

Multimodal Metaphors in English and Chinese Food Commercials: A Case of Snickers

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Abstract: Advertising serves as a unique mode of communication, where elements such as slogans, sounds, and images are essential approaches to conveying its central theme. Numerous scholars have examined advertising language and imagery through various linguistic frameworks, including stylistics, pragmatics, systemic functional grammar, and semiotics. However, the study of multimodal metaphors in advertising, particularly about their types, presentation modes, and characteristics, remains insufficiently explored. This article, grounded in conceptual metaphor theory, analyzes the multimodal metaphors employed in 14 Snickers television commercials, aiming to address the following research questions: (1) What types of multimodal metaphors are utilized in Snickers TV commercials? (2) How are these multimodal metaphors manifested through different modes? (3) What distinctive features do these multimodal metaphors exhibit in food commercials? The findings of this study indicate three key results. First, the multimodal metaphors identified in the Snickers commercials can be categorized into two primary metaphor systems, namely, the great chain of being metaphor system and the event structure metaphor system. Second, the images, language, and sound modes work in conjunction to realize the multimodal metaphors. Third, the source domain typically appears earlier than the target domain. By examining how metaphors are represented across different modes, this article contributes to the existing body of research on multimodal metaphors and offers valuable insights for advertisers in the field.

Keywords: Multimodal metaphor; Conceptual metaphor; Great chain of being metaphor; Event structure metaphor; Snicker

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1. Introduction

Advertising serves as a distinctive mode of communication, increasingly playing a pivotal role in the context of economic globalization and the digital age. Beyond influencing consumer behavior, advertisements also exert significant impacts on social, cultural, and ideological domains. Numerous scholars have approached the study of advertising language and imagery from various linguistic perspectives, including stylistics, pragmatics, systemic

functional grammar, and semiotics. However, the study of multimodal metaphors in advertising, specifically in terms of their types, modes of presentation, and distinct characteristics, remains underexplored. Furthermore, limited attention has been devoted to the analysis of multimodal metaphors in dynamic food advertisements. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the multimodal metaphors present in English and Chinese food commercials, using the well-known brand Snickers as a case study. Fourteen Snickers commercials from the United States and China are analyzed to explore the use of multimodal metaphors. The paper is structured as follows. The first section outlines the research background, purpose, and significance; the second section focuses on food advertisements as the primary subject of study; the third section introduces key theoretical frameworks related to conceptual and multimodal metaphors; finally, the analysis of Snickers commercials is presented, followed by a discussion of the findings.

1.1. Research background

Advertising, at its core, can be regarded as an art of persuasion. Through the strategic use of texts, images, and sound, advertisements aim to influence consumer behavior and shape perceptions. The language of advertising has evolved into a distinct style, characterized by specific choices in vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical devices. Since the 1960s, the linguistic intricacies of advertising language have attracted significant scholarly attention, with analyses grounded in various frameworks such as stylistics, systemic functional grammar, semiotics, communication theory, and pragmatics. The advancement of media technologies, particularly in the areas of television and the Internet, has ushered in the “visualization” era of advertising ^[4]. As a result, multimodal discourse analysis, which examines the interplay between language and visual elements, has emerged as a crucial area of linguistic inquiry ^[1]. Despite the growing body of research on multimodal discourse in advertisements, the focus has largely been limited to static, two-dimensional designs such as print advertisements and political cartoons. Comparatively little attention has been given to the multimodal analysis of food commercials, particularly those employing dynamic elements ^[2].

1.2. Research purpose and significance

The analysis of multimodal metaphors in advertising has garnered increasing scholarly interest in recent years. While various studies have examined advertising slogans and images through the lenses of stylistics, pragmatics, systemic functional grammar, and semiotics, there remains a notable gap in the exploration of multimodal metaphors, specifically in terms of their types, modes of presentation, and defining characteristics. This study seeks to address these gaps by utilizing the conceptual metaphor theory developed by Lakoff and Johnson as a theoretical framework to analyze multimodal metaphors in 14 Snickers television commercials from both domestic (Chinese) and international (American) markets. The research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What types of multimodal metaphors are present in Snickers commercials? (2) How are these multimodal metaphors presented through different modes of communication? (3) What distinctive features characterize the multimodal metaphors in these commercials? By examining the interaction between various modes (e.g., visual, auditory, and linguistic), this study seeks to expand the application of multimodal metaphor theory to a broader range of advertising contexts. Moreover, the findings of this research contribute to existing scholarship on multimodal metaphors and offer practical insights for advertisers in the food industry, particularly those involved in digital and online media campaigns ^[5].

2. Literature review

This part introduces some information about advertising, commercials, and the previous studies of them. And then, it talks about the limitations of previous studies ^[6].

2.1. Previous studies of foreign research

In recent years, advertising language has continued to be a significant area of focus within linguistic research, particularly due to its role as a mediator between consumers and commodities. Berger and Packard investigated how foreign languages are used in advertisements to shape consumer perceptions, particularly by associating products with their country of origin ^[7]. This builds on earlier sociolinguistic approaches, where language is not just a tool of communication but also a cultural signal that influences brand identity and consumer engagement. Similarly, Hornikx and Van Meurs explored how multilingualism and ethnic language choices in advertising can foster cultural connections, particularly emphasizing the importance of English in conveying modernity and success in non-English-speaking countries ^[8].

2.2. Previous studies of domestic research

With the development of China's commodity economy in the 1990s, the study of advertising and its language was still in its infancy. During this period, advertising language began to undergo significant changes, attracting increasing attention from scholars, and the study of advertising language gradually flourished. In the field of advertising language research, numerous scholars have conducted in-depth explorations of the characteristics of advertising language from various disciplinary perspectives. Based on the development of rhetorical studies and metaphor theory, Wang analyzed 30 public service television commercials, focusing on the formal representation of dynamic multimodal metaphors in advertising discourse. In her book review, Jia evaluated *English for Food Science*, pointing out that the book provided a new perspective for research on the English of food advertising. Wang analyzed the interpersonal meaning of English food advertising discourse, emphasizing that advertising language, in addition to conveying information, also serves functions related to speaker identity, status, and attitude. Zhang focused on the application of vague language in English food advertising and its Chinese translation methods, noting the promotional effect and aesthetic value of vague language in advertisements. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Zhang explored iconicity in advertising language and analyzed its application in advertising translation, highlighting the importance of equivalent iconicity in the translation process ^[9].

These studies indicate that advertising language is not random but follows specific creative principles and strategies. The stylistic features, pragmatic presuppositions, semiotic creativity, vague language, and the application of multimodal metaphors are all key factors in the effectiveness of advertising communication. Taken together, these works demonstrate that advertising language is a multidimensional, interdisciplinary field of study, encompassing areas such as cognition, pragmatics, semiotics, and new media ^[10].

2.3. Limitations of previous studies

In recent years, research on advertising language has evolved significantly, particularly in exploring how linguistic features shape consumer perceptions ^[14]. Studies have focused on various aspects such as multilingualism, cultural connections, and the use of natural language processing in digital advertising ^[11, 13]. Similarly, domestic research has examined advertising through lenses such as rhetoric, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics, especially in food advertising ^[4].

However, despite these advancements, much of the existing research on food advertising has primarily focused on static text-image advertisements in print media. While scholars have extensively explored advertising from stylistic, pragmatic, and semiotic perspectives, there remains a gap in the study of multimodal metaphors in television food commercials. The dynamic nature of television food ads, especially in terms of their multimodal representations, including visual, auditory, and linguistic modes, has not been thoroughly analyzed^[11].

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the multimodal metaphors present in Snickers television commercials, investigate how these metaphors are conveyed through various modes, and identify the distinctive features of multimodal metaphors within these advertisements.

3. Conceptual metaphor

Multimodal metaphor is from the conceptual metaphor. This part gives a general introduction to conceptual metaphor. Then, it talks about the multimodal metaphor, including its definition, some previous studies, and its applications in commercials^[12].

3.1. General introduction of conceptual metaphor

Lakoff and Johnson proposed that metaphors are integral to the cognitive system, not limited to language but embedded in thought and action. Metaphors map concrete experiences (source domains) to abstract concepts (target domains), helping people understand complex ideas^[3]. Lakoff and Turner expanded on this by emphasizing that metaphorical mappings follow a hierarchical structure. By the late 1990s, the importance of metaphors in cognition was widely accepted in linguistic circles. Scholars like Forceville further extended this theory to interdisciplinary fields, integrating metaphor into broader research contexts.

3.2. Multimodal metaphor

3.2.1. Definition of multimodal metaphor

A mode is a symbolic system known as a specific perceptual process. Humans can perceive a variety of symbolic systems belonging to different modes, including 1) pictorial signs, 2) written signs, 3) spoken signs, 4) gestures, 5) sounds, 6) music, 7) smells, 8) tastes, and 9) touch. Forceville and Urios-Aparisi defined the monomodal metaphor as a metaphor in which both the source domain and the target domain were embodied by a mode or mainly through a mode. For example, a metaphorical expression in language. In multimodal metaphor, the source domain and the target domain are embodied by different modes. Strictly speaking, in multimodal metaphors, the source domain is embodied in one mode, and the target domain is embodied in another mode. However, in the actual situation, many source domains and target domains of the metaphors are presented in multiple modes. For example, the source domain can be co-presented by the auditory mode and the visual mode, and the target domain is also presented by these two modes. This study also counts such metaphors as multimodal metaphors.

3.2.2. Previous studies of multimodal metaphors

Multimodal metaphors originated within the framework of conceptual metaphor theory, as proposed by Lakoff, and pictorial metaphor theory, advanced by Forceville. These theories suggest that the source domain and target domain of a metaphor manifest distinctly in different modes, such as visual, linguistic, or auditory forms. Forceville's seminal work on multimodal metaphors in 2009 expanded on these ideas, offering insights into how different modalities interact to convey meaning.

Kövecses further contributed by identifying two key metaphor systems: the great chain of being metaphor and the event structure metaphor. The great chain of being metaphor organizes various forms of existence hierarchically (e.g., humans above animals, animals above plants), and metaphors are generated when concepts from one level are used to understand another. The event structure metaphor focuses on space, motion, and force, constructing metaphors such as “States are locations”, “Changes are movements”, and “Causes are forces.” Since then, researchers worldwide have continued to expand multimodal metaphor theory, exploring its applications in fields like advertising, media, and communication.

In recent years, Chinese scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the diversity and dynamics of metaphors across different cultural and social contexts^[3]. Feng laid the groundwork for a multimodal metaphor framework aimed at addressing certain limitations in visual design grammatical subjectivity. This framework provided theoretical insights into the construction of visual grammatical interaction and compositional meaning. Building on this, Feng and Zhao expanded the model by incorporating the Metonymic Construction Model of Meaning and Attitude Meaning, further refining the theoretical approach. Despite these advancements, a comprehensive, authoritative, and systematic theory of multimodal metaphors has yet to be fully established in both domestic and international academic circles. More recently, Xie and Kuang employed conceptual integration theory to analyze multimodal metaphors in COVID-19-related news cartoons, revealing how these metaphors reflect fundamental shared cognitive experiences^[2]. Cheng and Liu, taking a cognitive narrative approach, explored how multimodal metaphors in advertising discourse represent and recontextualize social change and continuity^[1]. They suggested that future research should focus on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons to better understand how multimodal metaphors are used and interpreted in diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, with the ongoing development of digital technology, they proposed that researchers should pay greater attention to the evolving forms and functions of multimodal metaphors in digital media and social platforms^[13].

4. Multimodal metaphor in the food commercials

In this part, the article analyses the multimodal metaphor in four Snickers commercials from America and China. There are two systems in the commercials, the great chain of being metaphor and the event structure metaphor.

4.1. The great chain of being metaphor in the food commercials

In all 14 commercials, the study found four metaphors from the high-level source domain to the low-level target domain. Their source domains are “Human”, and the target domains are “Snickers” and “Ball.”

4.1.1. Metaphor from the high-level source domain to the low-level target domain

In the following example, the high-level source domain is “Human”, specifically the “Patient”, while the low-level target domain is “Snickers.”

Example 1: Snickers is a Patient

This commercial uses ordinary people to represent Snickers, emphasizing that the internal qualities of Snickers are more complex than its outward appearance. The advertisement begins with a patient visiting a doctor and behaving abnormally by singing when his mouth is open. The doctor then states that the patient requires a Snickers, at which point the product is introduced. The patient appears confused at first, but the doctor proceeds to show him an X-ray, revealing a member of a famous 1990s American boy band inside his body. The doctor

explains, “Same on the outside, different on the inside,” illustrating that both the patient and Snickers have qualities that differ internally. For Snickers, ingredients such as peanuts serve to replenish energy. The visual and linguistic modes work together to communicate the metaphorical connection between Snickers and the patient, portraying Snickers as the hidden band member within the patient. Ultimately, the Snickers bar reinforces the central theme of the commercial.

The commercial employs language, visual, and auditory modes to convey its metaphor. The linguistic mode is expressed through dialogue and subtitles, linking Snickers to the hidden band member. The visual mode remains consistent throughout the commercial, depicting the member of the boy band hidden inside the patient’s body. The synchronization between the doctor’s speech and the visual elements allows the audience to appreciate the actor’s performance seamlessly. The auditory mode further complements this, combining dialogue that directly addresses the audience with rhythmic background music, which aligns with the visual elements. As the patient’s condition changes, the music shifts to a more upbeat tone. In summary, the language, visual, and auditory modes collaborate to present the anthropomorphic metaphor of “Snickers is a patient.”

Notably, in this commercial, the source domain and target domain are not introduced simultaneously. The source domain is introduced early in the visual and linguistic modes, while the target domain is revealed later. This temporal delay helps to build suspense and engage the audience throughout the commercial ^[14].

4.1.2. Metaphor from the low-level source domain to the high-level target domain

The thematic metaphor in the following commercial maps specific features of the low-level source domain “Ball” onto the high-level target domain “Human.”

Example 2: Human is a Ball

This commercial creates a striking contrast by depicting the state of football players before and after consuming Snickers, thereby reinforcing the product’s core function. The commercial likens a hungry athlete to a deflated ball, aligning with the overarching theme of Snickers. Initially, the commercial introduces three key characters: the star kicker, the key midfielder, and the goalkeeper. The goalkeeper is portrayed as a weak figure, similar to Lin Daiyu, a frail character from classical Chinese literature, with large question marks visually representing his confusion and weakness.

As the narrative progresses, the multimodal interaction of music, dialogue, subtitles, and visuals highlights the frailty of the hungry athlete, metaphorically comparing him to the weakened image of Lin Daiyu. Interestingly, the commercial does not directly equate the athlete to a deflated ball; instead, it first employs the imagery of a weak female character from a well-known novel to represent frailty ^[15]. Through this characterization, the metaphor of the hungry athlete as a deflated ball gradually unfolds. Later in the commercial, the athlete’s transformation after consuming Snickers is portrayed through auditory, visual, and linguistic elements, with the ball metaphorically restored to its original, inflated state. This before-and-after contrast underscores Snickers’ crucial role in alleviating hunger.

Within this metaphorical chain, the “Deflated Ball”, as a man-made object, is hierarchically positioned lower than the “Human.” Consequently, the metaphor “A hungry person is a deflated ball” conveys passivity, projecting characteristics such as weakness and helplessness onto the individual, thus diminishing their status. However, in this commercial, the exaggerated portrayal of hunger-induced weakness highlights the debilitating effects of hunger, emphasizing the urgency of seeking a solution, which Snickers provides.

The linguistic mode, through the phrase “You are so weak when you are hungry. Eat a Snickers”, explicitly

connects the source and target domains. The visual mode further emphasizes the athlete's transformation after consuming Snickers, symbolized by the restored ball. The auditory mode is skillfully integrated, with energetic music accompanying the football scenes and soft classical music underscoring the image of frailty. This contrast effectively reinforces the central message of Snickers' ability to alleviate hunger and restore strength.

4.2. The event structure metaphor in the food commercials

The event structure metaphors in Snickers commercials aim to highlight the change that hunger and Snickers bring to the body, mainly in two stages: 1) hunger causes trouble, and 2) after eating Snickers, the problem is solved quickly.

The commercials below use two event structure metaphors in the multimodal metaphors: "Causes are forces" and "States are locations."

4.2.1. Causes are forces

Many food commercials highlight the advantages of their products by featuring famous stars who praise and express their preference for the food. However, the following Snickers commercial utilizes the event structure metaphor of "Causes are forces" to illustrate the impact of "Hunger plaguing people", which is conveyed in a subtle yet visually compelling way. The metaphor depicts "Hunger as a negative force."

In the commercial, Mr. Bean attempts to perform a meditation task with three knights, but he is visibly inflexible and awkward when hungry, making it difficult for him to focus on the task. This awkwardness culminates in him falling into a house, representing the disruptive consequence of hunger. This sequence establishes the first stage of the event—depicting the negative effects of hunger—mapped to the theme metaphor "Hunger is a negative force." Since both "hunger" as a feeling and "power" as a concept is abstract, the designer relies on the visual of Mr. Bean's fall to metaphorically represent hunger as the negative force that causes people to falter.

In the second stage of the commercial, Snickers is introduced, and upon consuming it, Mr. Bean's problem is instantly resolved. He stands up, energized, and returns quickly to the task, symbolizing the metaphorical shift to "Eliminating hunger as positive power." Through this metaphor, the process of "solving the problem of hunger" is visually conveyed, with Mr. Bean's recovery underscoring the Snickers bar's ability to restore energy and strength, maximizing the audience's intuitive understanding of hunger.

Throughout the commercial, the visual mode effectively portrays the interaction between the source domain (hunger) and the target domain (human experience). The designer uses Mr. Bean as a metaphorical embodiment of a weakened knight, further emphasized by the language mode, which guides the audience's attention to the theme and transition from hunger-induced weakness to recovery through Snickers. The auditory mode complements this by using intermittent background music to reflect the emergence of hunger in the first stage and a cheerful melody in the second stage, coinciding with the resolution of hunger. In the final shot, a close-up of Snickers is accompanied by stronger music, reinforcing the brand's role in alleviating hunger.

4.2.2. States are locations

At the beginning of the commercial, the phrase "Who are you when you are hungry?" appears on the screen. A group of friends is shown climbing a mountain, and one of the boys asks, "Where is Qiang Zi?" Soon after, one of the boys, dressed in blue, is holding a girl who says, "Wait for me. When is the end of life?" As the story

progresses, one of the boys remarks, “Are you playing in a Korean drama? You become so unreasonable when you’re hungry. Have a Snickers.” This scene uses body positioning to suggest that the hungry boy is relying on his friends for support, appearing as weak and helpless as a typical distressed heroine in a Korean drama.

After consuming the Snickers, the boy becomes stronger and pushes away the friend who had been holding him, signaling that he is no longer weak or dependent. The commercial effectively transitions from depicting reliance on others to independence, illustrating the metaphor through language, visuals, and sound. The visual mode emphasizes the physical closeness of the characters, highlighting the metaphorical connection between “Proximity of the body” and “Dependency.” The linguistic mode reinforces the metaphor through dialogue, explicitly expressing the boy’s tiredness and weakness, and mapping the relationship between the source and target domains. As the boy’s weakness is emphasized, the background music takes on a tragic tone, subtly underscoring his reliance on his friends. However, after consuming the Snickers, the boy regains strength and no longer needs the support of those around him.

5. Conclusion

This study selected food commercials as the research subject. The commercials mainly include four kinds of symbol resources: pictorial signs, written signs, spoken signs, and music. Few studies have specifically conducted detailed multimodal discourse analysis on food commercials. The findings of multimodal metaphors are as follows. First, there are two kinds of multimodal metaphors in the Snickers commercials, the great chain of being metaphor and the event structure metaphor. Second, the image mode, language mode, and sound mode in commercials cooperate to complete the multimodal metaphor, to present the theme of the commercials in the shortest time and in the best way. Third, the multimodal metaphors in the commercials show the characteristic that the source domain is presented earlier than the target domain in most multimodal metaphors. This kind of method helps to create suspense and attract the audience.

Disclosure statement

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