

MRS Conference 1993

The dark side of the onion

*Rethinking the meanings
of 'rational' and 'emotional' responses*

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Semiotic Solutions*

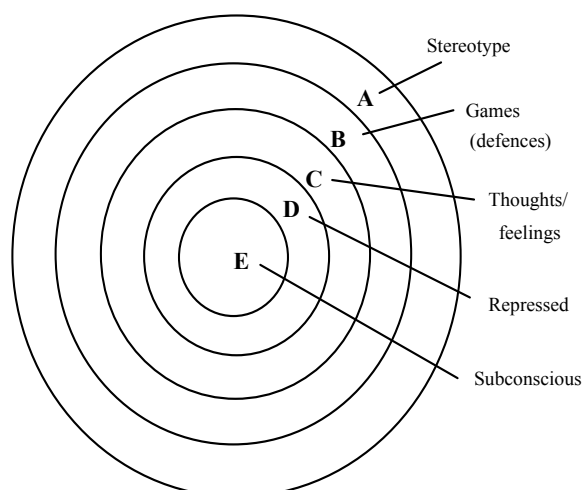
Introduction

*The process is rather like peeling an onion.
You have to go through all the rational layers
to bring out people's deeper emotional feelings*

(Old qualitative research proverb)

How do we make a seemingly logical connection between a vegetable and a conversation? Why does it make sense and why does it enable us to grasp at some deep, intuitive level the emotional implications of what we are doing in the process of qualitative interviewing?

Perhaps we are thinking 'rationally', seeing the onion as a homespun, easy substitution for Bill Schlackman's widely-used Model of Consciousness.



Source: Schlackman (1989)

Or we might just feel it is right because it seems to explain the emotional experiences of moderating. We did some *ad hoc* research amongst quallies as to why the onion skin felt so apposite; why it seemed such a natural analogy:

Because the deeper you go, the more tears there are

Because it's so hard to get them to open up, it makes you cry

*Because onions make things tasty and interesting
and qual is so much more interesting than quant*

*Because the outer layer is just a lot of dead skin
and the really sweet bits are inside*

The point at issue here is that neither the understanding nor the feeling makes any sense without the other. The onion only connects with our imaginative decoding mechanisms in the context of what we rationally understand about the processes and techniques of qualitative research—and conversely, the analogy has only taken root in the discourse because it can slip around in language, breaking out of the syntax of straightforward literal communication and ‘meaning’ so many different things.

This paper is about the hidden layer of the onion skin—our *shared* unconscious, and its invisible manipulation of what we have hitherto understood as ‘the rational’ and ‘the emotional’ consumer response. How to access it, how to recognise it, how to interpret it and how to use it as a basis for analysis of consumer culture.

The paper is based on four fundamental propositions:

1. The ‘rational’ response is *more* than just a protection for people’s hidden feelings. Its real value in research is as an open but *coded* translation of an imaginative experience.
2. The imaginative experience and the translation are not *sequential*. They are *simultaneous*. You cannot have one without the other.
3. People use socio-cultural frames of reference to decode research propositions and recode the response. Consumers are in fact giving us a *coded version* of the social and cultural relationship with products and brands that is driving their ‘feelings’.
4. Because language (and language-systems) are the medium of culture, the rules of language become the rules of the code. Qualitative research then becomes a matter of working with the code through understanding the rules of language.

The shape of the paper

In the first part of our paper we shall reformulate the distinction between rational and emotional psychological consumer states as **types of language**, suggesting that it is not what people say that is important, nor even what they mean, *but that the mode of response is, in and of itself, the meaning.*

Alongside this reformulation, we will challenge the conventional wisdom that privileges the emotional response over the rational, the ‘deep’ revelations of the psycho-doodle over the easily-accessed explanation—what we would call the fallacy of the onion-skin.

Instead we shall argue for a new paradigm that maps onto thinking about the cultural dimension already beginning to evolve in qualitative research.

The second part of our paper sets out the ground plan of the rules of language, and the third and fourth parts apply the theory to the everyday practice of qualitative research.

In this practical sections, we take a new look at projective techniques and stimuli and present the concept of ‘framers’—our methodology for understanding how the language consumers use reveals the cultural drive behind their apparently rational or emotional stances.

And, finally, we shall return to the onion skin and put forward our version of this familiar metaphor.

Part 1

The codes of qualitative research

The dominant code—going ‘deeper’

*The convertible, we found, could be compared
to the ‘mistress’, the sedan to the wife*

(Dichter 1960)

Dichter’s seminal work on motivational research set the agenda for what has become a normative quest for the Holy Grail of qualitative research: the ‘deep’ meanings of products and brands. This orthodoxy can be

confirmed by logging the number of briefs that ask us to “get below the rational to consumers’ deep feelings”.

Because they lie ‘below’ respondents’ consciousness, these feelings and meanings must, by definition, be enabled or ‘brought out’ in some way by the moderator. The notion of ‘going deeper’ has now become a taken-for-granted meaning of ‘good’ moderation. Such is the hold of this model on the industry that not privileging this ‘deep’ discourse is tantamount to falling short of our informal codes of professional competence.

The psycho-dynamic model... dominates modern qualitative research values. Even when we ask straight questions, we rarely, if ever, take the responses at face value. That would be ‘simplistic’ or ‘naive’ (both value-laden words). When the client asks for ‘good’ qualitative research, he or she often means that which digs deeper, uncovers more unconscious meanings. (Ereaut 1992)

In qualitative research, particularly, we have developed—and internalised as truth—a two-tier system of values for consumer response.

The superficial or *rational* response tends to be dismissed because it is, supposedly, ‘easy’ to come by and, more importantly, because it is held to be inauthentic or unreal—a counterfeit card played by consumers in a devious psychological game. The highly valued responses, in contrast, are of the ‘difficult’, authentic and *emotional* kind, the deep feelings people will not or cannot normally express without the mediation of the moderator’s expertise ¹

Emergent codes?

Gill Ereaut’s paper, quoted above, challenges this dominant research ideology as indeed does Jon Chandler and Mike Owen’s suggestive paper on the Evolution of Qualitative Research (MRS 1989) in which they develop ‘*the proposition that our proper object of study is not the individual either as a rational or a psychological being. Our proper object of study is the cultural web of meaning and behaviour which we call ‘consumer culture’.*

Developing this theme, Chandler and Owen make two related points:

Our attention needs to be directed towards the process of analysis and use of data rather than being simply preoccupied with its collection. Here we need to move away from the current obsession with technique and start using data analytically.

We need to define our objectives for study as much in terms of meaning systems and cultural structures as in terms of attitudes and motivations.

Our paper takes up this challenge and puts forward a new frame of reference in which ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ responses are reinterpreted—not as reflections of individual psychologies but as expressions of the collective mind of culture. In the new frame, the operative distinction is not between ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ responses, but between different *and equal* versions of self, perceived in the imagination, shaped by different linguistic modes of expression, and driven by cultural rules of language.

This involves a progression towards a conceptual framework which can grasp emotionalism and rationalism, from the researcher’s point of view, not as more or less valuable or usable levels of consciousness but as equally revealing and significant modes of making meanings.

**Metaphor and Metonymy:
two kinds of response and two types of language**

The new frame developed in this paper draws on structural linguistics, and clinical studies of neurological damage affecting the language-processing centres of the brain. The conjunction of these two fields tells us about the linguistic and cultural software we all run when processing information of various sorts... including ads, packs, design, marketing messages and research questions.

The two basic modes of language addressed, affecting the encoding and decoding of not only verbal but also visual and all other communications, are *metaphor* and *metonymy*.

These two terms refer to the *cultural* equivalents of what we conventionally regard (with a built-in value judgment), as psychologically ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ responses. To revisit the onion: a ‘metonymic’ response to the question ‘*why is an onion skin like qualitative research?*’ would be:

Because it refers to psychological techniques to strip away people’s defences to get at the feelings and emotions they find it difficult to articulate

while

Because the deeper you go, the more the onion makes you cry

would be a metaphorical response.

The metaphor-metonymy opposition will be explained, and its cultural salience and pervasiveness illustrated, in Part 2. Here we want simply to outline how these two types of language also drive our own research codes.

**“I didn’t realise I’d been speaking prose all my life”
‘Playful’ and ‘normal’ language**

Metaphor we tend to grasp intuitively because we have a cultural frame for it, as wordplay—language itself intruding in the communication process or actively and perceptibly doing something. Most of us learned something about metaphor at school and find it quite easy to recognise. Dichter’s convertible-mistress and sedan-wife associations are clearly metaphorical.

The onion, with its spherical surface, its underlying layers and its ‘peelability’, is a physical metaphor which stands in for an abstract model of the human psyche. The metaphor superimposes one set of meanings on another, demanding imaginative decoding and, most importantly, the receiver’s active participation in making meanings. This is where language plays, slides, goes ‘deep’ and invokes an emotional dimension when we make the connection in our imagination. This imaginative dimension is described in Catastrophe Theory as ‘the qualitative shift in our minds when we ‘get’ a pun or a play on words’²

Metonymy (non-metaphorical language), in contrast, tends to be invisible and more difficult to frame or grasp *because it is our cultural norm*. When we ‘speak prose’ we talk metonymically.

Metonymy is language busily and discreetly at work—taken for granted, apparently innocent, transparent, neutral, literal, not really doing anything except opening up a window onto the world. The language Dichter uses to *present* the car metaphors he has uncovered is metonymic. People use metonymic language to *explain* what they have drawn in a metaphorical psycho-doodle.

In a broader sense metonymy embodies all that is logical, linear, unplayful and unambiguous in language. The movement of metonymy is to link all the parts into a transparent whole, so that we can ‘see through’ to the meaning without leaving any playful residue and without making us aware that language is involved in any way except to present the concepts behind the words.

But language is never innocent. It is always doing something, and always defining the hearer or reader in a particular way. It is metonymy’s ideological givenness and normalisation that makes it so difficult to characterise, so easy to overlook and so easy to denigrate as the expression of a predictable and superficial consumer response.

This is not to deny that some kinds of response *are* more difficult to elicit than others or that, as Peter Cooper has said, there is “*an intuitive level largely responsible for the inarticulate and active involvement consumers have with advertising and marketing*” (Cooper 1987)

Our contention is that the logical (metonymic) level carries just as much responsibility as the intuitive (metaphoric) in determining the consumer's cultural and ideological involvement.

It is a question not of what people are hiding or defending but of which socio-cultural frame they are using to interpret their own relationship with a research topic. The difference in the frame is articulated by consumers in different forms of linguistic response. If the frame gives them permission for involvement on a more playful level, they will talk more easily—or psycho-doodle, or make collages—in poetic associative language (metaphor). If, however, they are using another kind of frame—another perception of self—they will *want* to play the image back in more precise and literal terms (metonymy). The rational cultural language *becomes* the expression of an emotional need.

The problem is that, as cultural creatures ourselves, researchers tend to be only actively aware of one kind of frame, the creative and metaphorical—the metonymic being the invisible norm for us, as it is in the culture at large. Because metaphor is so imaginative, it lets us see that something is obviously going on.

But a metonymic consumer response may be a critical indicator of how the brand, product or advertisement is working at the level of the imagination, and of how different cultural classes of consumer (*“people like us”*) perceive themselves in relation to it. If we ourselves are unable to perceive the metonymic dimension, and its forms of cultural permission and denial, we are by and large refusing ourselves access to valuable consumer data.

Illuminating the onion

Always ‘going deeper’ has, unknowingly, imposed metaphorical frames on *legitimately* metonymic consumer responses. To make ourselves fully aware of the cultural and linguistic mode of the original response adds new dimensions and control to the whole process, empowering both respondent and researcher.

Ultimately we come not to bury the onion, but to illuminate its dark side. Our common prize, by complementing the psychological with linguistically based techniques, will be a fuller understanding and a finer tuning of the cultural dimensions of brands, products, advertisements and consumer responses.

Part 2

The rules of language

Agnosia: lost in perceptual space

The dark side of the onion is one of those mixed metaphors that give us an external and exotic viewpoint on our normal codes of perception and representation. Such topsy-turvy deconstructions of the norm are the raw material of comedy, fantasy and surrealism.

But what happens when you *really* wake up inside a Kafka novel, a Magritte painting, or a “*somebody’s pulling your Pilsner*” commercial?

The neurologist Oliver Sacks has presented a number of case-studies describing individuals who lose their hold on what we normally take to be reality³. The *way* in which they lose their bearings has a structure to it.

And some decoding back, reading the norm out of these distortions, begins to give us a map of the basic linguistic and cultural orientations we suggest market research should be looking at to complement and enrich our current knowledge of the ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ psychological response.

Detail and context: the two basic ‘ways of seeing’

Sacks gives us the story of Dr P, whose problems begin when he starts ignoring students he should recognise. Soon he has difficulty recognising faces at all. Then he starts to pat the tops of water-hydrants and parking meters, taking these to be the heads of children. He talks to carved knobs on the furniture. On another occasion, Dr P insists that his foot is his shoe and, on leaving the room, tries to take his wife’s head with him, mistaking it for a hat.

A similar case—John, shown on BBC2’s *Horizon* in 1986—fails to recognise a picture of his wife (“*obviously not a complete stranger because it’s in the family album*”, “*I can give you the details but can’t put them together*”).

In another scene, John studies a photograph of Sheba, the family Alsatian, against the background of a Christmas tree surrounded by presents. He decodes the image by noting a dog, or possibly a model of a dog, squatting near a tree or “*large shrub*” which suggests to him that the setting must be out of doors. A picture on the wall does not look like a window, he admits, but *is* probably a window because no-one hangs pictures on outside walls. The presents he interprets as “*some sort of ornamental collection of stones on a pathway*”.

Freud coined the term ‘*agnosia*’ for these dysfunctions in recognition and perception. The symptoms challenge our common-sense view of objective reality. They make us realise that the world of objects ‘out there’ is, in fact, structured by our *internal* codes and expectations. It is our perception that imposes order on the chaos of incoming sensory data.

When is a Christmas tree no more than a ‘large shrub’? When it is impossible to access the appropriate ‘Christmas’ schemata—the ‘frames’ or ‘scripts’ of contexts, objects and relationships artificial intelligence researchers model when they try to simulate our cultural knowledge

To read a photograph is not just to recognise an object *but to deploy acquired ways of seeing*. John and Dr P’s exclusion from some of these codes is no more remarkable than the response (reported by Marshall McLuhan) of a tribal audience in the 1950s who interpreted an agricultural documentary as being ‘about’ a chicken. Further investigation showed that the chicken had occupied the lower right-hand corner of the screen for just a few frames halfway through the film. In a recent qualitative project, groups of young women respondents judged a whole stealomatic as being riddled with sexism because it contained the briefest shot travelling down a woman’s half-clothed body.

The key to our basic forms of expression and understanding is the indissoluble relationship between detail and context.

*Significant detail can only be accessed through context
context can only be accessed through significant detail.*

**Paradigms and syntagms:
detail and context in language**

What John and Dr P both lack is a context (or at least *our* context) for their visual perceptions. Because there is only detail, they can’t see the wood for the trees. Worse still, without a context or frame to put it in, the individual detail slides between conflicting possibilities—hat/head, shoe/foot, window/picture—two interrelated dimensions of seeing.

In making sense of our world we draw on:

1. selection of individual objects, each from a range of possibilities (detail).
2. making possible the co-ordination of objects as parts of a whole picture (context).

Without context, a basic instability affects our way of ‘seeing’.

These dimensions of seeing map onto the two basic dimensions of spoken and written language (referred to in structural linguistics as the *paradigmatic* and *syntagmatic* axes).

If I say ‘apple’ and you respond ‘orange’, ‘pear’, or ‘banana’ you are working on the paradigmatic axis. The responses are linked to the stimulus as possible structural *alternatives* to it in a sentence. Any of these can, formally if not semantically, occupy the ‘apple’ slot. This is the

dimension on which metaphors are created—usually by linking two semantically related alternatives, one stated and the other implied, in the same slot.

If you say ‘eat’, ‘juicy’ or ‘Garden of Eden’, your response is placing ‘apple’ in a syntax of *combined* terms. These are not alternative contenders for the ‘apple’ slot but components that stand next to it in building up a larger context—like a sentence or a narrative. This is the syntagmatic—or metonymic—dimension.

Roman Jakobson's study of the two main types of *Aphasia* (neurological dysfunctions specific to verbal language processing) confirm the importance of these two dimensions. *Broca's Aphasia* leads to what Jakobson calls “similarity disorder” (a breakdown in the association of words on the paradigmatic axis) and an inability to use metaphor. In *Wernicke's Aphasia* it is the syntagmatic linking of words into a coherent context which goes haywire, resulting in “contiguity disorder” and an inability to grasp metonymy. Both dramatically affect the decoding and encoding processes of communication.⁴

**Linguistics and semiotics:
the ‘language systems’ of culture**

These two structuring principles of paradigm and syntagm—in which we find the core of metaphor and metonymy, and the basis for building new tools and techniques for qualitative research—shape not only language but other cultural systems. The semiotic analysis of signs in general is based on a foundation of linguistic analysis.

Syntagms and paradigms, grammatical systems, structure our understanding of our daily life. There are syntagms in:

- food* (order of courses in a meal/meals in the day),
- clothing* (different garment or accessory slots making up the *ensemble*)
- furniture* (juxtaposition of pieces in the same room)

and paradigms, for each; dozens of possible specific alternatives for every slot in the syntagmatic sequence. Think of all the paradigmatic alternatives that could fit into the main course slot of the ‘dinner’ syntagm or the ‘footwear’ slot of the clothing syntagm. (And think of how we ask people to *select* images or words to describe a product or brand in group discussions.)

It is the interplay of these two dimensions that solves the catch-22 of detail and context. Studies of agnosia gives some indication of their fundamental significance: the damage to brain hardware begins to make visible, through the gaps in a patient's ability to relate paradigm to syntagm, metaphor to metonymy, a larger map of our common cognitive and cultural software.

**Metaphor and metonymy revisited:
mapping linguistics onto projective techniques**

This clinical and linguistic frame can throw the differences between metaphor and metonymy into sharper relief—and, critically, it makes metonymy visible to us as a mode of meaning *production* which is every bit as active and artificial as metaphor.

In its narrowest sense, metonymy is a figure of speech in which one component signifies a whole context of things, either next to it or logically connected with it: (*'head'* for cattle; *'hands'* for workers; *'Downing Street'* for the UK government and executive, etc). On a broader level, metonymy works towards ordering words into unambiguous connectedness.

Metonymic language would never attempt to explain the human psyche in terms of an onion (a detour from the straight line of meaning) but would locate it logically, as part of the whole, in a rippling out of ever widening but *stable* contexts:-

- the psyche as part of the brain/body,
- the brain and body as part of emotionalism and rationality
- emotionalism and rationality as part of consumer response
- consumer response as part of a discussion group, and so on and so on.

The contexts may be explicit or implicit, but the linguistic aim is the same. The ambition of metonymy is to leave no play or materiality in language—only a single, uninterrupted plane of connection and meaning.

Within this frame we can see more clearly how metaphor works. When Shakespeare calls the sun "*the eye of heaven*" or the world "*this great and universal theatre*", the structural switching within language is exactly the same as when Schlackman's Model of Consciousness is identified with an onion.

Two possible alternatives from the paradigmatic (or detail) dimension of language are being jammed together in the same slot—the identification of the two, across their differences, generates a new, relatively playful and unstable shimmering of meanings. The linear flow of language's syntagmatic axis is interrupted by the wordplay, and the strait-jacket of syntax eases.

There is more room for freedom, pleasure and participation in decoding. The collision of two different terms in the same slot also opens up the possibility of different syntagmatic frames being imposed on the same sequence of signs. As we switch between meanings and contexts, language and perception become things to be played and experimented with—flexible material presences rather than mundane, transparent means to the end of representing fixed meaning.

This, in our view, is the most exciting, joyous and valuable use of projective techniques. Personification, obituaries, collage boards, etc. all enable a metaphorical experimentation with accepted meaning which in turn allows consumers to get in touch with their own imaginations.

But they still have to have a context—a metonymy—to understand why they are making these particular imaginative connections.

Roman Jakobson identifies metaphor and metonymy as the two poles of our culture. Mythic discourse, lyric poetry, Romanticism, Symbolism, Surrealist painting and Charlie Chaplin films are all metaphorical—as is film montage (juxtaposition of images generating meanings in excess of the sum of the parts). And, of course, advertising devices and brand properties.

Metonymic forms of expression predominate in scientific discourse and in ‘clear’ or ‘transparent’ prose generally—also in literary and photographic realism, and Hollywood narratives... and in positioning statements and helpfully explanatory voice-overs.

Most images can be exploited to emphasise one or other of these cultural modalities. A photograph of a tall blond man in dark clothing captioned “*Rutger Hauer*” will be metonymic. You can make it metaphorical by replacing the caption with “*Guinness*”. So Rutger Hauer ‘means’ Guinness, just like the onion ‘means’ projective techniques.

How you *feel* about a worldview of Guinness-drinking as expressed through the creative use of Hauer in the Guinness campaign (or about the worldview of qualitative research as expressed through the metaphor of the onion) depends on the cultural and social frame you use to put a context around the metaphor, your ‘way of seeing’. Or, as we have said elsewhere, your “*cultural class*”⁵.

At root, language is metaphorical *and* metonymic. The feelings we express about ourselves: how we are and how we ought to be in relation to the world about us (including the paraphernalia of the marketplace) are expressed through the interrelation of the two poles.

At the present time, our techniques are biased towards metaphor. But metonymy is out there. We must open our eyes to it and find ways to exploit its value in decoding the cultural stance, the perception of self in the context of the brand that drives the imaginative relationship people have with products, brands and advertising.

Part 3

Putting the linguistic model into practice

*“You know where you’re going
but do you know where you’re coming from?” (Ereaut 92)*

The title of Gill Ereaut’s paper, quoted in Part I, raises a critical issue of the baggage researchers bring with them to the qualitative (and indeed the quantitative) process.

Ereaut suggests that

All qualitative researchers must bring to the job sets of mental models, theories and beliefs. The researcher with a psychological background will probably have different sets from one with an anthropological background and so on.

The mental model we bring to this paper starts from a theoretical viewpoint that the language people use to ‘explain’ their choices in selection procedures (or any other explanations for that matter) is never innocent. It is either inserting itself playfully and materially into the discourse or it is trying to pretend that it is simply a shrink-wrap for the concepts that lie behind it.

In either case it is not ‘reality’. It is a coded version of the world of the question—or the brand, or the product field—seen from a particular cultural frame.

It has been the premise of this paper that these language schemes are decodable and interpretable through the principles of linguistics and semiotics and that we can, indeed, we should, be performing a kind of running, on-the-job decoding operation in both data-gathering and analysis.

From psychology to literary criticism

The onion skin refers basically to psychology; formulating the consumer in its own taken-for-granted meanings as individual person, responding to research propositions through his or her ‘thoughts’ and ‘feelings’.

Our paper overlays that model, taking, as its reference point, literary criticism. In this new plan, the consumer is a text (a fragment of culture); also author of his or her own scenario in the drama—or the comedy—of the brand.

The purpose of research in the literary critical frame is to analyse the consumer as a character through the dramatic devices and the language he or she is using to construct a personality for him/herself in the context of the research topic.

Importantly, however, the personality is not constant.

To quote Chandler and Owen again

*People do what they do because they share
in cultural meaning systems.*

Cultural meaning systems change from product to product and from brand to brand within products. And as the culture changes, so does the **discourse**, a prevailing way of talking about something that structures how we are expected—or even allowed—to think about it. (The discourse of pop music is different from the discourse of classical music)

Defining consumer discourses

All product fields and brands have a distinct discourse: a way of speaking about themselves which draws from and feeds into the wider discourse out there in the culture. Consumers construct themselves out of this discourse, make themselves up, as it were, out of the bits and pieces of language that are flying around in the cultural ether.

(Cultural change happens when new social groups invade this discourse and bring with it part of their own cultural baggage [we have written elsewhere on the impact of new money on old money] ⁶ Think of what happened to the discourse of the city when the Thatcher yuppies took over. Costumes changed, so did the decorum—and so did the language.)

Discourse is the cultural expression of social values, attitudes and beliefs.

An American respondent in a breakfast cereal project was once asked to describe mornings in her household. She said

*I give them their cereal, their toast
and their slap—then send them off to school.*

Everybody laughed. The discourse simply did not allow this to be anything other than ironic. You cannot have a discourse of violence invading a discourse of childcare.

However, in the context of a tennis match, the same respondent might have said to her partner

Get out there and beat the hell out of them

In the discourse of competitive sport, the violent metaphor is acceptable.

**Reading the discourse:
listening to the language**

The sharp-eyed reader will, of course have spotted that *'I give them their slap'* in the American girl's response is metonymic and *'beat the hell'* is metaphorical.

But, look again. The playful tone of the response should have alerted us to the fact that 'slap' here could also be a metaphor. The woman could have been (in fact, was) choosing from a set of alternatives.

slap
shove
push out the door
relieved goodbye

By using playful metaphorical language, she had opened up a gap in the sentimental discourse of cereals and childcare and revealed the moment of pleasure when the children have gone off to school and the day is your own.

The material noun had intruded into the invisible nature of the explanatory language. But the play can only be understood in the context of the prevailing (rational) discourse—the serious business of bringing up children and caring for their welfare including, of course, sending them to school and ultimately letting go altogether. The metaphor of 'empty nester' has not gained its hold in our minds without good reason.

Listening for possible metaphors in apparent metonymy (and *vice versa*) is key to using linguistics in qualitative interviewing.

'Willing to tell you, wanting to tell you, waiting to tell you'

The important point here is that the slap metaphor accesses an extraordinarily complex web of emotions deriving from cultural perceptions of how we are supposed to care for our children, but that we did not have to 'go deep' in terms of pulling the information out. As Jon Chandler has said *"It falls out of people's mouths."*

Likewise Nike have built their empire on the metaphorical ascendancy through sport of the disempowered classes—blacks and kids. But they didn't have to go deep to find that either. The discourse is peppered with metaphors for power through violence.

Vide the line on one of the latest Nike posters

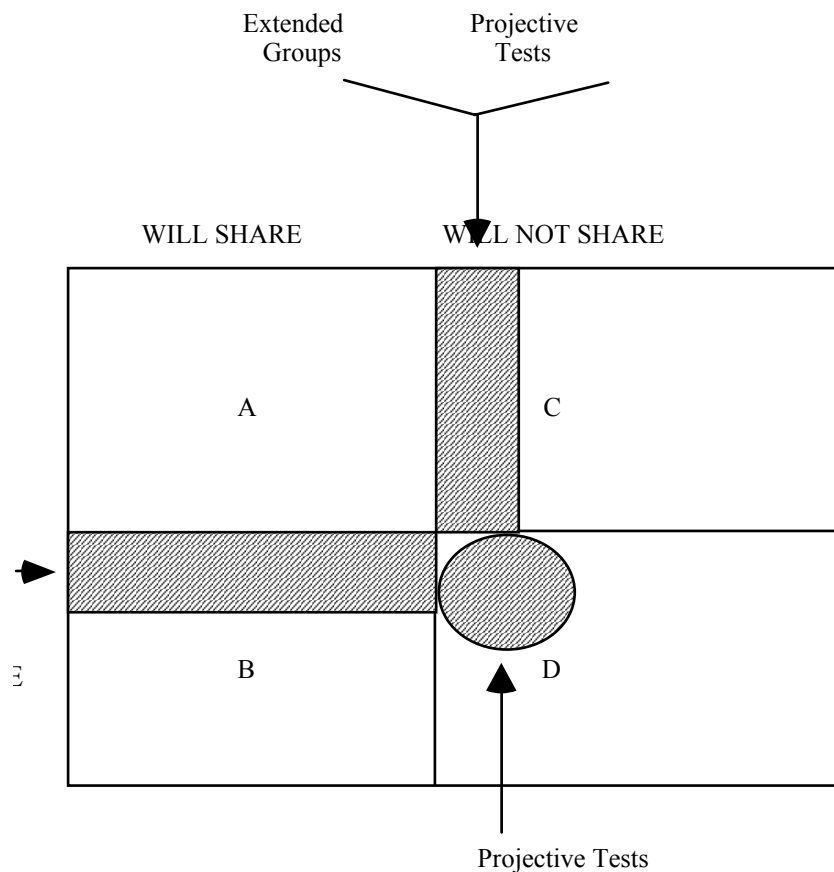
It's not the winning, it's the taking apart

Our concern in this paper is not with what people won't tell you, or even what they can't tell you, but with *what they already are telling you* through the language and discourses they are using to encode their cultural perspective.

As Alfred Doolittle has it, consumers are “willing to tell you, wanting to tell you, waiting to tell you” if you will only give them the tools—and listen to what is ‘falling out of their mouths’.

Not aware, will share

In developing a model for the articulable and the inarticulable from the point of view of the linguistic paradigm, we have found it useful to adapt Bill Schlackman’s ‘4 quadrants of consciousness’ idea—and again this insight should be credited to Gill Ereaut. ⁷



Four quadrants of consciousness Source Schlackman (MRS Course)

In Schlackman's explanation of the model, he suggests that the respondent’s consciousness is divided into four quadrants and that projective techniques are most useful in getting at the information held in quadrants B and C, where people are ‘not aware’ of the information held there.

The linguistic model agrees with Schlackman's argument that projective techniques are 'most useful' in getting to the information contained in Quadrant B—*WILL SHARE/NOT AWARE*—but disagrees with his premise that it has anything very much to do with building up trust in order to ‘release’ withheld information; although ‘trust’ is, of course,

critical to the group dynamics. In our adaptation, it is much more a question of using projective and other techniques to enable people to lay before you the cultural map they are using to chart their way through the discourse (the shared meanings of products, brands and markets).

**Selection, combination and cultural framing:
a new way of looking at the use of present techniques**

At the heart of the methodology we are suggesting is the concept of ‘framers’. Framers are not new techniques in themselves; more a new way of looking at the things we already do. To illustrate this point, we have taken as a basis for the practical part of the paper, the chapter on Projective Techniques in Wendy Gordon and Roy Langmaid’s book *Qualitative Market Research*

Essentially, by ‘framing’, we mean giving people ways to *select* ‘signs’—objects, or ideas or images—and *combine* them into a scenario. The interrelation between the two actions reveals the *cultural ‘frame’* they are using to:

- a) make the choice in the first place (*detail*)
- b) combine the choices into a particular scenario (*context*)

For example, Gordon and Langmaid quote consumer personification of Domestos as:

A knight in shining white armour come to clean out all the bad from the world

Like a policeman, male, strong, fighting off all the baddies and winning

Strong and dependable, caring, bright and cheerful person, like my mother (p. 97)

The choice of metaphors in the first two examples clearly references cultural male authority figures. The metaphors are combined into scenarios wherein dirt is expressed through new metaphors for moral evil to be ‘cleaned out’ and ‘fought off’.

What they reveal is a *cultural* attitude to dirt and to the *semiotic* role of cleaners.

Interestingly, however, the third scenario is using a *personal* frame of reference, not a cultural code. The paradigmatic choice is actually combined into a string of real attributes which only make sense for the respondent at the end of the sentence as a description of her/his own

mother. But, as the authors say in the introduction to projection techniques:

After all, we are not trying to discover whether an informant hates his mother or not, but rather how his psychological make-up influences his perception of, say, a make of car or a brand of breakfast cereal (p. 95)

We would concur absolutely with this, but replace ‘psychological’ with *cultural*. Brands may or may not be finally able to tap memories of Mum in the advertising, but cultural attitudes to dirt are woven into the web of the meanings of cleaning.

Part 4

Linguistic techniques

A short step from projective games

Deriving from the rules of language, we suggest that most of the projective techniques we use are actually *already* being thought of in terms of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axes.

Gordon and Langmaid describe the five main types of procedures thus:

1. Association
2. Completion
3. Construction
4. Expressive
5. Choice ordering

Association and Choice Ordering are working on the selection procedures of language. Completion depends on creating a context, and Construction and Expression describe the process of ‘ways of seeing’.

Within the limits of a short paper, we thought it might be helpful to show how we have adapted some of the most widely-used techniques for the *lit crit*’ model .

1. Product mapping

For many years, we have been amazed at the exponentially enormous value of product mapping. People seem to be able to tell you so much by simply putting packs in groups. The linguistic model explains why. They are constructing paradigms of alternatives within the grammar of the product field.

Moreover they map these paradigms with a metaphorical or a metonymic weighting—that is they are thinking about them in a more playful or more ‘serious’ character mode, exactly—as we shall go on to say—as they do in word association.

The first instinct is almost always to map metonymically—grouping products by their use—in which the part of the deodorant, say, stands in for the whole cleaning and grooming process. But people can easily ‘flip’ from metonymy to metaphor, grouping products by colour or shape. In this latter exercise, colour may be an analogy for fragrance and shape for the imputed user market.

This also works with typography. With its curlicue typeface *Flake* **is** female and its square-faced opposite number, *Mars*, heads up a paradigm of ‘masculine’ chocolate countline bars.

In a favourite example of product mapping, women mapped supermarket toiletries in two broad paradigms. ‘*The Pretties*’ and ‘*The ones you throw in the trolley with the frozen chicken*’ Pretties and Chicken became the linguistic and conceptual framework for a cultural perception of how you are allowed to think of supermarket toiletries in the context of:

- family purchases*
- self pampering*
- gifts*

The first two are self-evident. The third presents a more interesting frame. You can buy an own-label ‘Pretty’ from Boots or Marks and Spencers for a gift, but you can’t buy one from Tesco or Sainsburys, because the overriding discourse in the supermarket is ‘chicken’-led. Frozen chicken is a metonym for the contents of the trolley, but it is also a metaphor for rushing round in a hurry. A gift you buy in a hurry is a cultural no-no, because, as everybody knows

It's the thought that counts

You can't buy someone a ‘thoughtful’ gift when you’re buying the frozen chicken in the supermarket, because ‘*you just want to get in and out*’.

Product mapping gives people a methodology for creating paradigms that may be in and of themselves either metaphorical or metonymic. Mapping also has an important syntagmatic dimension in that the identification of paradigms can lead to suggestions for scenarios that link the different groups together in a kind of product ‘sentence’ or ‘narrative’. Through supplying contexts to link the parts into a whole, consumers can identify gaps in the larger picture, semiotic spaces which might be filled by new product or brand concepts.

The important thing to hammer home at this juncture is that *neither is more or less revealing*. Both are golden nuggets of cultural information.

2. Word Association

Word Association is the daddy of selection techniques (to slip in another metaphor.)

Used in conjunction with product or brand names, free association can give you a marvellous snapshot of the cultural frame that is structuring the meanings of the product.

Gordon and Langmaid suggest for instance that to invite respondents to word-associate with cornflakes '*might get answers like family, Kellogg's, sunshine, British, boring, children etc .*'

Analysing these linguistically, *Sunshine* is the only clear metaphor. *Family* and *children* are metonymic. You decode them realistically. All those family breakfast commercial scenarios come to mind; and it's interesting how Kellogg's have played with those codes in their most recent advertising.

British is on the cusp. It could be metonymically standing in for the manufacturing company's geographical base or it could be a metaphor for a British way of life, in which case the corn flake would be tapping cultural perceptions of what it means to *be* British (or not be British) and the role of food in the establishment of a sense of national belonging.

You can push the metaphor by contextualising British with

food
clothes
landmarks...etc

But the really interesting word association hypothesised by Gordon and Langmaid is *boring* because it signposts the edge of a symbolic community.

'People like them eat boring old cereals like corn flakes'

3. Reading hostile metaphors

Gordon and Langmaid make the point that polarised positions of warmth and hostility can be set up by word association.

We want to suggest (and this is true of all responses, including the much more complex statements people make in describing, for instance, brand imagery) that the hostile association tells you as much, if not more, than the positive. The language of rejection marks out the point of departure

from the symbolic community people are spontaneously grouping themselves into.

A subtext of *People like them eat boring old corn flakes* is also saying *People like me eat exciting not-corn-flakes (or exciting not-cereals)*

(The choice of boring from the paradigmatic axis comes about by comparing it, at the level of the imagination, with excitingness in foods—and then dismissing cornflakes from this scenario. Clearly this leaves a semiotic space for some excitement in the product field—and the strategic questions may be answered by defining this space for this consumer group.)

The whole exercise described above is hypothetical; but it shows the potential richness of the linguistic data as an open and freely offered entry point to peoples' cultural relationships.

4. Using dissonance in consumer language

We are all aware of the apparent dissonance between 'rational' and 'emotional' responses. One type of reply seems to mean one thing and the other appears to be saying something else. We believe that this is partially responsible for the quest for going deeper—but, in our view, it is not a question of dismissing the 'rational' but of using the tension between the two linguistic modes to find out what is really going on.

If all the metaphors ('emotional' language) are negative and all the rationalistic metonymic explanation is signifying a positive response. this can mean that behaviour is moving ahead of the old cultural 'taken-for-granted's'.

Convenience foods are a prime example of this. Metaphors refer to a cultural imperative to 'start from scratch' and feelings of 'guilt'. Metonymic descriptions of behaviour are developing a new cultural space.

The research task then becomes to forge a new *imaginative* space that reflects the positive *reality*.

Equally, of course the metaphors can be positive, but the context is revealing a deal of hostility.

In either case, what consumers are performing is a kind of cultural knee-jerking—the metaphors are dead, without energy, but we have not yet developed new ones to take their place.

Importantly, it is not the imaginative surprising creative association that tells us this but the realistic, literal connections that people make when they are building up a 'narrative' .

Bank metaphor

Trust, authority, establishment

Bank metonymy

Calling in all the overdrafts and busting businesses

5. Personification

All forms of personification—obituaries, analogies, words and pictures—are self-evidently working on the axis of selection. But as Langmaid and Gordon point out *‘it is the group’s explanation of the reasons for their choice that is important, not the interpretative guesses of the moderator’* (p. 97).

This may be a moment to pause, as it does seem that we have been making ‘interpretative guesses’ throughout this section of the paper.

6. Interpretative guesses and on-the-job decoding

Gill Ereaut suggests that we should—and can—decode on-the-job by:

listening for taken-for-granted meanings, often couched in terms of ‘have to’ or ‘supposed to’ or ‘it wouldn’t be right any other way’ Also appear in clichés, sayings, truisms, and ‘obvious’ comments (easy to dismiss these in a psycho-dynamically orientated environment)

asking the consumer how s/he perceives her/himself to be constructed by the brand by reverse questions—what does the inside of Habitat say to you about the sort of person you are supposed to be? What assumptions are made about you by the packaging of Persil? What does American Express believe about your values?

These mechanisms map onto Max Blackston’s paper, *A Brand With An Attitude* (MRS 1992) in which he argues that: *‘the successful consumer-brand relationship... depends crucially on the consumer’s perceptions of the brand’s attitudes.’*

7. Accessing the brand’s attitude: metaphors for ‘me’

Consumer perception of brand attitudes is revealed through the metaphors they select to represent *themselves* rather than the brand, either through psycho-doodles, fantasy or collage material. In a comparative study between supermarket shoppers, the Sainsburys rejecter group seized gleefully on a picture of slugs falling over each other as a metaphor for how the retail giant constructed their customers by their interior design and corporate identity.

Another group in the same study fantasised about fancy-dressing for the supermarket in *‘a shawl and clogs’*, but imagined they would go to Marks and Spencers *‘in black lace underwear and a scarlet petticoat’*.

All brands, as Blackston says, make assumptions about their consumers; based on cultural value systems and taken-for-granted meanings. Consumers will play these assumptions back through the use of metaphor, the shimmering diamonds of the imagination. BUT—and it is a mighty BUT—we must look to metonymy for the context in which the metaphor makes sense.

8. Using metonymy to make the context visible

In a way, this paper has been an illustration of the normalising ideology of metonymy. In language and in projective techniques, we can ‘see’ metaphor, but metonymy does its work invisibly. In many ways the questions we ask, the discourse of the discussion itself, is the most powerful technique we can employ to bring out the contexts that are structuring imaginative relationships. Gill Ereaut’s suggestions are really helpful here.

There are, however, other techniques we can adapt. such as **Completion**.

Completing a sentence such as:

Sainsburys makes me feel like a slug because...

is actually a simple way of using metonymy to make the context visible.

And, as a final point, consumer language as we all know isn’t always expressed in words. As we began to talk about Sainsburys, the whole group sat forward and some women gripped an imaginary trolley. The trolley trundling up and down the aisles ‘on automatic pilot’ was standing in for the whole supermarket experience.

Pushing that trolley up and down those aisles makes me feel like a mindless slug.

9. Moods, metaphors and metonymies, using collage stimuli

Collage boards can also be used to see the interplay between metaphor and metonymy.

For instance, in a whisky project respondents might pick heather as a symbol of the origin of whisky—clearly metaphorical.

If you then get them to contextualise this with metonymic pictures of glasses, or realistic lifestyle images of kinds of pubs, drinking locations etc, they can show you the cultural frame that gives the symbolism of the heather its power and its strength.

10. Application ad infinitum

The examples quoted above are a start-point. Almost everything we do to understand consumer response to products and brands can be rethought through the linguistic paradigm. The techniques we have discussed refer to the gathering of response data. Clearly the linguistic model also offers a new perspective on the analysis.

And again, the paper has been orientated towards qualitative research because that is where our work has taken place. The potential use of the linguistic model, however, in quantitative investigations, where language is so much the prime conduit almost dazzles the mind.

Our hope is that this paper will start both the qual and the quant side of the industry thinking about the cultural meanings embodied in consumer response and also that it will make you question the dominant codes of qualitative market research. With this in mind, we offer a new perspective on an old friend.

Back to the future

Not one onion, but two perspectives

It has been our aim to challenge and improve, not to destroy.

The understanding that the respondent's consciousness is not enough as the focus for qualitative research was a quantum leap, not least in the development of group dynamics.

In the use of the linguistic model, however, we want to suggest that we should be looking at the onion from two perspectives at once.

From one perspective, the onion is made up of layers of similarity—you takes your choice from amongst its skins. And from the other it is made up of units that work from the inside to the outer layers, combining the selected layers into a whole, with the outer layers contextualising and making sense of all the inner ones.

This double onion is not a metaphor for the individual psyche. It is a metaphor for the *cultural* unconscious—and its medium is language.

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¹ See, for instance, Wendy Sykes and Kay Brandon, *Qualitative Research Models, Towards a Typology*, MRS 1990 for one description amongst many of this prevailing view

² Alexander Woodcock and Monte Davis, *Catastrophe Theory*, Penguin 1980 (p. 9)

³ See Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*, Duckworth 1985

⁴ Roman Jakobson, *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia*, Mouton, 1971

⁵ See Monty Alexander and Virginia Valentine, *Cultural Class, refreshing the parts that social class cannot reach*, MRS 1989

⁶ David Wright and Ginny Valentine. *New Profiles of Affluence*, MRS 1990

⁷ The authors would like to express their debt to Gill Ereaud for her help in putting together this paper and in developing its ideas