A Study of Multimodal Metaphors in Newspaper Cartoons Representing COVID-19

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Abstract

Based on Forceville's (1996) multimodal metaphor theory, the present study analyzes the multimodal metaphors in 6 newspaper cartoons representing COVID-19, exploring how pictorial and verbal means of expression are used to create multimodal metaphors. The results show that 1) Pictorial mode, verbal mode, and verbal & pictorial mode are the major modes used in the multimodal metaphorical representations; 2) The embodied aspects of the source domains are often complemented by socio-cultural knowledge.

Subject Areas

Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics

Keywords

Multimodal Metaphors, Newspaper Cartoons, COVID-19, Pictorial Mode

1. Introduction

Newspaper cartoons that involve both verbal and non-verbal discourse are persuasive visual summaries that depict current social issues in a form that is easily understood by the general public. Nowadays, with the COVID-19 pandemic posing a dire threat to the health of global citizens, the major concern of the world is to fight against the novel coronavirus pneumonia. A series of cartoons concerning the COVID-19 pandemic are thus created by cartoonists worldwide. These cartoons usually contain a wealth of multimodal metaphors which provide valuable research data for the scholars studying multimodal metaphors.

Recent years have witnessed a rising number of studies on multimodal metaphors. These studies mainly concern three aspects: 1) theoretical studies on multimodal metaphors (Feng, 2011 [1]; Zhao, 2011 [2]); 2) the relationship between

multimodal metonymy and metaphors; 3) studies on multimodal metaphors in various forms of discourse including advertisements (Hu & Liu, 2018) [3], posters (Yang, 2015) [4], and political cartoons (Pan, 2011 [5]; Ma & Gao, 2020 [6]; Wang, 2021 [7]). All of the aforementioned studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of multimodal metaphors. However, few researchers have conducted research based on the corpus of one topic.

In view of it, the present paper is going to analyze multimodal metaphors in 6 newspaper cartoons that portray the COVID-19 pandemic based on the theory of multimodal metaphor mainly proposed by Forceville (1996) [8], with the purpose of identifying how pictorial and verbal means of expressions are used to create multimodal metaphors. By analyzing the metaphors involved in the cartoons, the present study aims to improve the visual literacy of readers in this information era where verbal information is frequently accompanied by other modes of information. At the same time, the paper also hopes to raise people's awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Multimodal Metaphor

Since Lakoff and Johnson (1980) [9] influentially proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), a growing proliferation of research on metaphors has been conducted. However, most of these studies merely concern metaphors in verbal discourses and little attention has been paid to non-verbal manifestation of metaphors. Forceville (1996) [8] pointed out that further assessment of the CMT requires analyses extended from mere verbal discourse to pictorial and multimodal discourse. Therefore, starting from a study on pictorial metaphor in static advertisement, Forceville further launched a series of studies on multimodal metaphors and proposed the multimodal metaphor theory.

A distinction has been made between multimodal metaphor and monomodal metaphor. According to Forceville (2009) [10], monomodal metaphors refer to metaphors whose target and source are exclusively or predominantly rendered in one mode, while multimodal metaphors can be defined as metaphors whose target and source domains are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes.

Forceville (2011) [11] also provided us with a useful strategy for distinguishing between pictorial and multimodal metaphors: imagine erasing all verbal elements in the cartoon, and 1) if the visuals still allow for identifying a target and a source, the metaphor is construed as a pictorial one; 2) if neither target or source becomes unidentifiable, it is construed as a multimodal metaphor.

2.2. Classification of Multimodal Metaphor

In Forceville (1996) [8], four types of metaphors were distinguished, namely MP1 (metaphors with one pictorially present term), MP2 (metaphors with two pictorially present terms), PSs (pictorial simile) and VPMs (verbal-pictorial meta-

phors). In 2002 [12], Forceville modified his previous classification and divided metaphors into 5 new categories, namely contextual metaphor, hybrid metaphor, pictorial simile, integrated metaphor and verbal-pictorial metaphors. He pointed out that the fourth type of metaphor, verbal-pictorial metaphor, is better regarded as a subtype of a superordinate category, to be labeled "multimodal metaphor". It can be seen from the above classification that Forceville's taxonomy mainly focuses on pictorial metaphor rather than multimodal metaphors.

Besides Forceville, other researchers have also made contribution to the classification of multimodal metaphors. For example, based on the modes of the source and target domain of the metaphor, Yang (2015) [4] put forward 6 types of multimodal metaphorical representation. They are "verbal mode—pictorial mode", "verbal mode—verbal & pictorial mode", "verbal & pictorial mode—pictorial mode", "verbal & pictorial mode—verbal & pictorial mode", "verbal & pictorial mode—implicit mode", and "pictorial mode—verbal & pictorial mode". The present study is going to adopt Yang (2015)'s classification [4].

3. Research Questions and Data Collection

3.1. Research Questions

This paper sets out to answer the following questions: 1) What are the major modes used in the multimodal metaphorical representations? 2) What are the source and target domains of multimodal metaphors in the cartoons? 3) Which types of multimodal metaphorical representations are shown in the cartoons?

3.2. Data Collection

The data for this study consist of 6 cartoons created by professional cartoonists worldwide and published in the "cartoon column" of the online newspapers. The cartoons were collected via Google Search (https://www.google.com) by searching the phrase "COVID-19 cartoons". The identification of multimodal metaphors is based on the definition of multimodal metaphor proposed by Forceville (2009) [10] as well as his strategy for distinguishing between pictorial and multimodal metaphors. All of the cartoons selected are specifically about the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors of the cartoons come from different countries including the United States, China, and India.

4. An Analysis of the Cartoons Representing COVID-19

4.1. Features of Multimodal Metaphors Representing COVID-19

Table 1 summarizes the source domain, target domain and the mapping feature of each metaphor identified in the six newspaper cartoons pertaining to COVID-19. As can be seen in Table 1, the source and target domain of the multimodal metaphors are represented by different kinds of modes. Most target domains are represented by verbal mode while most source domains are shown by pictorial mode. Pictorial mode, verbal mode and verbal & pictorial mode are the major modes used in the multimodal metaphorical representations.

Table 1. Target domain, source domain and projected features.

	Target Domain (Mode)	Source Domain (Mode)	Projected Feature
1	COVID-19 (verbal)	Tsunami (pictorial)	"dangerous, disastrous"
	Plan to open school (verbal)	Sandcastle (pictorial)	"fragile", "unreliable",
2	COVID-19 (verbal)	Crocodile (pictorial)	"life-threatening force"
3	COVID-19 (verbal)	Huge opening mouth (pictorial)	"dangerous", "life-threatening"
	Economy (verbal)	Ship on the beach (pictorial)	"stagnate and unable to move forward"
4	Turning point of infection curve (verbal & pictorial)	Peak of a snow mountain (verbal & pictorial)	"hard to reach"
5	COVID-19 (verbal & pictorial)	Poisonous apple (pictorial)	"deadly poisonous"
6	COVID-19 (verbal & pictorial)	Trouble (pictorial)	"troublesome, unwelcome"

The target domain is always the COVID-19 or something that is greatly influenced by COVID-19, including the economy and the plan to open schools. What most source domains share is that they depict situations in which physical well-being or even plain survival is endangered? By projecting the features of tsunamis, crocodile, huge opening mouth, and poisonous apple onto the target domain COVID-19, the cartoonists enable us viewers to visualize the danger of the invisible COVID-19.

4.2. Types of Multimodal Metaphorical Representations

Among the 6 newspaper cartoons representing COVID-19, three types of multimodal metaphors are identified. They are "pictorial mode—verbal mode", "verbal & pictorial mode—verbal & pictorial mode", and "pictorial mode—verbal & pictorial mode".

1) Pictorial Mode (Source Domain)—Verbal Mode (Target Domain)

In Figure 1, the right part of the cartoon shows a big wave threatening to sweep the castle away. The pictorial representation of the sandcastle is smaller and is placed at the bottom left corner of the cartoon. The builder of the castle is gone, unseen in the picture, perhaps running away at the sight of the ominous tsunami.

The first metaphor we are invited to construe can be rendered as COVID 19 IS TSUNAMI. The source domain is pictorially represented while the target domain is shown verbally by the text "COVID surge". This qualifies as a multimodal metaphor which belongs to the verbal-pictorial category. The feature mapped from the TSUNAMI upon the COVID 19 is "dangerous, disastrous and destructive". It implies that COVID-19 is as fierce as the tsunami and will inevitably bring disasters and destroy everything it comes across.
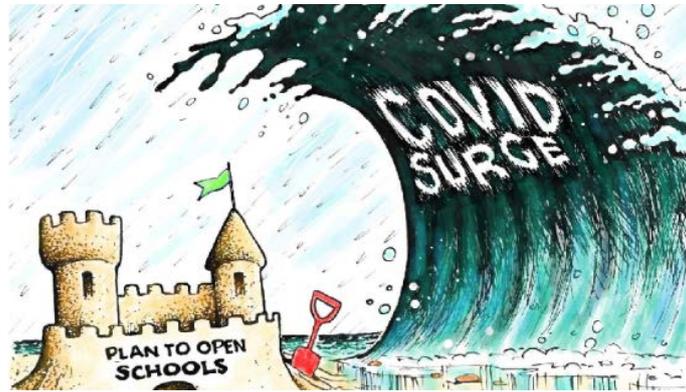
Figure 1. Cartoon by Dave Granlund, US.

Besides, from the point of view of the representational meaning, a transactional process can be identified. The drops of water in the air are shooting towards the sandcastle, forming several vectors that lead the eyes to the sandcastle. The vectors here connect the sandcastle with the tsunami and suggest that the huge wave can pose a direct threat to the castle. The text "plan to open schools" projected on the front side of the sandcastle allows us to identify the second metaphor as PLAN TO OPEN SCHOOLS IS SANDCASTLE. The metaphor here is also realized by the interaction of two modes. Connotations of SANDCASTLE that come to mind are "fragile", "unreliable", and "soon to be destroyed". All of these features of the sandcastle can be adapted to be attributable to the primary subject PLAN TO OPEN SCHOOLS. The interpretation of the metaphor runs something like: "Just as the sandcastle can be easily washed away by the tsunami, the same is with the plan to open schools. Such plan is merely an illusion since it will be easily influenced or even destroyed by COVID-19 surge and is soon to be cancelled or postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic".

In Figure 2, the cartoonist depicts a crocodile in a watering hole, tempting the animals on the bank including the antelopes, zebras, and giraffes to get into the "fine water". The crocodile is the most salient character in the composition since it is larger than the surrounding animals, and is placed in the foreground. A horizontal line formed by the upper outline of the bank runs through the middle of the cartoon, dividing it into two sections. The world of the crocodile which signifies danger is thus separated from the world of the other animals which signifies safety. The animals in the background serve as a metonymy for the general public.

The multimodal metaphor here is COVID 19 IS CROCODILE. The metaphor is realized by the interaction of two modes. The source domain is pictorially represented; the target domain is cued by the verbal text "COVID 19" projected on the napkin of the crocodile. The napkin, an attribute of the crocodile, here implies that the crocodile is ready to have a meal. Also, the crocodile's opening mouth with sharp teeth in it as well as its claws stretching out toward the sky both suggests its ferocity. Thus, the mappings from CRODODILE to COVID-19 are "life-threatening force" and "high degree of danger". The interpretation of the

metaphor runs something like: "The COVID-19 is a threat for the general public and is as dangerous as a crocodile hunting for its prey".

In Figure 3, it can be noted that this picture is not divided into two equal halves. The left section is the most salient, not only because of its size but also because the salience of the huge opening mouth. The first one can be verbalized as COVID-19 SECOND WAVE IS AN OPENING MOUTH. The target domain is presented verbally by the text inscribed inside the opening mouth while the source domain is cued by the pictorial modality. The projected feature might be "fierce, dangerous and life-threatening". The second metaphor is ECONOMY IS A SHIP ON THE BEACH. The target domain is verbally presented and the source domain is depicted visually. The feature mapped from A SHIP ON THE BEACH upon the ECONOMY is "stagnate and unable to move forward".

2) Verbal & Pictorial Mode (Source Domain)—Verbal & Pictorial Mode (Target Domain)

Figure 4 shows four men climbing a snow mountain which bears the inscription "infection curve". One man asked the others whether they had reached the peak of the mountain, and the man in red answered, "Maybe. But keep staying six feet apart". A transactional action process can be identified in which the four


Figure 2. Cartoon by Dave Granlund, US.
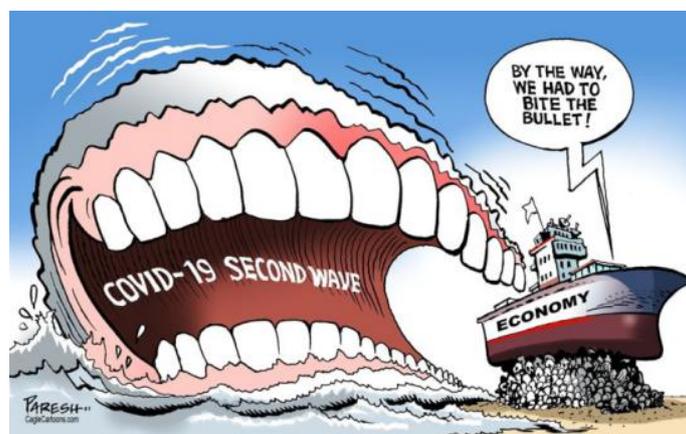
Figure 3. Cartoon by Paresh Nath, India.

Figure 4. Cartoon by David Horsey, US.

men aiming to reach the top of the mountain can serve as Actor while the top of the mountain serves as the Goal. The vector is formed by the rope between the men and the angle of the men's bodies.

One way of verbalizing the multimodal metaphor contained in this cartoon is THE TURNNING POINT OF TEH INFECTION CURVE IS THE PEAK OF A SNOW MOUNTAION. The source domain is cued by two modalities: "the peak of a snow mountain" is rendered pictorially, and its identification is "anchored" (Barthes, 1986 [1964]: p. 28) by the verbal text "the peak" enclosed in the dialogue balloon in the cartoon. The target domain is also realized by two modes: the text labeled on the front side of the mountain leads the viewers to regard the outline of the mountain in the cartoon as the infection curve and see the highest point of the curve as the turning point of the infection curve. The projected feature mapping from the source domain to target domain is probably "a goal hard to reach". The interpretation of the metaphor is presumably: Climbing a snow mountain is sure to be a demanding and time-consuming task which requires lots of time, patience and efforts. Similar to mountain climbing, it will take a long time before the turning point of the pandemic shows up. Before we welcome the turning point of the pandemic, all we have to do is continuously making efforts to fight against the COVID-19. For example, we can combat the coronavirus by keeping a distance from another person, which is also suggested in the cartoon.

3) Pictorial Mode (Source Domain)—Verbal & Pictorial Mode (Target Domain)

Figure 5 presents us with a scene in which an old woman is giving a red stuff to Snow White. From the view of representational meaning, there also exists a reactional process in which Snow White is Reactor and the red stuff is Phenomenon. The vector is formed by the direction of the glance of Snow White, which guides the viewers to look at the red stuff. Therefore, the red stuff becomes the most salient due to the greatest amount of light it receives, its bright red color and its central position in the whole composition.

Figure 5. Cartoon Retrieved from:
https://webneel.com/art-contest-corona-virus-drawings-illustration.

The metaphor here can be verbalized as CORONAVIRUS IS AN POISONOUS APPLE. The interpretation of the metaphor is mediated by a reference to the fairy tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves where the apple offered by the old peddler woman disguised by the queen turns out to be a poisonous one. Therefore, the viewers of the cartoon can immediately recognize the secondary term of the metaphor as AN POISONOUS APPLE after identifying the two represented characters in the cartoon as the vicious queen and Snow White respectively. The source domain, namely the poisonous apple, is inferred via the reference to the fairy tale as well as the red color and round shape of the stuff holding in the hand of the old woman. The target domain is cued by two modalities: the coronavirus is rendered pictorially as a ball with spikes on its surface and the caption in the upper part of the cartoon further confirms that the ball stands for the coronavirus. Here the property projected from the source domain upon the CORONAVIRUS is obviously "deadly poisonous". By construing such a metaphor, the cartoonist intends to warn the public of the danger of the coronavirus.

In Figure 6, the Earth is presented as a man in panic, not knowing what to do with the countless kids asking for candies. A large number of kids dressing as ghosts line up at the door of the man's house, asking for Halloween candies. From the point of view of interactive meaning, the man faces the viewers frontally, so the viewers are meant to be emotionally involved with the man and empathize with him. The dialogue balloon in the cartoon shows that there is a verbal process in which the man is the Sayer while the text "No more COVID-19" is the Utterance.

The metaphor can be construed as COVID-19 IS TROUBLE. The target domain is represented by the text in the dialogue balloon as well as the headgear of

Figure 6. Cartoon by Luo Jie, China.

the kids shown in the cartoon resembling COVID-19. The source domain is activated by the pictorial context. The pumpkin-like baskets in the kids' hands, the candy bowl in the air and the kids dressing up in costumes as ghosts altogether create an association with the "trick-or-treat" tradition of Halloween. As is depicted in the cartoon, few candies in the bowl form a sharp contrast with the innumerable kids asking for candies. This implies that the man is in great trouble as he is running out of candies and is placed in a tricky situation. The feature mapping from the source domain to the target domain is presumably "tricky and unwelcome". The interpretation of the metaphor is presumably: "Coping with COVID-19 is similar to dealing with numerous kids asking for candies at Halloween. Both are troublesome and tricky".

It can be concluded that the embodied aspects of the source domains are often complemented by socio-cultural knowledge and it is this knowledge that provides many of the mappings (Forceville, 2011) [11]. The viewer needs to be familiar with the fairy tale of Snow White and the "trick-or-treat" tradition of Halloween to be able to identify and interpret the two metaphors mentioned above.

5. Conclusion

The present study analyzed the multimodal metaphors in 6 newspaper cartoons representing the COVID-19 pandemic and divided the multimodal metaphors into three types, namely "pictorial mode—verbal mode", "verbal & pictorial mode—verbal & pictorial mode", and "pictorial mode—verbal & pictorial mode". The study finds that most target domains are represented by verbal mode while most source domains are shown by pictorial mode. Pictorial mode, verbal mode, and verbal & pictorial mode are the major modes used in the multimodal metaphorical representations. Besides, the embodied aspects of the source domains are often complemented by socio-cultural knowledge. As for the limitations of the paper, on the one hand, only 6 cartoons have been analyzed in the paper, so the degree to which the findings can be applied to a larger number of cartoons

still needs further exploration. On the other hand, the analysis might be affected by the author's subjectivity. Therefore, a future study might add more cartoons and adopt a more objective research method to provide new insights.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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