

## Chapter 10

# Advertising With Humour: A Pragmatic and Semantic Investigation

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### ABSTRACT

*The present chapter considers verbal humour used in advertising as a rhetorical device. To understand humour, one needs to make inferences by resorting to background knowledge (the domain of pragmatics), and to knowledge of the linguistic code (the domain of semantics). This endeavour examines a series of successful marketing campaigns for ROM, a Romanian chocolate bar brand, and tries to analyse the humorous elements they feature from a pragmatic and semantic perspective. Dwelling on ingrained prejudices and stereotypes, the advertisements for the Romanian chocolate bar have managed to attract attention by humorously exaggerating and sometimes by shocking the audience, compelling them to take action and share their opinions on the advertised matters on various websites. This strategy, which employs humour extensively, has turned out to be successful and, as a consequence, the brand's sales have dramatically increased.*

### INTRODUCTION

Advertisements have long become part of our daily life. Whether we walk in the street, watch TV, go to a movie or surf the internet, numberless adverts will pop up in front of our eyes, trying to direct our attention to this or that product. In fact, they are so numerous that we tend to overlook most of them and can hardly remember anything two minutes afterwards. That is, unless there is something memorable about them, maybe if they make us smile for at least a brief second. No wonder, then, that many advertisements often feature humorous language as the 'it' factor that will draw attention upon the product they promote. This is no news. As early as the 1500s, pub signs used visual puns to attract customers, but humour has begun to be widely incorporated into promotional campaigns in the modern meaning of the word with the advent of broadcasting, at the beginning of the 20th century (Gulas & Weinberger,

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2006). Academic research on humour in advertising has subsequently emerged, more often than not for pragmatic reasons, trying to measure its persuasive power and influence upon the customers' buying choices (Unger, 1996; Beard, 2007; Dynel, 2009). Still, many researchers maintain that its effectiveness remains uncertain (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992; Forabosco, 2011), while some prominent figures in the advertising industry, such as Claude Hopkins, the grandfather of modern advertising, goes as far as to advise marketers against using humour, maintaining that people would not buy from clowns (Hopkins, 1966). It is even claimed that, sometimes, humour is so engaging and distractive that the opposite effect is achieved: people remember the joke, but fail to associate it with the targeted product (Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Martin, 2007). One thing remains, however, sure: humour enhances liking and creates bonds with the audience. Therefore, to overlook its importance may be as bad as to overrate its persuasive force.

The present chapter is more interested in the theoretical mechanisms behind humour as a rhetorical vehicle rather than in trying to devise ways to measure its effectiveness. It, therefore, goes the linguistic path and leaves the latter aspect to the marketers. To understand humour, one needs to make inferences by resorting to background knowledge (the domain of pragmatics), as well as to knowledge of the linguistic code (the domain of semantics). The chapter will consider the marketing campaigns of a Romanian chocolate bar brand and will try to analyse the humorous elements from a pragmatic and semantic perspective. The focus will solely be on verbal humour. Situational humour triggered by visual stimuli is more a matter of semiotic analysis, which does not constitute the province of the present endeavour.

## BACKGROUND

What makes us laugh? What is humour, after all? What are the conditions that a discourse should meet in order to be considered funny and humorous? The definitions are numberless, and, most probably, one which is all-encompassing does not exist (Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). The nature of definitions varies according to the vantage point from which humour is defined. Seen as a type of communication, it is believed to engender a positive emotional reaction (Crawford, 1994; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Hurren, 2006). This type of approach, however, leaves out the traits and characteristics which make a piece of discourse humorous. As a matter of fact, for a text to be humorous, it needs to communicate incongruous meanings, which will trigger amusement in the audience (Gervais and Wilson, 2005; Martin, 2007; Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011).

Initially, the word *humour* was used in connection with any of the four bodily fluids (or *humours*), which were thought to determine physical disposition and temperament (sanguine, melancholic, choleric and phlegmatic). The word took on a new meaning in the late Middle Ages, when Ben Jonson wrote the *Comedy of Humours*, which emphasised comic and odd character traits. The genre became even more successful in the seventeenth century, when it evolved into the comedy of manners. In the following two centuries, the word gained popularity and was used to refer to a sort of Romantic individual eccentricity, but without any critical intention, as we usually understand the term today (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017). The modern usage of the word *humour* encompasses a variety of nuances, such as wit, comic, laughter, comedy, or jesting. Sometimes, scholars draw clear distinctions between various nuances, as does, for instance, Freud, who differentiates between comic, which needs two people, and *wit*, which involves three participants (in Matte, 2001). Speaking about the use of humour in advertising, Stern (1996) contends that laughter would be a better term to describe the audience's response to stimulus advertisement.

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