The search for values as a didactic tool - an interdisciplinary perspective

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Abstract

The present article explores the didactic potentialities of an interdisciplinary approach intended for university, master or doctorate courses where the development of professional strategies and the acquisition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are the main target. By exploiting a heuristic method provided by semiotics, namely Floch's Axiological Square, students can acquire the toolkit that permits them to analyse the process of value creation as well as the discursive procedures and lexical peculiarities typical of corporate communication. Although the focus is on pharmaceutical discourse, we are convinced that the methodological apparatus illustrated here is potentially applicable to other ESP domains and that it highlights the importance of dialogue between apparently distant disciplines for better educational outcomes.

Keywords: Floch's Semiotic square; learning by doing; ESP; interdisciplinarity.

1. Introduction

The present contribution1 is part of a vaster project aimed at exploring the heuristic and didactic potentialities of an interdisciplinary approach (Swales, 1990; Perrenoud, 1998; Bhatia, 2008). This is a proposal intended for university, master, or doctorate courses where the acquisition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is aimed at developing skills that permit the production of effective communicative strategies capable of creating and presenting a credible and convincing corporate image. The focus here is on pharmaceutical discourse but we are convinced that the methodological apparatus proposed can be exported into other ESP domains.

Within the realm of specialist-language education, recourse to the analytical and practical tools made available by disciplines apparently remote from each other may impact, positively, upon processes of student learning and motivation (Holmbukt & Larsen, 2016). We wish to highlight the contribution Floch's semiotics of marketing might well make to corporate communication. The dissection of the semiotic mechanisms underpinning the production of meaning may foster and enhance the motivation of ESP learners.

The objective is, therefore, twofold: on the one hand, to provide learners with some of the tools they need to understand value-endowing discursive procedures; on the other, to allow them to "learn by doing" (Ellis, 2003; Steffens et al., 2015; Niemeier, 2017), that is, to acquire some of the rhetorical strategies and lexical peculiarities typical of corporate communication indirectly. The learning outcomes expected upon completion of the didactic activities illustrated below (in section 3) are:

- Acquisition of a theoretical tool for text analysis (semiotic square) and its application to various domains beyond its original scope;
- Ability to identify the value sets encoded in texts and to replicate them for effective communication;
- Ability to recognise the dynamics of meaning-making processes;
- Acquisition of the ESP and discursive strategies typical of pharmaceutical communication.

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[1] The authors conceived and discussed the paper together. In particular, Andrea Fenice is responsible for Sections 3 and 4; Renzo Mocini for Sections 1 and 2.

2. Methodology

In order to show how our approach may be implemented, two pharmaceutical websites were selected: *astrazeneca.com and pfizer.com*[2]. This choice was dictated by criteria of opportunity as the companies chosen seemed particularly suitable for illustrating the educational potential of an interdisciplinary approach that brings marketing semiotics and ESP in a dialogue. Eco (1988) claims that semiotics aims to describe the workings of communication and signification. According to Greimas (1966), the elementary structure of signification is produced according to a semiotic square (see Figure 1), which allows us to represent semantic categories by implementing three opposite logical sets: presupposition or contrariety, complementarity or implication, and negation or contradiction. Floch (1990) applies this tool to marketing, describing how companies invest their products with a set of values. Starting from the opposition between "existential values" and "utilitarian values", he posits that promotional strategies fall into one or more of the four categories associated with the vertices of a square: Practical, Ludic-Aesthetic, Utopian and/or Critical.

- The Practical set of values is associated with utilitarian values and highlights the functional features of a product.
- On the contrary, the Utopian set corresponds to existential values and aims at exalting general principles such as life, identity, adventure, freedom and so on.
- The Ludic set, also called aesthetic, focuses on the qualities a product possesses, which are capable of enhancing leisure and/or generating aesthetic appeal. This set of values refers to pleasure, enjoyment as well as luxury, beauty, and other non-utilitarian characteristics.
- Finally, the Critical set of values emphasises an object as such. This mode presents the product in purely concrete, pragmatic terms by focusing on elements such as the cost-benefits ratio or value for money.

Crucially, Floch's square, like the semiotic square in general, is not arranged statically, but is a dynamic configuration of concepts. This means that the semantic space between them is as important as the vertices themselves. In practical terms, a textual configuration not only can, but is likely to use more than one value set and mixed value strategies as well. This is also why we strongly believe in the semiotic square as a teaching tool capable of stimulating reasoning rather than mnemonics. Students do not learn a series of "labels", static categories to which to assign textual strategies, but they are encouraged to develop critical thinking and question all the assumptions they make, avoiding simplistic often inaccurate binary solutions.

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[2] The analysis that follows is based on the version of the two websites mentioned (last accessed on the 29th of January 2023).

Within the domain of corporate communication, this semiotic tool can be didactically exploited to investigate the language and discourse strategies used by pharmaceutical companies to showcase their research products and frame information disclosure. After all, the square describes only the deeper (more abstract) levels of signification, while "at a more superficial level, the positions are converted into values that ultimately will be desired and pursued by the subjects" (Floch, 2001, p. 113). Therefore, the same values can be discursively realised in different ways, also depending on the semiotic mode selected: verbal, non-verbal or both. This way, the square allows for "the recognition of pertinent expressive features in the production of a specific meaning effect" (Floch, 2001, p. 137). Against this background, students will be guided to use the axiological square to analyse the various value-endowing devices employed by pharmaceutical companies on their websites. Figure 1 below displays the four Flochian strategies and their corresponding value sets.
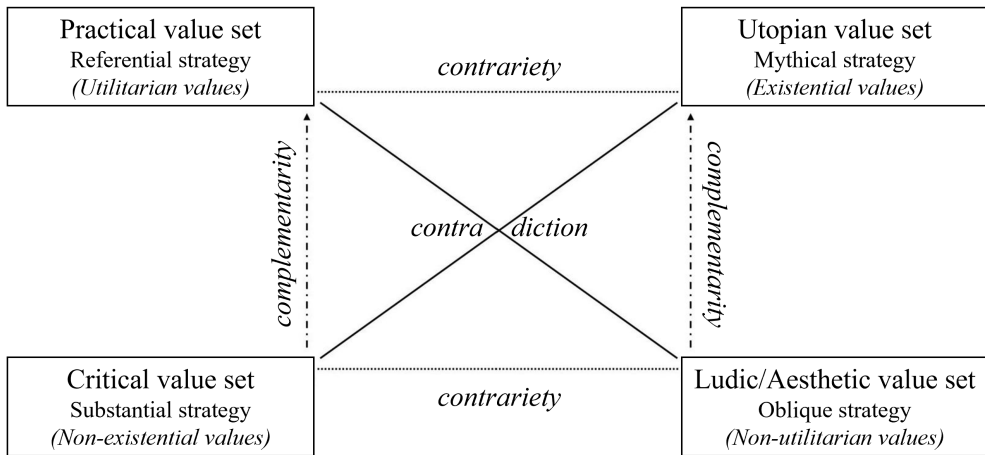

Figure 1. Floch's axiological square.

The practical value set is based on utilitarian values and corresponds to what Floch calls a "referential strategy": a "set of procedures aimed at presenting the discourse in question as true" (Floch, 1990, p. 274, our translation and emphasis). Clearly, not only marketing, but any other form of communication including pharmaceutical discourse can adopt this strategy of factual *presentation* of reality, by foregrounding objectivity, providing data, tables, graphs, and referencing scientific sources.

Conversely, a utopian value set corresponds to a mythical strategy based on fundamental, existential values. It can be found almost without variation in the discourse of pharmaceutical companies. Life, health, the power of science and social well-being are some of the most common utopian values called upon to enhance their communiqués.

Floch associates the ludic or aesthetic set of values with an oblique form of advertising, which relies on less immediate communication that required active interpretation, a "cognitive effort" to understand indirect messages. The label "aesthetic" refers to non-utilitarian values that stress the aesthetic/ludic pleasure experienced by the subject. Just as the practical set of values was an *ostentation of* reality, its contradictory opposite – the aesthetic set – is a strategy of *concealment*. Therefore, the enunciator can "strike the ludic chord" of the enunciatee implicitly – or as Floch puts it, obliquely – through aesthetically pleasing images, or enticing calls for action.

Finally, the critical value set denotes a substantial strategy. Looking at Floch's examples for marketing (quality/price, cost/benefits ratios) this set does not seem to apply to pharmaceutical discourse. However, one should make distinctions between the meanings of "substantial", going beyond the common meaning (ample, sizeable), and focusing on its etymological meaning: "pertaining to the substance or essence", "involving an essential part or point" (Etymonline). Marrone (2007) proposes a revised square in which the substantial strategy consists in a sort of "close-up" of the object *per se* and its perceptible characteristics. Thus, the emphasis is on the object itself, a "hyper-realistic" *presentation* where some identifying characteristics are selected and magnified in their perceptual nature, often in isolation from their context.

3. Didactic activities

The didactic activities outlined here are not meant to act as a thorough and exhaustive examination. Rather, they simply provide a sample analysis to illustrate the teaching application of the Flochian axiologies. Once the basic concepts of Floch's square have been explained by the teacher, the students are asked to analyse selected portions of pharmaceutical websites to look for the specific value strategies adopted by the enunciator.

As expected, these websites regularly adopt the practical value set. Given the abundance and easy identification of this kind of strategy, the students should start their analysis by identifying verbal and visual elements leading to a referential strategy. Significantly, the expression "what science can do", which we find on the homepage of AstraZeneca, is an eloquent example of this communicative solution. In general, most webpages of pharmaceutical companies feature articles with more or less technical or general-purpose health information. On *pfizer.com*, for example, a menu provides links to various informative sections, such as "how drugs are made", "product list", "coronavirus resources". Similarly, AstraZeneca's website displays charts and visual data summaries all intended to pinpoint relevant medical facts. Since it is frequent and easy to detect, this kind of pragmatic strategy is a good starting point for students to accustom themselves to the characteristics of Flochian analysis. While analysing communicative strategies, students can – osmotically as it were –

identify instances of ESP and recurring syntactical structures. However, the teacher should point out that, although the provision of information is the overt aim of these websites, the practical value set is not necessarily the only strategy involved.

Once the students have familiarised with the referential strategy, we suggest that the teacher guide them to make comparisons with its complementary communicative solution, the substantial strategy. Both are easily found together in visual discourse. We argue that very similar images can implement one or the other strategy depending on the (mainly verbal) context in which they are placed. The article "Harnessing the power of cell therapy" on the AstraZeneca website, for example, is accompanied by the silhouette of a woman's body full of animated pictures of magnified cells, proteins and other microscopic elements. This picture possesses almost no informative content. Despite using actual images obtained using a microscope, it is a mere collage whose only purpose is to attract the reader's attention. In this case, the magnification is simply a "hyper-realistic zoom", a focus on the object *per se*, which indicates a substantial strategy. However, when the article describes the CAR-T cell therapy, the pictures of magnified cells refer directly to the scientific information that is being given. Here we can identify a vertical movement on the square towards a practical set of values since the picture is a visual aid to the verbal explanation of the research data provided.

An eloquent illustration of the ludic set can be found in the lexical choice concerning the link buttons. Normally, these are variously labelled as "read more", "find out more", etc. On *astrazeneca.com*, however, we also find buttons such as "explore our latest film" or "explore all our science centres". The same call for action is present on the Pfizer homepage where the first button reads "Explore our science". These labels frame the search for information as a quest, in a sort of mild gamification where the user is rewarded with various kinds of data. Interestingly, on the Pfizer website, the button "Explore our science" leads to a section called "science will win", which refers to the "war against diseases" but also subtly reinforces the semantic domain of "game". It is clearly a different kind of ludic value set compared to that used by Floch to analyse the promotion of a product for its aesthetic or enjoyable features. However, in both cases, the enunciatee is presented with an indirect message which requires active participation to be decoded. Here, the metaphor of exploration is used to tell a story, adding an aesthetic component to an informative text, using a mixed strategy that exploits contrasting value sets on the diagonal of the square.

During the final phase of the learning unit, the teacher can guide the students through more complex analyses, focusing on less obvious cases where multiple strategies can be detected. When entering the AstraZeneca homepage, for instance, the user is welcomed by a conspicuous teal banner. On the left, there is the aforementioned white caption reading "What science can do"; in the right-central area, we find a mid-ground close-up shot of a man's silhouette full of colourful lights. A closer examination shows that the blue light in his head is the schematization of a digital network with floating 0s and 1s, while the yellow and pink

lights in his chest are folded proteins and a double DNA helix. In the bottom-right-hand corner, there is a white "i" information icon. A click of the mouse reveals a short paragraph:

> *Disease understanding: Connecting broader omic-technologies can identify the more complex and transient molecular changes that underpin the course of disease. AstraZeneca is turning this data into knowledge, to help identify novel drug targets.*

Here, the focus of the textual segment is clearly the image, which reveals a clear substantial strategy: it is aesthetically appealing, but the students should be warned that this does not necessarily imply the choice of an aesthetic strategy. In actual fact, the values are not ludic/aesthetic (non-utilitarian); rather, the caption stresses the usefulness of science, indicating a practical and/or critical position on the square. Which of the two is dominant? We suggest the latter. Although the paragraph quoted provides hard scientific facts, evoking objectivity and research practices through the use of a highly specialised lexicon (e.g., *omic-technologies*, *transient molecular changes*), two communicative aspects need to be underlined. Firstly, this excerpt exhibits factual information, but it does so without entering into detail. It is the written equivalent of the aforementioned "zoom effect" focusing on a very specific aspect of medical research without any precise context. We might argue that this excessive close-up actually diminishes the strength of the informative content. The phrase "turning this data into knowledge" does not explain much of the actual process, and it is not even clear what "this data" or "knowledge" refer to. Secondly, the excerpt appears only if the user passes the mouse over the information icon. This means that the written message is backgrounded in favour of visual communication. Referring back to the image, the same strategy can be identified: although the visual elements shown are the result of advanced technology and scientific research (actual pictures of DNA and folded proteins), they yield no actual scientific information. Again, we can find the "hyperrealism" which Marrone considers an aspect of the substantial strategy, rather than the factual presentation of reality indicating a practical set of values. Therefore, the analysis performed using the square reveals a vertical semantic movement from a practical to a critical value set.

As a final example, the students might consider that, with the exception of titles and menu items, AstraZeneca's homepage opens with a claim followed by a call to action:

> *We are transforming the future of healthcare by unlocking the power of what science can do, for people, society and planet.*

> *Discover more about our company [Link button]*

The initial claim enacts a mythical strategy, presenting a utopian value set. Students should be invited to focus on the language used: on the one hand, the presence of words referring to existential values: *future*, *people*, *society*, *planet*; on the other, the use of the continuous present "we are transforming" that suggests both a constant effort and a future plan. The

enunciator is implicitly creating a narrative where the company plays a proactive role in shaping the world. The verb *unlock* adds to this strategy: "unlocking the power of science" creates a mythical, almost heroic configuration with the company as the protagonist of a story. Further evidence of this strategy can be found in the short videoclip accompanying the claim. This is no place for a multimodal analysis, which would go far beyond the scope and aims of this paper. Suffice it to mention that the voiceover introduces the video telling us that "This is the *adventure* of what science can do", and claims that science has taken them "to places [they] never thought possible" making them "pioneers". Using this perspective, one can explain the peculiar verb used in the link button, *discover*, which reinforces the narrative of the explorer the term adventure connotes. This is also an instance of the different though associated ludic strategy created by the "explore" link buttons mentioned above.

4. Conclusion

Contemplating Floch's square and the generative potential of the values presented at the four vertices as they interact vertically and transversally with each other to produce semantically nuanced texts, it should appear clear that the discourse found on pharmaceutical websites rarely pursues a single strategy. Therefore, Floch's square should be presented to ESP students not as a simple list of strategies but as a tool capable of facilitating the interpretation and replication of the values encoded in texts. In other words, the square is a dynamic tool and should be used to highlight logical relations rather than to assign mere labels to segments of discourse. When used heuristically, the semiotic apparatus proposed here can favour the acquisition by learners of discursive and linguistic skills crucial to effective corporate communication in English. The illustrative analysis carried out has striven to corroborate the fact that the Flochian method appears to be applicable beyond its original scope, confirming the pedagogical potential and value of "any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines" (Moran, 2002, p. 16) and calling for further research in this direction.

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