

Arousing the Receiver's Involvement by Flouting the Communicative Principles

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the addresser's attempt at gaining the addressee's attention towards his message. The field chosen for the investigation is the language of advertising, and more particularly one of its effective, although not widely used, strategies: humour. The hypothesis we put forward is that humour arises as a consequence of flouting the communicative rules. In this way, readers may develop a feeling of solidarity with the advertiser for being daring or interesting, and above all for letting them 'in the know'. Thus the use of humour is studied as a persuasive tactic.

1. Introduction

Recently there has been wide interest in the language of advertising (Grunic, 1991; Cook, 1992; Tanaka, 1994). However, the analyses tend to concentrate on well-known devices such as punning. Our aim in this paper is slightly different. We focus on the use of humour, an effective advertising technique that has passed unnoticed to most authors, but that is born out of the same strategy as the other linguistic mechanisms that make up slogans: transgression of the principles that rule any communicative act.

Thus, the goals of the present study are: the understanding of how violation of the communicative rules affects readers; the assessment of the reasons why writers (advertisers) choose flouting. To achieve those aims we have organised the paper into four sections. We start with the close examination of general beliefs about the language of advertising and the

extent to which they can be maintained. Next we present the theoretical tools that permit us to account for the special characteristics of communication in advertising. Section four introduces us to the reasons why humour is persuasive, which is followed by our last section, a discussion of some examples where the appropriateness of the theory is tested.

2. Questioning general beliefs about the language of ads

Our everyday life is surrounded by advertisements that appear on television and radio, at the cinema, on billboard posters, in newspapers and magazines and even arrive home through the letterbox. There is little in common, if anything, between the beginnings of advertising in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and the modern invasion we suffer. In its origins most advertising was straightforward: its language and style was formal and respectful; its tone was often ceremonious (Leech, 1972; Dyer, 1992). In the late twentieth century, the power of the mass market has radically altered this. In a competitive market, advertisers have to be better or more persuasive than their rivals if they are to succeed. Their marketing campaigns seek to establish a clear and distinctive image and identity which will make their products or services stand out from equivalent brands from other companies.

Although the various types of advertising we have mentioned are likely to differ according to the perceived characteristics of the potential consumers, they will each contain a set of features which proclaim their common identity as advertisements. Thus, regardless of time and the sophistication imposed by development, we would be inclined to recognise that advertisements have one overriding aim which is to sell goods and services.

To Bex (1996), it is precisely this particular discursive practice what makes a reader identify a text as an ad. The interpretation of an expression takes place within a context in which it achieves maximum contextual effects. The reader is aware of how advertisements typically work in society and he will be able to recognise advertisements even though he may have no interest in the goods or services on offer.

Advertisements work by raising interest in a product or service. The strategies used in each case must be appropriate both to the target audience and to the kind of product or service offered. Some ads aim to convince the consumer to buy one particular brand rather than another, showing the product as more successful, more stylish, or better value even if more expensive. Other advertisements use a 'reason why' approach to make consumers buy an item that is not essential to everyday living.

Thus, from our point of view, the main function of advertising is to persuade, that is to say, to modify the attitude of the audience. Its subordinate function is to provide information (size, brand name, price, address or telephone number of the shop or company, etc.). But advertisers appeal to our desire to be a 'successful career man or woman', a 'wonderful lover' or part of a 'happy family'; they exploit our wish to be 'beautiful', 'responsible' and 'powerful'. Advertisements suggest that we can become all this through the acquisition of

the products, so, in each case, the function of the ad is to get you to buy. Although information may be provided it will not be neutral because there is an implicit purpose.

Often the initial impact will be caused by the visual content and the overall design. But it is the use of language that will ensure that the product or service and the brandname are remembered. Typically, the language of advertising is labelled as positive, unreserved and colloquial. Any manual (Thorne, 1997) will be quick to admit that the features of advertising language can be traced back to the presence of verbal contractions, imperatives, use of the second person pronoun 'you', deletion of certain elements (articles, prepositions or subjects), verbless clauses, unusually short sentences, etc.

Although advertisements are seldom realised in full grammatical form, readers are not likely to be confused as to its intention, and the supply of missing items is effected without problems. To this extent it could arguably be said that (indirect) interaction between advertiser and audience is smoothly carried out.

However, this well-known account of advertising language is close to a naïve picture of the real situation. We opened this section talking about the overwhelming presence of advertising in our society. This availability may have negative effects on a consumer who becomes tired and bored of messages whose sole aim is to make him spend his money. Obviously, advertisers themselves are well aware of this danger, this is why they make an effort to empathize with their audience. It is our claim in this paper that advertisers have opted out for linguistic strategies that take their readers off-guard. Straightforward formulas and a smooth recovering of the message are no longer good assets to success. The aim is twofold: firstly, advertisers need to overcome the rejection that springs up not only from the advertising invasion, but also from the acknowledged aim of selling. Secondly, they need to regain the audience's attention.

From this new perspective, it is easy to understand why the language of advertising cannot be simply characterised as colloquial language. It is much more than this. Instead we should seek out for persuasive techniques, in other words, for the rhetoric of advertising language. Our focus in the present study will be on the use of humour due to its persuasive and affective features.

3. The pragmatic approach

This section sets out our approach to a pragmatic theory that enables us to account for the characteristics of advertising communication, at the same time that provides a fully-fledged answer for the use of humour as a persuasive strategy.

The advertiser's preference for a spendthrift language can be rightfully studied from an inferential approach to communication. Grice's work on implicature came into linguistics in the late sixties and had a major impact on the evolution of the field; one reason was that it opened up and legitimised the study of what Fauconnier (1990) likes to call "invisible meaning" (conversational implicatures, indirect speech and the like), i.e., inferences that

are essential for a proper understanding of what is said, and yet bear little or no connection to any manifest linguistic structure.

As pragmatics soon took a life of its own, a theoretical movement informally known as radical pragmatics has argued that it was desirable to reduce all of pragmatic theory to a few grand principles. This is known (Richardson & Richardson 1990: 499) as Pragmatic Minimalism, i.e., one can account for all pragmatic phenomena using fewer maxims than those proposed in Grice (1989). The project of analysing the conversational maxims into more general or fundamental principles is certainly an interesting one. An example is represented by Attardo & Raskin's general theory of Verbal Humour, as described and developed in Attardo & Raskin (1991; 1994).

They suggest that the original set of Gricean maxims should be reduced to the maxim of quality and the maxim of relation. This reduction is grounded on a redefinition of Grice's principles to adapt them to jokes, as well as in the fact that some of the principles are more often flouted than others.

The main fault we find with Attardo & Raskin's theory is that it is devised to deal with humour resulting from jokes. This is a problem since traditional sources of jocular remarks (dialectal language, regional characteristics, etc.) are not in the least suited for the purpose of advertising. Advertising is aimed at reaching as wide an audience as possible: no potential consumer should feel himself the target of attacks. Such a practice would upbring resentment and dissuade from purchase instead of encouraging it.

Another important difficulty is the connection that Attardo & Raskin establish between humour and ambiguity. This is an extended practice indeed (Pepicello & Green, 1984; Binsted & Ritchie, 1997). However, when talking about advertising language, we would like to make a neat distinction between the two strategies. Thus, while advertising ambiguity is mainly based on two possible readings of a single item (i.e. it is often associated with plays on words), humour may have diverse origins. There is one thing, however, that is common to both strategies, it could further be said, that is the key point of the rhetoric of advertising language: it is based on the systematic transgression of the communicative principles.

The aim of the present paper is to explain such a transgression from the 'relevance' framework of Sperber & Wilson (1986), the most successful and extreme version of pragmatic minimalism. These authors state that when we engage in communication the ultimate goal is to alter the hearer's cognitive environment; cognitive environment being defined (1986: 39) as a set of facts which are manifest to an individual.

Given the characteristics of advertising, as well as the special relationship between sender-receiver, Tanaka (1994: 41) claims that in contrast to what happens in ostensive communication, in covert communication the speaker does not intend to make his informative intention mutually manifest although he does try to alter the cognitive environment of his addressee. The lack of cooperation is overcome with cooperation at the cognitive level not at the social one. Somebody who asks for our attention suggests that there is good reason to assume that you might benefit from complying with his request. This leads us to the notion of optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 157-160), which places

two conditions on the interpretation of an utterance, namely, that it achieves enough effects to be worthy of the hearer's attention and that there is no gratuitous effort in achieving those effects. The communicator must attract the audience's attention, and this will be accompanied by reward.

The effects we have mentioned are contextual effects, which can be attained in three different ways (Sperber & Wilson 1986: 42-43): a) contextual implication (information that cannot be deduced from either existing assumptions or the new information alone), b) strengthening of existing assumptions; c) contradiction and elimination of old assumptions.

To our present purposes such an approach has at least two major advantages. Firstly, it predicts that the listener takes a larger share of the responsibility in deriving the speaker's meaning. Secondly, it guarantees that the extra processing effort involved in understanding an utterance has a reward, a reward that ultimately takes the form of extra contextual effects.

A central issue to the first point is how long the hearer should go adding premises to the context and recovering further conclusions. Relevance Theory (RT) provides a satisfactory answer for this too. In deciding what has been communicated, the hearer will be guided by consistency with the principle of relevance. In deciding how far he should go, he will operate in agreement with the criterion governing cognitive activities, that is, never beyond the point where the processing effort outweighs the effects achieved.

There is an interesting conclusion to be drawn from RT, i.e. there is not a clear-cut between assumptions strongly backed by the communicator and assumptions derived by the addressee's own responsibility. Advertisers will make the most of an exchange governed by such rules, since the addressee will be free to adapt the interpretation to his own needs, beliefs, etc.

The remainder of this paper is designed to evaluate the persuasive dimension of humour within the approach of RT.

4. Humour as a persuasive strategy

The hostile relationship between writer and reader can be rectified through an adequate exploitation of the power that confers the advertiser the fact of being the 'ruler' of the communicative act: he chooses what to say and, most importantly, how to say it. In order to overcome the aforesaid rejection, the writer should be the artificer of the audience's shift from hostility to solidarity.

Although comparatively little work has been done on the topic of how potential effects on readers may lead advertisers to choose humour (Allen, 1988), studies in face-to-face interaction suggest that sarcasm can have the effect of creating solidarity and may be face-saving (Slugoski & Turnbull, 1988; Seckman & Couch, 1989; Kreuz et al., 1991; Jorgensen, 1996).

The question that naturally arises is what is the impact of humour on persuasive communication. On trying to determine this we will start by limiting the concept. Humour

has been defined by typologies or stimulus properties (for example puns, incongruity, slapstick) and by its behavioural manifestations (for example laughter, smiling). However, the most commonly accepted definition of humour has been the audience's perceptual response. In other words, humour is falsifiable in that there is a simple test of its success: whether the audience is amused or not (Gelb & Zinkhan, 1986; Ruch et al., 1990; Binsted & Ritchie, 1997).

One challenging line of criticism with the widely spread definition of humour is that, given the special characteristics of advertising communication, the audience's perception of a message as funny and entertaining is not the ultimate reward the advertiser longs for. The consumer's response is not immediate (it will not show up on the faces of an audience in front of the showman who knows on the spot whether his jokes are amusing or not). On the contrary, the advertiser must wait until statistics prove that a product or service advertised through a humorous campaign is selling well.

The indirect nature of such reaction puts us on alert about what one can expect from the use of humour in ads: humour, as its very definition seems to entail, needs to be funny but above all persuasive.

3.1. Why is Humour Persuasive?

Unger (1996: 146-148) offers three possible hypotheses that attempt to explain the persuasive power of a humorous message: a) the distraction hypothesis; b) involvement and closure; c) source credibility.

- **Distraction hypothesis.** It defends that a persuasive message will be more effective if the audience is distracted during the presentation. Distraction (humour) inhibits the target from generating counterarguments, which leads to greater message acceptance and persuasion. Thus it is specially recommended when the audience is hostile. Studies investigating the hypothesis have been inconclusive. While some support it (Biel & Bridgwater, 1990), others have failed to confirm it (Nelson et al., 1985).

- **Involvement and closure.** The involving nature of humour is linked to closure. There is tension or arousal until the moment the joke is understood or the incongruity explained (Forabosco, 1992).

- **Source credibility.** Sternthal & Craig (1973) indicate that humour may increase a spokesperson's credibility by making him or her more likeable or trustworthy.

These three proposed hypotheses for humour's persuasive power are not mutually exclusive, yet the first explanation is perhaps the most likely to be incorrect. From our point of view the claim that humour lowers the audience's guard and reduces the tendency to counterargue the persuasive message is misguided when we insert it within the framework of RT just outlined.

We believe that the advertiser's goal is to attract the reader's attention to a message whose meaning is not obvious at a simple glance, but that will definitely be eye-catching and

thought-provoking. The reader is initially confronted with a slogan that needs time to be deciphered, like a puzzle. It is obvious then that a hypothesis that predicts a passive receiver cannot be among our approach to humour.

On the contrary, the very name of the second hypothesis seems to be more in tune with our beliefs. If we admit that humour comes out of incongruity, as indeed most researchers observe (Katz, 1993; Palmer, 1994), it is not difficult to imagine that readers, in an attempt to strive for consistency, will become psychologically and emotionally involved. However, as Yus Ramos (1997: 503) makes us note, incongruity is a necessary, although not sufficient, condition for an expression to be humorous. In order to solve the psychological puzzle satisfactorily, the receiver must be able to find the cognitive rule that permits him conciliate the first interpretation and the last one. RT provides the right approximation to explain how the involvement-closure relationship is produced. First of all the addresser conceives a message whose interpretation is apparently straightforward; such a straightforward interpretation will be swiftly activated by the addressee in agreement with the principle of relevance. Once the receiver feels psychologically relaxed because he has retrieved the seemingly right interpretation at no cost, he is surprised by an element which does not fit in his cognitive environment. This strange element gives way to what Yus Ramos (1997: 504) has called "cognitive dissonance," or other authors (Marcus, 1980) have termed a garden-path effect.

Introducing this element is tantamount to making the addressee uneasy: he is completely caught off-guard. The psychological arousal makes the reader trace back his steps and assign a new interpretation on the light of this information.

Note that there is an important difference between the joke and a humorous advertisement. In spite of the fact that the underlying process amounts to the same mechanism, funniness is inherent to the former, but not to the latter. The advertiser does not aim at telling a laughable remark, but at a persuasive message which is amusing. This is precisely why we defend that humour is not only a consequence of ambiguity (not in vain this is the principal source of most jokes (Chiaro, 1992)). Thus whereas it is undeniable that double meanings involve humour, we believe that ambiguity-humour is not a necessary link. This claim supports itself in a nonservient role of humour, but rather in its status as an independent tactic. Our thesis then is that humour is obtained when the sender manipulates the message in such a way that the most accessible interpretation will not turn out to be the most relevant one; in other words when he breaches the principle of relevance.

This is where the third hypothesis about the persuasive nature of humour comes into play. According to it humour increases a spokesperson's credibility; nevertheless, this is unhelpful, unless accompanied by an indication of why this is so. One of the major benefits of covert communication is that it places on the listener the responsibility of recovering the message. Paradoxically, credibility is boosted when the addressee, after the garden-path phenomenon, derives a new interpretation that is rich in contextual effects. The existence of assumptions weakly backed by the addresser favours the message in that the receiver has freedom to shape it according to his own tastes and beliefs. It follows then that each reader of a slogan may activate his set of weak implicatures.

Once we have explained how RT helps us understand why humour is so useful a device in advertising, we are going to analyse some slogans to test the theory in practice.

5. General discussion

We would like to start having a look at a slogan in which the humorous effect is a consequence of near-punning. With this we pursue a better appreciation of the contrast with examples where plays on words are not present, and yet humour is elicited.

Five ways to breast feed your family. <Birds Eye> *She* November 1997.

The slogan is accompanied by five big pictures, each presenting a mouth-watering roll. The most accessible interpretation of a mother who cares about her babies and breast feeds them clashes with several elements: first, the picture just described; secondly, with the verbal complement *family*, since the mother is expected to breast feed babies, not the whole family; thirdly, the quantified expression *five ways* seems to be pointing at the five pictures rather than to the way of nourishing new borns. Incongruity cannot be solved at this level because the pictures are not clear enough about their content: they show food but yet what kind?

The bodytext will provide the solution thanks to the information contained in it: "... delicious family's meals made with succulent chicken breast served in a choice of" That is, feed your family on breast chicken; the slogan gives a new meaning to an already lexicalized form. The contextual effects derived from the processing effort do not involve the rejection of all previous assumptions, some of them may survive in the form of weak implicatures. Along this line, the addressee may think that this trademark is concerned with natural food, a balanced-diet, and accordingly will be chosen by mothers worried about a healthy family, etc.

Consider the following example:

You're going to call your boyfriend back home. As soon as you can remember his name. <Malibu> *Glamour* October 1995.

The image that accompanies the ad is important when we come to explain which is the most easily accessible interpretation. The reader can see a sunset on what seems a Caribbean beach; a group of people (three girls and two boys) in swimming trunks are pushing a boat out of the water. This picture helps the addressee interpret the first sentence of the slogan in a context where one has come to a seaside resort without her partner, misses him, and thus will phone him. This interpretation is in agreement with the principle of relevance, therefore the receiver will stop there without considering other options.

The second sentence, however, contains information that contradicts the old assumptions. If the boyfriend's name cannot be remembered it may be the case that one is

not so much in love with him; instead these days away from routine make you realise the fun you are missing, the perspective of new relationships, etc. The purpose of the ad is to advertise Caribbean rum. Everybody knows that alcoholic drinks are associated with a state of happiness, friendship, etc. The extra processing effort has produced extra contextual effects.

Let's move to another slogan:

OK: You're stranded on an island with only three pieces of make-up ...
< Cover Girl > *Cosmopolitan* November 1997.

As the addressee reads the sentence a familiar situation comes to mind: the famous question about what three things one would take to a deserted island. This connection seems relevant until one finds the item *make-up*, which refers to three pictures showing lipstick, make-up and mascara and introduce the incongruity. Obviously, make-up is not of any use when you are stranded on an island. The slogan does not contain further information that may solve incongruity, so the reader moves to the bodytext where it can be read: "You're fresh, you're set, wherever your go (even if it's the island of Manhattan...)." The expression *island of Manhattan* is the link between the old interpretation and the new one: you can really feel at a loss on that island, an exclusive place where business are made, important meetings are held, job interviews take place, etc. And where one should always look beautiful. The contextual effects are derived from the clash produced between the two interpretations.

This indirect use of language is costly for the reader: it requires more processing effort than the interpretation of a message in usual circumstances (when there is no deliberate rule transgression). By the same token it is expected to be more rewarding. The incongruity offered asks for a solution. When this is attained, the addressee feels pleased with himself at the same time that experiments positive affiliation towards the ad, and eventually toward the advertised brand. This is why empathy, warmth (understood as a positive emotion involving psychological arousal) and humour can be related (see Unger (1996) for this connection).

It is fair to say that the use of humour in advertising is subject to some risks. First of all, humour wears out quickly: when a humorous ad appears too often, the reader may disregard it or become irritated. Because of the arousal cycle, a humorous slogan, as happens with jokes, is best the first time. This can explain why there is no abundance of this type of messages (in stark contrast with the use of ambiguity). The second major problem is the danger of misunderstanding. Successful ads seem to abide by a recipe: while the slogan is built on a spendthrift language strategy, the bodytext that accompanies it shows the profusion of details that will put through the intended meaning. In any case, the writer should make sure that the incongruity offered can be solved. Otherwise all the efforts (and the money!) would have gone for nothing.

Generally, humour in advertising softens negative feelings towards the advertising industry itself more often than it causes amusement or is perceived as joking.

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