

# A Course in Pictorial and Multimodal Metaphor

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## Lecture 4. Pictorial and multimodal metaphors in commercials

### **Introduction**

A necessary condition (though not a sufficient one) for the construal of metaphor is some form of resemblance or similarity between two phenomena that, in the given context, belong to different categories. Given this premise, it will transpire that when the representations in which metaphors are studied are moving images rather than static ones, the opportunities for creating metaphor proliferate. Let us first consider what changes for pictorial metaphors in moving, as opposed to static, images. As in Lecture 2 and Lecture 3, the focus will be on the genre of advertising.

### **Pictorial metaphors in commercials**

1. *Whereas in printed advertisements and billboards the target and the source of a pictorial metaphor must be visually represented or suggested simultaneously, in filmed footage this is not necessary: they can be represented one after another.* When a metaphor's target and source are not simultaneously represented or suggested, this means that such a metaphor cannot be captured in a single frame. Put differently, in such a case it would be impossible to take a screen shot in which both terms can be identified. In reality, however, the situation is often more complex, since a film or film fragment may first represent target and source one after the other, and subsequently together, so that in the later stage they *are* simultaneously visible. But even then, the awareness that a metaphor is at stake is a developing one. Since metaphor construal requires a perception of *two* disparate things and the postulation of an identity relationship between them, the need for such construal becomes clear only gradually (of course in commercials "gradually" frequently pertains to a time-span of mere seconds).

2. *Cinematography has more ways to cue the metaphorical coupling of two disparate things than photography or drawing.* Whereas both dynamic and static representation can deploy the entire *mise-en-scène* repertoire to depict resemblance (colour, texture, position, posture, facial expression, etc. For more on cinematic *mise-en-scène*, see Bordwell & Thompson 1997; chapter 6), the film camera in addition has other identity-enhancing tricks at its disposal: it can suggest resemblance between two things by filming them with the same unusual camera or lens movement. What is unusual partly depends on context. Some

movements are relatively rare in cinematography *tout court*: a circular movement, a Z-shaped movement, a quick zoom-in. But in a film consisting almost entirely of pans (the camera swivelling along the horizontal axis), two tilts (the camera swivelling along the vertical axis), while not intrinsically extraordinary, would stand out as unusual. (This is nothing else but the notion of “foregrounding” long familiar from literary stylistics.) *Any* unusual movement, in both these senses, will do: As long as the unusual movement is exclusively reserved for the representation of the two things, and thereby draws attention to itself, the similarity is salient, and could therefore be the basis of a metaphor. By extension, similarity can be created by framing. Imagine there are only two extreme close-ups in an entire film. These draw attention as being similar, and could serve as target and source of a metaphor – even if they occur an hour apart in screen time.

But the *montage* of two shots, too, can be unusual. The standard transition between two shots being the “cut,” there are in fact many other possibilities, most of them seldom used in mainstream film nowadays (videoclips are more adventurous in this respect), and usually having no labels in mainstream parlance (“dissolves” and “wipes” are among the better known exceptions). An unusual shot transition used to present a shot, repeated once, makes them “similar” in a way that could be exploited metaphorically. Notice that while salient framing and shot-transitions might seem to be specifically cinematographic devices, variants of them can in principle also be used in static images. Imagine an image that consists of many smaller-sized images. If all of these smaller images were photographed in long shot (that is, from a long distance), except for two which are in extreme close-up, then the same mechanism as above applies. And if we abstract from the montage principle, stating that montage pertains generically to how separate units are “collated” or “collaged” together, then we could identify a static image counterpart. If within the said series of smaller-sized images two of them had boundaries (as in paintings’ frames) depicted in a manner different from the rest, the result would again be salient similarity.

Finally, for completeness’ sake, it is to be observed that – in cinematographic as well as in static images – similarity can be created, or enhanced, even in post-production. A colour filter – or any other technique from the toolbox of “special effects” in a software programme – can be locally applied to two phenomena to make them look similar; and thus can create the condition for metaphoric construal.

The lesson to be learned is that the list of devices that can be used to mark two things as visually similar is endless, but that moving images have more ways of establishing it than static ones. Moreover, we should never forget that similarity between two phenomena, irrespective of the manner in which it has been created, is never in itself sufficient for establishing that a metaphor needs to be construed.

## **Multimodal metaphors in commercials**

Apart from movement, film has another device not available to static representations to create similarity; it has (in most cases) sound, which can be subdivided into spoken language, non-verbal sound, and music. Together with visuals and written language, that is, film has five channels via which information can be conveyed. These channels are here called “modes.” One way of characterizing a certain medium (here defined as a carrier and transmitter of information) is to specify via which modes it can communicate. Since film often uses all five modes simultaneously, it is a highly multimodal medium. (Radio, and old-style, pre-mobile telephone, by contrast, can deploy only the three sonic modes, lacking visuals and written language.)

The concept of *mode* is a slippery one. On the one hand, the five modes currently identified do not constitute an exhaustive list, since smell and taste can be information-carrying channels as well – though not (yet) in film. On the other hand, it may be sensible to further subdivide the visual mode to account for similarity pertaining to forms, sizes, colours, framings, etc. Moreover, there are arguably good reasons to confer mode-status to “gesturing” (David McNeill even claims “that evolution selected the ability to *combine* speech and gesture under a meaning, and that speech and gesture emerged in evolution together,” McNeill 2005: 20-21, emphasis in original; see also Mittelberg & Waugh forthcoming), but if we were to do so, should it rank under “visuals”? These are important questions, but they cannot at present be satisfactorily answered. For the genre at hand, commercials, it suffices to discuss the five modes of visuals, written language, spoken language, non-verbal sound, and music (for more discussion of “mode,” see Forceville 2006).

Whereas two phenomena represented in the same mode can resemble one another, it is generally speaking impossible to claim this for phenomena rendered in different modes. (One possible exception is synaesthesia; another one conventional correlations, such as between light colours and high musical tones. Both of these will for present purposes be left out of consideration.) The primary mechanism that becomes operative for the construal of similarity between phenomena rendered in different modes shifts from resemblance between two disparate phenomena (the central mechanism in monomodal metaphors, for instance those of the pictorial variety discussed in Lectures 2 and 3) to their co-referentiality or their simultaneous cueing. Co-referential cues involving language are deixis and names: “this woman,” Nelson Mandela, “African elephants” would normally be co-referential with pictures showing a woman, Nelson Mandela, and elephants, respectively. “Captions” accompanying visuals conventionally cue co-referentiality between the two modes.

A multimodal metaphor, then, will here be defined as a metaphor whose target and source are entirely or largely rendered in two different communication channels, or modes. The qualification “entirely or largely” is necessary because, as we will see, a metaphorical term can be cued in more than one mode simultaneously. Let

us now consider three metaphors in commercials in light of the above considerations.

**Case study 1** Commercial screened on Dutch television for Rexona deodorants [CREATE LINK]

*Description:* Accompanied by an upbeat tune, we see several sequences of busy street scenes, featuring not only human beings, but also buffaloes, seals, and various monkeys. The animals dominate the scenes, hindering traffic and being loudly present (particularly the monkeys). These sequences are cross-cut with a shot of a man, a flag painted on his face and spraying his armpits in front of the bathroom mirror, who transforms into a dangerous-looking gorilla. This shot clearly cues the issue of “football” – which would be foremost in people’s minds anyway, since this commercial was broadcast during the football craze of the 2006 World Championship. Other shots triggering the football domain are an orangutan hanging triumphantly out of a taxi, a flag fluttering from the window; a journalist reporting while a super says “futbol 24” accompanied by a football logo, a crowd of ecstatic chimpanzees cheering in the background; and monkeys dancing and shouting in front of a TV screen showing football. Given that now the domain of football is firmly established, the viewer is likely to interpret other shots as related to it: when we see a herd of seals eagerly awaiting an underground train, and a number of hyenas impatient to get out of one, we take them as planning to go and see a football match (live or with friends on TV). The commercial ends with a voice-over saying “Laat het beest in je los!” (“Release the animal in you!”). This text is also presented in a super, followed by “Rexona for *men sport* offers you the right protection. ... Rexona, you can rely on it.”

*Creation of pictorial similarity.* The similarity between humans and animals is cued in various ways. The street scenes show animals walking and behaving like humans, the juxtaposition with real human beings reinforcing this resemblance. In the case of the man in front of the mirror, who suddenly appears to have become a gorilla, the gorilla has not only literally taken the place of the man (cf. Carroll’s 1994, 1996 “noncompossible homospatiality”; see also Lecture 2), but the resemblance is reinforced by the fact that the colours of the flag painted on the man’s face are the same as the colours on the monkey’s snout. In short, even without any sound or (spoken or written) text, most viewers will be aware that monkeys and people are equated.

*Construal as metaphor.* As indicated, similarity is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for metaphoric processing. A further requirement is the ability to distinguish between target and source, and to find at least one feature that is mappable from source to target. Clearly, the fact that this piece of film belongs to the genre of “commercials,” and that the commercial is one for Rexona (which is largely made clear via text) considerably helps viewers in their awareness that here humans are presented in terms of animals rather than the other way round,

suggesting HUMANS ARE ANIMALS. The feature that is presumably to be mapped, “instinctiveness” or “naturalness,” will for many people be reinforced, not created, by the line “release the animal in you!” After all, the commercial plays with clichés such as that watching football releases primordial, usually pent-up (at least in Northern Europe) emotions, or even instincts. It is this cliché that for most people will refine the metaphor to MEN ARE ANIMALS even before the textual reference to males (“men sport”), since the male before the mirror could otherwise have been interpreted as representative of generically “human.”

*Pictorial or Multimodal Metaphor?* Given that both target and source of the metaphor are presented primarily by visual means, we could call this a pictorial metaphor. Presumably, a manipulated version of this commercial that leaves out all sound and all spoken and written text would for most viewers still suffice to conclude that humans and animals are equated – and moreover that humans (rather than animals) are the target of something that is to be construed as a metaphor, so that we could call this a monomodal metaphor of the pictorial variety (Forceville 2006). But the fact that the human viewer is addressed, via an imperative, at the end of the commercial (“Release the animal in you!”) means that the target domain is also cued verbally, albeit via indirect means (the “you” addressed is a human, more specifically a man). Moreover, the most important mappable feature – say, “natural, instinctive behaviour” – is also reinforced by the animal sounds. That this feature is here something basically *good* is triggered by the advertising convention that something positive is always claimed for the product – and apparently it is a reason for rejoicing that the Rexona deodorant, apart from supposedly protecting you from smelling, helps release natural instincts in you, with possibly sexual overtones as well. Animality, of course, can also be something bad when applied to humans. Consider a very different commercial that also deploys the metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS, more specifically HUMANS ARE MONKEYS. In two American commercials for Careerbuilder to which I was alerted by Gunnar Eggertsson (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YR71GnQ4CU4&mode=related&search>) it is a desperate employee’s colleagues and bosses that are portrayed as monkeys. Here, clearly, the “natural instinctive behaviour” of monkeys is something bad: the commercial ends with the question “Want a job?” and the advice to contact Careerbuilders.

## **Case Study 2** Commercial screened on Dutch television for Cif cleaning spray [CREATE LINK]

*Description.* A sad-looking girl puts her hand against what seems to be a large glass window; a ragged woman at the other side of the glass responds by putting her hand against the girl’s hand, only the glass intervening. The girl anxiously asks, “When are you gonna get out of here?” The woman replies, “In a while ....” and then turning away from the girl, “I gotta get back.” The first long shot after the close-ups and medium close ups of the girl and the woman, reveals that the

woman is in fact cleaning the bath. The girl anxiously cries out, “I love you mama!”, to which the woman answers, with a sob, “I love you too, baby!” A female voice-over now says something in Dutch that can be translated as “Thorough cleaning does not need to be a punishment. For Cif introduces Cif Power Cream Sprays.”

*Creation of pictorial similarity.* Through a number of cues, two scenarios are presented as similar: being imprisoned and cleaning a bath tub – although the latter scenario is initially disguised. The former is triggered by a number of signals that the viewer is assumed to recognize from numerous visits-to-people-in-prison scenes in American films and TV series. These include the orange dress of prisoners and the cliché substitute for physical contact by putting up hands against the unbreakable glass window separating prisoner and visitor. Once it is clear that the woman is cleaning the bath, viewers realize that they have been misled in mistaking the orange blouse for a prison dress and the transparent water-shield for the glass separating prisoner and visitor.

*Construal as metaphor.* The salient similarity between being in prison and cleaning the bath only makes sense as a metaphor, CLEANING THE BATH IS BEING IN PRISON. Notice that a Dutch viewer, accustomed to subtitled Hollywood films, the very fact that the dialogue is in (American) English and is subtitled further activates the “American prison” scenario. Once the metaphor is identified, other elements in the source qualify for adaptation to fit the target: the daughter’s anxiety that she will not see her mother for a while because she is imprisoned presumably transforms, tongue-in-cheek, into the anxiety that she will not see her mother for a while because her mother will be too busy cleaning.

*Pictorial or Multimodal Metaphor?* As in case study 1, the metaphor is strictly speaking a pictorial metaphor, since both target and source are visually represented (or suggested). But sound (in the form of the American-English dialogue, the mother and daughter’s audible anxiety, and the ominous music) undoubtedly facilitates identification of the metaphor, while one salient mapping, “punishment,” is explicitly verbalized in the voice-over text.

**Case study 3** Commercial screened on Dutch television for Calgon washing powder [CREATE LINK]

*Description.* A neatly dressed woman sits on a bench in a corridor, her facial expression suggesting that she is fretting over something. When a man in a blue overall-like dress comes out of a room, she jumps up and asks “And, could you still do anything about it?” (“En, kon u er nog iets aan doen?”), to which the man replies, “No, alas, too late.” The man and the woman now enter the room, walking towards a washing machine. The woman comments that it still looks as if new, but the man replies that it has been completely “calcified.” The message is that using Calgon washing powder is far better for the machine.

*Creation of pictorial similarity.* As in case study 2, the repairman and customer scenario is made to resemble a different scenario: that of a doctor and the anxious relative of a patient. The room in which the washing machine is located, and where the repairman has his tools, looks like an operating room, also because of the dominance of blue-green colours. Moreover, he uses a mini-camera on a flexible tube, inserted in the machine. We then have a view of the machine's innards that strongly resembles footage familiar from many medical programmes on Dutch TV showing patients' intestines etc. In one of the last shots, the woman vows that henceforward she will use Calgon. Significantly she is now dressed entirely in white – as if she is a nurse.

*Construal as metaphor.* If the similarity between the two scenarios is perceived, the viewer cannot but understand it as a metaphor and allot target status to the domain to which the product belongs. Thus the metaphor could be verbalized as WASHING MACHINE IS PATIENT. Since the commercial is not for washing machines (although the repairman tells the woman that Calgon is endorsed by “major washing machine producers,” whose logos are briefly displayed) but for washing powder, a more appropriate verbalization may be CALGON WASHING POWDER IS MEDICINE.

*Pictorial or Multimodal Metaphor?* Basically, the same principle applies as in case studies 1 and 2: The two domains are identifiable on the basis of visual information alone; and even without any dialogue, the voice-over, and the written supers at the end, I suspect viewers familiar with the genre of advertising would be able to guess correctly what is target and what source domain. But again, of course, verbal information *does* help. Particularly the first sentence uttered by the woman, “And, could you still do anything about it?” helps trigger the hospital scenario. Indeed, this ominous question suggests that she was waiting not just outside any operating room, but outside an intensive care unit, where life or death itself is at stake – a suggestion that is confirmed by the repairman's reply, which makes clear that his “operation” has not been able to save the washing machine's life.

## **Discussion**

On the basis of the three case studies discussed above, in combination with other pictorial/multimodal metaphors in commercials analysed (Forceville 2003, 2007, forthcoming), it is possible to identify a number of parameters that are pertinent in the study of multimodal metaphor as well as to present tendencies that require further examination in more case studies and/or empirical testing (see Forceville et al. in preparation).

(1) *Order in which target and source are cued.* The three case studies discussed are typical in cueing target and source one *after* another rather than

simultaneously. They appear also to be typical in presenting the source first. Note that this is different from standard *verbal* metaphors of the NOUN A IS NOUN B variety, in which the target A is signalled before the source B. In TV commercials the revised order makes sense, I propose, in creating and hopefully (that is, for the advertiser) holding, viewer interest. By first cueing something that turns out to be the source rather than the target (which usually is, or is metonymically related to, the product), the viewer will supposedly be intrigued by the function of this “something” – and thereby may be kept from zapping away in order to solve this mini-puzzle.

(2) *Mode(s) in which target and source are cued.* As we have seen, both target and source can be cued in more than one mode simultaneously. Since a target often coincides with the product advertised (or, antonymically, with the to-be-disparaged product of competitors), it is often signalled visually. If target coincides with product advertised, at some stage or other – but at the very last in the final shot of the commercial – it will also be labelled verbally. (Usually the product’s logo, which hovers between being a verbal and a visual sign, will also be shown.) If one of the domains is exclusively cued visually, and the other exclusively verbally, it tends to be the target that is visually, and the source that is verbally cued (as in the verbo-pictorial metaphors discussed in Forceville 1996; but consider the Shell commercial in Forceville 2007 for a counterexample). Non-verbal sound and music, when playing an identifying role in metaphor, cue the source rather than the target. Many more case studies, however, need to be done to confirm (or disconfirm) these preliminary findings.

(3) *Mappable features are partly rendered non-verbally.* In the Rexona commercial, the spoken and written verbal information “release the animal in you” helps cue “following instinct” as the central mappable feature. But the visuals provide a lot of information about the animals’ behaviour that a viewer could (sub)consciously map, such as their authority-defying behaviour (specifically of the monkeys), and the sense of belonging to a group. Similarly, while the Cif commercial mentions the keyword “punishment” as the mappable feature from the domain of imprisonment to the domain of using a competitor’s cleaning spray, the nature of this punishment is presented visually as that of being locked up in an American prison. The drama inherent in this event, as well as the suggestion of the length of the prison sentence, is suggested largely by the visuals. And the Calgon commercial nowhere verbalizes words that unambiguously refer to the domain of illness or hospitals. That the room is an operating room, that the repair man is a surgeon, that the camera-inspection of the machine is the examination of a patient’s intestines, and that the washing powder is the “correct” medicine – all this is, again, largely conveyed by pictorial means.

The fact that the sources are suggested visually rather than by explicit verbal means has at least the following consequences: (1) viewers can pride themselves on being visually literate enough to recognize the source domain, which enables them to solve the mini-puzzle these commercials pose, and thus gives them,

possibly, a good feeling about the product; (2) an explicit verbal spelling out of the metaphor's mappable features would have sounded ridiculous and unbelievable. It is the viewer who, at his own responsibility, construes the metaphor (in Sperber and Wilson's Relevance-theoretical terms, the mapped features would be "weak implicatures"; see Sperber and Wilson 1996, Wilson & Sperber 2004; for applications in the realm of advertising and popular culture, see Forceville 1996: chapter 5; 2005) and makers can always deny they deliberately intended a metaphorical interpretation. In some cases this allows them to get away with things that, if verbalized, might have been socially unacceptable or even illegal.

(4) *Processing time of metaphors*. The psychologist Raymond Gibbs, discussing verbal metaphors, warns that humanities scholars tend to conflate the various stages of metaphor uptake, ranging from comprehension, via recognition and interpretation, to appreciation (Gibbs 1993, 1994: 114-18). The time span involved in these stages varies from milliseconds in the comprehension stage to, I would suggest, potentially decades in situations where a poetic metaphor is not properly appreciated until many years after it was first encountered. If, as seems appropriate in a genre such as advertising, we stick to the shorter end of the continuum, it is pertinent to investigate what the various modes contribute to (the speed of) identification and interpretation of the metaphor. This requires experimental work in the laboratory, involving suppression of one mode or another. Suppressing spoken speech, non-verbal sound, and music is technically easier, of course, than manipulating away visuals and written language, so it makes sense to start with the using the sound track as a variable, but with current developments in audio-visual software it should not be too difficult to create different experimental conditions in the visuals as well.

(5) *"Range" and "scope" of metaphors*. The fact that in commercials metaphorical targets so often coincide with products means that it should be possible to categorize metaphors according to particular product categories. For instance, one could investigate the metaphorical source domains used to promote alcoholic beverages, or even more specifically beers, and chart whether anything systematic can be said about the choice of source domain. This question pertains to what Kövecses calls metaphors' "range": the set of source domains used to metaphorize a particular target domain (2005: 70). Conversely, one could select a certain domain (e.g., "woman," "man," "wine," "jewellery," "animals") and inventory where and how it is used as a metaphorical source domain. Kövecses calls this the metaphor's scope: "the set of target domains to which a particular source domain can apply" (Kövecses 2005: 72). Are there patterns detectable in the feature(s) selected for mapping to the target? Are there correlations between specific source domains and specific (types) of products? (see Forceville 2000; Moulin 2004). Of course, such examinations may well yield cross-cultural differences.

(6) *Familiarity of source domain and selection of mappable source domain features*. As with metaphors in any mode and medium, they will fail straightaway

if the source domain is not recognized. Somebody totally unfamiliar with representations of (American) detention systems, for instance, will presumably be completely baffled by the Cif commercial discussed above. In order for the metaphor to be interpreted in more or less the way envisaged by the makers, the audience must in addition select the “appropriate” features to be mapped from source to target. What is appropriate is largely governed by the genre’s conventions (i.e., it makes a positive claim about a product, brand, or service), but this in turn depends on the values and opinions prevailing in a community – what Black, borrowing from Aristotle, called *endoxa* (Black 1979: 29). Clearly, different communities (national, ethnic, gendered, professional, etc.) may have different *endoxa*, and this may lead to involuntary misinterpretation as well as wilful “reading against the grain.” Reception research involving different (sub)cultural communities is required here (for some examples of potential cross-cultural (mis)interpretation of pictorial metaphors, see Maalej 2001).

(7) *Verbalization of the metaphor*. In order to be discussable in academic writing, a multimodal metaphor must be verbalized in A is B format. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have continuously discussed surface manifestations of metaphors and their relation to a conceptual root. However, their examples, impressive both in variety and quantity, have somewhat disguised that even within the realm of language there is usually no “natural” way to verbalize the conceptual level of the metaphor. And it is highly doubtful that humans’ conceptual “language” is the same as their verbal language. If in online communication, metaphor uptake does not result in conscious verbalization of the conceptual metaphor of which it is a manifestation, the whole matter of verbalization becomes a rather tricky business. After all, once a certain, plausible, verbalization has been put forward, this verbalization tends to govern the search for mappable features (for angles on this discussion, see Caballero 2006; Forceville 2006; Bartsch 2002).

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