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VISUAL METAPHOR IN COMMERCIAL AD: EFFECTIVENESS OR FAILURE?

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Abstract

Based on the modern approaches to the study of multimodal pragmatics, this study focuses on its new facet, identifying the correlation between cognitive and pragmatic features of visual metaphor with reference to visual grammatical analysis and Optimal Innovation Hypothesis added by explanatory tools of the conceptual blending Theory and Relevance Theory along with cooperative principle. The purpose of the article is to analyze the visual message of commercial advertising while assessing its successfulness / failure in accordance with the sequentially applied criteria of “the level of metaphorical polysematicity and ambiguity”, “the availability of the relevant context of interpretation”, “the level of optimal innovativeness”. The paper reached four principal results. First. The visual metaphor flouts one or few cooperative maxims, which triggers discursive implicature. Second. Depending on the level of implicitness and polysematicity of the visual metaphor, the result of the maxim flouting can be both implicature and explicature. If the inference of the implicature is intended by an advertising message, but requires excessive efforts to process visual information in lack of relevant context, the level of the metaphor interpretation remains explicature. Third. “Explicature” and “implicature” levels of visual metaphor interpretation are associated with different stages of blending processes. Inference of discursive implicature, which constitutes the intended meaning of the metaphor, coincides with the stage of the blend elaboration; Fourth. Depending on the balance between the level of familiarity and innovativeness, the components of a visual metaphor can be ranked on the scale of “attractiveness” for the target client—from optimally innovative to pure innovative devices.

Keywords: advertising, visual metaphor, blending, implicature, visual grammar, scale of innovation.

1. Introduction

While the multimodal studies are lately advanced as the key focuses of the discourse studies (Bateman 2014; Dicerto 2018; Jewitt & Oyama 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Machin & Ledin 2020; O'Halloran 2004), the problem of multifaceted correlations along the axes “multimodal / inference pragmatics”—“conceptual visual metaphor”—“visual grammar”—“level of innovation” remains unexplored.

At the same time, the analysis of such correlation aspects allows, in our opinion, to identify the parameters and measure the specific success or failure of advertising, including those belonging to a world famous brand.

As research material, the article uses only one multimodal advertisement for a 2014 Land Rover vehicle, since the focus of the study and its novelty are in the integrative analysis of advertising within the framework of multimodal pragmatics, visual grammar, optimal innovation hypothesis and conceptual blending explanatory tools.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the visual message of commercial advertising while assessing its successfulness / failure in accordance with the sequentially applied criteria of “the level of metaphorical polysemanticity and ambiguity”, “the availability of the relevant context of interpretation” and “the level of optimal innovativeness”.

The purpose is revealed in the objectives, the solution of which determines the stages of research: (1) to analyze the visual message from the perspective of the conceptual blending methodology; (2) to reveal the disregard of cooperative maxims due to the ambiguity of visual metaphor while assessing the “availability” of relevant contexts for the inference of discursive implicature; (3) to match the “explicature” and “implicature” levels of interpretation of the meaning of a visual metaphor with the stages of conceptual blending; (4) to assess the obtained results from the perspective of the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis (Giora, 1998; Giora & Fein, 1999; Giora et al., 2017); (5) to identify the successfulness / failure of advertising.

2. Theoretical background and methodological design

The research is based on four currently central trends in modern multimodal analysis: Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Dicerto 2018; Kravchenko et al., 2020; Kravchenko et al, 2021; Kress, 2010; O’Halloran, 2004; Shevchenko, 2019) including in the perspective of visual grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006); theory of conceptual integration (Coulson & Oakley, 2000; Fauconnier, Turner, 2002; Krysanova & Shevchenko, 2021) and the theory of relevance (Carston & Powell, 2006; Wilson & Sperber, 2004), i.e. such its facet as Optimal Innovation Hypothesis (Giora, 1998; Giora & Fein, 1999).

Multimodal analysis of discourse is applied in its specific aspect—the relationship between conceptual and pragmatic characteristics of the visual component of advertising, which remains one of the poorly studied problems in modern research.

Some aspects of this problem have been studied in view of the relationship between the visual part of advertising and the pragmatics of its verbal code (Bateman, 2014; Braun, 2016; Dicerto, 2018; Kravchenko et al, 2020; O’Halloran, 2004), in perspectives of visual semiotics (Jewitt & Rumiko, 2001; Machin & Ledin 2020; Beasley & Marcel, 2002 et al.), visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) and visual rhetoric (Gkiouzepas & Hogg, 2011; Scott, 1994).

At the same time, different research perspectives including the aforementioned ones, primarily focus on discursive pragmatics, studying conceptual structures as a means of implementing strategies of sociosemiotic construction of ad mythology and its associating consumer identities. However, the studying visually expressed concepts within the framework of Gricean and post-Gricean approaches still remains lacunar in multimodal research.

Instead, like the verbal metaphor (Grice, 1975; 1989), the visual metaphoric message flouts the maxim of quality of information and, if high ambiguous, involves a disregard of other cooperative maxims. The maxims disregard triggers discursive implicature, which inference conveys the meaning of the visual metaphor to be restored in the relevant context of the whole multimodal message and, if necessary, in the discursive context of a particular advertising campaign.

In case of compound polysemantic visual metaphor the first stage of the analysis consists in its decoding at the level of explicature. The second stage is the inference of discursive implicature. The need for the second stage is due to a high degree of visual ad creativity,

In the case of a complex polysemantic visual metaphor, the first stage of analysis is to decode it at the level of explicature. The second stage is the inference of the discursive implicature. The

need for the second stage is due to a high degree of creativity of visual advertising, with flouting the cooperative maxims of quantity, quality and transparency of information as implicature triggers.

Both explicature stage of the metaphor decoding and implicature stage of its inference correlate with the processes of its conceptualization, which necessitate the explanatory tools of the metaphor conceptual analysis.

Visual metaphor as an essential “coded” part of the multimodal messages, its typology and functions are extensively studied by M. Toncar and J. Munch (2001), J. Schroeder (2002), L. Scott (1994), E. El Refaie (2003), C. Forceville and E. Urios-Aparisi (2009). However, exploring visual metaphor, the scientists primarily explore a dual metaphorical model, relying in their analysis on the source-sphere and the target-sphere correlations.

In our opinion, it is more expedient to explain the metaphorical meaning of the visual message based on the theory of conceptual blending. In contrast to the traditional method of inferencing the conceptual metaphor, it is more helpful to explain the vast majority of visual metaphors in advertising that are unconventional, occasional, involving several source and target input spaces and their compound blending.

With that in mind, the paper relies on the theory of conceptual integration (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Krysanova & Shevchenko, 2021), attempting to correlate the inference of explicature and implicature with particular links of the conceptual blending mechanism. The latter is based on four-space model, which are structured through image-schematic, propositional, metaphorical, metonymic, symbolic frames. Two or multiple source and target input spaces are blended in the generic space of their common characteristics, which leads to a new emergent structure that, in turn, can further be “integrated” with blended and input spaces in compound metaphoric meaning.

Considering that the blend composition entails the attributing some relation between the elements of input spaces, the decoding the explicature hypothetically coincides with this first stage of blending process by establishing obvious (not requiring additional contextual effects) propositional connections between input spaces. Depending on the complexity of the visual metaphor, the implicature inferencing stage either coincides with the process of completion filling in the missing semantic link with knowledge from long-term memory or with elaboration of the mental structure obtained at the “explicature” stage, with involvement of the entire context of advertising message, including the verbal part.

Both visual and verbal parts are assessed according to the criteria for fitting the optimal relevance and optimal innovation contexts, based on the idea (a) of a multimodal context as the semiotic space, implying, strengthening, or eliminating inference about the visually / verbally intended meaning, (b) as well as the parameter of the optimal balance between the message creativeness and its “recognizability”.

At this stage of the analysis, the paper involves the approach of “multimodal pragmatics” based on “theory of relevance—multimodal discourse” correlation considering that contextual factors assist a recipient in disambiguating a message with the least effort (Dicerto 2018, p. 37-59).

If the visual code flouts some cooperative maxims, triggering the search for discursive implicatures, verbal part provides some “options” that support or eliminate inferential hypotheses about the implicature meaning, and, vice versa. So, visual and verbal parts are interrelated as both a mutually interpretive code and a source of cognitive effects (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) including contextual implications, strengthening, contradiction, or elimination of an available assumption.

In determining the pragmatic ambiguity of the visual message, resulting in maxims flouting and the triggering of implicatures, the paper applies elements of visual grammar by G. Kress and T. van Leeuwen (2006), who applied three metafunctions advanced by Halliday’s (1994) functional grammar, to multimodal visual messages. Halliday’s ideational metafunction is associated with the representational meaning of the visual message, which is studied in two aspects: narrative and conceptual. Narrative models are dynamic and function to represent how “actions and events unfold” in the space of visual communication, while conceptual models are static and “represent

participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 59). In the representational plane there are two groups of participants: on the one hand, actors, places and things, on the other hand—the addressees and recipients of messages. In narrative structures, the participants in the image are linked by a vector formed by the elements of the image through bodies, limbs, gaze, etc. Among the narrative processes, one of the most common is the “reaction” type, when the vector is formed by sight and creates a reaction, not an action (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 67-68).

Conceptual structures of representational value are divided into classificational (relating participants to each other by the criterion of subordinate-main), analytical (connecting participants in terms of part-whole or hyponym-hyperonym) and symbolic, conveyed both by symbolic cues and attributes (additional symbolic connotation, expressed by light, details, hue, saturation).

An interactive meaning that correlates with the interpersonal function of Halliday, includes such basic elements as the contact, distance, attitude, and modality. In advertising, which has a high level of stylization and generalization, such contact-creating interactive cues as the gaze, the distance of the participant from the viewer or the angle of perception of the participant by the viewer lose their significance due to the frequent “physical” absence of the participant himself. If so, the main element of interactive meaning becomes modality conveyed by color harmony, discrimination, saturation, and differentiation, as well as lighting, brightness, depth, contextualization, associated with detailed background or its absence.

The composition meaning correlates with Halliday’s textual function and relies on principles of information value (depending on left and right, top and bottom, center, and margin locations), salience, based on size, tonal and colour contrast, placement in the visual field, perspective, etc. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 201–203), and framing (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, pp. 179-185) as the way, in which the visual elements connect or disconnect by lines, shapes or empty spaces.

If the cues of the representational, interactive, or compositional meanings are in disharmony with each other or with the verbal code, it may create ambiguity, thus effecting the cooperative maxims flouting and triggering an implicature to be filled in the relevant multimodal or cognitive contexts.

To explain such processes, the article partially involves the Optimal Innovation Hypothesis (Giora, 1998; Giora & Fein, 1999; Giora et al, 2017) helpful in reinterpreting the notions of the optimally relevant context in the cases of the innovative figurativeness of ad visual mode. This theory distinguishes between familiar stimuli, purely innovative stimuli and optimally innovative stimuli, ranking them at the scale of “pleasure” or attractiveness for the target addressers. An optimally innovative stimulus is rated as more pleasurable than either a familiar stimulus or a purely innovative stimulus. The “pleasure” is due to a surprise experienced in suddenly discovering some novelty where it is least expected, or the gratification in discovering the familiar in the novel. Though both pure innovations and optimal innovations involve novel responses, only optimal innovations further involve familiar responses, though it requires an extra processing effort compared to familiar responses, because they involve processing the salient and more. According to the optimal innovation hypothesis, it is neither literality nor figurativeness that accounts for the pleasure induced, but some salience imbalance: the surprising discovery of the novel in the salient or the salient in the novel (see Giora, 1998; Giora & Fein, 1999; Giora et al., 2017).

3. Research outcomes

3.1. Visual code: conceptual facet

The visual message selected for analysis represents the key message of the 2014 Land Rover ad campaign.



Fig. 1. Maasai: Land Rover (Criscuoli & Koutroumanis, 2014)

For all its apparent simplicity, the visual message is a complex metaphor involving four-level conceptual integration.

The first blended space (BS) displays the compound compression relationship of the “part-whole” and cause-consequence types: if the tire (partonym of a car) as a footwear is as comfortable, durable, and fit for hard-to-reach places, then the car / Land Rover (holonym), associated with this footwear is comfortable, durable, and perfectly suitable for hard-to-reach places.

Attributing of “part-whole” relation between the elements of input spaces constitutes the stage of the blend composition.

The second stage of BS completion occurs when blended structure matches some background knowledge. Here it bases on the knowledge about the visualized tire associated with both functional characteristics and appearance:

(a) tire — car shoes (In Ukrainian there is a colloquial idiom “perezvuty mashynu” — to change the car for summer / winter);

(b) the treads of the shoe suggest the Land Rover front grille.

So, the metonymic-metaphorical nominative shift is simultaneously determined by the comparative and possessive basic propositional scheme. To explain the blended space below, we use some abbreviations: ITS (input target space), GS (generic space), and ISS (input source space).

ISS-1: tire footwear

ITS-1: Land Rover: vehicle characteristics

GS-1: similar qualities: wear resistance, strength, “passability”; visual resemblance: Land Rover front grille-like treads of the shoe

BS-1 — Land Rover is irreplaceable (as wear-resistant footwear) in areas inaccessible to other vehicles.

BS-1 correlated with explicature, constituting the “propositional form” of the coded visual message. The second component of explicature or the propositional attitude involves development of the obtained BS-1 with its mental simulation based on strategic task of any advertising: appeal to people—target customers who love off-road travel.

The second and third BS are less obvious and needs some cognitive efforts to be inferred.

The second BS displays the associative relations between the feet of an African and such

vehicle characteristics as speed and endurance. in track and field the African people win the long-distance races. The latter connotative meaning is strengthened by verbal slogan, referring to the Maasai tribe from Tanzania (Kenyans and Tanzanians are generally known to be the best long-distance runners in the world).

ISS-2: sport: records in long distance running

ITS-2: Land Rover: vehicle characteristics

GS-2: similar characteristics: speed and endurance.

BS-2: Land Rover—long distance record holder in speed and endurance

Illocutionary elaboration of the BS-2: appeal to people who like speed and long-distance trips.

The third BS pertains to footwear as personification of something home, local, familiar.

ISS-3: footwear

ITS-3: Land Rover tire footwear

GS-3: “at home” feeling

BS-3: Land Rover is as local in places far from civilization as the tribe there

The fourth BS emerges from elaboration of the obtained BS-3 with ISS-1 (the tire footwear), ISS-2 (the tire footwear on the feet of an African), BS-1 and BS-2 associating them with the meanings “lack of civilization”, “spatial remoteness”, which results in the optional cause-consequence blended space:

As Land Rover can go into terrain other vehicles can't, is superior to other cars in the long-distance races and, most important, is as local in hard-to reach-places as the tribe, wearing Land Rover tires footwear, it may be the personification of civilization in the most remote places of the planet.

3.2. Visual vs. verbal code: pragmatic ambiguity

Disregard of the maxims of the quality and unambiguity of information conveyed by the visual code is due to some inconsistency between the representational, compositional, and interactive meanings. The basic role of tire sandals in ad representational meaning is foregrounded by their salience in size, placement at the bottom as a specific piece of information and in the center of the visual field, which indicates certain key information.

From that perspective, tire sandals become an ostensive stimulus that will trigger the ad addresser's processing effort.

At the same time, the visual part is characterized by a significant lack of detail. First, the vehicle itself is not being presented. Secondly, the shadow of the SUV's grille, which, in addition to tire sandals may metonymically indicate a car, is located on the left (thematic) part. However, conceptually significant details should be placed in the “rhematic” right side—similar to sentence perspective. Presumably, the hint on shadow from the machine itself is localized in the upper part, shifted to the right, which, in accordance with the principles of visual grammar, is correct, since the visual information presented at the top is more ideal, containing a kind of a ‘promise’ and right-side positioning is informationally “rhematic”. However, this shadow is so “blurred” and indistinct that it violates the modality cues due to the lack of detailed background, lighting, brightness, depth, contextualization, and other attributes of the salient interactive meaning.

In addition, the image of brown feet in tire sandals stained with clay and sand suggests some dynamic narrative models associated with places remote from civilization and the way of life of the aborigines. In other words, the image of tire-sandals on the feet of an African can be perceived and therefore interpreted as both a conceptual-metaphorical (see analysis above) and a narrative component of representational meaning. *The latest version* is expected to be strengthened by the verbal slogan “Lions can run faster than us, but we can run farther” (Maasai proverb). It is assumed that the verbal anchor will contribute to the restoration of the missing semantic links. At the same time, the information is restored only partially—at the level of explication, that the legs belong to the representative of the Massai tribe, which “can run farther than lions. At the same time, the full

cognitive effect based on the slogan is expected to be provided by background knowledge that the Tanzanian Maasai tribe traditionally wears shoe treads to help them cover great distances in hard-to-reach places. However, most target addressers of the ad cannot make that connection due to the lack of such background contextual knowledge.

In addition, when compared with the visual metaphor of the Land Rover, the first part of the slogan (Lions can run faster than us) actualizes an additional meaning, associated with the insufficient speed characteristics of the car (lions can run faster than a Land Rover). Moreover, this meaning is not eliminated in the context and weakens the impact of advertising in general. In a whole, the verbal code does not “support” such elements of visual metaphor (see 3.1) as “speed”, “comfort”, “civilization”, strengthening only the meanings “endurance” (primary) and “passability” (secondary).

The word “lion”, although it is part of the proverb, can also cause unintended associations with cars that are named after animals, i.e. Leon—a lion (Seat), Tiger—a wild cat (Sunbeam), Bobcat (Mercury), Cheetah (Chevrolet), Jaguar, Cougar (Mercury), Puma—a wild cat (Ford), which, accordingly, “run” faster than LD.

3.3. Pure innovation vs. optimal innovation: is visual code effective or inconclusive?

In our opinion, the analyzed advertising takes the middle place on the scale of optimal innovativeness. First, the visual code is polysemantic as along with the prominent characteristic “high passability” it may trigger such connotation as “poverty”. Most advertisers lack the background knowledge that treads are the traditional footwear of the Maasai tribe, who wears such sandals not out of poverty, but out of convenience. Also, a necessary component of the background knowledge of the ad target addresser should be information that, due to the nomadic lifestyle, the Maasai people must travel long distances.

Thus, advertising cannot be considered optimally innovative, since, (a) firstly, not all intended components of the visual part are recognized by the addressees due to their lack of background knowledge and (b) secondly, the verbal part supports only two of the four components of the visual metaphor, although the attractiveness of the vehicle for the target customer is based on all four components, which is proved by the analysis of visual advertising from the perspective of conceptual blending.

In addition, the verbal part itself flouts the maxim of unambiguity, which can trigger the unintended implicatures about insufficient speed, Land Rover comparison with other machines, etc. that is not eliminated by the visual context.

At the same time, advertising is not purely innovative either, since the image of tread-sandals, soiled in dirty sand and hinting at difficult off-road places, is salient enough to restore the meaning of the metaphor at least at the “explicature” level.

Accordingly, the analyzed Land Rover advertising takes the middle place in the scale of optimal innovativeness.

4. Conclusions

The paper reached four main interrelated results.

The visual metaphor flouts one or few cooperative maxims, which triggers discursive implicature. Depending on the level of implicitness and polysemanticity of the visual metaphor, the result of the maxim flouting can be both implicature and explicature. If the inference of the implicature is intended by an advertising message, but requires excessive efforts to process visual information in lack of relevant context, the level of interpretation of the metaphor remains explicature. “Explicature” and “implicature” levels of visual metaphor interpretation are associated with different stages of blending processes.

Inference of discursive implicature, which constitutes the intended meaning of the metaphor, coincides with the stage of the blend elaboration. Depending on the balance between the level of

familiarity and innovativeness, the components of a visual metaphor can be ranked on the scale of “attractiveness” for the target client—from optimally innovative to pure innovative devices.

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ВІЗУАЛЬНА МЕТАФОРА В КОМЕРЦІЙНІЙ РЕКЛАМІ: ЕФЕКТИВНІСТЬ ЧИ НЕВДАЧА?

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Анотація

Ґрунтуючись на сучасних підходах, дослідження фокусується на новому аспекті мультимодальної прагматики, виявляючи кореляцію між когнітивними та прагматичними особливостями візуальної метафори із залученням візуального граматичного аналізу, гіпотези оптимальної інновації, теорії концептуальної інтеграції, теорії релевантності і принципу кооперації. Метою статті є аналіз візуального повідомлення комерційної реклами у ракурсі оцінки його успішності/неуспішності відповідно до послідовно застосованих критеріїв “рівень метафоричної полісемантичності та неоднозначності”, “наявність відповідного контексту інтерпретації”, “рівень оптимальної інноваційності”. Дослідження дозволило дійти таких основних висновків. Перше. Візуальна метафора є відхиленням від однієї або декількох кооперативних максим, що є тригером дискурсивної імплікатури. Друге. Залежно від рівня імпліцитності і полісемантичності візуальної метафори результатом відхилення від кооперативних максим може бути як імплікатура, так і експлікатура. Якщо інференція імплікатури заплановане рекламним повідомленням, але вимагає від цільових адресатів надмірних зусиль для обробки візуальної інформації за відсутності відповідного контексту, рівень інтерпретації метафори обмежується експлікатурою. Третє. Рівні “експлікатури” та “імплікатури” у інтерпретації візуальної метафори пов’язані з різними ланками концептуальної інтеграції. Вилучення дискурсивної імплікатури, що, власне, становить інтендоване адресантом значення метафори, збігається з етапом нарощування (elaboration) бленду. Четверте. Залежно від

балансу між рівнем впізнаваності та інноваційності компоненти візуальної метафори можна ранжувати за шкалою “привабливості / задоволення” для цільового клієнта – від оптимально інноваційних до чисто інноваційних.

Ключові слова: реклама, візуальна метафора, блендінг, імплікатура, візуальна граматика, шкала інноваційності.

ВИЗУАЛЬНАЯ МЕТАФОРА В КОММЕРЧЕСКОЙ РЕКЛАМЕ: ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТЬ ИЛИ НЕУДАЧА?

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Аннотация

Основываясь на современных подходах, исследование фокусируется на новом аспекте мультимодальной прагматики, выявляя корреляцию между когнитивными и прагматическими особенностями визуальной метафоры с привлечением визуального грамматического анализа, гипотезы оптимальной инновации, теории концептуальной интеграции, теории релевантности и принципа кооперации. Целью статьи является анализ визуального сообщения коммерческой рекламы в ракурсе оценки его успешности/неуспешности в соответствии с последовательно применяемыми критериями “уровень метафорической полисемантической и неоднозначности”, “наличие соответствующего контекста интерпретации”, “уровень оптимальной инновационности”. Исследование позволило сделать следующие основные выводы Первое. Визуальная метафора является отклонением от одной или нескольких кооперативных максим, маркируя дискурсивную импликацию. Второе. В зависимости от уровня имплицитности и полисемантической визуальной метафоры результатом отклонения от кооперативных максим может быть как импликация, так и экспликация. Если инференция имплицитности запланирована рекламным сообщением, но требует от целевых адресатов чрезмерных усилий по обработке визуальной информации при отсутствии соответствующего контекста, уровень интерпретации метафоры ограничивается экспликацией. Третье. Уровни “экспликации” и “имплицитности” в интерпретации визуальной метафоры связаны с разными звеньями концептуальной интеграции. Извлечение дискурсивной имплицитности, что, по сути, составляет интендированное адресантом значение метафоры, совпадает с этапом наращивания (elaboration) бленда. Четвертое. В зависимости от баланса между уровнем узнаваемости и инновационности компоненты визуальной метафоры можно ранжировать по шкале «привлекательности/удовольствия» для целевого клиента – от оптимально инновационных до чисто инновационных.

Ключевые слова: реклама, визуальная метафора, блендінг, імплікатура, візуальна граматика, шкала інноваційності.