

A Study on Rhetorical Expressions in Japanese Advertising Language

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This paper analyzes the use of metaphor and metonymy in Japanese advertising language. These rhetorical devices enhance emotional appeal, capture consumer attention, and convey product value indirectly through imagery and association. Metonymy expresses benefits via related elements like body parts or sensations, while metaphors connect products to nature or emotion, evoking rich sensory experiences. The study examines examples across categories such as beauty, health, and lifestyle, showing how these expressions align with Japanese cultural values of subtlety and suggestion. It concludes that metaphorical language in advertising not only informs but also emotionally resonates with consumers, making products more memorable and desirable.

Keywords: metaphor, metonymy, advertising, rhetoric, Japanese culture

Introduction

Metaphorical expressions play a crucial role in advertising by effectively conveying the characteristics and value of a product. A metaphor is a rhetorical device that imbues language with richer meaning by comparing one thing to another. In advertising, metaphors are frequently used to capture consumer attention, leave a lasting impression, and evoke emotional responses. From the perspective of advertising objectives, it is only natural to use expressions that deliberately violate selectional restrictions in order to attract attention (Koyama, 2010, p. 1). Rather than directly explaining the functions or features of a product or service, such expressions appeal to the senses and imagination.

For example, the metaphor “This car is as fast as the wind” not only emphasizes the vehicle’s speed but also conveys emotional values such as freedom and exhilaration through the natural element of wind.

Moreover, metaphorical expressions often go beyond mere product descriptions—they connect with the consumer’s lifestyle and values. In a cosmetics advertisement, for instance, the phrase “eternal beauty” does more than promote the product’s effects; it taps into a universal human desire to preserve youth and beauty forever. Such expressions resonate with consumers, helping to build affinity and trust toward a brand or product.

This paper analyzes the use and impact of metaphorical language in advertising. It examines which types of metaphors are particularly effective and how they influence consumer purchasing behavior. Special attention will be given to the differences in metaphor usage across a variety of product categories—from everyday goods to luxury brands—exploring how cultural and social contexts shape these rhetorical choices.

Rhetoric and Its Classifications

The *Modern Linguistics Dictionary* defines rhetoric as follows: “Rhetoric: the techniques used to craft expressions for the purpose of persuasion, or the academic discipline that studies these techniques”.

As this definition suggests, rhetoric possesses persuasive power, making it essential in the language of advertising. Looking at the role of rhetoric in ancient times helps illuminate its function in modern advertising discourse.

Sato (1992) identifies two major roles that rhetoric played in classical times:

1. The art of persuasive expression.
2. The art of artistic or literary expression.

Traditional Rhetoric and Its Classifications

There are various types of rhetorical devices, and different scholars classify them in different ways. This paper adopts the classification proposed by Sato (1992), which organizes rhetorical devices (“kotoba no aya”) into the following categories:

Simile

This is the most basic and straightforward form of figurative expression. In European rhetorical terms, it is referred to as a simile. A simile compares one thing to another using phrases such as “X is like Y” or “X resembles Y”, also known as “explicit comparison”.

Example: Jack is as foolish as a donkey.

Metaphor

A metaphor is a rhetorical expression that borrows the name of one thing to refer to another, similar thing. Also called an “implicit comparison”, a metaphor omits comparative words like “like” or “as” and states the comparison directly.

Example: Jack is a donkey.

Metonymy

In contrast to metaphor, which is based on similarity, metonymy is based on contiguity or association between two things.

Example: The road was frozen. The village slept in the depths of the cold.

→ “The village” = “the houses and people within the village”

Synecdoche

The definition of synecdoche is considered nuanced and complex. According to Sato, synecdoche involves using a word that is either broader (more general) or narrower (more specific) than what is expected. In other words, it is a rhetorical device that uses a general term to refer to a specific case, or a part to represent the whole. (Note: Since the boundary between metonymy and synecdoche remains unclear, this paper treats both as part of the broader category of metonymy, based on contiguity.)

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a classical rhetorical device that expresses things in an exaggerated manner—greater than they actually are.

Example: Waiting felt like a thousand autumns.

Accumulation

This rhetorical method emphasizes a subject by piling up a series of equivalent words or phrases to create a layered, expressive effect.

Example: If you're too kind, she gets conceited. If you scold her, she pouts. If you hit her, she cries. If you kill her, she comes back as a ghost. Women sure are troublesome, aren't they?

Litotes

Litotes affirms a statement not by asserting it directly, but by denying its opposite. This form of understatement often enhances the positive implication by veiling it.

Example progression:

- Happy (neutral expression).
- Not sad (simple litotes).
- It's not that I'm not happy (double negative for emphasis).

The above classifications are based on Sato's framework. However, in this study, we will primarily focus on metaphorical expressions commonly found in everyday language—specifically, simile, metaphor, and metonymy (which includes both metonymy and synecdoche)—as we examine the rhetorical language used in Japanese and Thai advertising.

Rhetorical Expressions in Advertising Language

A metaphor is an indirect form of expression that compares one thing to another, rather than stating something directly. Ito, Makiuchi, and Honna (1986, p. 348) refer to this characteristic as the “playfulness of metaphor”. It appears frequently not only in literature but also in our everyday language—and is especially prevalent in advertising discourse.

Metonymy

Care and beauty related to body parts.

- “Beauty at your fingertips”—Hand Cream (Atrix).
- “Fashion at your fingertips”—Nail Polish (ParaDo).
- “Bringing out the sparkle in your eyes”—Mascara (Maybelline).
- “Moisture for your lips”—Lip Balm (Nivea).
- “Gentleness for your eyes”—Contact Lenses (Acuvue).

Metonymy is a method of expressing one particular entity through something else that is related to it, involving relationships such as adjacency, proximity, coexistence, temporal connection, and causal connection (Arimitsu, 2007, p. 214). Metonymy is a particularly effective rhetorical technique in advertising. By symbolically representing a part for the whole, it evokes sensory and emotional responses in consumers. This is especially true in ads for personal care and beauty products associated with specific body parts. Through the skillful use of metonymy, such ads suggest the beauty, comfort, or health benefits of a product in a subtle yet powerful way, leaving a strong impression.

Instead of directly stating what the product does, these advertisements focus on the experience, outcome, or emotional resonance the product evokes. This approach encourages consumers to empathize with the message and engage more deeply. For example, portraying a simple hand cream as something that enhances “the beauty

of your hands” helps consumers recognize the aesthetic value the product offers. Likewise, presenting nail polish as “fashion at your fingertips” frames it as an extension of personal style and self-expression.

Moreover, metonymy is highly effective in appealing to emotion. In beauty and personal care advertising, not only physical appearance but also the resulting confidence and sense of happiness are essential elements. Words like “radiance”, “gentleness”, and “moisture” carry emotional weight, allowing consumers to envision how the product might positively affect their lives and feelings—ultimately increasing the desire to purchase.

In sum, advertising expressions that use metonymy symbolically convey a product’s function and benefit in a sensory and emotional manner. This rhetorical technique leaves a lasting impact on consumers and effectively communicates how a product can enrich their daily lives.

Products related to physical sensation and health.

- “The joy of washing with foam”—Body Soap (Biore).
- “A boost to your morning wake-up”—Coffee (Nescafé).
- “A refreshing throat”—Throat Lozenges (Ryukakusan).
- “Clean from the inside out”—Beauty Drink (FANCL).
- “Freshness in your mouth”—Chewing Gum (Xylitol).
- “A comfortable night’s sleep”—Beds (Simmons).
- “Relaxation time in the bath”—Bath Additive (Bathclin Babu).

When it comes to products related to bodily sensations and health, it is important for advertisements to convey the physical and emotional experiences these products provide, rather than merely describing their components or functions. Symbolic expressions are especially effective in emphasizing these experiential aspects.

A common trait among these ads is the use of metonymy—they do not describe ingredients or mechanisms directly. Instead, they highlight the sensations or experiences that result from using the product. For instance, “foam” in the case of body soap, “wake-up” for coffee, or “refreshing feeling” for throat lozenges each evokes tangible sensory associations that help consumers imagine how the product will feel.

This approach allows consumers to perceive not just the physical effects, but also how a product enhances their quality of life. It emphasizes satisfaction and well-being as central outcomes of product use. By tapping into sensory imagination, such advertising deepens the emotional connection between consumer and product.

Moreover, since health and bodily sensations are deeply personal, using metonymy increases the emotional appeal of the ad. These products do more than serve a practical function—they enhance a user’s confidence and happiness. By symbolizing these effects through metonymy, the ads deliver a stronger and more resonant message.

In this sense, advertising that uses metonymy for health and sensation-related goods is a powerful technique—it presents the sensory value of a product in a way that emotionally engages the consumer, boosting both interest and desire to purchase.

Products related to fashion and appearance.

- “Today’s step”—Footwear Brand (ABC-Mart).
- “Lighter footsteps for your day”—Sneakers (New Balance).
- “The magic of scent”—Perfume (Samourai Woman).
- “A fragrance that changes your mood”—Fabric Softener (Lenor).

In advertising for fashion and appearance-related products, metonymy is a particularly effective way to intuitively communicate the emotional and lifestyle value a product brings. These expressions go beyond the literal meaning of words, appealing to consumers by evoking the experience of wearing or using the product.

The phrase “a fragrance that changes your mood”, for example, is a metonymic expression. Rather than stating outright that the fabric softener changes your mood, it focuses on the concrete attribute of “fragrance”, which in turn implies an emotional transformation. The ad suggests that beyond making clothes smell nice, the scent has the power to uplift one’s mood and influence the ambiance of daily life.

This kind of messaging shifts the consumer’s focus from product function to emotional impact. From a metonymic perspective, “fragrance” becomes not just a sensory feature, but a symbol of psychological and emotional uplift. It invites consumers to imagine how scent can positively transform their everyday experiences.

Thus, in advertising fabric softeners, metonymy is used not only to describe physical properties, but to position the product as a life-enhancing tool—one that touches emotions and elevates daily living. It emphasizes the emotional motivations behind purchasing decisions, making the ad both impactful and relatable.

Metaphor

Metaphors using nature and scenery.

- “An oasis for the heart”—Mineral Water (I LOHAS).
- “Comfort above the clouds”—Sofa (Nitori).
- “Blessings of the sun”—Vegetable Juice (Kagome).
- “Ride the wind”—Bicycle (Bridgestone).
- “Healing in the forest”—Spa (Kusatsu Onsen).
- “Wrapped in the scent of cherry blossoms”—Body Care (L’Occitane).

Metaphors that draw on elements of nature and scenic imagery are widely used in advertising as a way to vividly depict the sensations and experiences associated with a product. These expressions allow consumers to instantly visualize pleasant natural landscapes or emotional states, effectively conveying the product’s value in a sensory and emotive manner.

Metaphors related to sensation and experience.

- “A paradise of melt-in-your-mouth delight”—Ice Cream (Häagen-Dazs).
- “A healing coffee moment”—Coffee (Starbucks).
- “Silk that feels like skin”—Stockings (Atsugi).
- “As light as a feather”—Shampoo (Pantene).
- “A cup that opens your world”—Coffee (Nespresso).
- “A fragrance that makes the heart dance”—Perfume (Chanel).
- “Embraced by gentleness”—Baby Products (Pigeon).
- “Lip gloss in love”—Lip Gloss (Canmake).
- “A kiss of ice”—Carbonated Drink (Pepsi).
- “Fiery passion”—Sports Drink (Amino-Value).
- “Curtains of light”—Curtains (Nitori).

These metaphorical expressions are effective because they allow consumers to vicariously experience a product’s qualities—even without direct contact. Humans tend to understand concepts more easily through concrete imagery and sensory input rather than abstract information. Metaphors serve as a bridge, transforming

intangible product benefits into vivid experiences that resonate emotionally.

Yasuda (1997, p. 260) stated the following about personification in advertising:

When we try to think of things as if they were “people,” even light or difficult topics can feel more familiar, making us more inclined to listen. Personification is a commonly used technique in advertising to attract the reader’s interest and open their heart.

Metaphors that evoke physical sensations or emotional experiences also leave a stronger impression in consumers’ memories. For instance, the phrase “a paradise of melt-in-your-mouth delight” goes far beyond simply saying “delicious”—it creates a lush, sensory scene that is more memorable and emotionally impactful. This helps drive consumer preference in a crowded marketplace filled with similar products.

Furthermore, metaphors enhance a product’s perceived value by framing it not merely as a physical item, but as a unique and enriching personal experience. Take Nespresso’s “a cup that opens your world”—this phrase implies that drinking coffee is more than a daily habit; it becomes a moment of self-expansion or inner discovery. As a result, the coffee gains emotional and symbolic weight, increasing its appeal and differentiation.

Metaphors expressing radiance and beauty.

- “Golden glow”—Beer (Kirin Ichiban Shibori).
- “Jewelry that sparkles like stars”—Jewelry (Tiffany & Co.).
- “Snow-white brilliance”—Detergent (Ariel).
- “Mysteries of the universe”—Chocolate (Ghana).
- “Water as art”—Soft Drink (Pocari Sweat).

Advertisements that employ metaphors of radiance and beauty share several key features. First, these metaphors appeal to the visual and sensory experiences familiar to consumers, thereby enhancing the perceived allure of the product. Expressions such as “golden glow”, “sparkles like stars”, or “snow-white brilliance” evoke moments of beauty drawn from nature and daily life, enabling consumers to intuitively sense the product’s uniqueness and emotional value—beyond mere utility.

These metaphors also emphasize experiential value rather than focusing solely on the product’s physical characteristics. For example, purchasing jewelry or beer is not just about obtaining a product—it’s about acquiring a sense of occasion, luxury, or personal reward. Thus, metaphor in advertising becomes a powerful tool to promote lifestyle and emotional resonance, not just functionality.

Moreover, metaphors of beauty and brilliance often suggest not only visual appeal, but also qualities such as trust, rarity, or craftsmanship. Words like “gold”, “stars”, “snow”, “universe”, and “art” are all associated with exceptional value or aesthetic refinement. Through these metaphors, ads subtly position the product as a distinctive and superior choice, suggesting that ownership or use confers a sense of status or distinction.

In this way, metaphors that express brilliance and beauty are highly effective in advertising. They communicate not just the appeal of the product through sensory imagery, but also impress upon consumers the meaningful experience and emotional significance it offers. Rather than emphasizing functional appeal alone, such advertising builds emotional connections, enriching and deepening the overall brand image.

Conclusion

This study has explored the diverse and nuanced use of rhetorical expressions—particularly metonymy and metaphor—in Japanese advertising language, revealing their profound impact on consumer perception and

emotional engagement. Far from being mere decorative flourishes, these rhetorical devices function as strategic tools that allow advertisers to transcend literal descriptions and instead evoke sensory, emotional, and aspirational dimensions of the products they promote.

Metonymy, by symbolically representing parts of the body, sensations, or lifestyle elements, effectively communicates the implied benefits of a product in a way that feels intuitive and emotionally resonant to consumers. Ads that focus on “soft fingertips” or “a refreshing throat” do more than describe beauty or health—they enable the audience to imagine the lived experience of using the product. This kind of indirect communication strengthens the connection between consumer and brand by appealing not to logic but to feeling and familiarity.

Metaphor, on the other hand, invites consumers into a more imaginative and poetic interpretive space. By comparing products to elements of nature, sensation, or celestial imagery—“an oasis for the heart”, “as light as a feather”, or “jewelry that sparkles like stars”—advertisements infuse commodities with symbolic value. These metaphors transform mundane products into vehicles of emotional or even existential significance. A simple cup of coffee becomes “a gateway to a wider world”, suggesting that daily rituals can carry profound meaning and self-affirmation. In doing so, metaphors elevate a product’s appeal, not through features, but through the promise of experience.

Throughout the analysis, it has become clear that rhetorical expressions serve several vital purposes in Japanese advertising. First, they reduce cognitive load by translating abstract product qualities into familiar, image-rich concepts. Second, they create emotional resonance that aids brand recall and preference. And third, they differentiate products in highly saturated markets by embedding them within culturally resonant or aesthetically compelling narratives.

Particularly in the Japanese context—where sensitivity to aesthetics, harmony, and subtlety is deeply embedded in the culture—rhetorical expressions are not only persuasive but also culturally congruent. They reflect a communicative style that values suggestion over assertion, atmosphere over instruction, and emotion over exposition. Thus, rhetorical language in advertising does not merely sell a product; it narrates a lifestyle, evokes shared values, and constructs emotional bridges between the consumer and the commodity.

In sum, the strategic use of metonymy and metaphor in advertising is a powerful semiotic practice that shapes how products are perceived, desired, and remembered. It enhances not only the marketing efficacy but also the cultural sophistication of the brand’s voice. As advertising continues to evolve in a globalized and increasingly digital world, a nuanced understanding of rhetorical techniques will remain essential for creating messages that are not only noticed but felt—deeply and memorably—by the audience.

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