

Conceptual Blending in Social Issue Advertisements

Anela Mulahmetovic Ibrisimovic* & Nerma Pezerović-Ridić**

Summary

The aim of the paper is to examine the extent to which conceptual integration theory can be applied to the analysis of social issue advertisements. Taking into consideration that we live in a visually-dominated culture, visual resources such as advertisements, cartoons, and memes have been used in crafting short, eye-catching messages, seeking the biggest impact with a limited amount of space. In recent years, there has been an enormous interest in the way conceptual integration theory can be used to explain how the mentioned resources are formed and what message they convey. More precisely, CIT will be used to show a glimpse of the intricate mental processes that are involved in the creation and understanding of social-issues advertisements.

Content

Theoretical outline

Conceptual integration theory, commonly known as blending, has emerged as an offspring of Fauconnier's mental spaces theory. In one of his works, Fauconnier (1994: xxvii) states that meaning construction or conceptualization is inseparable from the context since sentences serve as cues for the construction of mental spaces. Mental spaces are said to be "structured, incrementable sets, that is, sets with elements (...) and relations holding between them (...) such that new elements can be added to them and new relations established between their elements (ibid:16). In other words, mental spaces are temporary containers of information created for the purpose of better comprehension of a spoken or a written discourse.

* Tuzla University, Bosnia and Herzegovina

** Tuzla University, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Mental spaces get integrated in a conceptual integration network as a model of how meaning is mentally constructed. The network encompasses minimally four mental spaces that are structured by many different domains, namely two input spaces connected by counterpart matching or cross-mappings that is indicated by solid lines in the diagram, a generic space, and a blended space. The link between the generic space and input spaces is bidirectional. The generic space inherits elements from the inputs creating a less detailed structure than the one found in the input spaces, which is in turn mapped onto its counterparts in the inputs. There is a partial projection from the inputs into the blended space marked by the broken lines in the diagram. What emerges in the blend is a novel structure that remains connected to the inputs, as the blend "contains generic structure captured in the generic space but also contains more specific structure, and it can contain structure that is impossible for the inputs (...)" (Fauconnier and Turner 2002:47).

Methodology

It has been suggested that the creation of meaning in an advertisement can be explained by applying conceptual integration theory (Lundmark 2003, Ruiz 2006, Joy et al. 2008, Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic 2012). The paper tries to prove that social-issue advertisements are no exception. The three social-issue advertisements that were analyzed in the paper were randomly selected from "the most powerful social-issue advertisements that make you stop and think" (Digital Synopsis 2016). The first social - issue advertisement was part of the 2010 campaign by the French LICRA (Ligue Internationale Contre le Racisme et l'Antisémitism) against racism and anti-Semitism. The campaign slogan "Your skin color. Shouldn't dictate your future" had cognitive and emotional appeal and served as a call for action. The second social- issue advertisement was taken from the 2014 "Liking is not helping. Be a volunteer. Change a life" campaign developed by Publicis Singapore for Crisis Relief Singapore. Finally, the third UN social- issue advertisement tried to bring attention to the issues of discrimination, gender inequality, and women's rights. On their website, UN women (2013) stated that the intent of the campaign was to "expose negative sentiments ranging from stereotyping as well as outright denial of women's rights".

- Social-issue advertisement 1 Source:
<http://www.ufunk.net/en/publicite/contre-le-racisme-et-lantisemitisme/>
- Social-issue advertisement 2 Source:
<https://digitalsynopsis.com/inspiration/60-public-service-announcements-social-issue-ads/>
- Social-issue advertisement 3 Source:
<http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/10/women-should-ads>

In all three examples, conceptual integration network is established by opening mental spaces on the basis of verbal and/or linguistic element, cobbling them together and cre-

ating the blend. The blended space contains a structure that represents an incongruity that needs to be solved. What ensues is the unpacking of the blend and reconstructing the input spaces by relying once again on visual and verbal components that serve as cues for the viewers to arrive at the intended meaning. Following the reconstruction, the backward projection to the input spaces highlights the contrast between the emergent structure in the blend and the elements in the inputs and, as Delibegovic Dzanic and Berberovic (2010:210) notice, “reinforce[s] construals in input spaces in accordance with the new structure created in the blend “. In this way, viewers are able to grasp the main idea behind the advertisement.

Tentative Results

The paper presents an analysis of social-issue advertisements within the framework of conceptual integration theory. The main goal of the paper was shedding light on the meaning construction in social issue advertisements, as well as the comprehension of central ideas behind them. It needs to be pointed out that texts, images and social context play a vital role in the understanding of social-issue advertisements. Thus, in the first advertisement, the image of babies in cribs opens a mental space that comprises a newborn nursery. Furthermore, the advertising slogan, as well as the social context in which the advertisement was created, evokes the concept of racial segregation in the French society.

Selective projections from the two input spaces give rise to the blend in which black babies in a nursery wear uniforms that symbolize lower-paid and lower-status jobs, as opposed to white babies whose future has not been predetermined.

In that sense, we are able to understand the central message behind the advertisement, that is, the provision of tougher support against racial discrimination.

In the second advertisement, verbal and visual components prompt the opening of mental spaces comprising the domain of war and Facebook, respectively. In the blend, a dying boy is gently held in his mother’s arms, as the Facebook users are giving the thumbs up. Since the blend itself represents an incongruity that needs to be accounted for, the unpacking of the blend enables the backward projection and reconstruction of the input spaces. It is suggested that posting a courageous status/photo and getting thousands of virtual likes will be rendered ineffective unless users take prompt action. The blend ridicules the social setting in which virtuality is being treated as a substitute of reality, rather than its supplement.

In the third example, input space one contains women around the world that differ in race, nation, and ethnicity, and the concept of women’s rights. The second input space utilizes a Google search engine and a list of the most denigrating searched phrases on women suggested by the Google autocomplete search function. Lastly, input space three comprises the notion of restraint that is metonymically symbolized by duct tape. Projections to the blended space result in the blend containing four women with the duct tape over their mouth which has been merged with the Google queries. Backward

projections point out that women are unable to voice their opinion but have sexist attitudes imposed on them. The advertisement puts the spotlight on the fact that the notion of women's rights is still met with resistance around the world, contravening the entitlement to equality with men.

Taking everything into account, it can be concluded that conceptual integration theory can be applied to the analysis of social- issue advertisements. The paper confirmed the hypothesis by showing that visual and verbal resources are exploited in an advertisement in order to grab attention, aid the creation of meaning, and incite people to act. It can be suggested that, to a certain extent, conceptual integration theory explains how human beings think.