

THE NATURE OF VISUAL METAPHORS IN IT ADVERTISING

Anisoara Pop

Targu Mures, Romania

Summary: Through the analytical processing they induce, metaphors are in keeping with the informative, rational bias of the persuasive intent of information technology (IT) product advertising. Since representational visual grammar has limited chances of rendering additional meanings and commendatory connotations, visual metaphors represent a staple pursuit in print IT advertising with predominance of abstract versus concrete metaphors. Although concrete metaphors are easier to comprehend than their abstract counterparts, the latter are preferred as they are anchored (explained) in, and substantiate either the headline or the copy grammar message, guiding the reader/consumer unerringly towards the intended closures.

I. Introduction

1.1. Functional versus feel products

Functional product advertising has been reported to be highly informational [Neese 1994], i.e., rich in factual information content and tangible cues relative to product attributes. Evaluation on inherent functional product features allows comparison with similar products [Dahlen 2003] and induces analytical processing that involves the consumer, IT products thus falling within high-involvement, “think” product category.

On the other hand, non-factual products such as cosmetics, food, and drinks belong to the “feel” category where the consumers are exposed to the product through associations and affective attributes rather than rational purchase motives.

Such product-linked aspects are expected to be mapped differently at both linguistic and visual level of ad construction. Based on Zandpour’s [Zandpour 1994] definition of creative strategy as “the guiding principle determining the general nature and character of advertising”, and Simon’s [Simon 1971] classification of creative strategies as: information, motivation with psychological appeal, symbolic association, repeated assertion, command, brand familiarization, and imitation, etc., we have demonstrated empirically that at copy level, IT advertising is biased on *information* and *argument* strategies which are linguistically encoded through concrete IT product specifications usually listed under headings as well as facts and reasoned arguments “why”, respectively [Pop 2008].

The current paper will examine the nature of visual metaphors in print IT product advertising and assess their function within the general framework of rational persuasion.

II. Metaphors

2.1. Visual metaphors

Defined as statements or pictures which cause the receiver to experience one thing in terms of another [Lakoff 1980], metaphors communicate attributes and transfer meaning between a referent (*secundum comparatum* or vehicle) and

product (*primum comparatum*). Stern¹ [Stern 1990] defines pictorial metaphor as similar to verbal metaphor in that it compares two images through analogy by suggesting that one object is like another, even though they are quite different.

Effectiveness of metaphors in advertising is still a matter of debate. Psycholinguistic studies of advertising have demonstrated that due to their interest value and curiosity stimulation, *metaphors determine a deeper level of ad processing*. Other researchers [Phillips 1997] have communicated, however, that *metaphors are not always comprehended as their creators have intended*.

Visual metaphors depict relationships between a product/service and some visual element with qualities that the creator wants to assign to that specific product. From this premise, it is assumed that [Kaplan 1992²] *visual metaphors might be easier to comprehend and facilitate better recall than verbal metaphors*. The explanation is simple: while verbal metaphors require a receiver to create their own image (which may or may not overlap with the one intended), in a visual metaphor the comparison has already been produced.

Hypothesis. Our research question (RQ) will focus on **the nature of visual metaphors in IT advertising and demonstrate that although concrete metaphors are easier to comprehend, visuals predominantly take the form of abstract metaphors as they anchor the headline or copy message guiding the reader/consumer towards the intended closures.**

To this end we will enforce a basic distinction between concrete and abstract visual metaphors and their related functions on a corpus of 30 advertisements published in the June, September, October, and December 2004 issues of the CHIP journal, including IT products and services ranging from printers, PCs and servers, to digital cameras, parts and communication services.

2.2. Concrete versus abstract metaphors

Concrete metaphors rely on comparisons that can be directly experienced through the senses, whilst in **abstract metaphors** the product is compared to a non-tangible quality, i.e., the experience evoked by the image cannot be touched, tasted, seen, felt as an object in the ad. It has been suggested that concrete metaphors are better comprehended and less prone to misinterpretations than abstract ones, with no further implication, however, of the latter being less powerful.

The headline: “Cresc înalți deasupra celorlalți / They grow up (high) above the others” (ZyXtel) is associated with an image of extremely tall cable-like forest trees. The copper networks are equated with particular traits of the trees in the image: length/height, which can be experienced directly through the senses. This tenor is surfaced (anchored) by the headline “înalți / tall (high)” (concrete metaphor).

An example of abstract metaphor is the ALPIS ad image of an experienced mountaineer engaged in a dangerous escalation almost reaching the top, covertly communicating computer-linked concepts of performance, skill, power, traits which are intangible to the senses:

¹ Quoted by Phillips B.J. (2000).

² Quoted by Morgan (1999).

Headline: “Fii la înaltime” (pun in Romanian): “Rise to expectations/aspire/climb towards the peak.”

Although rarely, the visual metaphor can be reinforced by a verbal metaphor as in the ZyXel and Flanko ads:

“Downpour of offers” (Flanko).

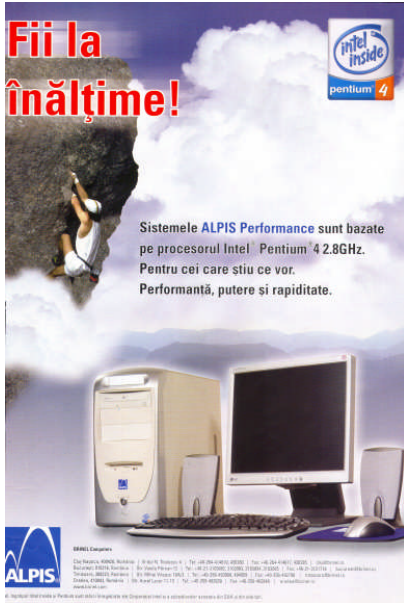


Fig. 1. Alpis Computers

III. Analysis

In 43% of the 50% IT ads resorting to metaphor, copy-writers employed abstract visual metaphors (and only in 20% to concrete metaphors), whereas the remaining 50% either had reversed anchorage (the image anchored the text) – in cases of parasitic copies – or the images were representational (matter of fact shots of product in use): basically office locations including employees and product of the perfect-modern-efficient-office type which subscribe to rational persuasion. Since representational visual grammar has limited chances of rendering additional intended strong implicatures other than an objectified, factual, market presentation, visual metaphors remain a staple pursuit of IT advertisements with predominance of abstract versus concrete metaphors.

Starting from the above-mentioned contention in advertising research that **concrete metaphors are easier to comprehend than abstract ones**, we may wonder why would IT advertisers rely on more difficult to interpret abstract metaphors, even if the metaphorical images are addressed to highly computer-literate readers (or just for that!). The utility of abstract visual metaphors could be questioned unless we consider them in conjunction with the verbal grammar of headlines (HG) and copies (CG), which, as illustrated in the Alpis and ZyXtel ads above, serve to anchor in place the metaphorical meaning. A further distinction we imposed, therefore, on visual metaphors was \pm **anchorage in HG and/or CG**. From this perspective the conclusion is different: **although abstract, IT visual metaphors are deeply anchored** (explained metaphor) in either HG or CG. IT advertisers do not seem eager to leave consumers construct their appropriate closures but industriously pinpoint the intended interpretations under different degrees, either as “clue” (less directly) or completely, most frequently as headline clues (see table 1):

Product/service	Visual metaphor	± HL and/or CG anchorage
Orange	Vehicle: cheetah Tenor: speed	HG anchorage: www. La o nouă viteză / www. At a new speed
UPS	Vehicle: skyglader Tenor: high performance	CG anchorage: “cu performanțe tehnice înalte ” / ”with high technical performance”
Canon printers	Vehicle: three women Tenor: beauty	CG anchorage: “vor decora biroul tău (clue)” / ”will decorate your office”

Table 1. Degrees of HG or CG anchorage in visual grammar

We can conclude that there are **strongly conveyed pictorial implicatures** or central meanings which should be **difficult to misinterpret**, and if this may happen, the headline and/or CG will restore them to the intended place through anchorage.

Another distinctive characteristic of the IT corpus was the evident exclusion of image metaphors prone to conveying messages related to sex and romance, destined to imbue technical products with sexual innuendo. Pictorially depicted sex appeal, nudity or romantic settings, scored zero tokens despite the conspicuous advertising contention that “sex sells everything”. Our corpus deployed no IT-associated images on which derivation of sexual-weak implicatures rely in the case of cosmetics, drinks and other low-involvement “feel” products. The only intended association between product and women figures was covert and resorted to (fig. 2) in the ambiguous reference of the text to the two sets of images: product/women.

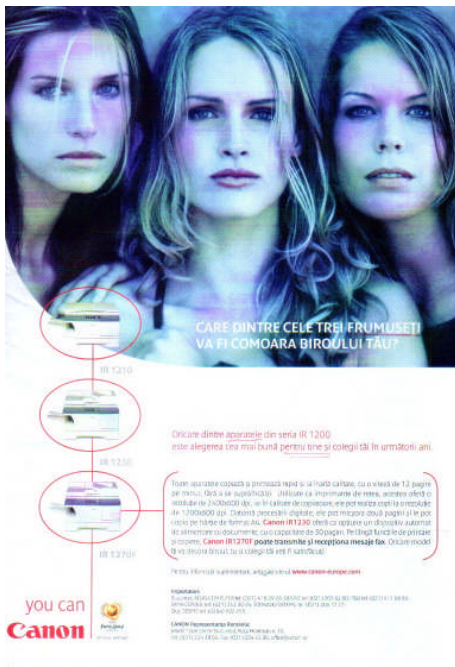


Fig. 2. The Three Graces

The “three beauties” – three young women – are primed by the headline, and three types of Canon printers are copy-primed. Theoretically, infinite weak implicatures can be associated with the product as attributes of the referent [young women]: beauty, style, attractiveness, delicacy, novelty, etc. “Which of *the three beauties* will be the treasure of your office?”

Nor did we encounter visual metaphors most likely to overtly convey negative but weak implicatures, with a single exception of an ad (outside our corpus but in the same journal).

The ad for Best Computers resorted to visual abstract metaphor, i.e., the vehicle was represented by a presumably evident difference in increased resolution of rendering two hideous next generation creatures. However, the overtly conveyed strong implicatures are positive and anchored in the CG: force, resolution (fig. 3): “Can you spot the difference? You choose.” Other invalid closures related to danger and lack of aesthetic traits, though strongly communicated by this visual metaphor, are nowhere supported in the grammar. Such examples are rare since most often additional weak implicatures conveyed through pictorial metaphors have a positive character.

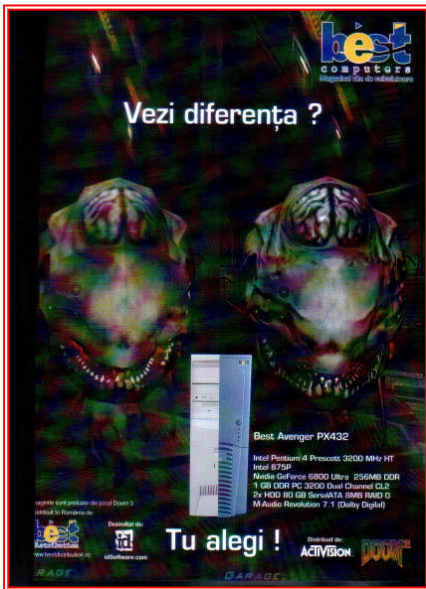


Fig. 3. Best Computers. “Can you spot the difference?”

Most visual metaphors in IT have an abstract character (43.3%) and are therefore deeply anchored in the HG and/or CG in a scale ranging from “clues” to complete interpretations in order to ensure ease of processing and prevent derivation of unintended meanings. This trend testifies to the fact that through the analytical processing they induce, metaphors are in keeping with the informative, rational bias of the IT persuasive discourse.

Invalid closures though strongly communicated by the visual metaphors of IT print advertising are nowhere supported in the grammar, while generally implicatures strongly conveyed through pictorial metaphors have a positive character. Otherwise, set against the advertising purpose of selling and commending the product, unfavorable interpretations are refuted.

An example is the case of Orange (see table 1): partially valid closures (tenor) for the “cheetah” vehicle could be: “rapid” and “rare” and hence “rare services are precious”.

To conclude, a validation test will set the additional interpretations against the general advertising assumption that each product is good and valuable, and will refute whatever is unfavorable about it.

IV. Conclusion

Illustrations in ads for durable IT products tend to be rationally biased (50%) and may represent a means of anchorage for copies based on emotional appeals. These representational images illustrate the product and its attributes with superimposed connotations of the perfect-modern-efficient-office type.

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