A Study on Metaphor Generation in Advertising–An Adaptation Model

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Abstract. In view of the frequent use of novel metaphor in advertising language and its originality, it is necessary to analyze the causes and process of its generation from the perspective of pragmatics. This study can not only open a new research field for traditional study of metaphor, but also provide theoretical support to the practices of metaphor in advertising. The theoretical framework is constructed on the basis of the Adaptation Theory proposed by Jef Verschueren, a Belgian linguist. In the continuous making of linguistic choices, the three properties of language—variability, negotiability, and adaptability are fundamentally inseparable. As to novel metaphors in advertising, its variables is mainly identified at two dimensions: the word class and sentential structure. The syntactical functions of Vehicle and the position of Topic, Vehicle and Ground in the metaphor will determine the metaphorical effects. The negotiability is reflected in the advertiser's adaptation to the communicative context, that is the social world and mental world of relevant communicators. In the social world, the advertiser need to identify its specific customer groups. Accordingly the social classes and social culture, which have unique features along different communities and nations, exert a pervasive influence on the construction of metaphorical meaning. As to the mental world, the advertiser will make linguistic choices to adapt to his communicative needs, such as attracting more attention of the audience, touching off the audience's interest, strengthening the audience's memory, and evoking association and developing a special atmosphere. Besides, the advertiser also needs to be inter-adaptable with his assessment of what the mental world of the audiences look like. Therefore, the generation of novel metaphors in advertising is the advertiser's linguistic choices while adapting to the social and mental worlds with the ultimate purpose of achieving success in communication.

Introduction

The study of metaphor has experienced a long history in academia with a large quantity of adherents. And in daily life, metaphor is actually used in a wide range from human internal thought to external expressions and entities. Developed continuously as a main topic, metaphor is viewed by modern scholars not only as a rhetorical means but also as a cognitive means for people to perceive, cognize, and conceptualize their surrounding world. "Metaphor is a device for seeing something in terms of something else."(Burke,1945) It helps us to apprehend unknown things with reference to the known or to understand known things from a new perspective. It is this characteristic that makes it popular in communication, especially such special one as advertising. It is well known that the main and ultimate purpose of an advertisement is to persuade the audience to purchase the product advertised. In order to achieve this goal, advertisers seemingly prefer to talk about the products metaphorically, that is, in an indirect way. The present research attempts to study this linguistic phenomenon in Chinese printed advertising from a pragmatic view.

The aim of this study is to explore the dynamic adaptation in metaphor generation in Chinese advertising, with which the advertisers believe that the audiences' interest can be aroused to a large extent, and that understanding the metaphors will guide and influence their attitudes to the product. First of all, the variability of metaphors will be referred to, which is to study the different levels of linguistic repertoire available to advertisers. Then under discussion are contextual correlates to which advertisers are adapting in promoting a product, including physical, social and mental factors, because they play an important role in constituting the points of reference to which advertising metaphors are to adapt. Generating from the above-mentioned objectives and on the basis of

Adaptation Theory, research questions are listed as follows:

(1) What is the variability of advertising metaphors?

(2) What contextual correlates are advertising metaphors adapting to?

The present study is based on authentic and naturally occurring data. All data for this study are printed Chinese advertisements collected from Southern Urban Daily in three consecutive months. Making use of such data for the present study, we attempt to achieve maximal reliability. In view of the increasingly important role of automobile in modern life of Chinese society, in a public media, e.g. the newspaper, quite a number of advertisements are designed for this industry with more creativity and innovation than other products. Therefore, we only choose and collect advertisements for automobiles (not including classified advertisement).

Since people are exposed to an enormous amount of commercial messages, the advertiser must try to have his ad noticed among numerous other ads and create a maximally effective impact during the brief time span. Advertisers begin to pay attention to the effective and strategic use of language. Metaphor is a linguistic means/strategy for more effective communication. In another word, metaphor is a pragmatic (communicative) strategy for strategic communication. "For centuries the study of figurative language was restricted to poetry and speeches, but we find metaphors in ads as well as in poems" (Greg Myers, 1994). It is true that there are many cases of metaphors involved in commercial advertisements, which set up a relation of similarity between two different referents, as if they are the same thing. Beyond the rhetoric function, they can further influence and modify the attitude of the audience.

Theoretical Framework

Originating from Darwin's theory of biological evolution, Verschueren first puts forward the Adaptation Theory in 1987 in *Pragmatics as a Theory of Linguistic Adaptation*, in which he argues that in terms of the use of language, human being makes negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs.

To make people understand the process of choice making, Verschueren (2000: 58) posits three hierarchically related key notions—variability, negotiability and adaptability as the base line to describe the use of language. Variability is characterized as the continuous making of linguistic choices from a wide and unstable range of possibilities. This notion defines the range of choices that is not a boundless one, but is confined to the frame of meaning. Negotiability means that choice making is not a mechanical process, governed by some categorical rules, but an adaptable process with highly flexible principles and strategies. Adaptability is the fundamental property of language, which prompts language users to negotiate their choices from a range of variable possibilities so as to satisfy their communicative needs.

In order to make the process clearer, an adaptation model is formulated. It is constructed from an utterer's point of view to explore the advertiser's use of novel metaphors in advertisements instead of how the audience interprets them. To produce an advertisement, the advertiser must have one or more specific communicative needs to satisfy. Therefore, taking into consideration of the type, nature and needs of the audience, he will try to approach points of satisfaction for his communicative needs by making choices at various levels, including choices of linguistic forms and linguistic strategies. All those choices are made in a negotiable manner on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies. From the variable options that are accessible to the advertiser, novel metaphor is chosen as an effective way to adapt to the physical, social and mental worlds for the purpose of achieving success in communication.
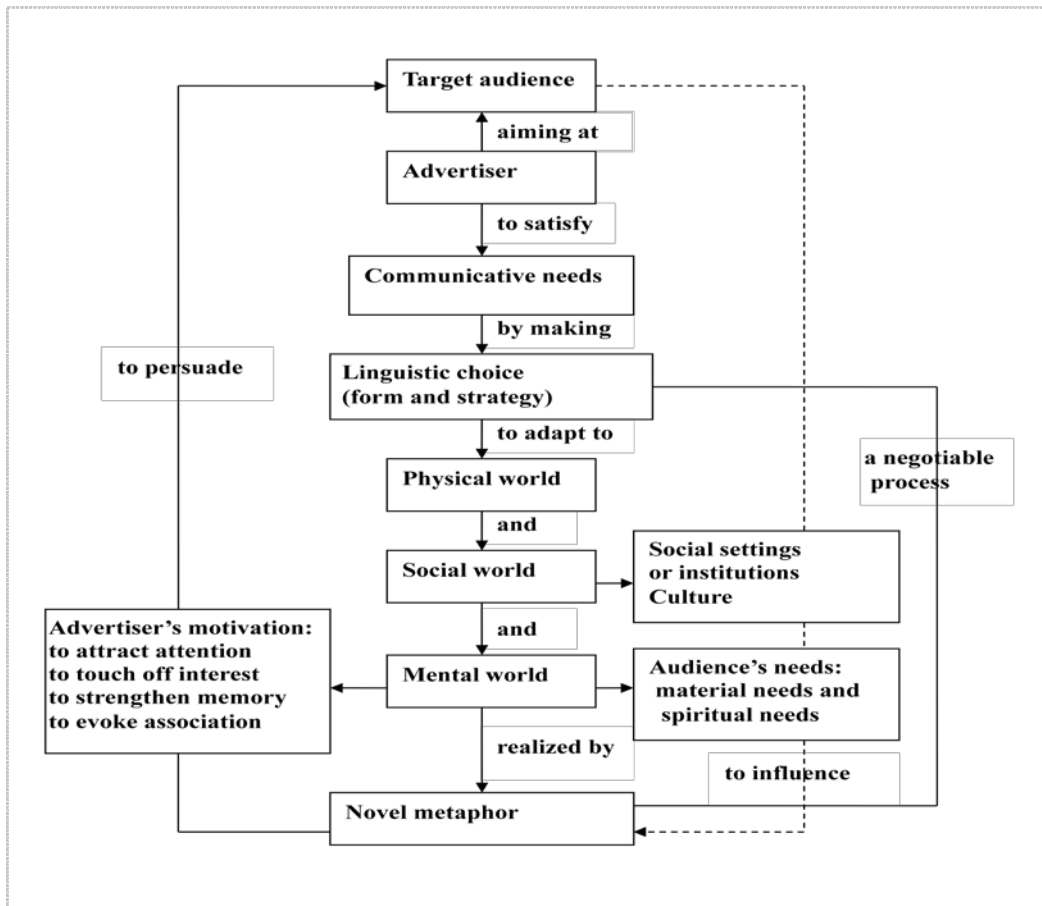
Fig 1.

The Variability of Novel Metaphors

The notion of variability may be associated with what is traditionally called "varieties of language", whether defined geographically, socially or functionally. But given the pragmatic perspective on language use or verbal action, the notion is generalized to the entire range of variable options which are assumed to be accessible to language users to make choices.

Since automobile plays an important and special role in people's daily life, in automobile advertising, advertisers naturally employ various referents that are linked closely with our life to distinguish their own products from others with an optimal point that, they think, appeals to the audience. To sum up these referents, we find, automobile is usually endowed with such favorable traits or qualities as respectable, useful and warm, beauty of sport, safe and efficient, and others. Now look at the following example:

越野王者归来 诠释您精彩生活 (The cross-country king returns to demonstrate your brilliant life.)

This is the headline of an advertisement for PAJERO(帕杰罗) automobile that is described as a king who can make the target audience live a brilliant life. The body copy of this advertisement explains this claim in details from three aspects: body rigidity, powerful engine and interior equipment such as open sky, CD player, and constant temperature air conditioner, etc. The word "王者(king)" is familiar to the common people with characteristics of powerfulness and high prestige that have been used to create the image of this vehicle. By the same token, other words like that are preferred by the advertiser, such as "成功者(successful person)", "领袖(leader)", "主宰(dominator)", "巅峰(summit)", "英雄(hero)", "状元(Number One Scholar)", "翘楚(outstanding person)", "新贵(new mandarin)", etc. These utterances show that to possess their products is a symbol of status.

In terms of the semantic structure of advertising headlines, we summarize six main types of novel

metaphors as follows: Topic only; Ground only; Vehicle + Ground; Topic + Vehicle; Vehicle only; Topic + Ground.

Table 1.

Occurrences Novel Metaphors in terms of semantic structure	Frequency of the occurrence	Percentage of novel metaphors collected
Topic only	25	22.5%
Ground only	24	21.6%
Vehicle + Ground	19	17.1%
Topic + Vehicle	18	16.2%
Vheicle only	15	13.5%
Topic + Ground	10	9.0%
Total	111	100%

From the above analysis on data collected, it can be concluded that the variability of novel metaphors in Chinese printed advertisements is mainly manifested in two dimensions: the word class and semantic structure. Various options of novel metaphors along these two dimensions are all linguistic choices which are employed by the advertiser to achieve his communicative goals. And in these metaphorical utterances, the Topic and Vehicle terms exhibit considerable variety or diversity, which are designed creatively and can not be exhausted. We can say, they are constantly changing.

The Negotiability of Novel Metaphors

Verschueren (2000: 59) defines the notion of negotiability as "the property of language responsible for the fact that choices are not made mechanically or according to strict rules or fixed form-function relationships, but rather on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies". To describe the wide range of novel metaphors the advertiser might employ in Chinese printed advertising is just the first step to explore the reasons of generating metaphors. And then we have to answer the question how the advertiser can make an appropriate choice from so many variable possibilities and convey his communicative goals effectively. Consequently, linguistic choices are permanently negotiable, which have to adapt to three contextual correlates, i.e., physical, social and mental worlds.

In advertising communication, especially through media such as TV and newspaper, there is almost no face-to-face interaction between advertiser and audience. The advertising texts are produced at an earlier time and interpreted later by audiences in distinct occasions. Consequently, we have to overlook all the factors such as bodily postures, physical appearance, etc. of the physical world, which are relevant to both the advertiser and audience, because they occur in different time and space, and can not influence each other.

Most of social factors that linguistic choices are inter-adaptable with have to do with properties of social settings or institutions. For advertising communication, advertisement is not only a carrier of information, but also a carrier of persuasiveness. Although the audience always holds a distrustful attitude to the words of the advertiser, he would have to depend on them to some extent to make his decision. After all, in modern society, advertisement is a main channel for the audience to get information. On the other hand, it is the audience who makes the purchasing decision and thus has the initiative. So it is necessary for the advertiser to try to achieve solidarity with his target audiences, that is, to show the same interests or feelings as that of the audiences. By doing so, he must know and analyze the audiences from various aspects, including their nature, behavior, way of thinking, needs and wants, etc. Only in this way can the information he provided move and persuade the audiences successfully.

The mental world plays an important role in verbal communication since making linguistic

choices is to some degree a mental operation. Aspects of mental reality get activated by the utterer and interpreter in their respective choice-making practices, and become part of language use as elements with which the making of choices is inter-adaptable. As to the mental world, the utterer's mental world, as well as the utterer's assessment of what the mental world of the interpreter(s) looks like, should both be taken into account.

Motivations or intentions appear clearly evident in the advertising communication. Therefore, psychological motivations, to which linguistic choices are adapted, cannot be ignored. Psychological motivations in the present study refer to the advertiser's spontaneous motives or intentions behind their linguistic choices of novel metaphors. The advertiser's motives or intentions mainly influence how to use Vehicle terms or concepts in a metaphorical utterance. As a natural consequence, driven by the adaptation to his various psychological motivations with the purpose of realizing or approaching his communicative needs, the advertiser may employ various linguistic choices and/or strategies. It is necessary to note that there is no one-to-one form-function relationship between the linguistic choices and the advertiser's psychological motivations. What's more, it is hard to provide an exhaustive list of the advertiser's psychological motivations, the most prominent of which are as follows: (a) attracting more attention of the audience; (b) touching off the audience's interest; (c) strengthening the audience's memory; (d) evoking association and developing a special atmosphere.

We are especially concerned with the social and mental factors, since it is impossible or unnecessary to cover all contextual correlates. With regard to the social world, the social classes and social culture, which have unique features along different communities and nations, exert a pervasive influence on the construction of metaphorical meaning. As to the mental world, both the advertiser's psychological motivations and the advertiser's assessment of the audience's mental world are discussed in details. To sum up, for generation of novel metaphors in Chinese printed advertising, the negotiable process is rather flexible without any fixed rule but it has to adapt to the contextual correlates in a given communicative context.

Conclusion

The present study has attempted to explore the dynamic adaptation in novel metaphor generation in Chinese printed advertising. With a crop of findings, the present study is believed to have some implications as follows: Firstly, at the theoretical level, the adaptation model for analyzing novel metaphors in Chinese printed advertising proposed in the present study is the product of application and development of Adaptation Theory. This adaptation model may shed some light on future studies of metaphors in other types of discourse, such as economic discourse, EST, and so on. Secondly, at the practical level, the discovery of the study makes a contribution to advertising practice to some extent. It may be directive and helpful to manufacturers and advertisers to make them learn how to employ various linguistic strategies to achieve various goals. It may be also helpful to the audiences to interpret the advertiser's mental world, so as to interpret his communicative goals or attitudes. Thirdly, fresh data from printed newspapers would add to the existing material of study on metaphor, especially novel metaphor. As most of the previous studies center on metaphorical understanding, this research may help to give us a new pragmatic perspective on the generation of metaphor. In addition, the present study is based on a number of naturally occurring Chinese data, which may improve our knowledge of how metaphors generate and operate in a language other than English on one hand, and makes contributions to the study of metaphor in China on the other.

Although the present study offers some encouraging results with regard to novel metaphors in Chinese printed advertising, the research has not reached the point of satisfaction in various ways. Firstly, this research suffers the limited amount and sources of data in the analyzing process. Data analyzed in this thesis come from Southern Metropolis Daily in Guangzhou. Although it is one of the most influential newspapers in the Pearl River Delta, its circulation is still limited, which will have effects on the category, quantity and quality of advertising. Moreover, the advertisements collected only involve automobile industry. Therefore, we cannot claim to be exhaustive on the

study of such data. Secondly, The object of study – novel metaphor in advertising is collected according to the author's own judgment on the basis of relevant theories. Thus, a degree of subjectiveness is unavoidable. Besides, there are some conjecture in the process of explanation and interpretation of novel metaphors. Thirdly, the account is not complete regarding the interplay between linguistic choices and the mental world of the interpreter. Though the influence of the audience's mental world on linguistic choices has been elaborated, the influence of linguistic choices on the mental world of the audience is not investigated.

So far, attempting to conduct an extensive study on the theme of novel metaphors, the present study is by no means exhaustive. A lot of issues have to be left intact. For example, to what extent do occupational, institutional and individual differences affect the generation and interpretation of novel metaphors? So, one direction future study might take is to search for more factors which also influence the generation and interpretation process of novel metaphors in printed advertising. Another question left behind is: what are the differences between Chinese advertising metaphor and the advertising metaphor in other countries, especially the developed countries with mature advertising industry? So a contrastive study of advertising metaphor is of significance, which may facilitate mutual understanding and push the development of metaphor in China. We can also get experience from the advertising industry in other countries so as to strengthen the competition of our products in the international market.

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