

## Lecture 3. From pictorial to multimodal metaphor

In this lecture, we will ponder some of the opportunities and limitations of the four pictorial metaphor subtypes distinguished in Lecture 2: contextual metaphor; hybrid metaphor, simile, and integrated metaphor. Moreover, in order to anticipate the analyses of multimodal metaphor in Lecture 4, the concept of multimodality in general and of multimodal metaphor specifically will be discussed.

### **Reflections on the various types of pictorial metaphor**

**Contextual metaphor.** Of the four types, metaphors of the contextual variety come closest to the idea of a collage. A certain visually represented thing is placed in an unexpected visual context, namely in a context which strongly cues something else instead. Typically, the representation results in a metaphorical statement about the first thing in terms of the latter. Thus the visually *represented* thing is the target of the metaphor and the visually *suggested* thing its source. It is the visual context that allows the spectator to infer the identity of the source. That it is the target of the metaphor that is visually represented and the source that is suggested rather than vice versa makes good sense in the case of advertising metaphors. Usually, when an advertisement deploys a pictorial metaphor, the target is (metonymically related to) the product promoted, and advertisers obviously want to show this product. The one attested example I have come across of a contextual metaphor in which it is the source, not the target, that is represented is an ad for Dunlop tyres ([figure 3.1](#)), with the metaphor TYRES ARE LIFEBUOYS (discussed in Forceville 1996: 122). The advertisement is rather daring for precisely this reason: the advertiser has chosen to dispense with depicting the product. The reason why he has done so, I speculate, is that from a visual point of view, tyres are not very spectacular products, and there is no huge difference between the visual appearance of Dunlop tyres and those of other brands. The decision not to represent the Dunlop tyres visually therefore hardly results in a loss of pertinent product qualities.

It is to be emphasized that the use of a contextual metaphor requires that the advertisement promotes a commodity that is literally, or metonymically, depictable. Here are two more examples. [Figure 3.2](#) is a Dutch ad for Chiquita bananas. The visual context not only personifies the banana (via the gondola and the position of the pole vis-à-vis the banana) but also shows the banana-gondolier in an exotic context (the palm tree and the incredibly blue water). To be sure, while target (BANANA) and source (GONDOLIER) are identifiable from the visual context alone, the mapped feature might still be rather puzzling. The verbal heading, which can be translated as “you recognize a Chiquita banana because of her natural beauty,” makes clear that it is not just “exoticness” that is

being projected, but presumably also “natural beauty” (and also verbally reinforces the personification via “her”). In [figure 3.3](#) the position of the Siemens mobile phone and the chain on the woman’s neck suffice to cue the contextual metaphor SIEMENS MOBILE PHONE IS NECKLACE. Connotations that can be mapped from the source include “is beautiful,” “is dear to its owner,” and “reflects personal taste.”

Clearly, if an advertiser wants to promote a service or idea, and there is not a depictable object that is uniquely or strongly associated with this service or idea, it is impossible to make use of a purely contextual metaphor.

**Hybrid metaphor.** A hybrid is by definition an “impossible” entity in the world within which it occurs. In fantasy worlds such as those of Aesop, de la Fontaine, and Disney, we most of the time don’t understand mice, foxes, rabbits, ducks etc. as people, even though the characters in it are clear mixtures of animals and humans. Such worlds are populated so ubiquitously by these hybrids that we accept them, by virtue of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief,” as “literal” creatures in their own right. We have to make an effort to remind ourselves that underlying these hybrids, as in all fables, is the metaphor ANIMALS ARE PEOPLE. We simply forget that this is a metaphor, because within the fable world it is a “metaphor we live by” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

It is partly generic context that determines whether man-animal hybrids are understood metaphorically. Outside of a fable context, we are more likely to construe metaphors. Think of Max Ernst’s disturbing collages with human-animal compositions in *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934, discussed in Forceville 1988). Here we see creatures that are part-human, part-animal, which in Carroll’s (1994, 1996) terminology are “noncompossible homospatial” ([figure 3.4](#), [figure 3.5](#), [figure 3.6](#)). The fact that the visual context of these creatures cues both animal and human elements makes it impossible to tip the balance in favour of the dominance of either, and this undoubtedly contributes strongly to their disquieting nature.

We can contrast these Ernst collages with, for instance, the pictures by Grandville (e.g. [figure 3.7](#); for more examples, see <http://www.la-fontaine-ch-thierry.net/fables.htm>). Not only is there consistency in the depiction of the animals-as-humans, the metaphors are moreover of the contextual and integrated rather than the hybrid kind: the animals are dressed like humans, and assume human postures, but they have not been physically merged with humans. We can mentally strip off their clothes, and imagine them resuming their “animal” postures – something that is impossible with the physical hybrids in Ernst’s work.

Looking briefly ahead to metaphors in moving images, we can see similar things in horror and science fiction movies. It is telling, for instance, that if we construe metaphors in *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, USA 1992), the good guy Batman (Michael Keaton) and the naughty but basically sympathetic Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) exemplify contextual metaphors (they can don their “bat” and “cat” dresses and masks, but also remove them; in fact they both live double lives), while the bad guy Danny the Vito character is a hybrid between a human and a penguin: he cannot get rid of his beak-like nose and his flipper hands (figure 3.8; I owe the example to Michael Minneboo.)

Given that a hybrid is an “impossible” entity, one would expect this type of metaphor to be not very popular with advertisers inasmuch as these supposedly are averse to promoting a product (which is, as we have seen, usually the metaphor’s target in ads) as if it were physically merged with something alien to it. After all, it might seem that the product is mutilated or damaged in some way. Let us look back with the wisdom of hindsight at the five metaphors identified as hybrids (or, as I called them earlier, MP2s) in Forceville (1996) and the six in Forceville (2000). In the book I was not yet aware of this aspect of hybrids, and in the *Hermes* article I had restricted myself to a specific corpus, so they were not selected with specific considerations in mind – even though no representativeness can of course be claimed for these examples.

Let us first consider the examples in the book. One of them (figure 6.11, Forceville 1996: 128) is a Dutch Government ad showing the earth as a burning candle, warning against abuse of energy (“we extract energy from the earth as if it is inexhaustible”). The second one, for Philips (figure 6.12), shows the competitor’s earphones-as-heavy-bricks. The third one, for Air France (figure 6.13), displays an Air France airline ticket as an Indian headdress (“exoticness” being the pertinent feature here) – but the headdress is recognizable as such because parts have been *added* to the (depiction of the) folded ticket. The fourth one, for the morning paper *De Volkskrant* features a bunch of keys, one of which ends in a nib instead of a bit (figure 6.14). The nib symbolizes rather than represents the product here – and moreover a nib is detachable from a pen. The fifth one, for the London Underground (figure 6.16), again vilifies its competitor, the car, by hybridizing a parking meter and a skeleton.

The six hybrid computer metaphors identified in the *Hermes* article are the following:

- (1) A cartoon computer is personified by stretching a human arm and having a thought bubble (figure 3.9; Forceville 2000: 35, ad no. 3). But here it is not the computer that is advertised, but a backup system (in the bottom half, incidentally, there is a contextual metaphor that could be verbalized as CD-ROM IS PANCAKE).
- (2) The portability of a printer is suggested by equipping it with a handle and

- by the heading “Any more portable and it would carry itself” (figure 3.10, detail: Forceville 2000: 38, ad no. 7), resulting in the metaphor *PRINTER IS BRIEFCASE*. The handle is *added* to the printer, which is thus not in any way deformed.
- (3) The notes in a musical score turn out to have heads made of tiny computer equipment items (figure 3.11; Forceville 2000: 38, ad no. 8) – already mentioned in Lecture 2. As in (1), however, it is a *system* that is advertised (“Intel LANdesk product family. Helping you take control of mixed environments”), not equipment itself.
  - (4) Whatever is supposed to be the meaning of the *DISK IS SAWBLADE* metaphor in figure 3.12 (Forceville 2000: 40, ad no. 10), the target of the metaphor does not refer to the product promoted – a notebook computer.
  - (5) The PC card drive advertised in figure 3.13 (Forceville 2000: 42, ad no 15) is made (?) to resemble the metal part of a seatbelt, while its surface looks a bit like car upholstery. If the card drive is manipulated at all, this is invisible to a layman like me. In fact, the categorization of this card drive as primarily hybrid seems in retrospect questionable: surely it is the visual and textual context, as well as the name of the product (“Click!”) that help cue the source as much or more than any hybridization.
  - (6) The metaphor *VIRTUAL HELPDESK IS GROUP OF PEOPLE* (figure 3.14; Forceville 2000: 47, ad no 26), if experienced as metaphor in the first place, again proffers a source domain for an abstract service (“virtual helpdesk”) rather than for a concrete, tangible product.

In short, a reconsideration of the 11 specimens suggests that hybrid metaphors in ads are used only when (a) the product advertised is not the target of the metaphor; (b) the product advertised is a service or abstract idea, rather than a tangible commodity; (c) or the manipulation of the product-as-target is (almost) invisible. In the last case, the qualification “hybrid” becomes questionable.

**Simile.** Similes in language explicitly announce their metaphorical nature via various linguistic cues, “is like” and “as” being typical examples. In this respect they are more explicit than metaphors, with their bare “is.” The pictorial subtype I baptized “simile” (Forceville 1996: 136-45), by contrast, invites the metaphor’s “seeing-A-as-B” in a way that is *less* explicit than those of the contextual, and even more the hybrid variety of metaphor. Hybrids infringe the physical integrity of at least one of the two terms involved, and contextual metaphors require a careful, usually highly artificial construction of separate elements in a single *gestalt*. By contrast, unobtrusively juxtaposing two “similar” entities in their entirety in a background can be done in a quasi-naturalistic manner. Consider figure 3.15, a car advertisement for the then new Renault model. The juxtaposition of car and horse, located next to one another and going in the same direction, suggests the construal of the simile *CAR IS LIKE HORSE* or, more specifically, *RENAULT DRIVING IS LIKE HORSE-RIDING* – an invitation that is enhanced by the

heading, which can be translated as “a typical feeling of wind-in-your-hair.” While the scene has clearly been staged for the purpose of promoting the car, the scene looks “natural” enough to be believable in real life. Hence, the juxtaposition *invites* rather than *forces* us to construe a simile. But of course the producer of a metaphor may have reason to signal the simile very emphatically. In [figure 3.16](#) (from the same series as [fig. 6.18](#), Forceville 1996: 139), the metaphorical comparison is inescapable because nothing in the background detracts from the visual similarity (flatness, position) between watch and fish. Another way of saying the same thing is that the similarity is not “naturalized,” as it was in [figure 3.15](#). (See also [figure 2.3](#) in Lecture 2, where the artifice of the metaphorical comparison is further stressed because the two objects occur in different frames.)

**Integrated metaphor.** This type of metaphor, not yet distinguished as such in Forceville (1996), is inspired by Thomas Van Rompay’s research. Van Rompay studies product design, and emphasizes that “products are not just ‘practical’ or ‘convenient’ objects, but also a source of pleasurable or meaningful experience” (Van Rompay 2005: 16). He claims that humans have (possibly universal) preferences for certain designs over others because of their embodied understanding of the products in question – a view he derives from Lakoff and Johnson (1980). In some cases, this leads to a product design that strongly evokes something different, that is, the design constitutes a metaphor. We already saw an example of such a product in Lecture 2 (the coffee machine-as-butler). Here is another example: the lamp on my desk at home ([figure 3.17](#)). One is invited to see or experience this lamp as a bird. This experience is enhanced by the fact that the lamp can pivot both where the main frame is connected to the two thin supports at the bottom (the “legs”) and at the top (the “head”), that is, the “bird” can bend forward, and it can move its head.

The integrated metaphor-type is characterized by the fact that target and source are perceived in a single gestalt, as in the hybrid type, but without the “noncompossible” conflation typical of the latter. The target has been designed or manipulated in a way that strongly evokes in perceivers (or: in some perceivers) the experience of something else, but there is no sense of the target’s identity having been violated. Architecture also yields examples of integrated metaphors. Gerry Cupchik discusses Paul Hekkert’s commentary on the building of the “Institute de Monde Arabe” in Paris ([figure 3.18](#)), designed by Jean Nouvel: “the overall view of the building appears as a carefully designed composition that makes a reference to carpets we know from Islamic cultures” (Cupchik 2003: 26), inviting the metaphor BUILDING IS CARPET. Another example is the hotel in Lara, Turkey: BUILDING IS CONCORDE PLANE ([figure 3.19](#)). Presumably the experience of the buildings’ metaphorical quality is “embodied” inasmuch as we are familiar with their sources (carpets, Concorde planes) from visual perception; but notice that the mappings from source to target are mostly culturally determined: it is the cultural value attached to these carpets that matters rather than, say, their texture

or colour; and it is the elements of high-technology and Frenchness that are presumably mapped.

The realms of product design and architecture provide specimens of integrated metaphor in three dimensions, but the type can also be found in two dimensions.

Materials that can be easily bent, folded, cut, stretched or otherwise moulded lend themselves well to this type of metaphor. And a “material” that can of course be endlessly reshaped is the human body itself: A person can briefly adopt a posture, or display a certain behaviour, strongly cuing a source domain.

Clearly, the four types constitute no hard-and-fast categories: a pictorial metaphor may well display features of more than one type – and in fact often do so.

### **Monomodality and multimodality**

The metaphors discussed in Lecture 1 are verbal metaphors; those in Lecture 2, and those in the previous section, are pictorial ones. In both situations, that is, target and source of the metaphor are presented in the same mode: language and pictures, respectively. A phenomenon that is to serve as a metaphorical target or source domain can, however, be signaled in yet other modes: by music, for instance, or sound, or even by smell, touch, or taste.

In order to be able to use the concept “mode” for metaphors, it will first be necessary to characterize it more precisely. The instantiations of “mode” just given (pictures, language, music, sound, smell, touch) all pertain to the senses. A convenient strategy would therefore be to equate modes and senses, yielding the pictorial, the sonic, the olfactory, the tactile, and the gustatory mode. However, this would mean lumping together sources of information that are habitually distinguished: while we smell smells, taste tastes, and touch surfaces, we *see* both written language and pictures, while we *hear* spoken language, music, and sounds. For one thing, this means that language can be both perceived visually and aurally. I propose there is good reason to do justice to the important differences between these two manners of perception by giving the status of a different mode to “written language” and “spoken language.” After all, oral and written text rely on very different conditions of understanding. Illiterate, blind, and deaf people can easily understand one, but not the other; a medium such as radio heavily relies on spoken language – and sound, and music – but excludes pictures (if these are present it has stopped being radio). Similarly, Western society distinguishes between speech, music, and other types of sound. The circumstances under which we listen to them, and the purposes – if any – we see them as having, differ vastly. We expect typically to be entertained and aesthetically pleased by music, informed by speech, while non-verbal sound elicits other reactions: a sense of

potential danger, for instance, or irritation. Non-verbal sounds are usually made less purposely than music or speech. Machines and tools make noises as a by-effect of the tasks they are supposed to perform, while even non-verbal sounds made by humans (laughing, crying, sighing, burping, farting, coughing, swallowing, wheezing ...) tend to be coincidental rather than strived-for effects.

For present purposes I therefore propose to distinguish between the following modes: spoken language; written language; pictures; music, non-verbal sound; smell; taste; and touch. Since the representations under discussion in this Course are mainly of the two-dimensional, mass-medial type, smell, taste and touch will not play a role here, but there is nothing that would argue against their use in metaphors as such: whenever a percept is deliberately used by its producer to evoke specific meaning, it is a sign, and can hence be used in a metaphor.

But even the five modes adhered to here could arguably be further subdivided. The concept of “picture,” for instance, is very broad indeed, comprising static as well as moving images, photographs as well as drawings and paintings, pictograms as well as diagrams, and indeed gestures. Spoken language allows for distinctions pertaining to gender, pitch, accent, dialect, etc. To what extent it will be fruitful to subdivide the modes identified here, and bestow the status of “mode” on these subcategories as well, is an issue that cannot be resolved until a substantial number of multimodal representations have been analyzed, and hence further reflection on this topic will have to be postponed.

We can now characterize multimodality, and by extension, multimodal metaphor, by contrasting it to monomodality and monomodal metaphor. Monomodal messages are, by definition, exclusively rendered in a single mode. Most books for adults are – possibly with the exception of their covers – representations of the verbal variant of monomodality. Books for young children, which are rarely without illustrations, by the same token are multimodal, containing the modes of written text and pictures. A radio interview consisting entirely of spoken language is monomodal as well, while a song-with-lyrics played on the radio is multimodal. These examples already suggest that talking about modes cannot be separated from talking about the material carrier of the message – that is, about medium. Radio by definition cannot make use of pictures, while TV and film can (and usually do); TV cannot (yet) make use of smell or touch, and neither can film. And finally, if the creator of a message has control over the location in which it is conveyed, yet other modes can be activated. The situation in museums comes to mind: exhibits or installations may produce a smell. For instance, the walls and ceiling of Wolfgang Laib’s “Wachsraum” (1992), a space in museum De Pont (Tilburg, The Netherlands, see [figure 3.20 http://www.depont.nl/en/menu/ind-col.htm](http://www.depont.nl/en/menu/ind-col.htm)) are entirely covered by a sweet-smelling bee wax. We may also be reminded of a short-lived experiment in theatres where odours were added to film. “In 1958, ‘AromoRama’ and ‘Smell-O-Vision’ appeared, to largely negative

response” (Thompson and Bordwell 1994: 380), whereas 1970s’ experiments with “sensurround sound” come close to enabling the “touch” mode. And of course smells need not be deliberately conveyed by the representation’s makers in order to have an impact on audiences: one can imagine that watching a film noir film such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, USA 1941) in a small theatre full with cigarette smokers adds a functional, if unintended, mode to the spectators’ viewing experience.

Monomodality typically characterizes verbal texts – the medium *par excellence* via which facts and knowledge have for ages been transmitted to new generations. But we also come across it in untitled paintings and many varieties of music. Nowadays, however, numerous messages combine language and pictures, or language, pictures, and sound and/or music and are thus multimodal.

After this brief characterization of monomodality and multimodality, let us return to metaphor. When is a metaphor multimodal? My proposal is to consider a metaphor multimodal if its target and source are rendered exclusively or predominantly in two different modes. One of the most frequent varieties of multimodal metaphors is no doubt the type combining a pictorial and a written term. In Forceville (1996: 148-61) I called this type a verbo-pictorial metaphor, and considered it a subtype of pictorial metaphor. Now I would opt for the nomenclature of “multimodal metaphor of the verbo-pictorial variety.” Another variety would be the combination of a picture or a written text and a sound or musical theme (or all of them together). Notice that a consequence of the choice for the modes adopted here is that a combination of a written text and an oral speech could also result in a multimodal metaphor.

The provisional definition of multimodal metaphor presented in the previous paragraph states that the target and source occur “exclusively or predominantly in two different modes.” This qualification is necessary because often a metaphorical term (target or source) is conveyed in more than one mode simultaneously. “Predominantly” then can be formalized as follows: to the extent that the metaphor becomes unidentifiable as such if modes other than the two different modes deemed most important are (mentally) deleted, it counts as multimodal. As holds for any metaphor, a multimodal metaphor can only function if the perceived source domain (a word or phrase, an image or image sequence; a sound, a musical theme, a smell, a taste, a touched surface) (1) is recognized; and (2) evokes one or more connotations. Subsequently, these connotations are to be matched – in Blackian fashion (see Lecture 1) to elements in the target domain. Here are some examples of sonic connotations:

- (a) *a singing teakettle* (possible connotations: “tea-making”; “homeliness”; “an alert to something deserving immediate attention” ...);
- (b) *a police car siren* (possible connotations: “immanent help from armed authorities”; “immanent danger from armed authorities”; “generic

- danger”; “an alert to something deserving very urgent attention” ...);
- (c) *a key in a lock* (possible connotations: “happiness/excitement/fear because husband/wife/father returns”; “an attempt to penetrate an ordinarily inaccessible space” ....);
  - (d) *a dangling ring of keys* (possible connotations: “imprisonment”; “power over others”; “guarding” ...);
  - (e) *the rattling keys of a keyboard* (possible connotations: “office work”; “data transfer”; “text creation” ...);
  - (f) *rain against the window pane* (possible connotations: “melancholia”; “fertility”; “freshness” ...).

Similarly, musical themes can have many connotations: a national anthem evokes the country of which it is the national anthem, a rock song may bring to mind its title, the words of the song, the genre to which it belongs, the “freedom,” (rock and roll), “anarchy” (punk) or other value attached to the genre ... (A particular subtle and malevolent use by Michael Moore in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a sequence about George W. Bush’s past, where a few bars of the J.J. Cale song “Cocaine” are audible – suggesting Bush used this drug during his student days. Notice that in order for Moore’s rhetorical strategy to be effective, the audience must first recognize the theme, and then realize what its title is – consciously or subconsciously.)

Smells, of course, also may activate connotations. Think of freshly mown grass; roses; shit; sweat; salty sea air; smoke, etc. Tastes and touched surfaces also trigger associations – although these are (hitherto) less amenable to being part in mass-communicative contexts.

It is important to remember that which of a range of potential connotations is pertinent will depend heavily on the discourse context, and can moreover differ among individuals in the audience.

Finally, I speculate that our fast-growing “visually literacy” makes us increasingly alert to how images are (ab)used to influence our interpretations and evaluations of the world around us, but that the meanings of sound, smell, taste, and touch are less consciously interpreted – so that these modes constitute more subtle modes of rhetorical manipulation.

In Lecture 4 we will take a closer look at a number of multimodal metaphors in advertising commercials to test the theoretical assumptions presented here in more detail. Since Lecture 4 is still under construction, readers eager to know more about the type are referred to Forceville (forthcoming).

**AUTHOR'S E-MAIL: [c.j.forceville@uva.nl](mailto:c.j.forceville@uva.nl)**

## References

- Carroll, Noel (1994). Visual metaphor. In Jaakko Hintikka (ed.), *Aspects of metaphor*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 189-218.
- Carroll, Noel (1996). A note on film metaphor. In: *Theorizing the moving image*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 212-223.
- Cupchik, Gerry (2003). The 'interanimation' of worlds: creative metaphors in art and design. *The Design Journal* 6:2, 14-28.
- Forceville, Charles (1988). The case for pictorial metaphor: René Magritte and other Surrealists. In Aleš Erjavec, (ed.), *Vestnik* 9: 1, Inštitut za Marksistične Študije, Ljubljana, 150-160.
- Forceville, Charles (1996). *Pictorial metaphor in advertising*. London/New York: Routledge. [Paperback published in 1998].
- Forceville, Charles (2000). Compasses, beauty queens and other PCs: Pictorial metaphors in computer advertisements. *Hermes, Journal of Linguistics* 24, 31-55.
- Forceville, Charles (forthcoming). Multimodal Metaphor in ten Dutch TV commercials. *Public Journal of Semiotics*. [Peer-reviewed, online journal available free of charge in the course of 2006 at <http://semiotics.ca/>]
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thompson, Kristin, and David Bordwell (1994). *Film history: an introduction*. New York etc.: McGraw-Hill.
- Van Rompay, Thomas (2005). *Expressions: embodiment in the experience of design*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, Technische Universiteit Delft, The Netherlands.