

Incongruity and incongruity resolution theory marketing essay



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Humour plays a decisive role in our daily life and it is also a subject of interest of numerous disciplines such as linguistics, popular culture, psychology, mass communications, marketing and some others. The discussion of what humour is can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato. The complexity of this phenomenon has been an intrigue for many researches. “Humor is a universal human activity found among all cultures and throughout all of recorded history (Alden, Hoyer, and Lee 1993)”. Humour is widely used in advertising as a form of communication in order to persuade customers to purchase products and services since it is generally believed among advertisers that “making us laugh will encourage positive thoughts and feelings toward their products and brands and put us in a receptive mood for their sales messages” (Beard 2008: 2). Cook said that “advertising is always a handy and useful mirror if we want to reflect on the way we behave socially (Cook 1992: 5)”.

However, the use of humour in advertising remains very controversial as its presence in advertising can cause both positive and negative effects. Response to a humorous ad can be different as individuals have different sense of humour. Therefore humour is very individual and subjective but at the same time it is universal. According to Raskin “responding to humor is part of human behavior, ability, or competence, other parts of which comprise such important social and psychological manifestations of Homo sapiens as language, morality, logic, faith, etc. Just as all of those, humor may be described as partly natural and partly acquired (Raskin 1985: 2)”.

Throughout its history there were many attempts to define humour but none of the definitions accounts for all its possible types thus underlying its

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complexity. Humour can be broadly identified as a form of communication in which a created stimulus may act to provide pleasure for an audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 95). Attardo states that “ linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists have taken humor to be an all-encompassing category, covering any event or object that elicits laughter, amuses, or is felt to be funny (Attardo 1994: 4)”. It is very important to distinguish between humour and laughter as humour has been often identified with laughter[1]which seems to be wrong as humour a mental phenomenon while laughter is rather a neurophysiological reaction to it.

1. 2 Aim and scope

The objective of this thesis is to contribute to further understanding of one of the numerous strategies employed by advertisers, namely humour. However, this thesis does not set out to provide a theoretical framework for humour in spite of the fact that the following chapters make frequent reference to the academic and scientific literature. The overall aim of the study is not only to provide a better understanding of humour in print advertising and give an insight into different linguistic theories of humour as well as its different types but also to describe different linguistic features which advertisers use to incorporate humour and illustrate this by means of empirical material gathered from a variety of sources. Under this point humour will be divided into two groups: pun-based humour and non-pun humour. We deal with pun humour when the advertiser uses elements of language to create new meanings that result in humour. My supposition is that this is the type of humour which most often occurs in print advertising. In this regard such linguistic devices will be described as polysemy, homonymy, idiomatic

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expressions, neologisms and nonce formations, and antonyms. However this would be just mere identification of a certain type of humour in advertising and its enabling factors. Therefore the extent of the study is to look how different types of humour vary across different products and services advertised in magazines. Since it is generally believed that the best media suited to the use of humour are radio and TV, lots of studies exploring the use of humour and its effectiveness were conducted mostly in this field. Therefore this thesis is focused on the advertisements presented in print media and does not feature ads that appear on the television, radio, internet, and cinema. There has always been a great debate over whether humorous print advertisements work and of course there is no need to say that they do. We just have to remember that humour print involves a more intimate relationship. Graham Warsop, the only creative director to have judged the big four international advertising awards, once said: " Print humour gets someone to smile inwardly rather than outwardly (Aitchison 2004:???)". This states again that not everybody will laugh at the same things.

It should be noted that headline and body copy of an advertisement will not be the crucial means of attraction since most advertisements are humorous only due to the interplay of text and image. The picture often functions as an eye-catcher in the ad whereas its meaning differs from the meaning of the text. Cook considers pictures to be a part of advertising discourse as they are used to convey a central idea in the ad (Cook 2003: 6). Thus, both pictures and headlines will be seen as equivalent and will be considered together as their interplay contributes to the overall meaning of the text.

[2]Advertising in its turn will be seen in the thesis as a communication process.

1. 3 Outline

As shown in the table of contents, this thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter One is the introduction in which the purpose and the research questions are stated. It starts by providing a background of the subject of the thesis, and then moves on to description of material and methods and ends by introducing the advertising terminology. Chapter Two is dedicated to a more detailed delimitation of the concept of humour, with an overview of the major humour theories which are necessary for introducing the operational definition of humour that will be used in this study. Chapter Three presents humour types. It discusses numerous existing taxonomies of humour types and offers a new classification which subdivides humour types into two main groups: pun based humour vs. non pun humour. The structure of this chapter is centered on this taxonomy with the corresponding analysis of the advertisements. Chapter Four is a research part of the thesis which analyzes the incidence of the identified humour types across various products and services and presents the collected empirical data as well as the results and findings. Chapter Five functions as a summing-up in which the research questions are answered and the conclusions are drawn. A bibliography and appendix will conclude the thesis.

1. 4 Material and Method

As stated above this thesis is focused on the advertisements presented in print media and does not feature ads that appear on the television, radio, <https://assignbuster.com/incongruity-and-incongruity-resolution-theory-marketing-essay/>

internet, and cinema. The selected material consists of a total of sixty two humorous advertisements chosen from the range of around two hundred English-speaking magazines published between the years 2006 and 2010. Popular lifestyle magazines have been mainly used as they are directed toward a general audience and have a high content of ads which advertise a wide range of products and service. I used so wide range of magazines because one and the same ad have been found in numerous magazines as well as in different issues of one and the same magazine. For this thesis I have mainly used such glossy magazines as Cosmopolitan, Marie Claire, In Touch, Chat, OK, In Style, Self, The Economist and some others. No gender issues will be put forward in this thesis as well as no differentiation will be made between humour in British and US magazines as it would give this thesis a whole new dimension.

As a first step in the selection procedure, I looked for any ads that displayed humorous context. The selection was relatively wide as this resulted in around 100 ads which I considered to be humorous. It should be noted that when browsing through numerous magazines it is very difficult to determine whether the ad is humorous or not as certain subjectivity is always involved into the process of decision making. That is why the subjectivity is inevitable. Despite the fact that such procedure of selection is often employed by many researches, I tried to avoid making decisions without consideration of opposing opinions and different points of view. For this purpose one interview was conducted the aim of which was to exclude prevailed subjectivity in my selective procedure and to explore two basic questions: which advertisements will be still considered as humorous according to the

interviewees and how they will determine the type of humour in case the ad proves to be humorous. A remark should be made under this point that anyway it will be to a certain degree the so called unilateral decision as in the long run it is me who decided which ads would be included and which would be left out. It is also worth of mentioning that the interview is not the main purpose of this study and that is why its presence in the thesis will be limited by the short description of its procedure and results.

Coming back to the interview procedure, it should be noted that the interview was conducted in a small group consisted of twelve participants. The length of the interview was two hours. Around one hundred fifty different ads were presented to the participants chosen on the assumption that all of them were humorous. In order to ensure that the results would not be biased, the participants were not informed about this fact as well they did not know what the study was exactly about. The participants were asked to have a look at each advertisement and to determine whether they consider it to be interesting or boring, creative or not creative and humorous or non-humorous. The two supplement questions besides the question about the presence or absence of humour in the ad were introduced only with the purpose of trying to avoid some potential disadvantages which are directly connected with an interview. This is the so called participant reflexivity, which means that the person being interviewed (interviewee) tells the interviewer only what s/he wants to hear. Then, since many people often expect from a humorous ad to make them burst into laughing and such an attitude would bias the results of the interview I decided to ask them to rate (in case they think the advertisement is humorous) how humorous it was on

a five-point-scale. Rating an advertisement as 5 meant that they considered it to be very humorous, 3 indicated that it was a moderate representative of humorousness whereas 1 suggested that it was a very poor example of a humorous ad and should be probably excluded from the list. The results drawn after the evaluation of twelve questionnaires were surprisingly consistent. The agreement was particularly high for the identification of the given advertisements to be humorous or non-humorous. As for rating is concerned the results were not similar, better to say they were very inconsistent and that proves again that humour is always being judged individually and subjectively.

After that all the ads were sorted out to determine which ads would be fruitful for a qualitative analysis. The advertisements which were considered by most of the participants as not humorous at all were excluded from the list of candidates for future analysis.

1. 5 Advertising terminology

No need to say that advertising has its own terminology. I am not going to list all the terms you can find in the field of advertising. Thus, the terminology will be limited to a few terms which are frequently used in this thesis. I will follow Cook's definitions which he presents in his "Discourse of Advertising" (2003).

According to him Headline Phrase(s) found at the top of an ad.

Caption Phrases (s) found in close proximity to an image.

Body copy A piece of smaller text, often containing the main
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(or copy) information.

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CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2. 1 Introduction

As was mentioned in the introduction, humour is by no means homogenous. Since there is no general acceptance in classifying humour, there is no ideal theory of humour which can cover all its factors and embrace all its peculiarities. Most of the existing humour theories are mixed and it seems to be impossible to incorporate such a huge phenomenon as humour into a single integrated theory.

As a starting point it can be asserted that humour is triggered by particular mechanisms (Spotts, 1987). Spotts states that these mechanisms can be grouped into three main categories: the cognitive theory, superiority theory, and the relief theory (Spotts et al. 1997: 20). The chapter that follows is dedicated to some of the main threads of the theories of humour that have emerged although it is important to notice that not all humour theories ever proposed will be presented in it and it will not be attempted to make a comprehensive survey of all these ideas. Only those theories will be discussed which play a significant role for working out an operational definition of humour for this thesis.

2. 2 Incongruity and Incongruity-Resolution Theory

Incongruity can be called in other words inconsistency or contradiction. The incongruity theory goes back to Francis Hutcheson's *Reflections Upon Laughter* published in 1750. Later on it was revisited and represented by Kant, Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard. Incongruity theories are considered to be cognitive in their nature. This is the group of theories which dominates humour research. According to McGhee (1979) humour is as reaction to incongruity and he defined incongruity as "the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation and so forth. When the arrangement for the constituent element of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous." The existing theories of incongruity have a difference based on the question whether incongruity is a necessary condition for humour to be produced and if yes, whether it is sufficient or probably there are other conditions needed to cause humour. Based on this fact two schools of thought about incongruity theories appeared: the so called one-stage incongruity theories and two-stage incongruity-resolution theories. One-stage incongruity theorists like many representatives of some psychological theories propose that we often laugh when we see or hear something unexpected. In terms of this theory it can be said that "we cognitively process (or think about) the message in a single stage that includes three parts – interruption (what's that?), perceptual contrast (there's something incongruous and unexpected here!), and playful confusion (what's it mean) (Speck, 1987: 7)".

Other theorists like Jerry Suls and Thomas Schultz, the opponents of the two-stage incongruity resolution theory, postulate that it is not sufficient for a message to be funny by itself and they insist on the overlapping of meanings

of the incongruous parts and on the presence of a second stage, namely the resolution of the incongruity. “ Incongruity becomes stronger only when it follows a resolution process and is understood and accepted by its audience (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 23â€ 26)”.

Attardo considered incongruity theories to be cognitive in their nature and were often associated with linguistic theories of humour.

To summarize the ideas, it can be added that incongruity theory is based on the idea of a contrast between two overlapping scripts whereas incongruity-resolution theory requires the presence of two stages: incongruity as derivation from expectation and incongruity understood in resolution which in its turn results in amusement. Incongruity is seen by many researches as a humour type. I prefer to see it as a condition needed to produce humour.

2. 3 Superiority Theory

The second branch of the main humour theories is presented by theories of superiority. These theories have gone by lots of names such as disparagement, criticism, hostility, aggression, malice, degradation, and derision. This group of humour theories is based on the ideas of Aristotle, Quintillian, Plato, and later Thomas Hobbes (seventeenth century) and it is directly connected with the social function of humour which cannot be said about the incongruity theories which consider humour as an individual phenomenon. Superiority theory is a theory of mockery. In terms of this theory humour is pointed against something or somebody thus making us to believe that something or somebody is superior to somebody else. In other words “ we laugh from feelings of superiority over other people, from <https://assignbuster.com/incongruity-and-incongruity-resolution-theory-marketing-essay/>

suddaine Glory arising from suddaine Conception of some Eminency in our selves, by Comparison with the Infirmities of others, or with our owne formerly” (Critcheley, 2002: 3). It is suggested that people joke about things that make them feel unsure and/or uncomfortable as a way of releasing feelings of tensions (Gulas and Weinberger 2006: 28).

2. 4 Release Theories

Release theories as well as superiority theories have numerous names such as arousal theory[3], freedom theory[4], and tension-release theory[5]. This group of theories describes how people respond emotionally to humour. It was put forward by Herbert Spencer in the nineteenth century but it was better explained and thus it is better known from Freud’s analysis of humorous utterances given in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). “ Freud proposed that jokes provide us with a release from the constant need to repress our natural aggressive and sexual desires, and are thus experienced as pleasurable. Like dreams, jokes come from the unconscious, bur are first transformed into less explicit forms, thereby providing a socially acceptable way of breaking taboos” (Ventola, Guijarro 2009: 79).

The release theory has rather to do with the physiological function of humour. It is based on the notion of homeostasis, which means that humans regulate their inner environment on the physiological level in order to ensure certain stability in response to strain, tension, and anxiety.

Morreall (1983) talks about the biological function of laughter and insists on the possibility of coexistence of relief theory with other theories discussed <https://assignbuster.com/incongruity-and-incongruity-resolution-theory-marketing-essay/>

above: incongruity (“ relief through resolution”) and superiority (“ relief through triumph”).[6]

2. 5 Linguistic Theories of Humour

Since all the existing theories of humour are based on the notion of incongruity there is no theory about which it can be definitely said that it is a purely linguistic one. “ Linguistic” in this case is rather a conditional name. Nevertheless, the first step into this direction was put forward by Raskin, who suggested a script-based semantic theory developed for verbal humour.

Viktor Raskin’s Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humour was presented in his book *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (1985) which was a great contribution to all of the humour theories ever proposed and a first attempt to describe humour from a linguistic perspective. Raskin set his goal as following: “ Ideally, a linguistic theory of humour should determine and formulate the necessary and sufficient linguistic conditions for the text to be funny (Raskin, 1985: 47)”. The script-based semantic theory of humour was designed as a neutral theory which takes in account all the three theories discussed above. According to Raskin’s theory, verbal or written communication is considered to be a joke if the text is fully compatible with two different but at the same time opposite scripts. Script in this case presents a large chunk of semantic information. This is the main hypothesis of his theory: “ A text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the conditions are satisfied. i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts

ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite in a special sense (...). The two scripts with which the text is compatible are said to overlap fully or in part on this text (Raskin 1985: 99)". Raskin introduces the notion of the trigger or a punch-line, which switches the listener from one script to another thus creating the joke (Raskin, 1985: 36).

Raskin's theory can be interpreted within the terms of incongruity-resolution school of humour.

Although his theory was primarily developed for verbal humour it proves to be effective for many types of humorous advertising, both for verbal and for visual.

It should be noted that there is also a revisited version of the SSTH called "The General Theory of Verbal Humour" (GTVH). This theory was a result of collaboration of Raskin and Attardo. The main aim of the GTVH was to broaden the scope of Raskin's SSTH in order to apply it to any humorous text.[7]Attardo comments about it as following: "Whereas the SSTH was a semantic theory of humor, the GTVH is a linguistic theory "at large" – that is, it includes other areas of linguistics as well, including, most notably, textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity, and pragmatics (Attardo 1994: 222)". Attardo postulates that resolution does not exclude the presence of incongruity; they coexist and accompany each other so that "any humorous text will contain an element of incongruity and an element of resolution (Attardo 1994: 144)".

2. 5. 2 Operational Definition

An operational definition of humour will have to encompass all the above listed theories as all of them are important for the analysis of the advertisements in this thesis. Under this point I would fully agree with Raskin when he said that "... the incongruity-based theories make a statement about the stimulus; the superiority theories characterize the relations or attitudes between the speaker and the hearer; and the release/relief theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the hearer only." (Raskin 1985: 40)

The operational definition of a humorous advertisement will be worked out in terms of Raskin's SSTH. The question arises why no I do not follow the GTVH. There are reasons for that. First, the GTVH adopted the main hypothesis of the SSTH. Second, the broadenings introduced, are not of much importance for a current analysis. The third reason is that the GTVH is still under development and not all the problematic issues have been resolved yet.

So the advertisement will be considered to be humorous if it fulfills the following conditions:

the advertisement has two overlapping scripts which cause the incongruity
these two scripts are in the opposite relation to each other.

The first condition alone would not be enough for the advertisement to be humorous as the overlapping of two scripts may have a non-funny text as a result as well.

CHAPTER 3. HUMOUR TYPES

3. 1 Introduction

Since there is no universal definition of humour, there are many ways to classify it and there is no universally accepted classification of humour types. Taxonomies of humour types are very different and not homogeneous. There have been many attempts to classify humour according to different criteria. Kelly and Solomon (1975), for example, classified humour according to techniques used in order to produce humorous effect and presented seven types such as a pun, an understatement, a joke, something ludicrous, satire, irony and humorous intent whereas Goldstein and McGhee talked about three types: nonsense, sexual and aggressive.

An overview of some main classifications is presented in Table 2[8], which proves the fact that the typologies of humour types are diverse and mixed as well as terminology used for different types of humour: “.....” (Raskin)

The classification of humour types presented in this thesis is based on the taxonomy offered by Catanescu and Tom (2001) which in its turn used Reick’s practitioner-oriented classification system as a basis. Catanescu and Tom adopted five types from this classification and added two new types which resulted in seven following humour types: comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, and surprise. As the study they conducted was not only devoted to humour in print advertising, not all humour types presented in their taxonomy could be included into classification for this thesis. Thus, such category as surprise had to be left out despite several examples of using this technique in a print advertisement which could be found during the analysis of selected material. The reason for

that was the fact that the operational definition did not work with this humour type as some other mechanisms were involved in such advertisements which were beyond the current analysis. To avoid the mixture of devices, types and techniques about which Raskin spoke, all these types were divided into two main categories, namely pun humour and non-pun humour each of them was subdivided into several sub categories. In such a way polysemy, homonymy, nonce-formations and idiomatic expressions fell under the category of pun humour and such types as comparison, personification, exaggeration, sarcasm and silliness under the category of non-pun humour correspondently.

The goals of this chapter are: a) to introduce some definitions of a pun to frame the discussion, b) to give an insight into some types of pun taxonomies, c) to develop pun taxonomy for the current analysis and to describe the nature of the linguistic phenomena involved in puns illustrating it with the help of gathered material, d) to offer a taxonomy of non-pun humour taking into account the occurrence of each type in the advertisements collected from the magazines.

3. 2 “ Oh! That’s a pun and I didn’t mean it”[9]

Before talking about pun-based humour it seems to be of great importance to determine what will be understood under pun. Puns are said to be the most common basis for humour.[10]“ The management of humorous language is largely a matter of devising transfers – the transfer from set to set, from scale to scale, from layer to layer, until the happy conclusion of a double vision is achieved. At the heart of this process of continual and

multiple transference, an important process aping the shiftiness of thought itself, is the apparently frivolous device of pun; word-play is the lure, the spinning toy that draws up the lurking and fishy meaning. We take punning for a tawdry and facetious thing, one of the less profound forms of humour, but that is the prejudice of our time; a pun may be profoundly serious, or charged with pathos (Nash 1985: 137)". As mentioned in the introduction, my supposition is that pun is the type of humour which most often occurs in print advertising despite quite the opposite points of view when puns were criticized for their frustrating ambiguity and for representing a simple and less sophisticated form of humour. That is why many advertisers prefer not to include puns into advertisements believing that they have a low intellectual status. Nash defends the pun against such accusations offering his own list of puns and insisting on the fact that puns are common in the language of journalism (Nash 1985: 137). Sherzer provides another argument in defense of puns in advertising stating that puns are highly appropriate for advertising as they deliver two meanings for the price of one (Sherzer 1985). The same opinion shares Redfern: " Advertising space is costly. Economy is essential, and puns are highly economical (two meanings for the price of one word or phrase), and in fact much more of a labour-saving device than many of the products they seek to promote. (...) Since the fundamental message of all advertising is known to everyone in advance, there is a need for diversification. Wordplay, with its distortions, bifurcations and re-creations, introduces variety and refreshment into saturation. Puns, the devious ones, are a way round those rather stuffy rules of the advertising watchdogs: adverts should be legal, decent and true. A recipe for mass-produced boredom. The words of adverts are double-talk, <https://assignbuster.com/incongruity-and-incongruity-resolution-theory-marketing-essay/>

necessarily. If adverts told only the verifiable truth, they would be pedantic and tedious. And so they have to approximate; they have to say one thing and suggest another. Obliqueness is all. So why not make a virtue out of necessity, and a silk purse out of a sow's ear? (Redfern 1982: 130-131)".

Redfern asserts that puns are well suited for advertising as " they are usually delivered with the requisite ambivalent mixture of false apology and only too real aggression (Redfern 1982: 275)." Definitions of pun as well as definitions of humour vary greatly from researcher to researcher. Freud considered puns to be the lowest form calling them " cheapest" stating that they can be formed with the least effort.[11]Walter Redfern (1984) devoted a whole book to pun in which he said that " pun can make an individual. (...) It can ruin lazy expectations; subvert the nature of language and thought (Redfern 1984: ??)".

Sherzer defined it as " a form of speech play in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings (Sherzer 1978: 336)". This the point (the presence of two senses) on which all linguistic and non-linguistic analyses agree. Following the rules of the incongruity-resolution theory a phenomenon of pun can be defined as two meanings incongruously combined in one and the same sentence. These two meanings cause ambiguity due to which a conflict arises between the two senses which is subsequently resolved by the surprising punchline (Ross 1998: 8).

Following the operational definition of a humorous advertisement, a pun-based humorous ad has to fulfill the following conditions: two meanings have

to be semantically incompatible, i. e. opposed. This is the so called deliberate ambiguity in a pun which creates the incongruity. Then it must be followed by resolution leading to humorous interpretation.

3.3 Pun taxonomy

There are numerous taxonomies of puns which essentially differ from each other.

Attardo criticized these taxonomies and attempts to explain the phenomenon of pun through its taxonomy. He tried to build the “taxonomy of the taxonomies” and distinguished four major types of pun classifications, namely: taxonomies by linguistic phenomenon, by linguistic structure, by phonemic distance, and eclectic (Attardo 1994: 112). Tanaka distinguished four categories of puns in advertising: “nonsense” puns, contextual puns, puns with sexual innuendo, and puns with two communicated meanings (Tanaka 1994: 64-80). I will keep to taxonomy based on linguistic phenomena as it is the most relevant one for this thesis. “Taxonomies based

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