

Metaphors in Advertising Discourse

Luu Trong Tuan¹

Abstract: Metaphors are the mappings of the abstract world into the concrete world through human senses or experiences. In Vietnamese advertisements, brands are metaphorized and brand metaphors can be categorized into ontological and structural metaphors. BRAND IS MOTION is a structural metaphor, and BRAND IS A CONTAINER, BRAND IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE, BRAND IS A COMPANION, and BRAND IS A GLADIATOR are instances of ontological metaphors.

Keywords: conceptual metaphors; ontological metaphors; structural metaphors; brand; Vietnamese advertisements

1. INTRODUCTION

Metaphors can be used verbally in the headline and/or copy. There are many advantages linked with the use of metaphors in advertising discourse. First, they elicit more cognitive elaboration than literal messages (Toncar and Munch 2001), presumably since individuals need to comprehend the complex message to draw inferences (Mick 1992). Their artful deviations provide intrinsic rewards that come from processing various interpretations of the text (Barthes 1986). Second, resolving such deviations or incongruities leads to favorable attitudes (McQuarrie and Mick 1999). Third, metaphors inject novelty, thus increasing motivation to read and process the ad (Goodstein 1993). Fourth, promotional metaphors, which are usually apt, comprehensive, and memorable, influence consumer beliefs and affect (Ward and Gaidis 1990). Another advantage of metaphors is their centrality to the process of imagination (Goldman 1986; Oliver, Robertson, and Mitchell 1993). According to Zaltman and Coulter (1995): "Without metaphors, we cannot imagine. They are the engines of imagination." Finally, McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) observed that consumers are more receptive to multiple, distinct, and positive inferences about the brand when metaphoric advertising is adopted.

Metaphor has been portrayed as "an expression which describes a person or object in a literary way" (Walter & Woodford 2005) and is the 'result of some operation performed upon the literal meaning of the utterance...' (Lakoff & Johnson 1980a: 453). This traditional way of defining metaphor had been used for centuries; and although currently deemed 'false' and obsolete (Lakoff 1993: 202), this traditional portrayal of metaphor can still be seen in the dictionary entry.

Nonetheless, traditional views on metaphor were ultimately modified when Lakoff & Johnson (1980b) introduced a different approach to understanding and categorizing metaphor with their theory of conceptual

¹ National University of Ho Chi Minh City Bio Data Luu Trong Tuan is currently an EFL teacher at National University of Ho Chi Minh City. He received his M.TESOL from Victoria University, Australia in 2004. Besides his focus on TESOL, his recent publications such as Language Transfer is Cultural Transfer between Communities, *Social Sciences Review*, No. 11, 2004, pp. 60-63; and Principles for Scientific Translation, *Social Sciences Review*, No. 8, 2004, pp. 63-67; and Building Vietnamese Medical Terminology via Language Contact, *Australian Journal of Linguistics*, Vol. 29, No. 3, September 2009, pp. 315-336 show his interest in language contact and translation areas.

*Received 15 July 2010; accepted 29 August 2010

metaphor. In this theory, they argue that metaphors pervade our way of conceiving of the world and are encountered extensively in several of our languages, thoughts and actions (p. 3). A reason for such widespread use is potentially that, by definition, conceptual metaphor aids the understanding of the non-physical by contrasting and categorizing abstract concepts with physical reality (Kövecses 2002: 6); this would be hard, if not impossible, to accomplish without the use of metaphor (p. 7).

Instances of abstract concepts employed to relate to physical realities include time, for example, that has been defined as a 'continuum that lacks spatial dimensions' ('Time' 2006). Due to a lack of physical depiction, human beings have had to relate to time with perceivable physical experiences in order to explicate it. In English language, time has been compared with motion, an adversary (Kövecses 2002: 285), a container (Lakoff & Johnson 1980b: 29), as well as money (p. 7). The phrase "spending time" is an illustration of money (use) being compared to time. Since a comparison is being made between concepts that evidently do not share physical properties (money-use, for example, is in no way physically similar to time that does not possess physical properties), these comparisons are utterly 'metaphorical'.

In marketing, a service, as an intangible product, lacks spatial dimensions; however, a product manufactured by a firm is a tangible entity with spatial dimensions. Numerous advertisements, nonetheless, are meant to seed value creation in customers, so market brands rather than products. Brands which lacks spatial dimensions are metaphorically expressed.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Metaphors in advertising literature has been primarily conceptual. Ward and Gaidis (1990) reviewed several models of metaphor comprehension and quality which were grounded in work from psychology and linguistics. Furthermore, Scott (1994) has argued for a theory of visual rhetoric to help researchers frame how meaning is constructed via visual arguments in advertisements. These contributions have provided both a call for, and a fertile ground for research into, the effects of metaphors in the marketing communication context.

Those responding to the call have provided valuable insight into the effects of these advertising message strategies. Findings suggest that consumers spend more time looking at and processing ads that contain metaphors (Gray and Snyder 1989). MacInnis, Moorman and Jaworski (1991) argue that as executional cues, metaphors are interesting, they stimulate curiosity about the brand, and consequently, they result in deeper levels of processing. Pawlowski, Badzinski and Mitchell (1998) found that children's cognitive development plays a role in the comprehension of metaphors in ads, which in turn affects memory. They found that although young readers may have difficulty interpreting metaphors, there was a slight advantage in recall and perceptions compared to literal advertisements.

A crucial consideration for advertising research is determining if metaphors are correctly interpreted or even understood by consumers. According to Ward and Gaidis (1990), comprehensibility is an important variable in the study of metaphors: "To be effective, a promotional metaphor must be minimally comprehended by its intended audience" (p. 636). Stern (1988) suggests that a significant proportion of the intended audience does not always "get" the intended meaning of the metaphor. Work by Phillips (1997) highlights the magnitude of metaphor comprehension in advertising. Phillips (1997) found that while strong pictorial implicatures (metaphors in which central meaning is manifest and difficult to misinterpret) were interpreted as the advertising creator intended, weak implicatures (those which require "work" by the viewer to interpret) were either misinterpreted, or solicited multiple divergent interpretations.

3. ONTOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL METAPHORS

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980b), conceptual metaphors penetrate our understanding of the world around us. Metaphors are present in everyday speech, in every language, and are to a certain extent, culture specific (p. 3).

This perspective maintains that one conceptual domain, is comprehended via another conceptual domain, and is expressed as DOMAIN A IS DOMAIN B (Kövecses 2002: 4). DOMAIN A that refers to any abstract concepts (or source domains) is related in some way to DOMAIN B, concrete objects (or target domains). Our understanding of the workings or features of the concrete domains will help us partially relate to the abstract ones (p. 4). This process is unidirectional, or non-reversible; this implies that the target domain can not normally be comprehended via the source domain (p. 6). This is logical, as individuals need to be able to relate the concrete to the abstract in order to understand the less physical world. In addition, this is a highly automated process that is used unconsciously; as Lakoff and Turner (1989) put it,

Metaphor is a tool so ordinary that we use it unconsciously and automatically... it is irreplaceable: metaphor allows us to understand ourselves and our world in ways that no other modes of thought can. (xi)

The use of capital letters, when referring to the domains, signifies that conceptual metaphors, being mental categories, are not necessarily expressed in a language. Nevertheless, all metaphorical expressions are written in lower-case letters (Kövecses 2002: 4). This signifies that conceptual metaphors in a language are expressed through metaphorical expressions.

Even though all conceptual metaphors function according to the cognitive theory of metaphor illustrated above, there are different categories of classification. The metaphorical expressions structured by conceptual metaphors that will be investigated in this paper fall into two categories: structural and ontological metaphors. The disparity between these two types of metaphor is that structural metaphors include an extremely well-defined target domain that will help structure the abstract source domain (Kövecses 2002: 33). Ontological metaphors, on the other hand, do not have such a well-defined target domain (p. 34). Ontological metaphors purely categorize the abstract source domain into objects, substances, and containers and our understanding of the three is rather limited and quite general (Lakoff & Johnson 1980b: 25). If the mappings of the ontological metaphors were richer than they are, they would be considered structural metaphors (Kövecses 2002: 35).

3.1 Ontological metaphors

Ontological metaphors are one of the least noticeable types of conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson 1980b: 28). They enable us to understand our own experiences as regards concrete objects, by picking out certain parts of our own experiences from the whole in order to categorize, group and quantify them. In other words, we ‘impose artificial boundaries’ on abstract entities (Kövecses 2002: 25).

BRAND IS A CONTAINER

One concrete reality encountered among the ontological metaphors that relates to brand, is a container, BRAND IS A CONTAINER. In the ensuing advertisement, whereas Yomost yoghurt contains ingredients derived from nature, Yomost brand contains more than that: the brand is a container of rhythms of life.

Bản hòa tấu của những hương vị thảo nguyên
(A concert of the flavors from the pasture)
(Advertisement of Yomust yoghurt)

The brands “Vinaphone” and “HTC” contain the entire world:

Cùng Vinaphone và HTC Wildfire mang cả thế giới vào điện thoại di động của bạn
Vinaphone and HTC Wildfire bring the whole world into your cellphone.

BRAND IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE

Another conceptual metaphor that structures the view of brand in Vietnamese advertising discourse is the BRAND IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE conceptual metaphor. This conceptual metaphor can be implicitly expressed in advertisements:

Du lịch Việt Nam - Vẻ đẹp tiềm ẩn.
(Vietnam tourism – the hidden charm)

It can be explicitly expressed to highlight that brand value is linked to life:

La Vie - Một phần tất yếu của cuộc sống
(La Vie – the integral part of life)

Ở đâu có sóng ở đó có sự sống.
(Where there's air – there will be life)
(Mobifone's advertisement of 3G)

Or via a valuable commodity such as gold:

Đầu tư ngay, tay chạm vàng
(Invest instantly to touch gold)
(Advertisement of The EverRich II apartments)

Ensure Gold – Sống khỏe với trái tim vàng
(Ensure Gold – Live healthily with a gold heart)

BRAND IS A COMPANION

Brand, furthermore, is metaphorized as a companion who understands and supports customers in their quest for their own values in their life as well as their career. Take the following advertisements as examples:

Tay trong tay trên đường thành công
(Hand in hand on the journey towards success)
(Advertisement of Fiat car in Tuoi Tre (Youth) Newspaper on October 16, 2001)

Người bạn đường dũng mãnh đang đến
(A strong companion is approach)
(Advertisement of Ford car in Tuoi Tre (Youth) Newspaper on June 5, 2001)

In the examples above, even though “tay trong tay” can be understood as “Fiat car user’s hand on the car’s steering wheel” (in Vietnamese language, “tay” has two homonyms: “tay” implying “hand” and “tay” implying “steering wheel”) and “người bạn đường dũng mãnh” (a strong companion) can be discerned as “Ford car”, both Fiat and Ford mean to transfer their brand values to their customers and promote them to higher levels in society as well as push them towards opportunities. “Dũng mãnh” (strong) here denotes the power of the brands.

The subsequent examples show that brand values are made prominent and obscure the concreteness of the products (FPT, S.J.C.) or services (AIA).

FPT - Cùng đi tới thành công.
(FPT – Towards success together)

Gửi trọn niềm tin cho người dẫn đường tận tụy
(Place all the trust on the guide)
(Advertisement of AIA Insurance Company in Tuoi Tre (Youth) Newspaper on April 13, 2001)

S.J.C. – Người bạn chuẩn mực và tin cậy
(S.J.C – A trustworthy friend)

BRAND IS A GLADIATOR

An extension of ontological metaphors subsists in the form of personification. Personification is expressed in conceptual metaphors through a source domain that has been ascribed human characteristics (Lakoff & Johnson 1980b: 34).

In the conceptual metaphor BRAND IS A GLADIATOR, we have traveled from comprehending BRAND IS A PERSON to comprehending brand in a specific way; we now acknowledge how to think about and act towards it (Lakoff & Johnson 1980b: 34). Brand values in the ensuing advertisements are personified into gladiators fighting against any harms towards the beauty and the peace of human life:

Mosfly – Hạ gục nhanh, tiêu diệt gọn
(Mosfly – Defeat briskly, eradicate thoroughly.)

OMO- Đánh bật 99 vết bẩn
(OMO – Eliminate 99 sorts of dirt)

Xóa đi dấu vết thời gian
(Erase the traces of time)
(Advertisement of DeBon in Heritage (Di Sản) magazine, issue December and January 2001)

3.2 Structural metaphors

Unlike ontological metaphors, the target domains in structural metaphors are understood through the intricate makeup and detailed knowledge we have of the source domains (Kövecses 2002: 33).

The three versions of the BRAND IS MOTION conceptual metaphor that will be investigated in this paper embrace:

1) The brand is deemed a point towards which the observer (customer) moves, as illustrated in the following ad in which customers move toward Vfresh brand:

Trái tim ơi, để chắc ai đó thật sự quan tâm đến bạn, hãy tìm tôi
(Heart! To be sure that person whole-heartedly cares for you, please find me.)
(Vfresh soy milk)

2) The observer (customer) is a point towards which the brand moves, as San Miguel brand is boldly rushing towards customers shaking things around:

Long trời lở tuyết
(Heaven shakes and snow falls)

or Ajinomoto travels around the world to visit every customer:

Vòng quanh thế giới, Ajinomoto.
(Around the world, Ajinomoto)

and Yomost brand moves towards you, carrying his love:

Hãy để cánh bướm Yomost nối nhịp yêu thương
(Let the Yomost butterfly connect heartbeats)

3) The brand, in certain cases, moves, and customers move along. The advertisement below suggests consumers should move along the continuous technological innovation of Sony:

Sony – luôn đi trước thời đại
(Sony – always go ahead of time)

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Metaphors are the mappings of the abstract world into the concrete world through human senses or experiences. Similar to time metaphors, brand metaphors can be categorized into ontological and structural metaphors. BRAND IS MOTION is a structural metaphor, and BRAND IS A CONTAINER, BRAND IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE, BRAND IS A COMPANION, and BRAND IS A GLADIATOR are instances of ontological metaphors. Cognitive theory, along with views on ontological and structural metaphors not merely help explore time metaphors and brand metaphors, but also metaphors of other abstract concepts by mapping them into the dimensions of space or the dimensions of human experiences, so abstract concepts become no longer abstract through human cognitive lens.

REFERENCES

- Barthes, R. (1986 [1964]). Rhétorique de l'image. *Communications* 4,40–51.
- Goldman, A.I. (1986). *Epistemology and Cognition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goodstein, R.C. (1993). Category-based Applications and Extensions in Advertising: Motivating More Extensive Ad Processing. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20 (June), 87-99.
- Gray, S.A., and Snyder, R. (1989). Metaphors in Advertising: Effects on Memory. In Gardner, M.P. (ed.), *Proceedings of the Society for Consumer Psychology*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 85-87.
- Kövecses, Z. (2002). *Metaphor: a practical introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1993). The contemporary theory of metaphor. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*. 2nd ed., (202-251). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980a). Conceptual Metaphor in Everyday Language. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 77 (8), 453-486.
- Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. (1980b). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, G. and Turner, M. (1989). *More than cool reason: a field guide to poetic metaphor*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MacInnis, D.J., Moorman, C., and Jaworski, B.J. (1991). Enhancing and Measuring Consumers' Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability to Process Brand Information from Ads. *Journal of Marketing*, 55(October), 32-53.
- McQuarrie, E., & Mick, D.G. (1999). Visual rhetoric in advertising: text-interpretive, experimental and reader-response analyses. *Journal of Consumer Research* 26, 37–53.
- McQuarrie, E., & Phillips, B. (2005). Indirect Persuasion in Advertising: How Consumers Process Metaphors Presented in Pictures and Words. *Journal of Advertising* 34 (2), 7–21.
- Mick, D.G. (1992). Levels of subjective comprehension in advertising processing and their relations to ad perceptions, attitudes, and memory. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18(4), 411-424.
- Oliver, R.L., Robertson, T.S., & Mitchell, D.J. (1993). Imaging and analyzing in response to new product advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 22(4), 35-49.
- Pawlowaki, D.R., Badzinski, D.M., and Mitchell, N. (1998). Effects of Metaphors on Children's Comprehension and Perception of Print Advertisements. *Journal of Advertising*, 27(Summer), 83-98.
- Phillips, B.J. (1997). Thinking Into It: Consumer Interpretation of Complex Advertising Images. *Journal of Advertising*, 26(Summer), 77-87.

- Scott, L.M. (1994). Images in Advertising: The Need for a Theory of Visual Rhetoric. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21(September), 252-273.
- Stern, B.B. (1988). Medieval Allegory: Roots of Advertising Strategy for the Mass Market. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 52(July), 84-94.
- Time (2006). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved November 18, 2006, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9108686>
- Toncar, M., & Munch, J. (2001). Consumer responses to tropes in print advertising. *Journal of Advertising* 30, 55–65.
- Walter, E., and Woodford, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD)* [CD-ROM]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ward, J., and Gaidis, W. (1990). Metaphor in Promotional Communication: A Review of Research on Metaphor Comprehension and Quality. *Advances in Consumer Research*, Vol. 17, Marvin E. Goldberg, Gerald Gorn, and Richard W. Pollay, eds., Provo, UT Association for Consumer Research, 636-642.
- Zaltman, G., and Coulter, R.H. (1995). Seeing the voice of the customer: Metaphor-based advertising research. *Journal of advertising research*, , July/August, pp. 35-51.