

## **HUMOR IN ADVERTISING**

**Cristina Radu-Golea**  
**Senior Lecturer, PhD, University of Craiova**

*Abstract: The use of humor is common practice in advertising, but the impact it has on customers/addressees has not been thoroughly studied. Nevertheless, over the last years, important progress has been made in researching this phenomenon, but most studies are rather taxonomical or synthesizing, than purely theoretical. In advertising, humour is a multifaceted ‘ingredient’. It is not necessarily a guarantee of better, more original or efficient ads, but it can have a favourable role (which can increase the audience/product acquisition), providing that the applied solution is benefitted from in point of the objectives set, of the strategic perspective, and also of the audience and situation characteristics, and type of humour used.*

*Keywords: humour, advertising, allusion, ambiguity, language*

The attempts of defining such a common, natural and ubiquitous phenomenon as humour, performed repeatedly by the scientific community, have resulted, so far, only in partial results<sup>1</sup>. Even though the attempts of defining and explaining this phenomenon have concerned all the branches of social sciences, starting from philosophy, anthropology and getting to experimental positivist psychology, the correct understanding of humour, when it becomes a fact, will have major implications not only on these sciences, but also in applicative domains.

The researchers’ impossibility of creating a universal and all-encompassing theory on humour is reflected at the level of the terminology, too; that seems to be both a result and a cause of conceptual confusion. Generally, theoreticians don’t agree on the causes, mechanisms or functions of humour either. The only segment of literature where a consense has been reached is psychoanalysis, where the terms *humour*, *comic*, *joke* are clearly defined and aren’t mistaken one for the other or misused.

The acquisition or development of humour must be tackled from two perspectives (which are connected) inducing different behaviours. The first hypothesis consists in understanding and appreciating humour, the second consists in generating and disseminating it. Within the defining frame set by the researchers there has been operated a fundamental distinction between *humour/umor*, and *laugh/râs*<sup>2</sup>. Sometimes, the two concepts have been used interchangeably, but, in principle, the differences remain valid: laugh can be only „indirectly” linked to humour, without being an intrinsic constituent of the latter.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mihaela-Viorica Constantinescu, *Umorul politic românesc în perioada comunistă: perspective lingvistice*, București, 2012; Richard J. Alexander, *Aspects of Verbal Humor in English*, Gunter Verlag Tubingen, 1997; Mihai Coman, *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*, Iași, 1999; Daniela Frumușani, „Context și conversație în producerea/receptarea glumei”, în *CL*, XXXV, 6/1986; *m r nd Jele u, Alo, televiziunea! Un „jurnal de front” pe programul 1*, București, 1992; Elliot Oring, *Engaging Humor*, Chicago, 2003; Tatiana Slama-Cazacu, *Stratageme comunicative și manipularea*, Iași, 2000, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Laugh is a physiological „answer”, while humour is a mental experience.

„Old Chinese considered laugh as a barbarian act of uncivility, they laughed only of inferior things, only in the kitchen or in the very intimate companionship of concubines and courtesans”. (I.D. Sîrbu, 1991, p. 88)

Accidental or unintentional humour is subdivided into two categories: physical and linguistic. The first type characterises happenings and situations: the famous slipping on a banana peel, falling downstairs, tripping on a curb, etc.

The success of some TV shows such as *Candid Camera* can be accounted for by this type of humour, and so is that specific to the e-mails which circulate the strangest and most unexpected life events, product labels, instructions or unexpected and funny uses of products, etc.

Accidental humour derives from mistaken letters, pronunciation errors, logic errors, etc. An eloquent example is provided by the TV programmes of the type *Kids say funny things/Copiii spun lucruri trăsnete*, or those which attempt to cause accidental humour, resulting from misunderstanding a situation, a name<sup>3</sup>, or the sense of a word.

The allusion is a direct reference to some reality known by both the source of the message and the hearer, but which is not named or mentioned as such, directly. Etymologically, *allusion/aluzie* (< Fr. *allusion*, cf. Lat. *allusio* ‘joke’) is to be related also to the Latin verb *ludere* ‘to play’ and the meaning ‘semantic game’ is confirmed by the objectives of an allusion. It is also an efficient technique chosen in order to achieve a condensed discourse full of multiple meanings. That is why allusion is efficient in advertising, cartoons or comic strips. The main difficulty in using it in the advertising – type of communication lies in finding references which to communicate the same idea to as many people as possible, or, hopefully, to all the individuals making up the audience. On the one hand, the events or situations referred to by means of allusions may not be familiar to all members of the audience, but be understood just by some of them or only by certain socio-professional groups, etc.

Some relevant examples from Romanian advertising are represented by the campaigns which made reference to realities of the communist period, i.e. the period before 1990. Thus, the *Connex*<sup>4</sup> brand used footage from the assessment visits made by the former president Nicolae Ceaușescu together with his wife; the *Bucegi* beer brand also used communist period images with the people queuing to buy milk and meat, the *Imperial* vodka brand used images with the Romanian Communist Party Congresses and also the syntagm *The Imperial Party of Romania*, an allusion to the name The Romanian Communist Party, the chocolate brand *Rom Tricolor* reminds us of the feared Securitate and of its brutal methods or of the communist regime’s efforts to repress youth’s wish to transgress the pressure towards social uniformization, etc. Over time, the number of those who remember the communist period has increased and that is why the brands using such allusions are those who rather target middle-aged or old people.

Ambiguity is an important “component” of advertising-specific humor; lexical ambiguity is the most frequently used device in advertising, since it allows plays on words. There are enough examples in Romanian advertising based on lexical ambiguity: the *Kreskova* vodka brand was based on a play on words with sexual allusions<sup>5</sup>: *Crezi că o va...?/ Do you think he’ll... her?* Other

---

<sup>3</sup> *Mă cheamă Tzara țara/ Tristan Tzara (nume de cod)/My name is Tzara/country/Tristan Tzara (code name)*. The proper name is homonymous in Romanian to ‘country’. The poet Tzara himself explained that his pseudonym was a play on words: ‘sad country’.

<sup>4</sup> In Romania *Vodafone* took over the local mobile phone operator *Connex*.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Constantin, *De ce trebuie luat în serios umorul în publicitate/Why ad humour should be taken seriously*: „De regulă, când vine vorba de calitatea umorului, riscul cel mai mare este să îți subestimezi audiența și să vii cu glume care îi jignesc inteligența”/‘usually, when it comes to humour quality, the highest risk is that of underestimating the audience and using jokes which insult their intelligence’, <http://www.bizwords.ro/article/advertising/1636/De-ce-trebuie-luat-in-serios-umorul-in-publicitate.html/27.12.2017>.

Cf. Rodica Zafiu, *Evaluarea umorului verbal*, <http://cachescan.bcub.ro/2009-05-27/560798.pdf/27.12.2017>; Oana Țifrea, *Recunoașterea umorului în texte*, <https://profs.info.uaic.ro/~corinfor/Humor-Oana.pdf/27.12.2017>, etc.

examples are represented by the frozen chicken brand *Coco Rico* which used the slogan *Unde mai pui că e și gustos/On 'crest' (top) of that, it is also tasty*, the *Băneasa* bakery brand, with the slogan *O pâine bine crescută/'well-bred' bread* or the *Fulga* brand: *Ce vacă sunt! Am uitat să mă prezint.../I'm such a cow, I've forgotten to introduce myself* ('vacă de lapte'/milk cow vs. 'rude person').

Syntactic ambiguity is more complex than lexical ambiguity. It manifests itself in the form of the possible change of the meaning of a syntactic construction depending on placing focus on one or another of its components. The internet jokes are relevant in this respect: *Căutăm om de serviciu care să frece podelele și două chelnerițe/we're looking for a genitor to rub the floor and two waitresses; Avansați, căci stă un om prost pe scară/move on, there's a man staying obtuse on the stairs*, etc.

In advertising communication, no agreement has been reached regarding the extension of the humour effects on consumers. In Romania, there is no statistics dealing, formally or informally, with the percentage of ads which use humour, but an analysis of the advertising market studies over the last years (*AdMarket Research*) proves the fact that both the representatives of advertising agencies and their clients consider humouristic ads as more creative than those that don't appeal to humour.

For the moment, all that can be taken into consideration is represented by a few studies<sup>6</sup> whose results are not unitary, but controversial and rarely reduplicated experimentally<sup>7</sup>. The central controversy of all the studies and debates is the issue of humour efficiency in advertising communication: is humour efficient? Does it trigger only positive reactions from the consumers? The affirmative answers, as many as they are at present, mainly prove the benefic influences on the consumers' attention, preference and attitude towards a brand<sup>8</sup>. These influences differ depending on a number of moderating variables such as the purpose of the message, the characteristics of the audience (addressees), the features of the product and a series of executional factors, such as the type of humour, which is the most important.

Moreover, humour is a source of distracting the consumer's attention, inhibiting the possible tendency of counterargumentation, having thus an augmentative effect on persuasion<sup>9</sup>. Humour is a risky promoting strategy, which can affect the fame of a brand negatively. But not all brands appeal to this type of communication, i.e. through humour, for reasons having to do with the perspective of brand values, the position of the brand or the 'halo' made by the associations created in consumers' minds by the brand throughout time, i.e. brand heritage.

It is certain that a relatively high number of elements linked to the socio-demographic or cultural particularities of the receivers can have a direct influence on humour perception and definition. Maybe in a more profound way than many other psychological realities, humour is a social and cultural construct. In the Western world the advertising industry has drawn its conclusions regarding the relation between advertising communication and humour and has tried to apply some rather circumstantial strategies, one being that of ensuring that humour is not used to distract the audience's attention from the main message: thus, subtle humour is preferred to coarse humour, there should be a relation between humour and the product or situation presented, humour should be harmoniously integrated within the rest of the message, etc.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Bibliography.

<sup>7</sup> See Sternthal, Craig, 1973, p. 12-18; Weinberger, Gulas, 1992, p. 35-60.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Madden, Weinberger, 1982 p. 8-14; Speck, 1991, p. 1-44.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Sternthal, Craig, 1973, p. 12-18; Gardner, 1970, p. 25-30.

In advertising, humour is more than a common communicative strategy, it is an element which can have a substantial influence on the commercial message of an ad, and, implicitly, on its results.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Alexander, Richard J., *Aspects of Verbal Humor in English*, Gunter Verlag Tubingen, 1997.
- Coman, Mihai, *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999.
- Constantinescu, Mihaela-Viorica, *Umorul politic românesc în perioada comunistă: perspective lingvistice*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2012.
- Frumușani, Daniela, „Context și conversație în producerea/receptarea glumei”, in *SCL*, XXXVII, 6/1986, p. 509-516.
- Gardner, D., “The Distraction Hypothesis in Marketing”, in *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 10/1970, p. 25-30.
- Jelescu, Smaranda, *Alo, televiziunea! Un „jurnal de front” pe programul 1*, Editura Libra, București, 1992.
- Madden, T.J., Weinberger, M.G., “The Effects of Humor in Magazine Advertising”, in *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 11, No. 3/1982, p. 8-14.
- Oring, Elliot, *Engaging Humor*, Chicago, 2003.
- Slama-Cazacu, Tatiana, *Stratageme comunicative și manipularea*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2000.
- Speck, P.S., “The Humorous message Taxonomy: A Framework for the Study of Humorous Ads”, in Leigh, J.H. and Martin, C.R. Jr. (eds), *Current Issues and Research in Advertising*, Vol. 13/1991, University Of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, p. 1-44.
- Sternthal, B., Craig, S., “Humor in Advertising”, in *Journal of Marketing*, No. 37(4)/1973, p. 12-18.
- Weinberger, M.g., Gulas, C.S., “The Impact of Humour in Advertising: A Review”, in *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 21/1992, p. 35-60.

## **Sources**

- Maria Constantin, *De ce trebuie luat în serios umorul în publicitate/Why ad humour should be taken seriously/* <http://www.bizwords.ro/article/advertising/1636/De-ce-trebuie-luat-in-serios-umorul-in-publicitate.html>/27.12.2017.
- Sîrbu, Ion D., *Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal...*, vol. I, II, Craiova, Editura Scrisul Românesc, 1991, 1993.
- Rodica Zafiu, *Evaluarea umorului verbal/* <http://cachescan.bcub.ro/2009-05-27/560798.pdf>/27.12.2017.
- Oana Țifrea, *Recunoașterea umorului în texte/* <https://profs.info.uaic.ro/~corinfor/Humor-Oana.pdf>/27.12.2017.