



Figurative Language Across Cultures

Unpacking Creativity: The power of figurative communication in advertising

Abstract: While there is a widespread, if tacit, assumption that most communication is literal, in reality a great deal of communication is non-literal, with studies showing that over 15% of the language used in news and academic texts is figurative (Steen et al. 2010). Figurative language pervades everyday communication, ranging from informal conversations to human-computer interactions, online exchanges, graphic novels, app design, and most importantly for this talk, advertising. It is one of the primary tools for achieving economy of expression, clarity, persuasiveness, politeness, communication of evaluations and emotions, and other ends.

The most widely-studied form of figurative communication, metaphor, has been shown to be a key tool in communication, particularly when discussing abstract ideas or emotions. While some studies have explored metaphor in advertising, very few have examined the ways in which metaphor combines with other tropes, such as metonymy, irony, hyperbole, and understatement in the context of advertising. Finally, only a few studies have investigated the ways in which different types of figurative communication operate and interact in non-linguistic forms of expression, such as images, senses, sound and music. This is particularly pertinent in advertisements that involve new media, such as Internet fora, viral advertising campaigns, and social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter. Finally, very little research has investigated how this operates cross-culturally.

The goal of this talk is to show how different types of figurative communication and the ways in which they combine affect consumer responses. I will report on a number of interdisciplinary investigations, combining lab experiments, data analysis and qualitative research that explore the ways in which figurative communication, in language, image and sound, works as a means of persuasion. I will consider how this contributes to the effectiveness of advertisements in traditional and new media, and how this effectiveness varies according to the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the advertisements and the consumers (with a specific focus on the three most widely-spoken languages in the world: English, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese).