

May 22nd, 9:00 AM - May 25th, 5:00 PM

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# T(r)opical patterns in advertising

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**ABSTRACT:** This research aims at unraveling relationships between rhetorical devices from *elocutio* and argumentative *topoi* from *inventio* in advertising. Studies on this topic have attempted to demonstrate not only that rhetorical devices condense argumentation schemes, but also that they have a strong argumentative force. I will try to achieve my goal by applying the Argumentum Model of Topics (a tool allowing to unveil inferential patterns behind arguments) to a corpus of award-winning advertisements.

**KEYWORDS:** Argumentum Model of Topics, product advertising, topoi, tropes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the marketing field, Goldenberg and other scholars from the University of Jerusalem (Goldenberg, Mazursky, & Solomon, 1999; Goldenberg et al., 2009) have singled out a set of ‘creativity templates’ as a large scale research project. These are ‘deep’ patterns structuring and organizing information in the multimodal text of the advertisement. These patterns have been found to recur with particular frequency in award-winning ads (that in their perspective are ads of proven creativity). The main thrust of Goldenberg’s research is showing that creativity is not an unbounded intuition and a constraint-free process, but rather can be traced back to “few simple, well-defined design structures” (2009, p. 1). While this research moves from concerns that are very distant from those of argumentation theory and completely ignores the literature on rhetoric and argumentation, many of the templates that they single out seem to involve the combination of a *trope* and a *topos*. For instance, the template named *pictorial analogy* underlies a metaphor and an *argument from analogy*, whereas the template of *extreme consequences* underlies a *hyperbole* and an *argument from consequences*.

In the present contribution I put forth the hypothesis that a rhetorical and argumentative analysis of advertising messages in terms of tropes and topoi can provide a deeper understanding of the nature of the recurring patterns that marketing researchers have observed and cast light on their functioning and effectiveness. Furthermore, a better understanding of the relationship between tropes and topoi can help us to determine to what extent the persuasive goals of the advertising text are pursued argumentatively, that is via the recognition and acceptance of reasons.

In this paper I analyze two examples taken from a corpus of award-winning print advertisements and billboards which has been collected and classified according to the rhetorical pattern(s) employed. First, I classify advertisements by both the creativity template(s) and the rhetorical figure(s) employed. Second, I reconstruct, adopting a *topoi* perspective, the argumentative inferential structure of a sub-set of the corpus in order to carry out a qualitative research.

The reconstruction of the argument schemes will be achieved employing the Argumentum Model of Topics (AMT; see for example Rigotti and Greco-Morasso, 2010 and the literature cited there), a tool which allows us to unveil argumentative inferences and which can be employed in order to understand the inferential pattern lying behind tropes and figures in advertising. In fact, using the AMT we can reconstruct the endoxical and the procedural components of arguments. The analysis of the whole corpus will allow us to single out different kinds of relationship between topoi and tropes: (1) *interpretive*, where the trope functions as a guide in the pragmatic reconstruction of the enthymematic inference pattern by ensuring the activation of the correct *topos* and the selection of the intended *endoxon* from the pool of shared beliefs; (2) *attentional* where tropes enhance the viewer's attention level either towards the *endoxon* or towards the minor premise (*datum*) of the enthymematic argument, and (3) *ludic /aesthetic* where tropes have the value to entertain the viewer as the argument is presented.

My working hypothesis are (1) advertisements are argumentative texts which aim at persuading potential consumers that a product is worth buying; (2) advertising makes large use of rhetorical devices which are conveyed either through one semiotic modality or through a combination of them; (3) arguments may be conveyed through images and a combination of pictorial and verbal modes. In the following sections – before presenting two examples of analysis – I will try to shed light on these hypotheses.

## 2. ADVERTISING IS AN ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPE

Product advertisements are discourse genres which belong to an activity type (Rigotti & Rocci, 2006, and the literature cited there) where a company – which has given the task to give voice to its needs to an advertising agency – argues in order to persuade potential consumers that the product advertised is worth buying (Pateman, 1980; Slade, 2002, 2003; Ripley, 2008; Rocci, 2008, 2009; Walton, 2009; Kjeldsen, 2012).

A print advertisement for shoes, for instance, is a communication event to be ascribed to the activity type of promotion. Within this activity type the market of shoes is the interaction field – a social reality characterized by shared goals and mutual commitments – and advertising as the interaction scheme – a culturally shared recipe for communication. Interaction schemes encompass discourse genres, that is, standard communication schemes used in order to achieve the goals of a given interaction scheme (Rigotti & Rocci, 2006, p. 173). We follow Bakhtin's (1986, p. 60) incipit of his seminal essay *The Problem of Speech Genres* where he provides a definition of discourse genres:

All the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language. Quite understandably, the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as are the areas of human activity. [...] Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of these aspects – thematic content, style, and compositional structure – are inseparably linked to the whole of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call speech genres.

The interaction scheme of advertising selects a genre from the group of discourse genres (billboards, TV commercials, flyers, print ads, radio ads, outdoor advertising, online pop-ups) related to a similar communicative practice.

Walton (2007, pp. 41-44) clearly states that advertisements aim at selling a product and that in order to achieve this goal they are structured in premises and conclusions. Taking a Pragma-Dialectic's perspective (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 235; see also Kjeldsen, 2012) product advertising is a single, non-mixed difference of opinion between a company producing and selling a product – the protagonist – and a potential consumer – the antagonist – on the issue “whether or not the appraised product should be purchased” (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 235). The protagonist is committed to advance and defend a positive (‘prescriptive’ in van Eemeren, 2010, p. 235) standpoint which is usually implicit but that can easily be formulated thanks to the well-defined context where it is created.

Because we know the context of this difference of opinion, we also know the stated aim: ‘Buy this!’ This is a proposition shared by all commercial advertising. No matter what an advertisement communicates, it will always, either directly or indirectly, carry this claim. This ultimate proposition may be called the *final claim*. Knowing the context and the final claim, every viewer is provided with a starting point for discovering the premises supporting the final claim, and thus reconstructing the argumentation. (Kjeldsen, 2012, p. 243)

Advertising argumentation takes the form of practical reasoning (Walton, 2009): the potential consumer has a goal and buying product X is a means to help fulfil the goal, thus the potential consumer should buy product X. Advertising has the task to argue why product X is a means to fulfil the goal and it does so by advancing “*evaluative standpoint[s]* in which the product [...] to sell is positively assessed” (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 235).

Product advertising is thus a call for action. As Rigotti (2008, p. 566) shows “within the ontology of action, [the] locus from the final cause focuses on the relation connecting the end (goal, purpose) of an action with the action itself.” We can identify an argumentation governed by a locus from the final cause in every product advertisement having as the final conclusion the positive standpoint *Buy product X*. As an example, we reconstruct the argument from final cause of an advertisement for training shoes (figure 1; this print ad is an example analysed by

Goldenberg, Mazursky, & Solomon, 1999) where the desirability of the product – that is protection – is linked to the action of buying it:

*Maxim:* If X presents feature Y which is desirable, it is reasonable to reach X.

*Minor Premise:* Nike Air training shoes are reasonably desirable because they present features of extreme safety and protection.

*Final conclusion:* You should buy Nike Air training shoes.



Figure 1

### 3. ADVERTISING EMPLOYS PICTORIAL AND MULTIMODAL RHETORICAL DEVICES

Studies have been conducted on pictorial and multimodal rhetorical devices in advertising both in the field of linguistics (Forceville, 1996, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Mazzali-Lurati & Pollaroli, forthcoming) and marketing (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004; Goldelberg, Mazursky, & Solomon, 1999; Goldenberg et al., 2009; Lagerwerf et al., 2012). These studies were concerned with identifying, characterizing, and classifying rhetorical devices – even if not all of them adopt this concept -- in ads, and also assessing their impact on consumers in terms of attention, appeal, recall, comprehension, etc.

Stemming from a cognitive approach to metaphor – and especially from Lakoff & Johnson (1980) saying that the essence of metaphor is conceptualizing and understanding one thing in terms of another – Forceville (1996, 2008a, 2012) acknowledges that metaphor is a manifestation of a salient and pervasive cognitive process whose expression is not necessarily linguistics: it can also be pictorial. Forceville (2008a) outlines a classification of four pictorial tropes and gives a characterization of multimodal metaphors too. Types of pictorial metaphors are: (1) *hybrid metaphors*, i.e. images where an impossible gestalt of both the target and the source conveys the metaphorical identity, (2) *contextual metaphors*, i.e. images where the target is placed in the context of the source, (3) *pictorial similes*, i.e. images where the target and the source are juxtaposed, (4) *integrated metaphors*, i.e. images where the target is shown in a posture or position that reminds of the

source. Then, in *multimodal metaphors* target and source are conveyed by different semiotic modalities (Forceville, 2007, 2008a).

A marketing approach to advertising patterns results in some studies where different taxonomies are proposed. In addition to the research on creativity template conducted by the Jerusalem group of research, a typology of advertising strategies is proposed by Phillips and McQuarrie (2004; see also Lagewerf et al., 2012). With the aim of better understanding advertising pictorial strategies and consumers response to them, they provide a taxonomy of nine visual rhetorical figures. Their taxonomy is created by converging the visual structure dimension – the way elements are physically pictured – and the meaning operation dimension – the cognitive process required to understand the ad. Three types of visual structure – juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement – cross three types of meaning operation – connection, comparison for similarity, and comparison for opposition (the print ad in figure 1, for instance, uses visual rhetoric of similarity via replacement). However, we believe that the visual structure called *replacement* could be better characterized this way: (1) replacement with target in the context of source, (2) replacement with source in the context of target, (3) replacement with target with the shape of source, and (4) replacement with source in the shape of target. Types (1) and (2) are two versions of Forceville’s contextual metaphor, whereas types (3) and (4) are two versions of Forceville’s integrated metaphor.

#### 4. ADVERTISING ARGUES PICTORIALY

In the last few years, research has emerged on visual argumentation. This seeks to address a gap pointed out in argumentation theory, that is a full attention devoted to verbal components of texts. Roque (2012, p. 277) provocatively says:

It seems crucial to me to dissociate *argumentation* and the *verbal*. [...] most of the time arguments are a set of mental or logical or cognitive operations independent from the verbal, so that they can be expressed verbally as well as visually. Seen this way, a visual argument is just such an argument expressed visually. In other words, therefore, it is not the argument itself that could be considered visual, but the way it is displayed.

The move towards a consideration of the argumentative role of images in multimodal texts emerged with a special issue of *Argumentation & Advocacy* in 1996. Contributions by Gretchen S. Barbatsis, David Birdsell and Leo Groarke, David Fleming, Leonore Langsdorf and Cameron Shelley inaugurated a shift of focus from a dominant verbal perspective of argumentation theorists to a still feeble research on how visuals in advertisements, drawings in political cartoons, and photographs in newspaper articles can contribute to the argumentative moves being put forward by the writer. Since 1996 the main issue has been whether images can be considered to be arguments or not (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, 2007; Groarke, 2002, 2009; Slade, 2003; Blair, 2004; Kjeldsen, 2012; Roque, 2012). The topic is so controversial that the journal *Argumentation & Advocacy* devoted another special issue in 2007 to it, where, among other works, Valerie Smith suggests looking at images as enthymemes to understand how they can argue, thus taking into account both the

culture-bound premises (*endoxa*) of this kind of argument and the specific meaning realised within the given text. Some other scholars (Finnegan, 2001; Kjeldsen, 2012) conceive visual argumentation as an enthymematic process where images “evoke intended meanings, premises and lines of reasoning” (Kjeldsen, 2012, p. 240).

If an image is either an argument or not is to be established departing from the communicative context and the genre where it appears. Visuals in ads, for instance, are not ambiguous and vague components contrasting the logic of argumentation; yet, they are as relevant as verbal elements to support the claim of the advertisement as a goal-oriented artefact. According to Birdsell and Groarke (2007, p. 106) in argumentative activity types visual propositions “may play a role in visual arguments”.

In any case, images have a role in the text: they either present information relevant to argumentation in an accurate and concise way or have the rhetorical advantage to make the information more persuasive and forceful (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007, p. 103). Kjeldsen (2012, p. 240) does not see these characteristics as either/or, but rather he claims that “the full rhetorical potential of pictures is thus exercised when their discursive ability to create utterances, propositions and arguments is united with their aesthetic materiality and sensual immediacy.”

Birdsell and Groarke 2007 distinguish five ways in which visual images are used. *Visual flags* are images whose function is to capture the attention of the viewer; *visual demonstrations* are images which convey a message that would not easily be conveyed in words (ex. charts, tables, etc.); *visual metaphors* are images which convey claims figuratively; *visual symbols* are images that stand for something they represent by some strong association (ex. the grim reaper for death); *visual archetypes* are similar to visual symbols but they represent something by popular narratives (ex. extended nose for lying from *Pinocchio*).

## 5. TWO EXAMPLES OF ANALYSIS

Before presenting the analysis of two print advertisements with AMT, it is necessary to make explicit one point. As we have seen in the previous sections, advertising is an argumentative activity type which often employs pictorial and multimodal metaphors; images in advertising, being them metaphorical or not, are examples of visual argumentation. Fahnestock (1999) states that tropes and other rhetorical devices epitomize lines of reasoning, i.e. *topoi*. Rhetorical figures are “diagram-like rendering of the relationship among set of terms, a relationship that constitutes the argument and that could be expresses at greater length” (Fahnestock 1999, p. 24).

The print ad for Nike Air training shoes (figure 1) is an example of contextual metaphor (SHOE IS JUMPING SHEET in Forceville, 1996) and of pictorial analogy template (Goldenberg, Mazursky, & Solomon, 1999) where a shoe replaces a firemen jumping sheet by evoking some similar features or associations. This is an example of visual metaphor (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007) that condenses an argument from analogy (Fahnestock, 1999). Both the product (Nike Air shoes) and the source (a jumping sheet) belong to the same category, to the same functional genus, of ‘elastic surfaces’. The protagonist invites the antagonist to accept this piece of information at the very moment of seeing the print ad; thus it becomes shared knowledge. AMT

(Rigotti & Greco Morasso, 2010) sees shared knowledge and opinion (endoxon) as a premise that composes the contextual component of the argument. The fact that ‘for the jumping sheet belonging to the genus of the elastic surfaces entails that it protects people from impacts’ is a datum. The locus from analogy (figure 2) generates the maxim ‘if X belongs to the same functional genus of Y and belonging to this genus proves to entail Z for Y, then Z is entailed for X too’ which provides the inferential mechanism of the argument. The set of association (*implicative complex* in Black, 1979; see also Forceville, 2008b) is mapped from the jumping sheet as a source to Nike Air shoes as a target: ‘Nike Air belongs to a functional genus that for a firemen jumping sheet entails protection of people from impacts’ (first conclusion/minor premise). Thus the final conclusion – the evaluative standpoint – is that ‘Nike Air protects from impacts’. This is the attribute that makes Nike Air shoes desirable and worth buying.

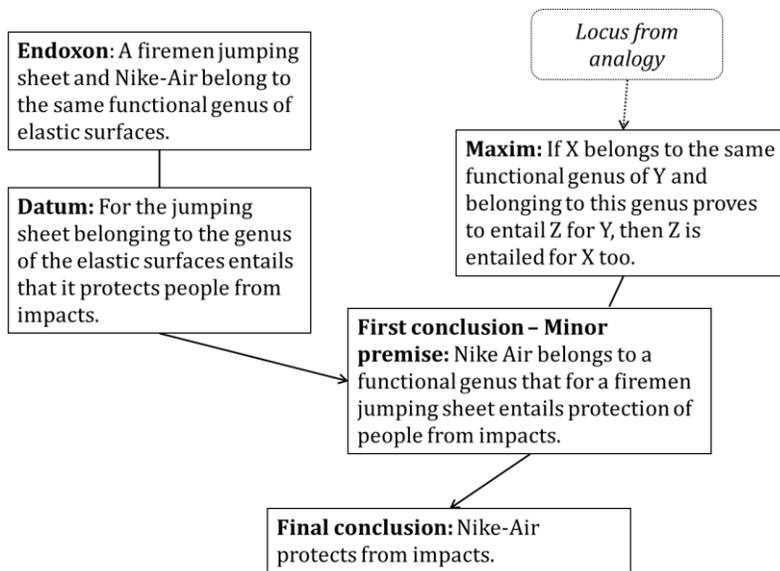


Figure 2

Another interesting case of award-winning advertisement is the Bosch print ad for fridges with NoFrost Technology (figure 3). It can both be ascribed to the pictorial analogy template and the extreme consequences template; in fact, it shows an unpleasant situation resulting from not using the product by depicting an iceberg-shaped block of ice in the context of a freezer.



Figure 3

The headline reads: ‘If you have icebergs in your fridge, they are missing somewhere else. The NoFrost Technology prevents icing in the freezer and saves energy’. The multimodal message tightens a causal chain that links the fact of having ice in the freezer and the melting of icecaps. The causal chain is better explained through AMT.

The headline gives the concrete attribute of the product (datum) ‘the NoFrost Technology prevents icing in the freezer and saves energy’ for the standpoint ‘if there is frosting in your fridge it is reasonable *ceteris paribus* to adopt the NoFrost Technology’ (Figure 4). The ontological relation between the datum and the final conclusion is a locus from final cause. The inferential mechanism created by this locus is ‘If a means is capable to bring about a goal it is reasonable *ceteris paribus* to implement it’. We specify *ceteris paribus* because there might be other means to bring about the same goal.

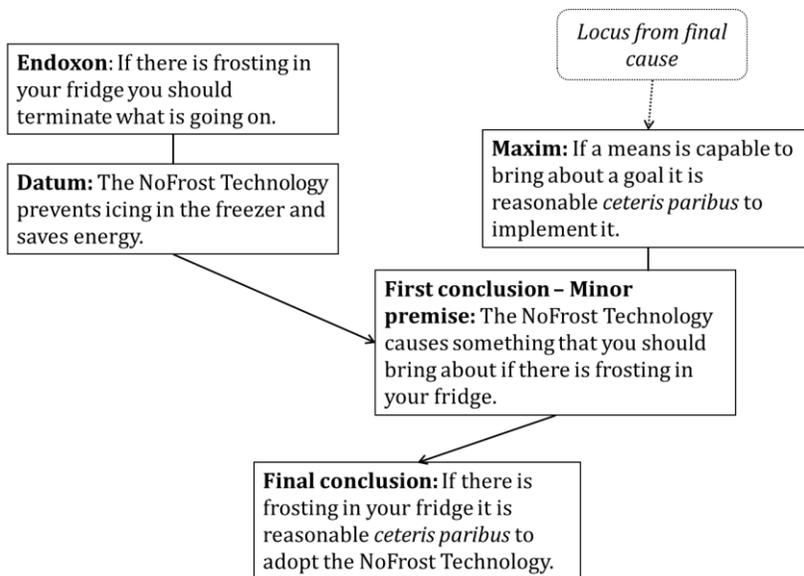


Figure 4

The print advertisement gives reasons to support the endoxon ‘if there is frosting in your fridge you should terminate what is going on’. Icing in the freezer is a sign of causing global warming (datum) and strategically the advertisers hints at the endoxon ‘contributing to global warming is undesirable’. The antagonist – the potential consumer – feels involved by this current opinion: of course nobody wants to be labelled as a person who contributes to global warming. The undesirable situation ‘contributing to global warming’ should be terminated: this is clearly an argument generated by a locus from termination and setting up (see Greco Morasso, 2011) and the maxim is ‘If a situation is undesirable it is desirable to terminate it’ (Figure 5).

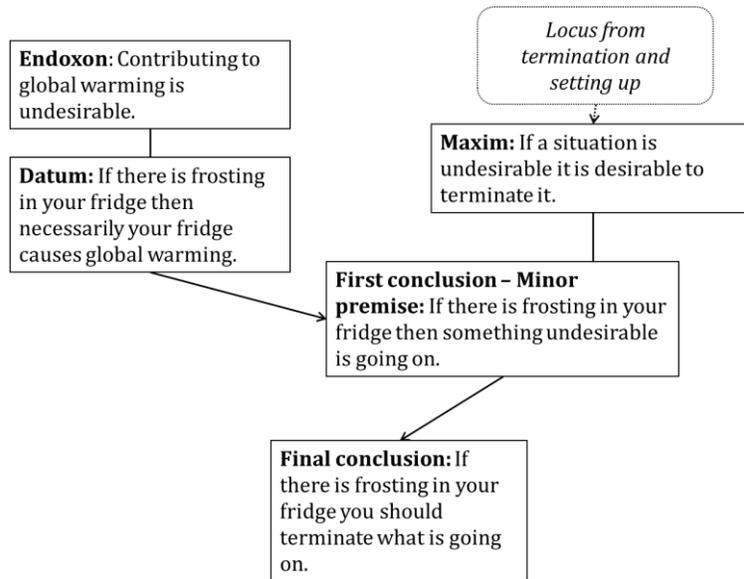


Figure 5

However, the second statement of the headline ‘the NoFrost Technology prevents icing in the freezer and saves energy’ also hints at energy saving. There is a connection between frosting in the fridge, saving energy and global warming. The datum of the argument scheme in Figure 5 ‘If there is frosting in your fridge necessarily your fridge causes global warming’ is supported by sub-argumentation. The conditional sub-argument presents the multimodal datum ‘if there is frosting in your fridge it is because the fridge is energy inefficient (it is caused by energy inefficiency)’ and the endoxical premise ‘energy inefficiency is a cause of global warming’. The ontological relation between the datum and the standpoint is one of efficient cause; the inferential connection at work here is ‘If an event X is necessarily caused by a situation Y which also necessarily causes an event Z, then the occurrence of X necessarily entails the occurrence of Z (is a certain sign of Z)’.

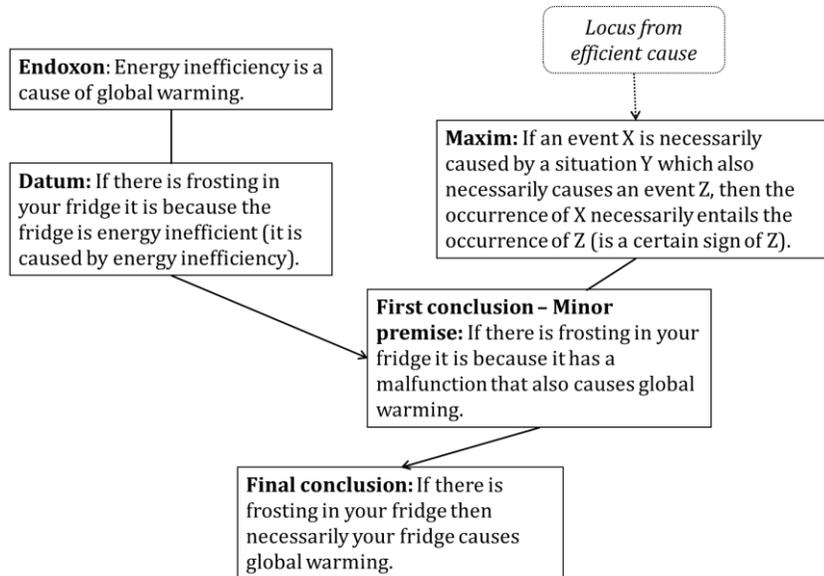


Figure 6

The metonymy ICING IN THE FRIDGE STANDS FOR MELTING OF ICEBERGS – conveyed by what seems to be a pictorial metaphor of the contextual type (Forceville, 2008a), or a connection via replacement (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004) – condenses a series of arguments governed by two ontological relations of cause (final cause and efficient cause) and an ontological relation of termination and setting up. The visual metaphor (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007) employed here works together with the verbal component to convey figuratively an argumentation that is not analogical in terms of loci. This shows a strong difference from the first example where visual metaphor only hints – although in a different way – at analogical argumentation.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this contribution I tried to examine whether tropes provide essential information for the reconstruction of the inferential structure of the arguments that are advanced in support of the advertising evaluative standpoint that, in turn, proves the desirability of the product. I have tried to clarify the working hypotheses on which I base my research, that is that advertising is an argumentative activity type, that advertising makes large use of pictorial and multimodal rhetorical devices, and that visuals in advertising, either metaphorical or not, argue. I have tried to show that pictorial and multimodal tropes represent – by condensing – an argument scheme, a topos, and its inferential connection.

I have tried to achieve this goal by presenting two apparently similar examples of award-winning print advertisements employing pictorial metaphors in their visuals. I have reconstructed the argumentation in these print ads using the Argumentum Model of Topics proposed by Rigotti and Greco Morasso; this model allow the reconstruction of both the logical and the contextual structure of arguments. We have seen that in the case of Nike Air print ad a pictorial metaphor condenses an argument from analogy, where in the case of Bosch ad a pictorial

metaphor hints actually at a metonymy and at a series of arguments which have nothing to do with analogy; in fact, the Bosch advertisement is constructed on a locus from final cause, a locus of termination and setting up, and a locus from efficient cause. Nike-Air print ad is thus a clear case of metaphorical argumentation where the visual metaphor has an interpretive function: it guides the reconstruction of the enthymematic inference by ensuring the activation of the correct locus from analogy. Bosch print ad develops a more complex argumentation where the pictorial metaphor – which hides a metonymy – together with the headline condense a series of arguments that AMT allows to extricate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I am grateful to my supervisor Andrea Rocci for guiding me in this doctoral research.

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