



When visual metaphors are tough but highly persuasive

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Visual metaphors are pictorial counterparts of verbal metaphors such as *Man is a wolf* or *The sky is crying*. In a visual metaphor something the target, that is presented or suggested pictorially, is compared to something that belongs to another category the source, which is also presented or suggested pictorially. Visual metaphors are often used in advertising (Forceville 1994; Indurkha & Ojha 2017), political cartoons (El Refaie 2003) and films (Whittock 1990; Fahlenbrach 2015). Figure 1 provides an example of a visual metaphor in advertisement, which shows people sitting in an airport. All of them but one has loudspeakers for their heads. The image conveys the noisy environment of airports and suggests that people talk so loudly in airports as if “their heads were loudspeakers”. Images that can be interpreted like this are called visual metaphors.

Visual metaphors are creative in nature and enhances the persuasiveness of a message, which it intends to convey. However, the process to extract the intended message of visual metaphor requires higher cognitive effort as well as cultural background. Previous studies suggest that greater cognitive elaboration to comprehend a visual metaphor appearing in advertisements provides greater intellectual and creative satisfaction, which in turn leads to greater persuasion (Jeong 2008; Kim, Baek & Choi 2012). However, it can be argued that a very complex visual metaphor and detailed elaboration may also lead to confusion or misunderstanding.

In this study, we aimed to explore the relationship between the complexity of a visual metaphor and its persuasiveness in conveying the intended message. In particular, we asked “what is the relationship between the cognitive effort employed to comprehend a visual metaphor and its persuasiveness?”. The study tested 20 visual metaphors appearing in print advertisements in different conditions. In these conditions, complexity of visual metaphor was varied by explicitly suggesting the source, the target and the intended message of metaphors. 24 Participants were asked to rate (1) the complexity involved in comprehending the metaphor, (2) appropriateness of the representation and (3) persuasiveness of the advertisement on a Likert scale.

Results suggested that comprehension of visual metaphor negatively correlated with persuasiveness of visual metaphor when no explicit suggestion was given. There was no significant correlation between comprehension and persuasiveness when the visual metaphor was suggested with the target or the source or both. However, interestingly, when the intended message was suggested for a visual metaphor, participants still found it difficult to comprehend the visual metaphor but rated its persuasiveness very high.

Based on our results, we conclude that (1) complexity involved in the comprehension of a visual metaphor leads to greater persuasiveness and perceived appropriateness and (2) suggestion of intended message does not reduce the complexity, instead it increases it by forcing them to look for alternative interpretations of the visual metaphor to arrive at the intended message. We argue that visual metaphors allow participants to get to the intended message by searching for cues that may lead to various possible interpretations of the visual metaphor. This multiple interpretation process requires greater cognitive effort but leads to greater persuasiveness.

Figure 1



Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the support of the Sardinia Regional Government for the financial support (Research project: "Argomentazione e metafora. Effetti della comunicazione persuasiva nel territorio sardo", RAS, L. 7/2007).

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Keywords: Visual metaphor, Cognitive elaboration, persuasion, Argumentation, Visual argumentation

Conference: XPRAG.it 2018 – Second Experimental Pragmatics in Italy Conference, Pavia, Italy, 30 May – 1 Jun, 2018. **Presentation Type:** Poster or Oral

Topic: Experimental Pragmatics

Citation: Ojha A, Gola E, Lai N and Ervas F (2018). When visual metaphors are tough but highly persuasive. *Front. Psychol. Conference Abstract: XPRAG.it 2018 – Second Experimental Pragmatics in Italy Conference*. doi: 10.3389/conf.fpsyg.2018.73.00029

Received: 08 May 2018; **Published Online:** 23 May 2018.

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