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Why do advertisers use visual metaphors? A pragmatic perspective

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Why do advertisers use visual metaphors? A pragmatic perspective

Abstract

This article investigates the role and interpretation processes of visual metaphors in print advertising using a pragmatic approach, more specifically, Relevance Theory (RT). Relevance Theory reveals that the audience interprets ambiguity of metaphors according to their background and inferential knowledge. Complex metaphors require more processing effort from the consumers and can be left misunderstood if no extra anchoring is provided. This study contributes to the theoretical knowledge of advertising and its creativity by applying pragmatic approach to this research area. It shows how images can reveal some interesting and important issues within advertising communication with potential consumers, which in turn can generate some further discussions. Research findings have direct implications for the creative management of advertising techniques and consumer research.

Keywords: visual metaphors, print advertising, pragmatics, ambiguity, Relevance Theory.

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Why do advertisers use visual metaphors? A pragmatic perspective

Introduction

The phenomenon of advertising has attracted the attention of researchers from various backgrounds. The significance of studying advertising is growing and the approaches undertaken to carry out research into this discipline vary. Print advertising is one area where focus on the reader is crucial in securing what the rhetorical objective is. A key task for advertisers is to be original and to catch the attention of the audience (Wang, 2013). This task is becoming more challenging in the modern world of consumerism and rising competition. One of the ways to achieve this communication is through the careful implication of visual figurative language. Only recently consumer researchers have begun to treat visual imagery in advertising as something other than a sign or a simple means of affect transfer (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996; Chang, 2013).

Previous research characterized advertising texts in terms of linguistic categories, and metaphors were identified as one of the most frequently used category in advertising. This article explores the use of metaphors in advertising with particular attention to the visual side of this figurative device. Functions of metaphors in advertising vary. They can also appear to be puzzling due to its ambiguity. According to the study of pragmatics, solving a puzzle is a positive experience as it makes the audience feel good about their intellectual abilities. Metaphors can attract attention, but should still express the intended advertising content. They allow advertisers express few meaning in one. Advertising is about association and metaphors can help building this association (Tanaka, 1992). Metaphors can present a compact version of an object or event; they allow people to see characteristics that are intangible; and they are much brighter

expressively, sensuously, and cognitively because they are close to perceived experience (Ortony, 1993; Ang and Lim, 2006).

Visual metaphors play with the meaning and intrigue the receivers, but it can be debated whether the intended meaning is always interpreted successfully or whether the audience just derives the meaning they feel confident about the most. This could be one of the reasons of complex visual metaphors not being employed extensively in advertisements (Djafarova, 2008). High levels of ambiguity signify complexity, requiring extra knowledge and time for the processing. But the role of metaphors in advertising cannot be underestimated.

The literature also points out the importance of the metaphors in building creative appeals in advertising and attracting consumers. Other functions of figures of speech include double-talk, economy of space and humour. Research suggests that in the near future consumers will not be targets but compatriots. Advertisers will respond to the needs of the consumers, and advertising can be seen as integrated work between advertisers and consumers.

Pragmatics and Relevance Theory in Advertising

This research adopts a specific field of semiotics, pragmatics to further analyse and understand the use of visual metaphors. Pragmatics studies the utterance interpretation within the context (Carston, 2002). The approach of pragmatics goes far beyond of other approaches such as, for example, semantics (the study of meaning). If semantic meaning is obtainable by decoding linguistic expressions and is valid independently of context, pragmatics has to do with elements, which depend on contextual information and reader's abilities (Tanaka, 1992). As this paper explores the images in the context

of advertising, pragmatic approach is able to assist in understanding this communication.

The rules of pragmatics underpin the theory, outlined by Sperber and Wilson (1981), known as Theory of Relevance. Relevance Theory is based on Grice's maxims (1981; 1989, see Figure 1). Research in linguistics provides strong support for Grice's view of pragmatic interpretation as a properly inferential process, and argues that the extent of pragmatics was much wider than Grice (1975) had discussed in his studies. Grice (1975) was mainly concerned with the role of inferential intention recognition in implicit communication, but it is now increasingly seen as also playing a substantial role in explicit communication (Sperber and Wilson, 2002; Carston, 2002).

According to Grice (1981), the result of a conversation depends on different approaches which the speaker applies to the communication process. Grice (1981) uses the term '*the cooperative principle*' when referring to the way in which people try to make the communication process successful and interpreted accurately. He indicates that in usual setting of conversation speakers and hearers share a cooperative principle. Speakers shape their utterances to be understood by addressees. Grice (1975) argues that in order to understand what other people are trying to communicate, they usually follow certain rules which might be unnoticed. These rules are introduced as four maxims by Grice (1975), presented in the Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Four Maxims of Grice (Adapted from Grice, 1975)

1. The Maxim of Quality

Try to make your statement sound true and have an evidence for this true statement, thus it should be of a high quality to the recipient.

2. The Maxim of Quantity

Give the right amount of information, i.e. make your contribution as informative as is required, but it is important not to make it more informative than is required.

3. The Maxim of Relation

Be relevant. Make sure that the information is of relevance to the addressee and the intended meaning is easily derived. It would make the communication process easier for both parties.

4. The Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous, i.e. avoid ambiguity.

The founders of Relevance Theory, Sperber and Wilson (1981), argue that the addressees derive the meanings the most relevant to them, therefore achieving the contextual effects intended by the advertiser. As a result, Relevance Theory does not refer to the figurative language (e.g. metaphor) or ambiguity as to the art of deviation. The purpose of advertising is to attract the attention to the promoted product and sell it. Since those goals of advertising are familiar to the consumers, they expect relevant communication to pursue the information to them. The audience is ready for the processing effort needed to interpret the meanings of the figurative devices.

According to Relevance Theory, advertising image allows the audience to derive the most relevant meaning, as the reader understands the context of the advertised product/service. The principles of relevance help consumer to construct the intended meaning (Sperber and Wilson, 1981; Djafarova, 2008). The intention of the

advertisement is to provoke, to encourage the audience to think of the advertised issue. This aim will be achieved, as the relevance to the context has been questioned and there was no clear link between the brand advertised and the images pictured. The message stays longer in readers' minds as they would need more time to process the information. It would be more effective in attracting attention than a more direct advertising communication. Tanaka (1992) argues the message with the puzzle would appeal to the audience more as the reader is rewarded for solving the puzzle by constructing the meaning intended by the advertiser.

Relevance Theory helps to understand why some meanings, but not others, are recovered in the process of interpretation of visual metaphors. Relevance Theory provides new framework for the analysis of metaphors. It confronts issues such as, for example, how to disambiguate ambiguous meanings or how to interpret utterances whose content is superficially irrelevant to their context (Stern, 1990).

The United Colours of Benetton

The United Colours of Benetton (UCB) employs a standardised advertising campaign consisting of provocative visuals depicting socio-cultural issues, which have received both praise and criticism worldwide (Zumbansen, 2001; Rajghatta, 2011; Hill, 2011).

Some argue UCB's unique selling point is their provocative advertising style and involvement in discouraging social discrimination (Vezina and Paul, 1997).

Distinctiveness is an important element of provocative advertising; if advertisements were similar to a previous provocative campaign it would lose its provoking power

(Vezina and Paul, 1997). Giroux (1994) argues UCB has brought a dangerous level to what is appropriate for a company to advertise. It is suggested that western society still comprehends an advertisement as nothing more than a sales pitch and to exploit social discrimination is regarded as ethically wrong (Ramsey et al., 2007). In UCB's defence, Tinic (1997, p.1) argued, 'it is time to expand the study of advertising and to examine this means of communication as something more than capitalist propaganda'.

Benetton advertisement picturing three hearts with the words 'white, black, yellow' uses distinctive visual metaphors and is introduced to illustrate communication process between a potential consumer and an advertiser. This advert presents an anti-racist message launched by Benetton in conjunction with French anti-racist organisation. The aesthetic nature of this advertisement is likely to draw the reader's attention. The quality of detail is intriguing and invites the reader to further examine the image. The words 'white', 'black' and 'yellow' could potentially have racial connotations. Although the terms 'white' and 'black' maybe acceptable in most societies, the metaphor 'yellow' is a word considered to depict Asian ethnicity, which is considered politically incorrect and discriminative. The three hearts denoted are significant to the overall deconstruction of the advertisement and soften the provocative referral to 'yellow'. This way the racial equality is advocated. The three hearts (or signifiers) are similar in appearance and represent three different races. The notion of the heart itself holds connotations of love, emotion and the capacity for sympathy, which supports this message of equality. The unity of the both the signifier and signified reinforce the idea that despite the skin colour, all people are the same. It plays on the saying, 'we're all the same on the inside' and this is likely the preferred

reading intended by the UCB. This particular advertisement image (A) refers to race, equality and unity.

According to Relevance Theory, if the addressee suspects that the communicator has deliberately chosen an over-elaborate stimulus and caused him some extra processing effort, he might doubt the communicator's true intention and refuse to produce extra effort to process the utterance. The principles of relevance help the receiver to recover the intended meaning. According to the interpretation, the audience would derive the following assumption:

1. Three hearts signify 3 different races.

Known that it is an advertisement for Benetton fashion brand, assumption would bring certain contextual effects, which could be the following:

2. United Colours of Benetton shows that hearts of different races are the same. We are all the same. The brand strategy is to show unity of different races, of different 'colours'.

The interpretation 2 will be more consistent with the principles of relevance, and in particular with the fact that it is an advertisement for Benetton.

The aim of advertisement to attract attention of the consumers will be achieved by the above image (advertisement A) as relevance to the context has been questioned by the receiver. Thus, the message stays longer in the minds of the readers as they would think of its real meaning. As the ultimate message is so obvious, it may well be made more appealing for the audience if there is a puzzle to solve. The audience receives a pleasant intellectual experience by resolving the intended meaning of the metaphor. There is the possibility that with no visual metaphor used, the audience would have

paid no attention to the advertisement. So the effort needed to process the metaphor is still the minimum the advertiser was justified in demanding, given that he wanted to achieve the effect he did (Tanaka, 1992).

Another advertisement first catches the viewer's eye due to its colour scheme. It depicts two women holding a baby, and all three are of different ethnical background. The two complimentary colours of the towel draw the viewer's attention to the centre of the advertisement where UCB wants the reader to take their time in constructing the meaning of the message.

The two women, of different ethnicity, could represent motherhood. They signify their love for the child by placing their hands over his/her heart. With this in mind, the unity of the two women and the child could symbolise a family unit, which further suggests that the women could be romantically linked. The ethnicity of the child adds another dimension to this advertisement. It is suggested he/she is clearly not either woman's biological child, which could imply UCB also wants the reader to consider the notion of a non-stereotypical family representation and so the reader may spend more time analysing the image. Significantly, their facial expressions are serious yet portray sadness and the fact they are wrapped in a towel could suggest the family are protecting themselves from discrimination and prejudice. The message communicates equality saying that everyone, no matter of the culture, is entitled to love in all forms. Once again, according to Relevance Theory, if the consumers have enough of contextual knowledge of the advertised brand strategy, they would be able to derive the notion of unity communicated in this Benetton advertisement.

Relevance Theory and UCB Advertisements

Relevance Theory aims to underpin the communication process of metaphors. This article identifies that the meanings communicated through the metaphors are derived and understood in different ways. In the advertisements where the metaphor is expressed through abstract notions, the processing effort required for the interpretation of the metaphor is greater than in the cases of communication through object-based metaphors. Generally, abstract ideas are more difficult to interpret and understand as they carry different meanings, which can only be obtained within the context.

According to Relevance Theory, the communication of visual metaphors is consistent with the principles of relevance if the time spent on processing the metaphor is substituted by the reward the reader gets for deriving the right meaning (Sperber and Wilson, 1986; 2002). Ambiguity in Benetton advertising is not always consistent with principles of Relevance Theory, as the time spent on processing the images does not always lead to the reward. Limited anchoring (following explanation of the ambiguity) in representation of visual metaphors in Benetton examples leads to ambiguity and controversy. However, the meaning of the metaphor is always relevant to the context it is used in. Consumers expect a certain type of language use within the context of advertising. Placing an abstract notion in the form of metaphor, advertisers try to make the meanings as relevant to the context and the reader as possible. The accompanying element (anchoring), which helps the interpretation of the metaphor, is commonly used in the advertisements. More anchoring would be needed to help the interpretation of ambiguous advertisements.

The process of interpreting visual metaphors depends on the degree of metaphorical involvement in the advertisement (Proctor et al., 2005). This means that the processing effort required for the interpretation of metaphors is influenced by the level of difference between the target and source subjects of the metaphors (McQuarrie et al., 1996). The inferential and processing abilities of the viewer are also important elements in the process of the metaphor derivation.

The growing competence and awareness of receivers as consumers raise the expectations from advertising, as they require seeing more on the informative side where the product is concerned. Abstract metaphors are entertaining but do not let consumers draw the adequate image of the product. The main function of the metaphor, according to this theory, is that of sustaining the memory for a longer time (Proctor et al., 2005). However, Relevance Theory is only applicable if there are enough contextual effects in the advertisement and if the reader has enough inferential abilities to extract the right meaning (Tanaka, 1992).

Relevance Theory has been embedded to explain the process the receiver has to go through to interpret the intended meanings of the ambiguous meanings (Sperber and Wilson, 2002). Anchoring is required to avoid misinterpretation and reduce complaints from the prospective consumers of advertising dishonesty and correspond with the range of regulations that protect consumers' rights.

One of the reasons for Benetton to use this advertising approach is to attract attention to their product line (clothing), where advertising strategy is full of common approaches, such as for example, celebrity and model endorsement. Employing a

different strategy, has granted Benetton a unique status in advertising arena. Benetton is now perceived as a company that attempts to raise people's awareness in relation to various social issues. And, although they manage to get noticed by the use of controversial images, the question stays if these visual metaphors overshadow the actual product and brand identity. Relevance Theory suggests that companies choosing to use this approach should still provide more anchoring to their advertising messages.

Degrees of Ambiguity

According to RT, ambiguity levels vary according to the amount of processing effort required (Carston, 2002). Visual metaphor is an extreme form of active semantic ambiguity. Ambiguity is underpinned by the double meanings metaphors convey. Active ambiguity evokes alternative meanings in the readers' minds. The context helps to recover the ambiguity and reveals the intended meanings expressed in the advertisement so that the readers can understand them.

Semantic ambiguity is more obvious as it influences the factual meanings. This point is tackled by the pragmatists within Relevance Theory, arguing that the reader would recover the relevant meaning with an extra processing effort required within the identified context (Sperber and Wilson, 2002). Ambiguity in metaphors is interpreted through excessive processing effort and the inferential abilities of the reader. Less processing effort is required for the understanding of less ambiguous meanings.

Metaphors are ambiguous by nature, communicating at least two meanings. Strong ambiguous meanings communicate stronger notions and consequently there is more influence on the reader from the communicator's perspective. A low degree of

ambiguity captures consumers' attention without being perceived as hard to comprehend. As a result communicators are not in a great danger of leaving the reader without the ability to recover an intended meaning of the advertisement. Advertising needs to communicate in a predictable way. The interpretation of the metaphor recovers and explores new fresh ideas and attitudes. These new ideas draw a whole new picture of the product's qualities and attributes. Consequently potential consumer re-conceptualises his/her old ideas and opinions about the advertised product. Therefore, many meanings expressed through the metaphor may change the attitudes of the readers towards the product.

When evidence about the quality of the advertised product is ambiguous, there is a greater danger of confusion in the viewers' minds. If the advertisement seems to mislead, it will be in more danger of consumers to complain. The more ambiguous an image is, the more dangerous its use in advertising, and the greater the need for anchoring to help the receiver derive the communicated meanings correctly. These points reinforce the argument that anchoring is important in the communication process of ambiguity in advertising.

Contribution

The literature review has identified a gap in the present advertising theory. This article demonstrates how the analyses of visual metaphors can be conducted. It was also identified that the majority of the previous research is concerned with images themselves but do not take into account how these images have emerged in the first

place and how they can be interpreted to understand that they communicate the meanings they denote (Proctor et al., 2005). This work has addressed this question.

A pragmatic approach has been discussed in the literature but its application to the analysis of advertising was rare. This has been tackled in this study. Using a pragmatic approach to analyse metaphors can reveal how the meanings are interpreted. This approach to the analysis of ambiguous advertising offers fresh insights into how advertised products are represented. It is a way to explore advertising from a new angle.

Figure 2 provides a summary to contribution to knowledge where the analysis of metaphors in advertising is concerned. The sense-making process of metaphors is consistent with the Relevance Theory when sufficient contextual effects are provided to require less processing effort from the reader. This is fulfilled by the context of advertising where readers expect a particular use of verbal and visual language. However, in the case of concept-based metaphors, more anchoring is required due to its high level of ambiguity. This is particularly a concern in contemporary print advertising which has more competition from the emerging Information Technology devices and which is looking to provide more informative messages to increasingly diverse and competent target markets.

Figure 2 Contribution: Metaphors

- Metaphors: Concept/abstract-based and Object-based.
- Interpretation of metaphors is consistent with the principles of Relevance Theory when anchoring is provided.

Recommendations on how to achieve successful communication through the use of metaphors are presented in this section. Targeting a particular market, the advertisers still cannot adequately estimate the personal and intellectual abilities of the customers. Thus, some anchoring contributes to the interpretation process of ambiguity. One could argue that visual would lose their identity as distinctive linguistic devices if the correct answer was overtly stated. However, it would also depend on whether visual metaphors carry some essential information or whether it is there just to catch the attention (Jeong, 2008). In the examples obtained for this research, information is an important part of metaphors.

This study does not claim that visual metaphors should not be used in advertisements, rather, when used, the audience has to be assured that he/she has sufficient abilities and contextual effects to interpret the intended meanings, informing about the quality of the advertised product.

Conclusion

UCB have chosen to use a standardised print campaign consisting of ambiguous imagery depicting socio-cultural issues received both praise and criticism worldwide (Rajghatta, 2011; Hill, 2011). Ambiguity allows for different degrees of interpretations; that a reader can deduce a meaning according to their own ideologies (Okazaki and Mueller, 2008). For instance, UCB's 1990 advert depicting the bloodied soldiers clothing could be described as 'strategic ambiguity' (Puntoni et al., 2010; Puntoni et al., 2011) in that any reader, no matter what their culture, could relate to this image as no physical body depicting a particular race was shown. It could be argued that the message would still be consistent with the principles of relevance theory as it relates to the cultural context of the audience (Tanaka, 1992).

The use of pragmatics allows an interpreter to encipher second order connotations (Barthes, 1964) and in the past, interpretations have been made not intended by the sender (Sweeney, 2008). One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that several of UCB's print advertisements were misunderstood and in some cases incomprehensible. One example was that the 1992 advert of the black women breastfeeding the white baby. It can be interpreted as a representation of black slavery. When no other sign (anchoring) is shown to suggest otherwise, the reader may automatically associate black slavery with the brand icon that has been placed beside this representation. This level of ambiguity can be too confusing for the reader. According to Relevance Theory, the reasons for the misinterpretation can be lack of intellectual ability of the reader to process the message correctly. In this case, the reader would require additional information to maximise contextual implications (Sperber and Wilson, 1981).

The findings of this investigation coincide with Tinic's (1997) belief that UCB's main advertising objective is to communicate the brand philosophy and company values. There is a strong link between UCB's advocacy for racial equality and the brand's identity, which can be seen as appropriate and unique. The provocative element of their campaign makes the brand distinctiveness in its deliberate attempt to gain attention through raising awareness of social issues. This style of communication appears appropriate for advertising context. The boundaries of advertising are continually being broken (Ogilvy, 2011) and Tinic (1997) argues UCB's campaign illustrates how modern advertising has been transformed into an overtly political medium.

Since this is a conceptual study which explores the interpretation process of visual metaphors from pragmatic perspective future research could further investigate the attitudes of UCB's target audience towards this type of communication. Additionally, a longitudinal study may prove more insightful in analysing the changing attitudes of UCB target audience. This study could determine whether the audience's changing values are affected by culture or if personal experiences have more of a significant affect. It is noted, by using an advertisement as a means of analysis, anthropologists, for instance, could potentially gain further insight into ideologies embedded in individuals from similar communities. Fresh study is needed to keep this research area up-to-date. This knowledge could help to determine the direction the advertising industry is heading and have implications for the practice of marketing communications.

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