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Hyperboles Not Turning to Metaphors: How to Explain Audience Cooperativeness?

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Abstract: We observe that an audience attempts to interpret the relation between a source domain and a target domain as a hyperbole before interpreting it as a metaphor. It could also first try a metaphorical reading or attempt several possible readings and successively select the relevant outcome. But it does not. This is exactly as the rhetor anticipates. In this article a hypothetical model is developed to explain this remarkable cooperativeness, also explaining why the rhetor could anticipate this behaviour by the audience. The explanation is based on (1) ordering types of comparisons on a scale from rational mapping between moderately similar domains up to associative mapping between very different domains, and (2) assuming a general principle that interpretation is a process of developing hypotheses. This process runs from more restricted hypotheses to less restricted hypotheses until an equilibrium is reached between text coherence, foreknowledge, and perceived rhetorical situation.

Keywords: comparison, metaphor, hyperbole, rhetorical device, discourse interpretation

1. Introduction

We distinguish between many types of comparisons. Often discourse structure invites its audience to construct a comparison but seems underspecified in indicating which type. Sometimes it makes a remarkable difference which type of comparison is actually constructed; the rhetorical goal of the discourse is ruined when one type is constructed, but served with another, while obviously both types are possible. Of course, an audience that reflects on the intentions of the rhetor will know which one this rhetor intends and prefers, but when it concludes with one type after having tried the other option, damage is already done. This speculative essay answers the question: how can the rhetor trust his or her audience to follow the intended way and that way only? What ‘blocks’ the alternative way?

To formulate a hypothetical answer, I first articulate a cognitive model that accounts for how an audience constructs a comparison and attaches meaning to this construction process (section 2). Then I formulate and illustrate the problem

mentioned above in a more technical manner (section 3). In section 4, a two dimensional scale is proposed on which we can position different types of comparisons. In section 5, I finally propose a cognitive principle that accounts for a more or less fixed way audiences orient themselves on this scale. The scale, together with this cognitive principle and a clear criterion to mark the completion of this interpretation process, explain why audiences tend to follow a predictable route, why hyperboles do not turn into metaphors, and why audiences seem cooperative.

2. Constructing comparisons

Most scholars nowadays share the insight that *comparison* is a cognitive phenomenon. Discourse presents clues from which an audience constructs the comparison and attaches meaning to it, sometimes in complex and partly creative cognitive mapping processes. One can distinguish three sequential steps, bearing in mind the interaction as well as recursion between the steps.

- Step 1: source domain and target domain have to be identified. Textual clues guiding an audience toward this first step can be highly explicit and conventionalized (Ronald Reagan: “Government is like a baby”; Natalie Nougavréde: “Embracing Assad would be like Kissinger cosied up to the Khmer Rouge”; pictorial element dominating an ad (source) combined with image of product and brand name in the bottom right corner (target); and so on). But textual clues can also be remarkably implicit. In many multimodal comparisons, weak conventions seem sufficient to make an audience perform the task.
- Step 2: a hypothetical mapping process from source domain elements on target domain elements needs to take place. This mapping can be rather straightforward, based predominantly on similarities between source and target domain in the ‘real world’. But it can also be ‘creative’, based on ‘open’ analogies between the domains. In cases of implicitly clued comparisons with ‘open’ analogies, cognitive processes rely heavily on foreknowledge that the author anticipated, as well as on the tendency of an audience to search for an interpretation that is context-relevant and makes sense in the rhetorical situation. ‘Foreknowledge’ needs to be taken here in a very broad meaning, including world knowledge, shared cultural values, stereotyped concepts and scripts, cultural memes and even embodied ‘knowledge’.
- Step 3: when source and target domain are hypothetically identified, and

a hypothetical mapping has been performed, the outcome needs to be tested against the perceived rhetorical situation. Again, the outcome may be straightforward; the resulting meaning seems relevant and fits into the audience's perception of the rhetorical situation. Equilibrium results between textual clues, attached meaning, and rhetorical situation. But an outcome can also be the absence of a satisfying equilibrium. The interpretation process 'continues' in a more creative, problem-solving mode, or terminates with a 'result': "I do not think that I fully grasp what is meant here".

In sum, interpreting a comparison is, to a large extent, a top-down process, reaching for an interpretative solution, or equilibrium. Equilibrium is reached if main discourse elements cohere and resulting meaning is consistent with foreknowledge, relevant, and fits into the audience's perception of what the author intended.

Discourse-related evidence supporting this cognitive approach is abundant and comes from several sources. To mention a few: Lakoff and Johnson (1980) studying conceptual metaphors show that audiences do represent meaning by mapping aspects of B on domain A, while in the discourse, no form can be identified that resembles *A is B* or *A is like B*. Forceville (1996, 2009), studying multimodal metaphors in advertisements, shows how metaphorical interpretations are invited while none of the shapes is marked, by convention, as tenor to represent target domain, or as vehicle to represent source domain; the audience in interaction with foreknowledge constructs them as such. The frequent appearance, in language as well as multimodal discourse, of radical or almost radical comparisons (comparisons in which the target domain is not explicitly represented in the discourse) also indicates that the comparison is in fact constructed by the audience. In multimodal discourse, a relatively insignificant element from source or target domain can be shown to represent a rich and complicated domain (metonymy), while the relevance of the comparison requires construction of analogies between elements from the domains that are not represented in the textual clues at all. For example, a bottle of motor oil is shown, fused into a medical drip, with a slogan "Intensive Care". Such clue triggers a cognitive process in which the diligence of an intensive care nurse toward her patient is compared to that of a car owner and his car (Forceville 1996; Schilperoord & Maes 2009: 215, 229).

All these phenomena support a cognitive model in which minimal clues in the discourse trigger a rhetorical device constructing complex comparisons (Van den Hoven 2015). The steps of the construction process do not need to be encoded in the discourse. Many discourse forms turn out to be adequate clues to trigger the cognitive

process (Forceville 2009, 2014).

A cognitive approach asks how audiences, performing the mapping process, construct meaning roughly in the way the historical author intended. This question must be answered in two parts. The first part addresses the presupposition in the question: do audiences construct meaning roughly in the way the historical author intended? There is evidence that this is certainly not always the case. The cognitive process required to interpret original, often figurative, and sometimes implicit comparisons is partly creative and depends on foreknowledge. Therefore, in many details and core themes of comparison, an audience's interpretation process can deviate from what the author intended, resulting in similarly deviant meanings attached to the discourse.

In a Dutch editorial cartoon (Figure 1) we see a boy standing in a corner, with his face to the wall. Written on his back is: cuba. We see an arm, pointing a finger in the direction of the boy; the sleeve has the flag of the United States. We identify the scene as a teacher who punishes a schoolboy, placing him in a corner. This is a stereotyped, though somewhat old-fashioned script. It characterizes the teacher as authoritative. We identify the boy as a metonym for Cuba and the teacher as a metonym for the USA. So we construct a metaphorical comparison: [the USA punishing Cuba]_{tenor} is like [an authoritarian teacher punishing a naughty pupil]_{vehicle}.

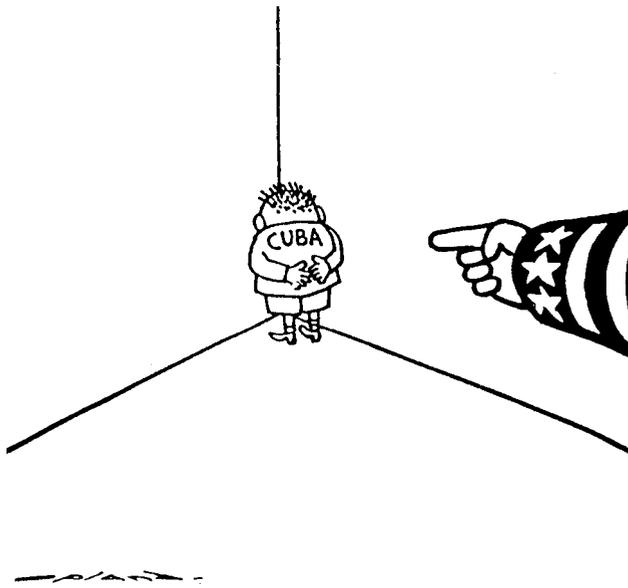


Figure 1 a political cartoon of Opland

This cartoon was published in a left-wing Dutch newspaper in a time of seriously disturbed relations between the USA and Cuba. The intended meaning is to blame the USA. The intended complex mapping process, not uncommon in the cartoon-genre, runs as follows.

- Step 1: two domains are recognized, each containing agents (teacher and pupil; USA and Cuba) and scripts (an authoritarian way of enforcing classroom discipline; maintaining diplomatic relations between states).
- Step 2: an assumption of at least an analogy between both domains leads to a hypothetical mapping; some concepts, interpretations, values regarding the relation between a teacher and a pupil in a script of authoritatively maintaining classroom need to be mapped onto the relation between USA and Cuba in a script of maintaining diplomatic relations between two autonomous states.
- Step 3: this mapping clashes with the values that the audience assumes the historical author endorses, namely: diplomatic relations between two autonomous states are not analogous to the relations between an authoritative teacher and a pupil. On the contrary: the diplomacy script requires equality. This clash between outcome of the mapping and assumed rhetorical situation needs to be solved by the audience. The clash can be solved by assuming irony, a figure of thought that fits very well in the genre and creates equilibrium.

This altogether guides the audience to an interpretation: the USA are to blame because of their behaviour towards Cuba; they treat Cuba with an attitude of assuming absolute authority, not willing to discuss, convinced of the unique value of its own position, not willing to listen, assuming a fundamental inequality between itself and Cuba (values mapped from the source domain), while autonomous states should approach one another as equal counterparts. This is, with optimal certainty, the intended meaning of the cartoon (compare also Schilperoord & Maes 2009).

Students, confronted with this cartoon out of its original context, incidentally attached the almost opposite meaning: “Rightfully the USA gives Cuba what it deserves, a good old-fashioned punishment in the form of diplomatic and economic sanctions; Cuba in his international relations indeed behaves like a naughty schoolboy”. We can trace the difference in the process that results in this opposite interpretation. Step 1 and 2 are similar. But in step 3 this audience does not see a dis-analogy; on the contrary, it endorses the analogy and reaches equilibrium.

So we see that interpretation processes can and do sometimes go ‘wrong’, seldom as dramatically as in this example but quite often in details. Audiences differ in their

interpretation process and therefore in the resulting meaning they attach to the discourse. But often they come remarkably close to the meaning the historical author intended. In these cases the interpretation process runs roughly as the author foresaw. The explanation is in the combination of the elements that determine their equilibrium.

Equilibrium requires: (a) that under the hypothesized meaning the most salient discourse elements cohere; (b) that this meaning is consistent with foreknowledge; and (c) that it fits into the audience's perception of what the author intended. If one of these elements is wanting, no solution is found yet that creates equilibrium and the process continues (or terminates, leaving the audience with a feeling of not having fully understood the discourse). If the author inserts some strategic coherence markers where guidance is required, sufficiently anticipates foreknowledge and makes his rhetorical position knowable, this guidance in combination with the requirements for equilibrium is adequately determinative to make his audience follow the route he had in mind.

This model is not sufficiently detailed to predict success or incidental failures of complex cognitive interpretation processes, constructing and interpreting comparisons. But certainly it provides a framework that can be the start of an explanation as to why the interpretation process stops at a certain point – the audience having reached equilibrium – and why the constructed meaning at that point frequently resembles the author's intentions. An intriguing problem, however, remains, and that is the actual topic of this paper.

3. The problem

Take a look at a Chinese advertisement for sanitary napkins (Figure 2).

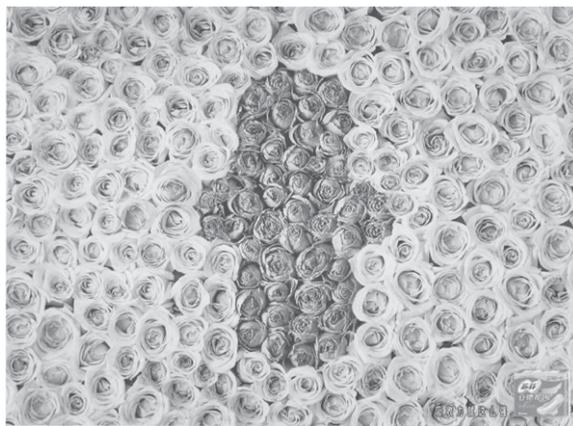


Figure 2 A Chinese ad for sanitary napkins

- Step 1: we see a conventional indication of a source and a target domain: a dominant image (source domain) and the image of the product-packing at a conventional place (target). The slogan reads: powerful absorption. So we have a target domain of ‘females using the product’ related to a source domain of ‘a flowerbed of soft, pink, nicely smelling roses’. Several comparisons lay around the corner: [the tender female]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle}; [the tender female skin]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle}; [the fragrance of the female skin]_{tenor} is like [the smell of the roses]_{vehicle}.
- Step 2: the audience is invited to map concepts, interpretations, and values associated with the domain that the roses indicate on the target domain: the product, the use of the product, or the user of the product. Concepts, interpretations, values connected to the vehicle, such as NICE SMELL, TENDER, SOFT, transfer to the product, or the user of the product, or the skin of the user of the product as the tenor. This is a plausible, somewhat conventional mapping, as it is not uncommon to positively represent the female with the metonym of tender flowers, or the female skin with a metaphor of soft and lightly coloured flowers, such as these pink roses. The smell of the roses may even come close to the smell of a lightly perfumed product, an almost literal comparison.

So far, so good. But the image shows more. It also shows dehydrated roses in the shape of the sanitary napkin. Obviously, the intended meaning is that the audience interprets this element in the picture as a hyperbolic expression of the capacity of the napkin to absorb liquid (supported by the verbal expression): [the absorption potential of the napkin]_{tenor} is like [the absorption potential of the object that has been on the place of the dried out roses]_{vehicle}. Hyperboles are a frequent mode of figurative comparison in advertisement. It is clear that the audience is intended to remain in the realm of the *target* domain; if you would place the napkin on a flowerbed of fresh roses, it would, in a hyperbolic exaggeration, leave the roses entirely dried up. In this way the interpretation process continues.

- Step 2 (continued): the audience maps the hyperbolic evidence of absorption power shown in the source domain of a bed of roses onto the product in the target domain.
- Step 3: the metaphorical/metonymical mapping of tenderness, smell, softness from roses on female or female skin, as well as the hyperbolic mapping of absorption power from bed of roses on the product render the salient discourse elements coherent. The attached meaning, a female product that is

highly functional, is consistent with foreknowledge and fits into the audience's perception of what the author intended. Equilibrium is thereby reached. The interpretation process is considered completed and terminates.

This is a complicated interpretation process, but most audiences do not seem to have trouble performing it. The cognitive system has developed an adequate rhetorical device to parse this kind of structures.

This device, however, should have an intriguing built-in feature that we did not discuss so far. It should 'block' any interpretative route that leads to an obviously unintended meaning, even if it is formally applicable, adequate to parse comparisons, and renders discourse clues coherent. Suppose the audience approaches the discourse predominantly as a didactic metaphorical comparison. It hypothesizes, quite plausibly, that the author intends to 'teach' the audience about the effect of using the product using a metaphor. This is by no means a weird option as it is customarily employed in advertisements. So, this audience assumes to encounter a metaphorical comparison embedded in another metaphorical comparison: [the tender female skin]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle} and [the effect of the workings of the product on the skin]_{tenor} is like [what you see depicted on the bed of roses]_{vehicle}.

This audience is close to the intended reading; the mere difference is that it does not construct a hyperbole with the napkin as central element, but extends the metaphorical representation of the female skin to the entire image, including the area of the dried-up roses. As a result, this dried-up part 'maps' onto the part of the skin that was covered by the napkin and therefore represents the skin itself after the napkin has been used. Yuk! This is certainly not the comparison the advertisement designer intended for his audience to construct: [The skin that was covered by the napkin]_{tenor} is like [a bed of dehydrated roses]_{vehicle}. But, given the fact that a metaphorical relation between roses and female skin is a conventional option, one may even say that the second reading seems 'systematically' more straightforward than the combination of a metonymic reading ([the tender female]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle}) or metaphorical reading [the tender female skin]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle}) combined with a limited hyperbolic reading of the dried-up area, staying in the target domain.

This advertisement is one of a series. The others show green leaves with a brown, parched shape, and grapes with a shape of dried out raisins, both in the shape of the napkin. In these versions, the source domain as a metaphorical representation is not obvious. Roses are often associated with the female skin and skin products, raisins and leaves are not. So the 'logic' of a second, embedded metaphorical reading is less

unequivocal than in the roses version, because the first metaphor, [the tender female skin]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle}, is now absent.

Obviously, an audience that follows the metaphorical Yuk!-route will not reach equilibrium. The meaning that this audience arrives at will clash with its perception of what the author intended. So, the interpretation process continues and finally the hyperbolic reading will prevail, reaching equilibrium. However, this is not a satisfying model to explain that the majority of audiences do not encounter any Yuk-moment. A hypothetical meaning that is successively rejected because no equilibrium is reached remains part of the ‘polyphony’ that constructs the meaning. In case of the cartoon, this is an intended, invited, and necessary role; the cartoon intentionally presents a scene that is meant to be rejected (US treats Cuba as a naughty boy), to articulate the intended meaning (It is wrong that the US treats Cuba as a naughty boy). Together this results in an argument. Here, however, when the “yuk!” pops up, damage is done. So, either this advertisement has erred, or the author genuinely assumed that the metaphorical route is blocked (except for academic semioticians who approach the discourse with a perverted analytical eye). Informal observations among a group of Chinese students indicate that the “yuk!!” does not pop up spontaneously. But the unwanted reading can be encouraged and is constructed by a substantial minority when the metaphorical relation between the bed of roses and the female skin is sustained. This seems to indicate that this reading is ‘blocked’. But the Yuk-reading can be activated, sustaining the metaphorical relation between fresh soft roses and female skin.

In the remainder of this paper, I propose a tentative explanation. To do so, we need to model different types of comparisons (section 4), as well as formulate a cognitive principle, which predicts that under certain circumstances an audience arrives at one type before it attempts another type (section 5). The specific question is therefore:

How can we explain that an audience attempts to interpret the relation between a source domain and a target domain as a hyperbole before it attempts to interpret it as a metaphor instead of (a) first trying the metaphorical reading or (b) attempting both and successively selecting the relevant outcome?

4. Ordering types of comparisons

We distinguish between different types of comparisons: literal comparisons,

metaphors, hyperboles, metonyms, and so on, the details which depend on different traditions. There are opinions about the distinction between literal and figurative comparison, between metaphor and simile, and on defining metaphor from many perspectives (compare for example Lakoff, & Johnson 1980; Croft 1993; Lakoff 1993; Peirsman & Geeraerts 2006; Steen 2007; Gibbs 2008; Forceville 2009; Barcelona, R. Benczes & F. Ruiz de Mendoza Ibáñez 2011 and the numerous references in these works). Important is the contribution by Lakoff's (1987), who reconsiders many instances of categorisation to be a form of comparison instead of a process of feature-checking. Also useful is the overview of relevant literature by Steen (2007) who, in his search to define metaphor from a discourse and cognitive approach, discusses many forms of comparison.

I do not know, however, of any existing proposal that directly considers the *order* in which an interpreter 'decides' to 'fit' different types of comparison on an underspecified discourse. By an underspecified discourse, I mean a discourse that offers clues that allow the interpreter to construct, for example, a hyperbole as well as a metaphor, a literal as well as a figurative reading, and so on. The proposal developed in this paper is necessarily tentative and rudimentary. But it helps to formulate an intermediate answer to the question formulated above.

The core of the current proposal is that comparisons can be arranged on a continuous scale. Typical forms are marked as points on this continuous scale. The scale is based on two related dimensions. First, there is similarity *of the domains* that the vehicle and the tenor stem from: the scale runs from very similar source and target domains on one extreme end, to very different domains on the other (also compare the proposal in Peirsman & Geeraerts 2006). Second, there is the *kind of mapping relation* between source domain and target domain: the scale runs from very rational, conceptual mapping on the one end, to very free, associative mapping on the other. The metaphor, for example, refers to a heterogeneous group of comparisons situated somewhere 'in the middle' of the scale; the domains in a prototypical metaphor can be very different, but we still find a fairly rational mapping. From this point on, we can move toward more associative forms of mapping between very different domains, or we can move toward comparisons with more similar domains and even more rational, conceptual forms of mapping.

We find on one extreme side (let us call this the right side) of the scale, discourse in which elements from very different domains are juxtaposed such that the audience still recognizes it as inviting a 'comparison', but the audience is hardly guided toward

a detailed process of mapping elements of the one domain onto the other. We find the scale ‘dissolving’ in a realm of unarticulated associations. A typical example may be an advertisement in which we see a car reflecting a background of a shiny sun, with a huge blue wave. The audience will identify a source domain (with the wave as its central element) and a target domain (with the car as its central element) and will feel invited to map – in an unbound, associative way – values and concepts from the source on the target domain.

On the other extreme (the left side), through an invitation to construct some kind of ‘literal’ comparison (source and target domain strongly related and mapping very rational: “The heart is like a pump”), the interpreter is asked to construct a ‘normal’, adequate classification (“The heart is a biological pump”). Lakoff (1987) shows that in many contexts classification is best explained by taking recourse to comparison, i.e., comparing a situation or object with a prototypical example that one has become familiar with at a certain moment, in a specific culture; if the two match sufficiently, the situation or object is ‘classified’ as such. Conceptualizing classification this way, it is in fact categorizing by comparing.

On the right side, we run ‘out of the scale’ when two elements are merely juxtaposed, no longer inviting any form of mapping. On the left side, we run out of the scale when an element is merely predicated in a fully conventionalized and purely informative way (“He is father of two children”). It is clear that the transitions between the types of comparisons are gradual and not sharp, as are the extremities of the scale on both sides (Van den Hoven 2015, Chapter 5).

This model explains why it is difficult to sharply delineate different types of comparisons as well as to define the concept of comparison in general. It, for example, explains why the distinction between literal and figurative comparisons is ambiguous. It also explains the significant differences between comparisons that are named metaphorical; this type covers a quite large area in the middle, running from a strongly ‘didactic’ metaphor employing closely-related domains with rational mapping, to highly creative metaphors employing much more different domains with less restricted mapping.

On the scale, we can position a prototypical hyperbole somewhere on the left side of the metaphor. Vehicle and tenor are presented as stemming from one domain or from very closely related domains. One element is blown-up out of proportion or severely exaggerated in a particular way, but the audience is invited to map the exaggerated situation rather straightforwardly onto the ‘normal’ situation. In an ad

for a brand of push-up bras, we see a source domain with a cup that has an extremely long, horizontally bowed straw; we compare this image with a very similar target domain of a lady wearing the push-up bra drinking from a cup. We conclude that the bra augments the size of her breasts so considerably that she needs to hold the cup significantly further away from her body (obviously not as extremely as the straw in the target domain suggests). Or, in another ad for the same product showing a male model with articulated breasts, we are supposed to project what we see in the source domain of males with no breasts, on the target domain of females with small breasts. Because the vehicle is ‘similar’ to the tenor, we can say that we are moving in the direction of a literal comparison. The hyperbole uses a vehicle to focus the audience’s attention on one aspect or function of the tenor, often to evoke a strong evaluation, positive or negative.

The model also helps to understand why metonymy is a difficult category to position. Metonymy is a figure in which an element from a target domain is evoked by means of an element from an associated source domain. The first complication with this concept is that not all metonymies are comparisons. Wall Street is used to refer to the U.S. financial and corporate sector, Hollywood stands for the U.S. film industry. There is no mapping process supposed. Such metonyms, obviously, have no position on the scale. However, many metonymies do evoke the exploration of similarity or analogy, and they can combine domain relations that are more remote than the spatial part-whole relations that underlie the examples above. Another complication is that the distance between the domains can vary greatly, and the mapping can vary from a very rational similarity to a rudimentary association. This is due to the fact that some metonymic relations are comprehensible because of the similarity between the domains and the straightforwardness of the mapping, while others are deliberately ‘constructed’ in a culture over a certain time period. The first type is positioned on the left of the prototypical metaphor and even left of the hyperbole, while the second type merges with the metaphor or is even positioned on the right side of the metaphor (also compare Peirsman & Geeraerts 2006). An example of a metonymy that is positioned far on the left side of the scale is in the preferred reading of the sanitary napkin example. The flowers can in many cultures be read as a metonym for the tender, soft female person, popularizing flower names as names for girls, explaining abundant use of flowers in female products, making flowers a suitable symbolic gift to a woman, and so on. Far on the right side is the Marlboro man. For many years, the cigarette brand Marlboro deliberately created an association with cowboy-life, depicting the

Marlboro man, a cowboy smoking a cigarette. The man developed into a metonym; even the smoking could be left out. Two very different domains (source: cowboy-life; domain: cigarette smoking) became mutually associated, by consistent advertising. The audience is not guided toward a detailed process of mapping but toward an emotional realm of associations. An example of metonymy merging with metaphor, somewhere in the middle of the scale, is created by a Dutch supermarket chain named Albert Heijn. The supermarket used a sustained campaign about its good-natured local manager, who is positive and funny. The relation between this person as the vehicle and (elements of) the supermarket as the tenor developed into a metonym. But the audience is still invited to map observations about the behavior and appearance of this man onto the company as a whole. The model therefore explains why metonymy is a problematic category.

Once again, the model developed here is tentative and rudimentary, but it positions the prototypical types of comparisons in one framework that is adequate to explain a number of observations. This model, combined with a rather simple cognitive principle, explains why an audience attempts to interpret the relation between a source domain and a target domain as a hyperbole before it attempts to interpret it as a metaphor.

5. The cognitive principle

The cognitive principle that I propose is simple: after having hypothesized a source and a target domain, an interpreter basically attempts to solve the mapping process by starting to assume the type of comparison as far on the left side of the scale as plausible, progressing to the right until equilibrium is reached. This means: hypotheses that assume similar domains precede hypotheses that assume more different domains; hypotheses about mapping processes that are rational precede hypotheses that assume mapping processes that are free and associative.

Together with the interpretation model that predicts that the interpretation process stops when equilibrium is reached, this theoretical and hypothetical model suffice to explain the observations regarding the advertisement example. The area with the dried-out roses is highly salient and conveys a plausible clue to construct a hyperbole; a hyperbolic interpretation leads to a satisfying meaning. Hyperbole precedes metaphor, and a metaphorical reading is never reached because equilibrium terminates the process. The other salient element is the large field of fresh pink roses; a metonymic interpretation of representing femininity leads to a satisfying meaning.

This type of metonym precedes metaphor, and a metaphorical reading is never reached. The second part renders the first part even more plausible as the metaphor [the tender female skin]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle} is preceded by the metonym [the tender female]_{tenor} is like [a bed of pink roses]_{vehicle}, rendering the metaphor less salient when the metonym already creates equilibrium. As such, the metaphor is less salient, and extending this metaphor to the (previously explained in hyperbolic terms) dried up area is even less salient. This also explains the observation that when the metaphorical reading was explicitly emphasized, part of the audience indeed extends this metaphorical interpretation to the dried-up part, resulting in the yuk!-reading.

Of course this theoretical and hypothetical model to explain the order in which an audience attempts to fit different types of comparisons should not be ad hoc. First of all it should be supported by other observations in comparison construction, showing for example how a plausible literal, metonymic, or hyperbolic reading of salient elements precedes and indeed blocks a reading as an (extended) metaphor. The following ad may be such example (Figure 3).



Figure 3 advertisement for condomshop.ch

The first salient element to draw attention to is the naked man, compared with the men dressed in heavy protective uniforms. A construction as a ‘literal’ comparison may establish equilibrium, suggesting that this man is taking an extreme safety risk, compared to what the others think to be necessary – in fact, a stupid risk. This is confirmed by the second salient element; the bright yellow package with the red condom, saying: “Don’t be stupid”. Successively, the entire scene conveys a clue to

develop a metaphor: [Having sex without a condom]_{tenor} is like [starting a SWAT-action totally and stupidly unprotected]_{vehicle}. A step that is required in the interpretation process is for the audience to transpose the negative connotation presented here into its positive counterpart: [Having sex with a condom]_{tenor} is like [participating in a SWAT action well-protected]_{vehicle}. Such transposition may bring about some extension of the metaphorical mapping from the nakedness of the man, being associated with the ‘nakedness’ of a penis without a condom. However, the audience is not supposed to analyse this metaphorical relation thoroughly. Mapping too much of the vehicle onto the tenor would result in comparing sexual intercourse with a violent encounter or any action in which you have a gun in your hand. Mapping the idea of over-protecting oneself such that one feels as little physical sensation as possible on the target domain of having sex is also a message that an Internet condom-selling company does not want to convey.

Obviously one needs to systematically explore underspecified discourses that invite the construction of a comparison, in particular, searching for counterexamples. Only when time and again the model can account for the intended or empirically observed readings, the plausibility of the model can increase on empirical grounds. However, there is also a more deductive way to support its plausibility. If the principle fits into a more general cognitive mechanism, this contributes to its plausibility.

This indeed seems to be the case. Fauconnier & Turner (2002), for example, propose an abstract general framework based on an assumption that interpretation processes generally run from hypothesizing more restricted meaning toward loosening the hypothesis; this assumes meaning construction that requires more creative mapping processes. A hypothesis is most restricted when it is almost entirely determined by the information provided by the discourse. ‘Less restricted’ means that the need to supply foreknowledge increases and the need to creatively solve clashes. The order in which one tries increasingly less constrained types of comparisons is motivated by the fact that the attached but rejected meaning of former cycles is presupposed by later cycles. If this is a plausible, more general cognitive strategy, this model for comparisons proposed here gains plausibility as it fits into this framework. Also the basic semiotic process underlying Peircean semiotics assumes departing from the direct object, the meaning as understood from former experiences with the sign-vehicle, in a dynamic way developing a ‘new’ interpretant if equilibrium is not reached (van den Hoven 2010).

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