

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Birmingham		
Unit of Assessment: UoA27: English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Using figurative language and images to improve community, health and wellbeing campaigns in the West Midlands and beyond		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: April 1999–present		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Jeannette Littlemore Paula Pérez-Sobrino	Prof. of Applied Linguistics Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow	April 1999–present Oct. 2015–Oct. 2017
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2016–December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>In an increasingly saturated and competitive sector, the need to create effective advertisements is a pressing challenge for charitable organisations and small businesses with limited marketing budgets. In response to this challenge, the Exploring Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising (EMMA) team, led by Professor Littlemore, have:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improved the reach and performance of a public health campaign, leading to an increased take-up of sexual health services; 2. Increased the effectiveness of the marketing campaigns of community and well-being organisations in the West Midlands; 3. Changed organisational practices across the advertising industry, particularly in the West Midlands region. 		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The EMMA team explored the combination of metaphor and metonymy in advertising and measured their impact on the interpretation, speed of comprehension and general effectiveness of advertisements. This was the first broad-scale empirical study of multi-modal figurative language in advertising. It was innovative because it identified different variables influencing the success of advertising and also examined the interplay between these, tested them empirically and explored their emotional impact. To do this and implement their findings, EMMA — and subsequent collaborative workplace-based projects — used qualitative interviews and biometric technologies (such as electrodermal activity measurement and eye tracking) to examine the extent to which people engage with figurative language and linguistic concepts in marketing campaigns. These methods allowed the EMMA team to articulate potential benefit of figurative language for social marketing campaigns, advertising agencies, professionals and businesses.</p> <p>Key research findings:</p> <p>RF1. In comparison with other figurative tropes and literal language, the presence of correlational metaphor, situational irony and visual hyperbole in advertisements increases their appeal (RO1, RO2, RO4).</p> <p>RF2. Contrary to expectation, multi-layered metaphors — which require viewers to interpret several ideas or relationships within the same message — are particularly effective for conveying complex messages and are understood more quickly than single layered metaphors (RO1, RO2, RO4).</p> <p>RF3. Responses vary significantly according to nationality. This is particularly significant in super-diverse contexts like Birmingham and the West Midlands. If advertisers, charitable organisations and businesses are sensitive to linguistic and cultural differences in people's responses to figurative messaging in metaphors, local and international communities are more likely to benefit from specific, appropriate and effective advertising (RO2).</p>		

- RF4.** Metaphors that contain an 'optimal' (intermediate) degree of novelty are more likely to be perceived to be of higher quality and understood more quickly than those that are highly novel. Metaphors that contain negatively-valenced vehicle words and infrequent vehicle terms (in comparison with the topic terms) are more likely to be considered high-quality metaphors (RO3).
- RF5.** Metaphors that are novel, salient, are presented from a first-person perspective, and involve motion, and references to the senses are more likely to be experienced on a physical level and thus to be more effective in advertising (RO5).
- RF6.** Advertisements containing figurative messages that require more work on the part of the viewer to get from the literal meaning to the figurative meaning in context are more strongly appreciated and are more likely to lead to take-up of the product (RO1, RO2).
- RF7.** Bodily- and environmentally-based word-colour associations are more likely than non-bodily- or non-environmentally-based associations to occur across languages and to be retained by users of a second language. They are therefore more robust and more likely to be effective in advertising (RO6).

3. References to the research

- RO1.** Littlemore, Jeannette, and Pérez-Sobrino, Paula (2017). "Eyelashes, speedometers or breasts? An experimental cross-cultural approach to multimodal metaphor and metonymy in advertising". In A. Baicchi and A. Bagasheva. *Figurative Language We Live by. The cognitive underpinnings and mechanisms of figurativity in language*, Language Issue of Textus: 197– 221. DOI: 10.7370/87674
- RO2.** Pérez-Sobrino, Paula, Littlemore, Jeannette, and Houghton, David (2018). "The role of figurative complexity in the comprehension and appreciation of advertisements", *Applied Linguistics*, 40(6): 957–991. DOI: 10.1093/applin/amy039
- RO3.** Littlemore, Jeannette, Pérez-Sobrino, Paula, Houghton, David, Jinfang, Shi, and Winter, B. (2018). "What makes a good metaphor? A cross-cultural study of computer-generated metaphor appreciation", *Metaphor and Symbol*, 33(2): 101–122. DOI: 10.1080/10926488.2018.1434944
- RO4.** Pérez-Sobrino, Paula, and Littlemore, Jeannette (2020). "What makes an advert go viral? The role of figurative operations in the success of Internet videos". In L. Hidalgo and B. Kraljevic-Mujic (eds). *Performing Metaphorical Creativity across Modes and Contexts. Figurative Thought and Language*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI: 10.1075/ftl.7.06per
- RO5.** Littlemore, Jeannette. (2019). *Metaphors in the Mind: Sources of Variation in Embodied Metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: 10.1017/9781108241441
- RO6.** Littlemore, J., Pérez-Sobrino, P., Julich, N., and Leung, D. (2019). "Is comfort purple or green? Word-colour associations in the first and second language". In A. Piquer-Piriz and R. Alejo (eds). *Metaphor in Foreign Language Instruction*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. DOI: 10.1515/9783110630367-006

4. Details of the impact (Note: Text removed for publication is indicated by [REDACTED])

1) Improved the reach and performance of a public health campaign, leading to an increased take-up of sexual health services

Against a background of worsening sexual health at a regional level (35,635 new sexually transmitted infection (STI) diagnoses in the West Midlands in 2017; Public Health England) and sexual health service cuts nationwide (resulting in 50% of UK women having "poor sexual health"; the *Guardian*, 9 January 2020), EMMA **increased public awareness of the importance of sexual health** across the Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, one of the largest Trusts in England. This increased awareness led to a **greater uptake in STI screening and services** and, ultimately, **increased diagnoses and treatment**.

Umbrella Sexual Health is part of the Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust and provides sexual health services across Birmingham and Solihull. EMMA's research changed the approach of Big Cat, a marketing and advertising agency working with Umbrella, and in doing so directly shaped the tone of Umbrella's July 2019 campaign in a range of online platforms and physical locations. EMMA's findings suggested that figurative puns involving more cognitive dissonance (RF1,

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RF2), more movement (RF5) and more optimally creative metaphor (RF4, RF6) were more likely to lead to take-up of their important messages. Big Cat incorporated these findings into the campaign and their influence is clear in the resulting adverts.

The Director of Communications at University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust testifies to the importance of EMMA in shaping the campaign: “The research undertaken by the [EMMA] team and their input regarding the structure of campaign headlines and the effective use of metaphor, was instrumental in enabling the campaign to **raise awareness** of Umbrella Health, **increase requests** for free STI self-sampling kits, and to **increase traffic** on the Umbrella website” (S1). Data from the final campaign that ran in July 2019, demonstrates significantly improved take-up on previous campaigns via a number of success metrics:

- Increase in Facebook posts from [REDACTED] in 2018 to [REDACTED] in 2019 (S2);
- Increase in advert impressions from [REDACTED] in 2018 to [REDACTED] in 2019 (S2);
- Increase in visits by ~1000 to the ‘Appointments’ page (which is the first step to ordering a kit or health check; S2);
- Increase in number of STI kits ordered from Umbrella Sexual Health (39% increase from [REDACTED] in 2018) which represents the highest number of kits ordered in 2019 for one month in July (S3);
- Increase in kits returned for testing (27.7% increase from [REDACTED] in 2018 to [REDACTED] in 2019; S3);
- Umbrella have never had such a high distribution number of STI testing kits in the five years of records (S3).



Figure 1: The photograph above shows a rotating billboard in Birmingham city centre at the busy Holloway Circus junction. The advert shows the words “Exploring her botanical gardens?” in capital letters.



Figure 2: The image above is an example tweet from the campaign from Umbrella’s twitter account. It shows a paused video with the words ‘Entering her Queensway Tunnel?’ in capital letters, alongside the caption ‘Steer clear of trouble with a free STI self-sampling kit from Umbrella’. Posted 12 July 2019.

In addition to increased take-up, EMMA’s findings and recommendations resulted in **economic gains** for Umbrella; the substantial increases in STI kits ordered, returned and tested were achieved with a [REDACTED] decrease in budget, from [REDACTED] in previous campaigns to [REDACTED] in the 2019 STI campaign (S1, S2). It also marked a **change in practice** going forward, as the Director of Communications goes on to testify: “This research-led approach has therefore had a **significant and quantifiable impact on the success of the campaign**. The incorporation of linguistic research was a **new a way of working** for Umbrella and we will continue to pay close attention to our use of figurative language” (S1).

2) Increased the effectiveness of the marketing campaigns of community and well-being organisations in the West Midlands

EMMA’s findings led to **significant improvements in marketing campaigns** for Big Cat’s other major social clients in the region, for example, Solihull Community Housing (SCH) and RightTrack.

SCH is a not-for-profit organisation that manages the housing stock on behalf of Solihull Council and delivers housing services to the tenants of Solihull, West Midlands, which encompasses approximately 10,000 tenanted homes. EMMA's work led to **major improvements in the SCH logo** — the company's 'key branding tool' — which has been implemented across the website and communications, staff work-wear, fleet of vans (70+) and company offices. SCH reports that these improvements have led to an **increased number of website page views (22%), website visitors (52%) and new website users (54%), as well as a [REDACTED] growth in customer activity** (S5).

The EMMA team achieved this by recommending that SCH branding should include complex figurative images containing multiple metonymic references to the services (RF1, RF2, RF6) provided in appropriate, bodily- or environmentally-based colour combinations (RF7); this was an approach "which had not been considered with previous SCH branding", but which allowed SCH to "more effectively convey our organisation's values" and thus better "engage and communicate with our customers" (S5). SCH went on to state that "[c]ollaborating with the EMMA team and Big Cat, has enabled us to explore and hone our new identity, make it more appealing, and facilitate discussions about our core values as an organisation" (S5).



Figure 3: The photograph above shows two vans with geometric shapes in shades of orange, purple and green.

RightTrack Learning is a Birmingham-based company that provides training for organisations in areas such as equality and diversity, unconscious bias and employee well-being. Following EMMA's recommendations, RightTrack changed its online identity which led to **an increase in website views (9.86%) compared with the previous year** (S4).

EMMA research suggested that RightTrack should employ pairings of text and image that involve multiple, innovative metaphorical connections that nonetheless draw on an existing underlying relationships, as such messages are more likely to evoke positive reactions and increase the effectiveness of the website (RF2, RF4, RF6). The Lead Director of RightTrack attested that "The EMMA research **improved the website** as the findings gave us a better understanding of how figurative messaging can be utilised to deepen user engagement, and extend user time spent on the website"; he also explained how this "was an approach we hadn't applied to our website previously" and thus allowed RightTrack to create something "more sophisticated and tailored to our strategic aims" (S6).

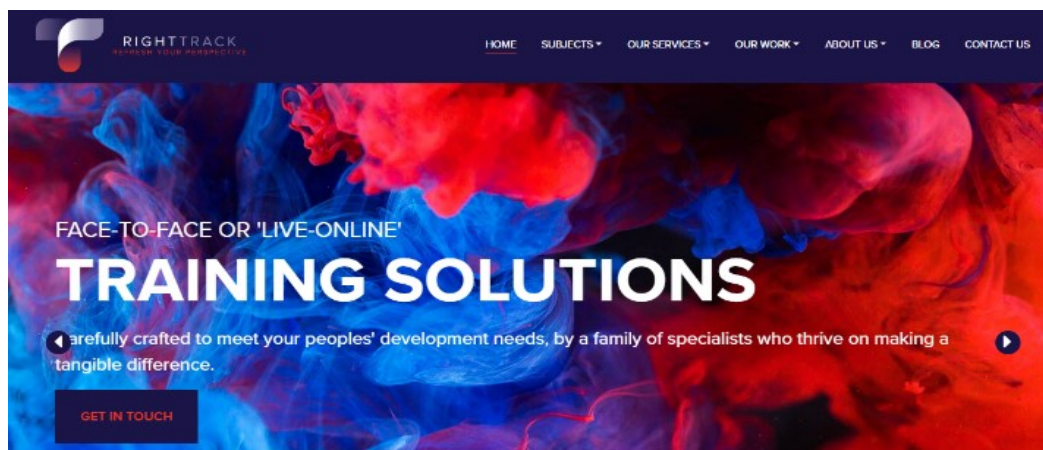


Figure 4: The image above shows a screenshot of RightTrack's new website with white text that says "Face-to Face or 'Live Online' Training Solutions" on top of a bright red and blue smoky background.

Given RightTrack's market position, this increased website engagement means that more organisations in the region are likely to seek RightTrack's services around equality, diversity and

workplace well-being. As Big Cat noted “for the business community in Birmingham this means that more companies are receiving the help they need” (S4).

3) Changed organisational practices across the advertising industry, particularly in the West Midlands region

Using its ‘Metaphor by Design’ approach to apply the project’s research findings (RF1– RF7) to marketing campaigns, EMMA brought about changes to advertising and branding practices more widely.

Big Cat is a leading agency in the region, with a focus on fundraising, behavioural change, healthcare and education. EMMA’s collaboration on a number of projects — including the three outlined above — resulted in Big Cat **changing their approach** to clients by incorporating a more integrated focus on figurative messaging. The CEO states that EMMA’s “research and work on these projects has in turn benefited Big Cat itself, with an improved strategic approach to figurative language and its applications within branding identities and marketing campaigns [...] Our collaborative work has also led Big Cat to taking on a new member of the team, as a Cognitive Linguistic Researcher. This indicates a new dedication to embedding the EMMA team’s research into our organisational approach.” They now assert that their client relationships are “stronger than ever as a result of this value-added offering” (S4). The success of this collaboration and the changes in practice resulted in EMMA and Big Cat winning the West Midlands ‘Partnership of the Year’ in the Birmingham Post’s Business Awards 2018 (S7), which afforded them “a level of recognition on a regional level we had not had before” (S4).

EMMA also brought about a **change in practice** at the West Midlands branch of the global marketing and communications agency McCann. By collaborating with the EMMA team and drawing on their research, McCann changed the way it conducts brand development, allowing for the optimal incorporation of figurative messaging at every stage from concept development through to testing; this in turn resulted directly in the organisation securing new client work (S8). The Head of Research and Development at McCann Central explained how they “are now systematically employing [EMMA’s] approach, which involves using corpus-based analyses to identify figurative ways of thinking that are characteristic to different subgroups of a brand’s customer base.” He explained how the company has adopted this approach to secure a range of new client work, including the next round of research with Holland & Barrett (worth [REDACTED] in Q1 next year); he was clear that McCann “would not have had the level of impact on them had we not been working with you and your team.” Overall he concluded that “This increased awareness of the importance of figurative language has **shaped the global McCann approach** to understanding the meaningful role that a brand can play in people’s lives” (S8).

Finally, EMMA **raised awareness across the advertising sector** of the ways in which figurative messaging can be used effectively in everyday practice. This was achieved through the co-creation (between EMMA and Big Cat) of Insight papers about collaborative projects designed to maximise the effective use of figurative messaging. These were published in the *CreativeBrief*, an industry-wide marketing platform, which provides brands and agencies with ideas and resources for creating more effective work; the Insight papers are designed to showcase best practice and to raise awareness of innovative new approaches to addressing challenges faced across the industry (S9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1. Testimonial from Director of Communications, University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust (June 2020)
- S2. Umbrella Sexual Health report (July 2019)
- S3. STI Kit distribution information
- S4. Testimonial from CEO of Big Cat (November 2020)
- S5. Testimonial from Communications Manager, Solihull Community Housing (July 2020)
- S6. Testimonial from Lead Director, RightTrack Learning (July 2020)
- S7. Birmingham Post ‘Partnership of the Year 2018’ award with Big Cat
- S8. Testimonial from Head of Research and Development, McCann (May 2020)
- S9. Insight papers published by Big Cat in the *CreativeBrief*