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INTERPRETING HUMOROUS ADVERTS IN ONLINE MEDIA

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Abstract: *Starting from the definition of verbal humour as "production of incongruity based on linguistic construction or on the events described" (Norrick, 2006, 425), the article aims at discussing several humorous adverts put together in campaigns led by two national newspapers, one from the UK (The Guardian) and one from Romania (Gândul - The Thought). While the British ads are reactions to a spontaneous campaign initiated by The Guardian, the Romanian campaign is professionally orchestrated by an advertising agency. The structure of the messages as witty adverts facilitates humorous interpretation. The messages from the Romanian campaign are analyzed from a pragmatic perspective, resulting in identifying several functions of humour in media texts: reducing anxiety, contradicting the collective mentality, and reinforcing national pride.*

Key words: *adverts, humour, stereotypes, online campaign, ethnic humour.*

1. Introduction

The present paper aims at discussing several humorous adverts put together in two campaigns led by a national newspaper from the UK (*The Guardian*) and one from Romania (*Gândul - The Thought*). A serious political situation (the removal of work restrictions in the UK for Romanians and Bulgarians) is approached humorously by the Romanian newspaper and is targeted at a similar British campaign meant to prevent Romanians and Bulgarians from going to the UK. Under the slogan „Don't come to Britain! It's full!", the various British posters promote self-deprecating humour, whose main function is to elicit sympathy from the audience. The messages in the Romanian response campaign have the structure of witty adverts which facilitate the humorous interpretation.

The paper presents some of the findings of a qualitative study based on the humorous messages comprised in an online media campaign in English in a Romanian newspaper. The research focuses on the linguistic structures and strategies employed by the authors of the adverts to convey humorous and ironic meanings in the adverts and draws several conclusions on the possible functions of humour as they were intended by the authors or perceived by the readers *reducing anxiety* which comes from an unpleasant situation, *contradicting the collective mentality,* and *reinforcing national pride.*.

2. Theoretical framework

Starting from general to particular, the theoretical framework of the present study

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addresses the issue of humour in a larger cultural context, then focuses on the humorous genres, and then on the typology and functions of humour in the media. The general analytical framework is that of discourse analysis, with emphasis on structures and mechanisms that build this specific type of communication. As part of a larger dialogue, the humorous adverts will also be analysed from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective.

Depending on cultural as well as on personal dimensions, humour has become the object of study for many disciplines. From a cultural perspective, there are interests in the national traits specific to the description of cultural dimensions, in Geert Hofstede's terms (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010). From the analysis of the values corresponding to the five cultural dimensions of a national culture (individualism / collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; power distance; masculinity / femininity, and long-term orientation) one can derive many of the stereotypes associated with a specific nation, even in terms of their production, understanding, and acceptance of humour (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993). For instance, in a culture such as the British one, with a score of 35 on the power distance dimension, accepting and promoting the belief that "where you are born should not limit how far you can travel in life" (http://geert-hofstede.com/united-kingdom.html, accessed: 23.04.2013), can be easily associated with the acceptance of contestive humour, which is normally used by inferiors to contradict the opinion of a superior. In opposition, in cultures with a high score on the same dimension (i.e. power distance) – such as the Romanian culture, for instance, which has the score of 90 - subordinates obey and respect their bosses, overtly contestive humour being completely avoided.

For the present linguistic study, I will adopt the definition of verbal humour as "production of incongruity based on linguistic construction or on the events described" [9, p. 425] and, consequently, a descriptive as well as a communicative (Lynch 2002) and functional approach. A descriptive approach of humour can follow the display of humorous genres (for an analysis of oral genres of humour, see Kotthoff 2007) or sub-genres, their typology being either too general or too specific. In Attardo's terms (Attardo 2004), humor can take the form of joke-telling (performed humour), teasing, ritual humour (everyday repetitive humor rituals), and conversational humour (spontaneous, highly situational, and context-bound), all these types being interpreted as non-bona fide modes of communication. Considering the cognitive aspects involved in understanding and interpreting humour, the script-based theory (Raskin 1985) adds new elements to what can be considered a joke. Thus, the verbal or written text should be "compatible fully with two distinct scripts and the two scripts are opposite in certain definite ways such as good-bad, sex-no sex, or real-unreal", while the third element, the punchline, manages to switch "the listener from one script to another creating the joke" (Raskin 34-35). The concept of punchline here describes the witty, slogan-type texts used in humorous adverts.

3. The data - humorous adverts

Though the role and the impact of humorous adverts in online media campaigns has been previously analysed in relation with the 2005 UK elections (Shifman, Coleman and Ward 2007), a linguistic analysis of such data has not been thoroughly done so far. The proposed linguistic framework in the present study is

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mainly a sociolinguistic and pragmatic one, also considering the senders' intended and perceived communicative aims. Taking the shape of posters (with text and/or photo), humorous adverts are used in online media campaigns to facilitate interpretation of events and to comment on serious political or social issues under the "safety net" of a non-bona fide mode of communication.

Humorous adverts have a non-narrative structure, lying between conversational jokes (banter, puns) and canned jokes (non-narrative form). They are highly intentional and contain slogan-type texts, in form of one-liners (Chiaro 1992), expressing witticism, and overtly conveying meanings besides facilitating humour. Being inherently clever and context-bound, humorous adverts are closer to banter.

In our data, humorous adverts are based on cultural stereotypes and discourses, with intertextual elements of political and social critique. The punchlines are targeting background encyclopedic assumptions regarding the author's culture, the readers' culture, the socio-political context, and the induced and the perceived attitude of the media.

4. Socio-political and media context

In order to facilitate the understanding of the role played by humorous adverts in the present campaign, a short presentation of the relevant socio-political context is necessary.

In January 2013, a few British officials expressed their concern about the impact the removal of work restrictions in UK for both Romanians and Bulgarians may have on the local workforce. Starting from January 2014, the Romanians and the Bulgarians will no longer have restrictions to work and live in the UK, and British officials and ordinary people showed concern about the impact of this on UK social services, health system and housing conditions.

In order to voice this concern and to raise awareness of the possible impact of this decision of EU authorities on the life of British citizens, *Channel 4* television and *The Guardian* newspaper proposed this issue as the core topic for their regular poster campaign:

> "Please don't come to Britain – it rains and the jobs are scarce and low-paid. Ministers are considering launching a negative advertising campaign in Bulgaria and Romania to persuade potential immigrants to stay away from the UK.
> The plan, which would focus on the downsides of British life, is one of a range of potential measures to stem immigration to Britain next year when curbs imposed on both country's citizens living and working in the UK will expire.
> A report quoted one minister saying that such a negative advert would "correct the impression that the streets here are paved with gold". However, Prime Minister David Cameron's official spokesman declined to comment on the plan."
> (The Guardian, Sunday 27 January 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/jan/27/uk-immigration-romania-bulgaria-ministers - 23.04.2013)

Under the slogan "Don't come to Britain! It's full!", the various British posters were designed by readers and then posted on *The Guardian* web page. The ads comprised both photos and text, being neither unitary, nor professional in form and structure. The messages contained direct address

"It's better where you are."

irony and self-deprecating humour

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> "Britain is shit!"
> "We hate ourselves. We'll probably hate you, too!"

their main function being that of eliciting sympathy from the audience. Being posted on *The Guardian* webpage, the messages and, implicitly, their authors looked for popularity amongst the readership of the newspaper. Though self-denigrating in form, by use of self-deprecating and self-directed humour (Norrick 1993), the texts in the British posters convey a very powerful meaning, a nationalist defense to a possible invasion. Witticism is constructed by verbal means ("UK? YUK!"; "Grey Britain…"), also mocking at well-established habits:

> "Britain and binge drinking: Who'd want to live in a country like this? ";
> "Queuing. A skill it's important to perfect before entering Britain"

or values:

> "Inequality is Great Britain";
> "Government isn't Great Britain".

Other texts are merely descriptive, or ironic, followed by the advice "Stay at home!":

> "The food here is bad. Deep-fried mars bars, jellied eels and tripe are among Great British delicacies. You might think you're safe with a burger, but then it turns out to be HORSE. Stay at home. Honestly.";
> "Are you Romanian or Bulgarian? Well, don't come to the UK. It's rainy, we love reality shows and we're in the middle of a really quite serious recession. In fact - and this isn't just us being whinging Poms - it's generally a bit rubbish here."

In their construction of humour, British contributors to *The Guardian* poster campaign employed some elements of ethnic humour. Thus, fragments of ethnic scripts and targets (Popescu 2011) can be identified. Romania and Bulgaria appear as exotic countries, some of the contributors mistaking Bucharest, the capital city of Romania for the capital of Hungary (Budapest). Following the same script, British readers advise Romanians and Bulgarians to "*Try Miami instead…"* or "*Go to Australia*…", to avoid the unpleasant British weather. Among the targets specific to ethnic jokes, poverty seems to be preferred both as a means of ridiculing the immigrants' search for better-paid jobs:

> "Come here and clean the loo. Britain is full of horrible jobs we employ foreigners to do. You're welcome!"

and as a deterrent for the same social category*:*

> "Sorry! The lifestyle you ordered is currently out of stock".

As a general observation, the whole media campaign is based on cultural gaps, stereotypes, and prejudices about both countries.

5. Poster analysis and interpretation

In February 2013, in response to the British campaign, a Romanian newspaper, *Gândul (The Thought),* launched another campaign under the title *Why don't you come over*. The exchange of humorous adverts in these two media campaigns contains allusions and distortions,

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resembling a match of "verbal ping-pong" (Chiaro 1992) between the Brits and the Romanians.

In the present paper, I will analyse the adverts belonging to the Romanian campaign, as the very aim of it was a humorous one. Started in January 2013, the campaign was professionally orchestrated by *Gândul* newspaper and an advertising agency, whose creative director stated: "We tried our hand at British humour." At the same time, the editorial director of *Gândul* announced that "Gândul is very serious about its role as the mouthpiece of Romanians who want Europe to be laughing with us not at us. This is what this campaign is all about: showing the Brits that, no matter what happens (...), what they need to fear is British humor *Made in Romania*" (http://www.gandul.info/english /let-s-talk-football-10631948 Accessed: 23.04.2013).

The *Why don't you come over?* campaign managed to reach global audiences in its first two weeks of existence (in Romanian media – print, TV, online, radio -, in international media – print, TV, and online in the UK, USA, France, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Hungary, Belgium, Brazil, India, Switzerland and Pakistan -, on social networks, on blogs and comments in online media worldwide (for estimated figures, see http://www. gandul.info/english/let-s-talk-football-10631948 - 23.04.2013).

The experience of the advertising agency in other political campaigns gave a unitary and professional approach to the posters and the actions in all the stages of the campaign. Started as an invite to visit Romania, to get to know the country and its people, the *Why don't you come over?* campaign continued with the creation of an online couch surfing platform (on www.whydontyoucomeover.co.uk) and a well-paid job advertising one. The whole campaign was not related to any political or governmental institution.



The posters in the Romanian campaign are simply designed in the colours of the British flag: blue, red and white, having a specific message (changing with every poster) and a invariable text ("You may not *like* Britain, but you will *love* Romania!"), appearing as a subscript of the main message and functioning as a musical coda. At a semantic level of analysis, it is interesting to notice the difference between *like* and *love.*

The word *like* has many definitions, while *love* is more restricted. On the one hand, *like* is broad and generic in expression, being a passive, independent term as its meaning is not influenced solely by actions or feelings, but also by comparisons. *Like* is an interchangeable word predominantly used to enhance parts of speech. Relative to *love*, *like* is often used as a watered down version of *love*. The term *like* has a vast array of meanings.

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Used in a variety of senses and parts of speech, *like* appears as an adjective (a modifier), a preposition (modifying verbs, nouns, and adjectives), and as a conjunction (connecting words). *Like* also appears as an adverb (it modifies a verb), describing something near, close, or approximate (*She is more like 50!*). *Like* can also be used as a noun (a person, place, thing, thought, or idea) to describe something (*Several executives, business men, and the like, were at the bar*). As well, *like* can be used as a verb, but also as an interjection in informal speech (*The concert was, like, really great*).

On the other hand, *love* appears as a singular term, usually a verb, describing a powerful emotion, an action, but also a state of being. The difference between *not liking Britain* and *loving Romania* appears as a significant change of hearts between the British attitude towards immigrants and the warm invite to visit Romania.

Organised in form of opposite arguments, the messages in the *Why don't you come over?* poster campaign answer the prejudices the Brits have about Eastern countries, emphasizing national strengths.

In the examples:

(1) "**Your** weekly rent covers a whole month **here**. Pub nights included".
(2) "**Our** Tube was not designed with sardines in mind. Sorry, sardines!"
(3) "**Our** newspapers are hacking celebrities' privacy, not people's phones."
(4) "**Our** air traffic controllers have seen snow before. They were unimpressed."
(5) "**We** don't have a Congestion Charge **here**. **We** believe congestions are punishment enough."
(6) "**Our** draft beer is less expensive than **your** bottled water."
(7) "**We** serve more food groups than pie, sausage, fish & chips."
(8) "Half of **our** women look like Kate. The other half, like her sister."
(9) "**We** have the most beautiful road in the world according to **your** top motoring show."
(10) "**We** speak better English than anywhere **you**'ve been in France."

the gap between the two countries appears in the persistent use of the plural personal pronouns *we* and *you*, along with the adverbial *here* with strict deictic meaning. *We/our/here* are assigned to describe Romanian values: affordability – in example (1) and (6), convenience of public transportation – in example (2), variety of food – in example (7), reknown beauty of Romanian women – in example (8), and language proficiency – in example (10). They contrast with expressions built around *you/your* which refer to British values, stereotypes and habits: weather conditions – in example (4), drinking – in examples (1) and (6), top TV shows – the reference to Top Gear in example (9), lack of food variety – in example (7), invasion of private life in the land of tabloids – in example (3), high taxes – in example (5), and expensive life – in examples (1) and (6). The mechanisms of creating contrast are also recognizable in the use of comparisons (the comparative – in the examples (6), (7), and (10), and the superlative – in the (9)th example).

Though highly contextualized and specific, the cultural differences between the two cultures did create a humorous effect. *Scoring points* in favour of Romanian way of life was purposefully emphasized in all the ads, in order to create a humorous reaction in the readers' minds. Processing this kind of humour was difficult for the Romanian average reader, whose competence in British humour is somehow limited to understanding and appreciation of traditional jokes about London weather or to Scottish parsimony. Introducing refined ironic comments, humorous allusions and witticism to

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Romanian readership created a coping mechanism meant to be used as a mediation tool between the two cultures. Thus, humour and jokes were meant to contradict the "collective quality of the information" (Jus 131) existing in the UK about Romanian values and way of life, to promote solidarity among Romanians, to lighten their concerns, and to mitigate sociopsychological threats underpinning self-revelation.

Irony ("Our Tube was not designed with sardines in mind. Sorry, sardines!") and downsizing ("Well, at least the beer was cheap, right?") complete the mechanisms of making the *Why don't you come over?* campaign a successful one.

6. By way of conclusion

Traditionally, a joke is a set-up narrative containing or not a dialogue line (which was missing in our data), with a punchline which leads to surprise and incongruity with the set-up. Starting from this definition, I have argued in favour of interpreting humorously the advertisements belonging to a public media campaign. The set-up in our data was culturally contextualized, based on stereotypes belonging to two different cultures – the British and the Romanian ones-, and on a serious political issue – that of preventing an invasion of immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria to come to the UK, once the work restrictions were lifted at the end of 2013.

The structure of the messages as witty adverts facilitates humorous interpretation and responds to a number of socio-pragmatic functions. In our data, humour contributes to *reducing anxiety* which comes from an unpleasant situation. Romanian ads campaign functioned as a coping mechanism to the already manifested British prejudices regarding East-European countries. Thus, humour contributed to *contradicting the collective mentality,* to *reinforcing national pride* and *promoting solidarity* (on both sides). British readers reacted to an issue which could threaten their future job opportunities, their national health and social systems, while the Romanians wanted to reinforce national pride in a campaign for Romanian values and not against the British ones. Being amusing and witty, humorous ads contributed to the *enjoyment of readers* and to an interesting *display of ingenuity*. At the same time, the use of self-deprecating humour in the British campaign was meant to *elicit sympathy,* while the humour constructed on contrasting ideas (as in the Romanian campaign) was meant to *highlight the absurdity of prejudicial attitudes.*

Interpreting humorous adverts in online media campaigns can reveal multiple mechanisms and functions of humour in contact with a constantly growing readership. The specific features of online media bring interesting insights to creating and maintaining solidarity through humour. Though the present paper presents the findings of a single case study, I can predict that enlarging the corpus of humorous ads and refining the theoretical framework can contribute significantly to a better understanding of this phenomenon.

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