

Lakoff and Johnson's Concept of Metaphor and the Study of Communication

“Metaphor,” write Lakoff and Johnson, “is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action” (3). This is a bold assertion since, as the authors themselves note, the majority of people consider metaphor to be merely “a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish” (Lakoff and Johnson 3). The authors define metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff and Johnson 5), and introduce the idea of “metaphorical concepts” in order to develop their main argument that “human thought processes are largely metaphorical” (Lakoff and Johnson 6).

The metaphorical concept “argument is war” is considered as an example (Lakoff and Johnson 4). Other related metaphors, including “I demolished his argument,” and “he shot down all of my arguments,” demonstrate the authors’ claim that metaphors such as “argument is war” are central to our culture and in fact “structure the actions we perform” (Lakoff and Johnson 4). According to Lakoff and Johnson, human thought and communication depends heavily on metaphors which are used by humans to make sense out of their surroundings. The “argument is war” metaphor demonstrates that the meaning of “argument” is often understood in terms of “war”. Lakoff and Johnson point out that, if the “argument is war” metaphor did not exist, a different metaphorical concept would provide a framework within which to think about argument, for example “argument is dance”. According to the authors, this is true of all other aspects of human thought and communication. Each idea is understood through comparison with an already established idea or concept.

There are numerous examples of this process at work. In the margins of their book, Understanding Human Communication, Alder and Rodman include and define what they term

“cultural idioms”. The amusing expressions are in fact metaphorical concepts. A “sure-fire” plan is “certain to succeed” (18), to get “a fair shake” is to get “honest treatment” (91), to “save face” is to “protect one’s dignity” (161), to “put someone down” is to “insult or degrade” them (196), and to “let off steam” is to “release tension” (481).

Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphorical concepts can be used to develop new means of studying communication which focus on identifying and analyzing use of metaphors and metaphorical concepts in language. A general framework for such a method is not difficult to contrive. First of all, because most messages are rife with metaphors and is difficult if not impossible to focus on the use of all metaphors at once, it is important to determine the topic of interest. Secondly, using a broad set of possible metaphorical concepts for the chosen topic, the message is analyzed word-for-word in order to identify metaphors. Finally, the identified metaphors are evaluated against the possible metaphorical concepts and independent language images and conventional metaphor is documented. As a means of studying communication, Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphorical concepts is useful in facilitating the critical interpretation of media messages.

Given the pervasiveness of metaphors in human thought and communication, it is not surprising that advertising is engorged with them. Advertisers very effectively use metaphor in order to indirectly associate a product with a metaphorical concept which has positive connotations. Often, the metaphor used in an advertisement becomes incorporated into thought patterns with the result that the association with the product is profound and lasting. This effect can be seen in the attitudes of the teenage subjects interviewed by Gillespie in “Cool Bodies: TV Ad Talk”. “TV advertisements” notes Gillespie, “function as myths and metaphors” (176). This claim is echoed by Fiske in “The Jeaning of America”. “Advertising is used in an attempt to

give meanings” to products and enable people “to recognize their own social identity and values in the product” (Fiske 6).

In Southall, England, television provides powerful metaphors of national and western culture. Gillespie’s interviews with South Asian teenagers illustrate how metaphorical concepts used in television advertising are being internalized by youth and ultimately creating a desire and acting as a catalyst for cultural change. Gillespie’s work is an important example of how cultures are shaped and changed through reception of advertising metaphors. During the interviews, the teenagers displayed “a set of shared cultural reference points, images and metaphors which spice local speech” and are derived from advertisements (Gillespie 178). One example of this is “the slogan ‘I bet *he* drinks Carling Black Label’”, which Gillespie found to be “a common refrain” to accompany a success such as a goal in sports (178). A major metaphorical concept is used in advertisements for American products such as Coca Cola and McDonald’s, both immensely popular with the youth Gillespie interviewed. The major metaphorical concept is *America is freedom*, a utopian image easily internalized by the young consumers. Gillespie notes that this metaphor is “a myth – a mythical construction of an American teenage lifestyle and of America itself” (176). Within the framework of the *America is freedom* concept, the metaphor typically introduced by the advertisements is therefore understood as *product X is America* and consequently *product X is freedom*.

Coca Cola, with its ambiguous slogan, “you can’t beat the feeling” and its catchy, highly metaphoric commercials, has achieved “an unparalleled popularity among the youth of Southall” (Gillespie 191). While the slogan itself could easily be a metaphor for “the emotional and sensual experience of adolescence” (Gillespie 192), it is the visual, idealized commercials that

truly capture the imagination of the young audience and can be linked to the metaphorical concept *America is freedom*. Metaphorically,

“...the consumption of Coke promises happiness, love, friendship, freedom and popularity. In the world promised by the ads, relationships are uncomplicated; young people simply care for each other, everyone loves one another and socializes together; life is fun and free.” (Gillespie 193-194)

Gillespie notes that “the appeal of McDonald’s and Coca Cola ads and slogans succeeds on a very similar level” (199). McDonald’s burgers are seen as a metaphor for “freedom because they represent a food which you don’t *have to have*” (Gillespie 199). The imagery, songs, and slogans used in advertisements for McDonald’s and Coca Cola connote an “ideal ‘freedom’ which transcends boundaries” (Gillespie 204). According to Gillespie, these are not the bland commercials which are viewed as “unwelcome marker(s) of their difference” (197), but vibrant “teenage dreams” (198) brimming with metaphors: *McDonald’s is America! Coke is America!* and since *America is freedom, Coke and McDonald’s are freedom!* Such metaphor use in advertising is highly effective and should not be underestimated. “America, as experienced through the media has itself become the prime object of consumption and a symbol of pleasure” (Gillespie 176).

Just as Gillespie’s work demonstrates that the America and freedom metaphorical concept is used in marketing McDonald’s and Coca Cola to South Asian youth in Southall, Fiske’s “The Jeaning of America” demonstrates how similar metaphors are used in jean advertisements. These metaphors link jeans to freedom, naturalness, and Americanness:

“As the opening of the western frontier was a unique and definitive moment in American history, so jeans were seen as a unique and definitive American garment...” (Fiske 4)

Fiske describes how jeans can be worn by members of virtually all groups and classes in society, while simultaneously representing multiple and apparently unrelated ideas and philosophies. Fiske recognizes jeans as metaphors for these ideas and philosophies, noting that all of these associations are equally accurate in capturing the rich metaphoric nature of jeans. The author identifies three “cluster(s) of meanings” associated with jeans (Fiske 2). To some, jeans “were seen as informal, classless, unisex, and appropriate to city or country”, with the word “free” being the “most common adjective used” (Fiske 2). Others associated jeans with “naturalness and sexuality”, with the adjective “natural” being used “almost as frequently as ‘free’” (Fiske 3). This “naturalness” was linked to “physical labour, ruggedness, activity, physicality”, and “the American work ethic” (Fiske 3). A third cluster of meanings centered around “the cowboy and the mythology of the Western”, “progress and development and, above all, Americanness” (Fiske 4).

According to Fiske, jeans, like all commodities, have both a “material” function and a “cultural” function (11). The material or practical function is to provide “warmth, decency, comfort, and so on”, while the cultural or symbolic function is “concerned with meanings and values” (Fiske 11). It is this symbolic function that enables the consumer “to construct meanings of self, of social identity and social relations” (Fiske 11) which, like patterns of thought and understanding, are structured largely through the use of metaphorical concepts. Jean advertisements rely heavily on metaphors. In the hands of advertisers jeans themselves become a metaphor for “strength, physical labor, and sports performance” for men, and for “sexuality”

for women (Fiske 3). It is the practicality and versatility of jeans that allows advertisers to successfully employ such a wide range of metaphors in marketing them. Also, Fiske notes that jeans have traditionally had two main foci, specifically youth and the working class (1). Both are highly idealized “centres of meaning” which provide a fertile supply of attractive metaphors for use in advertising. These metaphors are then internalized by the consumer, who incorporates the desired meaning into their own identity. For example, “a middle-aged executive wearing jeans... is aligning himself with youthful vigor and activity and with the mythic dignity of labour” (Fiske 1). Likewise, wearing designer jeans is “an act of distinction... a move upscale socially, to the city and its sophistication” (Fiske 7). Through advertising, designer jeans become a metaphor for “the East” and “culture”, while generic jeans represent “the West” and “nature” (Fiske 7). According to Fiske, torn jeans are a metaphor or “a marker of alternative, and at times oppositional, social values” (15).

A thorough reading of Gillespie’s “Cool Bodies: TV Ad Talk” and Fiske’s “The Jeaning of America” in light of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphorical concepts reveals a multitude of metaphors which are central to advertisements for American products such as McDonald’s and Coca Cola in Southall, England and for jeans in America. According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors are internalized by people and incorporated into patterns of thought and communication. Gillespie’s interviews with South Asian teenagers and Fiske’s survey of students support this thesis, since both groups spoke highly metaphorically in reference to the product without apparently being aware of the metaphors or of the influence of advertising. As Gillespie notes, “if they do not feel themselves to be influenced by the ads, it is evidently only because they already have been” (194).

With their theory of metaphorical concepts, Lakoff and Johnson created an invaluable tool for the study of communication. While it is difficult to identify, let alone define, each and every existing metaphor, our task as communication students is facilitated by acknowledging the framework of metaphorical concepts. A task which remains, in the words of Hebdige,

“to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as ‘maps of meaning’ which obscurely represent the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal.” (Hebdige 18)

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