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The role of text in the identification of visual metaphor in advertising

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Abstract

In the last decades visual metaphor has been considerably researched, particularly in advertising. Several methods have been developed for the identification and analysis of visual metaphor (e.g. Forceville 1996, 2008; Phillips 2003; Gkiouzepas & Hogg 2011). Identifying the metaphorical meaning of the image on the basis of formal and conceptual categories is quite straightforward in these methods. In this paper we provide an insight into the role of text in identifying visual metaphor in ads through the quantitative analysis of a small sample of online ads. Although the image may stand out as a separate unit, the verbal element often helps to determine the metaphoricity of the image. The image-text interaction has been discussed by several scholars such as Barthes (1977) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Whereas Barthes sees the relationship in terms of dependence of the image on the text, Kress and van Leeuwen claim that they are connected but independent. Our study leads us to postulate a metaphoricity scale of the image on the basis of its relationship with the text.

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1. Introduction

In the last years visual metaphor has been extensively researched. While some investigations have discussed the

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use of visual metaphor in specialised language (e.g. Caballero 2009; El Refaie 2003, 2009; Rojo & Orts 2010; Velasco-Sacristán & Fuertes-Olivera 2006a,b), other researchers (e.g. Forceville 1994, 1996, 2008; Phillips 2003; Gziouzepas & Hogg 2011) have developed methods for the identification and analysis of visual metaphor in advertising. In these methods the metaphorical meaning of the image is determined by formal and conceptual features.

The aim of the present article is to explore the role of text in creating and identifying visual metaphor. Although the image often stands out as a separate unit, it may include non-visual materials that have a function in the overall meaning of the image and may help to determine its metaphoricity.

Image-text interaction in visual genres has been discussed by several scholars. 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 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. Despite these investigations on image-text interaction in visuals, little research attention has been directed toward the role of the text in visual metaphor creation and identification. In this light, 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.

In this paper the term ‘visual metaphor’ covers the instances in which metaphorical meaning relies exclusively on the image and the instances in which the metaphorical image is supported by the text. We attempt to give evidence of the different roles of the text and the image in advertising through the analysis of a set of ads. The relationship between the image and the text has implications for metaphor creation and identification and the role of the text varies, as we shall see in the next sections.

2. Methodology

The images were collected through a hand search of ads on Internet. Data selection was carried out in two stages. First we chose online ads and discarded other types of visuals such as newspaper images on the basis of their political bias, and billboards on the basis on their strong commercial effects. In contrast, online ads display a high variety which allows for examining the different roles of the text and the image. Then we proceeded to the selection of ads. Of a total corpus of 200 online ads, we chose nine. The selection was made according to three criteria: (i) the ads combine visual and verbal information; (ii) in all the ads the image manifests a metaphor; (iii) the ads illustrate the various roles of the text and the image.

3. Analysis and results

A close analysis of the ads sample has led us to suggest three categories of ads on the basis of the ways of interaction between the image and the text:

1. In the first category of ads, the image instantiates a metaphor that is backed up by the text. The source and the target are visually cued.
2. In the second category, the image and the text combine to trigger a metaphor. There are two modes of representation of source and target: (i) the source is visually cued, while the target is verbally rendered; (ii) the source and the target are visually manifested.
3. Whereas in the previous categories, the image has a metaphorical character *per se*, in the third category the image does not apparently encode a metaphor; it is the text that reveals the metaphorical meaning of the image, even if the source and target are visually expressed.

In the remainder of this section we illustrate the different roles of the image and the text in creating and

identifying visual metaphor.

The ads shown in figures 1, 2 and 3 belong to the first category inasmuch as they reveal the prevalence of the image over the text. The image profiles a metaphor and represents both the source and the target. The text acts as the linguistic support of the image. Thus in the first ad (fig. 1) the image of the curriculum vitae of MacDonald's beef with the word *hired* on it reflects the anthropomorphic metaphor MCDONALD'S BEEF IS THE APPLICANT HIRED. The text *Recruited for quality* has two functions: (1) it supports the visual metaphor by explaining why MacDonald's beef was the candidate hired; and (2) it illustrates a pragmatic function of metaphor, namely to highlight the product quality.

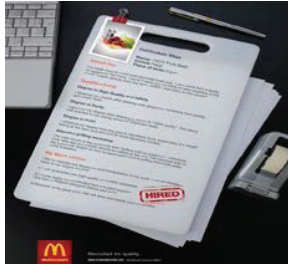


Fig. 1. Ad for MacDonald's beef.

Similarly, in the ad for Spanish wineries (fig. 2), the metaphor is visually construed. We are confronted with the image of a glass of wine, whose shape reminds us of a tree trunk and whose content evokes sap. The image reflects a hybrid metaphor (Forceville 1996: 163), where the target (wine) and the source (tree) objects are fused into a semantically bounded object. This visual amalgamation yields the metaphor WINE IS SAP. Again the linguistic message *Los frutos de la tierra* 'the fruits of the earth' supports the visual message. Nonetheless, the text plays a more relevant role than in the previous ad: it explains and develops the visual metaphor. More specifically, the verbal element establishes the connection between source and target: wine and sap are naturally produced. The text therefore enhances a product feature, thus working as an advertising strategy.

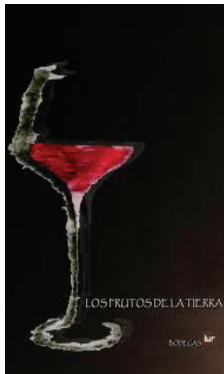


Fig. 2. Ad for Spanish wineries.

The image also plays a central role in the next wine ad (fig. 3), in which wine making is understood in terms of music composition. This general mapping activates the more specific mapping MUSIC NOTES ARE WINE INGREDIENTS. Again the text *Du grand art pour l'apéritif* 'Great art for a snack' is the verbal expression of the visual metaphor but it is not indispensable for cueing it.



Fig. 3. Ad for the Pineau de Charentes wine.

The next ads (figs. 4-7) pertain to the second category of ads above mentioned, where image and text go hand in hand in metaphor creation. The text combines with the image to instantiate a visual metaphor and facilitates the correct interpretation of the image. The source and the target are rendered in different ways.

In the ad for Ontario's children's aid society (fig.4) the pictorial detail of two big weights on a girl's shoulders represents the target concept of children's abuse, as the text makes clear: *Kids shouldn't have to live with abuse*. The image acts as a visual representation of the source and the text acts as a linguistic representation of the target.



Fig. 4. Ad for Ontario's children's aid society.

The image of the ad for Eurostar (fig. 5) depicts a frog wearing a helmet inside a canon. We are aware of the metaphorical nature of the image but we need to resort to the text (*Eurostar - The fastest way to travel from Paris to London*) to construe the metaphor EUROSTAR IS A BULLET and identify the feature mapped from the source to the target, i.e. speed.



Fig. 5. Ad for Eurostar.

In the next two ads the visual metaphor is also activated by the combination of the image with the text. The

difference is that source and target are signaled visually and verbally. In the ad for the shampoo Timotei (fig. 6) we see the hybrid image of a lion with human hair. The text *Dompte les crinières les plus sauvages* 'It tames the widest manes' builds up the relationship between source and target and activates the metaphor UNRULY HAIR IS A LION'S MANE, the wildness of the source object being translatable into the unruliness of the target object.



Fig. 6. Ad for Timotei.

The text is also essential to elucidate the meaning of the image in the next ad (fig.7). The ad is meant to promote peaceful relations between Ukraine and Russia. We are confronted with a further hybrid image in which a missile is visually amalgamated with a microphone. The text *Words kill wars* combines with the image to generate the metaphor WORDS ARE WEAPONS.



Fig. 7. Ad for Ukraine-Russia Dialogue for Peace.

The final ads fall within the third category of ads in which the text plays a primary role. Unlike the images previously discussed, these images heavily rely on the text. In the ad for the Hospice Association of Ontario (fig. 8) someone is painting a small vase with a drooping flower in pink and yellow. Apparently there is nothing symbolic there. Yet the text *But we do know there is life before death* reveals the metaphoricity of the image by associating the drooping flower with death and the action of painting in bright colors with life, as shown in figure 9:

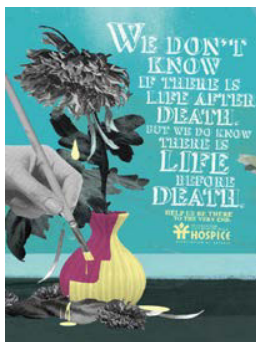


Fig. 8. Ad for the Hospice Association of Ontario.

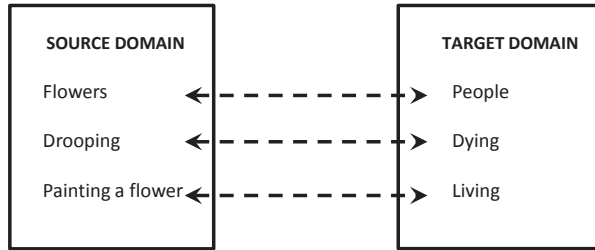


Fig. 9. Metaphorical mappings for the ad shown in fig. 8.

The interpretation of the image in the last ad (fig. 10) is also dependent upon verbal information. The image of two bottles of wine lying on a surface does not seemingly convey any metaphorical meaning. It is the text *Get closer to the world of wine* that builds the metaphor cued by the image WINE BOTTLES ARE BINOCULARS. The verbal element is thus key to assigning metaphorical meaning to the image.



Fig. 10. Ad for the website vinos.com.

Our analysis leads us to postulate a metaphoricity scale of the image on the basis of its relationship with the text, as shown in figure 11:

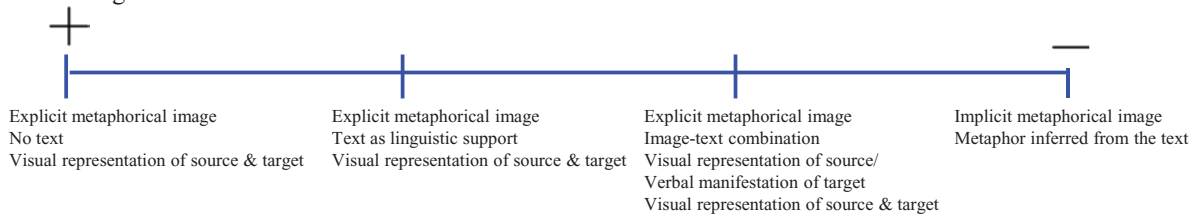


Figure 11. Metaphoricity scale of image in advertising.

As we see, there are various degrees of metaphoricity of the image. At one end of the scale the image carries all metaphorical meaning because the verbal component is missing. At the other end of the scale the image does not convey metaphorical meaning by itself; it is language that imposes meaning on the image. In between there are two types of metaphorical image. In one category the metaphorical meaning of the image is linguistically supported, while in the other category the metaphorical meaning is shared by the image and the text.

To sum up, we can make a distinction between four types of visual metaphor on the basis of the degree of metaphoricity of the image:

- a) Pure visual metaphors profiled by the image. A verbal element is absent, so that the image carries the meaning and triggers a metaphor.
- b) Visual metaphors triggered by the image and supported by the text. The source and the target are visually represented.
- c) Visual metaphors reflected pictorially and verbally. The source and target are visually or differently rendered.
- d) Visual metaphors activated by the text.

4. Conclusion

In the present study we have taken a look at the interplay between image and text in activating and identifying a visual metaphor. This is an aspect of visual metaphor that is neglected if we believe that visual metaphor is only activated by the image. On the contrary, the verbal element forms part of the visual context and thus plays a role. In line with this, we have sought to provide evidence of the distinct roles of the text through the analysis of a small sample of ads. The analysis has yielded two findings. The first finding is connected with the role of the text. As we have seen, the text of an ad plays three alternative roles: (a) it acts as the linguistic support of a metaphor encoded by the image; (b) it combines with the image to instantiate a visual metaphor; (c) it reveals the metaphorical meaning of the image. In the light of this, we claim that there are different degrees of metaphoricality of the image on the basis of its relationship with the text. The second finding of our survey concerns the pragmatic function of the text. It has been shown that the text may serve to highlight the product quality or one of its features, thus working as a persuasive technique.

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