Metaphor construction in online motivational posters

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Abstract

Motivational posters in public spaces are known to be effective in influencing attitudes, but their electronic counterparts have been considered as dubious ‘pop psychology’. The structure and content of these posters, which may relate to their effectiveness, have however not been adequately analyzed from discourse analytic perspectives. This paper examines aspects of metaphor construction in a sample of 900 online motivational posters. Identified metaphor units were coded with variables related to their VEHICLE, TOPIC, and MODE, and relationships between these variables explored. The results (i) suggest metaphor as a common feature of motivational posters, (ii) reveal prominent topics, vehicles, and topic-vehicle pairings, (iii) show that while metaphor units tend to be multi-modally presented, topics tend to be only verbally presented, and (iv) uncover tendencies for particular topics and vehicles to be presented either verbally, visually, or multi-modally. The present approach focuses on interpreting patterns of content and form underlying a larger quantity of data, complementing multimodal metaphor studies which richly explicate a limited set of examples. Implications and future research directions are offered.

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1. Introduction

Motivational posters intended to influence behaviors and attitudes are commonplace in public spaces and, more recently, on social media. It has been shown that strategically placed physical posters encourage relevant positive decisions like stair walking and buying healthier beverages (Bergen and Yeh, 2006; Kerr et al., 2001). However, their popular electronic counterparts are the subject of much skepticism and parody. Their noticeable presence on websites and social networking platforms has been described as a case of well-intentioned but ineffective ‘pop psychology’ (Justman, 2005), possibly doing more harm than good to viewers. While questions about their effectiveness are psychological in nature, the potential relevance of communicative aspects such as poster size and message content has also attracted some research interest (Kerr et al., 2001). More systematic analyses of the structure and content of motivational posters from discourse analytic perspectives have nevertheless not been forthcoming.

Fig. 1 is an example of a motivational poster. It shows a girl letting go of a heart-shaped balloon, metaphorically representing the overcoming of ‘things that makes [sic] you sad’. Metaphor, the act of describing and potentially thinking of something in terms of something else (Semino, 2008), is in fact a salient but underexplored feature of motivational posters. Since they attempt to communicate positive ideas about abstract topics such as attitudes and emotions in simple yet attention-grabbing ways, we can expect designers to use metaphors and other rhetorical devices to render such...
abstractions more concrete, relatable, and/or appealing. Many of these metaphors are also likely to be visual or multimodal (Forceville, 2009) like in Fig. 1 where the metaphor of ‘letting go’ is expressed with both words and pictures. However, our understanding of how (multimodal) metaphors are constructed and communicated in motivational posters lags well behind other genres such as films, cartoons, and advertisements, where researchers have already gone from describing their contents to evaluating their effects (Alousque, 2014; Jeong, 2008; Landau et al., 2015; Pérez-Sobrino, 2016). Basic descriptive questions concerning topics, vehicles¹ and the construction of topic-vehicle relationships in motivational posters remain unanswered.

Meanwhile, it is also noticeable that contemporary research of multimodal metaphors and image-text relations in general tend to prefer a qualitative approach characterized by rich analyses of a limited number of examples. This is quite sensible given “how much uncertainty and debate the practice of combining text and image causes” (Bateman, 2014:5), and the complex synergies in expressing meanings with more than one mode (Lemke, 1998). The relative merits of detailed description versus generalizability is of course a long-standing methodological debate. Yet it seems clear that capturing general patterns of multimodal metaphor is complementary, if not necessary, for making claims about its variabilities across genres and contexts (Deignan et al., 2013) – even at the expense of simplifying the analysis of particularistic text-image phenomena. There is nevertheless a dearth of studies using quantitative methods to examine metaphor patterns across larger and more representative samples.

This paper reports a quantitatively oriented study of metaphor content and modality across a sample of 900 motivational posters downloaded from popular websites. It aims to provide an initial understanding of key aspects of metaphor construction including the frequency of metaphor use, frequent topics, vehicles, and topic-vehicle pairings, as well as associations between choice of modality and choice of topics/vehicles. I begin by briefly reviewing the key contributions of multimodal metaphor research, situating the present work within recent efforts to expand its contextual and analytical horizons. I then specify the research questions, present the methodology and findings, and conclude with suggestions for follow up research.

2. Multimodal metaphor research

Multimodal metaphor research derives from a natural convergence between advances in metaphor theory, particularly Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff, 1993), and the growing range of contemporary contexts in which multimodality is becoming more salient and complex (Bateman, 2014; Jewitt, 2009). Two of the most important claims of CMT are that metaphors are pervasive, and primarily conceptual rather than linguistic. By examining metaphors in non-

¹ The major difference between I. A. Richard’s ‘topic/vehicle’ and Conceptual Metaphor Theory’s ‘target/source’ is that the former refer to specific metaphor tokens, while the latter generalizes related topics/vehicles as ‘conceptual domains’. It will become apparent that although this paper does seek generalizations underlying metaphor tokens, it does not make claims about conceptual domains. Therefore, Richard’s terminology is preferred.
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