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## METAPHORIC MOTION PICTURES IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

### Abstract

This paper explores specific features and the role played by pictorial metaphors as employed in social networks in a cross-cultural context (using the examples of Georgian and English languages) and discusses the cases when motion pictures or so-called GIFs work as pictorial metaphors. However, not all of the motion pictures or GIFs are considered to be pictorial metaphors. The paper will focus on the items conveying metaphoric concepts and discuss their peculiarities and features.

Specifically, the aims of this paper include the following:

To explore the peculiarities of the usage of pictorial metaphors in social networks and reveal a new type of representation of this stylistic device.

To show the ways motion pictures and GIFs are employed in social networks, reveal their specific features and the reasons for their popularity.

The theoretical background of the research is Charles Forceville's fourfold distinction of pictorial metaphor into Hybrid metaphor; Contextual metaphor; Pictorial simile and Integrated metaphor

The empirical data this paper is based on embrace the relevant examples from social networks, such as Facebook.

**Keywords:** pictorial metaphor, social networks, motion pictures, GIFs, pragmatics.

### 1. Introduction

Metaphor is a linguistic phenomenon that has been attracting more and more attention in recent years. The growing popularity of this stylistic device can be the result of the modern

lifestyle and tendencies not only in linguistics but also in other fields of knowledge . This paper focuses on the pictorial representation of metaphor and its occurrence in social networking sites. Emphasis is on motion pictures, the so- called GIFs. According to Cambridge Dictionary – “GIF is a type of computer file that contains a still or moving image. GIF is an abbreviation for “Graphic Interchange Format” (Cambridge Dictionary). In social networks the GIFs suggest specific context, specific information and are to substitute verbal representation of some specific utterances.

Before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, metaphor revealed a purely linguistic understanding and most of them were represented in a verbal mode. However, developments in different fields, especially in technology, resulted in some major changes in a language as the means of communication. This brought alterations and transformations for a number of different linguistic devices. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson opened new opportunities to metaphor when they suggested that this stylistic device is more about thought, actions, and imagination. (Lakoff & Johnson 2003). This means that metaphors may have both verbal and pictorial, filmic and musical representations. (Rusieshvili & Dolidze 2015)

Lakoff and Johnson define conceptual metaphors as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.. (Lakoff & Johnson 2003 : 5). Creating a metaphor is defined as a process when the characteristics and features of one domain are transmitted to another domain in order to explain or characterise it. This definition suggests that there are two elements in the process of decoding of this trope - one of them is a primary element ( i.e the element depicted through the features of the secondary element) whereas the other element is classed as a secondary element (i. e the element which transfers additional features to the primary element).

The key point in decoding a metaphor correctly is to take into account culture, background knowledge of the decoder and a shared context. Lakoff and Johnson explain that “every experience takes place within a vast background of cultural presuppositions” (Lakoff & Johnson

2003: 5). Without proper background knowledge and cultural awareness, the addressee may misinterpret the metaphor or, in some cases, not understand it at all.

Metaphors can be represented in various ways. However, this paper emphasizes the pictorial representation of metaphor. Furthermore, it explores specific features and the role played by the pictorial metaphor as employed in social networks (For example, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in a cross-cultural context (using the examples of Georgian and English languages and cultures). The data selected for the analysis are motion pictures, the so-called GIFs, which have become quite an important part of communication on social networking sites. As revealed by the research, more than half of the 100 cases of GIF or verbal statuses on social networks that this research covered were followed by at least one GIF comment. It should be mentioned that GIF comments are more common than GIF statuses. Motion pictures substitute verbal representations of certain concepts and usually suggest a specific context. It is the context, which helps an addressee decode the metaphor expressed by the motion pictures adequately, refer to allusions and infer the essence of the whole conversation. Before discussing the examples it should be mentioned that not all the motion pictures (GIFs) that convey certain meanings and trigger some thoughts or refer to allusions can be considered as pictorial metaphors.

This paper focuses on metaphoric motion pictures, defines their function and reveals their significance for communication in social networks. As well as this, it discusses the peculiarities and socio-linguistic features of this stylistic device in modern communication and puts the emphasis on the role of background knowledge, age and culture in the process of decoding the metaphor.

The theoretical background of the research is (Forceville, 2009) Charles Forceville's fourfold distinction of pictorial metaphor into

- A. Hybrid metaphor
- B. Integrated metaphor
- C. Pictorial Simile

D. Contextual metaphor

Social network tendencies and its linguistic features are constantly changing since new generations of internet users bring in new methods of communication. Nowadays GIFs are becoming popular on social networks. This has also made pictorial metaphors popular in this field. The data of this research suggest that Forceville's theory of four types of pictorial metaphors may be utilized as the theoretical basis for the linguistic phenomenon of motion pictures, so called GIFs that have recently emerged on social networking sites.

**Data and Methodology of the Research**

The examples of pictorial metaphors in the paper are brought from social networking site - Facebook. The research analyzed 100 cases of using GIFs as Facebook statuses or employing them in post comments.

Social network features non-metaphoric GIFs too, but this research focuses on the ones which fit in with Forceville's fourfold distinction of pictorial metaphor.

1. A hybrid type of pictorial metaphor

"A hybrid type of pictorial metaphor (image 1). A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object or gestalt consists of two different parts that are usually considered as belonging to different domains, and not as parts of a single whole. The interpretation of this hybrid depends on understanding one of the two parts in terms of the other". (Forceville 2002a)

Image 1.



According to Charles Forceville, there are three questions that define whether a certain example belongs to pictorial metaphors or not. (Forceville 2007)

1. What are the two elements (primary element and secondary element) of the metaphor?
2. Which are the primary and secondary elements of the metaphor and how we assume that?
3. Which features of the secondary element are transmitted to the primary element and how we perceive it? (Forceville, 1996.)

To assume whether the examples given below belong to any of the four types of pictorial metaphors as singled out by Forceville, we will need to answer those above-mentioned three questions.

The first example (Image 1) is taken from one of the Facebook user's profile. "13<sup>th</sup> day... Me: ..." is a verbal element of metaphor accompanied with a motion picture (GIF) depicting a faith healer making some moves with his hands to heal people from a distance. It can be impossible to decode the verbal element of this metaphor unless one knows when the post was uploaded. During March 2020, the whole world fought against Covid 19, the virus that spreads easily and the only way to avoid being infected is to stay at home. Self-isolation became a mainstream for social network influencers at that time and was also reflected in the language. Therefore, the author indicates the number of the self-isolation day (13) and to express his mental condition on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of self-isolation, he employs the GIF where the faith healer makes some motions

with his hands to express his magical powers. In order to decode the GIF, it is crucial to possess relevant background knowledge. As well as this, without knowing modern generation's attitude towards faith healers ( they are considered to be swindlers) and the quality and standards of TV shows of the Soviet days, it would be harder to understand why the healer's GIF is used to describe a person's feelings and state during self-isolation. Therefore, employing this metaphor, the author ironically describes his current condition and tells us that he is close to insanity due to such a long self-isolation period.

After decoding the meaning of this metaphor, we should move to defining its primary and secondary elements. The two elements of this pictorial metaphor are the text, which is a verbal representation of the main message, and the GIF enclosed to the text. In other words, the primary element or the domain is characterized by another domain, the picture. It can be assumed that considering the fact that the days of self-isolation, which the text refers to, are characterized by the allusions suggested by the GIF. Accordingly, the text is the primary element of the metaphor and it is characterised by the motion picture, which is the secondary element of the metaphor.

## 2. Integrated type of pictorial metaphor

Forceville defines integrated type of pictorial metaphor as “a phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object or a gestalt is represented in its entirety in such a manner that it resembles another object or gestalt even without contextual cues”. (Forceville, 2002a)



Image 2.

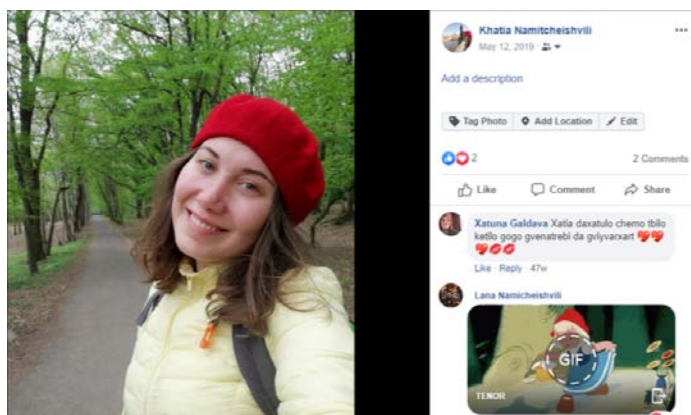
The example is brought from one of the Facebook pages and suggests culture specific content in an ironical and sarcastic way. The first photo depicts a boy's new haircut whereas the second one describes what the hairstyle was meant to look like. Both photos are accompanied by the GIF comment concerning this post. The GIF shows basketball fans applauding and expressing their excitement through various dancing motions. The GIF comment is ironical and also contains elements of mockery. Moreover, the metaphor suggests that this haircut makes the boy look like a basketball star and fans' ironical plaudits go to him. The primary element of the metaphor is the photos and the secondary element is realized through the GIF comment. Therefore, the picture builds up the domain that suggests the idea and the GIF comment is the domain that transfers additional characteristics (reaction of the society and fans) to it. Although the picture would still convey the same meaning without the GIF comment, it provides additional features and makes the whole situation more ironical.

The reesearh has revealed that one of the main functions of motion pictures (GIFs) is irony. The shorter and sharper the comment is the more ironical or sarcastic it can be. Accordingly, utilising GIFs to express irony or sarcasm is very common in social networks. Sarcastic and/or ironical functions can be assumed considering the user's reactions to the post or the comment.

### 3. Pictorial Simile

According to Forceville, pictorial simile is “A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object is juxtaposed with a unified object belonging to a different category in such a manner that the first is understood in terms of the second”. (Forceville, 2002a)

Image 3.



Picture 3 is from the author’s personal Facebook profile account. It depicts an example of a pictorial simile where one element of the metaphor is a picture and the second element is a GIF comment. As any other pictorial similes, this example puts emphasis on the visual resemblance between the two elements. Decoding this metaphor is quite easy due to the explicit resemblance to the Red Riding Hood and her story. The picture depicts a person in the forest wearing a red hat and the metaphoric GIF comment provides additional features to the picture and activates many associations such as walking alone in the forest, picking flowers, watching out for wolves, etc.

The primary element of this metaphor is the picture, which emerges as a domain characterized by another domain, the GIF. The associations accompanying the Red Riding Hood are transmitted to the girl wearing a red cap in the picture and consequently, the girl in the photo is compared with the fairy tale character. It is also worth mentioning that primary and secondary elements of the metaphor become obvious in the comments evoked by the GIF. Since a comment is a reaction of a user towards another user’s status, a picture or a post on social networking sites, it can be assumed that the domain, which works as a secondary element, adds features to the primary element and, in this way, create a metaphor.



4. Contextual type of pictorial metaphor

“Contextual type of Pictorial metaphor. A phenomenon that is experienced as a unified object or gestalt is understood as being something else due to the visual context in which it is depicted”. (Forceville, A Course in Pictorial and Multimodal Metaphor, 2002a)

Image 4.



The example is taken from one of the facebook pages. Based on Forceville’s definition it can be claimed that image 4 depicts an example of contextual type of pictorial metaphor. One element of the metaphor is a newspaper article published online whereas the second element is a GIF comment. When it comes to the contextual pictorial metaphor, it is critical to consider that both elements convey meaning if taken separately but when they are put together, they suggest something different from their original meanings.

In this particular case, the newspaper article describes a politician’s announcement, according to which people with higher salaries should pay more taxes to facilitate the economic development taken into consideration the ongoing events caused by the pandemic. Both this initiative and its author were criticized ironically referred to by social network users.

The GIF comment depicts a popular character Robin Hood who is famous for stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. With the GIF the author expressed their attitude towards the initiative and ironically drew parallels between the politician and Robin Hood. It is also worth mentioning that the GIF is taken from a cartoon which makes this comparison even more ironic. It should also be mentioned that the same happens in case of pictorial simile, but

the difference is that in pictorial similes both elements are pictures and the metaphor itself focuses on visual resemblance between the two elements, while in contextual metaphor we have verbal representation equalised with a pictorial representation of one and same concept.

While decoding the metaphor it can be assumed that its primary element is the verbal representation given in a form of an article whereas the secondary element is the GIF comment. The verbal part of the metaphor suggests a concept, idea which is specified by the GIF comment and the allusions it triggers in the addressees. Accordingly, the primary element is the verbal part of the metaphor and the motion picture acts as its second element.

#### Discussion of the findings and conclusions

The research studied 100 cases of motion pictures employed in the comments of posts on social networks. The study shows that when providing a non-verbal comment, social network users frequently prefer motion pictures over still pictures, because they bring more associations to the addressees' minds. In majority of cases, due to the fact that emotions we see in GIFs activate a number of allusions which make metaphor even more "valuable" than it was actually meant by the author. GIFs featuring famous characters from movies, TV series, cartoons, etc. are the most popular. Out of 100 cases of GIFs on social networks explored by this research, more than 70% featured a character or a situation from a famous and popular movies, cartoons, TV series, etc. The addressor and the addressee possess shared knowledge about the characters or situations from famous TV shows that we see in GIFs. So their characteristics, personalities and the stories behind these characters are transmitted to the primary element of the metaphor and make it fuller. This once again emphasizes how important the shared knowledge is in the process of decoding a metaphor.

The research allows us to conclude that:

1. The main function of motion pictures (GIFs) is to express an irony or sarcasm.
2. GIFs that feature famous characters or celebrities are the most popular.
3. Most frequently motion pictures are employed either in the status or picture comments.

4. In nearly 40% of 100 cases analyzed by the research GIFs are used for summarizing or finishing the discussion. Making a GIF comment after a verbal conversation is a sign that the speaker has nothing more to say and just summarizes or expresses his/her emotions or position pictorially. Therefore, in more than 90% of cases this works well and the GIF comment actually finishes the thread of the conversation.
5. Social network users do not realize that GIFs are metaphoric representation of a certain concept.

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