

Research on Cognitive Linguistics of Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising--A Case Study of Automobile Advertising

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Abstract: Multimodal metaphor research focuses on the role of multiple sensory channels in meaning construction, while cognitive linguistics explains the relationship between language and thought from the perspective of cognitive mechanisms. Advertising, as a multimodal text, utilizes the integration of images, sounds, language, and other modalities to convey metaphorical messages and evoke emotional resonance among consumers. This paper takes automobile advertising as the research subject, delving into the cognitive mechanisms of multimodal metaphor in advertising and its impact on consumer psychology, thereby revealing the significant value of multimodal metaphor in the field of advertising.

Keywords: Multimodal metaphor; Cognitive linguistics; Automobile advertising; Metaphorical cognition; Consumer psychology.

1. Introduction

In today's highly commercialized society, advertising has become an important means of information dissemination. It not only serves to convey information about products or services but also carries the mission of spreading culture and values. The success of advertising hinges on its ability to touch consumers' emotions, evoke their resonance, and ultimately drive purchasing behavior. With technological advancements and the diversification of communication methods, multimodal advertising has emerged. Multimodal metaphor, as a core element of multimodal advertising, integrates visual, auditory, tactile, and other sensory information to make advertising content more vivid and engaging, significantly enhancing its appeal and effectiveness.

The development of cognitive linguistics provides robust theoretical support for the study of multimodal metaphor. Applying cognitive linguistic theories to multimodal metaphor research helps reveal the process of transmitting and understanding metaphorical messages in advertising, offering scientific guidance for advertising design and marketing strategies. Automobiles, as significant consumer goods in modern society, are highly representative in advertising. Multimodal metaphors are widely used in automobile advertising, where clever metaphorical constructions create unique cognitive and emotional experiences for consumers. Therefore, studying multimodal metaphor through automobile advertising is of great importance for enriching advertising theory and guiding advertising practice.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Multimodal Metaphor and Cognitive Linguistics

2.1. Definition and Characteristics of Multimodal Metaphor

Multimodal metaphor breaks the limitation of traditional

unimodal metaphor, which relies solely on linguistic expression, by conveying metaphorical meaning through multiple sensory channels (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009). In daily life and cognitive activities, language is not the only means of expression; senses such as vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste all participate in the construction of meaning. Multimodal metaphor is based on this cognitive reality, emphasizing the synergistic role of different modalities in metaphorical expression.

Compared to unimodal metaphor, multimodal metaphor has distinct advantages. For example, in automobile advertising, describing a car's "speed and power" solely through text may fail to create an intuitive impression for consumers. However, combining dynamic exterior design (visual modality) with the powerful roar of the engine (auditory modality) can vividly convey the metaphor of "speed and power." Different modalities complement and reinforce each other, making the metaphorical expression richer and more multidimensional. This allows the audience to perceive and understand the metaphor from multiple angles, enhancing the effectiveness of information transmission.

Multimodal metaphor is also context-dependent, as its interpretation is closely tied to specific contexts. Under different cultural, social, and historical backgrounds, the same combination of multimodal elements may convey different metaphorical meanings. Therefore, when analyzing multimodal metaphors, contextual factors must be fully considered to accurately grasp their connotations.

2.2. Metaphor Theory in Cognitive Linguistics

Cognitive linguistics challenges the traditional view of metaphor as merely a rhetorical device, proposing instead that metaphor is a fundamental way humans cognize the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In human thought, metaphor plays a crucial role, helping people understand unfamiliar and abstract concepts through familiar and concrete ones.

Conceptual metaphor theory is one of the core theories in cognitive linguistic research on metaphor. It posits that metaphor is essentially a cross-domain mapping—

transferring structures from a relatively concrete and easily understood conceptual domain (source domain) to a relatively abstract and harder-to-understand conceptual domain (target domain).

Image schema theory is another important component of cognitive linguistics. Image schemas are basic cognitive structures formed through human interaction with the objective world, such as container schemas, path schemas, and balance schemas. These schemas are abstract and generalizable, helping people organize and comprehend experiences. In metaphorical construction, image schemas play a key role.

2.3. Integration of Multimodal Metaphor and Cognitive Linguistics

The integration of multimodal metaphor and cognitive linguistics provides a new perspective for studying language and meaning construction. Both focus on the construction and transmission of meaning but from different angles. Multimodal metaphor explores how metaphorical information is conveyed through the combination of different modalities across multiple sensory channels, while cognitive linguistics delves into human cognitive mechanisms to explain how these metaphorical messages are integrated, understood, and processed in the brain.

Image schema theory also plays a role here. For example, a visual depiction of a car driving on a winding road (visual modality), combined with a verbal description of the joy of driving (language modality), activates the path schema in consumers' minds. Consumers construct the image of driving a car as an exploration of life's journey, thereby developing cognitive recognition and desire for the car's performance and the joyful experience it offers. This integration of multimodal metaphor and cognitive linguistic theory enables advertising to more precisely reach consumers' cognitive level, evoke emotional resonance, and achieve its communication goals.

3. Analysis of Multimodal Metaphor in Automobile Advertising

3.1. The Great Chain of Being Metaphor in Automobile Advertising

The Great Chain of Being metaphor is common in automobile advertising, where cars are analogized to animals, natural phenomena, or high-tech products to construct unique metaphorical relationships and assign specific attributes and values to the cars.

Comparing cars to animals is a frequent technique. For instance, in the Dongfeng Nissan X-Trail advertisement, the car is likened to a "steed." Visually, the car's body lines may mimic the elegant posture of a steed, presenting a smooth and dynamic silhouette. Auditorily, the engine's startup sound resembles the steed's powerful neigh. Through these two modalities, the steed's characteristics—speed, power, and vitality—are mapped onto the car. When consumers see such an advertisement, they associate the image of a steed galloping across the plains with the car's performance, thereby reinforcing their perception of the car's speed and power.

3.2. Event Structure Metaphor in Automobile Advertising

Event structure metaphor in automobile advertising is

primarily used to showcase the car's performance and driving experience. By metaphorically linking driving behavior to other meaningful events, it creates unique psychological impressions for consumers.

"Driving is soaring" is a typical event structure metaphor in automobile advertising. In the Chery Tiggo 8 advertisement, the car is visually depicted speeding on an open road against a backdrop of blue skies and white clouds, as if soaring freely through the air. Auditorily, gentle wind sounds and uplifting music simulate the environment of soaring. Mapping the concept of "soaring" onto "driving" allows consumers to feel the freedom, exhilaration, and boundlessness of driving, enhancing their anticipation of the driving experience. This metaphor not only highlights the car's speed but also adds romantic and joyful emotional tones to the act of driving.

3.3. Personification Metaphor in Automobile Advertising

Personification metaphor endows cars with human traits, establishing emotional connections between cars and consumers and strengthening consumers' emotional identification with the cars.

In one car advertisement, the car's stylish appearance visually resembles a fashionable companion, while the slogan "It understands your needs" is used linguistically. This expression maps the traits of a "friend"—understanding and companionship—onto the car. When consumers see such an advertisement, they feel an emotional closeness, perceiving the car not merely as a means of transportation but as a companion that understands their needs and accompanies them on their journeys. This personification metaphor fulfills consumers' psychological needs for emotional interaction and a sense of belonging, increasing their emotional attachment to the car.

4. The Impact of Multimodal Metaphor on Consumer Cognition

4.1. Emotional Influence of Multimodal Metaphor

Multimodal metaphor, through coordinated stimulation of multiple sensory channels, can significantly enhance the emotional impact of advertising. In automobile advertising, the car's sleek design (visual modality) and the powerful roar of the engine (auditory modality) together create a strong aura, igniting consumers' desire for the car's performance. For example, the Audi RS7 advertisement, with its smooth body lines, unique color scheme, and the deep, powerful sound of the engine upon startup, instantly sparks consumers' pursuit of speed and excitement. Such intense emotional impact makes it easier for consumers to remember the advertisement and develop a strong interest in the car.

Multimodal metaphor can also evoke emotional resonance among consumers. When the metaphor aligns with consumers' life experiences, values, or emotional needs, they feel a strong sense of identification. For instance, automobile advertisements themed around family outings showcase the car's spacious and comfortable interior and heartwarming family scenes (visual modality), accompanied by warm music and affectionate slogans (auditory and language modalities), conveying the metaphor that "the car is a carrier of family joy." This reminds consumers of their own happy moments with family, creating emotional resonance with the advertisement and fostering a positive attitude toward the car.

4.2. Cultural Adaptability of Multimodal Metaphor

Multimodal metaphor, with its intuitive and vivid characteristics, can transcend cultural differences and be understood and accepted by consumers from diverse cultural backgrounds. For example, the metaphor of comparing a car to an "eagle" works because eagles symbolize strength, freedom, and bravery in many cultures. Whether in Eastern or Western cultures, people can grasp these traits represented by the eagle. Thus, when automobile advertising employs this metaphor, consumers from different cultural backgrounds can quickly understand the car's performance advantages as conveyed by the advertisement.

However, in cross-cultural communication, multimodal metaphors need to be adjusted according to cultural characteristics. Different cultures interpret certain colors, symbols, and imagery differently, so advertisers must fully consider these factors to avoid cultural misunderstandings that could undermine the advertisement's effectiveness. When designing multimodal advertisements, it is essential to select and apply metaphorical elements appropriately based on the cultural characteristics of the target market, ensuring the accurate transmission and acceptance of the advertising message.

4.3. Cognitive Load Reduction by Multimodal Metaphor

Multimodal metaphor reduces consumers' cognitive burden and improves the efficiency of information transmission by conveying messages through multiple sensory channels simultaneously. In automobile advertising, when visuals display the car's appearance and functions, audio introduces its performance parameters, and language emphasizes its advantages, consumers can absorb information from multiple angles, making it easier to understand the advertisement's content.

Compared to unimodal advertisements, multimodal metaphors provide richer cognitive cues for consumers. For example, when introducing a car's intelligent safety system, the advertisement not only describes its functions verbally but also demonstrates its working principles through animations (visual modality) and alert sounds (auditory modality). Through coordinated perception via multiple senses, consumers can quickly grasp complex technical concepts, reducing the difficulty of information processing and comprehension.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that multimodal metaphors in automobile advertising transcend mere aesthetic appeal, functioning as cognitive tools that shape consumer perceptions and emotions. By integrating conceptual metaphor theory and image schema theory, advertisers can craft narratives that resonate deeply across sensory and cultural dimensions.

Future research should explore emerging technologies like AI-generated content and VR advertising, where multimodal metaphors may evolve into interactive, immersive experiences. Additionally, comparative studies across product categories (e.g., luxury vs. eco-friendly cars) could reveal nuanced applications of metaphorical strategies. Such advancements will not only refine advertising theory but also empower practitioners to design campaigns that captivate increasingly discerning audiences.

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