

“Surf on 4-inch stilettos”: Multimodal Metaphor and Metonymy in Mobile Phone Advertising

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Multimodal metaphor and metonymy are frequently used in advertising (Forceville, 2008, 2009; Hidalgo & Kraljevic, 2011; Pérez-Sobrino, 2016) because they allow efficient communication of a product’s desirable features (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Littlemore & Pérez-Sobrino, 2017). Here, we analysed a corpus of 60 advertisements from 16 telecommunication brands. We compared 31 mobile network advertisements to 29 mobile manufacturer advertisements because these two product categories differ in concreteness: one can physically interact with a mobile device, but a network is intangible. Research has found that communication networks are frequently conceptualised via metaphor (Maglio & Matlock, 1988; Matlock et al., 2014), so we predicted a higher frequency of metaphor and metonymy for networks as opposed to devices.

The corpus was coded following a modified version of the protocol used by Pérez-Sobrino (2016, 2017), including coding complex figurative operations: metaphonymy, metonymic chains, and metaphoric complexes (see Goossens, 1990; Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez & José-Pérez Hernandez, 2011). Overall, we found that 43 advertisements (72%) included some form of figurative operation. A total of 27 ads (45%) featured complex figurative operations. In addition, we found a particularly high frequency of figurative operations involving mobile devices and SIM cards, which participated frequently in metonymy (DEVICE/SIM CARD STANDS FOR NETWORK) and container metaphors (DEVICE/SIM CARD IS CONTAINER OF INFORMATION).

Overall, we found no difference in the frequency of metaphor, metonymy, nor figurative complexity between mobile phones and networks (all p 's > 0.05), disconfirming our initial concreteness-based hypothesis. We suggest that mobile networks may be so familiar to users that their conceptualisation does not need additional figurative operations (compare Matlock et al., 2014). Alternatively, the constraints of the specific discourse of mobile phones and their networks may create similarity in mobile advertising, regardless of the conceptual difference between mobile manufacturers and networks.

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