

Humour: A Device of Persuasive Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the relationship between humour and a type of written persuasive message: the advertising slogan. Our aim is to show how the advertiser seeks the reader's attention through linguistic tactics that produce humour. We explore the incongruous nature of advertising humour and the technique of flouting the Gricean maxims to achieve effect. The principles of communication initially proposed by this author are redefined in an attempt to make them more suitable as an explanation of advertising flouting.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the importance of humour as a persuasive strategy from a pragmatic approach. When we relate humour and persuasion, it is assumed that any kind of communication whose target is to persuade faces a certain degree of rejection in the audience to whom it is addressed. Humour reveals itself as an artifice to overcome the aforesaid rejection. Previous to the analysis of this suggested relationship, it will be necessary to clarify the humour and the persuasion concepts, as well as framing them in a given type of communication, i.e., advertising. We do believe that in this field the use of humour, particularly its verbal manifestation, is highly productive.

Persuasion & Humour: Two Complimentary Concepts

It is not difficult to defend that advertising is a communicative act, especially if we take into account that it is possible to distinguish within it a sender (the advertiser himself), a receiver (the potential audience) and a message (the slogan). There exists, however, a capital difference between ordinary communication and advertising communication, in that the latter is characterised by a) the lack of reciprocity between the participants of this communicative act; b) it results from a plan rather than springing up spontaneously; and as already specified c) it has been conceived to be addressed to an audience instead of to an individual. Given all these distinctive aspects, we will focus on the first, that is, on the lack of reciprocity. According to Lakoff (1988: 28), unidirectionality in communication is a sufficient requisite to define a discourse as persuasive. Thus, following this author, we maintain that persuasion is the sender's attempt to change the mental attitude, behaviour or point of view held by the receiver. Bearing in mind that the goal of advertising is to present a product as the best over a range of similar ones, its persuasive function could not stand out more clearly.

The univocity of communication also has consequences in other respects that will be dealt with in what follows. The receiver's reply to the message issued by the sender does not take place in the same terms, that is, it is not an oral or written answer, but it is embodied in the acceptance or denial of the product promoted through a given slogan. Or either it is reflected in the statistics carried out by marketing agencies.

This manifest absence of immediacy can be regarded as a certain touch of passivity on the receiver's side. Nevertheless, the writer's use of language is aimed at transforming that supposed passivity into true activity. For the last fifteen years, linguists (Fowler et al. 1979; Fairclough 1990) have tried to explain how the power relations involved in communication work. Research has proved that the person who holds power (because they belong to a high social status, because they occupy a post of some responsibility and talk to their subordinates, etc.) is the one who leads communication in that they decide to initiate or end a conversation; it is them who ask the questions and so on and so forth.

In our opinion, in the case of advertising power is on the sender's side since it is he who decides to establish the communication and consequently chooses the terms in which it is going to take place. Because of that, this power that we attribute to the sender is the key to set up an effective, but also affective, communication with the receiver. We cannot forget that the recipient of advertising messages knows beforehand the advertiser's aim conveyed through the slogan: selling. This previous knowledge far from stimulating communication may hinder it since it is susceptible of generating rejection in an addressee who is weary of the advertising bombardment. It is the sender's task to overcome this drawback, and, for us, the answer lies in taking advantage of the power that entails the condition of being the addresser.

Tannen (1990) puts into relationship the concepts of power and solidarity, two notions that, although at first sight could appear as opposing each other, for the author have a lot in common. She goes even to the point of asserting that one of them may be found in place of the other: "what appears as dominance may not be intended as such, but also what seems like cooperation may actually be intended to dominate" (Tannen 1990: 520). Despite the fact that Tannen has based her research on face-to-face interaction, our purpose is to show that power and solidarity form also part of unidirectional communication.

In trying to prove that, however, we differ from Tannen in one important respect. She (1990: 520) believes that "the linguistic strategies by which power and solidarity are achieved and expressed can be the same, so intentions such as dominance cannot be correlated with linguistic strategies". On the contrary, our

claim is that the advertiser will make an effort to be solidary with his audience in an attempt to overcome the rejection that the public may feel towards advertising, and the way to achieve it is through humour. We consider that the solidarity with the audience springs up from the use of humour because through this strategy the advertiser laughs at his own slogans, that is, he laughs at himself. The use of this method allows for some detachment from his emission, at the same time that he gives the impression of sharing the receivers point of view. Thus power dissolves into solidarity.

It should be pointed out that not all advertisers are in favour of using humour in their slogans (Baldwin 1982; Fletcher 1985) as they think that selling is a serious business and therefore laughing is out of place in ads. We do believe that ideas of this kind are due to the lack of knowledge about how humour as a strategy works. It is not that the ad has to make the reader laugh his head off, rather it is the advertiser's effort to empathize with the audience. In this sense we strongly share Ruch & Rath's opinion (1993: 377) when they state that: "reactions to humor should be conceptualized at a broader level (one which also takes the emotional nature of one's response to humor into account) rather than being restricted to the level of the perception of the stimulus as being funny."

Certainly, from the advertising perspective, the most important consequence that derives from the use of humour is not that the addressee recognizes a slogan as amusing, but that humour enhances an emotional relationship between a message and its receiver. This relationship reveals itself as the advertiser's reward to have used humour, since through such a tactic the writer succeeds at making the reader forget that he is in front of a slogan which aims at selling something. Our argumentation also sustains itself in the thesis that the acknowledgement of humour is an interpersonal process that implies the negotiation of meaning. Such a conception directly affects the roles of the participants in the communicative act: if the addresser opts out for the use of humour in his message, part of the addressee's task will concentrate on discovering the relevance of such an option. In so doing his function will shift from passivity to activity.

Up to now we have only dealt with humour as a strategy, and we have just pinpointed some of its more immediate effects. The next step will be to analyse in detail the mechanisms that are used by the addresser in communication.

The Linguistic Manifestation of Humour: A Pragmatic Approach

As Prado (1995: 158-159) has rightfully noticed, it is a little of a problem to define humour with respect to a single essential feature, since the one that suitably fits in a set of examples is perfectly inadequate for another. The reason for this

inadequacy has to be sought in the varied nature of humour, which does not lend itself easily to theoretical constraints.

In spite of it, most of the researchers (Katz 1993; Palmer 1994) seem willing to admit that humour comes out of incongruity, although some (Morreall 1987) qualify the sort of incongruity with which they identify humour as “pleasant”, “enjoyable”, etc. This last remark appears to be in agreement with the findings reached in a recent study carried out by Staley & Derks (1995). These authors conclude that although nonsense is a possible humouristic structure, the audience feels that the resolution of incongruity is a more satisfying option.

According to what has been said, there are two aspects worth considering: incongruity as an outstanding feature of humour and the need to satisfactorily resolve it. Given the nature of advertising, the use of incongruity will be effective provided that the solution to it should be available to the reader. The advertiser cannot risk failure or misunderstanding in the interpretation of his advertising campaign. If that should happen, his effort, time and money would have gone for nothing. On the contrary, we can anticipate that the language of advertising offers a kind of incongruity that has necessarily to be solved.

In order to show how advertising humour works we are going to invoke the Principle of Cooperation and the Gricean maxims (Grice 1975), under the hypothesis that humour results from the flouting of these rules of communication. In fact, if we bear in mind that Raskin (1985) supports his theory in such a violation, ours is not a novel proposal. But contrary to this author, we do not distinguish between a first reading of the joke, in which the reader notices the violation of Grice’s maxims, and a second reading in which the reader switches to what Raskin (1985: 103) calls the *Enon-bona-fide* mode of humour’. Roughly, these “non-bona-fide” maxims are a revised version of Grice’s but adapted to jokes. The case of advertising seems to us slightly different.

We do not find it necessary to resort to these non-*bona-fide* maxims to account for advertising humour, since it is highly likely that it will suffice to look at Grice’s principles from a new perspective. As established by Grice himself, flouting the Maxim of Quantity amounts to providing less information than necessary. It is this absence of detail what triggers incongruity, as it prevents the reader discovering at once a given relationship. Such a relationship will remain incongruous until the addressee has gathered all the data that will lead him to correctly interpret the message.

The Maxim of Relation is rather frequently flouted too. To us the violation in this case is the consequence not of omitting what is relevant (specification of the Maxim suggested by Grice and followed by Raskin) but of giving information

that initially is thought relevant and will turn out to be irrelevant. Thus our interpretation of this Maxim differs from tradition but finds its full justification in the characteristics of advertising communication discussed previously.

As to the Maxim of Quality, Grice associates it with lies. However, advertising humour derives from the flouting of this Maxim when the slogan seems to go against the advertiser's aim. This explanation is backed up by Grice's own words:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1989: 26)

Cooperating is something more complex than simply establishing a collaborative endeavour. Messages understanding necessarily involves variables such as linguistic knowledge of relevant contextualization cues, understanding of what the activity's goals are, etc. In this sense Gumperz (1990: 430) remarks that cooperativeness must be assessed with reference to some commonality of purpose or mutual agreement as to the general direction that an exchange is expected to take.

The recipient is absolutely aware that the slogan he reads has been conceived to sell a product and therefore it should praise that product. If this "law" is not abided by, the addresser is violating the Maxim of Quality. Obviously, such a flouting clashes with the addressee's experience, what arouses suspicion of the slogan.

Lastly we are left with the Maxim of Manner. In the present study there is not any example attached to this principle, as we have not found any slogan that implies a blatant violation of Manner resulting in incongruity and thus producing humour. Perhaps this should alert us on the productiveness of this particular principle when it comes to explaining advertising communication.

While it may be going too far to characterise the Maxim of Manner as inadequate, it does seem reasonable to envisage the possibility of reducing the maxims that are violated by messages built on humour strategies. On the grounds that some of the principles are more often flouted than others, Attardo (1990) suggests limiting the original set to the Maxim of Quality and the Maxim of Relation.

Were the choice justified enough, we would be only too willing to join such a reductionist approach. However, things do not seem to be so easy. On the one hand, Attardo jumps to this conclusion basing it on the research undertaken by others sparing us the much welcome evidence to ratify his decision. On the other hand, it is not well founded to order the maxims hierarchically on the sole grounds

of the number of jokes that can be ascribed to each of them. And that for one reason. The Maxim of Quality is highly effective in advertising, but the reaction that this violation provokes in the reader would be lost if that were a common practice. So going against the Maxim of Quality would cease to be a humour tactic.

We put forward, then, the following hypothesis: humour in advertising messages manifests itself when, in writing his message, the sender does not observe the Gricean maxims, or either he gives the impression of being oblivious about the aim of advertising, thus constituting an example of non-cooperative behaviour.

This hypothesis has immediate consequences in at least two ways: one concerns the goal orientation that the receiver of the message has and the other affects the elaboration of the slogan. In the first case, the receiver is taken aback by a message that systematically goes against the expectations generated either within the linguistic context, or within the context of the communication that has been established. Advertising humour is hence associated with surprise, an effect that alerts the reader, at the same time that involves him in the interpretation of a message whose content is not directly accessible.

Now we are going to deal with the design of the slogan, important to the extent that the alluded effect of surprise depends on it. It should be remarked that in the few words that make up a slogan it is not always possible both to present and to resolve incongruity, even sometimes the advertisers themselves prefer to delay clarification. For all this, in those ads with a humorous intent there is an element that becomes essential: the body text. This is the part that will permit to resolve the incongruity of the slogan, but simultaneously the writer succeeds at making the reader pay attention to a piece of the ad that, unless there is a special interest, will not be read.

Another relevant aspect in the architecture is its final part. Leech (1983: 22) asserts that the disposition of new information in a clause is governed by the Principle of End-focus, which stipulates that such information should be placed at the end. Certainly, the ad built on humour strictly conforms to this principle. What is more, we can add that the presence of final elements is totally unexpected, consequently the reader is forced to reconsider his interpretation of the message. Owing to this particular characteristic of humorous slogans, it will be possible to establish a dependency between Leech's principle and what psycholinguists know as "garden-path" phenomena, a relationship that will not be explored here.

The Practice

In order to gain a better understanding of the workings of humour in advertising, we are going to examine some illustrative examples.

Let's consider the following slogans:

- (1) Visitors to the Regent, London are permitted to laugh. (The Economist, 20th February 1993).
- (2) "If a microwave oven uses radio waves, how come I can't boil an egg on my Hi-Fi?" (Marie Claire, November 1990).

It is arguable that in these two slogans, the writer has created incongruity by flouting the Maxim of Quantity. The reader has not access to the necessary information that will enable him to comprehend in (1) the relationship between laughing and staying at a hotel, nor in (2) the point that links a Hi-Fi and boiling an egg. This lack of information provokes in the reader, who can't enjoy the ad until he has satisfactorily solved the puzzle, a state of psychological incertitude.

The disclosing function is undertaken by the body text, where the reader discovers that at the London Regent the client will find a perfect harmony between the modern way of life and the purest Victorian tradition. This successful "marriage" has been achieved thanks to a comfortable and pleasant atmosphere that shares little with the cold forms of former times.

Example (2) is slightly different. The incongruous relationship that the reader is faced with does not present so clear an elucidation as the previous one, although it can be regarded as an anticipation of the ludicrousness that characterises the tone of the body text. When reaching this part of the ad, the reader becomes aware that Sony alleges that its new Hi-Fi equipment is so technologically advanced that it has limitless resources (well, nearly, because it is not still possible to cook with it!). Needless to say, nobody expects this much from technology, and hence the humorous turn.

These two examples have been contrived under a scant dose of information that will make the recipient of the message go astray. The slogan contains only some of the data, an informative synchretism that results in violation of the Maxim of Quantity, since the reader, operating in agreement with his world knowledge, is unable to establish a relationship between unconnected elements. Violating the Maxim of Quantity is by no means the only way to create incongruity. Let's move to our next two slogans:

- (3) "Sony wanted to demonstrate that the man-in-the-street could understand the advanced technology of their latest mini hi-fi system. Unfortunately they picked the wrong street." (Marie Claire, January 1991).

- (4) Looks like Cheddar. Tastes like Cheddar. Hand on heart, it isn't Cheddar.
<Flora> (Good Housekeeping, August 1991).

It is our claim that these two examples go against the Maxim of Quality, since in them both the advertiser means the opposite of what he apparently states.

Slogan (3) dissociates itself from the advertising maxim of praising the product promoted. The reader knows only too well that neither Sony nor any other trademark would finance an advertising campaign to make public any fault in their manufacture. It is worth noticing that the advertising copy appears between inverted commas, that is, it is meant to reproduce the thought of someone strange to Sony's, for instance, a member of the audience (it can be read in small letters that the sentence is attributed to Brian May, the member of Queen).

The fact that the ad stands against the goal of advertising provokes the reader's reaction, alerting him and attracting his interest towards the body text, where he finds details on how advanced Sony's technology is. So advanced that only qualified technicians are able to understand it. But Sony's merit lies in that anyone (the-man-in-the-street) can handle the system, understand the instructions and make the most of it (as if he were indeed a sound technician).

In (4) we deal with three sentences. The first two present a comparison and in the third one, as a statement of truthfulness, it is admitted that what is being promoted is not the prestigious British cheese. Once again, the reader is aware that the advertiser states a half-truth, i.e., it can't merely be an ad about a variety of cheese that looks and tastes as a well-known one. In the body text the receiver will find, as hoped, the reason why Flora is preferable to Cheddar cheese: it is low in calories, thus healthier. Under this new light, what initially could have been taken for a middling product becomes close to a star in nutrition.

The two slogans just examined illustrate how effective it is to go against the goal of advertising. This alerts the reader, who mistrusts an ad that probably echoes his own thoughts but that, by definition, can never represent the advertiser's. Finally, we will consider two more examples:

- (5) In Santiago de Compostela pilgrims find their rewards on earth as well as in heaven. <España> (The Economist, 10th April 1993).
(6) Now you can tell your husband precisely when he started snoring last night. <Indiglo> (People, 26th December 1995).

It is our belief that the interest of these slogans rests on their totally unexpected end. (5) starts with a place name, Santiago de Compostela, followed by the term pilgrims. These items together are relevant enough to activate in the

reader implicatures about religion, pilgrimage to the holy place, promises to the Saint, etc. However, the next phrase, rewards on earth, comes unexpectedly in the created context. The order rewards on earth as well as in heaven is relevant in itself due to its low frequency, since a pilgrimage will be rewarded in the afterdeath. The body text specifies the nature of these earthly rewards: Spain's intention is to promote the richness of her art, the extraordinary variety of her food and wines. All this is waiting for the pilgrims to be discovered. In our opinion this presentation flouts the Maxim of Relevance, since those elements that originally seemed to guide the interpretation of the message turned out to be misleading.

Something of the kind happens in (6). The VP tell your husband precisely, and in particular the adverbial form precisely, are initially relevant for the reader and predispose her to expect something momentous. But all she finds is the word snoring that more than an extraordinary event is an annoying routine. So the reader moves in less than seconds from the climax to the anticlimax. In this example there is no body text to add details about the performance qualities of Indiglo watches, and so the surprise is simply concentrated on the slogan.

These last two examples show how flouting the Maxim of Relevance may result in humour. The tactic consists in using information that is relevant for the reader and, consequently, that creates expectations about what is to follow. The rest of the slogan, nevertheless, falls short of such expectations since it introduces information that will force the receiver to change the course of interpretation.

Conclusion

In this paper we have analysed the relationship between humour and a type of persuasive messages: the advertising slogan. That relationship has its origin in the advertiser's need to write a message that interests the reader, at the same time that will make him forget that he is the selling target.

We have studied the humour strategy as a violation of three out of Grice's four maxims. This flouting results in an incongruous message, not to say the least unexpected, that attracts the reader's attention. The tactic interests the reader and challenges him to find a way out of the incongruity. In so doing he will need the help of parts of the ad (i.e., the body text) that would otherwise pass unnoticed. This method allows the sender to take advantage of his privileged role in the communicative act. Parallely, it is highly likely that the reader feels prone to choose a product that made him have a good time.

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