HUMOROUS ASPECTS IN THE ADVERTISING DISCOURSE: THE ANALYSIS OF THE OUTDOOR POSTER DEDEMAN

Iuliana APETRI
ibicor@yahoo.fr
Ştefan cel Mare University of Suceava (Romania)

Résumé : *Le discours publicitaire est un espace ouvert à la créativité icono-textuelle d'une manière illimitée. Notre démarche dévoile le moyen dont l'humour se manifeste dans la communication publicitaire de type outdoor poster. Pour décrypter le message transmis au public, il est utile de dresser notre attention vers les aspects qui contribuent à la création de l'humour au niveau linguistique, de même qu'au niveau iconique. Le mélange créatif des signes qui composent un message publicitaire avec une nuance humoristique a comme but de convaincre le récepteur d'acheter le produit ou d'adhérer au service présenté, dans une forme atypique, inédite et persuasive, au-delà des limites de la perception habituelle du dernier. L'analyse des réclames sélectionnées se fait par une approche interdisciplinaire, de nature sémiotique et psychosociologique, d'où on obtient la manière dont les signes linguistiques et iconiques agissent dans un message publicitaire de type outdoor.*

Mots-clés : *discours, icono-texte, publicité, humour, sémiotique.*

MOTTO :
„A provoca râsul este comunicarea supremă."
Jacques Séguela

Introduction

No matter how accessible and popular it seems, humour in advertising obeys certain socio-cultural and affective-cognitive criteria which determine its purposefulness: it is either complete, or improper, diverting the intention and the signification wanted by the author. The sentence is given the moment when the receiver gets in contact with the message for the first time. It is then that he/she decides, depending on several factors,

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unique and subjective, whether the humorous tone is pleasant or not. Humour is used in advertising as a means of persuasion and not as a purpose in itself.

The advertising industry is now characterised by such a high degree of conceptualization and creativeness that it is quite challenging to produce something new, with a certain and precise impact. The saturation of the consumer market and the countless products that satisfy the same needs engage the client in a difficult situation and, most of the times, an ambiguous one. The challenge of the receiver is to make a decision according to his/her own psycho-mental and attitudinal configurations.

The manner in which a message is constructed is targeting more and more toward one or more categories of public. Thus, we can speak of a public segmented after well-studied and defined criteria. The intention of the advertising creator is to emerge from avoid the ordinary patterns, in order to surprise the consumer. The fundamental premise is to attract the latter's attention: a successful message will never pass unobserved. The successful use of humour in advertising depends on a few essential factors: 1. the understanding of the mental patterns of the receiver; 2 – the understanding of the strategies of solution-making used by the target-public; 3 – the capacity of the consumer to distinguish between reality and illusion (Cho, 1995: 191). The presence of humour in the advertising act is a very precious tool. It is a huge challenge for any copywriter to create something luring and impacting. Humour makes this work even more intense, as the possible meanings can leave the receiver indifferent, harm or delight him/her. Due to this reason, humour was often avoided in the practice of advertising. In this respect, the German researchers Herbert Bless, Gerd Bonner, Norbert Schwarz and Fritz Strack (2001: 2016) concluded that a counter-attitudinal message can influence a sad person only if it presents very strong arguments. People who experience happiness receive in equal ways both the weak and the strong arguments, if they are not in the position to pay attention to the content. The conclusions of these studies show the major impact of the affective disposition from the moment of the message reception. Thus, the same message can have a different influence over the receiver, depending on the emotional mood of the latter. This represents another reason for the ad creators to avoid the risks engendered by humour as much as possible, when they are not really sure of their many various meanings. In this light, the status of humour acquires a dual connotation: it either helps the message, or it harms it. This dilemmatic situation is a permanent challenge for any specialist in advertising.

Evolutionary Landmarks, Typologies and Classifications of Humour in Advertising

In his work "One hundred Years of Humour in American Advertising" (2005: 63), Fred K. Beard shows that the use of humour in the American commercials from the 19th century had the same effect on the public as in the 20th century: it was associated with the lack of dignity and bad taste. The proofs of these researches demonstrate that "humour does not sell" (*Idem*, 63). Thomas J. Madden and Marc G. Weinberger (1984) admit that humour contributes to a very small extent to the credibility of the source.

The arguments that sustain the use of the humorous strategies in advertising have evolved along with the socio-cultural factors specific to the consumer society (a) the development of technology and the enrichment of the means of creation and transmission of messages; (b) the diffusion on a larger scale of the information to mass-media; (c) the intensive exploitation of emotions; (d) the public's capacity to receive a larger and more complex amount of information; (e) the taste of people for humour. These arguments

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strengthen the idea that intelligently used humour, can contribute to the success of the advertising message. Other studies (Weinberger, Gulas, 1992: 56-57) have revealed that the use of humour in advertising does not contribute to the persuasion of the target audience more than a non-humorous message.

The manner in which humour is used in advertising is very important, because, just as Claude C. Hopkins (1923, 2007) showed, people dislike buying something from a clown, and the purpose of advertising is not to amuse. Humour can distract the attention from the intention of the message. The consolidation of humour in advertising was facilitated by its association with sexuality, this strategy succeeding much faster and easier in reaching the target-audience. In Fred K. Beard's opinion (2008: 23), the use of humour in the creative space of advertising is correlated with periods of economic growth; after the 80s, it has developed considerably through the exploitation of emotions. The same author claims that a third of the outdoor commercials are humorous in nature.

The research showing that `humour does not sell` were was counter-balanced by the studies done after 1980, which demonstrate that humour has a higher persuasive power, to the detriment of the messages that induce fear (Gulas, Weinberger, 2006: 114).

Gerard J. Tellis (2004) distinguishes a few modalities in which humour operates in advertising: a – it breaks the ice, through the creation of a communication bridge between the interlocutors; b – it creates a positive emotional frame that influences the perception of the brand; c – it appeals to diversion and it succeeds in attracting and maintaining the attention of the receiver, having as an effect the diminishing of the counter-argumentative behaviour of the receiver. Tellis associate humour with an 'intellectual puzzle', as its understanding offers satisfaction to the interlocutor which is essential in the assimilation and memorization of that advertising message and brand (2004: 161).

From a psycho-sociologic perspective, "the justification of the use of humour in advertising is connected to catharsis: the emotional relaxation, the answer to the psychic tension". An essential attribute of humour is that it has the capacity to relax, that is why the communication imbued with humorous notes manages to attract the attention and to stir the public's interest. Such a message starts with a tensed construct, followed by the note of surprise that commutes the attention of the interlocutor towards other horizons and reaches a unique, unexpected result, which commands laughter (Chelcea, 2016: 451).

In advertising, humour acts on the basis of three mechanisms, identified by Yu Yao Chang and Soumava Bandyopadhyay (2014: 93-94) as: 1 – *cognitive* (the receiver notices the incongruence and concludes that his/her expectations are not fulfilled, then searches to establish an agreement between the incongruent elements); 2 – *affective* (defined through the physiologic excitation and the theme of the message); 3 – interpersonal (humour is explained in the context in which it is placed).

The advertising messages that contain humour can be classified into a typology that is structured after some the following criteria: 1 – humour is associated with the advertised object; 2 – the product generates humour; 3 – the humour is oriented toward the product. There are also commercials that do not fall into this typology, but it is preferable that the humour be directed toward the product, so that the commercial has success (Beard, 2008: 53).

The most important and the most common theories explaining humour are: 1 – the theory of surprise (the humour results from the observation of the relation between the two sequences that do not have common elements in normal circumstances); the theory of superiority (initiated by the English philosopher Th. Hobbes, who treated

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humour as a narcissistic act, and added spontaneity); 3 – the theory of incongruence (formulated by the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal, who asserted that the distance between what people expect and what happens in reality is the best modality to arouse laughter); 4 – the biologic theory (humour is a genetic adaptation and its effects are positive for the individual and for the human species); 5 – the theory about the game (it refers to the positive correlation between the self-report of being ticklish and the self-report of the tendency to laugh −Hurley *et alii*, 2011: 39).

The advertising discourse is a mixed and heterogeneous construction made of elements that are graphically grouped and that find themselves in a relation of complementarity. These have precise roles, distinct and yet semantically convergent and in dynamic relations of interdependence, in order to give rise to a persuasive-rhetoric message meant to be luring and cathartic. The advertising icono-text is the result of the fusion of the *representation of the real and the structuring of the real* (Corjan, 2004: 213).

The Outdoor Posters of the Dedeman Company

Our approach contains the analysis of some commercials that are part of the campaign initiated for the Romanian company Dedeman on the occasion of *Dragobete* celebration, present in the Romanian cultural space on the 29th of February; this celebration is similar to Saint Valentine, known as the *Valentine's Day*.

In the following lines, we will examine the manner in which the advertising icono-text appears in several advertising messages, as well as the unique way in which they were realized.

The Commercial *Mower* (see Annex 1):
"Când iubirea mă apasă/ *When love weighs me down*
Eu îţi dau o motocoasă."/*I buy you a mower.*

The commercial *Mirror K118* (see Annex 2)*:*
"Două mere, două pere, / *Two apples and two pears I eat,*
Eu îţi spun că te iubesc/ *And I love you, don't forget,*
Şi la prima revedere/*So the next time that we meet,*
O oglindă-ţi dăruiesc."/ *It's a mirror that you'lll get.*

The commercial *Hobbyst Angle Grinder* (see Annex 3):
"Eşti aşa cuceritor/ *You're so charming*
Că-ţi ofer un polizor." / *That I'm offering you a grinder.*

The commercial *Laminate flooring* (see Annex 4)*:*
"Romantismu-i desuet, / *Romance's obsolete*
Mai bine îţi iau parchet."/ *Better give you laminate.*

The commercial *Chain Electric Saw Grünman* (see Annex 5)*:*
"Îţi pun inima pe tavă/ *Know that you hold my heart forever*
Şi tot ce-i al meu e-al tău/ *And everything that's mine is yours*
Şi pentru că eşti atât de suavă/ *And for being so deserving*
Îţi dau în dar şi-un ferăstrău!" / *I am making you the gift of a saw*

The commercial *Superblank Dye* (see Annex 6)*:*
"Tare-mi place dragostea/*Our love is so great*
De-aia-ţi cumpăr/*I think I'll buy you*
o vopsea." /*a pot of paint.*

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The commercial *Atomizer* (see Annex 7) [1]*:*
"Aş da totul pentru tine/ *Being with you is all I long for*
Ca să-ţi spun că mor de dor/ *I'd give anything to call you mine*
Dar de mă gândesc mai bine/ *But come to think of it a bit more*
Îţi cumpăr un atomizor". /*It's an atomizer I will buy*.

The icono-textual message from the selected commercials can be approached on two levels: the linguistic one and the iconic one. As it is a mixed construct, the two dimensions merge to create visually a homogenous and convincing result.

1 – The linguistic level is determined by the choice of some terms that are part of the poetic romanticism paradigm, veiled in a rhythmic and ludic verse. The rhyme emphasizes the optimism note of the product, as it seems the only one to sustain the intention of the message in contouring the pseudo-syllogistic formula. In other words, if nothing of the read text not indicates the waiting, the strategic presence of the rhyme creates a familiar cadence. The effect settles in two stages: firstly, it emphasizes the invitation to play, through the romance atmosphere which maintains the suspense, and secondly, through the *surprise* effect that it produces when it presents the solution. If the receiver's own psycho-affective mood and attitude allows the receiver to react positively to the intended humour by the emitter, then**,** the commercial reached its purpose and the recipient participates in the game. Otherwise, the reaction of the receiver can be one of rejection. This is explained by the abrupt difference between the two paradigms, as it can be accentuated by the frustration created by the failure of the increasing illusion of the first part of the text.

Some commercials contain four verses, in opposition to others which managed to comprise the message in only two verses. For instance:

"Îţi pun inima pe tavă/ *Know that you hold my heart forever*
Şi tot ce-i al meu e-al tău/ *And everything that's mine is yours*
Şi pentru că eşti atât de suavă/ *And for being so deserving*
Îţi dau în dar şi-un ferăstrău!" / *I am making you the gift of a saw*

The commercial *Atomizer* (see Annex 7)*:*
"Aş da totul pentru tine/ *Being with you is all I long for*
Ca să-ţi spun că mor de dor/ *I'd give anything to call you mine*
Dar de mă gândesc mai bine/ *But come to think of it a bit more*
Îţi cumpăr un atomizor". /*It's an atomizer I will buy*.
(The commercial *Atomizer KASEI*–Annex 7)

The text of these commercials reminds us of the dictum 'Less is more'. The reading of the four verses demands more effort, because the text is layered on four lines and, moreover, it is harder to memorize.

Another commercial, although as long as the others in dimension, is easier to read and appeals to the intertext to construct the message:

[1]The original texts in Romanian were translated in English and we leave both versions here to meet the academic accuracy and reduce translation's limitations for bilingual readers.

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"Două mere, două pere, / *Two apples and two pears I eat,*
Eu îţi spun că te iubesc/ *And I love you, don't forget,*
Şi la prima revedere/*So the next time that we meet,*
O oglindă-ţi dăruiesc."/ *It's a mirror that you'lll get.*
(The commercial *Mirror K118*– Annex 2)

We find examples of successful texts, well-structured and easy to memorize, such as:

−The Commercial *Mower* (Annex 1):
"Când iubirea mă apasă/ *When love burdens me*
Eu îţi dau o motocoasă."/*It's a mower that I offer you.*

The commercial *Hobbyst Angle Grinder* (see Annex 3):
"Eşti aşa cuceritor/ *You're so charming*
Că-ţi ofer un polizor." / *That I'm offering you a grinder.*

The commercial *Laminate flooring* (see Annex 4)*:*
"Romantismu-i desuet, / *Romance's obsolete*
Mai bine îţi iau parchet."/ *Better give you laminate.*

The paradigmatic incongruence between the two lines from the commercials above is easy to detect. This is the model after which all the commercials from this outdoor campaign are constructed, even though they have two, three or four lines.

Although the majority of commercials pay homage to the romantic love, we notice a message which makes an exception from this pattern: "Romantismu-I desuet, / Romance's obsolete / Mai bine îţi iau parchet./ Better give you laminate" (The commercial *Laminate flooring* – Annex 4). Through this discordant note, the authors of the commercial intended to evade from the general scheme of the campaign in order to surprise, in case the receiver was already used to the previous patterns and expected similarity this time too.

While in the majority of cases we easily deduce the humorous finality of the game proposed by the author of the commercial, there exists a situation in which the text not only succeeds in convincing but it even disorients the receiver: "Când iubirea mă apasă/ *When love weighs me down* /Eu îţi dau o motocoasă."/*I buy you a mower* (The Commercial *Mower* – Annex 1). In this case, it is difficult to construct that *intellectual puzzle* to attribute to this message a ludic-persuasive role.

All the commercials have the purpose of presenting the products on sale at Dedeman Company. This is explicit through the informative macro-dimensioned text which presents the price of the product, inserted right near its name.

The generic slogan: "Dedeman dedicated to your plans" is present in the lower part of the commercials, near the logo, on the right side.

2 − The image plan is non-metaphorical: what is missing is the fantastic images of the story-telling characters to sustain the illusion created by the first words. In exchange, we notice the advertised object, in its greatness, which expresses very clearly the intention of the commercial, without illusions and expectation, just a strictly denotative visual message. In the commercials that we have analysed, we can notice a general visual plan, attributed explicitly to the Romanian celebration of *Dragobete*. The contextual signs are explicit, graphically represented through hearts, flowers and garlands.

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The purpose of the visual anchorage reminds of the occasion on which the love declaration is offered and sustains the text in expressing its romantic note.

The image is weakly represented in these commercials. The criteria of presenting the advertised object are respected, but the elements that sustain the text of the commercial are represented in a trivial, rudimentary and un convincing manner. We are dragged into a trap, we are lured into a romantic and dreamlike dimension, before awaking suddenly from the illusion that we have nourished in our mind. We are invited in a world where our dreams and expectations from the partner leave the impression of a relationship full of passion and romance, and, after a few words, we awake in the pragmatic context of the immediate comfort, inherent in the conjugal universe. Curiosity is appeased by the pragmatics of the domestic life: stop day-dreaming, you should rather realize that a useful object for your house or for your partner will bring you more satisfaction.

All the commercials respect the chromatics of the Dedeman company, blue and orange, two complementary colours, dynamic and powerful, which connote joy, sociability, clarity and cleanness.

The icono-textual isotopy

After tasting a little of the illusions that lure us at the beginning, we dive into a non-metaphorical world, where the passion for the partner is a likened to or even replaced with the passion for the practical necessities of the other. Thus, the illusory expectation induced by the incipient text is interrupted suddenly by the non-metaphorical pragmatism, with the intention of surprising the receiver. The latter finds him-/herself between two extreme situations: the purpose of the second bringing him/her back to reality, as the illusion collapses: "Romantismu-i desuet, /Romance's obsolete /Mai bine îţi iau parchet. / Better give you laminate."

The icono-textual isotopy of the commercials is expressed through the semantic convergence of the linguistic and iconic signs. The elements from the first plan related to love are graphically illustrated through iconic signs from the paradigm of the romantic love.

We can thus identify two icono-textual levels that usually contrast: the one of the romantic love and the one of the conjugal pragmatics. Both the linguistic signs and the iconic ones are disposed on two successive levels, and the bridge between the two is constituted by the linguistic signs from the first level, which sustain the existence of the second one.

If the iconic signs from both levels were disposed without the presence of the linguistic ones, it would be difficult to comprehend the message. Thus, the electric saw is situated in a contrasting plan with the roses and rose petals, and the mower does not seem to have anything in common with the hearts, although they are part of the same iconic construction.

Thus, we can speak of the isotopy of a double iconic textuality and of the double icono-textual isotopy, due to the difference of the two plans, which, through the function of anchorage (Barthes, 1964: 40-52), tends toward a unitary signification of the advertising construct. The supplementary element that homogenises the whole advertising construct is humour: it manages, in most of the messages, to eliminate the distance between the two paradigms of the human life and to unify all the elements into a persuasive and surprising unity.

In all the outdoor posters here analysed, this contrast between the two different dimensions of life is constantly evoked, related to the *theory of surprise*, where humour appears through the juxtaposition of two sequences that, usually, do not seem to have common elements. At the same time, we can notice the humour that resulted from the use of the *theory of incongruence*: the linguistic text from the beginning announces a certain perspective in the

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developing of the message, and the receiver is lead to surprise by an unexpected change, his/her attention being commuted in an opposite direction of his/her expectations.

Conclusion

The analysed icono-textual messages address the level of the conscious perception of the consumer using arguments of an affective-emotional nature, through which the explicit commercialization of some products belonging to the Dedeman company is intended. The humorous strategies lure the receiver into a poetic, romantic dimension and then they invite him/her to confront, unexpectedly, the daily conjugal pragmatism.

Although the effects of these messages can be dependent on the disposition of the consumer at the moment of the reception, we can assert that the purpose of attracting the attention is fulfilled. We can continue to appreciate that this very step can easily lead to the following steps, respectively the stir of interest, the embedding of the buying wish and the act *per se*. This successive development takes place if the target-public is willing to digest the surprise-messages from the commercials in a positive and amusing manner. What we can notice after analysing these posters is that they appeal to the most profound and emotions of the receiver. As it covers the two extreme dimensions of life, the message reaches its purpose, if it manages to engender humour and to harmoniously unify the romance and pragmatism of the couple's life, through a simple, pleasant and surprising game.

(Translated into English by Ana Crăciunescu)

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ANNEXES



ANNEX 1
Commercial Mower EXPERT

ANNEX 2
Commercial Mirror K118





ANNEX 3
HOBBYST Angle Grinder

ANNEX 4
Commercial *Laminate Flooring RING*



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ANNEX 5
Commercial *Chain Electric Saw GRÜNMAN*



ANNEX 6
Commercial *Superblank Dye + Prime*



ANNEX 7
Commercial *Atomizer KASEI*

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