

**ESOMAR Congress 1995**

**Looking through the kaleidoscope  
What is the qualitative mission?**

**OPENING UP THE BLACK BOX**  
*Switching the paradigm  
of qualitative research*

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**SUMMARY**

The paper argues that, while we have refined the moderation of qualitative interviews, for reasons that are sometimes as much political as practical, we have neglected the study of the **interpretation** of qualitative data, consigning it to an unknowable subjective ‘black box’.

We have done this at our peril! The ‘genius’ of the individual researcher is the foundation of the ‘guru’ status of leading practitioners—but it is also the single most damning weapon our detractors have against us.

For the sake of our own accountability to ourselves and for comparability across studies, but also for the sake of the long-term reputation of the industry, we need to ‘switch the paradigm’ and start from a theoretical position of **how** consumers are making sense of the research proposition, rather than from ‘the sensitive interpretation’ of what they say.

This is the ‘critical approach’ and it provides the foundation for the main part of this paper, wherein I range around modern theories of consumption, developing them into new ways of looking at the data, as well as re-evaluating what we are already doing. Most of the suggestions derive from cultural and communication theory and, as such refer to the insights of structuralism and semiotics. However it is the averred aim of the paper to switch the paradigm, not to switch off the reader. I have kept it simple.

In this context, it is important to make the point that I am not suggesting a move from 'artist' to 'scientist', rather the switch of emphasis from 'researcher' to *consumerist*. From this shift all else will flow.

## INTRODUCTION

*Interpretation depends on the individual—his unique combination of personality, experience and theoretical training, as well as demographic criteria such as age, sex and socio-economic group*

(Gordon and Langmaid 1988)

*Interpretation is playful, imaginative, creative, intuitive, subjective, particularistic, transformative, imaginative and representative.*

*Interpretive insights often spring from serendipity*

(Spiggle, Journal of Consumer Research, Vol 21)

The quotes above reveal a taken-for-granted belief that runs right through the qualitative market research industry. Although nobody disputes we can systemise, and therefore, standardise, most important aspects of the process—recruitment; topic guide, the analysis of interview content, even moderation—somehow the *interpretation* of consumer response is regarded as both unknown and, more disturbingly, **unknowable**.

Most of the handbooks on the practice of qualitative research don't even mention it and those who do, including such undisputed leaders as Gordon and Langmaid, state unequivocally that the business of interpretation must come down to the unreplicable make-up of the individual researcher. Or even, as Susan Spiggle has it in an otherwise deeply scholarly article, the researcher's genius (or luck). Spiggle describes the difficulty eloquently

*'The intuitive, subjective, particularistic nature of interpretation renders it difficult to model or present in a linear way.....Rather interpretation occurs as a gestalt shift and represents a synthetic, holistic, and illuminating grasp of meaning as in deciphering a code'.*

It is the purpose of this paper to argue that we **can** model and systemise the interpretation of qualitative data, but only if we break out of the 'black box' of the unknowable intuitive insights of individual researchers and pay attention to '*the synthetic, holistic...grasp of meaning*' and, in particular to Spiggles analogy, '*deciphering a code*'.

Moreover, that it is fundamental to the qualitative mission that we do so.

I shall argue my case from four perspectives, the first two explaining how and why we have got ourselves stuck in this interpretive impasse—and the second two proposing a way out.

In this context then I shall suggest that to open up the black box so that we can all see and use what is inside, we should switch the paradigm of how we think about the way we think (our metasystems of interpretation) from

people to *consumers*  
researcher to *consumptionist*

## **THE OLD PARADIGM (1)**

### **The tool box and the black box**

This section suggests that, for a complexity of reasons, we have concentrated on the techniques of moderating to the detriment of those of interpretation. We have, in effect, developed an opposition between the open tool box of the interview—and the secret, closed black box of the findings

I believe this to be attributable to three potent strands in the development of qualitative research: the early influence of psychology, the need to create a USP for qualitative projects that would not be vulnerable to a comparison with quantitative studies and the latter-day explosion of viewed international focus groups.

### **The influence of psychology**

The space of a paper such as this precludes discussion of psychological theory, but several important points should be made about the influence of psychology on qualitative **market** research. On the positive side, it has played a vital role in helping us to develop the battery of projective and enabling techniques, without which qualitative market research would be stuck in the Fordist model of direct question and answer, with no attempt to reveal the imaginative structure that lay behind the response.

However, as McCracken (1988) puts it this has led to ‘a methodological individualism and microcosmic focus’ which has had to be transcended before we began to consider ‘the larger social and cultural systems and contexts of consumption’

Moreover, it has created an unhealthy notion that we are peeling away respondent defences in order to get to some repressed emotions that they would rather not tell us, going below the rational conscious response to the ‘deeper’ (and murkier) emotional world of the unconscious..

As I have written elsewhere<sup>1</sup> the real difference between the rational and the emotional is that they are two terms of language, going on at the same time: the rational explanation being merely a translation of an imaginative experience. We are not going psychologically deeper into the individual’s soul, we are opening up the actions of culture in structuring thoughts through language.

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<sup>1</sup> The Dark Side of The Onion, Valentine and Evans, MRS Conference 1993

## **Subjectivity —the qualitative USP**

*The subjectivity of the interpretive process and its dependency on the constellation of attributes of a single practitioner should not be source of concern or anxiety. It is the strength of qualitative research.*  
(Gordon and Langmaid *op cit*)

Quantitative studies are replicable, qualitative studies are unique; numbers are cold, the human attributes of the individual researcher are warm, funny, passionate..etc...etc. But behind this is an anxious sleight of hand. Quantitative studies are objective, qualitative studies have been unable to find a way of protesting their objectivity. The industry defence has been to raise the status of subjectivity, until it achieves the mystique of the guru, the insightful genius whose work is undoubtedly brilliant, but whose processes cannot be known or reproduced.

## **The explosion of viewed groups**

There are two sides to the importance of this phenomenon for the privileging of technique over analysis. In the first place, clients who come to watch groups for the global projects in markets as far apart as Europe, USA and Asia-Pacific are reassured to find a comparability of group process. Projective techniques display a basic qualitative professionalism.

It also makes it infinitely easier to write the guide and therefore to control and co-ordinate the project from the international (or national) project leader's point of view.

**The problem is that comparability of technique has no bearing on comparability of findings, unless the techniques have been designed to reveal how the consumption process compares across demographics, across ages and genders and across cultures.**

Secondly, and much more insidiously, moderating technique has been used to give viewed groups a sexy gloss. As Branthwaite and Swindells put it (MRS Conference 1995) we have developed 'a variety of techniques which have served to enhance the actual performance of group discussions'.

**Performance** is the operative word here. 'Good' groups become groups which are entertaining, where consumers get funny or saucy or behave with an abandon almost akin to the volunteers in a hypnotist's stage show.

Quiet, thoughtful—or unco-operative—groups are more and more being misunderstood as, at best, 'hard work' and, at worst, the product of lousy moderating. The 'success' of the project (and the continuing workflow) is often judged as much on the entertainment value of the viewed sessions—as it is on the marketing value of the findings.

**The researcher's 'code-book'  
—the first step towards a new paradigm**

Gordon and Langmaid make the point that, '*interpretation is continuous, rather like the pattern of threads weaving through a piece of cloth. It consists of the development of hypotheses which are continually being challenged throughout the process.*' The notion of deciphering coded data throughout the process builds on this idea. The codes we have to decipher run through everything from 'the first contact' to the last page of the report.

But this, of course, begs a fundamental question: if everything is in code, how come we understand it at all? How do we communicate with clients and vice versa; how do consumers make sense of the stimuli; how can we know what is going on.

**Because these codes are the shared codes of culture, not the spontaneous and unique outpourings of individual 'people'.**

**THE OLD PARADIGM (2)**

**Commonsense, empiricism and expressive reality**

The point here is that the research industry as a whole continually blocks its way towards developing a systemised approach to interpreting qualitative data by subscribing to an unacknowledged and unspoken commonsense belief that 'it's all about talking to people'. These 'people' are believed to be describing a real world outside both the interview and the framework of their language. In consequence, we become 'individuals' interpreting 'individuals'

Commonsense, empiricism and expressive reality are the dominant paradigm in our belief about how we should approach qualitative data. In essence they encompass the four struts of a theory to which most practitioners subscribe, albeit in most cases, unconsciously

1. There is a social world out there as concrete and real as the natural world or the world of physical objects
2. The social world is inhabited by aggregates of individuals (people) who are the source of their own understanding of the world and its meanings, (*I think therefore I am*)
3. Respondents in groups transmit their experiences and replay their real lives out there in the real social world to researchers as though these experiences were independent of both the interview itself and the language they are using to frame their answers.
4. They express this reality in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognise it as true.

## **Shifting the paradigm** **—Development of a critical approach**

Over the past two decades this paradigm has been challenged by a new theory born in the wake of the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure: structuralism, post-structuralism and post-modernism (gathered together under the broad banner of semiotics and cultural studies) have all played their part in developing a **critical approach** to what ‘people’ say in the context of a market research discussion and why they say it.

I do not propose to revisit here this intellectual and theoretical architecture. Those who are interested will seek it out. What I must do, however, is set out how the critical approach to qualitative research has reformulated the tenets of commonsense and expressive reality.

### **The critical approach**

1. There is no concrete social world ‘out there’. Our society is a cultural construction, carried from person to person, group to group via signs and symbols.
2. We are not the centre of our own understanding. We understand the world and its meanings through cultural assumptions, shared meaning systems and taken-for-granted beliefs and values that are ideologically based and culturally reinforced.
3. Reality is not a pre-existent idea that lies outside language. It is produced by and inscribed in language. The words respondents use are not empty vehicles innocently transporting concepts. All discourses—verbal, non-verbal, visual, musical, olfactory, auditory, etc. etc.—structure the way we think about things, not the other way about. If a train that should have left at 8. 30 leaves 15 minutes after schedule, it does not become the 8. 45. It becomes the ‘late’ 8. 30. The material reality of the departure time is subsumed in the taken-for-granted concepts of late and early—with all their connotations of proper and improper social behaviour—that are circumscribing the way we think about this train. (In the UK this will also include British Rail, the rail unions, labour relations). An entire socio-cultural value system—all wrapped up in that little word ‘late’.
4. The cultural construction of respondents’ worlds, the assumptions and meaning systems they are using to make sense of our questions (and all the stimulus) are encoded in their response. Our interpretive role is not to look for ‘truth’; but to crack the code.

**The critical approach is the foundation of the paradigm shift proposed in this paper. Its premises described above point towards a systemised interpretation of qualitative data, based on understanding how cultural rules and assumptions are encoded in:**

- brands
- products
- advertising
- packaging
- design
- and consumer response to questions about ‘consumption’

However, in order to affect this paradigm shift, researchers do not have to go back to school or university and take a degree in ‘consumptionism’. This is what we practise all the time. The new paradigm demands first and foremost a shift in perception and philosophy. From this, we can develop new models of interpretation, but we can also re-evaluate the techniques we are already (half-unconsciously) using, as well as learn new ways of looking at the data.

## **A NEW PARADIGM (1)**

### **From ‘people’ to *consumers***

At the heart of my paper is the argument that the very notion of ‘the consumer’ begs a theory of consumption. Moreover that this theoretical architecture now exists and is available to market research from all the modern academic disciplines that take a critical approach to culture and the supra-individual characteristics of the consumption process.

To illustrate this, I shall first range over some of the visions of ‘the consumer’ that have arisen out of the critical approach and which are, of necessity, part of the larger theory of consumption.

This will sketch out the ground for the last part of the paper—the development of a model of consumptionist interpretation.

### **Consumption theory (1)**

#### ***Consumption is ‘thoroughly cultural’***

*Consumption is shaped at every point by cultural considerations. The system of design and production that creates consumer goods is an entirely cultural enterprise. The (goods) on which the consumer lavishes time, attention and income are charged with cultural meaning. Consumers use this meaning to entirely cultural purposes. .... to express cultural categories and principles, cultivate ideals, create and sustain life-styles, construct notions of the self and create (and survive) social change. Consumption is thoroughly cultural in character. (McCracken op cit)*

## **Consumption Theory (2)** ***'Markets' are 'cultural classes'***

The mechanics of what Saussure called 'the life of signs within society' allow us to coalesce into 'cultural classes', spontaneous groupings of 'People Like Us' who can recognise each other by symbolic means (Alexander & Valentine 1989)

Cultural classes provide their members with an education and an ideology of belief systems, values and attitudes that mark out 'people like us' from people like them. These boundaries are signposted semiotically throughout brand communications.

Cultural classes cover all our segmentations:

- gender
- nationality
- regionality
- jobs
- leisure pursuits
- therapies
- style
- shopping habits...etc...etc

Consumers recognise that a brand belongs to the same 'cultural class' if it encodes a shared worldview; if it, too, subscribes to a 'doesn't-everybody- think-like-this' perception of the way things are..

The notion of 'cultural classes' also explains how and why typologies work so well to conceptualise the marketplace and to establish a conduit through which to spark culture-to-culture contact as in the diagram above.

The same concept of spontaneous (or emic) belonging to classes or tribes also lies behind Sacks's Membership Categorisation Device theory, cited in Silverman 1993.

In order to explain the theory Sacks gives this example:

*the x cried, the y picked it up*

We 'hear' the words 'baby' and 'mummy' in place of x and y. This is then connotated into associations of nurturing, loving, responsible parenthood.. The language thus structures how we think. The baby cried, the mummy picked it up and (we hear in our heads) cuddled it. Aah, how sweet. But try 'the baby cried, the mummy picked it up—and walloped it'. *No, no, no*. That's child abuse. That's not people like us, that's people like them.

Importantly, if we can shift the consumer focus from their world out there to the 'people like us' encoded and assumed in the brief and the stimulus, we can see whether the inferences and implications match.

Which brings us back to the issue of what we have to interpret and where we practise our 'decoding'. As I shall argue strongly below, the brief, the stimulus and the guide are all co-texts for the response data, and they also have to be interpreted according to the laws and theories of consumption.

### **Consumption Theory (3)** *The encoding, decoding model*

Hall (1980) proposed an important model for understanding what consumers were actually doing with communications

Crucially Hall argues that the decoding process takes place within three parameters: *acceptance, refusal or negotiation* with the dominant meanings of the message.

To simplify, detergent marketing rests on a dominant meaning structure of the social importance of clean clothes. My dry cleaners displays the legend, attributed to some famous sage, “*a tear can be accidental, a stain is unforgiveable*”. This is the dominant ideology of washing powder commercials. Women the world over continue to accept this dominant ideology while they can refuse other meanings that relate washing clothes to the way of life of the home-bound housewife.

Fiske (1982) explains the refusal mode thus:

*The oppositional decoder recognises the dominant reading, but recognises it as false. He or she locates the meaning in a system that is radically different to the dominant one.*

Feminist readings located the meaning of much advertising in a system of power and oppression radically different from the dominant paradigm of ‘Mum’ drawing all her satisfactions from looking after her family and living a life bounded by the kitchen sink. The negotiating position is different again. In this mode, consumers are playing with the meanings; they ‘make their own ground rules’.(Hall op cit)

This is what happens when consumers accept some part of the dominant ideology, for instance the aspirational role models of the beautiful girls in haircare advertising—but refuse another part, say the notion that women make themselves look good for men.

Negotiated meaning also takes place when the ad or pack refuses to accept the rules of a dominant meaning altogether, so it subverts a straight message, using humour or even nonsense. Guinness, soft drinks, some car advertising are now indulging in such negotiating games.

When we investigate consumer response to advertising or design, our first step should not be whether or not they ‘liked’ or ‘disliked’ it, but whether they were accepting, refusing or negotiating with its dominant ideology.

We recently researched a business-to-business campaign which, **in content**, was based on a dominant ideology of the importance of size and corporate strength in this field—but which, **in form**, used a highly unusual and creative treatment that gave the audience a negotiating space in which to rethink their view both of the corporate personality and their own self-image as financial directors.

They ‘liked’ the ad on both counts, but were decoding form and content differently.

## **Consumption Theory (4)**

### ***The unmanageable consumer***

In an important new contribution to the debate on 20th century consumption, Gabriel and Lang (1995) argue that ‘the consumer’ is fragmenting into

- the chooser of goods
- the communicator of meanings
- the explorer of exotic worlds
- the seeker after identity
- the hedonist or artist
- the latent victim
- the rebel or activist
- the citizen

The issue for market research is that all these consuming roles (and the list is not exhaustive) may be different aspects of one marketplace—or even of one person. And one consumer may play all the roles in one single consumption transaction. Wendy Gordon has made a similar point in her paper on brand repertoires (MRS Conference 1994)

*each person is made up of a number of different people, each of whom may require a different brand solution in different circumstances*

The solution may lie in the purchase of different brands, but it is also true that one brand may have to satisfy many and diverse consumer personalities. The genius of Anita Roddick’s Body Shop is that its sensual aesthetics of fragrance and colour taps into the consumer as hedonist and seeker after pleasure, while, at one and the same time, its ethics of manufacture and trading policy addresses her/him as concerned eco-political activist.

The point at issue is this, once we know that one ‘consumer’ can carry within the same psyche all these different personalities, we need to legislate for establishing ‘who’ he or she is being at any moment of consumption.

This presupposes that we must know and understand the ‘frames’ respondents are using to decide which consumer mode they are in at different points in the interview.

### **Using visual imagery to determine consumer ‘frames**

Self assembly collages, psycho-doodles and mood boards all work well to allow consumers to show us how they are using different cultural contexts to relive different ‘emotional’ experiences. We can watch them ‘change the frame’

For instance, on work done on Peperami (Bifi in Germany) a small thin snack salami, we used a raft of collage material to explore the meanings of the brand, including one board of similarly shaped objects—cigars, guns, raised male fists and Michelangelo’s Adam’s pointing finger.

In the context of this board, mothers in the sample talked freely about the phallic shape of the product and the rude games their children played with the product. Amid much double entendre and laughter, they shared with one another (and with us) the fun they got out of this universal aspect of childhood. To come back to Sacks's MCD, they were acting out both membership of the *permissive, adjusted parent category* and the *sympathetic naughty adult companion category*.

The mood was loud and raucous—until we produced a board of 'female responsibility' packed with images of 'caring': nurses, breast feeding, shopping etc. Within minutes the whole atmosphere in the groups had changed as they became deeply serious about fat content and food value. They had become a different cultural class of '*People Like Us*' who worry about their children's diets. But both consumer modes played a vital part in their **overall** consumption and both therefore formed part of the interpretation of data and our findings *vis a vis* the appeal of the brand.

### **Consumption theory (5)**

#### ***The 'identity' of 'the consumer***

*Between the life-story that constitutes identity and the images of the consumer world....identities are fashioned through active engagement with products and the world of material objects.*

(The Unmanageable Consumer p. 88)

At the centre of all qualitative data is the extraordinary phenomenon, highlighted by Gabriel and Lang that late 20th century consumption depends upon '*stories which are read by consumers into innumerable, relatively mundane objects which they buy, own and use.*'

**The critical approach argues, however, that these objects do not, in and of themselves, have any meaning beyond that which their material constitution allows them to lay claim to. Persil, Daz, Lux, Omo do not 'mean' anything above and beyond the chemical reaction of detergent with water and its resultant effect upon grease and water-soluble dyes: Coca-Cola means nothing outside of the physical sensations produced by its particular formula of flavoured, carbonated water: BMW is no more than one form of internal combustion engine, encased in a chassis....and so on.**

When we stop and think about this, we know it must be so. There's nothing metaphysical about a bottle of Coca-Cola. It satisfies the physical thirst and activates the taste buds, that's all. And yet we also know that consumers do not think like this.

We know that they (and we) invest objects with meanings that seems to confirm all society's deepest values and attitudes and belief systems. (Persil as someone once memorably said is 'all about mother-love'!)

## **Products as ‘identity bridges’**

Quoting McCracken (1988), Gabriel and Lang suggest that we do this because, in consumption, material goods act like bridges between what we actually **do** with them—and how we imagine ourselves to **be**. They connect the real with the ideal. In a concept developed in conversations with Roger Silverstone of Sussex University, they connect the socio-cultural identity of the consumer with his/her semiotic identity.

The distinction between the socio-cultural and the semiotic consumer identity is important for the qualitative mission.

The socio-cultural identity represents, on one level, this ‘me’ that I actually am—with my disposable income, my real physical age and characteristics, my number and age of children, etc; on another level, it describes this ‘me’ that has been culturally constructed—my background, education, family life and teenage world experiences (Alexander and Valentine, op cit)

Both these ‘socio-cultural’ levels provide the consumer with the tools to start building the bridge between the material goods (or indeed services) and the ideal self which ultimately is reflected in the product or brand. In the words of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu they give us the ‘cultural capital’ with which to consume.

The ideal self is then the **semiotic identity**—a mirror image of the way consumers want to see themselves, projected by brand communications. For the whole thing to work, the brand image and the consumer image must fuse into a single semiological artefact. (And, of course, when we are working across markets and regions and countries, we are trying to find a common semiotic identity built from different socio-cultural bases).

## **Interpreting the semiotic identity —a tale of four stories**

At the semiotic level, as qualitative market researchers we are dealing not only with the consumer story but with three parallel stories’

- the marketer’s story
- the creative’s story
- the researcher’s story

The marketer’s story is the brief; the creative’s story is the stimulus; and the researcher has two stories; at one end, the research design and at the other—the translation of the consumer’s story into the report.

In commonsensical empiricism all these inputs are descriptions and objective reports of a ‘world out there’. The brief describes the marketing scenario; the stimulus

represents the ‘real’ ad or pack; the design orders the forthcoming interview—and the report tells the ‘truth’. The only thing that connects all of them is the sensitivity of the omnipresent researcher.

*Sensitive interpretation begins at the briefing and design of the survey..It also cannot be divorced from the final stages when the findings are communicated (often a two-way process) to the buyers and users of the study*  
(Gordon and Langmaid, Op cit p 113)

### **Not ‘stages of research’ but parallel texts**

Within the critical approach all of these ‘stages’ described above are not consecutive events, but **parallel** stories or texts that construct the semiotic identity of the consumer, connected by their shared cultural meanings, their encoding mechanisms and by their narrative strategies.

The consumptionist enterprise is not then to ‘get through’ the strategies and sensitively discover what lies ‘behind’ them. It is to discover patterns and differences **within the texts**, so that by the time the research is implemented (or not) they all tell exactly the same story.

## **A NEW PARADIGM (2)**

### **From researcher to ‘consumptionist’**

To summarise thus far: the key elements of the paradigm switch

- the rejection of a ‘black box’ in favour of a code-book
  - the shift from commonsense empiricism to a critical approach
  - the need for critical visions of ‘the consumer’ based on a theory of consumption
  - the growing awareness of the cultural nature of consumption
  - a new perception of the market as ‘cultural classes’
  - the recognition that the process of marketing communication is a process of encoding/decoding
  - the realisation that the consumer is no longer manageable as a single definable market typology
  - the reappraisal of products and brands as a bridge between the material nature of the thing and the semiotic identity of the consumer
- and finally
- the redefinition of the consecutive stages**
  - qualitative research as parallel texts**

Most of them have been covered to the limit allowed by the size and scope of this paper, in the sections above. It is the last shift that concerns me here in this final section: how can we interpret these parallel texts—and how can the process improve and enrich the qualitative mission.

### **Parallel Textual Analysis**

#### **—an overview**

The mechanics of textual analysis that I suggest as interpretive strategies are not, in and of themselves, new. The structuralist propositions of Ferdinand de Saussure; Vladimir Propp’s *Morphological Analysis of the Folk Tale* and Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralist analysis of myth are well-known to those practitioners who are already using a critical approach.

My reasons for including them here are threefold.

Firstly, critical qualitative interpreters are few and far between. For many consumptionists this **will** be new news—howsoever they choose to regard its value or viability.

Secondly, the academic primary source for this work is often daunting and therefore refuted. This seems to me an appalling waste of hugely important 20<sup>th</sup> century thinking that has revolutionised so much of the arts and humanities across the world—including now many business study and organisation and methods courses. In this context, we have done enough work with both clients and colleagues to know that it is possible to abstract key thoughts from this body of work—and create what we have dubbed ‘semiotic awareness’. Those who find it has opened whole new doors beg for reading lists; those who cannot use it, don’t—and, in the middle are a growing number of thoughtful people who find that it has simply changed the way they look at marketing communications and the demands and objectives of research.

Finally, I hope that the way I suggest (freely) adapting and incorporating some of these seminal ideas into qualitative data interpretation will have something to offer even those who know the principles and theories well.

### **Parallel Textual Analysis in practice (1)** ***Saussure’s Langue and Parole***

In the simplest possible terms, the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure argued that there is a cardinal difference between language and speech. Language is a ‘system’ and each speech act is an utterance within the system.

*We need to distinguish the system of language (langue) from the actual speech acts (parole) that any speaker actually utters. (Silverman 93)*

Silverman cites Saussure’s analogy of a chess game, where *the rules and conventions of the game constitute the langue and each move a parole*. Without the langue, the parole doesn’t make sense.

In this sense, consumer response is a parole and the underlying social and cultural rules behind each response is the langue. To fully understand the speech, we must understand the language.

There are several important points to be made here.

1. Langue and parole are not solely the province of linguistic speech or writing. Fashion is a language system. So are the packaging conventions of different product fields or food rituals, or sports, or business conventions. Each expression of these systems is a parole that could not exist without the underlying langue. It has no semiotic life of its own. When consumers are talking about these things they are referring subconsciously to a set of rules that enable them to make sense of the world around them

2. The langues split into what one might call sub-langues. Think of food rituals. The langue of the formal dinner or, even of the family meal together is quite different from the langue of fast or convenience food. A gourmet recipe is a parole of the former while a microwaveable bag of chips is a parole of the latter. In the beginning of microwave products, manufacturers thought that the products and brands should be part of a formal langue, while consumers had seen them as part of the fastfood system.

3. When consumers agree or disagree with a research proposition or ‘like’ or dislike an idea, they are signalling their acceptance or rejection of the underlying langue. This is critically important in the evaluation of concepts. Consumers will focus on the paroles—the colour of the dress, the length of a paragraph, the shape of a pack **because that is what they think we are asking them to do.**

What they are **really** responding to is the **systems** beneath.

4. We can get to those systems by interrogating the parallel texts. What social rules are being invoked by the brief and the stimulus. The microwave example above is instructive and it still holds good for many convenience products in the UK. Likewise the subsystems that form the langues of ‘male’ and ‘female’ toiletries. Graphics, fragrance, colour are all paroles that are subscribing to these language systems.

5. There is often a dissonance between the langue that consumers are using to tell us what they believe and the paroles that reveal what they actually **do**. In recruitment for the microwave project cited above, respondents were recruited on the basis of ‘heavy’ usage (5 times a week). In the groups this turned out to be so, but the paroles of their usage—boiling the children’s socks, heating coffee, hardening conkers, baking potatoes—revealed a langue of regular but highly peripheral usage. In the brief, ‘heavy usage’ had been assumed to mean involved cooking. In terms of semiotic identity, they could not have been more wrong.

### **Using langue and parole**

—As a way of moving from analysis to interpretation. Patterns of similarity or difference in content can be reformulated as acceptance or rejection of different sets of rules. This allows comparison within and across groups.

—As a device for establishing consumer response to the idea behind advertising, packaging or NPD without becoming enmired in the problematic of execution.

—As a methodology for understanding the socio-cultural positioning of products and brands—whether that positioning comes from the client, the creatives or the consumer. This shows up fault-lines in the chain of production, but very often also points up the need for consumer education.

This is very evident when the European langue of skin-care is presented to UK consumers. The ‘rules’ of how much time you are supposed to spend on your body are just diametrically opposed. After all, if we did not have the Protestant langue, we would not have the parole ‘pampering’

—As a part of the development of a common language between researchers. (Indeed, all the suggestions in this paper have that aim)

—As a check and balance on our own paroles and the langue/s that underpin them.

### **Parallel Textual Analysis (2)**

#### ***Propp’s Morphology of the Folk-Tale***

Much important work has been done by A J Greimas on the use of Propp’s study of the structure of the tale to develop his famous ‘semiotic square’. (Greimas 1966)

We have made a similar adaptation from Levi-Strauss’s structuralist analysis of myth that is described in the following section. Here I want to offer another way of using Propp’s morphology to interpret qualitative data.

As described by David Silverman, Propp argues that *'the fairytale establishes a narrative form that is central to all storytelling across many cultures. The fairytale is structured not by the nature of the characters that appear in it, but by the functions they play in the plot'* (Silverman '93)

Propp himself summarises his conclusions in four points

- 1. Functions of the characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, regardless of how and by whom they are fulfilled*
- 2. The number of functions known to the fairytale is limited*
- 3. The sequence of functions is always identical*
- 4. All fairytales are of one type regardless of their structure.*  
(1968 pp21-3)

If we transfer (and simplify) Propp's analysis to that other fairytale, advertising, we can see that the consistent characters he identified occur with absolute regularity in most marketing communications

*The Hero or Princess*  
*The Villain*  
*The Donor (of a magic agent)*  
*The Helper*

Sometimes they will also include

*False heroes, False villains*

Prop's 'sequence' is also the foundation for the ad narrative

*There is a lack of something*  
*The hero is identified*  
*The villain is identified*  
*The magic agent is received*  
*The hero overcomes lack and defeats the villain with the magic agent*  
*Rewards, weddings and riches*

However sophisticated their language and thinking, all the parallel texts of research will be predicated on this structure. They can then be refined thus.

*The consumer as hero*  
*The brand as donor*  
*The product as magic agent*  
*The creative idea as helper*  
*The need as lack*  
*The barriers to use as villain*

## Using the morphology

**1. General interpretation.** Clearly interpreting qualitative data according to Propp shows us how the consumer is weaving a story to construct a semiotic identity, but it also gives us a framework for comparison between all the texts. They will all make suppositions as to lack, barriers, the value of the magic agent and the way the helper makes it possible for the hero to reap her/his rewards and riches.

**2. Advertising Creative Development** Propp defines the ‘sphere of action of the helper’ as ‘liquidation of misfortune or lack, the solution of difficult tasks, the transfiguration of the hero’. This is easy to see in detergent or haircare advertising. It is less clear in car or alcoholic drinks. If we can understand just how the creative idea is using the product to overcome lack or misfortune and transfigure the hero, we can see how successful it is in creating a coherent narrative.

**3. NPD—the development of new tales** NPD as a different kind of yoghurt is one thing. NPD as a quantum leap into a category of product as yet unknown is quite another. Propp’s analysis can help us to put a structure on people’s lives that will stake out the territory of lack and villainy that will allow for R&D to produce new magic agents—and the ultimate creation of a new consumer hero.

**4. Comparison across cultures** Propp’s original enterprise showed how the tale is structurally similar although representationally different within and across cultures. The morphology thus gives us a real tool for the comparison of consumer stories across different markets. Sometimes this will show us unexpected syntheses and points of cohesion—but sometimes—and equally valuably—it will show us irreducible differences.

### Parallel Textual Analysis (3) *Levi-Strauss’s analysis of myth*

<sup>1</sup>

*A myth is a logical model, capable of resolving a contradiction*

It is a central tenet of semiotic and structuralist analysis that we understand what a thing is by what it is not. We work on systems of oppositions and differences. The myth brings together apparent opposites and makes them work **as though they were naturally harmonious**.

Without in any way trying to explain Levi-Strauss’s great structural study of myth (Levi-Strauss 1963), I want to show how his work provides the foundation for one of the most effective analytical and interpretive tools of the texts of qualitative research.

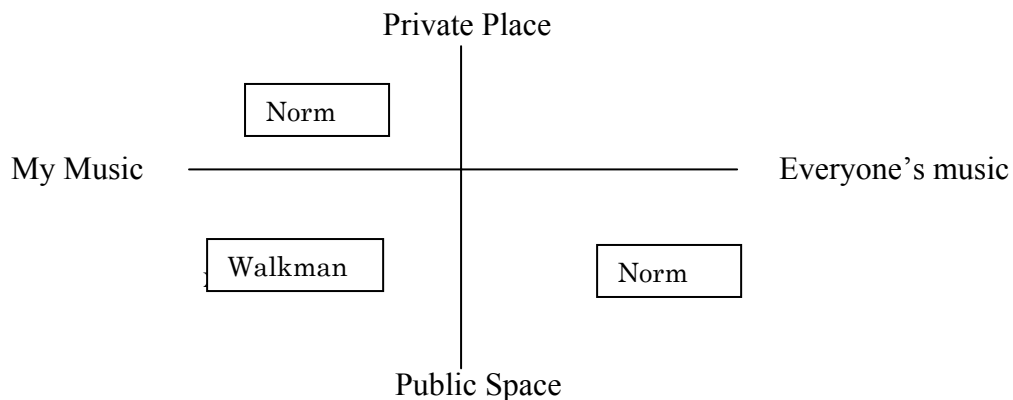
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<sup>1</sup> cf The Myth at The Heart of The Brand, Monty Alexander, ESOMAR

All brand and product promises are shot through with contradictions. The secret of the successful ones is that they manage to resolve them to create a ‘myth’. Take for instance the Sony Walkman. The Walkman resolves the contradiction between

<i>Private place</i>	<i>Public space</i>
<i>My music</i>	<i>Everyone’s music</i>
<i>Hi-fi</i>	<i>Non hi-fi</i>
<i>Fixed</i>	<i>Portable</i>
<i>Good reproduction</i>	<i>Bad reproduction</i>
<i>Technology</i>	<i>The human body</i>

**Fig 5 The Walkman myth**



All marketing propositions are predicated on this oppositional structure. *Clean* is opposed to *dirty*; *fast* to *slow*; *roomy* to *uncomfortable*; *shiny hair* to *dull hair*....and so on. These oppositions form the basis for the myth quadrant. The interpretive task is to seek out the oppositional paradigms and, from this to understand, via the quadrant, where the contradictions are coming from—and whether or how the product or brand can resolve them

Several important points must be made here.

1. **A myth quadrant is not a marketing matrix.** We are not looking to map products or brands all over the diagram. We are seeking normative expectations and conventional beliefs that will be overturned by the brand magic. These form 2 of the quadrants

These normative expectations will also reveal the contradictions in the 2 opposite quadrants. **These are the ‘windows of opportunity’**

2. The paradigms are not always overtly stated in any of the texts. Sometimes they are buried in taken-for-granted meanings. For instance, ‘responsible parenthood’ must be opposed to irresponsible parenthood, but mostly the latter is never stated, simply assumed. We have to look for the oppositions and turn them into parallel paradigms.

**3. Once you get into the habit of thinking in myth quadrants you can work your way through any problem you will ever come across in qualitative research.**

Because, to return to the very beginning and the issue of subjective interpretation, as Levi-Strauss has said—it is not so much that we think in myths, it is rather that myths ‘think’ in us.

## **Some Concluding Thoughts**

The aim of this paper has been to challenge the way we think about how we think. I have argued that it is possible to be 'objective' about the interpretation of qualitative data, if we take a critical approach to the process. And along the way, I have offered some suggestions for practical application. This aim requires one last comment.

Objectivity in interpretation is not meant to make us scientists, nor does it imply that we will provide a more 'truthful' account (although, in terms of understanding the process of consumption, I am sure that it will provide more actionable, precise and accurate findings about what really goes on inside the consumers' head).

More importantly, it is intended to make us systematic, rigorous and accountable in a way that 'subjective' interpretation never can, but which we must become if we are ever to move the qualitative mission on.

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