

METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF *MARKETING*

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Abstract

Currently, the centrality of marketing to enhancing the prosperity of businesses, individuals and even society is an undeniable fact. Marketing has emerged as a field worthy of being investigated by both marketing theorists and practitioners and specialized discourse researchers.

*Since the apprehension of the highly complex and abstract marketing notions cannot be achieved spontaneously, metaphor represents a valuable tool for providing a better understanding of the domain in question. In this context, our paper aims to explore three of the most relevant conceptual metaphors used in relation to marketing, namely the *MARKETING IS MOVEMENT*, the *MARKETING IS MILITARY CONFLICT* and the *MARKETING IS A RELATIONSHIP* conceptual metaphors. Relying on a corpus formed of two notable works on marketing, we highlight the main linguistic realizations of the above-mentioned metaphors, with a focus on their emergence and prominence in close connection with the shifts in the conceptual paradigm of marketing.*

Key-words: *metaphor, marketing, cognitive theory, movement, military conflict, relationship*

JEL Classification: A₁₂, M₃₁

Introduction

In the early 21st century, the contribution of marketing to business performance is generally acknowledged. Despite the proliferation of works on marketing, the (still young) marketing discourse holds yet many aspects to be unveiled. The marketing discourse is widely permeated by metaphors, most of which have become so common in the marketing jargon that their metaphorical origin is no longer visible. Nevertheless, their importance as vehicles facilitating the understanding of and providing new insights into the abstract domain of marketing cannot be denied.

In this context, our paper aims at raising awareness on the relevance of metaphors to the marketing discourse. More specifically, our focus is on highlighting the most frequent metaphors used in relation to *marketing*, as well as on examining the connection between the various marketing orientations and the conceptual metaphors that underlie them. We advance the hypothesis according to which the emergence and

prevalence of certain conceptual metaphors at a given time is much dependent on the dominant marketing orientation at that specific time.

In our attempt to detect the major conceptual metaphors that reflect the shifts in the conceptual paradigm of marketing, we shall rely on a corpus formed of two notable works on marketing, namely Kotler's *Principles of Marketing* and Baker's *The Marketing Book*. Besides investigating the implications at the cognitive level of the main conceptual metaphors thus identified, we shall also explore their linguistic realizations at the text surface.

It is worth mentioning that the specialized literature comprises very few works that discuss the metaphoric dimension of the marketing discourse. While retaining some of the distinctive features of marketing metaphors, as formulated by Viot (2006) and O'Malley et al. (2008) and acknowledging the importance of the *marketing metaphor* framework as described by Kitchen (2008), our paper provides an original insight into the metaphorical conceptualizations of *marketing*, primarily delineating their role as indicators of the shifts in the conceptual paradigm of marketing.

Literature review

While the economic discourse represents a fertile research field for specialized discourse theorists, researchers and linguists, the marketing discourse has only recently emerged as a distinctive sub-type of economic discourse that is worth investigating from a linguistic perspective. Accordingly, there are very few studies exploring its metaphoric dimensions.

The most notable contributions to the analysis of marketing metaphors are Durö and Sandström's (1988) comprehensive research on the military strategies, as they are transposed into the field of marketing via military metaphors, Viot's (2006) thorough analysis of the correlations between the metaphor of the *personality of the brand* and the scales of human personality and O'Malley, Patterson and Kelly-Holmes's account of the evolution over the time of the *marketing as relationships* framework.

Probably the most complete work on marketing metaphors so far is Kitchen's¹ *Marketing Metaphors and Metamorphosis* (2008). In his study, the author explores a vast inventory of marketing metaphors, such as *the globalization of markets*, *market segmentation*, *viral marketing*, *the product life cycle*, etc., as well as the metaphor of *marketing* itself, envisaged as exchanges and relationships.

Theoretical background

The theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics has provided us with a valuable tool for the analysis of the main metaphors that underlie the conceptualization of *marketing*. More precisely, our study is based on the *cognitive*

¹ Philip J. Kitchen holds the Chair of Strategic Marketing at Hull University Business School. He is the Founding Editor of the *Journal of Marketing Communications*. In 2003 he was listed as one of 'the top 50 gurus who have influenced the future of marketing' (*Marketing Business*). He is a Fellow of CIM, the RSA and Member of the Institute of Directors.

theory of metaphor, as developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their 1980 work *Metaphors we live by*.

The cognitive theory of metaphor centers upon the cognitive aspect of metaphor, which is envisaged as a matter of thought (hence the term *conceptual metaphor*) rather than a simply linguistic phenomenon.

According to the cognitive perspective, metaphor is conceived in terms of *cross-domain mappings* in the conceptual system. The mappings take place from one conceptual domain – the *source domain* onto another conceptual domain – the *target domain*. As a rule, conceptual metaphors employ a more abstract and complex concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source domain. A systematic set of correspondences is established between constituent elements of the source and the target domain respectively. This facilitates the understanding of abstract target conceptual domains such as life, death, time, economy or society in terms of relatively concrete and familiar source domains of experience, such as spatial movement and orientation, substances or human entities, etc. As Lakoff and Johnson put it, *The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*².

The cross-domain mappings are named using mnemonics which typically have the form A IS B, where A is the name of the target domain and B is the name of the source domain.

For instance, the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor favours the establishment of a set of ontological correspondences between certain entities in the target domain of *argument* (e.g., the interlocutors who are arguing, their verbal behaviour, etc.) and certain entities in the source domain of *war* (the opponents, the war strategies, etc.).

Lakoff and Johnson also propose a distinction between *conceptual metaphors* (that refer to the conceptual mapping) and *linguistic metaphors* (or *metaphorical expressions*), which are individual linguistic expressions that emerge as surface realizations of conceptual metaphors. Thus, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR underlies metaphorical expressions such as *Your claims are indefensible*, *He attacked every weak point in my arguments*, etc. As the authors argue, “[...] ARGUMENT is partially structured, understood, performed, and talked about in terms of WAR.”³

A conceptual metaphor framework for *marketing*

Over the past century, the marketing conceptual paradigms have evolved from the production, product and selling to the marketing and societal orientation. Each of these approaches to marketing finds its linguistic reflection in specific metaphorical conceptualizations of marketing.

² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 6.

³ *Ibidem*.

MARKETING IS MOVEMENT

At the beginning of the 20th century, as it emerged as a distinct domain of activity, marketing was pretty much assimilated to an exchange activity, focusing on production and products and involving, as the National Association of Marketing Teachers argued, *the performance of business activities that direct the flow of goods and services from producers to consumers (1935)*.

In accordance with this early perception of marketing as primarily involving the transfer of goods from the producer or seller to the consumer or buyer, the marketing discourse was marked by the emergence of the MARKETING IS MOVEMENT conceptual metaphor.

Since any form of exchange or transfer typically implies the movement of an object from a location A (the source point) to another location B (the end point/destination), the MOVEMENT conceptual metaphor authorizes the following ontological correspondences between the source domain of *movement* and the target domain of *marketing*:

- The producer/seller is the source point (of goods/services).
- The consumer/buyer is the destination point/target.
- The distribution channels are the path.
- The products/services are the object to be moved from one location to another.
- The salespersons are the vehicle that enables the movement.
- The intermediaries are the stops along the path.

At the linguistic level, the MARKETING IS MOVEMENT conceptual metaphor is signalled by means of directional prepositions such as “from ... to”, “towards”, motion verbs of the type “launch [a product]”, “flow [goods to certain locations]”, “direct [goods/services from a location to another location]”etc., or nouns/nominal phrases such as: “distribution channels”, “distribution circuit”, “merchandise circulation”, “flow of goods”. Perhaps the most relevant linguistic metaphor circumscribed to the movement metaphor is that of the *target*. This metaphor is encountered in nominal constructions such as *target-market*, *target-customers*, *target-public*, etc. The conceptualization of the customer as a *target* has major implications at the cognitive level, acting as a downgrader that helps depriving the customer of human attributes such as volition and rationality and turning him into a passive object of commercial manipulation, a mere profit generator tool.

On another level, the MARKETING IS MOVEMENT conceptual metaphor may be interpreted in connection with the process of positioning a company on the market, in which case the correspondences are established as follows:

- the current position of the company on the market is the source point;
- the position the company aims for is the destination point;
- the object to be moved is the company itself;
- the resources mobilized (new product development, product improvement, increasing sales, penetration of new markets, promoting products, etc) are the vehicle to reach the destination.

Within the movement metaphor framework, there is one variable that needs to be taken into account: the duration of the movement. This reinforces the idea that marketing is not a punctual event, but a process that develops in time.

MARKETING IS MILITARY CONFLICT

In the post-War years, the advances in production technology, as well as the customers' preferences gradually moving away from standardized products led to increasing competition among companies. Their priority shifted from production to selling.

The increasing awareness of competition and the orientation toward aggressive selling are characteristic of the selling orientation of marketing. This orientation created the premises for the emergence of the **MARKETING IS MILITARY CONFLICT** conceptual metaphor, which mediates the apprehension of any company/marketer confronting tough competition.

The mapping between the source domain of *military conflict* and the target domain of *marketing* enables the activation of the following system of ontological correspondences:

- marketers/companies are warriors/enemies;
- marketing activities are war strategies and tactics;
- the markets are territories to be conquered;
- low prices, personalized, high quality products and services, innovation, advertising, selling techniques, etc. are weapons.

The broad metaphoric scenario based on the **MARKETING IS MILITARY CONFLICT** conceptual metaphor envisages the marketers/companies as warriors/enemies waging a war for market share. They either fight for existing territory – the already established markets – or mobilize their resources in order to conquer new territories – the newly established markets. Their actions directed toward ensuring the success of the company on the market can be assimilated to authentic military strategies and tactics. Companies/marketers engage into marketing campaigns, similar to war campaigns, they make incursions into the competition's territories, attack the enemy companies and defend themselves. Price, quality, service, distribution, marketing activities, innovation, advertising and selling techniques become as many powerful weapons for increasing the appeal of the company's products, helping it to win the market share battle. In this war for markets companies may win or lose.

The marketing discourse is widely permeated by military metaphors. Metaphorical constructions organized around military terms include “marketing strategy”, “offensive/defensive strategies”, “counter-offensive”, “competitive attacks”, “flank position”, “marketing weapons/arsenal”, “strategic marketing”, “combat marketing”, “guerilla marketing”, etc.

MARKETING IS A RELATIONSHIP

The early 1970's came with the awareness that the success of a company does not rely on increasingly aggressive and expensive selling and advertising, but

rather on being more sensitive to the customers' needs and wants. It was the advent of the so-called "marketing concept" orientation: this concept holds that being more effective than competitors in creating, delivering and communicating superior customer value in a chosen customer segment is essential for achieving an organization's goals.

With the marketing concept orientation, the customer was placed at the core of the marketing process: the focus was on responding to, serving and satisfying the customer. This rethinking of marketing was accompanied by the introduction of the concept of *relationship marketing*. Relationship marketing focuses on the establishment, reinforcement and development of long-term relationships with the customer, obscuring the idea of short-term transactions that was characteristic of the previous approaches to marketing.

This stage in the evolution of marketing can be successfully accounted for by the **MARKETING IS A RELATIONSHIP** conceptual metaphor. The main correspondence that derives from this major conceptual metaphor sets a connection between the companies/marketers and the customers as potential partners in a relationship.

Like any ideal relationship, the company-customer relationship proves mutually benefic for both parties involved: on the one hand, the customers derive satisfaction from fulfilling their needs through acquiring the goods/services provided by the company; on the other hand, the company benefits from this relationship by obtaining a profit as well as the acknowledgement of its value. Moreover, to make the relationship work, it is essential that both partners be involved. The level of involvement can be accounted for in terms of loyalty to the partner. That is why relationship marketing systematically revolves around the strategies designed for managing and nurturing a company's interactions with clients and sales prospects, with a focus on their retention and loyalization.

To the difference of the customer metaphorically conceptualized as a passive inanimate *target*, the customer envisaged as a *partner* in a relationship regains his status as an active human being, capable of making conscious buying decisions and of providing feedback to the company/marketer.

The relationship may enhance the attachment to the company/company's products to such a degree that the customer may feel the need to "adopt" a product. Similarly, the company can be envisaged as a parent for the customer, "nourishing" and "nurturing" the client's expectations and needs and pursuing the client's happiness and safety.

It is worth mentioning that the **MARKETING IS A RELATIONSHIP** conceptual metaphor can evolve into several directions, helping reflect the relationship between the company and the individual customers (the relationship marketing proper), the relationship between organizations (industrial marketing), and even the relationship between marketing and the society as a whole (the more recent societal marketing orientation).

Conclusions

As stated at the beginning, our paper aimed at making an incursion into the most relevant conceptual metaphors that are employed to conceptualize the domain of marketing. By using the tools of cognitive linguistics, we have examined the main conceptual metaphors as they reflect the evolution of the marketing paradigms in time and highlighted their most common linguistic instantiations in specialized marketing texts. The study of our corpus has revealed the following facts: the early perception of marketing in simple transactional terms is metaphorically conceptualized by means of the **MARKETING IS MOVEMENT** conceptual metaphor. The shift from production to selling and the increase of competition for market share have led to the apprehension of marketing activities in terms of *military conflict* (via the **MARKETING IS MILITARY CONFLICT** conceptual metaphor). More recently, the centrality of the consumer to all marketing activities has favoured the development of the **MARKETING IS A RELATIONSHIP** conceptual metaphor.

Our findings have confirmed our hypothesis, holding that the metaphorical conceptualizations of marketing emerge in close connection with the marketing conceptual paradigm prevailing at a given time. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that the three conceptual metaphor frameworks of marketing discussed above are not mutually exclusive. Their co-occurrence in the marketing discourse testifies of the fact that the various approaches to marketing represent mere tendencies, which add on like as many facets to an integrated perception of the marketing domain.

In this context, further research could try to determine the extent to which each of the above-mentioned conceptual metaphors holds valid in the light of the most recent marketing evolutions.

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