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Visual metaphors in advertising: A cognitive-pragmatic interface

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Abstract. The article focuses on the analysis of the visual metaphors in advertising from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective using the method of conceptual blending theory, tools of inferential pragmatics, and visual design grammar. The aim of the article is to identify the cognitive-pragmatic interface of visual metaphor presented in commercial advertising of modern transnational brands from the point of view of metaphorical explicatures, implicatures in their connection with the stages and procedures of reconstructing the metaphorical meaning.

It is found that visual metaphors are represented by three main types – juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement, which differ in the level of their explicitness depending on the representation of the source and target of the metaphor in the visual plane of advertising, their merging into one gestalt, or the absence of visualization of input spaces. In metaphors of juxtaposition and fusion types, the restoration and/or detailing of the source and target are carried out at the level of explicatures, establishing a connection between the presented objects. At the implicature level, information about the product characteristics, which are the goal of specific visual advertising, is restored, forming secondary signified – connotations (power, fantasy, stability) intended to create stable associations with the brand and its products. In the case of replacement, implicatures restore both the source and the target spaces, as well as the secondary signified.

In all types of metaphors, implicature about the secondary signified is triggered by a violation of the maxim of quality of information through visual metaphorical means, combined with deviations from other maxims as the metaphor becomes more complex. The implicature is restored in the blend of the metaphor as a result of selecting attributes of the generic space with their refinement as the blend develops and elaborates, relying on verbal anchors and background information about the brand and its products.

Key words: visual metaphors, advertising, cognitive-pragmatic interface, implicature, explicature, blended space, generic space.

Introduction. Visual metaphors are an integral component of modern advertising, characterized by the interaction of semiotically diverse codes (O'Halloran, 2023), primarily the cohesion of verbal and visual elements. The increasing role of visual semiotics in advertising is conditioned by the "compactness" of visual thinking in processing large volumes of information in a short period of time. It is believed that the brain processes visual images 60,000 times faster than text, and 90 percent of information transmitted to the brain is visual (Walter & Gioglio, 2014). According to van Mulken et al.'s research (2014), advertising with visual metaphors is valued more and better understood than advertising without visual metaphors as it implies the audience's involvement in the process of reconstructing the meaning of the metaphorical image (El Refaie, 2003; Jeong, 2008; Proctor et al., 2005).

However, depending on the degree of explicitness, creativity, and complexity of visual metaphors, as well as their interaction with verbal anchors in the visual image, decoding metaphorical images involves varying levels of cognitive effort in information processing. Additionally, it can lead to the inference of unintended implicatures by the advertisers, thereby reducing the optimal effectiveness of the advertisement.

The novelty of this research lies in the analysis of the interface between the cognitive and pragmatic components of the visual metaphorical image, which implies establishing correlations between the type of metaphor and the metaphorical explicature and implicature triggered by the metaphor and reconstructed in its blended space.

Literature review. Visual metaphor is one of the favored focuses of modern semiotic studies. Scholars investigate the rhetorical and discursive functions of visual

metaphors (Feng & Wu, 2022; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Jeong, 2008; Margariti et al., 2022), the role of verbal anchors in their interpretation (Bünzli & Dillard, 2022) – in view of the reduction or enhancement of the effectiveness of visual metaphorical images by the verbal code (Phillips, McQuarrie, 2004), the structure of visual metaphorical models (Kravchenko, Zhykharieva, 2023; Kravchenko, Shanaieva-Tsymbal, 2023), semiotic dimensions of visual metaphors (Thellefsen, Friedman, 2023; Ventalon, Erjavec, Tijus, 2023), and types of visual metaphors (Lagerwerf, L., Van Mulken, & Lagerwerf, J.; 2023; van Mulken, van Hooft & Nederstigt, 2014; van Enschoot, van Hooijdonk & Bronkhorst, 2022). Currently, researchers have identified three types of visual metaphors: juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement, which vary in complexity depending on the number of inferences the target audience must make to reach an acceptable conclusion (van Mulken, van Hooft & Nederstigt, 2014).

In the pragmatic perspective, visual metaphor has been explored through the lens of the theory of optimal innovativeness (Arts & Schilperoord, 2016; Schilperoord, Cohn, 2023; Giora et al., 2017; Kravchenko, Yudenko, 2021), according to which such a metaphor can be ranked on a scale of "attractiveness" for the target client – from optimally innovative to purely innovative stimuli.

Visual metaphor has also been investigated in the context of inferential pragmatics – in connection with the violation by the metaphor of one or several maxims of cooperation and the restoration of the implicature triggered by the violation in the blended space, taking into account the distinction between explicature and implicature depending on the degrees of ambiguity of the visual metaphor, its interaction with the visual code, and others (Kravchenko, Shanaieva-Tsymbal, 2023).

In the context of interpreting visual metaphor through the lens of relevance theory, using criteria of processing effort and optimally relevant interpretation context (van Mulken, van Hooft & Nederstigt, 2014; Schilperoord, Cohn, 2023), an important conclusion is that the processing effort required for interpreting metaphors depends on the level of discrepancy between the

target and source subjects of the metaphor (McQuarrie, Mick, 1996; Proctor et al., 2005). Overly complex visual effects diminish persuasiveness and pleasure. Some studies have shown that if a message is perceived as too complex to solve and requires too much cognitive processing effort, readers/viewers may reject it, and its evaluation will decrease (van Mulken et al., 2014). On the other hand, visual effects that are too simple lead to a similar decrease in advertising effectiveness.

In addition to the theory of visual metaphor, the article relies on the concept of secondary semiotics in advertising (Barthes, 1973), according to which any advertising – both verbal and visual – is aimed at forming secondary signifieds at the level of stable connotations with the brand and its products (Kravchenko et al., 2021). These signifieds are intended to become stable associations, metonymically substituting denotative meanings such as "food," "mode of transportation," "device," etc., with connotations embodying the motivational values of the target consumer identity.

The aim of the paper is to investigate the cognitive-pragmatic interface of visual metaphor in the advertising of contemporary transnational brands.

The goal determines the solution of such research tasks:

- (a) to identify types of visual metaphors;
- (b) to reveal the relationship between the type of metaphor and its interpretation involving implicature or explicature;
- (c) to determine types of deviations from cooperative maxims with their justification as triggers of implicature meanings;
- (d) to justify metaphorical implicature as a component of the blended space in visual metaphor.

Materials and Methods. The research material consisted of visual advertisements for the brands Mercedes-Benz and McDonald's, containing metaphors of varying degrees of complexity.

The article employs cognitive linguistics and pragmatics tools for studying visual metaphor. The use of cognitive linguistic models for studying visual metaphor is justified by the isomorphism of mechanisms of verbal and visual metaphor formation: the activation of an image in two or more associated frames and the interpretation of

the image from the incoming target space in terms of the source frame, involving various cognitive contexts.

Therefore, the article applies the method of conceptual blending theory (Fauconnier, Turner, 2002), analyzing visual metaphor analogous to verbal metaphor (Kravchenko, Zhykharieva, 2023; Kravchenko, Zhykharieva, Letunovska, 2024) as a four-component model, including input source and target spaces, the space of their genetic attributes, and the blended space. Blending involves three processes of mixing: (a) composition, during which connections are established between attributes of input spaces, including using the compression mechanism in relations such as part-whole, cause-effect, and so on; (b) completion, as the matching of selected attributes of input spaces with background knowledge in long-term memory, and (c) elaboration, associated with the subsequent development of possible scenarios in the blend. The method of visual design has been applied to reconstruct visual metaphors in few studies (Fredriksson & Pelger, 2020; Kravchenko, Yudenko, 2023).

In addition, the article utilizes research tools from inferential pragmatics (Forceville, 2020; Grice, 1975, 1981), and elements of visual design grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Machin & Ledin, 2020).

Explanatory tools of inferential pragmatics (Kravchenko, Zhykharieva, Letunovska, 2024; Kravchenko, Yudenko, 2021) are employed to identify implicatures triggered by visual metaphors due to their violation of cooperative maxims, as well as to distinguish between explicature and implicature meanings depending on the

complexity level of the visual metaphorical image and its congruence/incongruence with verbal anchoring.

The grammar of visual design aims at interpreting three levels of meanings in multimodal communication: ideational, interactive, and compositional. These meanings are marked by the symbolism of color, its shades, tonal contrast, details, the arrangement of individual components of the visual message in the field of vision, with varying informativeness and salience of visual areas in the right-left, upper-lower, central-peripheral parts, etc.

The stages of analysis include:

(1) identification of the type of visual metaphor;

(2) reconstruction of the metaphor based on the method of conceptual integration;

(3) determination of the peculiarities of how the metaphor violates cooperative maxims;

(4) identification of explicature meanings, reconstructing the target and source spaces of the metaphor, and implicatures associated with the secondary signified;

(5) determination of the peculiarities of the interaction of the visual metaphor with the verbal anchor.

Discussion and results. Juxtaposition is the most explicit metaphor that contains visual representations of both the target and source spaces. In the visual metaphor of Smart electric cars, it juxtaposes the act of threading a needle (source) with the car's ability to navigate through a narrow street (target).



Picture 1: A Smart car

Image Source <https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/stove-0500a222-0450-4af9-98ac-ce8c644c49eb>.

In its structure, such a metaphor is closest to similes because it visualizes a common property of both the target and source (here – the narrowness of the needle and the street), thus bringing them closer to terms of comparison. The reconstruction of components of the input spaces occurs at the level of explicature. Analogous to explicature encoded by linguistic forms, the explicature detailing the input spaces of the visual metaphor is visually encoded: the meaning that the metaphor refers specifically to city streets is supported by the visualization of the needle as a stone monolith incorporating urban buildings and landmarks, including recognizable ones.

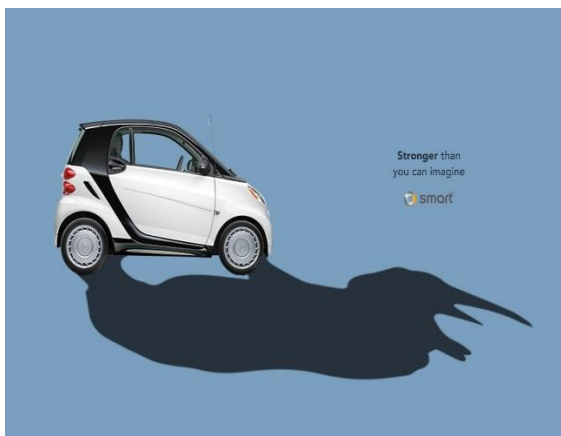
At the level of development and elaboration of the metaphor blend, background knowledge is drawn upon, on one hand, about the narrowness of streets in historical places like Paris (marked by recognizable symbols of the city) and, on the other hand, about the small size of cars – with the implicature in the metaphor blend that the size of the car, allowing it to maneuver in the busy city, is its advantage rather than a disadvantage. The implicature is triggered by the violation of the cooperative maxim of quality by the visual metaphor – according to Grice's interpretation of metaphor, which asserts that the speaker

using a metaphorical expression ignores the principle of quality, thereby implying some further judgment based on mutually shared presuppositions and the context of metaphor usage (Grice, 1975, p. 53).

In accordance with the main task of advertising - forming secondary signifieds as constant brand and product associations aimed at “alienating” its functional meaning and replacing it with connotations, metaphorical implicature shapes such a secondary signified as the superior maneuverability of the Smart car.

Despite Juxtaposition being the most explicit metaphor, it can still vary in degrees of explicitness. In particular, a metaphor may be less transparent if the visual image violates multiple maxims of cooperation simultaneously, making it more difficult to infer the implicature in the metaphor blend. In this case, the inference of implicature is achieved through the involvement of a verbal anchor.

In the metaphor presented below, the source space of the metaphor “Smart cars with the power of a bison” is restored at the level of explicature, the visual marker of which is the shadow that is cast by a small car and metonymically points to the animal, and the target space, accordingly, is represented by Smart.



Picture 2: A Smart car

(Image Source <https://www.behance.net/gallery/23874955/Print-Ads/modules/178130745>).

At the level of visual-compositional meaning, specifically in terms of markers of the saliency principle, the visual image contributes to deviating from cooperative maxims of quality and relevance: due to its elongated shape, size, and contours, the shadow significantly differs from the object

casting it. Antithesis implicature “small but strong”, triggered by the violation of the maxim is reconstructed in the metaphor blend, with the involvement of a common characteristic of the generic space, named by the slogan: “Stronger than you can imagine,” which establishes congruence between the

image of the car and its shadow based on the attribute "strength." From the perspective of the grammar visual design, the slogan located on the right side performs a function comparable to the grammatical role of the rheme, containing new information, while what is on the left corresponds to the theme.

Thus, the incompleteness of visual information on the left is compensated by verbal information on the right: the bison's shadow corresponds to the car because the car is much more powerful than it appears based on its shape and size. At the representational (ideational) level of meaning, the choice of the shadow as the source of metaphorization, rather than visualizing the animal itself, adds additional connotations to the visual message. In the blended space of the metaphor, the exploitation of the psychological archetype of the shadow

implies an antithesis between the visible (the small compact form) and what is hidden beneath it (power and strength), supported by the verbal anchor "then you can imagine": the small car hides the power and endurance of the bison, which is eight times more enduring than a horse.

Through metaphorical implicature in the space of the metaphor blend, the secondary signified of "strength and power" is formed, which, according to the creators of the advertisement, should be associated by the target consumer with the small Smart car.

The second type of visual metaphor is Fusion—also known as hybrid metaphor (Forceville 1996: 163), in which the target and source objects merge into a single semantically related visual gestalt. An example of fusion can be found in the advertisement for McDonald's McFlurry.



Picture 3: McDonald's McFlurry

(Image Source <https://www.adrubby.com/outdoor-ads/mcdonalds-my-mcflurry-imagine-yours>).

In the advertisement, the image of woman blends with the advertised ice cream, replacing a woman's hair or headgear. The source (hair or headgear) and target (ice cream) spaces of the metaphor are restored at the explicature level. Generic space features are projected onto the metaphor blend: visual similarity of ice cream to headgear or hairstyle, as well as the common action towards them, verbally marked by the verb "imagine" in a verbal anchor (to imagine hairstyle or ice cream) and visually by the gaze, which is a component of the interactive meaning in the grammar of visual design: the woman's gaze is not interactive but contemplative, directed not towards the audience beyond the visual space, but "into herself". The blend development involves a double metonymization of the source space

components: hair or headgear, referring to the source space, is metonymically linked to the head, which, in turn, is a metonymy with the replacement of the name of the content – thoughts, ideas, "localized" in the head, with the name of the container – the head.

At the level of blend development, connotative meanings such as "fantasy" and "exquisite complexity" are attracted, associated with the variety of McFlurry assortments. The elaboration of the blend relies on a directive act combined with the personal pronoun as part of the slogan "Imagine yours." If the visual metaphor violates the maxim of quality of information, then the slogan deviates from the maxim of quantity, stimulating the target audience to "imagine" about something further. Violating maxims triggers an implicature of the diversity

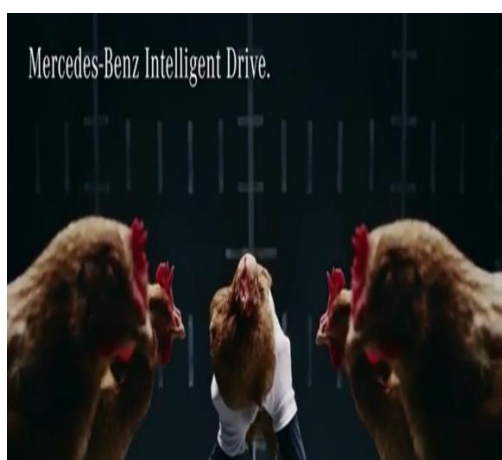
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of McFlurry types and compositions that can be chosen to taste – akin to headwear or hairstyle.

Accordingly, the implicature in the space of the blend of visual metaphor forms such a connotative meaning – a secondary signified – as fantasy and creativity, which should consistently associate with the advertised type of ice cream among McDonald's customers.

The most complex type of visual metaphor is Replacement, where neither the source nor the target of the metaphor is explicitly represented in the visual message. In the visual metaphor presented below, the target space of the metaphor is the Magic

Body Control system in Mercedes V8 cars, while the source space is the dance of chickens. In the blended space, generic features are projected, visualized through shared attributes of the source (chicken dance) and target (car functionality) spaces of the metaphor, namely immobility, balancing, and stability. The chicken heads, performing various body movements in sync with the rhythms of Diana Ross's "Upside Down," remains stable in any position. Similarly, the Magic Body Control system provides stability and balancing for the car, which always maintains a consistent level by automatically adjusting the suspension system to suit real-time road conditions.



Picture 4: Magic Body Control system in Mercedes V8 cars

(Image Source <https://digitalsynopsis.com/advertising/mercedes-benz-chicken-magic-body-control/>).

Besides violating the maxim of quality, the metaphor also breaches the maxims of relevance, as it triggers irony due to the collision of scripts "premium-class brand" (metonymically represented by the functional of the car) and "domestic bird." The ironic sense is further intensified due to semantic inconsistency at the connotative level of the verbal anchor – Intelligent Drive (at the top of the visual space) and the connotations of a chicken as a foolish bird.

Violation of cooperative maxims triggers an implicature aimed at restoring logical-semantic coherence between the chicken dance and the verbal anchor referring to Mercedes-Benz. The implicature in the blended space is associated with the actualization of the secondary signified "stability and balance" aimed at creating stable connotations with the functional of the car, metonymically transferred to Mercedes itself.

Conclusions. The visual metaphor in advertising is represented by three main types – juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement, which differ in the level of their explicitness depending on the representation of the source and target of the metaphor in the visual plane of advertising, their merging into one gestalt, or the absence of visualization of input spaces. In metaphors of juxtaposition and fusion types, the restoration and/or detailing of the source and target are carried out at the level of explicatures, establishing a connection between the presented objects. At the implicature level, information about the product characteristics, which are the goal of specific visual advertising, is restored, forming secondary signified – connotations (power, fantasy, stability) intended to create stable associations with the brand and its products. In the case of replacement, implicatures restore both the source and the target

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Візуальні метафори в рекламі: когнітивно-прагматичний інтерфейс

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Анотація. Стаття присвячена аналізу візуальних метафор у рекламі з когнітивно-прагматичної точки зору з використанням методу теорії концептуальної інтеграції, інструментів інференційної прагматики та граматики візуального дизайну. Метою статті є виявлення когнітивно-прагматичного інтерфейсу візуальної метафори, представленої в комерційній рекламі сучасних транснаціональних брендів, з метафоричними експлікатурами і імплікатурами на етапах реконструкції метафоричного значення.

Встановлено, що візуальні метафори представлені трьома основними типами – зіставлення, злиття та заміна, які відрізняються рівнем експліцитності залежно від репрезентації джерела та мети метафори у візуальній площині реклами, їх злиття в один гештальт, або відсутності візуалізації вхідних просторів. У метафорах типу зіставлення і злиття відновлення та/або деталізація джерела та цілі здійснюються на рівні експлікатур, встановлюючи зв'язок між представленими об'єктами. На рівні імплікатури відновлюється інформація про характеристики товару, на які орієнтована конкретна візуальна реклама, із формуванням вторинних означуваних – конотатів (потужність, фантазія, стабільність), покликаних створити стійкі асоціації з брендом та його продукцією. У метафорі «заміни» імплікатури відновлюють цільовий і джерельні простори, а також вторинне означення.

У всіх типах візуальних метафор імплікатура, що реконструює вторинне означення, спричинена порушенням максими якості інформації у поєднанні з відхиленнями від інших максимум у разі ускладнення метафоричного образу. Імплікатура відновлюється в бленді метафори в результаті вибору атрибутів родового простору з їх уточненням у процесі розвитку та деталізації бленду, спираючись на вербальні якорі та фонову інформацію про бренд та його продукти.

Ключові слова: візуальні метафори, реклама, когнітивно-прагматичний інтерфейс, імплікатура, експлікатура, простір бленду, родовий простір.