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GENERAL IMAGE UNDERSTANDING IN VISUAL METAPHOR IDENTIFICATION

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Abstract: Research on visual metaphor has rapidly developed in the wake of verbal metaphor research, focusing on the development of taxonomies for visual metaphors and the analysis of the use of visual metaphor in specialized genres. In these studies visual metaphor identification seems to be quite straightforward. However, a reliable procedure for identifying visual metaphor in all sorts of contexts still needs to be developed. The first step of such procedure is concerned with the acquisition of a general understanding of an image In this article we explore the issues that analysts face when they look at the image and establish its general meaning.
Keywords: visual metaphor, metaphor identification, image description, image meaning, image understanding.

Resumen: Los estudios sobre metáfora visual se han sucedido a partir de la investigación en metáfora verbal, y se han centrado en el desarrollo de taxonomías de metáforas visuales y el análisis del uso de la metáfora visual en géneros concretos. En estos estudios la identificación de metáforas visuales parece una tarea sencilla. Sin embargo, estimamos necesario diseñar un método fiable que permita identificar metáforas visuales en todo tipo de contextos. El primer paso consiste en adquirir una comprensión global de la imagen. En este artículo abordamos las cuestiones que se plantean los analistas al observar una imagen y determinar su significado general
Palabras clave: metáfora visual, identificación de metáforas, descripción de la imagen, significado de la imagen, comprensión de la imagen.

1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers in various disciplines agree that metaphor, defined as a matter of understanding one thing in terms of something else (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), may be found in various modalities of expression and media of communication, including gesture, film, and still images (Cienki & Müller 2008; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi 2009; Gibbs 2008). Although research within Conceptual Metaphor Theory (e.g. Kövecses 2002; Lakoff 1987, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999; cf. Ruiz de Mendoza & Pérez 2011 for an assessment of later versions) has primarily focused on linguistic metaphor, non-verbal metaphor has received much scholarly attention over the past years as well. One of the non-verbal manifestations of metaphor, visual metaphor, has become a popular research topic in a context characterized by 'the pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1994: 11) in contemporary culture. While some investigations have discussed the use of visual metaphor in specialised language (e.g. Caballero 2009; El Refaie 2003, 2009; Rojo & Orts 2010; Velasco-Sacristán & Fuertes-Olivera 2006a,b; Serig 2006), other studies explicitly address the identification and analysis of visual metaphor in advertising (Andriessen et al 2009; Forceville 1994, 1996, 2002, 2008; Kaplan 2005). They develop methods to identify visual forms of metaphor and also to pinpoint their conceptual structures. They propose procedural steps (or questions) that lead to a decision about whether visuals are metaphorically used, what the underlying conceptual domains are as well as what mappings hold between them. In this research, visual metaphor identification seems quite straightforward.

However, following the line of author et al. (2010: 2), we claim that "metaphor identification has to meet certain generally accepted standards of methodological quality". From that perspective, methods of visual metaphor identification and analysis lack clear definitions of the phenomena interpreted and also clear guidelines for deciding on each procedural step. In this context an attempt is made to develop a procedure for visual metaphor identification which aims at reliable, interpretable and replicable results (author, submitted). The visual metaphor identification procedure (VISMIP) proposed by Steen starts out with establishing a general understanding of the visual image in order to subsequently determine whether it displays any aspects that are incongruous with this general meaning which then give rise to interpretation by contrast and comparison. Simple though it might seem, acquiring a general understanding of an image is not straightforward. As a matter of fact, analysts face a number of relevant issues that raise nontrivial questions. It is the goal of this article to outline these questions in explicit terms in order to raise researchers' awareness of their crucial role for subsequent visual metaphor identification.

2. THE FIRST STEP OF A VISUAL METAPHOR IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURE: ACQUIRING A GENERAL UNDERSTANDING OF AN IMAGE

Fifty ads from the website www.adsoftheworld.com were individually analyzed by the first two authors. The individual analyses and subsequent discussion of the general meaning of the image raised a number of questions that have a bearing upon the design of a protocol for identifying visual metaphor. The questions point to the reasons why analysts may treat

images in different ways and why they may differ in their judgments. They therefore need to be addressed in any visual metaphor identification that aims for reliable analyses.

The issues can be related to at least two distinct aspects of general image understanding. The first has to do with describing the representational meaning of the image. It concerns the way in which analysts can deal with the concrete properties of what can be seen. The second has to do with determining the symbolic meaning of the image elements. This pertains to other meanings that can be attached to the concrete visual aspects described in the first issue.

2.1. Describing the representational meaning of the image

Even though the description of the general meaning of a visual may look like an easy task, it is in fact surprisingly problematic. As Smith at al. (2005: 16) remark, "the visual world […] is always ambiguous, without a single level of meaning that can be clearly explained in words." We wonder whether this is in fact completely true, or whether it is different from the verbal world, which from one perspective is also always potentially ambiguous. However, for language use, constrained methods and techniques have been developed for analyzing its complexities at all levels of meaning, and the question arises whether this can also be done for the visual world. Since there are many levels of meaning occurring simultaneously in an image, a protocol for visual metaphor identification needs to ensure that there is one clear base of reliable information about the object of investigation on which multiple analysts can agree before they start singling out potentially metaphorical elements in that base. It is this problem of creating a reliable starting point in general image understanding that is addressed in this article.

Our attempt at describing the representational meaning of an image has revealed the importance of the following issues:

a. Identification of the visual unit.
b. Selection of visual elements.
c. Relationship between the visual objects.
d. Image interpretation.
e. Image description.

Questions a, b, and c concern the identification of the visual elements to be described. Question d addresses overall image understanding, while the last issue has to do with the way image understanding is formulated by the analyst. In other words, analysts need to make decisions about what they will describe (a-c), what it means (d) and how this can be expressed (e). We shall analyze each of the issues in detail and illustrate them through examples from our sample of ads.

a. Identification of the visual unit

The first issue has to do with the scope of the analysis. Should the analyst exclusively focus on the visual elements of the image or should they also take into consideration other elements that form part of the image? This problem was illustrated by the fact that the sample descriptions by the two analysts very often left out the verbal text (i.e. the copy, the caption

or legend), the brand name and the logo of the image. For instance, description 2 of the ad shown in figure 1 did not mention the can in the bottom right-side corner.

Description 1: A woman slaps a man who has bad thoughts about her. A can of an alcoholic drink in the corner.
Description 2: A drawing of a woman who slaps a man in the face. The man is thinking about the woman's bottom.

Similarly, only one of the two descriptions of the ad shown in figure 2 mentions the logo:

Description 1: A very long needle and Mercedes logo.
Description 2: A needle against a black background.

The issue here is the precise target of analysis. Advertising (and cartooning) are types of multimodal discourse, where overall meaning is construed through two modes: visuals and written language. The relationship between the image and the text has implications for metaphor creation and identification. Image-text interaction has been widely discussed in image research. Barthes (1977) assigns a prevalent role to the text over the image inasmuch as the function of the text is to 'fix' visual meaning, which is too indefinite. He suggests two types of relationship; a) the text extends the meaning of the image, or viceversa (*relay*), so that new meanings are added to complete the message; b) the text elaborates the image, or viceversa (*elaboration*), which means that the same meanings are stated in a more definite and precise way. Two types of elaboration can be distinguished: (i) the image is an illustration of the text; (ii) the text is a more definite and precise restatement of the image (*anchorage*). In contrast, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) claim that that the image is an independently organized message, connected with the text but independent. Text and image are two media of representation that express the same kinds of meanings in various forms. Forceville (1996) examines image-text interaction in advertising within the framework of cognitive linguistics. His notion of *verbo-pictorial metaphor* considers the mode in which a conceptual metaphor is manifested. In his view a verbo-pictorial metaphor is a metaphor always encoded visually and occasionally in additional verbal form.

The nature of the relationship between image and text may shift from the 'introjection of language inside the [picture] frame' (Mitchell 1994: 65) – through indexicals referring to the pictured object – and image interpretation conducted by means of the text to the combination of both to make sense (Elkins 1999: 194), as shown by such terms as *emblem* (Elkins 1999: 6) and *imagetext* (Mitchell 1994: 9). In her analysis of newspaper cartoons, El Refaie (2003: 87) views the image-text interaction as a "bi-directional transfer of meaning between verbal and visual modes of signification." The relationship also depends upon the medium in which it appears.

We argue as follows. Since the image includes non-visual materials that have a function in the overall meaning of the image, and since it is our aim to produce a procedure for visual metaphor identification for all types of visuals, including visuals that utilize non-visual information, we concluded that we needed to take non-visual information into account in establishing a general understanding of the image. It therefore may also have to be part of

the general description. As a result, the description of the two preceding visuals should include the image, the verbal elements, the brand name and the logo.

Figure 1. Ad for the Flying Horse soft drink.

Figure 2. Ad for the Mercedes-Benz brand.

When analysts look at an image with a view to establishing a general image meaning, they should hence describe both visual and non-visual elements inside the picture space. In addition, non-visual information may contribute to the subsequent detection of incongruity by providing further meaning clues. Thus, features such as the typography, shape, color and placement of the text may be meaningful.

b. Selection of visual elements

In visuals containing more than one pictorial element, analysts may choose to emphasize certain aspects of the image and to subordinate or even leave out others. What is more, the deeper question is what counts as a separate element as such.[1]This may be influenced by the position of the pictorial elements. For instance, if a visual has two distinct visual elements placed next to each other, it is natural for both of them to be described, as is illustrated by the descriptions of the ad in figure 3:

Figure 3. Ad for Soyjoy bars.

1 Wertheimer (1938) has studied why some images seem to belong together as part of a group while others seem separate.

Description 1: A packet of Soyjoy on the left. Two boys hold each other on the right. One boy touches his stomach.
Description 2: A drawing of two friends. A Soyjoy bar.

At the same time, because of this overall division into two parts, the two boys on the right can either be seen as 'two boys/friends', suggesting that they function as one whole (Description 2), or as two further distinct elements (Description 1, 'Two boys … One boy …'). What counts as a separate element for description is clearly dependent on the overall relations between prominent visual components. This is important because the separate elements of description feed into the subsequent detection of incongruity as follows: while the Soyjoy bar and one of the boys are topic-congruous, the boy touching his stomach seems to be topic-incongruous since Soyjoy bars are qualified as healthy.

Another aspect concerns the central position of a pictorial element, which often marks it for selection. Consider the descriptions of the ad in figure 4:

Description 1: A yellow shirt throwing up blue ink inside the tumbler of a washing machine.
Description 2: Blue ink is pouring out the body of a headless man.

Both descriptions for the ad in figure 4 include a reference to the blue ink depicted in the centre of the image, but only one of them incorporates the product in the corner. Image selection thus seems to be somewhat related to the centrality or marginality of the picture, so that analysts may describe only one image, the one thought to be the central image, and discard those images understood as marginal. However, the descriptions of the ad shown in figure 5 should make reference to the element standing at the centre of the picture (blue ink) and the element in the corner (washing machine).

Figure 4. Ad for a Samsung washing machine.

Analysts must therefore describe all pictorial elements regardless their display. This has clear implications for the detection of incongruity, because all visual elements are susceptible of being incongruous. Thus, leaving aside one or more elements may invalidate the analysis at a later stage.

In other cases a visual element may be excluded from the description because the analyst is unable to establish a connection with the other visual element(s). This seems to be the case with the ad in figure 5:

Description 1: Overhead cables and a lamppost at night.
Description 2: Road signs persuading people to pierce their tongue, nipple, and eardrum.

Although the two pictorial elements in the ad, namely the lamp posts and the road signs, are in the same plane, the analysts omitted one in the description, probably because they seem to be unrelated. Curiously enough, the analysts did not exclude the same element. This is because there were no clear criteria for selecting visual elements in a picture. Yet this means that meaning was assigned to only those visual elements that were selected, implying that the other visual elements did not make a substantial contribution to the meaning of the image as a whole. However, starting from the idea that all visual elements are meaningful, we concluded that we had to take all visual information into consideration in establishing a general understanding of the image. As a result, the description of the image in figure 5 should integrate both the lamp posts and the road signs inasmuch as all visual elements work towards the creation of incongruity in the image.

Figure 5. Ad for XM Satellite Radio.

c. Relationship between the visual objects

Even when analysts do describe the same visual objects, their descriptions may reveal differences in the relationship between those objects. Analysts may treat them separately or describe them as related objects, as illustrated by the ad in figure 6.

Description 1: A big tree with a guitar stuck in it and a pair of sandals.
Description 2: A tree in which the text "The rockstar you couldn't marry now with a day job" is carved. Sandals on the ground in front of the tree. The neck of a guitar sticks out behind the tree.

Grouping or separating visual elements offers parameters for interpretation of the image. As noted above, grouping visual elements suggests that they function as a whole, while separating them implies that viewers need to draw an analogy between them in order to understand the image. As a result, the description of the image in figure 6 needs to integrate all the elements within a visual frame in order to establish a connection between them that allows for image understanding.

In addition, the relationship between the visual elements in the picture shows which the main participant is. The main participant is the visual focus. Consider the descriptions of the ad for Oral B Dental Floss (figure 7):

Description 1: A piece of meat with a tie in a business meeting with a woman.
Description 2: A young woman is looking at a standing piece of meat wearing a tie in an office.

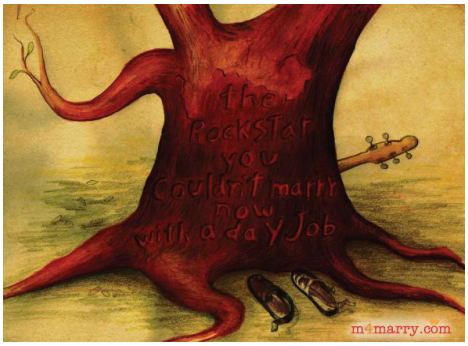

Figure 6. Ad for m4marry.com.

Figure 7. Ad for Oral B Dental Floss.

The analysts describe an identical scene in comparable ways, but the main participant in each of the descriptions differs. The first analyst considers the piece of meat as the main participant, whereas the second analyst regards the woman as the main participant. In this case this is a reflection of the fact that the woman is central because she is the perceiver while the piece of meat is central because it is the object perceived. Whether this difference is substantial for visual metaphor identification remains to be seen at later stages of analysis. At this stage analysts should provide a description that reflects the status of the participants as shown in the image display.

In much the same way, in the ad for a Golf car (figure 8) the descriptions reveal different central objects: in Description 1 the descriptive focus is the car itself, while in description 2 it is the slats (i.e. container vs. content).

Description 1: A Golf Variant car transporting four long wooden boards with a red cloth at the end of one.
Description 2: Long slats with a red cloth attached to them in a Golf Variant.

In this case, too, the visual part-whole relationship can be expressed from either angle, the part or the whole. Again, whether this difference has substantial consequences for later stages of visual metaphor identification is a question that remains to be answered.

Figure 8. Ad for the Golf Variant.

d. Image interpretation

After analysts decide which ad components and which visual elements need to be described, they must know what the image(s) depict(s). It is evident that some visual objects are unproblematically readable (i.e. transparent), such as the one depicted in figure 9. It is thus hardly surprising that it elicited two identical descriptions: *Four people walking across large ricefields*.

However, for other ads analysts may have trouble in identifying the visual object(s). A prime example is the picture of the ad in figure 10:

Description 1: The lower part of a boy's body with elephant-like legs on the right. A drawing of a game on the left.
Description 2: A drawing of a lower part of a body. The feet are replaced by paws. Another drawing showing a mixture of objects.

In other cases, there are categorical differences between the distinct descriptions of the objects in the visual. For instance, what is described as a blouse in the first description of the ad shown in figure 11 is depicted as underwear in the second description.

Description 1: A splash of purple paint on a silk blouse.
Description 2: A stain on a pink undershirt.

Figure 9. Ad for Oryza.

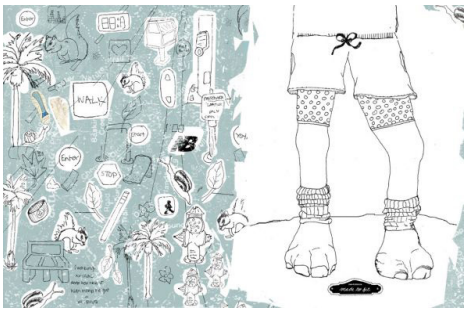

Figure 10. Ad for the New Balance brand.

Discrepancies about image interpretation may result from differences in the way analysts conceptualize what they see. These discrepancies are reflected at the level of expression (see below). Analysts may simply get the gist of the image or develop it. This is the case for the ad shown in figure 12.

Description 1: Personnel is having fun in a chic dining room.
Description 2: The staff of a mansion are in the dining room. The butler is looking at the gardener playing golf. A cook and a servant are dancing. The driver is reading a magazine. A cook is dancing on a table. Two servants are playing with pillows and laughing. A dog is hanging from a lamp.

The first description expresses a global understanding of the image, whereas the second description elaborates on the visual elements.

At a more concrete level, what is seen may be interpreted as a single event or as a series of events, as illustrated by the descriptions of the ad in figure 13:

Description 1: A sex worker is carrying her baby and cooking a meal in the kitchen.
Description 2: A prostitute holding her baby is cooking.

The perception of two distinct actions (i.e. carrying a baby and cooking) underlies the first description, while the main action in the second description is cooking.

Crucially, it is possible to interpret the same scene as different types of states of affairs. This applies in particular to visuals that feature some sort of scene. For example, the two descriptions provided for the ad shown in figure 14 include a woman and a coffee. However, one analyst describes the image as a process (description 1), whereas the other analyst depicts it as a state (description 2).

Description 1: A woman is slowly awakening and reaching for her McDonalds coffee cup.
Description 2: A sleeping woman with her right hand on a McDonald's coffee.

Figure 11. Ad for Omo detergent.

Figure 12. Ad for Ferretti yachts.

Nonetheless, divergences about the state of affairs encoded in the image do not have implications for establishing the metaphoricity of the image, since it is the visual elements that are metaphorically marked. Both descriptions identify two visual units, a woman and

a McDonalds coffee. The fact that they are encoded as participants in an Action or a State is irrelevant to subsequent detection of incongruity inasmuch as incongruity is derived from the visual units rather than from their semantic role in the event encoded in the image.

As mentioned earlier, an image has multiple levels of meaning and analysts may fail to consider them all. It is the case of intertextual meaning, i.e. the meaning gained through reference to previous images.

Further disagreement may be attributed to individual differences. It is undeniable that image interpretation is contingent upon the subject who sees it. Viewers bring to the image their knowledge about the context, the medium in which the image appears and their own expectations about the medium. People's cultural knowledge and awareness that ads serve a persuasive purpose influence their analysis of the image. Likewise, the way readers understand a cartoon is determined by the socio-political context at the time, the expectations they have towards the genre – cartoons are known to show a critical perspective on recent events – and towards particular newspapers.

In conclusion, it is evident that analysts face a number of problems when it comes to attributing meaning to the image. The problems range from the identification of the visual objects at a basic level to the conceptualization of the visual elements and the event encoded in the image at a deeper level. To handle this issue analysts have to look closely at (i) the relationship between visual and non-visual elements, (ii) the relationship between visual elements, and (iii) the relationship between the image under examination and other images. In some cases their background knowledge may help them to interpret the image.

Figure 13. Ad for AMMAR.

Figure 14. Ad for McDonalds Premium Roast coffee.

e. Image description

When we move from the way the image is perceived to the way it is linguistically expressed in an analytical description, further issues crop up. Even though we may know what it is that we see (whether an object or a situation), it may be hard to describe it in a univocal manner. In our exploratory research we seldom encountered identical or even very similar descriptions. This is not only due to the factors discussed above, but also to the possibilities for linguistic expression. Descriptions display differences in relation to the following aspects:

(i) Number of sentences or phrases.
(ii) Complexity of the descriptive elements.
(iii) Number of sentences or phrases.

To begin with, the depiction of a situation seems to pose more difficulties than the description of single entities. This may be because the range of descriptive elements is wider, including the description of who, what, where, when, and the like. If the ad shows a scene or several objects, there seem to be two overall possibilities: (i) the different elements are described in different sentences; (ii) the different elements are included in the same sentence. A clear example is provided by the descriptions of the ad shown in figure 15.

Description 1: The arcade of a theme park in a snowy plain with where the Audi has left a trace.
Description 2: An open gate to a Luna Park in a snowy landscape. Car tracks in the snow.

Describing the visual elements in a single sentence or in separate sentences has to do with their perception as a whole or as distinct visual units (see section c above). Given that the integration of visual units within a visual framework allows for establishing meaningful connections between them, the analyst should include them within a single sentence.

Figure 15. Ad for the Audi brand.

The number of sentences can show the way analysts conceptualize what they see. They may get a global understanding of the image, which is conveyed in the first sentence, and then develop it in the next sentence(s). This is the case of the ad shown in figure 12, which we reproduce for the sake of clarity.

Description 1: Personnel is having fun in a chic dining room.

Description 2: The staff of a mansion are in the dining room. The butler is looking at the gardener playing golf. A cook and a servant are dancing. The driver is reading a magazine. A cook is dancing on a table. Two servants are playing with pillows and laughing. A dog is hanging from a lamp.

While the first analyst provides a general description of the image in a single sentence, the second analyst describes the image in seven sentences, the first one presenting the scene shown in the image, the following sentences describing the actions of the different participants.

The amount of visual information is a fundamental issue. If analysts confine themselves to providing a general description of the visual, it will be hard to identify specific visual units that are incongruous. As a result, the linguistic description of the image must include all relevant visual details that help to identify an element of incongruity. This is in keeping with Kress and van Leuween's (1996) view about the role of visual design in image interpretation. In their social and semiotic theory of visual representation visuals can be read as texts which convey meaning through a visual code, i.e. a language of visual elements including shape, size, colour and composition. The impact of properties such as camera angle, orientation of the object within a scene, visual perspective, colour and cropping has been reported in empirical studies (e.g. Wang & Peracchio 2008: 211-218). In much the same way, size and composition play a role in making sense of cartoons.

(ii) Complexity of the descriptive elements

A major issue is related to the amount of detail in the description. A description may be fine-grained and express properties or attributes of the objects described, or convey a general understanding of the image. Consider the descriptions of the ad in figure 16:

Description 1: A young, smiling, male employee sitting behind a computer in an office and handing over his credit card to a hand sticking from the computer screen. A mean-looking man with a balaclava sitting behind a computer in a dilapidated room, holding a credit card in one hand, and sticking the other hand through the computer screen.

Description 2: A young man is receiving a credit card from a masked man wearing gloves through the computer.

Figure 12. Ad for Ferretti yachts.

Figure 16. Ad for internetsegura.

As we can see, the first analyst provides a detailed description of the image, whereas the second analyst simply mentions the participants. This issue is relevant for identifying incongruity elements at a later stage, incongruity being the basis of metaphoricity. Accordingly, the linguistic description of the image has to specify the attributes of the visual objects.

2.2. Determining the symbolic meaning of the image

After describing the representational meaning of the image (i.e. what we see), we should describe its symbolic meaning (i.e. what it means). Here we tackle the issue of denotation and connotation. As Leeds-Hurwitz (1993: 26) remarks, 'denotation refers to the explicit, obvious, straightforward, first meaning of a sign; connotation refers to the implicit, conventional, second meaning of a sign. The denotation/connotation dichotomy pervades many disciplines ranging from semiotics (e.g. Peirce 1977; Bal 1994) to art history (Panofsky 1970). Semiotic sign theories draw a distinction between the first and the second interpretation of a sign (Bal 1994)[2], or between representation (i.e. denotation) and interpretation (i.e. connotation) in Peirce's (1977) terms.

Similarly, art history theories posit a multidimensional model of meaning. Thus Panofsky's (1970: 51-56) iconography suggests three meaning *strata*, namely primary/natural meaning, secondary/conventional meaning, and intrinsic meaning (or content). In his analysis of non-art images (e.g. graphs, maps, pictorial elements in scripts), Elkins (1999: 53) claims that images can be assigned *expressive* (i.e. connotative) as well as *informational* (i.e. denotative) meaning.

Gestalt Theory (e.g. Koffka 1935; Wertheimer 1938;) provides a different approach to image meaning. The image is viewed and thus interpreted as a whole following a set of *laws*[3], which carries a different meaning (connotation) than its individual components.

The application of the notion of symbolic meaning to the analysis of images is not straightforward. Symbolic meaning encompassed a different type of meaning for each of the two analysts. For one, symbolic meaning seems to be the implicit meaning that is arrived at by attaching a concept to a visual element on the basis of the verbal element. This is the case for the image in the ad for a footwear brand (figure 17), in which the picture of a seemingly destroyed city represents the 'hell' in the verbal copy. The analyst attached the concept 'hell' to the pictorial element the city on the basis of the text 'makehellcool.com'.

Figure17. Ad for the Fastrack brand.

2 Bal (1994: 10) claims that first interpretations (i.e. denotations) are more general, vague and arbitrary, whereas second interpretations (i.e. connotations) are more specific and are not vague or arbitrary.

3 The Gestalt laws (or principles) are figure/ground, similarity, proximity, closure and continuation.

Two further interpretations of symbolic meaning were provided by the other analyst. In some cases she understood symbolic meaning as the visual representation of an abstract concept. For example, in the ad shown in figure 18 the concept of 'infinity' present in the legend is visually represented by the number of ipods around the girl's arm. Similarly, in the ad in figure 19 speed, which is the salient feature of broadband Volia, is visually expressed by the fast sailing of the Titanic.

In other cases symbolic meaning arose from the analogy between the pictured object and another object, as exemplified by the ad for MacDonald's beef (figure 20), in which a hamburger is featured as a person with a CV that demonstrates its high quality.

The notion of symbolic meaning hence caused substantial disagreement between the two analysts. The question is how the types of meaning suggested by the analysts are symbolic meaning. In a protocol for visual metaphor identification it is necessary to provide a clear definition of symbolic meaning and clues for detecting it that ensure a high degree of agreement.

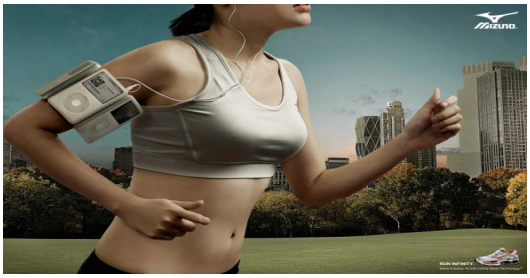

Figure 18. Ad for Mizuno ipods.

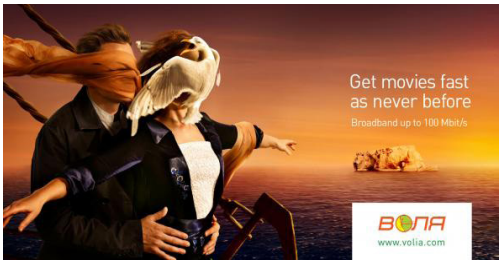

Figure 19. Ad for Volia broadband.

Figure 20. Ad for MacDonald beef.

Our proposal is to see symbolic meaning as the content that goes beyond the visible features of the object depicted in the image, such as the abstract entity represented by the images in ads 18 and 19. Thus, infinity, visually manifested by the number of ipods around the girl's arm, would constitute the symbolic meaning of the image in ad 18. Similarly, the image of ad 19 would symbolize speed, an attribute of the product advertised. It is our belief that symbolic meaning is carried by the visual elements themselves rather than by drawing an analogy between the visual elements and other entities which are not present in the image.

Symbolic meaning may be conventional. As a matter of fact, the analysts agreed on the symbolic meaning of an image if it was strongly conventionalized. For example, both analysts claimed that the pine tree in the ad in figure 21 represents nature, or that the computer in the ad in figure 16 is a symbol for Internet.

It should be noted that symbolic meaning may be generated by the text rather than the image. This is the case of the ad for Felicia Optica glasses (figure 22), in which the coins are presented as a symbol for value in the caption: *The Eyeglasses are increasing your value*.

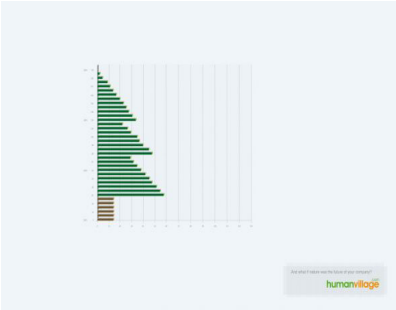

Figure 21. Ad for humanvillage.com.

Figure 22. Ad for Felicia Optica glasses.

Figure 23. Ad for Pampaverde burgers.

If symbolic meaning is activated by the text, it means that it is established through connection between the text and the image. Yet our analysis also reveals that symbolic meaning may be derived by relating the image to the product name or to the product, as illustrated by the ad for Pampaverde extra big burgers (figure 23), in which the symbolic meaning of the animal-like mouth as representing big size is closely linked to the product.

It is necessary to highlight the contribution of pictorial elements such as shape, size, color and layout to the symbolic meaning of the image. Moreover, perceptual similarity between the visual objects in terms of shape, color, etc. may affect visual metaphor.

3. CONCLUSIONS

The present contribution has attempted to develop research into visual metaphor through the discussion of some issues that are key to any reliable visual metaphor identification procedure. This paper has focused on the first step of such a procedure, which is concerned with image comprehension and description. This is a complex issue that raises a range of questions relative to the description of the representational and symbolic meaning and the topic of the image. Representational and symbolic meaning pose several problems that need to be satisfactorily dealt with in a sound visual metaphor identification method. As regards representational meaning, discrepancies may arise on three planes: 1) the perceptual plane: image layout, presence of non-visual elements / multiple visual elements and connection between them; 2) the cognitive plane: various interpretations of the image; 3) linguistic plane: different image descriptions. Symbolic meaning proves to be an even more complex issue for several reasons. First, the notion is confusing. Analysts may often fail to agree on what symbolic meaning is. Second, symbolic meaning is not always exclusively triggered by the image. In this light, analysts may frequently resort to the verbal element. The scope of this paper being limited and modest, further research needs to be carried out into the implications of the issues explored for establishing the meaning of the image. More specifically, they should be taken into consideration in the design of the guidelines for the first step in any visual metaphor identification procedure.

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