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Communicating Culture Through Text and Image - The Case of Danish and French Company Brochures

How can we diagnose and analyse signals of the corporate culture in a company's communication about itself? And what differences and similarities do these signals reflect from company to company, from industry to industry and from nation to nation? My Ph.D thesis (Johansen, 1999) is an attempt to answer these two sets of questions.

1. The purposes of the thesis

The traditional way to analyse the corporate culture of an organisation or a company is by means of interviews with the employees of the company in question. However, one can get a first impression of a corporate culture by analysing the written communication of the company. This first step of an analysis of the corporate culture is very interesting and relevant because the written communication often constitutes the scene of the first meeting between the company and its stakeholders. A greater knowledge of the relation between language use, rhetorical strategies and cultural axiologies will make it possible to get a first idea of the important values of a specific company in an accessible way. The need for this knowledge might be even greater when there is a need to communicate with persons coming from other cultures, whether these are different corporate, industrial or national cultures.

The purpose of my Ph.D thesis is *to analyse the cultural signals manifested in the written communication of Danish and French companies, as illustrated through the analysis of company brochures, and to compare the results in order to reveal differences and similarities between Danish and French cultures at three different levels: corporate culture, industrial culture and national culture.*

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The primary purpose is to show how the analysis of written communication can give a first indication of the corporate culture in question and to compare certain aspects of the culture of Danish and French companies. However, as an appropriate method to make this kind of cultural analysis has not been worked out so far, and there only exist very few studies of the topic, company brochures, the thesis has two additional purposes, that is a) to set up a model for the analysis of company brochures which is able to deal with the interaction of the visual and the verbal parts of a text and at the same time to give an account of the genre and the genre conventions; and b) to demonstrate, by means of this model, how cultural signals can be analysed in a corpus of Danish and French company brochures from different companies and industries.

The thesis assumes: 1) that every artefact, including the written communication, reveals something about the culture of a company, 2) that there is a tendency towards differences in corporate cultures between Danish and French companies due to the influence of business culture and national culture, and 3) that there seem to be significant similarities between industrial cultures across frontiers, that is a transnational subculture, due to the growing internationalisation and the development within communication technology.

2. An exploratory study of Danish and French company brochures

The data consists of a primary corpus of 35 Danish and 33 French company brochures along with a secondary corpus of product brochures, annual reports and company journals/papers from the same companies. The data represent two industries: high-tech and food industry, and four lines of business: electronics, telecommunications, dairies and bakeries. It was presumed that there will be differences in culture due to different factors: high tech products versus food products, new versus old industry, global-oriented companies wanting to be abreast of the developments in communication technology versus the more traditional food-producing companies.

The thesis presents a detailed analysis of 24 prototypical company brochures from the primary corpus (representing 11 Danish and 13 French companies). It is an exploratory study that demands the analysis

of a certain number of brochures and companies from each line of business in order to deal with cultural signals in each of the companies as well as with cultural signals at a industrial or national level.

3. Theory and methodology: a cross-disciplinary approach

The analysis of company brochures, which can be characterized as long, complex polysemiotic texts, is based on a cross-disciplinary approach combining theoretical fields from four different research disciplines: i.e., organisational theory, culture analysis, communication theory and semiotics.

As for the organisational theory, including research in corporate culture, the functional approach, represented e.g. by Schein (1986), is combined with the symbolic approach represented e.g. by Schultz (1990), Gagliardi (1990) and Alvesson & Berg (1992). The culture analysis is based upon the theories and well known studies developed by Hofstede (1984, 1991), Gullestrup (1992) and Trompenaars (1993). Within communication theory, market communication theory stressing the relations between culture, identity and image is an appropriate approach together with genre analysis based upon the theories of Swales (1990), Bhatia (1993) and Heinemann & Viehweger (1991).

As for semiotics, aspects from visual semiotics based primarily upon Barthes (1964) and Eco (1972) are combined with aspects from text semiotics, that is text semantics, where the analysis draws heavily upon Rastier and his theory of interpretative semantics dealing with the importance of semantic isotopies for the interpretation of a verbal text. An innovation in this thesis is the attempt to transfer his theory to the visual parts of a text as well.

Of course, it can be very difficult to handle a study of such a cross-disciplinary character. However, such an approach makes it possible to integrate different theories succesfully without being eclectic and to get a global synthetic approach that enables analysis of more complicated phenomena and at the same time gives a more detailed insight into the different subtopics.

4. Model of analysis

The study consists of 3 sub-analyses: 1) a textual analysis, 2) a cultural analysis and 3) a comparative analysis of the cultural signals of the Danish and the French companies.

The text analysis takes both the visual and the verbal parts into account and figure 1 shows the model developed for this type of analysis. It must be emphasized that the analysis does not follow a linear reading but is tabular instead with a high degree of interaction between the visual and the verbal parts: the analysis of the images cannot be done independently of the analysis of the verbal text and vice versa.

Figure 1: Model for the analysis of a polysemiotic text: the company brochure

Data	Visual analysis	Relations: image and text	Semantic isotopies:	Culture analysis
verbal and non-verbal parts of a text	denotation and connotation		visual and verbal isotopies	

The text in toto

The model draws upon the visual semiotics of both Barthes and Eco for the analysis of the images and for the interaction between image and text. To overcome some weaknesses in Barthes' way of categorising the interaction between text and image, it has been elaborated by including the theories of Eco.

With its concept of semantic isotopy, the theory of François Rastier of interpretative semantics can characterise the coherence of a text and the interpretative process taking place during the reading. Semantic isotopy is defined by Rastier as the effect of "*la récurrence syntagmatique d'un même sème*" (1987: 274).

Rastier has developed his theory for verbal language, but in my thesis the concept of isotopy is transferred to the visual parts as well, and

the study operates with both visual and verbal isotopies. In this way the concept of isotopy is used for the elucidation of the interpretative process in the attribution of signification between the verbal and the visual sign system. The results of the text analysis are the point of departure for the cultural analysis, which is done according to the principles indicated in figure 2.

Figure 2: Table for the distribution of isotopies among culture-sensitive domains

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Isotopies</i>	Very dominating	Less dominating	Non-dominating
Company				
Staff				
Customers/partners				
Society				

The table contains two dimensions: Firstly, a survey of isotopies distributed according to the degree of dominance of the isotopy in the brochure: very dominating isotopies, i.e. isotopies present throughout the brochure, less dominating isotopies, i.e. isotopies dominating in specific segments only, and non-dominating isotopies, i.e. isotopies playing only a minor role in one single segment of the text. It is not enough just to consider the dominating isotopies of a brochure because very often it is through the less and/or non-dominating isotopies that cultural differences and/or similarities are expressed. Secondly, these isotopies are ranged according to four different areas or actor perspectives: the company's presentation and perception of 1) itself as an actor, 2) the staff and the company's relationship to it, 3) the customers/partners and the company's relations to them, and 4) the surrounding society and the company's relations to it.

This table has several advantages in connection with a cultural analysis. On one hand the type of isotopy and the actor perspective will clearly show the central focus of the company. On the other hand, such a table will make it possible to compare the companies in order to verify or reject the hypotheses of differences and similarities.

Finally, the results of the cultural analysis of the French and the Danish companies are compared to make differences or similarities

stand out on each of the three different levels: i.e. corporate, industrial and national culture.

5. Interpretation of the results of the analysis

The culture analysis reveals so many signals that it has not been possible to give a survey of them all in my thesis, although we know that even an ad hoc isotopy found only in the presentation of one company may have great importance to the culture of the company in question.

The *first assumption of this thesis, that every artefact, including the written communication of a company, reveals cultural signals*, was firmly confirmed. The text-image analyses, the isotopy-analyses and the intra- and intercultural comparative analyses brought aspects to light that would not have been found by a general reading of a brochure. The analyses have even revealed signals that the company itself may not even be aware of.

The results showed similarities as well as differences. *Similarities in the expression and the content of the brochures*. The company brochure is first of all a presentation of the company, and therefore it is not at all surprising that the first actor perspective, i.e. the one of the company, was central to all of the companies. By contrast, there was great variation in the role of the three other perspectives.

When a company presents itself, it typically tries to tell about actions, qualities and relations to its stakeholders. Although some variation in language and image use was seen, all the companies stressed their position as market leader, their innovative faculties, product qualities and their ability to satisfy the needs of the customers. Concerning the level of expression of the brochures quite a few common features were found as well, e.g. they all try to make some variations in their choice of paper, lay-out, image techniques (e.g. the use of 'detached' photos with aesthetic function). Almost all of them try to combine symbolic photos and photos representing real life in the company. These similarities somehow have to do with generic conventions.

Regarding *the second assumption - that there is a tendency towards differences in corporate cultures*, this assumption was confirmed as well in a number of central areas. Many *French* companies turned out to be more oriented towards technology and position than the Danish

companies. To give an example: showing not less than 9 photos of the different branches of the company serves the purpose of pointing out the size and the position of the company. The technology-orientation clearly appears when you look at the pictures: 70% of the pictures do not show people. There might be persons present on the photos but they have the size of an ant. Stress has clearly been laid on technology and production facilities. The staff perspective does not very often play a part at all. If there is a description of the staff, it is very often about their educational qualifications, whereas nothing is said about their qualities and their relationship to one another.

Contrary to the French many *Danish* companies turn out to be much more oriented towards their staff, which is shown by the large number of verbal and visual isotopies focusing the staff. Like in the French, the photos in the Danish brochures present the production processes, but very often close-up photos show an employee in focus. From the point of view of autocommunication, the employees might even recognize themselves and one another, and in this way corporate belonging may be enhanced. The Danish companies are sending out signals of a corporate culture emphasising the levelling of the hierarchy and good relations with the employees. For instance, it is very striking that the isotopy called “employee or job satisfaction”, which for the visual part typically is expressed through a number of portraits of smiling employees, can be found in almost all the Danish brochures whereas it can hardly be found in the French brochures.

These differences can be traced to the level of national culture. At the same time, the study shows a few examples of Danish and French companies which are very similar to one another in terms of corporate culture. Therefore it can also be stated that the same corporate cultures can appear in two different national cultures, confirming the studies of Trompenaars (1993).

The third and last assumption - that there seem to exist significant similarities between industrial cultures across frontiers, was also confirmed. Several identic isotopies and cultural aspects appear in brochures from companies from the same industry across the frontiers which makes it possible to maintain the existence of transnational sub-cultures - a perspective that so far only has received scattered research attention.

All the food product companies seem to pay much attention to the quality of life and of products and to the cultural axiology “handicraft tradition versus modernity”. The high-tech companies for their part want to stress very firmly the importance of the technological development, globalisation and their ability to anticipate and capture the future. Both cases can be explained by referring to the influence of parallel societal and industrial evolution, even if this evolution did not have quite the same course in the two countries. In food culture, today’s way of thinking is “back to the tasteful products of the good old days, but of course with the improved hygiene standards that characterize the modern society”. As for the high-tech companies, they must try to keep up in a world where development runs fast, and this means that they must be oriented towards innovation and the future - otherwise their products would have been long since obsolete. But this goes for France as well as for Denmark.

However, some examples seem to contradict this tendency. *Differences* between industrial cultures can be found as well. For instance, Danish high-tech companies emphasize the technical characteristics of their product, like price, security, efficiency etc., aspects which are not stressed in the same way in the French brochures. Another example is the orientation of the French food product companies towards a presentation of their promotional communication. The French companies want to stress their creativity and ability to capture the market by showing examples of promotions, campaigns, slogans etc. It is quite clear that promotion and market communication are highly valued aspects of French corporate culture, whereas this does not seem to be the case in the Danish food companies.

In order to conclude: The similarities found in the data seem to indicate that Danish and French culture are close to one another in some aspects. Both cultures belong to the western world, we live under the same conditions, we are collaborating very closely through supranational organisations like the EU and the companies have to face growing internationalisation. But cultural differences found at all three levels seem to indicate that there are still different local circumstances such as values and norms to take into account in the meeting with other cultures.

In this short summary of my thesis it has only been possible to give an account for some of my findings, for a more detailed account I refer to chap. 9 of my thesis.

6. Research perspectives

A model which can be used for other polysemiotic text as well has been established for the analysis of company brochures. The manifestation of cultural signals has been confirmed, a method of making an introductory analysis of a company's corporate culture from its written communication has been developed, and the study has to a large extent confirmed the assumptions of the thesis concerning differences and similarities between Danish and French cultures at different levels. The topic, cultural signals in company brochures, however is far from being exhausted.

A cross-disciplinary study like this gives us the opportunity to pursue a large number of different research perspectives in the fields of semiotics and language use as well as in the fields of culture and communication theory (e.g. discourse analysis).

This model for reading a polysemiotic text can be tried out on other genres, but as polysemiotic texts are very complex, the analysis model can be elaborated with analyses of the argumentation strategies, the narrative structures or other rhetorical strategies like for instance the use of metaphores.

Regarding the semantic isotopies, there are still some methodological problems to be solved, e.g. the categorization problem. How can the dominance category of an isotopy be determined, especially as it has to combine the visual and the verbal sign system? As for the use of semantic isotopy in the analysis of images, we still need to find out if these isotopies can give an account of all the pertinent aspects of the images.

Finally to mention just one more perspective, it would be interesting to pursue and extend the study of the corporate culture of these companies by a traditional study, i.e. doing interviews with the employees, and/or by making a reception analysis of the brochures in order to find out to what degree the culture aspects presented in the company brochures correspond to the realities of the daily life of the companies.

Do the employees agree with this view of their company, or is it only an identity created by the managers?

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