Multimodal Metaphor Analysis of German Commercials

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This research examines the characteristics of multimodal metaphors utilized by German advertisers in their commercial designs. Commercial advertisements inherently incorporate a diverse array of communicative symbols, encompassing textual, visual, and auditory elements, which collaboratively function to construct metaphoric representations. Consequently, these advertisements are characterized by a rich presence of multimodal metaphors, strategically crafted to leave a lasting impression on viewers and to stimulate the purchasing intentions of targeted demographics. Employing a cognitive linguistics framework, this paper conducts a comparative analysis of the multimodal metaphors present in three exemplary German commercials: K-fee, Coca-Cola Zero, and Pure Milk. The findings illuminate the effective deployment of multimodal strategies in enhancing message transmission and fostering consumer engagement within the advertising landscape.

Keywords: multimodal metaphors, German advertising, commercial design, cognitive linguistics

Current Research Status and Research Purpose

Since Forceville proposed multimodal metaphor in 1996 and analyzed numerous examples of multimodal metaphors in his doctoral thesis "Image Metaphor in Advertising," there has been a surge of scholars both domestically and internationally conducting research analyses on various discourses from the perspective of multimodal metaphor, with advertising discourse being the primary focus. Urios-Aparisi studied multimodal metaphors in picture advertisements or animated advertisements, cartoons, music, and films (2009). Research on multimodal metaphors in China began around 2010 and gradually became a popular research direction in cognitive linguistics. Researchers like Feng Dezheng and Xing Chunyan studied the construction of spatial metaphors and multimodal meanings using automobile advertisements as examples, while Lan Chun and Cai Ying examined the multimodal metaphors in the classic Chinese television advertisement for Head & Shoulders shampoo (2013). Yang Xu and Wang Shaohua analyzed the mechanisms of multimodal metaphors in music within television advertisements (2013). In recent years, research on multimodal metaphors has reached its peak. As shown in the figure below, the research intensity peaked in 2020-2021, with 74 and 66 papers published on multimodal metaphors, respectively, during these two years. The main subjects of research were public service advertisements (90), television advertisements (21), print advertisements (17), promotional videos (11), and

news cartoons (10), among others. However, my search for research papers on German commercial advertisements and multimodality on CNKI yielded no relevant results.

This paper selects three representative commercial advertisements from Germany (K-fee, Coca-Cola Zero, and Plain Milk) on the Bilibili video platform and will mainly analyze the characteristics of multimodal metaphors used by German advertisers in their advertisement designs. Commercial advertisements typically involve multiple communicative symbols, such as textual, visual, and auditory modalities, which collaboratively create metaphors. Consequently, they often contain a wealth of multimodal metaphors aimed at leaving a profound impression on the audience and stimulating the purchasing desire of the target demographic. This paper will conduct a comparative analysis of the multimodal metaphors in the three German commercial advertisements from the perspective of cognitive linguistics.

Metaphor

Metaphor has always been one of the important focal points in cognitive linguistics research. In a certain sense, the development of metaphor concepts has also promoted the advancement of cognitive linguistics. The conceptual metaphor theory proposed by Lakoff in his work *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) plays an indispensable role in its development. This theory posits that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device in language but rather a cognitive approach through which humans express themselves by projecting specific concepts from one conceptual domain onto an abstract conceptual domain. It is one of the most fundamental aspects of human cognition (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 1).

In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff analyzes the origins and functions of metaphor, distinguishing between traditional views and the theory of conceptual metaphors. Traditionally, it is believed that metaphors are primarily created by literati, such as poets, and are then utilized by ordinary people. This creative process involves generating metaphors one by one. Such metaphors mainly function in literary language, enhancing its aesthetic quality and diversifying modes of expression. However, Lakoff argues that metaphors can be created by any ordinary person and can be generated in batches, representing a systematic mapping. Metaphor does not only function within literary works but also plays a significant role in daily life. From Lakoff's perspective, metaphor is a cognitive tool and a mode of thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 54).

Multimodal Metaphor

In the early stages of research on conceptual metaphor, scholars typically focused on the linguistic level. However, with the emergence of multimodal metaphor, the scope of conceptual metaphor has expanded to include sound, images, written symbols, smell, and more, prompting an increasing number of scholars to shift their attention in this direction. When discussing multimodal metaphor, one cannot overlook Forceville. In his doctoral dissertation *Image Metaphor in Advertising*, he introduced two-dimensional image metaphors from a cognitive perspective, using numerous advertisements as examples, thereby initiating the study of multimodality. The focus of metaphor research has gradually extended from the unimodal field to the multimodal field, evolving from singular image metaphors to advertisements and audiovisual programs on television (Forceville, 1996).

Forceville defines modality as "a symbol system that can be explained through specific, perceivable processes" (Forceville & Urios, 2009, p. 12). He associates modality with the five human senses and initially

categorized it into five types: visual modality, gustatory modality, auditory modality, tactile modality, and olfactory modality. However, this categorization did not provide clear boundaries between specific symbol systems within the same sensory system. Consequently, he later subdivided modality into nine distinct types: image modality, written modality, spoken modality, gestural modality, sound modality, music modality, smell modality, taste modality, and touch modality (Forceville & Urios, 2009, p. 22).

Unimodal Metaphor

Unimodal metaphor refers to metaphors where both the source domain and the target domain are represented exclusively or primarily through a single modality, such as linguistic metaphors, image metaphors, and visual metaphors commonly found in everyday life.

Multimodal Metaphor

Multimodal metaphor, on the other hand, refers to metaphors where the source domain and the target domain are represented through different modalities or primarily through different modalities (Zhao, 2011, p. 1). For instance, in an advertisement conveying the metaphor "water is a puppy," if the water is shaped like a puppy, it constitutes a unimodal metaphor because the source and target domains involve only the visual modality. However, if the water is shaped like a puppy and accompanied by the sound of a puppy barking, this metaphor would qualify as a multimodal metaphor, as its source and target domains involve two different modalities: the visual modality and the auditory modality.

The initial primary research objective of multimodal metaphor was advertising, which includes static image-and-text advertisements as well as dynamic advertisements on television that emerged with technological advancements. At that time, scholars focused on exploring how multimodal metaphors function in constructing and representing metaphors in advertising, particularly in their role in positively influencing products or services and the notable characteristics they exhibit. The second area of interest was comics, which encompass many different categories, such as comic strips and political cartoons. Additionally, genres such as music, sign language, promotional videos, and film clips also garnered considerable research attention.

An important characteristic of multimodal metaphor is its dynamism and narrativity. Traditional views consider metaphor as a fixed transition from A to B, meaning a stable relationship between a source domain and a target domain (Zhao, 2011, p. 2). However, this formulaic structure contradicts the characteristics of multimodal metaphor, as it goes against the essence of dynamic metaphor construction. Multimodal metaphor (multi-modeling) typically exhibits features of temporal and spatial sequences, usually expanding specific metaphors through visual modalities or simulating the development of events through auditory modalities. Kövecses proposed two primary and fundamental metaphor systems in human cognition. The first is the existence chain metaphor system, which refers to a hierarchical structure composed of various forms of existence and their characteristics, where higher-level forms of existence are positioned above lower-level forms, such as "animals" being above "plants" and "humans" being above "animals." This hierarchy plays a crucial role in constructing our cognitive state regarding various entities or existences. Kövecses argues that the existence chain itself is not inherently metaphorical; however, metaphor can arise when one level of concept is used to understand another level of concept. The second system is known as the event structure metaphor system, which constructs various elements within an event structure based on fundamental concepts such as space, movement, and force.

In today's multimedia age, businesses have invested considerable effort in advertising design to deeply embed products or services in consumers' minds and attract more customers. Commercial advertisements skillfully combine multiple modalities, such as images, sounds, and text, with the intention of enhancing the readability and artistry of the advertisement, thereby exerting sensory and psychological impacts on the audience. This, in turn, serves to capture attention and stimulate viewers' interest in purchasing. The three German commercials studied in this paper primarily employ three major categories of modal metaphors: visual metaphors, auditory metaphors, and event metaphors.

With the development of the times and advancements in technology, not only has the quality of products greatly improved, but customer demands for products have also increased significantly. To boost sales of their products, businesses have begun to employ advertising as a promotional method. In today's multimedia era, advertising is no longer limited to the initial simple text or image advertisements. To leave a lasting impression on customers and gain public recognition and favor for their products and services, major manufacturers have started to invest heavily in advertising design. A modern, outstanding commercial product advertisement typically combines various modalities in innovative ways and creates metaphors, resulting in advertisements that possess strong readability and artistry, capable of attracting viewers and stimulating the purchasing desires of target audiences. The commercial advertisements studied in this paper from China and Germany, two culturally distinct countries, primarily utilize three main categories of modal metaphors: visual metaphors, auditory metaphors, and event metaphors.

Visual perception is the primary and most important of the five human senses. Therefore, it plays a pivotal role in the construction of metaphors. People primarily observe the world through vision, and the objective existence observed visually influences the formation or construction of consciousness and thought in the human brain. In modern advertising, multimodal approaches can provide the target audience with intuitive, three-dimensional, and vivid sensory experiences, thus leaving a profound impression on viewers.

In visual metaphors, the primary expressions are entity metaphors and color metaphors. People use concrete and vivid things to aid in understanding abstract and unfamiliar concepts. This metaphorical method, which transforms unfamiliar images into concrete representations, is defined as entity metaphor (Shu, 2000, p. 12). Color metaphors also play a crucial role in the visual modality; specific colors can immediately capture people's attention, attracting the target audience and leaving a lasting impression. Different colors can also express various emotions of characters in advertisements, and colors can, to some extent, influence viewers' emotions in interpersonal contexts (Wang, 2018, p. 245).

In the construction of multimodal metaphors, the auditory modality is also one of the most important modalities. Forceville argues that non-verbal sounds and music play a significant suggestive role in the construction of multimodal metaphors.

In modern commercial advertising, excellent designers tend to favor the use of event metaphors in multimodal metaphors. In event metaphors, fundamental concepts such as space, force, and movement are treated as source domains, while the concept of events becomes the target domain. Typically, advertising designers reflect brand characteristics or connotations through the actual behaviors or actions expressed in the advertisement, subtly promoting the brand image to the audience.

This paper will analyze the characteristics of multimodal metaphors in German commercial advertisements from the perspectives mentioned above.

Case Analysis

K-fee Coffee Commercial from Germany

(https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1sP411w7Ev/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click).

The content of this advertisement is roughly as follows: a small car drives along a country road accompanied by relaxing background music. Suddenly, a terrifying face appears on the screen, the gentle music disappears, and the face emits a shrill scream. The video ends with a line in German: So wach warst du noch nie (You have never been this awake)

This German coffee commercial primarily employs three types of metaphors: visual metaphors, auditory metaphors, and event metaphors.

At the beginning of the advertisement, the viewers' attention is first drawn to the background of the video. The environment depicted showcases the vibrant springtime nature, with greenery and plants, creating a sense of tranquility and peace. A car drives steadily down the road. Such a scene is actually very likely to induce drowsiness. Here, visual metaphors construct an environment that evokes a sleepy state. The created environment and state serve as the source domain, while the calm state of a person is the target domain. Then, the sudden appearance of the terrifying face acts as the source domain, with the target domain being the K-fee brand coffee.

Meanwhile, auditory metaphors also play a crucial role, similar to the rhythm and process of visual metaphors. The light, leisurely music helps create a state conducive to sleep. The shrill scream that emerges serves as the source domain, with the target domain also being the K-fee brand coffee. The essence of this advertisement lies in the sudden transition between these two scenes. The latter scene triggers a surge of adrenaline, instantly awakening the viewer.

This advertisement primarily utilizes visual and auditory modalities to construct the effects of drinking K-fee coffee, employing multimodal metaphors to convey the invigorating effects that K-fee coffee can bring to customers. The final effect that appears at the end of the short film directly emphasizes the theme: K-fee coffee can provide customers with an unparalleled sense of awakening.

2014 German Coca-Cola Zero Advertisement

(https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV16x411N7F8/?p=4)

In this advertisement, Coca-Cola enlisted Manuel Neuer, one of the key players from the 2014 World Cup championship team, to endorse its product, Coca-Cola Zero. The commercial begins with a couple watching the World Cup on TV. The woman takes a bottle of sugar-free Coke from the fridge, labeling it as regular Coke. As the man drinks it, the woman says, "This isn't ordinary Coke; this is Coca-Cola Zero," followed by a brief description: "Real taste, zero sugar." The ad's core message is highlighted with the statement, "If you want it, you can have it all."

The most captivating part of the advertisement begins here. The woman continues, "If you want, I'm not your girlfriend; I'm Manuel Neuer." Upon saying this, the man's companion transforms into Neuer. Neuer then adds, "Or we're not in your living room; we're at the stadium." With this, the scene shifts to the stands, where they suddenly celebrate a goal. Next, they appear in the team's locker room, celebrating with teammates. Finally,

the man returns to his room, where his girlfriend is lying on the bed and says, "I'm not Neuer anymore." A male voice concludes the ad, stating, "Coca-Cola Zero lets you have it all."

This advertisement constructs metaphors primarily through visual and auditory modalities. One novel aspect is the use of visual modalities to create event metaphors. After the man drinks the Coca-Cola Zero handed to him by his girlfriend, a series of magical transformations occurs: first, his girlfriend becomes the famous football player Manuel Neuer; then their conversation suddenly shifts from the living room to the stands of a football stadium, followed by a celebration in the locker room, and ultimately returning to his bedroom. These sequences of changes represent events that, in reality, are impossible. Together, these transformations constitute the source domain, while the target domain is the message that "Coca-Cola Zero can give you everything you desire."

From the perspective of auditory modality, during the 9th to 10th seconds of the video, once the man drinks the Coca-Cola Zero, a whimsical, exploratory background music begins. This type of music is typically used in fantasy films when a storyline reaches a small climax. As the scenes change, the rhythm of the music gradually accelerates and increases in volume. When the man returns to his room, the background music abruptly stops, followed by a brief pause before the music reaches its climax, accompanied by drumbeats and bass, introducing the Coca-Cola Zero. This constructs auditory metaphors contrasting "Coca-Cola Zero as magical music" and "reality as music stopping."

The event metaphor embedded in the Coca-Cola Zero advertisement is that "Coca-Cola Zero has the magical power to give you everything you wish for." At the beginning of the short film, the man is watching the World Cup on TV, implying his love for football. After drinking Coca-Cola Zero, he embarks on a whimsical journey filled with scenes and characters related to football, such as famous football players, the stadium, and the team's locker room. The action of "drinking Coca-Cola Zero" activates the source domain, while the target domain of "getting everything you desire" is presented through character transformations, scene changes, and the advertising slogan, "Du kannst alles haben mit Coke-Zero, Echter Geschmack, Null Zucker" (You can have it all with Coke Zero, Real Taste, Zero Sugar).

German Milk Advertisement for Plainmilch

(https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV12x411J7Sm/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=5e5b2ef465bb96431e4653c965d66603)

The advertisement for Plainmilch is both creative and impactful, resonating with many viewers on platforms like Bilibili. It opens with a robot mother cradling a baby while nursing. Suddenly, the robot mother runs out of milk, akin to running out of battery power, and stops all movements. This absence of milk causes the baby to start crying loudly. At this moment, a well-dressed man carrying a suitcase approaches. He puts on gloves, unlocks the robot mother's back, and opens the mysterious suitcase, revealing Plain milk inside. The man then replaces the milk in the robot mother with the Plain brand milk. After the switch, a gauge representing milk quantity is filled up, revitalizing the robot mother as if she has been recharged. The baby smiles contentedly and stops crying. The ad concludes with a close-up of the Plain milk brand.

The effectiveness of the Plain milk advertisement is remarkable, warranting an analysis of how the advertisement designer constructs the brand image using multimodal metaphors. In commercial advertising, multimodal metonymy and multimodal metaphor often work in tandem, with multimodal metonymy assisting in

realizing multimodal metaphor. This advertisement employs numerous instances of multimodal metonymy, such as equating milk to a battery (representing energy).

From a visual modality perspective, after the mysterious man replaces the milk, the baby's smile activates the source domain, while the target domain is that "Plain milk is like human breast milk." The auditory modality similarly constructs metaphors; the transition from the baby's cries to laughter serves as the source domain, with the target domain being "Plain milk is like human breast milk."

Conclusion

This article, grounded in cognitive linguistics theory, analyzes some of the most popular and representative German commercials on the Bilibili video platform, focusing on the use of multimodal metaphors. The analysis of these advertisements reveals several key findings:

Sensory Metaphors: Multimodal metaphors in German commercials predominantly consist of sensory metaphors, particularly visual and auditory metaphors, which often complement each other.

High Frequency of Event Metaphors: Unlike traditional Chinese commercials, German advertisements exhibit a high frequency of event metaphors, which leads Chinese viewers to find them novel, engaging, and memorable.

Use of Multimodal Metonymy: Commercials frequently utilize various forms of multimodal metonymy to facilitate the realization of multimodal metaphors.

Cultural and Cognitive Differences: Due to cultural and cognitive differences between Chinese and German audiences, the selection of source and target domains in the metaphors within advertisements also shows distinct variations. This contributes to the perception of German advertisements as innovative by Chinese viewers.

Overall, the innovative use of multimodal metaphors in advertisements effectively enhances brand recognition and resonates with diverse audiences.

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