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The Effect of Highlighting and Hiding in a Multimodal Message: A Conceptual Blending Analysis of a TV Commercial for *Momester®Nasal*

ABSTRACT

The objective of the proposed paper is twofold. Firstly, by adopting the claim that the ultimate meaning of each multimodal message is more than the sum of modes used in the process of its creation, the author strives to offer a thorough analysis of the TV commercial for *Momester®Nasal*, using the tools as proposed in the Fauconnier and Turner Conceptual Blending Theory (2002). Secondly, assuming that a successful multimodal message “is achieved through all modes interacting both separately and simultaneously” (Pinar Sanz, 2015, p. 1), as well as pointing to the fact that multimodal approach to communication does not favour any of the modes applied in a message, but may, sometimes, highlight one of them (Winiarska & Załazińska, 2017, p. 7), the author poses a daring question to what extent the integration of distinct modes which occur in a multimodal message can be interpreted as the result of two cognitive operations, i.e. the effect of highlighting and hiding in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

The object in question is a TV commercial for *Momester®Nasal* where three modes: visual, linguistic and aural, are put under scrutiny. The analysis is to prove that alternate highlighting and hiding of elements belonging to three disparate modes also contributes to greater cross-resonance among the modes, which in turn strengthens the creative potential of the message (El Refaie, 2015).

Keywords: multimodality, conceptual blending, mode, highlighting, hiding, TV commercial

1. Introduction

Despite the growing popularity of recent technologies that enable us to relish in HbbTV advertising or streaming TV advertising (*aka* OTT advertising), it is still television that remains a predominant medium while attracting a potential customer’s attention, due to “its unparalleled reach and staying power” (Steggerda, 2021, p. 1). Since the digital era offers unlimited possibilities to make use of such modes of communication as music, sound, speech, text, or image to promote

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goods and services, TV commercials have become one of the most powerful tools in the hands of copywriters, simultaneously catching the interest of researchers in the field of both multimodal as well as linguistic studies.

To become attractive and successful, a contemporary TV commercial has to “mesmerize” a potential customer with its ingenuity and creativity while being intelligible at the same time. As pointed out by Vogel, “nothing is more efficient than creative advertising; creative advertising is more memorable, longer lasting, works with less media spending, and builds a fan community... faster” (Vogel, as cited in Pérez Sobrino, 2017, p. 1)¹. This creativity is, many a time, achieved by implementing various modes of communication that are at the disposal of a copywriter, be it sound, voice, language (written or spoken), or image. The use of diverse modes is not accidental here, but rather stems from the fact that human beings, in their process of communication, have a natural capacity to create messages and communicate various ideas with a plethora of available modes, thus making any type of communication more successful (Winiarska & Załazińska, 2018, p. 7; also Iedema, 2013)².

Being “equipped with” a full range of modes (e.g. visual, aural, linguistic, gestural, etc.) which co-deploy in an ingenious way and co-construct a mini-narrative (cf. Forceville, 2008) to achieve a pivotal aim, i.e. “to evoke positive feelings toward the product, service, or brand promoted” (Forceville, 1996, p. 104; also Forceville, 2008), a TV commercial becomes the genre which offers enormous possibilities when it comes to the way the message about a given product or service is presented, and, more importantly, received by a potential customer. Still, much as a multimodal character of communication used in commercials sounds convincing since it virtually touches every sense of a potential recipient of the information, it remains a challenge for scholars dealing with both multimodality and linguistic studies. This seems to be caused by two determining factors. First, as pointed out by Rossi and Sindoni (2017), “no definitive analytical framework can be provided when any complex multimodal fact is involved” (p. 65), which main-

¹ Vogel’s observation is very much in line with an earlier and more general observation on the phenomenon of advertising made by Forceville (2008, pp. 1–2): Advertisers’ perennial task is to make positive claims for brands, products, and services, in the hope that these will induce prospective consumers to consider, buy, and use them. These claims must always be pitched in a limited space or time slot. Moreover, the message should attract attention, and ideally stick in people’s memories, for instance by being humorous, or beautiful, or intriguing. This latter requirement is particularly important given that competition for audience attention, via an ever broadening variety of media, is fierce.

² Despite an enthusiastic approach to creativity while referring to TV commercials as well as other forms of advertising, it is also important to remember how to avoid potential misinterpretations and misunderstandings, especially when it comes to the reception of a given ad by people lacking shared background knowledge. A thorough research on this issue is provided in Pérez Sobrino, Littlemore and Ford (2021).

ly stems from the fact that each mode has to be examined individually, allowing for the factors which render its nature in an exhaustive and objective way. What is more, such a mixture of modalities is “neither static nor predictable and may vary considerably across time and space according to context” (p. 60). Another reason for which a multimodal commercial proves to be a complex issue is the fact that various resources (or modes) used in such a TV commercial have both “distinct potentialities and limitations” (Jewitt, Bezemer, & O’Halloran, 2016, p. 3), which is confirmed in the observation made by Kress (2000, p. 157):

Semiotic modes have different potentials, so that they afford different kinds of possibilities of human expression and engagement with the world, and through this differential engagement with the world they facilitate differential possibilities of development.

The arrangement of modes, as well as other elements which support those modes (e.g. the visual mode supported with facial expression of an actor, objects presented, or activities performed, colour and lighting used, or the aural mode strengthened by sound effects, choice of instruments used, or even phonological measures such as assonances, alliterations, or repetitions; cf. Etienne and Vanbaelen, 2006, p. 91; also Periasamy, Gruba and Subramaniam, 2015), form the so-called *description grid*, i.e. a framework which “takes into account multiple modes and elements found in the medium of television and the genre of television commercials” (Periasamy et al., 2015, p. 153). Of vital importance here is however the fact that various modes used in a given TV commercial have specific roles and tasks in the meaning making process (cf. Kress, 2010, pp. 28–29) and are usually responsible for only a part of the message they convey in multimodal communication. Therefore, it is not a coincidence that, while being activated, they intertwine, criss-cross and overlap with one another to boost the final effect of a message. From a cognitive standpoint, such “multimodal dynamicity”, where in one scene some modes are in the foreground while others remain in the background to swap their positions in another shot, allows us to recall Lakoff and Johnson’s notion of *highlighting and hiding*, first put forward in the research on conceptual metaphor, according to which focusing on selected aspects of a particular concept simultaneously “keep[s] us from focusing on other aspects of the concept (...) inconsistent with that metaphor” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 10)³. Lakoff and Johnson’s observations on highlighting and hiding also echo in theoretical considerations dedicated to the phenomenon of conceptual blending (Fauconnier

³ Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provide an interesting study of ARGUMENT IS BATTLE, an abridged version of ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor where “highlighting”, or focusing too much on the battling aspects of argument, such as attacking our opponent or defending our position, leads to outshining (or “hiding”) other aspects of the same concept, such as, e.g. the cooperative aspects of arguing (pp. 10–11).

&Turner, 2002; also Fauconnier, 1985/1994), although they are rendered in a more dynamic way. According to Fauconnier and Turner, the essence of conceptual blending understood as a dynamic basic mental operation inheres in selective projection (emphasis mine) of elements taken from input spaces onto “a novel blended space, which then dynamically develops emergent structure” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003, p. 57). This means that within virtually each stage of human thinking and processing we activate mental spaces, i.e. “very partial assemblies containing elements, structured by frames and cognitive models” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003, p. 58). Obviously, in the dynamic creation of the blend not each and every element of a mental space (known as the input space in the Fauconnier and Turner parlance) will be required to contribute to the ultimate meaning, but only those required for the “here and now” of the blending process.

The cognitive observations made above correspond with what we find while approaching a multimodal message, especially a complex one, operating on many modes and their affordances. To discover to what extent cognitive tools as elaborated within cognitive linguistics might prove useful and successful in the analysis of multimodal messages, let us now proceed to an in-depth analysis of a chosen TV commercial.

2. The Analysis

The object in question here is a commercial for *Momester®Nasal*, an OTC drug produced by the pharmaceutical company Polpharma in Poland⁴. The analyzed commercial belongs to the category of drug advertising and, as such, has to be compliant with pharmaceutical advertising laws imposed by European and/or national authorities. For instance, it cannot relate to prescription-only medicines or OTC medicines which have names identical to prescription medicines, medicines containing intoxicating or psychotropic substances, nor may it be presented or recommended by scientists, persons publicly known or persons who either have a medical or pharmaceutical education or imply that they have such an education (cf. Baker McKenzie, 2018, pp. 14–16; also Zimmermann, Pawłowski, & Zimmermann, 2009). This obviously imposes certain limitations on such commercials, but, still, it does not belittle their creativity and persuasive power which is to produce measurable results for both the product as well as pharmaceutical company. The TV commercial for *Momester®Nasal*, released in 2019, corresponds with the schema as proposed for the so-called problem-solution advertising, where four stages can be enumerated, i.e. 1) exposing the problem; 2) searching for advice; 3) finding a solution to the problem, and, finally; 4) joy at eliminating the problem (cf. Habrajska, 2017, p.126). To become effective, such a commercial should fulfill two demands: first, it has to

⁴ The analyzed TV commercial is available under the following link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu5Rv8YZYuE> (retrieved on July 23, 2021).

be addressed to those consumers who “readily identify with a problem” and, second, it is to convince a potential customer that the problem might be “easily solved by purchasing the product” (Imber & Toffler, 2008, p. 34).

The form of the commercial itself is also vital here since it resembles a short film which portrays a fragment of the main protagonist’s life: the man struggles with allergy, which impedes normal life and daily activities such as relishing in nature or spending free time with his friends outside. In this sense, the commercial can be referred to as a “mini-drama” in the sense of Esslin (1979), since, as aptly pointed by the scholar, “of all the art forms only drama can communicate such an immense amount of information on so many levels simultaneously within the span of a few seconds” (p. 99; see also Berger, 1996; Forceville, 2009)⁵. A multimodal message of the commercial is co-constructed by employing three modes, i.e. a) the visual mode, b) the linguistic mode, and c) the aural mode. The visual mode offers the presentation of the man wearing a spacesuit that protects him from pollen (metonymically represented here by the dandelion clock). In the consecutive scene the man takes off a helmet and reaches for *Momester®Nasal*, a nasal spray that relieves the symptoms of seasonal allergic rhinitis. Next, the protagonist, wearing casual clothes, enjoys the picnic while being in the park with friends and, in the final scene, recommends the spray to a woman in a spacesuit - another allergy sufferer.

The linguistic mode as depicted in the commercial manifests itself via both written or spoken words. The spoken message, presented here in the form of a voice-over, is an example of an extradiegetic narrating situation, where the objective narrator plays the role of “the authority of a rational purchase” (Moraru, 2011, p. 60). The message goes as follows: “Alergia to kosmiczny problem” [allergy is a cosmic problem] / “Zrób wielki krok w blokowaniu jej objawów” [make a giant step in blocking allergy symptoms] / “Przełom–*Momester®Nasal*–pierwszy dostępny bez recepty steryd najnowszej generacji” [a real breakthrough–*Momester®Nasal*–the first new generation OTC steroid] / “Stosuj raz dziennie, by blokować objawy alergii na długo” [apply once daily to block allergy symptoms for a long time]⁶. Apart from the message delivered by the narrator, a potential customer is also confronted with the written text which plays the role of a slogan here. This reads as follows: Wielki krok w blokowaniu objawów alergii [a giant step in blocking allergy symptoms], and is presented at the end of the commercial. Looking at the function the linguistic mode plays in the realm of advertising, we incline to the statement made by Kress (1998) which holds that “language is no longer the central semiotic mode” (p. 186). However, allowing for a cognitive perspective, language does play an important role since people tend to remember

⁵ Forceville (2009) adopts the notion of mini-narrative for such contexts.

⁶ All subsequent translations are delivered by the author of this paper.

advertising words easily, especially when compared to images. As observed by Fang (2019):

When it comes to an image, even though the image is reproduced and depicted in the brain, it cannot be called out as clear and fast as language does when the memory output is needed. [...] The image is easy to attract attention, but it is difficult to be clearly remembered. Language just makes up for this defect of image. Therefore, the combination of images and language can achieve the best publicity. (p. 326)

The third mode that is used within the analyzed commercial is the aural mode, where, as for the linguistic mode, two elements intertwine. These include: a) off-stage voices – noises that resemble the conversation between astronauts during the first landing on the moon and b) audible classical music: the opening section of Richard Strauss' tone poem *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, more recognizable as a self-contained piece of music used in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the leitmotif also used in popular culture as "a signifier of impending glories" (Cheal, 2020, p.1). Strauss' music used in the analyzed TV commercial begins with the opening fanfare, where low-humming organ pedal, cellos and double basses create "a sense of potentiality" (p. 2). When the fanfare is joined by the rest of the orchestra, the listener experiences the burst of ecstasy. Another important issue about the musical theme used here are strong bonds with crucial scenes in Kubrick's film which are to symbolize the progress of mankind (see the scene with an ape and a bone). The choice of appropriate music for a commercial is not incidental, either. As pointed out by Polarny (2019), music in advertising is important for at least three reasons. First, it serves as an excellent tool for persuasion: when a potential customer hears a recognizable motif, little time is left for a rational data analysis: in such situations, a customer is more likely to buy a given product without any hesitation. Second, music creates positive mood among potential customers: the more recognizable a piece of music, the greater chance for purchasing the product. Finally, music chosen for a given ad has to be compatible with the product it is to "illustrate". As pointed out by Suggs (2017),

[M]usic is important in advertising, but selecting the right music is even more important. Marketers need to understand their message and select music that conveys the same or similar message. [...] The shots in the advertisement and the beat of the song should be parallel to enable a certain flow. (p. 1)

Let us now proceed to the analysis of selected scenes from a TV commercial for *Momester®Nasal* to illustrate the phenomenon of highlighting and hiding and the way it influences the ultimate meaning conveyed in the commercial. To do this, three factors have to be taken into consideration, i.e. i) the meaning results from the interplay of various modes which are "co-present in a communicational ensemble" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 111), ii) diverse modes reinforce and

complement each other, and iii) multimodal approach to communication does not favour any of the modes applied in a message, but may, sometimes, highlight one of them (cf. Winiarska & Załazińska, 2017, p. 7). The above statements hold true for the interplay we observe between the linguistic, visual, and aural mode in one of the initial scenes of the commercial for *Momester®Nasal*. When the narrator utters a sentence “Zrób wielki krok w blokowaniu jej objawów” [make a giant step in blocking allergy symptoms], the phrase “wielki krok” [a giant step] is distinguished from the rest of the phrase by a raising voice and simultaneously accompanied by the visual layer, in which a viewer experiences zooming into the action of trampling plants that are the source of pollen allergy. Thus, two elements are highlighted: i) the phrase “wielki krok” [a giant step], extrapolated from a longer sentence “Zrób wielki krok w blokowaniu jej objawów” [make a giant step in blocking allergy symptoms] and ii) the shot of trampling plants with a boot, taken from a longer scene depicting the man walking in the park in a space suit.

The choice of highlighted elements is not coincidental, but points to a deliberate action of copywriters since the phrase “wielki krok” [a giant step] as depicted in the linguistic mode is, in fact, a paraphrase of the astronaut Neil Armstrong’s famous sentence uttered as he stepped off the Apollo Lunar Module in 1969⁷. The aural mode, represented by a merely heard sound of Strauss’ motif, instantaneously associated with Kubrick’s *Space Odyssey*, is a hidden modality here, though it also supports the meaning of the linguistic-visual-aural ensemble which guides the recipient of the message towards the notion of power, progress and success, all three features also desirable for the advertised product, *Momester®Nasal*.

Another interesting moment in the commercial where the three modes overlap and criss-cross is seen for the scene with the man reaching for *Momester®Nasal* to relieve allergic rhinitis. For the visual plane of the commercial, the mini-drama ceases to be a significant factor. Instead, the viewer is confronted with a schematic image of a nose and a bottle of spray containing the advertised drug which is applied to the nose. In this sense, one element of the visual mode (i.e. the story of the man) is replaced with another, more technical one (the board depicting a nose, coupled with enumerated symptoms of allergy), which might also be read as the process of highlighting and hiding within one mode. In the foreground stand the linguistic mode and the aural mode which intertwine for a couple of seconds. First, the linguistic mode is highlighted in order to inform a potential customer about the advantages as well as offer him/her basic information about the drug (“Przełom–*Momester®Nasal*–pierwszy dostępny bez recepty steryd najnowszej

⁷ The original Armstrong’s sentence in English goes as follows: ‘That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.’ Polish translation offers a plausible and faithful version here: ‘„to mały krok dla człowieka, ale wielki (krok) dla ludzkości”’. Thus, the phrase “wielki krok” [a giant step] as used in the analyzed commercial is a slight modification of the original phrase.

generacji” [a real breakthrough—*Momester®Nasal*— the first new generation OTC steroid] / “Stosuj raz dziennie, by blokować objawy alergii na długo”[apply once daily to block allergy symptoms for a long time]. Next, the aural mode comes in the foreground as it dominates over two elements of the linguistic mode, i.e. “Przełom” [a real breakthrough] and *Momester®Nasal*. The aural mode unfolds and intensifies in the final scene where we again come back to the mini-narrative, in which we see the man offering a nasal spray to a woman wearing a space suit. Here, other modes make way for the sound, or, more precisely, “the burst of ecstasy” represented by all orchestra (Cheal, 2020, p. 2), the pivotal aim of which is to strengthen delight over the effectiveness and novelty in treating allergy by the advertised product.

It is also interesting to notice that the effect of highlighting and hiding is not only seen while dealing with distinct modes, but also within the same mode. Apart from the already mentioned overlapping of dynamic mini-drama with a static board depicting the advertised product within the visual mode, a good example can be recalled for the linguistic mode as represented in the very first sentence “Alergia to kosmiczny problem” [allergy is a cosmic problem]. Here, the first meaning of the word “cosmic” in the sense of “relating to the universe and the natural processes that happen in it” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>) is relegated to a secondary position, thus becoming the element hidden, while “cosmic” interpreted as “very great” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>), becomes the element highlighted, since it corresponds with a huge problem allergy is.

The phenomenon of highlighting and hiding may also be successfully rendered by means of the Fauconnier and Turner four-space model of conceptual integration (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) to illustrate how dynamic cognitive processes process information expressed by the three modes, as well as show how much information comprised in these modes is further projected onto the ultimate meaning of the commercial in question. Let us now deconstruct the commercial for *Momester®Nasal* allowing for the tools of Fauconnier and Turner’s theory (2002).

Conceptual integration (also known as conceptual blending, cf. Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; also Libura 2007, 2010) is a higher cognitive operation, according to which meaning construction involves selective integration of conceptual elements belonging to two (or more) distinct mental spaces, known as input spaces, and being the basis for a novel meaning which dynamically emerges in a given context. The result of this operation is the so-called conceptual blend which “does not obliterate the inputs” but “provides a human-scale integrated scenario that serves as a conceptual anchor for the conceptual integration network” (Turner, 2008, pp. 13–14; also Zawisławska, 2011). The decoding of blend, the ultimate meaning being the result of the conceptual integration, is possible owing to four spaces involved in the process, i.e. i) two input spaces, which play the role of repositories created to recall elements associated with a particular concept; ii) the generic space in which shared

characteristics of the two inputs are found, and iii) the blended space being a combination of selected elements taken from input spaces as well as having “emergent structure of its own” (Oakley & Coulson, 2000, p. 178).

When adjusted to the needs of multimodal analysis proposed for the commercial in question, a four space integration offers two input spaces, i.e. the input for SPACE (input space 1) and the input for ALLERGY (input space 2), both allowing for the modes which operate within each input. Judging from the analysis for *Momester@Nasal*, it seems that input space 1 involves three modes: visual, linguistic and aural, while input space 2 works upon visual and linguistic modes only. Elements that constitute input space 1 include, i.a.: **the universe**, space exploration, space experts, **spacesuit visor**, progress, **astronaut protection**, health problems, isolation, achievements, limitations, **NASA logo**, *2001: Space Odyssey*, the utterance “that’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”, *Strauss’ music, fanfare, orchestra*, the word “cosmic” (in the sense of “very giant”), or the word cosmic (in the sense of “connected with the universe), *off-stage voices*, to enumerate a few⁸. In input space 2 such elements, as, e.g. **NASAL logo**, **medicine** (*Momester@Nasal*), **allergy sufferer**, health problem, suffering, **pollen**, doctors and pharmacists, expectations, research in medicine and pharmacy, efficiency, **flowers and trees**, a giant step, **grass**, **dandelion clock**, protection, carefree life, **friends**, **picnics**, entertainment, limitations, alleviating symptoms of allergy, or **the world** are found. Concepts such as success, progress or mankind belong to the generic space, since they constitute the background composed of characteristics shared by the inputs and rendered in various modes. No less important here is a network of vital relations that occur between input spaces is: we do observe various relations within the same mode (e.g. the relation of analogy between **NASA logo** and **NASAL logo**, or a part–whole relation for **the universe–the world** juxtaposition, where **the universe** remains a hidden element of the visual mode, while **the world** remains a highlighted element to portray life free from allergies, also in the visual mode), as well as and across modes, e.g. the relation of similarity between step (as rendered in the verbal mode in input space 1) and **step** as presented in the visual mode in input space 2. The most interesting issue here is the emergent meaning of the analyzed ad which guides us towards the product’s reliability, efficiency and best quality when it comes to combating allergy. The meaning here is conveyed by means of projection of selected elements which come from two input spaces, are rendered in various modes and intertwine throughout the commercial. For instance, a highlighted element giant as proposed for the linguistic mode (input space 1) mingles with the ele-

⁸ The notation as proposed herein allows the reader to distinguish elements belonging to the modes. Thus, elements belonging to the visual mode are indicated with bold, elements belonging to the linguistic mode are underlined, while elements belonging to the aural mode are italicized. Elements illustrating overlapping modes adopt double notation.

ment **step** from the visual mode (input space 2). We also experience a selective projection such elements as: problem (from input space 2), *2001: Space Odyssey* (input space 1), or *fanfare* (input space 1). Other projections, including elements which, so far, remain hidden till the very final moment finally contribute to the ultimate message of the commercial. These include, e.g. cosmic (connected with the universe), or **achievements** (a putative element that corresponds with the visual mode). When combined altogether, selected highlighted elements found in three analyzed modes successfully illustrate the general message of the commercial: *Momester®Nasal* is a revolutionary medicine product which combats allergy, a “cosmic” problem in contemporary society in an efficient way. The efficiency of the medicine is additionally strengthened by the fanfare heralding the ultimate success of the drug, as well as by means of a paraphrased line “Wielki krok w blokowaniu objawów alergii” (a giant step in blocking allergy symptoms). The schema of selected elements belonging to distinct modes and taking part in the integration is presented in Figure 1:

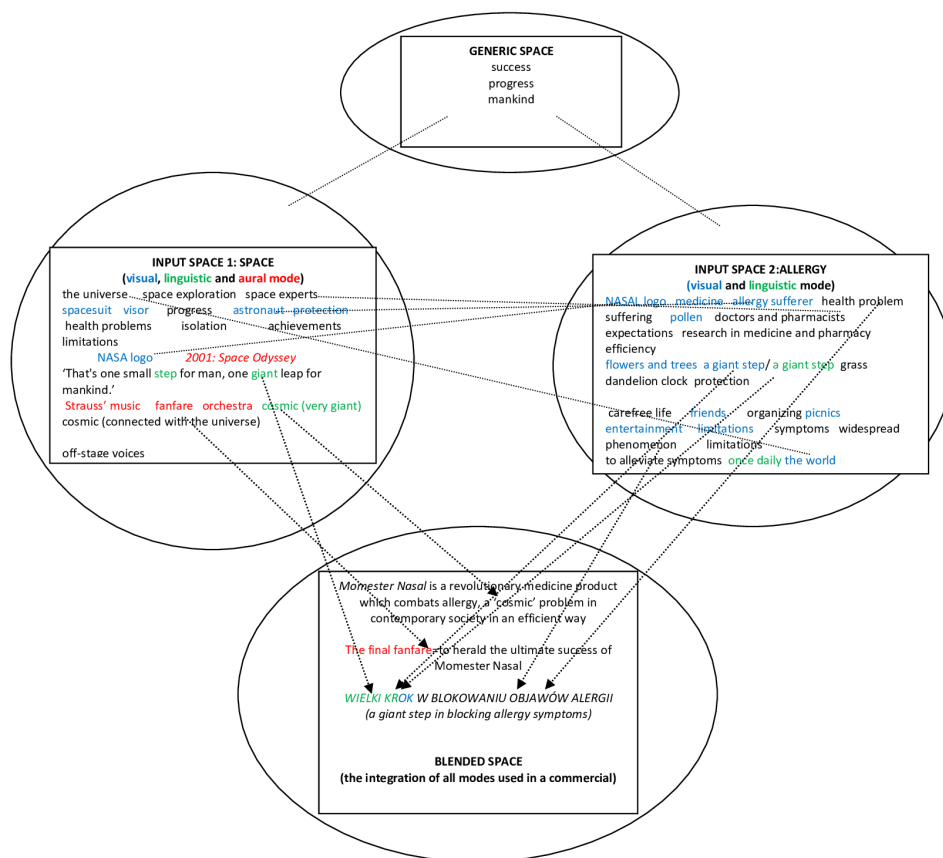


Figure 1: The integration of modes for *Momester®Nasal* commercial (based on the Fauconnier and Turner (2002) four-space integration network model)

3. Conclusions

The present paper is a modest proposal how to deal with various modalities used in a TV commercial adopting selected aspects of cognitive linguistics. As emphasised by Fabiszak (2017),

tools [...] developed within cognitive linguistics for the analysis of language, can be applied to other forms of non-verbal communication with the aim of elucidating the meaning-making processes in multimodal communication. (p. 267)

For this reason, cognitive operations such as the effect of highlighting and hiding, or the phenomenon of conceptual blending, are fully justified to be taken into account while analyzing *Momester®Nasal* commercial presented herein.

Undoubtedly, a plethora of modes applied in the commercial as well as the way they overlap and criss-cross thus forming a “multimodal grid” also contributes both to the dynamicity and creativity of the commercial. This dynamicity and creativity of the commercial is additionally boosted by what El Refaie (2015) calls the “cross-modal resonance”, i.e. the result of “exploiting the distinct characteristics and meaning potential of the various modes and their combinations” (El Refaie, 2015, pp. 14–15). Such resonances give the possibility to fill in the gap for one modality with the other, especially when the former is insufficient to provide the information required for a given commercial. On the other hand, for purely practical reasons, cross-modal resonances also give a copywriter the possibility to manoeuvre between such factors as time limitations or legal regulations imposed on the commercial that have to be taken into account as far as drug commercials are concerned.

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