

Construction of the Ethical Link in the Discourse on the Packaging of Food Products

Elena Sekhniachvili
University of Limoges

This article looks into the communication implemented in the discourse on the packaging of food products, which raises major ethical problems related both to food hazards, ecological and social crises, as well as to the questioning of the relationship of trust between the consumer, the different actors in the food industry and the communicators. The brand which is at the origin of the offer becomes a guarantor, with the communicator having the role of establishing the trust relationship with the consumer through the mediation of its discourse on the product. Our article proposes to show how semiotics, more particularly the semiotics of practices and J. Fontanille's theory of the ethical link, allowing us to analyze the ethical link that links the instances of practice involved in the action represented on the packaging. These models highlight the role of the brand in the construction of the ethical relationship with the consumer.

Keywords: ethics, semiotics, brand communication, trust, ethos, regulation of social interactions

INTRODUCTION

The current era is not only marked by a strong interest in ethical issues related to the ecological and social dangers that threaten society, but also by the problems which are posed by communication. The problem of the requirement for differentiation that arose in the communication on consumer products for human consumption a few years ago seems to have been resolved. Now, it is often the ethical value that makes the difference. Ethical themes that advance the concepts of organic farming, fair trade and sustainable development are invading the discourse of brands. They become strategic places in their positioning. The commitment and involvement of companies and brands in the concern for the Other (the consumer and the planet) allow them to position themselves as control authorities and to sell their product. Thus, Frédéric Aubrun noted the emergence of the alter-brand (Aubrun, 2013) which constitutes the crisis-appropriate system, the brand which now promotes the social relationship. Similarly, Caroline Marti de Montety emphasized: *“they [brands] are now fully asserting themselves as cultural actors in an euphemization of their market intention and are thus attempting to optimize the social value of their offers”* (Marti de Montety, 2013).

In the discourse on the packaging of food product, the ethical question revolves, firstly, around the relationship between man and nature, a guarantee of health. The mismanagement of scientific progress by man (use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides of genetically modified organisms) makes nature vulnerable, which [nature] sends back to its dominator/ruler [man] the consequences of their actions in the form of ecological crises and new diseases, thus making man vulnerable (Jonas, 1990, p. 61). Henceforth, the society ensures correct and responsible communication in order to decrease the risks of the development of

certain diseases due to the consequences of the technological progress relating to the mode of production of the elements, their mode of conservation and transport. Being concerned about safety, the consumer wants to have the maximum information about a product (composition, ingredients, possible risks) and transparency¹. According to the most recent studies, we observe a general tendency towards a more qualitative consumption².

Faced with a potentially dangerous product, the consumer, in his or her search for information to reduce the perceived risk, is looking for a guarantor to whom he or she can place his or her trust. This risk-reducing instance in communication becomes a brand that takes responsibility for any product or any commercial object that it offers on the market. *“The brand is a contract that must generate trust. The assurance given by the brand to provide a clearly established level of quality reduces the risk perceived by the customer”* (Lendervie, Levy, Lindon, 2009, p. 758).

Thus, the installation of trust that presupposes the contract between the brand and the consumer becomes a necessary condition to ensure the equality of the commercial exchange and customer satisfaction. Ethics in commercial communication therefore presupposes the equality of the exchange wherein the actors of supply (the brands) and demand (the consumers) are engaged through discursive mediation. To define ethics in commercial communication, we adopted Paul Ricoeur’s definition of ethics as the requirement of reciprocity and social justice based on the equality of the exchange between partners (Ricoeur, 1990). G. Ceriani put forward the contractual character of the exchange between the sender and the receiver in the process of the exchange which overdetermines the marketing communication and emphasizes that this exchange presupposes reciprocity. (Ceriani, 2003, p. 39)³.

The requirement for ethical communication by the consumer is manifested by the strategic change in the brand’s communication, which is reflected in the intensity of the expression of commitment and that of its involvement in the concern for the Other. Brands implement different strategies to regain their consumer’s trust. These strategies manifest themselves firstly, i) by the choice of ethical themes (sustainable development, fair trade, organic farming) to affirm their ethical positioning, ii) by the introduction in their discourse of guarantees that represent a modality of the “must-be” and “must-do” type, which becomes a kind of risk reducer⁴ and finally, iii) by the way in which the story of the product, of the consumer and of the brand is expressed or told. Thus, the trust relationship which the brand establishes and which the consumer seeks reflects the ethical relationship between the partners of the commercial and symbolic exchange. This relationship is built through the discourse whose objective is to represent the food.

However, the environmental communication presents risks. Thierry Libaert drew the attention on the paradox which accompanies the communication on the sustainable development: *“The more the company communicates on the sustainable development, the more it degrades the relationship of trust that is being shown to companies. The more the company talks on sustainable development, the more it makes itself liable to attacks on the reality of its commitment.”* (Libaert, 2010, p. 93). The author listed the reasons that could explain this boomerang effect. The first of which is an identity reason. This observation by communication specialists confirms our own observations. The semiolinguistic analysis shows that despite the presence of guarantees that are likely to reinforce the consumer’s trust, the discourse sometimes manifests contradictions in the representation of the secure ethical contents of certain products linked to the association of the guarantor brand (source actant), and the labels (control actant). We hypothesize that the accumulation of labels on the pack is not always beneficial for building trust and for increasing the persuasive power of the discourse. Moreover, the recent study, carried out in the field of marketing, *“Socio-environmental multi-labeling and consumer willingness to pay”* has reinforced this idea. According to the authors of the article *“the effects generated by the combinations of labels are still poorly known”* (Dufeu, Ferrandi, Gabriel, Le Gall-Ely 2014, p. 4.). Referring to other researchers, they stated that *“the presence of several labels can increase uncertainty and reveal diverse influences on consumer behavior”* (Tagbata and Sirieix, 2010; Janssen and Hamm, 2012; Dekhili and Achabou, 2013). These observations prompted us to do a more detailed analysis on the expression of the brand’s identity through its discourse and on the expression of the degree of its commitment in the discourse that represents the product.

Our article aims at showing how semiotics, more specifically, the Actantial model and the Action model of Jacques Fontanille (Fontanille, 2008a, p. 280), called “the link theory”, will enable us to analyze the

coherence or incoherence in the description of the identity of the brand and the product which is built in the very situation of the communication and cannot be detached from it. To carry out this study, we will first analyze the particularities of the packaging discourse that determine the conditions in which the commercial and discursive exchange takes place. We will then define the terminological and methodological framework of our study. Finally, in our analysis, we will try to describe the variation of the ethical link that characterizes the discourse of brands.

PACKAGING AS A DISCURSIVE GENRE AND THE CHOICE OF THE CORPUS

We have chosen to work from the discourse on the packaging of different food products. This interest in such communication is not accidental. Our objective here is to explain how the constraints of the discursive genre determine the ethical characteristics of the discourse and how the particularities of the packaging discourse condition the choice of the corpus in our work.

The discourse on packaging is a particular kind of discourse that combines the characteristics of advertising (especially its persuasive function) with the specificities of its own communication, which are determined by the role that the packaging object plays in the communication. Thus, this discourse pursues very specific objectives: to inform the consumer about the product contained in the packaging, its characteristics, its effects, but also to persuade, to incite the customers to buy it [the product]. The truths, the clarity, the transparency, the exhaustiveness of the information transmitted through this medium are conditions of the ethical communication and are subject to state control.

However, the discursivization of information through the mediation of verbal and visual devices is subject to certain constraints that define the packaging-specific discursive genre. They orient the perception of messages and can become the premises of interpretative ambiguities.

Communicative constraints are based on the establishment of rules that govern communication. The interpretation of the message, guided by the consumer's expectations, is based on trust determined for example by Grice's principle of cooperation (Grice, 1979, p.61)⁵. *Pragmatic constraints* depend on the conditions of the communication which can be called critical (market constraints, lack of time by the consumer to read the message, inattentive reading, prejudices towards the product and the brand, limited inscription space). *Cognitive constraints* are linked to the process of information processing by the receiver of the message⁶. These are the premises of unethical communication that are due to errors made during the interpretation of the message (Heuer, 1982). The strategic constraints are explained by the confrontation of the objectives of the participants of the communication. The main objective of the brand's packaging communication is to represent the product in an attractive way in order to persuade the consumer to buy it, in other words, to entice the consumer into making it (the purchase). The use of the discursive device (verbal and visual) determined by the persuasive strategy must provoke the desire to buy. The consumer's objective is to have a real (true) representation of the product; he or she seeks for proof that the purchase will be beneficial for him or her. The image and the text are, for him/her [customer], a reference function and a proof of the quality and authenticity of the product. The tension between the objectives of these two practices provokes the strategic confrontation of these two paths which are manifested in the strategy of the staging of the product by the functioning of the visual and verbal device. Thus, in the communication for fruit juices, the fruit may seem whole, in close-up, drawing attention to its shape, its brilliance to enhance the taste. The fruit could also be cut and put in a basket. In this case, the attention is drawn on the quality of the product and on the "traditional" value. The properties of the text demonstrate the purely strategic nature of packaging communication and the need to find ways of mastering a whole range of meanings that may emerge during communication.

The constraints listed above determine the linguistic specificities of packaging discourse which are governed by the principle of economy. These are the discursive economy linked to the surface properties, which is limited; the temporal economy, because in the real situation of the purchase the consumer is often in a hurry; as well as the economy of the cognitive effort (laziness) during the interpretation of the message. The text on the packaging is condensed, there are no developed sentences, predominance of nominal groups

and adjectives, several signs-symbols of labels, logos, pictograms, seals, and other brands that function as texts in the texts referring to other practices related to the product.

In packaging communication, images take precedence over text. It allows for the implementation of this principle of economy. Logos implement the principle of the elasticity of the discourse which is manifested by the fact that the maximum amount of information is expressed by the minimum number of signs. The sign thus becomes polysemic, with its meaning being unstable⁷.

Our study focuses on a corpus of food product packaging collected mainly at the “Super U” supermarket between 2009 and 2014. We were particularly interested in the discourse on brands, and their commitments through their words. Each element of the corpus was chosen in order to verify (justify) our working hypotheses according to two criteria. It had to be representative and exhaustive in relation to these hypotheses. The first sample consisted of the labels on the honey jars containing the brands and the logos. We defined some semantic categories expressed by its verbo-iconic sets in relation to each other (the number of actors represented by the logos, their position on the packaging, their proximity to each other and their association). Secondly, we were interested in the possible diversity of the collection of copies to be able to browse a set of positions which the packaging of other products contains. For this, we collected and analyzed the packaging of other products: biscuits, cookies, coffee etc. The choice of these products was determined by the presence of the ethical component. The main argument of their communication was based on the promotion of healthy food, the ethical relationship with the Other, and the relationship of proximity with the brand. The communication of these products uses the notions of organic agriculture, fair trade, sustainable development but also local regional agriculture represented by the small producer.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Discursive Ethos and Link Theory

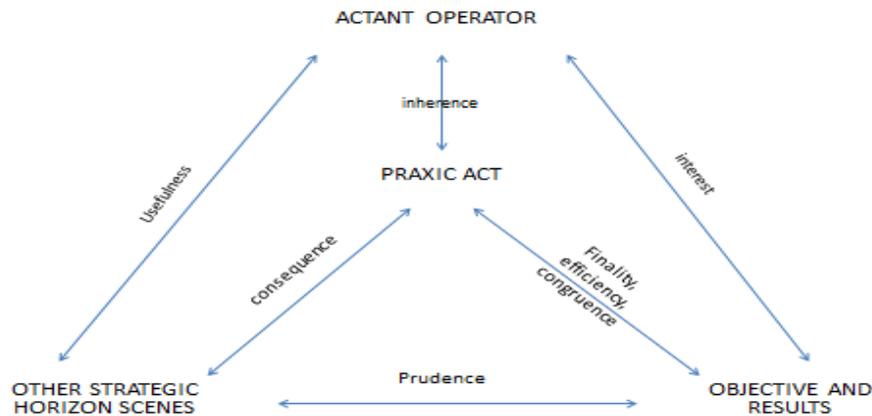
The notion of ethos was at the center of our analysis. On the one hand, it was the identity (ethos) of the brand that was constructed in action (praxis) through its discourse. The discursive ethos was studied within the Aristotelian rhetoric where it represents a self-image that the speaker builds in order to act by his word. On the other hand, the construction of the identity of the brand and its reputation is inseparable from the situation wherein the brand defines itself as a responsible agent. In this case, it is necessary to study the ethos of the practical scene and to use J. Fontanille’s model “the link theory” at the center of which are the agent and his act. The notion of responsibility highlights the link between the act (discursive or practical) and the ethos of the agent. D. Maingueneau stated that the speaker is a guarantor in the sense that he or she takes responsibility for the truth of the utterance (cited by Amossy, 2010, p. 36).

For our research, the notion of ethos was very important because the image⁸ that the brand constructs through its utterances becomes the bearer of the ethical characteristics of its discourse. “*The brand is born of a trust, of a confidence given and maintained; it dies by betrayal or deception. There is no brand without an implicit or explicit contract*” (Floch, 1990, p.73-74).

J. Fontanille proposed a model of analysis of ethics by drawing inspiration from Chaim Perelman’s argumentative theory. Perelman’s theory, called “the link theory”, makes it possible to specify the argumentative ethos of the agent, which comes under the procedures of persuasive practice. The author proposed to account for all argumentative strategies based on two major argumentative schemes: linking and dissociation. Fontanille applied this model to the analysis of practice, which was constructed in the relationship between the person, the act, and the discourse. Ethics can be analyzed in this way through the study of the relations of “links and dissociations between the act, the person, and the argument, which make it possible to describe the transformations of the ethos, the vagaries of responsibility and the imputation of responsibility, as well as the variations in the strength of the enunciative commitment” (Fontanille, 2008b). We will distinguish between the ethos of the agent, which is at the center of this model (the actor-operator), and the ethos of the praxis scene⁹ which is built in the relations between the operator, the act, the objective, and the other scene.

The author proposed the following model:

**FIGURE 1
THE LINK THEORY**



(Fontanille, 2007, p. 24)

This model highlights various relations between the actant operator, in this case, the brand, with different instances of the practice. In our study, we shall mainly focus on the study of the link between the operator (the brand) and the act, called “inherence”, which defines the responsibility of the actant operator. The discursive presence of the actant (the brand) is necessary to measure its commitment to the act (of saying or doing), and its availability to take responsibility for its act. It is all about the assumption of the act by the actant, agent of the action. The degrees of its discursive presence influence the variation of this link. We shall therefore speak of different degrees of responsibility.

Inherence is a position that defines the highest degree of responsibility-taking by the agent. If the operator displays itself as the author of its act, it will be a question of strengthening the link between the operator and the act. The operator is **inherent** to its act. For example, the producer who offers his product to the market would be an ideal figure to talk about inherence. He/she displays him-/herself under the appellation “I”. He/she is the only one who is to take responsibility of his/her product before the consumers. It is all about the act that is performed.

In the market situation, brands can create simulacra of this relationship with the consumer. If the agent is involved in the action, the operator adheres to its act, this link is called “**adherence**”. The link to the act is weaker than in the case of inherence because it is about the “ethical potential”. This is the weaker degree of responsibility because the agent displays his potential, a commitment promise. For example, the agent’s membership in the environmental community is not necessarily synonymous to his or her capacity to respond. The brand asserts its willingness and tends to prove its involvement in the action and its commitment.

Inherence is the opposite of **escheat** “**Desherece**”. The operator disengages, and we observe modal distension (Fontanille, 2008a, p. 256-257). This is enunciative erasure. The operator erases the traces of its presence. It puts itself in the background by speaking under the appellation “we”, or it takes a back seat, or it merges with other communicative actors. The discursive manifestations of this position can be multiple.

If the link between the operator and the act is weakened by the mediation of other actants, during a sharing, a delegation or a deprivation of responsibility, this case will correspond to “**exherence**”. The agent of the act speaks under the name “we”. He/she dissolves in the collective and thus loses his/her status of autonomous agent and is capable of solely answering for his act. To whom should the consumer attribute the responsibility for the product that did not meet his expectations if several brands are present on the label? Who guarantees the quality of the product? Is it the producer brand that offers the product to the market or the brand name or the collective actor behind the label?

In order to identify the weakening and strengthening areas of the ethical link in brand discourses, we shall proceed in two steps. Firstly, we shall describe the praxis of the discourse by defining the actants of the communication that interact through discursive mediation. Secondly, we shall describe the variation of the ethical link in order to define the degree of assumption of the act by the actant (brand). The defined positions (inherence, desherence, adherence and exherence) are abstract categories, which are similar to the positions of the semiotic square, which can find diverse and varied manifestations in texts. We would like to point out that this model has not yet been applied to concrete analyses, which is why this research represents an opportunity for us to put the theoretical apparatus of the semiotics of practices to the test in order to analyze the discourses of brands.

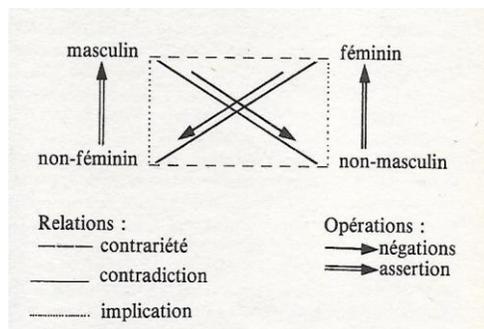
We would also like to point out that semiotic analysis is based on the principle of immanence formulated by Greimas, which defines the closure of the text, so that semiotics is restricted to the description of the internal forms of the meaning of the text or the articulations of the semantic micro universe (see Greimas 1986, pp. 91-93). However, the context of communication wherein the objects of meaning appear is also taken into consideration from the moment when it is itself approached as a text. This is why our study focuses on the analysis of the meaning that emerges from textual forms.

Presentation of the Results of the Analysis

The results of our analysis shall be presented using two semiotic tools: semiotic square and tensive diagram. They allow us to schematically represent the semantic positions described in our analysis.

The semiotic square is the visual representation of meaning (which is a system of relationships) through the installation of logical links between different types of values or semantic categories. The origin of the square goes far back to Aristotle’s *Organon*, where the philosopher set up the canonical relation that regulated the opposition of propositions: contradiction and contrariety. In semiotics, the square is no longer about the rational organization of modes of reasoning, but about the mode of structuring semantic micro-universes. It is a description instrument¹⁰. *“The interest of the square is to organize the coherence of a conceptual universe. It makes it possible to foresee the paths that meaning can take and the positions that are logically present but yet to be exploited, which it can invest”* (Floch, 1985: 198-199).

**FIGURE 2
THE SEMIOTIC SQUARE OF FLOCH**



French	English
Masculin	Masculine
Féminin	Feminine
Non-féminin	Non-feminine
Non-masculin	Non-Masculine
Relations	Relations
Contrariété	Contrariety
Contradiction	Contradiction
Implication	Implication
Operations	Operation
Négations	Negations
Assertion	Assertion

The tensive diagram (schema tensif) is another descriptive model of the semantic universe that was introduced by Fontanille and Zilberberg. This model takes into accounts the subject of the discourse, and is based on the idea that “a magnitude of any kind is, first and foremost, a sensitive presence for the subject of the discourse” (Fontanille, 2003: 70). This presence is expressed both in terms of intensity and in terms of extent (extensiveness) and quantity. Each effect of the presence thus associates a certain degree of intensity and a certain position or quantity in the extent. Let us consider knowledge. If intensity is applied to the depth of knowledge and extensity to the extent of the field of this knowledge, and if we distinguish for the two valences the low and high forces, we obtain four different types of “knowers” and knowledge (1) low intensity and extensiveness (knowing little about little), (2) high intensity and low extensiveness (knowing much about little), (3) low intensity and high extensiveness (knowing little about much), (4) high intensity and high extensiveness (knowing much about much)¹¹.

ANALYSIS

The Actantial Structure of Packaging Communication

Our work’s first direction is to demonstrate the role of brand identity. The analysis of the Actantial structure of the practice will allow us to define the identity of the actants of the communication, including the actant source of the action (the brand) and then to study the possibility of imputing the act to the actant.

The packaging shows us the very complex example of the stratification of the expression plane, as well as the corresponding content plane¹². For our study, we adopted the definition of the brand as proposed by F. Bobrie (Bobrie, 2008), for whom the identity of the brand is an “architecture” composed of three instances: guarantor brand, range brand and line brand (product brand). These instances are positioned at different discursive levels. *At the level of the enunciation*, the guarantor brand plays the role of the enunciator (Lu). It takes responsibility for the discourse concerning the market proposition before the enunciatee, the simulacrum of the consumer. At the level of the utterance, we distinguish between the sender, the range brand (Prince), and the receiver (on the one hand the reader of the message, on the other hand the receiver - subject who carry out the performance). The role of the recipient-subject is provided by the topical brand or product brand or line brand (Granola). This construction is called a brand architecture with a topical brand at the head, a guarantor brand that manages the other types of brands that are subordinate to it; the range brand (recipient function) and the product brand (subject and object) (Bobrie 2008, p. 4).

**FIGURE 3
PACKAGING OF LU PRINCE GRANOLA COOKIES**



At the practice level (*discourse in action*), we distinguish between the *source actants*, the *target actants*, and the *control actants*. The source actant represented on the label is the brand. The target actant is the consumer. The control actant is the company. Thus, the identification of the source, target, and control actants and their manifestations in the discourse will allow us to define who takes the initiative in the process, as well as the orientation that the discourse adopts.

The brand promises truth, quality, and good taste for the products it represents to the consumer, who is an individual and at the same time a collective actor. Thus, the brand expresses its commitment to the consumer and towards the society.

**TABLE 1
TYPES OF ACTANTS PRESENT IN THE DISCOURSE IN ACTION**

Source	Action	Control	Target
Brand	Commitment, undertaking	Society	consumer

In the discourse on the pack, the control actant is represented by society with institutions and other authorities (laws, deontological codes, advertising control institutions). It is the society whereof the source and the target are a part (us). In this category, we can also add the future generations and nature which are under the protection of the society which represents their interests. Let us take examples from the Nestlé Cookie Crisp brand discourse.

Thus, the society is represented in the brand’s discourse by

- The State

“Nestlé Céréales is a company committed to continuous nutritional progress encouraged by the State within the framework of the National Nutrition and Health Program (PNNS)”¹³.

- Nutritionists

“Nutritionists recommend consuming more starchy foods, particularly cereal products, and preferring them in whole grain form”¹⁴.

The control actant can be considered in the form of labels that represent a collective actant that is committed, presenting the different types of guarantees concerning the quality, the conditions of production, and the truth. At the figurative level, these are condensed texts, with syncretic languages. They represent the collective values that are shared by the source actant and the target actant. Their structure is similar to that of logotypes or heraldry. Thus, the labels are the actors that represent the control authorities. Their presence reassures consumers even if they do not fully understand their meaning. For us, all labels refer to the control actant which is represented by the society and its institutions. The control actant, *“the setting, the filter, the obstacle”¹⁵* (Fontanille, 2003) in semiotic terminology, determines the orientation of the brand’s discourse and the target’s expectation.

The fact that attracted our attention are combinations of the source actant (the guarantor brand represented by the logotype) and the control actant (represented by the label). The degree of presence of both in the discourse, which becomes perceptible in the verbal and visual discourse, informs us about who takes the initiative of the process¹⁶.

The target actant is also present on the label. For example, the wolf for the Nestlé Cookie Crisp cereal pack. The wolf plays the role of the child.

FIGURE 4
NESTLÉ COOKIE CRISP CEREAL



This is the consumer with whom the brand indulges into dialogue. He/she occupies the “you” position in the discursive space. As he/she does not take the initiative in the process, he/she is subject to the action. However, this does not mean that he/she does not act. Even if the exchange through packaging communication is asymmetrical or unilateral, the target actant gives the indirect response that manifests itself through the purchase of the product. The action of buying serves as a criterion for the strategic effectiveness of the brand’s message. It is also a sign of the consumer’s agreement to accept the brand and its values, and to adhere to its axiological universe.

The Variation in the Strength of the Ethical Link

Inherence Link or the Responsibility of the Enunciator (Operator-Act)

The inherence link corresponds to the relation between the actant and his act, which is expressed by the intensity of the commitment of the brand to its action in the concern for the Other and is manifested by the degree of its presence in the discursive field. We will analyze four cases that present different degrees of this commitment and different ways of being committed. The source actant, the brand, takes the initiative for the action and gives the argumentative force of its discourse by demonstrating its ethos. It assumes its position in the discursive space under the appellation “I”. It is the source actant that takes charge of the discursive practice which governs other practices (production practice, transport practice, etc.) for which it is held responsible and accountable.

However, the identification of the source actant in the discourse is not always obvious because it appears with other actants in different combinations. The degrees of the presence of the guarantor brand are identifiable from the traces it leaves in the discourse. The more visible and identifiable the brand is, the more its argumentative force increases, and the more stable the inherence link becomes. Sometimes the guarantor brand disappears behind other actants of the communication, which weakens the inherence link and the possibility of imputing the act to the actant. Even if the guarantor brand (source of the message) mobilizes the organic labels (control actant), it must not make them speak for it. As long as the roles are defined, each actor has its function in the communication. What matters are the configurations wherein the guarantor brand appears with other actants on the pack and takes the initiative in the action. The guarantor brand must not be substituted by the control actant or disappear behind it.

It is necessary to notice that the actants that take the initiative of the process embody the values that are attached to the products they promote. Some brands represent individual values. They display the

relationship of proximity with the consumer. Other actants promote collective values. They represent deontological or public institutions and embody the rule imposed by society. Let us present some examples:

The “Nestlé” brand is highlighted by explicitly announcing its commitment to the consumer. It uses verbal and visual marks:

“Nestlé is committed to your children”¹⁷. This commitment is represented by the green color which is dominant in its logo. The brand name appears several times on the front of the packaging. Given the absence of other actants in its discursive space, all responsibility is fully assumed by the Nestlé brand. It guarantees the whole wheat content of its product.

**FIGURE 5
NESTLÉ COOKIE CRISP CEREALS**



**FIGURE 6
U BIO PURE ARABICA COFFEE**



On the other hand, the pure arabica coffee brand tries to demonstrate the intensity of its commitment through the presence of several labels that refer to other communication actants. While in the first case it is solely the Nestlé brand, that is committed and takes responsibility, in the second case it is not clear who should be held responsible for the consequences of the act if the product does not meet the consumer’s expectations. The brand “Nestlé” embodies individual values. The actant speaks under the appellation “I”, clearly taking up the role of the brand that is committed. It is committed to the quality of the product. Pure Arabica coffee, on the other hand, rather emphasizes collective values. Not only does the product label multiply the “Bio” (Organic) and “Max Havelaar” control authority, but the U brand also merges with the Bio control authority, adopting its color and displaying its proximity to the Bio. At the same time, by adopting the codes of the Bio brand, U loses its own identity. By this strategy it fades away behind the Bio and leaves its place to it [Bio]. We suppose that the accumulation of labels can be explained by other strategies. For example, the “Max Havelaar” label adds new content. In this article we limit ourselves to the study of responsibility and study the association of labels from this point of view by trying to define who speaks and who responds.

In the following example, the guarantor brand ‘Famille Michaud’, a producer, is not present, this position is empty. We observe a brand of the range “Lune de Miel” which, through the use of metaphor and the symbol of the heart, gives the promise of pleasure. The “Lune de Miel” brand is positioned as the object of value that gives the promise of pleasure. However, it is impossible to impute responsibility to this object. Who defines the origin of the product? This function is entrusted to the collective actant, the Bio label. The empty position of the guarantor brand is occupied by the Bio label as if the guarantor brand delegated its responsibility to Bio. It is difficult to define who commits and who controls. The producer only appears on the back of the jar: “*Honey potted in the Pyrenees by the Michaud family, beekeepers since 1920*”. The producer who defines the origin of the product is not highlighted. Thus, the responsibility for the quality is displaced in favor of the aesthetic values (pleasure of consumption) because the pleasure of consumption is the main value of the guarantor brand “Lune de miel”. From the topological point of view, “Lune de Miel” occupies the place of the guarantor brand on the facing and the lid. From the significance point of view, it is an object of value: it is the sensation of the intense pleasure which the consumption provokes.

**FIGURE 7
HONEY. LUNE DE MIEL**



For the Pure Arabica coffee product, the U brand appears as the guarantor brand and the control brand at the same time because it does not produce the coffee but markets it with a commitment to its quality. The Bio label (control actant - the company), the Max Havelaar brand (control actant and collective actant) signal the brand’s commitment to fair trade and product quality.

**FIGURE 8
U BIO PURE ARABICA COFFEE**



These labels saturate the space available on pack and show the weakening of the inherence link because responsibility is not assumed by a single actant (the guarantor brand) but is shared. Thus, the fewer actants present in the discourse, the more stable the inherence link will be. The more we have actants who share the responsibility, the more the responsibility link extends until it breaks. This phenomenon was mentioned in Claude Zilberberg’s article “De la responsabilité” (Zilberberg, 2007): “*From a semiotic point of view, the degree of responsibility is inversely related to the number of protagonists: according to tensive grammar, the number functions as a divisor; the higher it is, the lower the degree of personal responsibility...*”.

In this example, even if we can distinguish between the guarantor brand that is the source and the logos that ensure control, there are two factors that weaken the ethical link. Firstly, in this example, the collective

actant, both the source and the control dominate, not only in terms of content but also in terms of expression. The Super U private label adopts the same figurative codes as the collective actant: round shapes, green color. It does not display its own values. The “U” brand has the same value as the control authority. In addition, “U” is not a producer’s brand but a distributor’s brand (source and control at the same time). Thus, in this example it is the control actant that takes the initiative in the action. It is the “we” that becomes the agent of the action. Secondly, the number of responsible parties reduces the possibility of imputing the consequences of the act to a concrete actant. If the consumer demands accountability for the product that does not satisfy him/her, to whom does he/she turn? If all the actants are committed to quality, their responsibility will be shared and the share of each instance will decrease.

Another way of creating a link of trust with the consumer is to show proximity to him/her, which makes it possible to set in a good distance that defines the ethical relationship between the instances of the practice. We adhere more easily to the proposals of the one we know; the one who looks like us and who is accessible at any time. This fact explains the success of the small stores in the neighborhood that offer regional products. They sometimes display the names and photos of the producers who supply the products. The agent is close, he/she is ready to answer for his product and the people trust him/her. In this way, the tension between the individual actant (the small producer) and the collective actant (the supermarket chains and even the brands of organic products) appears and is captured in the discursive space. This tension manifests the competition between individual and collective values. Lately, this strategy is used by big distribution brands.

The packaging of the “Miel l’Apiculteur” (Beekeeper’s honey) offers us an even more interesting example.

FIGURE 9
THE BEEKEEPER’S HONEY



The “Miel l’Apiculteur” brand is a syncretic actant: source, enunciator, sender and subject at the same time. This example is also interesting by its fusion of subject and object. The object “honey” cumulates the role of the subject “the Beekeeper” and of the guarantor brand, the enunciator “Honey the Beekeeper”. This syncretic instance takes charge of the narrative and the responsibility for the expression of the qualities of the product.

The sender who is put forward is the Beekeeper, Bernard Michaud, the individual actant, but who represents the Michaud family. The family does not explicitly propose the social values of equality or justice; there are no guarantees, but rather individual values of proximity to the consumer.

FIGURE 10
CAFE JACQUES VABRE, REGAL



FIGURE 11
JACQUES VABRE KITALÉ COFFEE



The Jacques Vabre brand proposes “Quality coffee for our planet”. The brand’s objectives are: Defending the richness and diversity of flavors; Preserving natural environments; Cultivating sustainable development. However, on the label, there are no labels, no institutional signs. Its position lies in the negation of the law imposed by the institutions. The enunciator is the brand “Jacques Vabre” which defends its position and its values. The pack displays only pure values (natural environments and the aroma of coffee expressed by the visual; the origin and qualities, expressed by the verbal). The pack does not display a control authority; the Jacques Vabre brand occupies a central position and assumes full responsibility.

FIGURE 12
U BIO HONEY



On the packaging of the U Bio honey, we find the traces of the individual actant (the guarantor brand) and the collective actant, the distributor brand and the label. The two actants are in the same field of presence. The commitment of the Super U guarantor brand is reinforced by the Bio label.

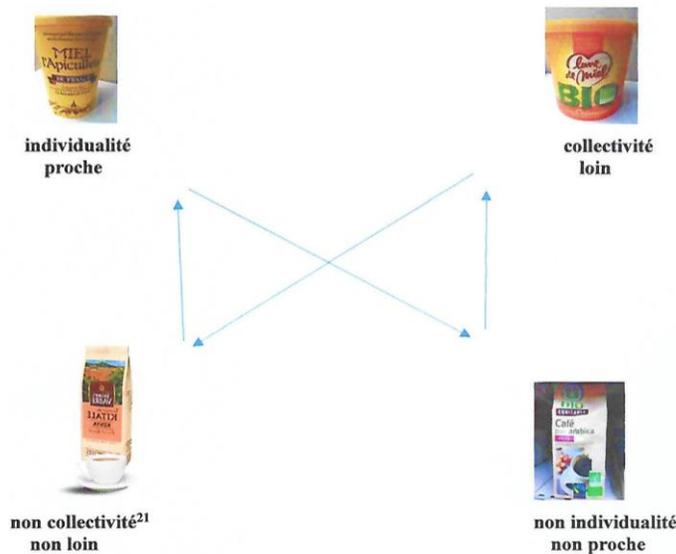
The above analysis allows us to summarize. When the guarantor brand displays its explicit presence on the packaging and expresses its commitment, we can speak of **inherence**. Its presence on the packaging dominates; it does not share its space with other brands. Examples: Nestlé cereals, Café Jacques Vabre. When it comes to the delegation of identity, we can speak of **exherence** (Pure Arabica Coffee). It is worth

noting that in the example “Lune de miel” the true source actant fades away in favor of the control actant as if it delegated its responsibility to the latter [control actant]. We can speak about “**deshherence**”. The U Bio honey is an example of **adherence**.

This representation of the actants on the pack is governed by the circulation of values in the discursive space. These are the values that are of individual nature (of the proximity and of the Good for oneself) and or collective (of the Good for the Other or the Other is a collective, undefined and anonymous instance).

To illustrate our point we represent the examples analyzed in the form of a semiotic square. The superimposition of the positions on the semiotic square makes it possible to highlight the fact that the expression of individual values brings the enunciator closer to the enunciate, and the expression of collective values, which is expressed by the labels, distances them. We note that the multiplication of guarantees which are the expression of social values does not always favor the installation of a relationship of proximity with the client¹⁸. This tension between the individual and the collective, and the close and the distant does not necessarily concern the perception that the consumer has of the label. It is a question of defining categories and working on the potentialities of meaning. From the point of view of the analysis of responsibility, “close” means defined and available to answer for his act. The small producer is close to the consumer because he knows him personally. He is a concrete person in front of us, to whom the consumer can impute the consequences of his act. The label is an undefined, impersonal, anonymous collective body that is not present, not accessible in case of need. This is the reason why the label will be more distant than the small producer. The objective of our work is not to evaluate the consumer’s perception but to analyze the meaning that can be generated through different discursive arrangements and to analyze the degree of the presence of the brand and other actants of the communication that prefigure the game with the enunciative responsibility.

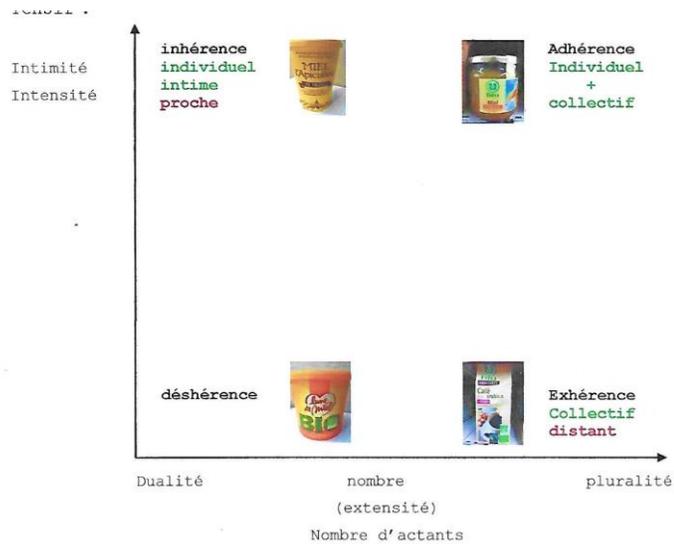
**FIGURE 13
THE SEMIOTIC SQUARE**



French	English
Individualite proche	Individuality, close
Non collectivite non loin	Non-collectivity, not far
Collectivite loin	Collectivity, far
Non individualite non proche	Non-Individuality, not close

The tensive diagram summarizes the results of the analysis of the brand’s degree of responsibility.¹⁹

FIGURE 14
THE TENSIVE DIAGRAM ²⁰.



French	English
Intimité Intensité	Intimacy (closeness) Intensity
Inherence Individuel intime Proche	Inherence Intimate individual Close
Adhérence individuel + Collectif	Individual + collective adherence
Déshérence	Escheat “Desherence”
Exherence Collectif Distant	Exherence Collective Distant
Dualité Nombre Extensité Nombre d’Actants Pluralité	Duality Number Extensiveness Number of actants Plurality

CONCLUSION

With this research, we would like to contribute to the study of the ethical dimension in discourse. The semiotic apparatus (the Actantial model and the link theory) has enabled us to describe the variation in the strength of the ethical link that links the act and the actant (agent of the action). The center of the model that manipulates all the links inexorably refers us to the actant who is at the origin of his act, the brand that states and assumes responsibility. The inherence link expresses an argumentative force that links the act and its responsible party. Thus, “imputation” consists in establishing the identity of the operator actant, of

the act, that concerns the actantial and narrative structure of the packaging's narrative. Responsibility manifests degrees, degrees of assumption of the act by the actant. It is expressed by the strength of the link that can be identified from the particularities of the discursive and rhetorical structure that participate in the ethics. Thus, the variation of the strength of the liability/responsibility link depends on the textual manifestation of the actantial role. As far as our corpus is concerned, two opposite positions are expressed by the brands: Nestlé and Jacques Vabre, on the one hand, and pure Arabica coffee, on the other. The Nestlé and Jacques Vabre brands are clearly identified on the pack. They fully assume their responsibility because they do not share their discursive space with other actants. Pure Arabica Coffee has several responsible parties, who are also syncretic actants. The distribution brand U (source actant and control actant) delegates its responsibility to the labels, Bio (control actant) and Max Havelaar (control actant). The "Bio" content is represented by two labels, the AB label and the European organic farming label. The responsibility is shared; the imputable instance is not clearly defined. The collective actants who are committed are opposed to a small producer who sells his/her products at the market. The degree of expression of the commitment is expressed by the accumulation of traces of presence of the responsible body. The brand that hides behind the label does not assume its full responsibility, and its commitment decreases.

This study could also contribute to the problem of optimization, which aims at the efficiency of practices. It seems that in order to improve the communication on organic products it is necessary to adjust the enunciative distance between the brand and the consumer: to fill the lack of direct contact and to set up strategies that allow for the compensation of the disadvantages with organic products, the absence of origin, for example. It seems important to install a more personal contact that humanizes the communication and makes it warmer. The label that expresses the guarantees should be accompanied by a reference to a guarantor brand that takes the initiative of the contact and expresses its availability to answer before the consumer for the quality of its product.

The semiotic models used allow us to measure the balance in the expression of the brand's commitment and to ensure that the fragile link between ethical and non-ethical communication is maintained. This study can be completed by further experimental research (sociological or psychological surveys) as well as by quantitative analyses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Translated & edited by American Publishing Services (<https://americanpublishingservices.com/>).

ENDNOTES

1. According to the 2007 Ipsos Insight survey, this criterion is considered "essential" by 69% of respondents (Oudghiri, 2007). According to a LH2 survey conducted in October 2007, 95% of those questioned would like to be better informed about the ecological impact of consumer products; and according to the study conducted in May 2007 by TNS Sofres and Eco-Emballages, 94% of them consider "green" labelling on products as being important (Peltier, 2009).
2. "The criteria of origin, ingredients, use, production conditions, product's shelf life are becoming more and more important and the demand for transparency that comes with it is also getting stronger" (Pastore Reiss, 2015).
3. Ceriani argues that the statement level (text, image) has pragmatic values (proposed benefits) contained in the message itself. However, it is at the level of enunciation (communication situation) that "the truthfulness of the utterance is verified, which is attested to by the previously established relationship between enunciator and enunciatee on the basis of the fiduciary contract that has been defined (by evidence or immediate certainty or by an exchange between a 'make believe' to which a 'true believe' must correspond)" (Ceriani, 2003, p. 65).
4. These are reassuring discourses on the life cycle of products, more particularly on their origin, AB labels, fair trade, symbols of recycling, sorting.
5. This principle of cooperation defines the conditions for the implementation of the Ethical and Truthful Communication Contract (Grice, 1979, p.61). According to this principle, in a communication situation,

when the receiver tries to detect a communicative intention, he/she can expect the speaker to follow this principle and thus act in a cooperative way. Grice (1979) developed this principle of cooperation into nine maxims.

6. Among the errors listed by Heuer are a) errors of perception (inertia of perception, influence of received ideas etc.); b) errors in the evaluation of probable facts; c) errors in the evaluation of evidence; d) logical cause/consequence errors.
7. For example, labels condense the multitude of rules and conditions that justify their existence. However, in order to correctly interpret the message contained in a label, it is necessary to have knowledge based on the regulatory texts that explain its operation. Is the consumer ready to make this cognitive effort to seek precise information or is his/her judgment based on preconceived ideas?
8. We use the term “image” here as a synonym for identity.
9. The praxis (predicative) scene is conceived as a “little drama” (Tesnière’s terms). At the center is an action expressed by the predicate (the verb). This predicate defines the number of actants necessary for the drama. In life the actants are represented by the actors (brand, consumer, future generations, society etc.) In the model presented above the praxis scene is composed of the instances that participate in the practice: operator actant, objective and result, strategic horizon (scene that has to be modified by the current practice), act.
10. The example often quoted by Floch opposes two terms “masculine”, “feminine” which is considered as a semantic axis where the two terms presuppose each other. These terms are in a relation of contrariety. The negation of each term makes it possible to form the semantic categories defined by the absence of this feature: “feminine - non feminine” / “masculine - non masculine”. It is a relation of contradiction. In turn, these terms are in a logical relation of implication with respect to the terms “masculine/feminine”. So the logical link between the terms feminine/non-masculine and masculine/non-feminine expresses a relation of complementarity.
11. Cf. Tensive diagram on the Signosemio website, available at <http://www.signosemio.com/fontanille/schema-tensif.asp>.
12. The structural principle of semiotics is the fact that it proposes to study and describe the meaning within the reciprocal relationship between the plane of expression (sensitive manifestations: verbal and visual) and that of the content (meanings, values). The integration and superposition of the enunciative layers form a hierarchical structure of the actantial system of this type of communication. It is frequent that the brand, which takes charge of the enunciation, is composed by the superposition of three levels of expression and content: the statement, the enunciation, and the practical levels.
13. “Nestlé” cereal packaging.
14. Id.
15. Terms borrowed from J. Fontanille.
16. For us, the process is an action represented in the discourse. It is a matter of defining the positions of the actants and the way in which the action is narrated.
17. Nestlé Cookie Crisp
18. Here, we want to defend the idea that the successful use of labels that express guarantees depends on their integration in the whole enunciative scene, which defines the global meaning of the statement. The mere multiplication of labels does not guarantee the success of the communication.
19. The tensive diagram highlights the semantic modulations of responsibility expressed on two axes: the vertical axis (intensity) measures the degree of closeness (intimacy) between the brand and the consumer, the horizontal axis expresses the number of protagonists who are at the source of the action. This diagram allows us to visualize the modalization of the link of inherence or responsibility. We measure the degree of involvement of the actant in the act and the possibility of imputing the consequences of the act to him.
20. The results of this analysis were published in Sekhniachvili-Komperdra E. “Construction of the ethical link in the food packaging discourse”. Communication and Professionalization No. 6: ‘Professionalization and ethics in communication (2): sectoral approaches,’ 2018. Available at https://resiproc.org/2018/07/12/lancement_no6_ethique-de-la-communication-2-approches-sectorielles/

REFERENCES

- Amossy, R. (2010). *La présentation de soi. Ethos et identité verbale*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Aubrun, F. (2013). Vers un nouveau concept de marque : l'alter-marque. *Communication et Management*, 10(2), 10–21.
- Bobrie, F. (2008). Sémiotique et design de communication : A la recherche du langage du marché. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 1(1), 1–9. Retrieved from file:///C:/Users/Elena/Downloads/5563-17394-1-SM%20(2).pdf
- Bolinger, D. (1973). Truth is a linguistic Question. *Language*, 49(3), 539–550.
- Canto-Sperber, M. (2004). *Dictionnaire d'éthique et de philosophie morale*. Paris, PUF, 4ème édition complétée.
- Ceriani, G. (2003). *Marketing mooving. L'approche sémiotique. Du concept du produit à l'image coordonnée. Analyser le mix, gérer ses effets de sens*. Paris : Harmattan.
- Courtés, J. (1991). *L'analyse sémiotique du discours*. Paris : Hachette.
- Dekhili, S., & Achabou, M.A. (2013), Pertinence d'une double labellisation bio/ écologique auprès des consommateurs. Une application au cas des œufs, *Economie Rurale*, 336, 41–59.
- Dufeu, I., Marc, F.J., Gabriel, P., & Le Gall-Ely, M. (2014). *Multi-labellisation socio-environnementale et consentement à payer du consommateur*. Retrieved January 29, 2018, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270683652_Multi-labellisation_socio-environnementale_et_consentement_a_payer_du_consommateur
- Dufeu, I., Gabriel, P., Ferrandi, J.-M., & Le Gall-Ely, M. (2014). Multi-labélisation socio-environnementale et consentement à payer du consommateur. *Recherche et Applications en Marketing, June*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270683652_Multi-labellisation_socio-environnementale_et_consentement_a_payer_du_consommateur
- Floch, J.-M. (1985). *Petites mythologies de l'œil et de l'esprit. Pour une sémiotique plastique*. Paris-Amsterdam : Editions Hadès-Benjamins.
- Floch, J.-M. (1995). *Identités visuelles*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Floche, J.-M. (1990). *Sémiotique, marketing et communication. Sous les signes, les stratégies*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Fontanille, J. (2003). *Sémiotique du discours*. Limoges : PULIM.
- Fontanille, J. (2007). Sémiotique et éthique. *Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques*, 110. Limoges : PULIM. Retrieved from <http://epublications.unilim.fr/revues/as/2445>
- Fontanille, J. (2008a). *Pratiques sémiotiques*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Fontanille, J. (2008b). Pratique et éthique : La théorie du lien. *Protée*, 36(2). Retrieved from http://www.unilim.fr/pages_perso/jacques.fontanille/textes-pdf/CEthique_pratique2004_06.pdf
- Greimas, A.J. (1983). *Du sens II*. Paris : Editions du Seuil.
- Grice, P. (1979). Logique et conversation. *Communications*, 30, 57–72. doi :10.3406/comm.1979.1446. Retrieved from http://www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1979_num_30_1_1446
- Janssen, M., & Hamm, U. (2012). Product labeling in the market for organic food: Consumer preferences and willingness-to-pay for different organic certification logos. *Food Quality and Preference*, 25, 9–22.
- Heuer, R.J., Jr. (1982). Cognitive factors in deception and counterdeception. In Daniel, D.C., & K.L. Herbig (Dir.), *Strategic military* (pp. 31–69). New-York : Pergamon.
- Jonas, H. (1990). *Le principe responsabilité. Une éthique pour la civilisation technologique* (Traduit de l'allemand par Jean Greisch. Titre original : Das Prinzip Verantwortung, Frankfurt, 1979). Paris : Editions du Cerf.
- Lendrevie, J., Lévy, J., & Lindon, D. (2009). *Mercator. Théories et nouvelles pratiques du marketing* (9th édition). Paris : Dunod.

- Libaert, T. (2010). *Communication et environnement, le pacte impossible*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Marti De Montety, C. (2013). Les marques, acteurs culturels – dépublicitarisation et valeur sociale ajoutée. *Communication et Management*, 10(2), 22–32.
- Oudghiri, R. (2007). Double révolution de l’information et de l’environnement. *Marketing Magazine*, 115.
- Pastore Reiss, E. (2015). Consommation responsable : plus qu'une exigence, une opportunité ! *La Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/green-business/l-actualite/consommation-responsable-plus-qu-une-exigence-une-opportunite-pour-nos-entreprises-501446.html>
- Peltier, F. (2009). La jungle des « labels verts ». *Marketing Magazine*, 133.
- Perelman, C. (1988). *Traité de l’argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*. Bruxelles : Editions de l’Université Libre de Bruxelles.
- Ricœur, P. (1990). *Soi-même comme un autre*. Paris : Seuil.
- Sekhniachvili-Komperdra, E. (n.d.). « Construction du lien éthique dans le discours du packaging des produits alimentaires ». *Communication et professionnalisation n°6 : « Professionnalisation et éthique de la communication (2) : approches sectorielles »*, 2018. Retrieved from https://resiproc.org/2018/07/12/lancement_no6_ethique-de-la-communication-2-approches-sectorielles/
- Tagbata, D., & Sirieix, L. (2010). L’équitable, le bio et le goût. Quels sont les effets de la double labellisation bio-équitable sur le consentement à payer des consommateurs ? *Cahiers d’Agriculture*, 19, 1.
- Zilberberg, C. (2007). De la responsabilité. *Nouveaux actes Sémiotiques*, 110. Limoges : PULIM. Retrieved from <http://epublications.unilim.fr/revues/as/2435>

APPENDIX

