

# Humour in Advertising

## 1. Humour is generally used to evoke the recipients' attention

Due to the fact that many markets are rather saturated today, many commercials aim rather at the recipients' emotional attention than at presenting a product's features and advantages. In order to appeal emotionally to the viewer/reader, ads use different strategies. Humour provides one strategy with which an advertiser may evoke positive feelings. These positive feelings can potentially lead to cognitive processes that motivate the recipient to buy the presented product. Considering the fact that involvement during commercial breaks is generally rather low, humour may be an appropriate means to catch the recipient's attention.

In order to be able to work with the term "humour", it needs to be defined. The word itself originates in Latin, meaning "fluid"; it refers to antique medicine which believed that human tempers were made up different mixings of bodily fluids ("humores"). Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century the term is used in the way we use it today. Humour, though, is something that goes beyond the "simply funny" things in life. At the moment, there is no consistent scientific definition of humour. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines humour as a "form of communication in which a complex, mental stimulus illuminates, or amuses, or elicits the reflex of laughter". It is, though, not just a one-dimensional phenomenon but has rather many facets which have to be differentiated, e.g. comic wit, sentimental humour, satire, sentimental comedy and comedy (Speck 1990).

This rather large amount of terms standing in context with humour already indicates that there cannot be one single definition but rather a whole field concerned with this topic. Semantically, Attardo (1994) has built up this field in the following way:



Looking at this variety of concepts, it should not be too surprising that there is little consensus about the effects of humorous ads. This is based on individual predispositions – one person might find a commercial extremely amusing while another rejects it. However, that depends, among others, on social and psychological factors: How has a person been socialized?

## 2. There are several theories about the effect of ad humour on the recipient:

### a. Incongruity Resolution Theory

McGhee (1979) defines incongruity as "the relationships between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent element of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous." The theory is presented as "essentialist" because it tries to provide the necessary and sufficient conditions for a phenomenon to occur, in order to define the essence of the phenomenon.

The approach is based on the assumption that the crucial element in a humorous situation/ad is a kind of incongruity which surprises the recipient. While she expects some certain features (based on earlier experiences with similar situations), the ad evokes a situation that does not comply with the recipient's expectations. However, in order to be humorous, the situational context must be safe and non-threatening.

When the recipient detects an incongruence, she has to start interpreting the situation. The interpretation consists of several steps. The first step represents an obvious meaning which, however, would not make much sense in this particular context. Only by providing encyclopaedic knowledge or information given earlier in the ad, she can resolve the situation and thus recognize it as humorous. The incongruity often appears in combination with a pun or a metaphor (see 3 a/b). Incongruity humour is also called "Ah-ha humour" (Behrens/Großerohde 1999) as the enjoyment comes along with intellectual pleasure, having solved a small challenge.

### b. Superiority/Disparagement Theory

Whereas the Incongruity Resolution Theory has a "cognitive" focus on information processing, the Superiority Theory aims more at affective elements of humour. Humour is often "evil", using tendentious or humiliating elements to ridicule other people or groups of people. If humour deals with "disliked" people it is considered even more funny than humour dealing with "friendly" people. An example for this is the famous "sport" of Kraut-bashing, practiced by Englishmen before football matches, using references to the World Cup 1966 or WW 1 and 2. These affective reactions do not necessarily have to be the result of long-lasting, negative attitudes towards other people, but can also occur momentarily. This explains the occurrence of such humour among friends or against one self (e.g. self irony). Disparagement humour is also called "Ha-ha humour" (Behrens/Großerohde 1999), meaning that someone is just laughing at something with the laughter having a mainly affective background. Origins of this theory go back to Aristotle and Plato, who presented definitions for humour and comedy as something that makes us laugh when the "evil" or "ugly" is ridiculed or suffers.

One key concept of humour is amusement, to be separated from enjoyment. The latter can also occur during sports or other kinds of entertainment, whereas the former is rather strictly entwined with humour.

### c. Release Theories

Release theories maintain that humour releases tensions, psychic energy, or that humour releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws. They account for the "liberation" of language, using puns and other word-play, thus violating actual language rules and "defunctionalizing" or "refunctionalizing" language. Release theories go back to Freud's analysis of humorous utterances but have a rather psychological focus. He put up a list of twenty mechanisms with which humour works. They operate inside both verbal humour (arising from words) and referential humour (arising from facts and actions) and can be reduced to two major mechanisms:

- condensation: one signifier contains several meanings and leads us to these meanings (e.g. puns or metaphors; paradigmatic relations)
- displacement: relationship between two senses which are present at the same time (syntagmatic relations)

#### d. Excitation Transfer Theory

This theory claims that high arousal levels induced by “communicated” excitement during one programme may be transferred to another programme (post-exposure). For example, if an arousing TV programme is followed by commercials, the arousal level may still be present during the commercial break. This has been empirically confirmed (Mattes/Cantor 1982) and can also be applied the other way round (commercials ⇒ TV programme). In order to take effect, though, both programme and commercial break ought to be mood-congruent. Highly humorous commercials in context with a solemn TV programme might completely lose their intended effect.

Perry et al. (1997) examined TV programmes and commercials for context and excitation transfer effects. They found that TV programmes are rated as more positively when the commercials were also rated as humorous. Moreover, they were considered more enjoyable in a more humorous context. Thus, increasing humour levels may improve programme liking and preference. The study itself worked with rather humorous programmes. The effect on solemn programmes is still unexplored.

### 3. Advertisers use several different linguistic features to incorporate humour:

#### a. puns

A pun is a phenomenon which involves the signifier facet of the sign. In the most common sense, a pun is a spoken joke or a joke meant to be interpreted as if read aloud. They can be put into the following taxonomy:

- homonymy
  - homophony
    - between different words
    - two or more words
    - a simple word with a composed one
    - one word with a group of two or more words
    - two groups of words
  - homography
  - paronymy
- polysemy
- antonymy
- morphemic attraction
- tendency to motivation
- contamination (Denglisch = Deutsch + Englisch)

There are three linguistic features with puns:

- paradigmatic puns: they, like all puns, provide two or more meanings. However, there is only one string present – the uttered one. The other one(s) has/have to be retrieved by the recipients from their storage of homonymic or paronymic strings (paradigm).  
Example: His sins were scarlet but his books were read.  
scarlet = purple, but also “verrufen”  
read = homonymy to “red”

- syntagmatic puns: these puns require the presence of the second string in the text (syntagm). Moreover, they also refer to the recipient's encyclopaedic knowledge.  
Example: You've had tee many martoonis. A giant leap for the International Monetary Fund, a small step for mankind.
- chiasitic puns: puns based on a chiasm (xyyx – scheme).  
Example: The fair sex: Yes. The sex fair: No.

A pun is based on the ambiguity of words. Yet not all ambiguous words are puns. The two senses in a pun are not random but have to be “opposed”, i.e. semantically incompatible in context. This incompatibility is a necessary condition for building up incongruity, which itself may lead to a humorous interpretation. The speaker's intended interpretation, though, must be recoverable. Furthermore, the conscious recognition of multiple interpretations is essential for an audience to process an utterance as a pun. In doing so, the advertiser achieves the full range of intended effects.

Among advertisers puns are assumed to have a low intellectual status and should not be included. Advertisers are perhaps attempting to dissociate themselves from the intention to use word-play. However, puns are used more and more frequently in ads, especially in anglo-saxon countries or Japan. Sherzer (1985) considers puns as highly appropriate for advertising because they deliver two meanings for the price of one word. Puns attract attention because they frustrate initial expectations of relevance and create a sense of surprise.

According to Tanaka (199?), there are four categories of puns in advertising:

- “nonsense” puns: the initial meaning of these slogans is nonsensical, forcing the recipient to reject it in favour of another interpretation – the one intended by the communicator. The second interpretation may require considerable processing effort and encyclopaedic knowledge.  
Example: Less bread, no jam. (Ad for the London Underground)  
bread (sl.): money, jam: traffic jam ⇒ message: using the London Underground will cost you less money. Furthermore, you will spend less time in traffic jams.
- contextual puns: here rejected interpretations contribute to the intended interpretation, providing access to encyclopaedic information  
Example: The “Opening Movement” (Coca-Cola)  
This slogan stands in context with a public at the “proms”. An opening movement can be the introduction to a symphony, for example. In this context, though, it represents the movement of opening a bottle of Coca-Cola. Here the first interpretation, standing in context with music, has to be rejected for the intended interpretation to be recovered.
- puns with sexual innuendo: these puns are usually used when the communicator wants to insinuate things that are too indecent to be said outright  
Example: After you get married, kiss your wife in places she's never been kissed before. (Slogan for honeymoon destinations)  
The slogan can be interpreted in the way that the wife gets kissed on body parts that have never been kissed before, which is quite an indecent interpretation. The other, intended, interpretation points out that after getting married, one should go on honeymoon and kiss his wife in locations she has never been to before.
- puns with two communicated meanings: some puns communicate two meanings at the same time. These puns sometimes have the disadvantage that it is not clear which interpretation is intended by the communicator. Therefore, the recipient has to combine different interpretations to get a comprehensive picture.

## **b. metaphors**

Metaphors are widely used in advertising. The Collins English Dictionary defines the metaphor as “an imaginative way of describing something, by referring to something else which has the qualities that you are trying to express. There are “standard” metaphors (e.g. a shy person = a mouse), which are

mainly used in advertising, and “creative” metaphors which propose an unusual or unexpected correspondence between words or expressions. Unlike puns, they enjoy a kind of respectability among advertisers. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) make a difference between three kinds of metaphors:

- ontological metaphors: based on human experience of objects and substances. Metaphors are not only linguistic devices, but also cognitive objects.  
Example: Argument is war: His criticisms were *right on target*. I've never *won* an argument with him.
- structural metaphors: they occur when one concept is “metaphorically structured” on the basis of another.  
Example:
- orientational metaphors: one metaphorical concept organises a system of concepts rather than structuring it  
Example: Regular savings build *up* to a big sum. ⇒ more is up; less is down

According to Grice, metaphors violate the maxim of truthfulness as the proposition expressed by the utterance containing a metaphor is not identical to the belief of the speaker. The recipient must thus regard the utterance as false in order to recognize the metaphor.

Wilson and Sperber, though, resent the idea of a “maxim of truthfulness” and claim that there is no discontinuity between metaphorical and non-metaphorical utterances. There is no process of considering any literal interpretation of an utterance, then rejecting it and looking for a non-literal interpretation. The recipient accepts the first interpretation to yield adequate contextual effects for the minimal rationally expected effort. The first accessible interpretation in the case of metaphor should be the less than literal one, given the context in which the utterance is processed.

Metaphors are heavily used in perfume ads, this referring to the characteristics of fragrances. Their description happens almost always in terms of their causes and their effects.

Metaphors differ from puns as follows:

<b>pun</b>	<b>metaphor</b>
two or more chunks of information	one chunk of information
contrast between two rather clearly defined interpretations	indeterminate range of thoughts and interpretations
strongly communicated	weakly communicated

The notion that an audience want advertisements to be entertaining contributes greatly to the use of puns and metaphors. Thus advertisers use both styles to evoke the recipients' attention. They also treat their audiences as potentially creative and resourceful, once they have managed to gain their attention.

### **c. semantic and syntactic features, e.g. repetitives or comparatives**

In print, advertisers mostly use humour in ads that are directly addressed to the public (visible in the fact that many ads “talk” to the recipient: “Have you...?”). Other elements for verbal strategies in print ads are:

- demonstratives (here we have...)
- imperatives (buy Cola now!)
- repetition of the brand name
- superlatives
- in comparing ads: comparatives (our product is better/stronger/more reliable than...)

The main medium for communication between the advertiser and the recipient is language; it builds up a strong and close relationship between visual and verbal communication.

Word figures that refer to semantic or syntactical features of the slogan seem to have a positive effect on product and ad recognition:

- syntactical:
  - transpositive: unusual syntax
  - privative: e.g. leaving out words in a slogan
  - repetitive: repetition of words (e.g. the brand name)
- semantic:
  - combination of contrasts
  - comparisons, similarities
  - replacements, substitutes

#### **4. Empiric studies have not brought up consistent results for ad humour research:**

##### **a. humorous vs. non-humorous ads**

Humour may increase source liking and decrease sceptical attitudes towards the product. Marketing studies proved this thesis, finding that humorous ads get higher scores in the categories of source liking and product preference.

The main result is that humorous ads have a greater capability of evoking the recipient's attention than non-humorous ads. Humour, however, may distract the recipients' attention from the actual product towards to ad itself.

In humorous ads, the humour itself must be easily recognizable, otherwise it runs the risk of not being understood by the recipient. Forms like satire, irony or sarcasm might be misinterpreted due to their complexity, and therefore might "ruin" the ad's message.

Humour may exert a positive influence on source liking but may also enhance previous experiences or attitudes towards the product. If the recipient's attitude has already been positive, this attitude might be even improved. However, the same could also apply to negative attitudes, them being even worsened. All in all, humour should be used in "reminder ads" or "confirmation ads" so that dissonances concerning the product decision can be avoided. If the recipient already has a negative attitude towards the product, more serious ads ought to be used.

##### **b. relevant vs. non-relevant humour**

According to Speck (1991), there are three kinds of relatedness in humorous ads:

- intentional – relationship between humour and the message (type, processing)
- thematic – humour and product-related themes
- structural – syntactical function of humour, integrating humour and the product claims

Weinberger et al (1995) found that product relevant humour seems to have clearly better effects on product remembrance than non-relevant humour. Non-relevant humour is also capable of arousing the recipient's attention but may distract from the actual product information and may therefore not achieve its purpose. The same applies to excessively used humour.

##### **c. ads for different product categories (cf. WEINBERGER et al. 1995)**

## **Product Colour Matrix (PCM)**

		<b>Purpose</b>	
		<b>Functional Tools</b>	<b>Expressive Toys</b>
<b>Financial Risk</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>White Goods</b> e.g. Insurances, Kitchens, Cars (not Sports Cars),	<b>Red Goods</b> e.g. Sports Cars, Jewelry, Designer Fashion
	<b>Low</b>	<b>Blue Goods</b> e.g. tooth paste, detergent, food	<b>Yellow Goods</b> e.g. beer, crisps, sweets,

Yellow goods seem to be best suitable for humorous advertising as they are considered as “small treats”. Ads concerned with these goods are watched with low involvement – humour might help to arouse the customer’s attention. The same applies to Blue goods, even if in a slightly weaker way as these goods are “small tools” with only a small financial risk.

White and Red goods, on the other hand, do not seem to be suited for humour in advertising. They require some consideration about the products because of the high financial risk (plus, in the case of the Red goods, some “social” risk).

#### **d. ads in different media**

According to Weinberger et al. (1995), TV and radio use humour more frequently than magazines. This might depend on the different modes of printed and audiovisual media: print is reader-paced, allowing more message detail and explanation. TV and radio, though, are media-paced. Furthermore, they mostly have only small time-slots (up to 30 seconds), which makes lengthy explanations impossible. On the field of entertainment, humour is one of the most important tools.