

AGNIESZKA MIERZWIŃSKA-HAJNOS

Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej

e-mail: roserom@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9798-5878>

CONTEXT-DEPENDENT OR CONTEXT-DETACHED? MULTIMODALITY IN COMMERCIALS FOR ŻUBR BEER. A CASE STUDY

KONTEKSTOWO ZALEŻNE CZY ODERWANE OD KONTEKSTU? MULTIMODALNOŚĆ W REKLAMACH PIWA ŻUBR. ANALIZA PRZYPADKU

ABSTRACT: The paper offers a multimodal analysis of a selected instance taken from a series of commercials for *Żubr* beer, an advertising campaign that has received wide acclaim among Polish audience in recent years. It seems that the success of the series resides in two aspects: firstly, by relegating the advertised product to a secondary place, the commercials for *Żubr* beer do not activate alcohol-related issues in a straightforward way. Secondly, by assuming the form of ‘mini-narratives’ in the sense of Forceville (2009), they adopt various modes (visual, verbal and aural) which become “the cue to resolving the puzzling message of the ad” (Pérez-Sobrinó 2017, p. 124). The way commercials for *Żubr* beer are constructed inheres in the incongruity between what is offered in their visual and/or aural elements and the actual message encoded in the verbal mode, and depicted at the end of each commercial. An in-depth scrutiny shows that all commercials for *Żubr* beer form a context-dependent BEER IS WISENT multimodal metaphor, with the visualized WISENT as the secondary subject (Black 1979, Forceville 1996, also Fabiszak 2017), or the source in Lakoff and Johnson’s parlance (1980), and the hidden BEER as the primary subject, or the target.

KEYWORDS: multimodality, TV commercial, metaphor, cross-modal resonance

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: multimodalność, reklama telewizyjna, metafora, rezonans międzymodalny

Introduction

Contemporary human communication abounds with messages which draw on a multiplicity of means to capture the recipient's attention. These means, broadly recognized in the parlance of communication studies as *semiotic resources*, or *modes* (Maćkiewicz 2017, p. 35), contribute to the emergence of multimodal messages, i.e. such types of communication in which “various methods of expression, both verbal and non-verbal, co-create the ultimate message” (Fabiszak 2017, p. 267, transl. A.M.H.). It is generally claimed that the use of multimodal communication, be it visual arts, posters, advertising campaigns, films, music or commemorative landscapes, is not only the result of natural capacity of each human being to create messages and communicate various ideas with a plethora of available modes (cf. Winiarska and Załazińska 2018, p. 7). Multimodal communication is also, many a time, a deliberate operation carried out by the sender of the message which consists in applying the fusion of two or more distinct modes to boost its creativity.

Therefore, it is not a coincidence that various multimodal operations and techniques are frequently used in the realm of advertising, for each advertisement, to become catchy and thought-provoking, has to possess the creative potential in order to become attractive for a potential customer while simultaneously remaining intelligible. Pérez-Sobrino points to an apt remark on this issue made by Vogel, according to whom “nothing is more efficient than creative advertising; creative advertising is more memorable, longer lasting, works with less media spending, and builds a fan community...faster.” (source: <https://hbr.org/2013/06/creativity-in-advertising-when-it-works-and-when-it-doesn't>, after Pérez-Sobrino 2017, p. 1).

A particular instance of advertising which involves elements of multimodal communication while being highly creative at the same time is a television commercial in which various modes co-deploy in an ingenious way to achieve a pivotal aim, i.e. “to evoke positive feelings toward the product, service, or brand promoted” (Forceville 1996, p. 104). TV commercials, besides other existing popular forms of advertising, are considered to be the genre which offers enormous possibilities when it comes to the way the message about a given product or service is finally presented, and, more importantly, received by a potential customer. By assuming the forms of ‘mini-narratives’ (Forceville 2009), also called ‘mini-dramas’¹ (Esslin 1979; Berger 1996), TV commercials are ‘equipped with’ a full range of modes, *i.a.* visual mode, gestures, technical, audio and linguistic modes

¹ According to Esslin, the influence of drama on TV commercials is of vital importance since “of all the art forms only drama can communicate such an immense amount of information on so many levels simultaneously within the span of a few seconds” (1979, p. 99).

(cf. Periasamy et al. 2015, p. 153) which facilitate the presentation of the ultimate message in a creative way².

The present paper offers a multimodal analysis of a selected instance taken from a series of TV commercials for *Żubr* beer, an advertising campaign that has received wide acclaim among Polish audience in recent years (cf. Benenowska 2013). It seems that the overwhelming success of the series³ inheres in two aspects: firstly, by relegating the advertised product to a secondary place, the commercials for *Żubr* beer do not activate alcohol-related issues in a straightforward way. Secondly, by assuming the form of ‘mini-narratives’ (Forceville 2009), they adopt various modes (visual, verbal and aural) which become “the cue to resolving the puzzling message of the ad” (Pérez-Sobrino 2017, p. 124). While analyzing TV commercials for *Żubr*, it is easy to observe that the creativity of the series consists in the incongruity between what is offered in the visual and/or aural elements and the actual message encoded in the verbal mode and depicted at the end of each episode. After in-depth scrutiny it appears that all commercials for *Żubr* beer form a context-dependent BEER IS WISENT metaphor, with the visualized WISENT as the source domain, and the hidden BEER as the target domain (Lakoff, Johnson 1980).

Towards the analysis

One of the most creative processes frequently recalled in various forms of communication is metaphor, generally understood as “a borrowing between and intercourse of thoughts [and] a transaction between contexts” (Richards 1965 [1936], p. 94). Richards’ observation on the metaphorical nature of thought was developed decades later by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), whose famous motto “metaphor is primarily a matter of thought” (Lakoff, Johnson 1980, p. 153) marked the era of cognitive studies on this phenomenon in a variety of fields, e.g. literature, press illustration, poetry, political discourse, arts, music, or advertising

² To refer to all possible modes that contribute to a multimodal character of TV commercials, Etienne and Vanbaelen (2006) came up with the notion of the *description grid*, defined as “a multimodal one [i.e. grid – A.M.H.] that takes into account multiple modes and elements found in the medium of television and the genre of television commercials” (after Periasamy et al. 2015, p. 153).

³ The series of commercials for *Żubr* beer has received many prestigious awards in recent years. For instance, one of the spots took the first place in the Sound/Sound Design category of the advertising competition held by the Advertising Creators Club (KTR). In 2015, the brand won honorable mention in the competition “Master of Polish Speech”. Also, in 2016, *Żubr* received “Kreatura 2016,” awarded by the editorial board of “Media & Marketing Polska” for its long-term creative achievements (source: <https://www.kp.pl/en/about-us/awards>), which indicates ongoing popularity of the campaign.

(see, *i.a.* works by Górska 2018, 2019; Pérez-Sobrino 2014, 2017; Fabiszak, Olszewska 2018; Zbikowski 2008, 2009; El Refaie 2015). Unique and highly creative metaphors are also found in multimodal communication and studied in concord with the standards elaborated on by Lakoff and Johnson, as well as other cognitive scholars. Such metaphors, however, require special attention and thorough analysis since it is not always a simple task to describe them in terms of concrete source-abstract target unidirectional mapping. As observed by El Refaie (2015, p. 14–15):

Even the most conventional conceptual mappings between one area of experience and another may be reinvigorated or completely transformed when they are represented in a new, original form (...). I suggest that multimodality dramatically increases the opportunity for creativity at the level of representation, by exploiting the distinct characteristics and meaning potential of the various modes and their combinations. The resulting ‘cross-modal resonances’, I argue, may encourage new insight, but this insight is often of a preverbal, emotional, and intuitive nature, rather than involving logical processes of mapping knowledge from one conceptual domain to another.

El Refaie’s observation is confirmed by that of Forceville’s, according to which “metaphors in advertising, particularly good ones, are typically *experienced* as surprising creative couplings of target and source” (Forceville 2008, p. 178, emphasis original, cf. also Forceville 2017). Urios-Aparisi’s statement on metaphor perceived as “an integrated experience of words, images, sounds and meanings” (2009, p. 96) also forces us to reanalyze and reconsider the way multimodal metaphors are rendered and received⁴.

The present paper offers a multimodal analysis of one commercial for Żubr beer, an episode taken from a popular TV commercial series designed for the Dojlidy Brewery⁵. The analyzed instance shares the formula with other episodes: they all assume the form of ‘mini narratives’ with a voice-over, where

⁴ Research in multimodal metaphor is also a continuation and consequence of earlier studies on metaphor. As pointed out by Forceville (2009, p. 34): “Researching multimodal metaphor (...) is a natural next step in the further development of metaphor studies – a development in which theoretical reflection will have to go hand in hand with empirical testing. If creative and conventional metaphor are key factors in human thinking, and if human thinking is reflected in more than verbal manifestations alone, investigating multimodal metaphor is highly worthy of extensive scholarly effort.”

⁵ What has to be remembered while analyzing TV commercials for Żubr beer is the fact that even a thorough interpretation of a single episode remains insufficient to prove the existence of metaphor of any sort. To become comprehensible and properly decoded, metaphors require longer time and more attested instances to be examined (as opposed to *ad hoc*-activated phenomena as, e.g. conceptual blends, cf. Fauconnier, Turner 2002, also Nordquist 2019). For this reason, it is essential that the analyzed instance presented herein be discussed against a broader framework assumed for the whole series, while simultaneously portraying only selected elements indispensable to account for the topic raised in this publication.

the narrator gives a detailed account of life in the primeval forest, pointing to such aspects as natural rhythm of life in the wilderness, or the competition between individuals of different species. In the focus of attention stands the European bison (henceforth: the wisent), a meek huge animal which has become the symbol of the Białowieża Forest where it lives in free-ranging herds. The objective of each episode of the series is to advertise beer which is brewed at the Dojlidy Brewery, located not far away from the Białowieża Forest. For this reason, copywriters deliberately use the Polish name of an animal (Pol. *żubr*) to promote a type of beer under the same name. A distinctive feature of the series of commercials for *Żubr* beer (including the analyzed instance) is the fact that the advertised product appears only at the end of each commercial. Still, it is always accompanied by a slogan commensurate with what is offered in the visual mode, while simultaneously referring to a true value of the product itself. In the *Żubr* series there are usually three modes used, i.e. the visual mode which serves as the setting for particular episodes, many a time coupled with the aural mode (usually represented by nature sounds), and the verbal mode which remains ambiguous throughout the course of a commercial, since, as pointed out by Benenowska, “its task it to serve both the unfolding plot of a TV commercial as well as remain associated with the activity of drinking beer” (Benenowska 2013, p. 21, transl. A.M.H.).

Undoubtedly, the overwhelming success of TV commercials for *Żubr* beer inheres in their creativity which, in concordance with Koestler’s definition, “involves the restructuring of habitual thought patterns through the bisociation of two or more apparently incompatible frames of reference” (Koestler 1964, p. 38). Indeed, what we experience while watching the *Żubr* series is an ambiguous interplay between the visual and the verbal, while the advertised product occurs only to be seen for a couple of seconds at the end of each episode⁶.

To prove this, let us analyze in detail two excerpts taken from the episode “*Żubr czeka na polanie*,” allowing for two modes: the verbal and the visual. Since the role of the aural mode used in the series is narrowed down to complement both the visual and the verbal mode in order to boost the atmosphere of the visualized as well as narrated setting by providing nature sounds (chirping birds, owl hooting, cuckoo sound, etc.), this mode will not be discussed in detail here.

The visual mode resembles a nature documentary. The setting which the recipient observes is the forest and, later, the glade. We also see a series of close-ups of forest animals (the squirrel, the hare, two boars, the owl). Everyday rhythm of wildlife is interrupted by the appearance of the wisent. The advent of the animal is marked by the aural mode: we can hear the grunt and the sound of hooves

⁶ This is also the reason for which commercials for *Żubr* beer can be broadcast in prime-time since any direct associations with alcoholic drinks remain reduced till the final shot when the image of the bottle and the logo of the brewery appear.

produced by a large, possibly slow moving animal which turns out to be a wisent in the very final scene when it joins the other three on the glade. The situation is presented in Fig. 1. below:



Fig. 1. The wisent joining other animals of the same species on the glade.
(source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaCBil2-Fio>)

The verbal mode is delivered in the form of a voice-over, the content of which goes as follows:

W puszczy wszystko, co nowe, zawsze budzi ciekawość. Znajomy, a jednak inny, intensywny w barwie, wyraźnie pełniejszy. Dołączył do stada i już czeka na polanie.

When literally translated into English, it goes as follows:

In the forest, everything that is new always excites curiosity. An acquaintance yet a stranger, intense in colour, and distinctly fuller (in the face). It has already joined the herd and is standing (lit. waiting) on the glade. (translation mine, A.M.H.)

Drawing on the insights presented above, one can put a daring claim that a series of commercials for *Żubr* beer operates on the multimodal BEER IS WISENT metaphor, where both the source and the target “are each represented exclusively and predominantly in different modes of representation” and “are cued in more than one mode simultaneously” (Forceville 2006, p. 384). The fusion of the verbal mode and the visual mode results in obtaining a verbo-visual message where the source domain is reconstructed against elements found for the concept of WISENT, while the target domain, BEER remains hidden only to be decoded in the very final scene⁷. Even though the BEER IS WISENT metaphor emerges against the pattern

⁷ When put under scrutiny, the BEER IS WISENT metaphor shares a lot of divergent points with Black’s interaction theory of metaphor (1979), successfully applied by Forceville to account for pictorial metaphors in advertising (Forceville 1994). Black’s theory operates on the *A is B* schema, where *A* (in the analyzed case the invisible beer) is the so-called primary subject (or the *target* in Lakoff and Johnson’s nomenclature, cf. e.g. Fabiszak 2017), while *B* (the wisent) is the visualized secondary *subject* (or the *source*).

based on two concrete domains, it is by no means a monomodal pictorial metaphor which consists in using already recognized domains “to denote known or less known domains by applying pictures, drawings and other forms of pictorial representation” (<https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/pictorial-metaphor/43126>). Therefore, the question arises what makes the metaphor in question multimodal and how we arrive at such conclusions.

To examine this problem, it is necessary to recall three kinds of messages as proposed by Barthes (1986 [1964]), which were also successfully adapted by Forceville to account for pictorial metaphors in advertising (Forceville 1994). According to Barthes, there are three types of messages to be distinguished: (i) the linguistic message, (ii) the denoted message, and (iii) the connoted message (Barthes 1986 [1964], p.30; after Forceville 1994, p. 9). In the linguistic message we find everything expressed in language (including the text that appears outside the image). Assuming that, for the analyzed instance, the text read by the narrator is such a type of linguistic message, it is now necessary to establish the relations it may have when juxtaposed with the visual component. Barthes enumerates two functions of such a linguistic message, i.e. *the relaying function* and *the anchoring function*, where the former indicates the fact that image and language remain “in a complementary relation” (Barthes 1986 [1964], p.30), while the latter is responsible for the appropriate “identification and (...) interpretation of the pictorial components” (Barthes 1986 [1964]; after Forceville 1994, p. 9). If we observe in what way the visual mode of the analyzed metaphor BEER IS WISENT corresponds with the verbal element which complements what is seen with a detailed account delivered by the narrator, we will notice the relaying function of the linguistic message. Moreover, the visual mode itself will be rendered as the denoted message (Barthes 1986 [1964]) since it conveys the literal image of wildlife in primeval forest, i.e. the visual representation comprised in the source domain.

An interesting situation occurs while reconstructing the target domain, BEER. As mentioned before, the target remains hidden until the very final scene of each episode and manifests via a vague image of the standard beer bottle as well as via the narrative or a slogan which, however, should be interpreted in a different way. Let us consider, once again, the verbal element of the analyzed excerpt:

W puszczy wszystko, co nowe, zawsze budzi ciekawość. Znajomy, a jednak inny, intensywny w barwie, wyraźnie pełniejszy. Dołączył do stada i już czeka na polanie.

Once a silhouette of a beer bottle appears in the final scene, the interpretation of the narrative no longer stands for:

In the forest, everything that is new always excites curiosity. An acquaintance yet a stranger, intense in colour, and distinctly fuller (in the face). It has already joined the herd and is standing (lit. waiting) on the glade.

Instead, we have a novel interpretation of the narrative which might be translated in the following way:

In the forest, everything that is new always excites curiosity. Familiar yet different, intense in color, and distinctly fuller in taste. It has already joined other types (of beer) and is waiting to be poured. (translation mine, A.M.H.)

This time, the linguistic message has not only the anchoring function (Barthes 1986 [1964], p. 30) which facilitates the identification and the interpretation of the visual component, but also activates the connoted message (Barthes 1986 [1964], p. 30) which manifests itself by recalling the shape of a beer bottle and the logo of the brewery at the end of each episode. Noteworthy here is the relation of homonymy observed in the Polish expression *na polanie* used in the episode. Throughout the duration of the commercial, its first meaning is activated (*na polanie* – ‘(to be) on the glade’), only to switch at the very final scene into the second one (*na polanie* – ‘to be poured’), additionally triggered by the visual element of the emerging silhouette of a beer bottle. The situation is presented in Fig. 2. below:



Fig. 2. The final scene for BEER IS WISENT metaphor
(source: <https://zubr.pl/reklamy-zubra/>, courtesy of “Kompania Piwowarska”)

All these parameters, when combined together, contribute to the fact that we no longer think of this TV commercial as of a film promoting the Białowieża Forest and its distinguished species– the wisent. Conversely, we delve into a completely different concept, beer, together with the appearance of the final scene. Judging the above, it is now possible to outline the sketch for a multimodal BEER IS WISENT metaphor, based in the interplay of the verbal and the visual mode, as specified in Table 1. below:

beer is wisent		
target domain		source domain
pub/ house	is	primeval forest
best beer (among other types)	is	wisent (the king of the forest)among other species of animals
habits and customs of drinking beer	are	habits and customs of wisent's life
male meetings to drink beer	is	wisent's being in a solely male group
group of people drinking beer	is	herd

Table 1. BEER IS WISENT metaphor

Concluding remarks

The analysis of the TV commercials for *Žubr* beer, one of the most successful, advertising campaigns in recent years, proves to what extent a multimodal character of the message increases the level of metaphor creativity (cf. El Refaie 2015). It seems that the more modes are coined to communicate a given message, the higher the creative potential of such a metaphor. Of vital importance here is also the so-called cross-resonance between the source and the target domain (El Refaie 2015), which additionally boosts the attractiveness of the message rendered by means of a multimodal metaphor. The BEER IS WISENT metaphor, though it relies on two completely distinct concepts, gains its ultimate meaning when the visual mode is complemented with the final scene in which the bottle of *Žubr* beer appears, coupled with the logo of the brewery. This is the very moment at which the verbal mode, so far playing the function of a complementary element for the visual plane, gains a completely different interpretation. Thus, the BEER IS WISENT metaphor ceases to be interpreted solely as bizarre incongruity between what is offered in the visual mode and the verbal mode but, instead, becomes a purposefully established cognitive operation which aims at boosting the effect of surprise in the target audience.

Concerning multimodal metaphors, one aspect cannot be overlooked either. It seems that the optimal interpretation of metaphors used in commercials is achieved when they are analyzed against the context in which they appear. Cultural background is also vital to avoid possible misinterpretations while decoding metaphors if they remain culturally determined (cf. Kövecses 2005; Forceville 2017; also Yu 2008), which holds true for the examined instance as BEER IS WISENT multimodal metaphor operates only with reference to *Žubr* brand (being context- and culture-determined). No less important is relevance here, for a given multimodal metaphor used in a commercial has to be recalled at a particular

moment in a particular place; it also has to be maximally relevant as far as the target audience is concerned (cf. Sperber and Wilson 1995; also Forceville 2008).

Last but not least, it has to be remembered that the BEER IS WISENT metaphor can only be established after an in-depth analysis of all commercials for Żubr beer. Obviously, the interpretation of a single instance as the one proposed herein is only a pretext to signalize how ingeniously multimodal metaphors are created, in what way they emerge in discourse, and, finally, which aspects should be taken into account by the recipient to decode them appropriately.

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STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje analizę multimodalną wybranego spotu reklamowego piwa *Żubr*, będącego częścią popularnej w Polsce serii reklam, stworzonej na potrzeby promocji produktów wytwarzanych przez Kompanię Piwowarską – Browar Dojlidy. Wydaje się, iż sukces całej serii opiera się na dwóch istotnych aspektach. Po pierwsze, dzięki przesunięciu produktu na drugi plan, reklamy piwa *Żubr* nie promują w sposób bezpośredni napoju alkoholowego. Po drugie, przyjmując formę mininarracji w sensie Forceville'a (2009), prezentowane reklamy angażują różne modalności (wizualne, werbalne, słuchowe), które, zintegrowane w komunikacie, „stają się sygnałem służącym do odkodowania nieoczywistej wiadomości ukrytej w reklamie” (Pérez-Sobrino 2017: 124, tłum. A.M.H.). Sposób, w jaki konstruowane są reklamy piwa *Żubr*, polega na sprzeczności pomiędzy tym, co oferuje ich warstwa wizualna i/lub słuchowa, a tym, co pozostaje zakodowane w warstwie werbalnej, i co zostaje ostatecznie odkodowane na końcu każdego spotu. Szczegółowe studium przypadku dowodzi, iż analizowana reklama, a wraz z nią cała seria stworzona na potrzeby promocji piwa *Żubr*, ukazuje mechanizm działania kontekstowo zależnej metafory multimodalnej *PIWO TO ŻUBR*, gdzie *ŻUBR* stanowi wizualizowany temat wtórny (por. Black 1979, Forceville 1996, zob. także Fabiszak 2017), będący, w ujęciu Lakoffa and Johnsona (1980), domeną źródłową, zaś *PIWO* interpretowane jest jako temat pierwotny, czyli domena docelowa.

AGNIESZKA MIERZWIŃSKA-HAJNOS

Instytut Neofilologii

Katedra Lingwistyki Stosowanej

Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej

pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4a

20-031 Lublin