightly varied ways without
substantially altering either their linguistic meaning or theme, there is a
need to formulate a set of transformational rules that can accommodate the

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**Fig. 1 The Hen Story Structure**
(Some Story Components are Implicit Rather than Explicit. That Is to Say,
They Are Part of the Underlying Structure Yet Deleted from the Actually Encountered Surface Structure. Brackets Around Notes Indicate their Derivation from the Surface Structure).
(Episode 4 continued on next page)

Fig. 1 continued
move from the basic underlying meaning to the set of surface structures regularly encountered. Strictly speaking, an infinite number of node reorderings and removals seems possible. However, the observation that only a few variations in surface structure seem to persist over time suggests that perhaps but a few transformational rules are necessary to account for most explicit surface structures. The existence of only a few rules would be in concert with the claims that story grammars facilitate story comprehension.

These concerns have led Johnson and Mandler (1980: 70) to propose ‘a psychological criterion of [easy] inferability as the primary constraint on allowable transformations.’ In other words, acceptable transformations are those which allow people to derive the underlying meaning without performing extensive inferential processing. According to Johnson and Mandler (1980: 70),

The most likely way that such a principle could be given empirical substance would be in terms of the time needed to comprehend two nodes in a canonically organized story as compared with a transformed version of the same story. If two nodes that are not adjacent according to base structure rules are nevertheless comprehended as rapidly as two canonically adjacent nodes, this would constitute prima facie evidence that the deleted (or moved) node is easily inferable.

To date there has been only preliminary empirical work on relating comprehension times to violations in canonical structure (Haberlandt 1982; Mandler and Goodman 1983). On the whole, the results have supported the psychological validity of story grammar analyses, i.e., printed stories that do not conform to a canonical structure take longer to read, thus appearing more difficult to understand.

Johnson and Mandler (1980) discuss two principle transformational rules: deletion and movement. Regarding the deletion rule, there are three types of nodes that can be deleted from surface structures: beginnings, complex reactions, and endings. An added constraint to ease of inferability is that only one of these three nodes can be deleted in a given episode. With regard to the movement rule, the only node that commonly moves within an episode is the goal. Johnson and Mandler (1980) discuss these rules at

length, providing examples and elaborating upon relevant empirical research and theoretical implications. The small set of transformational rules they propose permits a simplification of the base structure rules while preserving the integrity of the episode as the kernel of a story.

It is beyond our scope and purpose to fully articulate the details of story grammars. Instead, we have sought to introduce the concept in its basic form. Even at this level, though, story grammar analysis can be fruitfully applied to story ads.

**Story Grammars and Televised Story Ads**

In transferring one field’s perspectives and methodologies to another, caution must always be exercised insofar as the two fields often have substantive differences that make an untempered transfer neither desirable nor feasible. Televised story ads differ from spoken (or written) stories in several significant ways. First, story ads have a superordinate schema which Wright (1986) has called a schemer schema, i.e., adult consumers tend to process ads suspiciously, with the realization that the advertiser’s chief goal is to persuade them to purchase the particular product in question. With regular stories, readers and listeners rarely invoke such strong perceptual defenses. Second, televised story ads are highly compressed and fitted to rigid time frames (usually 30 or 60 seconds)—making the processing event even more prone to capacity overload than regular story processing. That is why the third obvious difference exists: Namely, most story ads consist of only one or two episodes. Fourth, unlike verbal stories, televised ads have complex pictorial as well as verbal elements. We will not separate them here, partly because many ads use both sets of elements to mirror each other, thereby promoting comprehension depth through imagery-language redundancy. But to the extent such redundancy is lacking, future applications of story grammars to advertising may need modification.² Last, the surface structures of televised ads are multiform, fueled in part by creative efforts to draw consumer attention and create curiosity. Therefore, the application of story grammars to televised advertising must be made judiciously, with an eye on the subordinate goal(s) of the ad, whether to attract attention, facilitate message comprehension, solidify or change
Fig. 2. Colgate Ad

Fig. 3. Hold Ad
Fig. 4 Colgate Story Ad Structure. Brackets around Nodes Indicate Their Deletion from the Surface Structure. Unlike Johnson and Mandler (1971).

A = 'and', C = 'cause'.

Fig. 5 Hold Story Ad Structure. Brackets around Nodes Indicate their Deletion from the Surface Structure.

A = 'and', C = 'cause'.

(COLGATE AD)

(BEGINNING)

(Event 1)

(Setting 1)

(Simple Reaction 3 & 4)

(GOAL)

(COMPLEX REACTION)

(GOAL PATH)

(ENDING)

(Event 1)

(Setting 1)

(Simple Reaction)

(GOAL)

(COMPLEX REACTION)

(GOAL PATH)

(ENDING)

(Event 1)

(Setting 1)

(Simple Reaction)

(GOAL)

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(Simple Reaction)

(GOAL)

(COMPLEX REACTION)

(GOAL PATH)

(ENDING)

(Event 1)

(Setting 1)

(Simple Reaction)

(GOAL)

(COMPLEX REACTION)

(GOAL PATH)
opinion/attitude, spur preference formation, etc. Historically in story grammar research, comprehension and story recall have been the chief dependent variables (Mandler 1982c). A wider set of dependent variables must be considered for televised story ad research.

To illustrate the application of story grammar analysis to televised story ads, two story ads were selected for their similarities and differences in both structure and theme (Figs. 2 and 3). Fig. 2 is a story ad about children brushing their teeth. The story includes a young girl’s first use of the product; her enjoyment of the product; an attempt by her younger brother to also try the product by reaching for the product; a conflict; a mediation by the mother; and a closing shot of restored harmony. Clearly, one theme is the girl’s loyalty to the product, so to speak, in trying to keep it to herself, and another loyalty theme related to the brand is embodied in the mother’s closing comment. Fig. 4 shows the Colgate story ad in its base structure according to the Johnson and Mandler (1980) scheme. The numbers correspond to the storyboard sections of Fig. 2.

Fig. 3 is a fairly common adult story ad about someone with an inopportune coughing spell, involving two episodes, one before and one after product usage. In Fig. 5, where the base structure for Fig. 3 is provided in Johnson and Mandler form, the setting and the beginning event occur simultaneously (unlike the Colgate ad of Fig. 2 and 4). Also, the Hold cough drops ad does not follow the typical rule where all developments within episodes lead to a goal path. We might expect to see story ads that an early episode would have a complex reaction and goal path but later episodes need not, especially given the time compression constraint. So, in Fig. 3 and 5, episode 1 is a full episode (except for the beginning embedded in the setting), whereas episode 2 is not, i.e., there is no goal path at all. The implied goal path of episode 2, which could be put in brackets within Fig. 5, may simply be to continue using the product/brand.

What is remarkable in just the construction of base structures (Fig. 4 and 5) is the subtle intricacy of these two story ads. Most consumers process these ads so quickly (if at all) that the interwoven components of setting, characters, developments, reactions, goals, attempts, and outcomes are hardly recognizable in their individual roles. Yet that’s precisely the point. Story ads permit rapid, schema-driven comprehension under time compressed conditions and limited processing capacities. In effect, inferencing is minimized with regard to the surface level of the message (e.g., why the female juror gave the male juror a Hold lozenge) and maximized for its deeper level meaning, such as where, when, and how the product might benefit the individual consumer.

From the advertiser’s vantage point, designing and producing a story ad for a given audience can be a formidable task. Inherent time constraints and audience differences in processing abilities clash with message complexity and sometimes require deletions, shifts, and mergers of story segments. But which ones? Or, if the message is simple and the story ad too obviously formulaic, the audience may find the ad dull and so predictable that they have little interest in it. Thus, there are constant urges by creative directors to fracture the form in eye-catching or ear-catching ways. But how much? For example, the interplay between attention and comprehension is not well understood. Anderson (1985) has recently offered a provocative hypothesis that attention is partly driven by comprehension—instead of vice versa as traditionally assumed in hierarchy of effects models (see Morarity 1983).

Advertisers can address questions about the effects of story ad structure through story grammar analysis and its formalized notational system. For example, an advertiser can compare potential story ads of similar underlying meaning or theme for their differences in surface structure resulting from varied applications of transformational rules. If a surface structure markedly departs from those typically found in story ads for similar products, then the question must be raised as to whether the transformational rules were violated. ‘Violated’ in this case is determined by a psychological criterion, not by a formal, logical standard. If the ease of inferability has been sacrificed, which is to say that the consumer cannot readily recover the canonical form, then the transformational rules may have been broken. What this means is that the consumer who confronts a story ad which has components deleted, embedded or merged, or sequenced unconventionally should be able to explain the deletion/embedding or reconstruct the normal sequence through subsequent ad recall. Otherwise, the ease of inferability has been sacrificed. Since the transformational rules may or may not be the same in story ad grammars as in regular story grammars, future research must seek to establish a taxonomy of psychologically valid transformational rules for story ads. Similarly, the coding of story ads according to their story components will require slow progress, given the complexity of
televised communication. In coding story components, high interjudge reliabilities must be established before substantive theoretical or applied research can move forward in the area.

Discussion

Story ads are familiar to adults and children alike. Providing a precise definition of the story ad concept is nonetheless more difficult than apparent on first thought (cf. Stein 1982a; Stein and Policastro 1984). Yet intuitively most people can distinguish a story from a nonstory (Prince 1973). Consider the American television ads for Country Time lemonade and American Express traveler’s checks. Do they tell a story? What about recent Pizza Hut ads with such notables as entertainer Martin Mull and boxer Marvin Hagler? Are those story ads as well? Somehow, grandpa and grandson on the front porch on a steamy summer day provide a story, whereas celebrities talking about pizza with their mouths full do not.

The grammaticality of story ads is nevertheless a matter of degree. Measuring the degree must be based on psychological criteria as well as analytic criteria derived from prior descriptive content analyses of specific story ad structures. Story grammars combine linguistic text analyses with theoretical and empirical research on human memory and cognition. As Stein points out (1982b:319),

a basic assumption common to all this current work on story grammars is that comprehension is an interactive process, where prior knowledge of stories influences the representation of incoming new information, just as the incoming new information influences the structure of already existing knowledge.

For consumer and advertising researchers the story grammar approach formalizes the structural analysis of story ads, helping to identify ads that are storylike and those that are not. It then offers the opportunity to relate that analysis to a range of advertising response variates, including differences in comprehension and recall within and between consumer groups. Other common dependent variables such as cognitive responses (Olson, Toy, and Dover 1982), attitude toward the brand and purchase intentions (e.g., Smith and Swinyard 1983), and attitude toward the ad (MacKenzie, Lutz, and Belch 1986) can also be measured and assessed as they too may be impacted differentially by story ad structures.

The story grammar approach also provides the opportunity to relate the nuances of story ad structure to less traditionally studied advertising effects like hedonic responses. Holbrook and Hirschman (1982: 134) have argued that ‘focusing on effects attributable to the syntactic aspects of message content—that is, their structure and style—is more germane to the experiential perspective’ than focusing on effects from semantic aspects. They cite research on perception and emotions that directly links hedonic responses to stimulus form (Berlyne 1971; Platt 1970). Hypotheses relating story ad syntax to collative stimulus properties like complexity, surprisingness, and uncertainty should be readily derivable from prior research and directly testable within the story grammar paradigm.

Still another advertising effect that can be studied through story grammars is the alleged promotion of anachronistic role models in advertising (Mick 1986). Advertising caricatures normative and ideal lives that are not statistically representative of contemporary culture (Sherry 1985; Umiker-Sebeok 1979). Inasmuch as caricature is a highly stylized form, its representation in advertising is evident in assorted hyper-ritualizations (Goffman 1979), i.e., standardization, exaggeration, and simplification of selected behaviors. As Pollay (1986) has recently noted, the unintended consequences of these advertising techniques have not been subjected to the same degree of scholarly research as the broadscale criticism they have received. Given the focus of story grammars on conventional structures in prose, a straightforward extension to story ads vis-à-vis hyper-ritualized enactments would be beneficial in assessing some of advertising’s darker implications.

It is also clear that story ads reinforce cultural values related to such topics as the role of leisure and work, the importance of patriotism, and the pleasures of camaraderie (consider beer and automobile story ads). According to Rokeach (1973: 5),
A value is an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end states of existence along a continuum of relative importance. (our emphasis)

Kluckhohn (1961: 18) has pointed out that

A value is a selective orientation toward experience, implying deep commitment or repudiation, which influences the ordering of 'choices' between possible alternatives in action. These orientations may be cognitive and expressed verbally or merely inferable from recurrent trends in behavior.

If we envision story ads with their structural regularities as 'recurrent trends in behavior,' then by Kluckhohn's definition cultural values are unquestionably central to story ads. A content analytic methodology developed by Pollay (1983) to measure values in advertising, in conjunction with the story grammar approach advocated here, offers exciting possibilities in the study of cultural values in story ads. For example, if past morphologies of folktales and myths are reliable indicators, it may be that values like cleanliness and ambitiousness are effectively communicated in story ads only to the degree that the inherent story grammar has been adhered to. Future research on these issues is greatly needed.

As noted earlier, the structural emphasis in story grammars derives from Saussure. Until recently, marketing and consumer researchers have almost exclusively favored pragmatic and (sometimes) semantic level analyses of advertising; this is especially true of North American researchers. Some European researchers have performed structural and/or syntactic analyses of advertising (Leymore 1975; Williamson 1978), although none have yet drawn from the story grammar perspective. Hence, story grammars applied to advertising encourage increased syntactic focuses on the relations between story components, i.e., in semiotic parable, sign-sign relations. Some semioticians have argued that understanding syntactic relations is prepotent to understanding semantic relations (sign-object) and pragmatic relations (sign-interpretant/reaction). There is much to recommend simultaneous use of these three levels of semiotic analysis in order to more fully ascertain the nature and impact of story ads. Although story grammars focus on structure, they are applicable to ad content and effects issues. In fact, as Johnson and Mandler (1980) maintain, more than traditional sentence grammars, the components of story grammars are identifiable based on content-relevant issues (e.g., settings, attempts) and the very raison d'être of story grammars is a pragmatic issue, namely their strategic ability to overcome natural processing constraints. Therefore, from the perspective of Morris' (1938) semiotics, story grammars can contribute to our understanding of the syntactic as well as semantic and pragmatic aspects of story ads.

Several very recent developments in advertising research and practice could benefit from a semiotic story grammar perspective. For example, Thorson and Snyder (1984) and Puto (1985) have studied the script-like nature of certain ads. Scripts are stereotypic sequences of events expected by people, either as participants in the events or as observers (Abelson 1981). Examples include eating a meal in a restaurant or receiving a dental checkup. Researchers have noted that many ads are stereotypical in the same manner as we have characterized the recurring structures of stories. However, these researchers have not focused on isolating structural commonalities across scripts; instead they have assumed or demonstrated that groups of consumers show high agreement about which elements make up particular scripts and the order of those elements (e.g., menu, water, order food, soup, salad, entree, desert, tip, pay bill).3

Inasmuch as many scripted ads are actually story ads, the story grammar approach has much to bring to these emerging issues in advertising research. In the first place, to ascertain the nature of scripts in advertisements will require generalizations about regularities in script components and their structures that have not as yet been accommodated by current script theoretic approaches. Second, script theory has little to say at this stage about what changes (deletions, movements, mergers) in ad scripts are possible without undermining their value as information processing aids. Puto (1985) found that script interruptions (unexpected information) were recalled better than common script events. Given advertising trends toward shorter commercials, some only fifteen seconds long, future research must focus on the effects of deletions, movements, and mergers of story ad/script elements.

The story grammar perspective hypothesizes that some story components and component sequences are more crucial than others. Hauser (1984) found
that a cause node deleted from a story produced more inferences than a deleted consequence node. Causes (goals and attempts) are apparently more important than consequences (reactions, outcomes, and endings) to story comprehenders, to such an extent that people naturally fill in the missing information automatically. Mandler (1982c) wrote several versions of single episode stories wherein a target sentence was moved farther away from its normal position. Her subjects took longer to read moved target sentences and made more recall errors when asked to reproduce the target sentences (as compared to reproducing sentences which had appeared in their typical positions). Omanson (1982) classified the content of narratives from a story grammar orientation and found that central content is judged more important and better recalled than noncentral content; also, text recall is enhanced by supportive content and impaired by distracting content. While these and other initial studies on story grammars may seem at first glance mundane or intuitively obvious, consider that advertising researchers have hardly examined these important issues and, when they have, the research has never approached the formal, systematic orientation of story grammars.

Semiotics and its relationship to story grammars and story ads have been alluded to at several junctures. The advantages of a semiotic orientation in the application of story grammars to story ads abound. First and foremost, semiotics focuses on interpretability in communication, on the various ways in which meaning is constructed by the sender and derived by the receiver. A major thrust of semiotic research is the examination of codes (sign systems) and the underlying rules that facilitate interpretability in the use of signs. Hence, the story grammar enterprise, with its search for invariant story components and related transformational rules, is really a semiotic enterprise. The complementary perspectives and methods of these two areas, in conjunction with evolving theories in perception, psycholinguistics, and social cognition can form a powerful framework for story ad research from both public policy and marketing perspectives.

For its own part, semiotics contributes a metalanguage that can enrich and extend story grammars—the second advantage of a semiotic orientation. For instance, story ads work at multiple levels of meaning related to their iconic, indexical, and symbolic aspects. Story grammarians have historically treated story components as unidimensional signs. By viewing story components as signs with several dimensions, story grammar analysis can be more readily taken beyond its strong structural/syntactic emphasis. For instance, a simple reaction in a story commercial, like a headache brought on by on-the-job stress, may be a symbolic sign of contemporary life at the workplace as well as an indexical sign of its cause (e.g., the boss' demanding overtime) and of its solution (e.g., the goal to seek relief with a branded product). These and other multidimensional perspectives of story ad components-as-signs offer broader insights on the semantics of story ads.

A third advantage of semiotics is the manner in which it poses questions about messages at structural levels (syntactic), semantic levels (content), and application levels (pragmatics). Whether these three levels are ultimately isolable in the study of communication remains a topic of debate, but their individual contributions to the nature of communication cannot be denied. In the study of story ads, all three levels must be addressed.

As marketing and consumer researchers come to appreciate the fundamental role of signs in communication, story grammar analysis in advertising research should similarly take on a heightened role. After all, a story ad is nothing more or less than a set of coterminal signs emerging from the behaviors, myths, oral traditions, etc. of consumer life and then reconstituted through the audio and video decisions made by advertising agencies. A semiotic of advertising story grammars is a blend of potent orientations that can help us better understand the story ads in-and-of our lives.

Notes

1. An example is the 'Family Tape: the American family may be split apart by divorce, juvenile delinquency, etc., but in these spots mom, dad, Tommy, Suzie, grandma, and grandpa sit around the dinner table and share their daily experiences. Don't you wish your family was like this?' (Blonsky 1983: 9)

2. Some televised ads, storylike or not, have purposefully divided pictorial and verbal components to such a degree that two scenes occur simultaneously (one linguistic, the other imagistic). For instance, a recent Michelin tire commercial shows a baby sitting aside an automobile
tire as two voices, those of the baby’s mother and father, carry on conversation about purchasing a new set of tires for the mother’s car.

3. Story grammar researchers have demonstrated the same with regard to story components and their canonical sequences (Pollard-Gott, McCloskey, and Todres 1979).

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Advertising: The Frame Message

Winfried Nöth

Defining Advertisements

What is an advertisement? This question seems to be of a particularly academic nature. Advertising is a text genre with which the average consumer has not only ample acquaintance, but about which he or she also has a very clear and definite conception.

Some Content Features of Advertisements

Once a message is recognized and identified as being an advertisement, the consumer will know that it is by an addressee who has paid for this message in order to inform or to persuade the addressee about certain ideas or commodities. In the case of commercial consumer advertising the addressee further knows that the addressee's intention is not only information, but ultimately action, namely the purchase of the commodity. Typical among the consumer's expectations about the text genre is that any evaluation of the commodity which the message might contain will always be positive.

Open and Hidden Messages

Yet there is often no recognizable trace of all these content features in the textual surface. The text will almost never disclose the costs of the advertisement. In masked advertising, where the paid message appears in the guise of a feature article, the advertiser even attempts to deceive the addressee about this point.

The advertisers' strategies of avoiding any reference to selling and buying are most imaginative. Many advertisements are texts without the apppellative function presupposed by the intention to sell. Often the