Metaphor and metonymy in advertising: Building viewpoint in multimodal multi-space blends

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Abstract

Video advertisements often involve metonymy and metaphor as major aspects of their structure. A complex multimodal ad's meaning, however, lies not just in individual metaphoric mappings or metonymic structures, but in the interrelationship between multiple mappings and mental spaces – that is, in the mental space network built up by the ad. Skilled creators of ads, in some respects like skilled poets, involve their audiences by prompting active network construction from implicitly as well as explicitly evoked inputs. Since input frames typically involve viewpoint, their viewpoint structures also participate in the broader network's structure – sometimes in important though inexplicit ways.

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Keywords: Implicit versus explicit evocation; Multimodal advertising; Multi-space blends; Network of mental spaces; Superbowl ads; Viewpoint

1. Introduction

This paper uses multimodal advertising data to address a somewhat neglected question: exactly how do multimodal communicators build metaphoric mappings? When I see a video sequence, accompanied by words (voice-over, print, character speech), how does that entice me into a particular metaphoric structuring of the content? And more specifically, what kinds of configurations are built? I shall thus be examining multimodal mental-space Blends in video ads. My primary claim is that in building up the complex meaning of an effective video ad, we need to go beyond classic metaphoric mappings between a Source and Target, and examine the ways in which the advertiser builds up a complex network of meaning relationships between multiple frames or spaces.

Recent decades of research on metaphor and metonymy have clearly shown that these phenomena are pervasive in human cognition – and are thus pervasive in human communication, language, and nonlinguistic or multimodal artifacts such as art and film. Cognitive linguistic analysis treats metaphor as a mental space mapping between spaces populated by two distinct frames. LOVE IS A JOURNEY, then, is first of all a mapping between a Target and a Source, e.g. a Relationship frame and a Shared Journey frame (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999). The development of the relationship maps onto the course of the journey. Therefore Source-frame (Shared Journey) linguistic expressions can be used to refer to aspects of the Target domain of Relationship, as in We've come a long way or This relationship is a dead end. This unidirectionality is a defining characteristic of metaphor: I can't use love relationship vocabulary in the same way to refer to aspects of physical travel. Further, current cognitive work on metaphor sees these mappings as building up blended spaces, in Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) sense: that is, we don't just link up Love with a Journey cognitively, we build up...
a blend, a new conceptual structure of Love understood as a Shared Journey – a conceptual structure different from our independent understandings of Love and Journeys. As we shall discuss below, this particular kind of two-frame metaphoric blend is the simplest case of a model which allows multiple-space networks of relationships.

Forceville (e.g., 1996, 2009, 2016) has been a major proponent of using such metaphoric mapping models for the analysis of multimodal advertising data, like the ads focused on in this paper. Such two-frame mappings are one subset of mental space Blending, as described by Fauconnier and Turner: it is assumed that out of the metaphoric mapping between (for example) Love and Journeys, a new blended space emerges, which is our comprehension of Love in terms of Journeys – this is distinct from our separate understandings of the frames of Love and Journeys. But we shall here argue that many multimodal ads in fact require a more complex multi-frame analysis – hence (as argued below) a larger mental space network of mappings.

As Dancygier and Sweetser (2014) have argued further, blending involves and shapes viewpoint. In metaphor, the Target and Source spaces themselves have viewpoint structure – e.g., it's entirely reasonable to find a Dead End a negatively evaluated frame, assuming that a Traveler's viewpoint (rather than a resident's) is taken, and from the Traveler's viewpoint a Dead End is an obstruction to their intentions. (From a local inhabitant's viewpoint, a dead end street may in fact be a positive phenomenon: low traffic, less noise – but that viewpoint on the Dead End frame is not what is mapped onto the Relationship.) Metaphoric blends inherit such viewpoints: a love affair judged useless to a participant's life goals (cf. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) may be negatively evaluated as a Dead End. Such extremely clear and conventional mappings shape everyday language and cognition: no English speaker lacks an understanding of a Love Relationship as a Shared Journey, or has trouble identifying the mappings. In complex literary data, or (as we shall discuss) advertising data, it can be significantly less simple and obvious to identify metaphoric structures analytically, partly because there may be multiple metaphors interacting in a single complex video or text passage. But viewpoint structures are part of the construction of the complex space network.

I shall be examining such data, looking at the varying means by which such mappings (and resultant viewpoints) are built up in such contexts, and how we can analytically identify them. How does the speaker or writer or film-maker guide the audience into particular metaphoric mental space structures – and what difference does it make what means are chosen? Sweetser and Sullivan (2012) have argued that very different effects are produced in poetry, by poets who choose to more or less explicitly evoke both Source and Target frames, and state mappings – as opposed to ones who more implicitly set up metaphors, perhaps by mentioning only the Source domain (Frost's famous 'The road not taken' never explicitly mentions life-choices as opposed to path choices). But in multimodal material, there are many possible routes to "mention," more or less explicit. Identifying an unmentioned domain as Source or Target frame is clearly a different job than identifying the metaphoric structure of this relationship is a dead end (which mentions both Source and Target and states a mapping overtly). How do advertisers exploit the difference between implicit and explicit, to draw their viewers into the mappings they intend? And how does viewpoint, in both Source and Target frames, result from such mappings: what is the difference between explicitly built viewpoint and implicitly built viewpoint, for example?

Print and video advertising are saliently multimodal phenomena: printed language and images, or audio and visual streams, come together to influence the viewer. There are social reasons to study it; we are flooded with these influences daily, and commercial advertising at least is clearly intended to profit the advertiser, not the consumer. But further, advertising is of special interest to analysts of multimodal communication. Precisely because of its financial value, it is frequently devised by able, experienced and highly paid creative teams who exploit the relevant modalities very fully. So the most successful advertising pushes the limits on the amount of meaning to be squeezed into a limited space of paper, or a brief span of television or on-line advertising time. These craftsmen know how to build blends, and to draw viewers into the desired viewpoint.

Not all ads involve metaphor to any major extent, of course. Consider washing-machine ads where the primary character is an attractive woman, obviously prosperous from the looks of her clothing and her well-furnished house, who takes good care of her family -- these frames (Wealth, Beauty, Home-maker) may help make viewers want to be like her, take part in her category, even by choosing her brand of washing machine. The “My Tide” sequence of Tide ads (aimed at broadening the detergent's appeal) featured characters including a handsome young dad folding a little girl's fresh-washed pink ruffled dress; by inference, using this detergent might include the user too in the frame-based category of Cool Young Dad. These ads involve characters serving as exemplars of larger categories: The Housewife, The Nurturing Dad. Such ads are therefore primarily drawing on categorial and frame metonymy, rather than metaphor. Such non-metaphoric ads will not be the primary topic of this paper, although I will address the issue of metonymy as a strong contributor to metaphorical ads as well.

In ads where metaphor is a central component, there seem to be quite a range of possible combinations of Target and Source frames to evoke relevant metaphoric mappings. With visual metaphors, often there is full visual depiction of both a Target and a Source: e.g. a famous Prius ad showing the shape of a Prius hybrid car superimposed on a green leaf shape (I will return to the Prius ad in Section 6). But a very common formula appears to be more explicit expression of the Target frame in language/text, and focus on the Source domain in the visual material. And this, again, is complicated by the fact
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