**Culture Clash: When Visual Metaphors Can Misfire**

You’ve heard that a picture tells a thousand words, but studying pictorial metaphors reveals how much background knowledge is needed to make sense of, and evaluate, visuals. Commercial print advertising and billboards make for good case studies because their goal is unambiguous: to sell consumer products and services. However, there are some pitfalls found in visual metaphors—illustrated by the example below suggesting how they may misfire when interpreted by members from a culture other than the one for which they were designed.

**One of the vital questions to ask when using or analyzing a metaphor is what knowledge and background assumptions the targeted audience must draw from to be able to interpret the metaphor, especially in the manner that its sender *wants*.**



Figure 4.1

Source: <http://www.creativeadawards.com/makes-your-horses-purr/>

Understanding what is going on in this German ad (figure 4.1) requires quite a bit of background knowledge. We first need to figure out what product is advertised. The picture of the plastic bottle in the right-hand bottom corner and the words “Advanced synthetic motor oil by Avia” provides the answer. But what has this oddly postured horse to do with motor oil? To make sense of the horse, viewers must know that the capacity of motors is measured in terms of “horse power.” The following metonymic chain must thus be recognized: MOTOR OIL [helps function] MOTORS [whose capacity is measured in horse powers, which is visually suggested by] HORSE.

But this horse is depicted in an unusual position, looking at and playing with a ball of yarn. Clearly, we’re to understand the metaphor HORSE IS CAT. We are helped in the identification of the source domain by the words next to the bottle, “Makes your horses purr.” Purring is a sound typically associated with cats, more specifically with *happy* cats. We further must know cats like playing with balls of yarn being dangled above them. Now we are there: HORSE IS CAT means something like “happily playing,” which, when applied to the motor, becomes something like “unproblematically running.”

While the envisaged audience undoubtedly has no problem going through these interpretation stages, it is important to realize that the central metaphor depends on specific connotations evoked by the cat as primarily a pet. People in cultures and subcultures where the first, or even only, connotation of CAT is “useful for catching mice” or “edibility” may be confused by the metaphor.

**Source:** Excerpted from pre-proof version of a paper based on a plenary presentation at the Second International Conference on Communication Styles, University of Krosno (Poland), 12-14 October 2015. Subsequently published as: Forceville, Charles (2017). “Visual and multimodal metaphor in advertising: cultural perspectives.” *Styles of Communication* 9(2): 26-41. (see journals.univdanubius.ro/index.php/communication). To quote verbatim from the text, please check the published version (ChF, May 2017).

*Visual and Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising: Cultural Perspectives*. Available from: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317175212_Visual_and_Multimodal_Metaphor_in_Advertising_Cultural_Perspectives> [accessed Jun 15 2018].