

Exploring the impact of figurative communication and advertising

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11

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF FIGURATIVE COMMUNICATION AND ADVERTISING

Reflections on a collaboration
between linguistics researchers and
a Midlands-based marketing agency

Samantha Ford and Jeannette Littlemore

Introduction

Metaphor is a powerful and widely used device in advertising, and there has been a substantial amount of research into the roles that it plays and the reasons for its success (Chang and Yen 2013; Gkiouzepas 2015; Jeong 2008; Pérez-Sobrino 2016; Phillips and McQuarrie 2002). However, much of this research has been laboratory-based, and much of the analysis of metaphor in advertising has been reliant on researchers' intuitions to interpret the 'intended message' of an advertisement. The main reason for the lack of real-world focus in this area is largely due to the fact that there has been limited proactive engagement with professionals from the advertising industry itself.

Research into the role played by metaphor in advertising has much to gain from the inclusion of input from advertising professionals. Metaphors can be read in many different ways, and the ways in which they are understood by metaphor scholars may differ considerably from the ways in which they are understood by the creative professionals who produced them or indeed the consumers at whom they are targeted (Littlemore and Pérez-Sobrino 2017; Pérez-Sobrino et al. 2019). In academic metaphor studies, a metaphor is deemed to be 'effective' if it has elicited a positive response from participants, or if the participants have said that the advertisement would make them more likely to buy the product that is being advertised or to engage in the action that is being promoted (Fishbein et al. 2002: 239). As the majority of academic studies have not incorporated actual distribution and sales data for live campaigns, perceived effectiveness measures (e.g. self-reported participant ratings) are deemed to serve as a 'best estimate' to indicate the degree of 'persuasive potential' (Dillard et al. 2007: 617) and as a proxy for actual effectiveness (i.e. how people would respond to a live campaign).

However, ‘perceived effectiveness’ scores can be unreliable in predicting actual effectiveness, as people tend to over predict the extent to which an advertisement may encourage sales or lead to behavioural change (Dillard et al. 2007).

Moreover, some of the research into the role played by metaphor in advertising has tended to assume that the main goal is to ‘sell a product,’ whereas advertising is increasingly being used for brand building (i.e. building a brand’s reputation) or for discussing a particular ideology or social issue (Binet and Field 2013). Indeed, the annual Cannes Lions Festival of Creativity for innovative campaigns frequently awards top prizes to agencies who have produced campaigns that enact a social duty, whether that be charitable donations and investment in community projects (e.g. Nike: *Just Do It HQ at The Church*¹) or the incorporation of inclusive considerations of their product design (e.g. IKEA’s *This.Ables*²). Therefore, the notion of an ‘intended message,’ which is discussed in much of the metaphor literature, cannot be accurately confirmed without consulting the original authors of the advertisement, and little research has been done that asks advertisers what exactly they intend to communicate when developing campaigns.

In our research, we have attempted to bridge the gap between metaphor researchers and advertising professionals by working together on research projects based around advertising campaigns that are in the process of being developed. The research began as an EU-funded Marie-Curie funded project, EMMA: *European Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising*,³ with Dr Paula Pérez-Sobrino as the Research Fellow. The aim of this project was to explore people’s comprehension of, and emotional responses to, metaphor in advertising across different cultures. Within the context of the EMMA project, we worked with various communication and branding agencies, ranging from large-scale multinational organisations to small local agencies, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how metaphor is used in advertising and received by consumers.

Through these partnerships, we hoped to gain deeper insights into the intended messages of the advertisements and to explore first-hand how and why certain metaphors are used in campaigns, as well as to measure how people engage with metaphor and whether the use of metaphor in different formats contributes to advertising effectiveness. Working with advertising agencies meant that we were able to access and observe measures for both perceived and actual effectiveness.

Enter Big Cat...

Our most successful and enduring partnership has been with the Birmingham-based marketing agency Big Cat Agency.⁴ We first met the CEO of Big Cat, Anthony Tattum, at a Birmingham ‘Business Breakfast’ event at which business leaders and researchers are invited to give talks on a common theme. The theme of the Business Breakfast at which we presented was: *Examining Language in Business*. We had not met Big Cat before the event, but during the course of the event where we each presented our ideas (EMMA on ‘metaphor in advertising’

and Anthony from Big Cat on ‘creative clarity’) we realised that we had a common interest in maximising the effectiveness of the language used in advertising and that there was therefore potential for collaboration. Our collaboration grew out of a mutual interest in gaining an insight into the workings of metaphor in advertising and in measuring its impact on consumer attitude and behaviour. We believed that we could investigate these issues by combining our knowledge of metaphor in linguistics with the extensive experience of Big Cat in creating campaigns.

The partnership began in 2018 and was informal to begin with. It has since transitioned into a collaborative PhD project with Samantha Ford as the PhD student, and Jeannette Littlemore and Anthony Tattum as joint lead supervisors. The project is funded by the Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), part of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) government body. In the context of this more formal collaboration, we have conducted studies that have investigated the effective use of metaphor in different environments in advertising, including websites, logos and billboards.

The variety of clients with whom Big Cat works, including charities, health-care and leisure providers, and the range of media through which they work has provided us with opportunities to use a variety of approaches and frameworks in our research. We have combined eye-tracking technology and electro-dermal measurements (EDA) with focus groups, interviews, surveys and corpus linguistic techniques to test the use and effectiveness of figurative language in five Big Cat campaigns for clients (to date, 2021): Right Track (professional training solutions); Solihull Community Housing (housing association); Aspire’s Channel Swim (spinal cord injury charity), Umbrella Health (sexual health NHS trust); and Absolutely Fitness (gym brand). We have also contributed to a number of other projects and clients including the Mental Health and Productivity Pilot (MHPP) funded by MidlandsEngine and Coventry University for mental health at work⁵; Royce Lingerie, specialised lingerie for post-operation and maternity women; and BHSF health insurance.

This collaborative work has had multiple benefits, which have included extending the reach of the clients with whom Big Cat works (many of whom are charities), improving creative practice in Big Cat itself and (for us) deepening our understanding of the ways in which advertising and communication work, which has had a significant impact on our academic work.

The benefits of collaborating with Big Cat

Working with Big Cat has been highly beneficial to our research. It has opened our eyes to the real aims of communications and branding campaigns, which are often more subtle than we had previously understood them to be. We have had opportunities to develop research projects and investigate aspects of figurative language that we would never have thought of investigating. These have

included, for example, investigations into the interaction between metaphor and humour in the context of creative puns; the interaction between language, colour and shape in terms of metaphorical expression; and studies of the myriad different forms that metaphorical creativity can take in different forms of expression. The research projects have provided us with an opportunity to work with large amounts of naturally occurring data and this has helped us to develop theoretical approaches that are more reflective of 'real-world' communication (some of which are reported in Sobrino et al. 2021). Recommendations that we have made arising from our research have been implemented in developing campaigns, and the impact of our work has been measured objectively through product sales, consumer behaviour, website traffic and social media engagement, where comparisons have been made with previous campaigns that had been created without insights from our research. Developing relationships with marketing professionals has also broadened our network, providing potential opportunities for future collaborations.

Big Cat have benefitted from the collaboration too. We have provided them with findings based on rigorous research studies that, when implemented, have helped their clients, many of whom are charities and non-government organisations (NGOs). The collaboration has also helped them to improve their creative practices, as well as contribute to the overall success of their campaigns. This has added a unique selling point (USP) to their business which has helped them to attract new clients.

The challenges we have faced and how we have overcome them

Somewhat ironically, one of the main challenges that we have faced in this collaboration involves language. One of the first things that we discovered when working with Big Cat is that academic linguists and marketing professionals sometimes use different words to talk about very similar concepts, and conversely, that we sometimes use the same word to mean very different things. We have therefore needed to take great care in explaining terminology to one another and not assume that those on the other side of the collaboration will necessarily understand exactly what we mean. For example, we have found that, when using terms such as 'metonymy' and 'hyperbole' with Big Cat, it is useful to illustrate them through the use of memorable examples, and in turn, when Big Cat uses terms such as 'marketing effectiveness,' they provide detailed explanations showing the complexity of the meaning of the expressions. Even the word 'metaphor' has been susceptible to different interpretations. Big Cat employees tend to use the term somewhat loosely, to refer to different kinds of creative language, and are less familiar with the idea of implicit, conceptual metaphors. They have been interested to learn of the work that has been conducted on the use of metaphor in forms of expression other than language.

In order to learn more about how to ‘speak each other’s language,’ we have had to ask many questions in order to clarify unfamiliar terms. Furthermore, in order to familiarise ourselves with the genres that characterise the advertising workplace, we have observed meetings between Big Cat and their clients, attended events with marketing audiences (e.g. The Marketing MeetUp, Birmingham⁶) and read up about marketing trends by marketing experts (Binet and Field 2007, 2013, 2017, 2019; Chun et al. 2018; Field 2019). We have also continued to learn throughout the partnership, and one of the authors (Ford) has taken up several training opportunities, including studying for and receiving the Eff Test Certificate, accredited by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA). She has also attended behavioural science workshops delivered by Richard Shotton, author of *The Choice Factory* (Shotton 2018). These opportunities have been made accessible through Big Cat, who have always been willing to share their resources with us. In taking these opportunities, we have not only expanded our knowledge and appreciation of the industry in which we are researching metaphor but we have also developed our ability to interpret and converse with our partners more effectively.

We approached the early stages of our partnership with an open mind and an adaptive attitude, which helped to build rapport. We tested out different ways of working together, identifying similarities and differences in our respective goals. For each project, this has meant identifying what each party wants to achieve, who should correspond with whom and how frequently we need to meet. We review the progress of the project on a regular basis and ensure that everyone involved is aware of the outputs to date. We communicate with each other at each step, check whether the project is on track and decide whether it needs to change course. Sometimes unexpected findings lead us down new and unanticipated paths. At times, we have had to negotiate the requirements of a particular project, including the need for academic rigour (i.e. sample sizes with suitable power and effect size for reliable statistical inferences to be made) and the potential for open access research and publication of findings from the studies that we have worked on together. In these discussions, we have emphasised the importance (for us) of gaining recognition from our institution, funders and academic peers.

We found out very early on in our partnership that academics and advertisers sometimes work to very different timelines. While academic studies require space to think about, design and conduct, advertisers work on a fast-paced schedule with multiple client campaigns in various stages of production at any one time, with sometimes only a few months from client instruction to campaign creation to the distribution of a live campaign. A fast turnaround for reports of our study findings has sometimes involved intense periods of work. In order to deal with this issue, we have been somewhat selective in terms of which campaigns we choose to work on. In general, we tend to choose campaigns that are beneficial to society, such as professional training, housing, public health charities and trusts, and fitness and wellbeing brands. We have found that the brief

reports we produce for Big Cat summarising our findings provide the basis for longer publishable papers.

Maintaining regular contact has been an integral component of our relationship. Samantha Ford (co-author) has a hot-desk space at the Big Cat office where (before the Covid-19 pandemic) she worked once a week to work among the marketing staff. Samantha's physical presence within the organisation has served multiple purposes. In addition to providing a physical manifestation of the partnership, it has also facilitated progress in-person updates, enabled us to attend in-agency meetings with clients to gain a contextual understanding of each campaign and allowed for spontaneous conversations in which exchanges of expertise and discussions have taken place that may have otherwise been missed.

The view from Big Cat

We felt that it would be useful in this chapter not just to present our own view of the collaboration but also the views of Big Cat. As part of the research collaboration, we have conducted interviews with seven colleagues⁷ at Big Cat, including the CEO, creative designers, account managers, human resources and administrative staff. We asked them, among other things, to talk about the kinds of things they consider when putting together a campaign, how they define creativity and effectiveness in advertising and what benefits and drawbacks our collaboration has brought. Here, we collate some of their thoughts.

Many of the Big Cat employees commented on the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and expertise that the collaboration has brought: 'It's a mutually beneficial relationship ... born out of longevity ... we [advertisers] are trying to be more scientific and you [academics] are trying to understand the area of industry that you're interested in, and so it is that two-way relationship' [001]. They particularly appreciated the academic rigour that the collaboration has brought to their work: 'If you're supported by academic rigour and you're supported by theories that have a foundation in academia, then you're going to make so much more progress and you'll also develop a wider array of understanding than you ever would by just trying to figure it out of the macro sense' [002].

Some commented on the importance of effective communication that acknowledges the different backgrounds of those involved in the partnership: 'I would just say that communication is the absolute key to building an established relationship between any two bodies who technically speak two different languages, as it were. Finding the middle ground and being able to discuss and having a secure and confident open area where people can ask their questions, people can say, actually you know what, I don't understand that, please could you explain a little bit more' [002].

The advertising professionals commented on the fact that the research can make the mechanics of the creative process more tangible and can facilitate easier communication within a creative team as well as with clients: 'For all those times we couldn't put a label on something and you knew that you had to achieve a certain

objective but you weren't quite sure how, it gives you both the support when you go to your clients to sort of explain and verify what it is that you're discussing' [002]. 'It makes a campaign a lot more effective when you've got all these different angles and different pieces of information; we learn a lot of things along the way as well' [006]. Others commented on the fact that applying advertising practices that are supported by academic research can also strengthen pitches to clients: 'If you can start bringing actual research into your pitches, that is a really strong statement. Once people understand that what you're trying to say is actually backed up by strong academic principles, then it adds a lot of weight to what you're saying' [005].

Some interviewees reflected on the wider implications of the partnership: '[A collaborative academic-practitioner partnership] is about different viewpoints, but it's [also] about breadth and depth of insight and understanding' [001]. In other words, it is not just identifying the use of figurative language in advertising but interrogating how and why figurative language is used creatively in advertising and thinking about the impact of language more generally: 'It's really, really useful to have the bank of knowledge from an academic perspective because it gives us [advertisers] that robust proven evidence-based approach... Gut feeling intuition is not enough alone' [004]. The added value provided by the collaboration was a focus of many of the interviewees: 'Something that is quite widespread within marketing ... if you look at some of the adverts I've seen, you know, there's not real insight to it at all. It's just they've grabbed a celebrity and they've put his or her face on the ad without really any thought. I guess it does work to a certain extent. But to be more effective, it's got being driven by an understanding of the audience. That's where it starts. The more you can understand that audience, the better. And then you can apply the studies and experiments and then you can test it' [004].

Some of the interviewees commented on the need to find a balance between 'hard-nosed' empirical research and the creative process, and on the complementary nature of these two approaches: 'I think for me, I've always been nervous about testing creative campaigns because there have been so many stories of campaigns that have actually turned out to be really effective... but I think it's all down to the context of how you test it' [003]. 'It does worry me a little bit in terms of people getting stuck on numbers... I know that numbers are important to a campaign to see what a campaign's reach is, for example, but I wouldn't want that to influence the creative side of it' [007]. These interviewees suggest that combining academic rigour with practical observation of consumer behaviour may provide more realistic insights into creativity. For instance, [003] explains that academic lab testing may encourage more rational responses from people because they are presented with an advertisement and asked to explain how they feel about it; whereas, observing people viewing an advertisement on TV at home focuses more on their emotional response in a natural setting: 'I think there's always a bias to people responding to questions. So, for me, robust research, and the ways academics can help, is to assist agencies and marketers in testing their creative [campaigns] through observing people, asking people questions, whatever tricks

they've got up their sleeves, and then putting that all together to get a better picture' [003]. A common theme that ran through all of the interviews was the need for synergy and a recognition of the respective skillsets and approaches that are brought by advertisers and linguists.

A case study: working together on a sexual health campaign

One of our most successful studies conducted through this partnership is our work with Big Cat on a sexual health campaign developed for Umbrella Health (Ford et al. 2021). Umbrella Health is an NHS trust with sexual health clinics based in Birmingham and Solihull, UK. Umbrella wanted to increase the uptake of home testing kits for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the form of increased orders and returns for testing in the West Midlands region. Sexual health is still a stigmatised subject in the UK (and further afield), and so Umbrella were looking for a way to raise awareness of sexual health and STI testing in a more indirect and palatable way. Metaphor lends itself very well to this task, as it can be used to talk about something in terms of something else (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003) and has been found to engage attention and elicit positive attitudes from viewers in the context of advertisements (Pérez-Sobrino et al. 2019; van Mulken et al. 2010). Humour can also serve as a powerful tool for mediating embarrassment caused by sensitive topics (Chapple and Ziebland 2004) and increase people's acceptance of messages involving sex-related topics (Sparks and Lang 2015).

We were a part of this campaign at every stage, from conception to distribution of the live campaign, which meant that we were able to make recommendations to Big Cat and to Umbrella, based on our findings for how metaphor and humour may be used effectively together in this campaign. Our study involved an online quasi-experiment that presented 12 advertisements to 355 participants from across the West Midlands region. The advertisements used humorous double-entendres (i.e. puns that can be interpreted in 'an innocuous, straightforward way, given the context, and a risqué way that indirectly alludes to a different, indecent context'; Kiddon and Brun 2011: 89) of well-known landmarks in the West Midlands. The names of these landmarks could be alternatively read as referring to sex- or relationship-related activities. For example, there is an area of Birmingham called 'Sparkbrook.' One of the advertisements in the campaign contained the question 'Got a spark with Brook?' – which suggests that someone may be contemplating a romantic (or sexual) relationship with someone called Brook. In another advertisement, the independent shopping and business workplace known as 'The Custard Factory' was reformulated into the question: 'Having fun with his Custard Factory?' which refers to the idea of playing with a man's genitalia.

As we can see in these examples, the double-entendres had a metaphorical basis. The decision to employ metaphor in the context of double-entendres was driven by the fact that double-entendres (like metaphor) work on different levels and contain an element of unexpectedness. They have been shown to be a useful

tool in advertising in that they attract attention (Abass 2007) and resonate with viewers (Djafarova 2008). The fact that double-entendres allow people to talk indirectly about sex, whilst appearing to talk about something completely different, makes them an ideal tool for use in advertising campaigns focusing on sexual health.

We tested the effectiveness of advertisements where the double-entendre had been manipulated in three different ways: (1) with and without word insertion; (2) with and without a creative metaphorical expression; and (3) whether they referred to the beginning, middle, or end of the sexual scenario.

It is beyond this chapter to go into more detail of this study (for more details, see Ford et al. 2021). But in summary, we found that the advertisements with double-entendres that kept the place name together without word insertion (making the cue for the alternative meaning more indirect), that made use of creative metaphors and that referred to the most active ‘middle’ part of the sexual scenario (sexual intercourse) were rated higher for perceived effectiveness, humour and likelihood of engagement on social media (e.g. like, comment, share or tag a friend). We recommended to Big Cat and Umbrella Health that they include more of these effective items in their campaign, which went live in June 2019. A corpus-based analysis of the free-text responses revealed variation in the types of interpretations that were offered by participants depending on their age, gender and education, and this information was also used by Big Cat to help them target the campaign more effectively.

The campaign was highly successful in comparison with expected outcomes and previous campaigns. Marketing evidence showed that outdoor engagement with the campaign exceeded its target by 7.66% ($N = 655,648$ from prospected 608,984) and on Facebook, online post views increased by 63,281 from the previous year (2018). During the campaign, the Umbrella Health website attracted 1,000 more unique visitors than prior to the campaign, with the ‘Appointments’ page (step one for ordering an STI kit) views also increasing by 1,000 unique visitors. A 51% increase of STI testing kits were ordered and returned for testing (from 3,784 per month to 5,729 per month) during the campaign (April–July 2019). Of these kits, 10% tested positive meaning that an additional 778 STIs (including HIV) were diagnosed and treated as a result of the campaign.

It is important to note that there are likely to have been multiple factors that contributed to the campaign’s success and that our contribution was only part of the picture. However, this case study provides an example of how metaphor research can at least contribute to improvements in sexual health.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed the benefits, opportunities and challenges we have faced in our ongoing collaborative partnership with Big Cat. Working with Big Cat has enabled us to learn more about each other and about our respective industries, and to contextualise and empirically test our research on figurative

language and creativity in advertising. Finally, we would like to say that as academics engaging with non-academic or non-linguistic partners, we must ensure that we speak plainly for lay audiences but also remember that the research and expertise we offer is specialist and valuable. We have found that collaboration with practitioners can lead to developments in the theoretical underpinning of the discipline and to the methods that are employed in the research as well as to improvements in professional marketing practices, client services and (in some cases) public health and wellbeing.

Top tips

- Try to involve your non-academic partner in the design of the study from the outset.
- Expect to be working with different timeframes and work out ways to deal with this.
- Be on the lookout for terminology that means different things to you and your non-academic partner.
- Look for opportunities to learn from your non-academic partner and consider how this learning might contribute to your discipline.

Acknowledgement

We would like to give a special acknowledgement to Dr Paula Perez Sobrino for leading the foundational work on which our collaborative research has been based.

Notes

- 1 Nike's *Just Do It HQ at the Church* was a collaborative campaign that renovated a disused Church in Chicago to give young people a safe space to play basketball, in an area with high rates of gun violence on the streets, and was awarded the 2019 Cannes Lions Grand Prix for Industry Craft (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcPMxwqV8BQ>).
- 2 IKEA's *ThisAble* was a collaborative campaign that produced specialised add-ons to IKEA furniture using 3D printing that increased the accessibility of furniture for people with disabilities and special needs, winning the 2019 Cannes Lions Grand Prix award for Health and Wellness, among other awards (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0PA_VpLIDw&t=1s).
- 3 Visit the EMMA project website for more details (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/edacs/departments/englishlanguage/research/projects/emma/index.aspx>).
- 4 Big Cat Agency (www.bigcatagency.com).
- 5 Mental Health and Productivity Pilot (MHPP, www.mhpp.me).
- 6 MeetUp is a platform for events by groups (very similar to Eventbrite), and The Marketing MeetUp group in Birmingham holds regular events that involve networking opportunities with and talks by marketing experts (www.meetup.com/The-Marketing-Meetup-Birmingham).
- 7 Advertisers are attributed ID codes to anonymise their data and adhere to ethical practices, denoted as e.g. [001], [002], etc.