

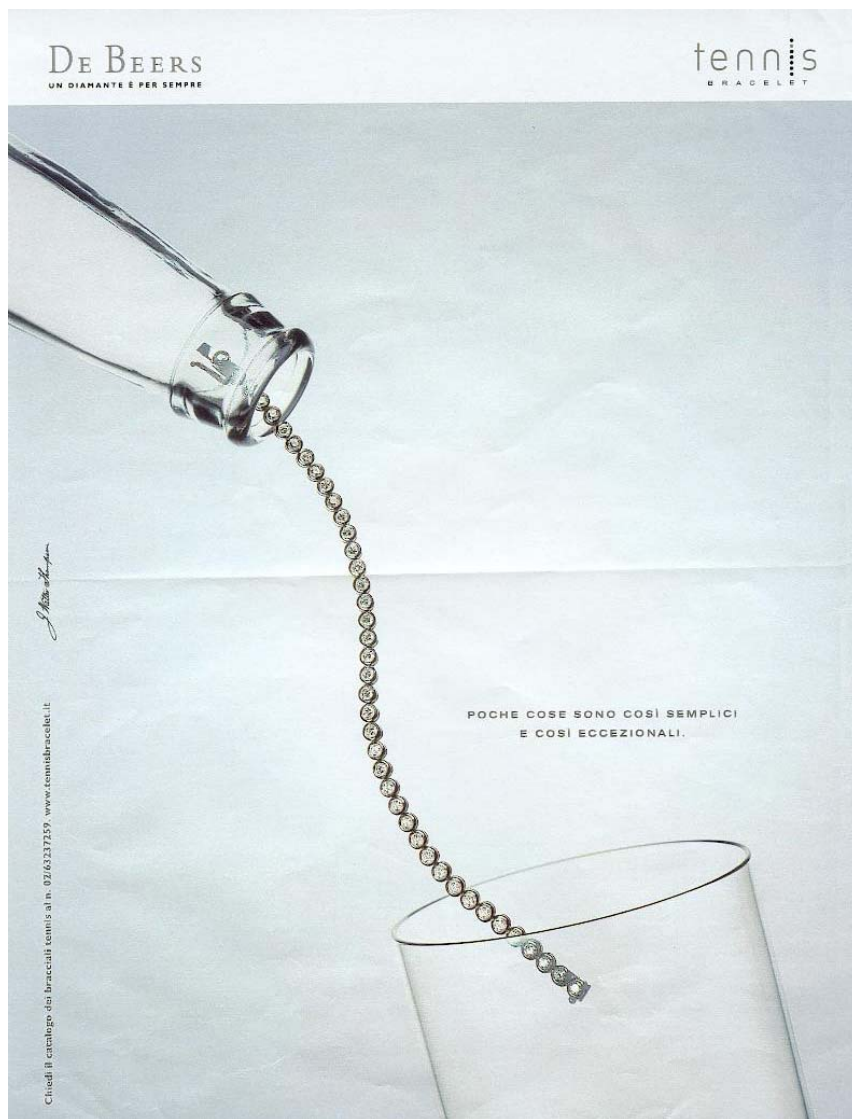
Analysis of an advertisement of the Tennis Bracelet by De Beers

Textualization of discourse, delimitation of text

The discourse, that is, the actual act of communication, implying a source, a message and a recipient, took place in Autumn-Winter 2000, when the ad appeared on the pages of Marie Claire (Italian Edition), a women's magazine with national diffusion. The target audience of the magazine are young and adult middle class/upper middle class Italian women.

As for the interpretative background of the discourse, the main difference between that time and today (late 2004) is the economic situation in Europe and Italy, which then (before 9/11th) was perceived as more positive than now. Such perception may have positively affected the demand of jewels, justifying a strategy of market expansion.

The message is a normal magazine ad (fig. 1), covering one whole left page. It is not part of a series, as far as we could verify. It has no frame or border, as usual in contemporary graphic advertising.



Having thus placed the message in a communication frame in which we have defined the sender, the recipient and the interpretative background, we may now analyze it as a text.

Syntactic Analysis

Separation of the levels and the parts

Graphic partitions

The ad is divided in two parts.

The first is a narrow horizontal upper band, covering about 8% of the ad, neatly separated from the larger area, the second part, by a difference of colors. The band is uniformly white while the rest of the page has a light blue/gray background (fig. 2), with a central lighter area.



On Levels

We define levels of articulation in texts when the text is divided in parts that can in their turn be divided in parts. The classic example are the three articulations of sintagm, moneme (first articulation) and phoneme (second articulation), that we find in spoken language. In syncretic texts we can divide the bodycopy in sentences, sentences or headlines in words, and words in characters. We can separate figures from background, and divide the figures in components, down to lines and colors.

Verbal part

The verbal part of the ad is in Italian and English.

On the white upper band there are two short verbal texts.

On the left we see two lines: above, the words 'De Beers'; below, the words 'Un diamante è per sempre' (A Diamond Is Forever). 'De Beers' is written all in capital letters, but of different size: the initials are bigger than the others. 'Un diamante è per sempre' is in capital letters of the same size, 4-5 times smaller than the line above. The font color of the upper line is gray, the lower one's is black.

On the right there are two words: above, 'Tennis', below, 'Bracelet'. 'Tennis' is written in the same way in English and Italian. 'Bracelet' is English.

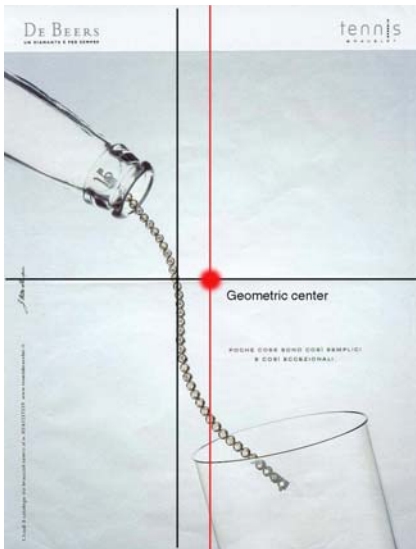
The word 'Tennis' is in lower-case, included the initial. The font style is thin, gray, rounded and a little greater than that of 'De Beers'. The 'i' of the word 'tennis' is replaced by a vertical dotted line made of seven little squares, of which the sixth from the bottom, separating the stem of the 'i' from its dot, is gray and the others are black. The dotted line starts a little below the alignment of the other letters.

The word 'bracelet' is in capital letters, but 4-5 times smaller than the word above it. The font is a little bigger than the lower line on the other side, but thinner.

In the main area we can see one group of words.

The words are placed a little right and low from the center of the composition. They run in two lines: above, 'Poche cose sono così semplici' (Few things are so simple); below, 'e così eccezionali' (and so exceptional).

The letters are capital, the font is the same as that of the word 'bracelet', the size is about one third bigger, but the characters are less spaced.



Visual part

The visual part of the ad can be divided in four quadrants, as in fig. 3. Two of them (lower left and upper right) are empty, and two of them are occupied by figures.

The background is, as we have seen, a blue-grayish-white pale undetermined surface, whiter in the central area.

The upper left figure has a thick dark-gray outline and is filled with white. The lower right figure has two straight lines and an oval, made with a thin dark mark. The inside is the same color of the background.

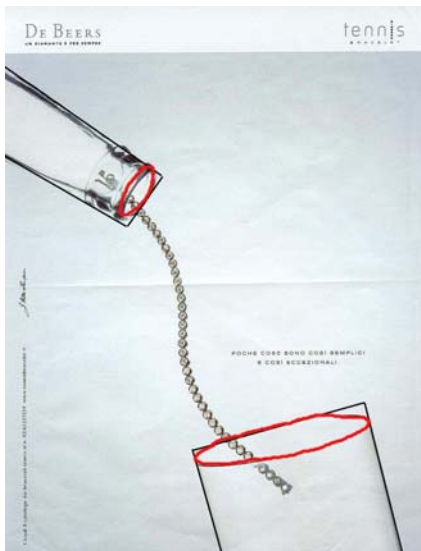
The figure connecting the two is made by many little circular elements, forming a curve. The curve has one end inside the left upper figure and another inside the right lower one.

Relations of the parts

Spatial relations

The upper white band presents a horizontally symmetrical arrangement of letters. The two groups of words mirror each other since they have the same distance from the borders, both have two lines and the first one has the same gray color. They differ because each line has a peculiar typeface and dimension.

The pictures are placed one in the upper left quadrant, another at the lower right and the third, having a curve linear shape, goes from the former to the latter, crossing the page and taking almost the center of the page. The geometric center of the composition is empty. This disposition gives the image a diagonal symmetry.



When one looks for the first time at the ad, and again after the first look, the eyes are driven back and forth from the upper left to the lower right corner of the image, maybe slowing down a bit to follow the curved line, and stopping shortly to read the text at the center, and then the words on the upper white band. We have the impression of a simple, essential composition, made more of emptiness than of graphic objects.

The colors of the whole message are pale and light, going from white to light gray and light blue, except for the black and dark gray used mainly for the outlines of the figures.

The two outlines have similar geometric forms. In a two dimension perspective they roughly resemble two rectangles of different size and proportions (fig. 4). In a three dimension perspective they appear as two partially visible transparent cylinders. The solids are made only by outlines, as geometric figures on a manual. They are only partially visible, with a part 'outside' the page and a part inside it.

When, in our mind, we complete a partially visible figure, we adopt a simple perceptive rule, which considers the illustration a window on the represented world. If an object is truncated by the borders, we consider it continuing in the represented world.

The two figures are similar also because the visible ends are two ovals, representing in perspective the two visible circles of the cylinders, and both are crossed by the dotted connecting line (fig. 4).

The message, in its syntactic structure, that is, without considering the meaning, carries what we call a ‘sense effect’, that is, drives an uncoded interpretation, not verbally represented, yet clear and usually shared by most of the interpreters.

In this case we can say with some confidence that the ad’s simple, thin lines and transparent surfaces, give a sense of cool, rarefied, minimal atmosphere.

Semantic analysis

The second step of the analysis consists in putting together the separate pieces and giving them a meaning in order to build, part by part and level by level, the interpretant of the whole text.

The easiest way is to use verbal interpretants (supported by some images), and to mount them as clusters of words and propositions or even narratives and dialogues, if this is the case.

Now, let us start from the visual.

We actually see at first sight the neck of a glass bottle, a glass and a bracelet.

Does the average viewer identify the product as a diamond bracelet only by means of the picture? Only a quantitative test can answer the question. Semiotic analysis can trace an interpretative path. Even with a glance, the bracelet is seen as made of little colorless cut stones. If they are diamonds the price of the product will be quite high, otherwise it will be considerably lower. The reader may either think they are diamonds, or they are not, or just suspend the judgment and go on looking at the ad. The complete identification of the product may take place by seeing the brand name, if the reader already knows De Beers. Otherwise, the brand motto will give a strong hint.

The image, probably a photograph, has caught the instant when the bracelet is, literally ‘poured’ from the bottle in the glass.

The bracelet does not touch neither the bottle neck nor the glass, it is ‘flying’ from the one into the other, taking a soft, curved shape, and it is perfectly still, with no sign of motion.

The bottle is inclined to pour its content, and the glass is inclined to allow the bracelet to enter. Such a gesture is usually performed by one or two humans, but no part of human figure, no sign of human presence (like a shadow or a piece of furniture) are visible.

The image, in short, can be interpreted as: “A diamond bracelet is being poured from a bottle into a glass”.

On Substitution

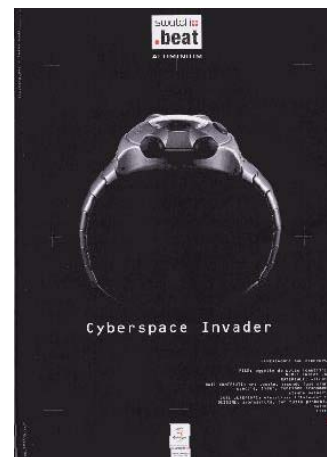
In advertising it is not rare to see an object replacing, or substituting, another. Let us see two examples.



In the Esselunga ad (a supermarket chain) (fig. 5), the headline says: “We hire energetic young people”. The leek replaces a young man with long wild hair and moustache.

In the Swatch ad (fig. 6), the watch, seen in that particular position, replaces a character of an old arcade videogame, “Space invaders”.

Substitution is based on resemblance: the substitute must share some property with the substituted, having other different and usually contrasting properties.



In our ad we find a similar image: the bracelet replaces something else. Its shape is so fluid and everything is so transparent that we are driven to think that the replaced liquid is water.

Let us stop here, as for now, completing the meaning of the visual this way: “A diamond bracelet is being poured from a bottle into a glass instead of water or as if it were water”.

Now let's take the verbal text.

The two lines slogan says: “Few things are so simple and so exceptional”. The text comments the image, therefore the predicates ‘simple’ and ‘exceptional’ are referred to the represented objects. Namely, bottle, glass, bracelet and, since the bracelet replaces water, also water. Yet, bottle and glass (although they also embody those properties) are secondary figures, because they are truncated and ‘serve’ the centrale object (the product). The sentence, with the help of the pictures, is completed like this: “Few things are so simple and so exceptional as diamonds (in particular this bracelet) and water.”

The denotation of the sentence, that is, its immediate or first meaning, is surprising but definitely acceptable as true. Actually, water is simple and exceptional. Simple, since it is chemically simple, transparent and colorless. Exceptional, because nothing can replace water for its properties and uses. Also diamonds are chemically simple (pure carbonium), transparent and colorless, and exceptional. But they are exceptional for other reasons: they are rare, expensive and precious, while water is rather common, cheap and humble.

Now, let us put together the meaning of the visual with that of the verbal text.

The bottle pours diamonds instead of (or as) water. The text explains the meaning of the picture: diamonds and water share the properties of simplicity and exceptionality.

The graphic organization of the words supports the content: the two main predicates (‘simple’ and ‘exceptional’) are at the end of each line. The text is arranged as if the second line were a kind of rebutt to the first: ‘so simple’ ...but... ‘so exceptional’.

A further step, however, must be taken.

Up to this point we did not employ more than linguistic knowledge and simple notions of advertising syntax.

Now we must introduce another notion, namely that of encyclopedia or background knowledge. By these terms, in semiotics, we mean not only linguistic competence, but the whole commonly shared knowledge of a culture or society.

In our case, the average interpreter easily understands the equivalence established by the message and is puzzled by the daring comparison. Yet, she knows also that water and diamonds are different under several eminent aspects.

Thus, the equivalence between water and diamonds is at the same time true and false. The sentence is paradoxical, that is, surprising and original.

To take one more step, we must now consider the enunciation.

The enunciation

When we face a message, among the first questions which engage our cognitive system are “Who is speaking?” and “To whom the message is addressed?” The former question regards the enunciator or addresser of the message; the latter regards the enunciatee or addressee.

To answer the first, we must draw, so to say, the profile of the subject who utters the message (or who might have uttered it: it is not always easy to say).

So, how can we imagine a person or a group who says “This diamond bracelet is simple and exceptional as water”?

In this ad, we have no visual hint or suggestion about the enunciator of the main, central part of the text, the first which comes to our attention. Non human subject is visible, although the image implies somebody who holds the bottle and the glass.

We have the sentence. We may also suppose that the enunciator of the sentence and of the visual is the same subject, or that the two subjects share the same discursive strategy, as two cops who stop a car.

Thus, we infer that he/she has the property of the sentence: is surprising and original.

Furthermore, the enunciator assumes the attitude of the sentence: he/she seems to ignore the main difference between diamonds and water. Such an ignorance is difficult to believe, because this would be inconsistent with the encyclopedia, particularly that of our target audience, so that we are inclined to think that the addresser is pretending it. Since the interpretative process of a text is similar to a dialogue, we may describe it as follows:

“This diamond bracelet is simple and exceptional as... as water.”

“Are you kidding? Diamonds cost a lot, water costs nothing...”

“Oh, you’re right! I really didn’t think about it! How fool!”

Why is a subject affecting to ignore, an evident and well known difference of price between two goods, while appreciating their quality? The easiest explanation is that the subject has no problem of money (or wants us to think so). In any case, this supposition would emerge to the hearers of the message, since they are supposed to adopt the standard encyclopedia.

It is up to the recipient to decide whether the utterer wanted or not to indirectly stress her/his wealth. However, it is clear that he/she puts the price of diamonds in the background, almost forgets it. In the foreground remains the statement of the aesthetic, essential, simple character of the product.

Moreover, the subject of the enunciation doesn’t see the bracelet as a status symbol, for its expensiveness, but in its intrinsic beauty.

The same happens with the word ‘diamonds’, that defines what the product is: it appears almost incidentally in the brand motto. Nowhere it is clearly written “this bracelet is made of diamonds”. You are supposed to know. To be among those who know.

Now we have reconstructed another piece of the discourse: the subject who utters the message is wealthy, but gives no importance to money, and appreciates exceptionality in what is simple, so much as to compare diamonds to water.

This interpretation goes some steps further than the immediate meaning (“a diamond bracelet is poured from a bottle into a glass”), but it arises in the mind as a ‘second thought’, just below the first one.

The secondary expressive traits of the message support the values of exceptionality and simplicity: the pale and light colors, the purity of lines, the empty quadrants, the frozen motion of the picture: everything gives the impression of a rarefact, silent, atmosphere. In this frame, the diamond bracelet appears as a daily object, playing the role of water poured in a glass.

The spatial disposition is coherent with the general tone of the enunciation: the product does not occupy the geometric center of the composition, which is left empty, as for an educated refusal of any showing excess.

The product itself is a simple string of diamonds, mounted in white metal, probably gold or platinum.

With regard to the addressee of the message (the other end of the enunciation axis), there is no direct call to his or her attention. The tone of the sentence is declarative, and printed in small font. The image has no strong colors or appealing figures. No consumer is represented, there is no “You”, neither verbal nor visual.

The addressee must take her decision whether to share or not the point of view of the enunciator. She is softly invited by the addresser to share the aesthetics of simple exceptionality and disregard of price. By accepting this view, she can be part of a social world built around these values. There is no attempt to gain her favour, to stimulate imitation, to stir social competition, to propose the product as a way of gaining social status. The addressee is embraced in the communication only if she grasps the understatement. Actually, this ad is a perfect example of ‘understatement strategy’.

Probably a good share of the readers of a women’s magazine are attracted by the chance to be part of such world.

At this point we take into account also the upper part of the message, because the producer’s brand and the product logo play their role at the enunciation level.

The words ‘diamonds’ and ‘bracelet’ appear only in this area. This means it is a function of the visual to explain the product and its features.

At the left, De Beers and its famous motto ‘A diamond is forever’, propose the durability of diamond as the symbol of all human values intended to challenge time: in this case love and investment, actually the two main reasons for buying jewels.

At the right, the product’s logo recalls by iconic relation (i.e. by similarity) the visual appearance of the product, putting in the ‘i’ the image of the bracelet. The word ‘bracelet’ is English, but the corresponding Italian word, ‘braccialeto’, is similar. Thus, we may suppose the comprehension easy.

The typefaces are simple, thin and small, as if the discourse were spoken in a low tone.

The brand, in that position, takes the role of external enunciator, subscribing to the style and the content of the ad. The brand is the author; the invisible holder of bottle and glass, and utterer of the sentence, is the actor. De Beers ‘says’ the text by means of the inner enunciator, who in semiotics is called ‘enunciated enunciator’. The high profile of the brand, which is almost synonymous of ‘diamonds’, is perfectly coherent with the text.

We can express the semantic synthesis of the message by the following verbal interpretant:

“De Beers, the famous diamond merchant known for the slogan <<A Diamond Is Forever>> (meaning that diamonds are symbols of enduring feelings and also a good investment), and who produces the classic Tennis Bracelet, stresses the simplicity and beauty of its diamond bracelet, expressing an aesthetic view that does not consider the price, and which is shared by people with good income and better taste.”

Narration

In this particular ad, there is almost no narration, since the time of the representation is just an instant.

However, we may say the Sender is De Beers, who, by means of the inner enunciator (also a Sender), communicates the bracelet as the Object of Value, to the client as a Receiver. The reader of the ad, as the Subject, can rely on the condision of the aesthetics of simplicity and exceptionality, which acts as a Helper, in order to neglect and thus cancel the price as Opponent and to realize the conjunction with the Object.

In terms of Narrative Schema, we see as Contract the conjunction of the Subject with the product. To carry out the program the Subject must acquire the Competence of appreciating the simplicity and exceptionality of water and diamonds and of neglecting price, that is, the particular philosophy proposed by the brand. Thus the subject will realize the program (Performance) and eventually receive as a Sanction the participation to the social group sharing this philosophy and wearing that bracelet.

Pragmatic Analysis

In this step we must answer the question: “Why (to what strategic purpose) did the enunciator utter the message?”

We already know the first answer: the enunciator implicitly asks to share his point of view. Imagine a dialogue:

Reader: “Yes, indeed, water and diamonds are both simple and exceptional”.

Enunciator: “So, why not to buy a tennis bracelet?”

Reader: “It’s expensive.”

Enunciator: “Oh, this is not a problem for you, since you really understand and appreciate simplicity and exceptionality.”

This means the message is aimed at people who can afford the purchase but, more than that, who share the brand values.

From the semiotic analysis emerges a strategy of brand values attraction. Target consumers are selected by the condision of the brand values. Among them, some will elect the product as a desirable object, a symbol of their taste and sensibility.

Furthermore, jewels are often a present made by a man to a woman to mark a particular event. Thus, it is important to provide women with valid arguments to place the product in good light to their possible donors, be they husbands or fathers.

The product derives its name from a sport ⁽¹⁾, and it can be worn by a young or a mature woman, in any hour of the day and with any dress. That is another reason to say it is simple and exceptional.

Eventually, tennis bracelet by De Beers is so classic that a man can buy it as a surprise present with a considerable confidence that it will be appreciated. Its beauty is not a matter of taste.

A short examination of the market reveals that 'tennis bracelets' are offered by many jewelers. Some of them are made with low cost stones and metal, some are real diamond bracelets. Among these, some have a more complicated design, with other stones or pearls around or among the diamonds, or with diamonds forming flowers or other figures. The De Beers Tennis bracelet has the simplest possible form, a string of diamonds. But De Beers is the largest diamond mining and marketing company, and this for a connoisseur means quality and absolute trust.

Interpretant

To complete the analysis, we must advance a hypothesis about the actual effect the message would have upon the target. The hypothesis might then be tested using quantitative tools.

The first step of interpretation is certainly attained: a quick glance is enough to grasp the diamonds-water metaphor and the puzzling original comparison. The feeling of simple elegance is evident in the whole structure of the ad.

High redundancy of meaning is typical of commercial communication. The fact that recipients dedicate to advertising a superficial and short attention is contrasted by the repetition, within the message, of the same content as many times and in as many ways as possible.

Only one doubt arises after the analysis of this ad: some consumers, in particular young and/or not expert, might think that the product is not so expensive, the more so if they did not read the word 'diamond', appearing only in little characters in the brand logo.

The second step of interpretation, that is, the aristocratic disregard for price, is probably taken by those who know what a diamond tennis bracelet is, and/or have read the upper part of the page.

This particular target will also feel the invitation to share the brand's vision, and should decide in themselves whether they accept it or not. From this point of view this is an 'include/exclude' strategy. Consumers who feel included will be strongly motivated towards the brand. Consumers who come to the second step of interpretation and feel excluded, because they think the price factor cannot be neglected, might also think that such an attitude is snobbish and reject the brand. The structure or the interpretative path, however, is such that only a minority of recipients will reach this conclusion.

This is, for example, a point where quantitative field research would be useful, to test how many readers are to be ascribed to the former or the latter category.

Evaluation

The ad is effective for a strategy of market expansion through brand values sharing. It might also work to expand and attract to the brand consumers who already have a positive evaluation of the generic product 'tennis bracelet' and who might thus be subtracted to lower quality competitors.

The main risk, as for any understatement, is to be underestimated by recipients, maybe high income consumers, who don't know the brand and the product and incline to ostentatious consumption behavior.

¹ The name 'tennis bracelet' was coined by the press in 1987. The famous American player Chris Evert used to wear such a bracelet during tennis matches. The diamond bracelet broke during a U.S. Open tournament final. And the match was interrupted to allow Evert to recover her precious stones. This story has not been considered in the analysis since it is probably not part of the common encyclopedia of the Italian target audience.