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## **PUNS IN ADVERTISING DISCOURSE: COGNITIVE ASPECT**

Статья направлена на рассмотрение когнитивных механизмов юмора в рекламном дискурсе (а именно каламбуров в рекламных слоганах). Создание и интерпретация юмора подразумевает сложные когнитивные процессы, в ходе которых в результате интегрирования стимулов двух исходных доменов возникает когнитивный диссонанс, вызванный двойственностью и противоречивостью исходных стимулов.

**Ключевые слова:** реклама, дискурс, каламбур, юмор, когнитивный, информация.

The present paper aims at studying cognitive mechanisms that are used to trigger the humorous challenge caused by verbal humour (more specifically, punning) in advertising discourse. Humour creation and interpretation involves a complex processing, where the integration of two input spaces results in a cognitive clash, triggered by ambiguity and incongruity of the input stimuli.

### **Introduction**

The Internet has revolutionised communication world. With the rise of social networks companies have access to a far wider range of consumers' interests, preferences and needs. However, the latter may not necessarily align perfectly with

those of marketers, as companies are not involved in the process of direct communication with their target audience. To communicate effectively and efficiently, marketers need strategies that are proven to increase customer engagement and satisfaction. Advertising, the ultimate goal of

which is to promote a product, persuade a potential consumer to purchase it and generate loyalty, offers models, where the degree of consumer involvement is expected to influence the amount and the quality of the consumer's cognitive response. Involved consumers are more likely to process information more actively. These cognitive evaluations can be directed toward the relevance and persuasiveness of the advertisements content [1].

Hence, advertising performs two functions – informative and persuasive. While informative advertising provides facts about a product, persuasive advertising involves a potential consumer into an emotional or cognitive game. Thus, advertising efforts are focused on triggering emotional or cognitive satisfaction, which, in many cases, is achieved through humour. In these terms, puns as play on words are an expeditious way to do so.

### **Advertising Discourse**

As A. Goddard states in ‘The Language of Advertising’, the central idea of advertising is that there is a certain conscious intention behind the text, with the aim of benefiting the originator materially or through some other less tangible gain, such as enhancement of status or image [5, p. 7]. Therefore, the purpose of advertising, which is usually defined as selling, may be selling both material and non-material things, i.e. ideas or even ideology. In its turn, society ideology is quite a stable system, which is based on the hierarchy of values. The latter include three constituents: archetypes (values from the past), stereotypes (values of today) and ideals (values of the future). These are the values that the advertising deals with.

Advertising has long ceased merely informing people about products and services. Its main function is persuasive, i.e. manipulating a potential consumer into buying more. It often happens that persuasive function of advertising discourse transforms into urging. In that case advertisement is oriented not only to the conscious but to the

subconscious of the recipient and the means that are used are not logically grounded arguments supported by facts but emotional or cognitive triggers.

It should be noted that persuasive potential is optimal when text and image ('icon') are used together in the advertisement. Therefore, almost all the advertisements are creolised texts, as they have two heterogeneous components: verbal (text) and non-verbal, or iconic – a picture, a painting, a scheme, a diagram, etc. [9].

It should also be noted that textual information is perceived linearly. However, more effort is required to process the same information from image. Even more so if there is incongruity or ambiguity of meanings in the information presented. This advantage, which seems to be slight at first, of putting a recipient into a confused state and making him think in a different pattern plays a crucial role in successful marketing.

### **Advertising In Terms of Conceptual Blending Theory**

Conceptual blending is described by G. Fauconnier and M. Turner as a general and basic cognitive process that operates in a wide variety of conceptual activities, including categorization, counterfactual reasoning, analogy, etc. [4].

Blend in advertising discourse involves two input spaces: a contextual space (information received from senses) and a background space (information stored in long-term memory, to which advertisers implicatively appeal). Instead of involving mappings from one domain to another, selected information is projected from both input spaces to the blended space where it is integrated. The background space presents the background knowledge, prior experiences, values and beliefs of the recipient. Those structures are well-established in the minds of native speakers. The contextual space contains the text and the iconic image of an advertisement. The blended space does not simply involve the combination or mixing of the two input spaces but forms a middle space set up for

cognitive purposes.

### **Humour In Terms Of Congruity Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory**

Having processed the material available in both domains the recipient encounters a contradictory effect. Incongruity triggers the humour challenge through surprise. Recipients construct received information in a sequential way, providing linear ranking of its members. Thus, recipients have certain anticipatory hypotheses about the utterance they process. The incongruity arises out of ‘expectancy violation’, when consumers anticipate linear development of the utterance and suddenly discover abrupt deviation from it. It is incongruity in the sense that Elpers [2] and later Leonard, Warren and McGraw described as ‘occurring when one perceives something that does not match their expectations or is inconsistent with their beliefs’ [7, p. 795]. As soon as violation is detected, the recipient leaps into re-processing inputs from both spaces. Thus, humour has a significant ef-

fect on cognitive processing as it requires extra cognitive effort from the recipient. This extra effort helps to maintain attention, heighten awareness and brings emotional and cognitive satisfaction. Information stored this way fades more slowly from the memory.

The ability of human mind to process information simultaneously, be it the input gathered from the senses or prior information stored in the long-term memory, and re-process it when incongruity occurs is thus widely exploited by advertisers.

### **Sample Analysis**

These mechanisms are exploited by advertisers through puns, inducing the perception of incongruous. Puns depend on similarity of form, due to the homonymous, polysemous or panonymous relationships of words, and disparity of meaning. Humour is triggered through incongruity and relies on confusion the reader encounters when he reaches the punchline of the utterance, as in Figure 1:

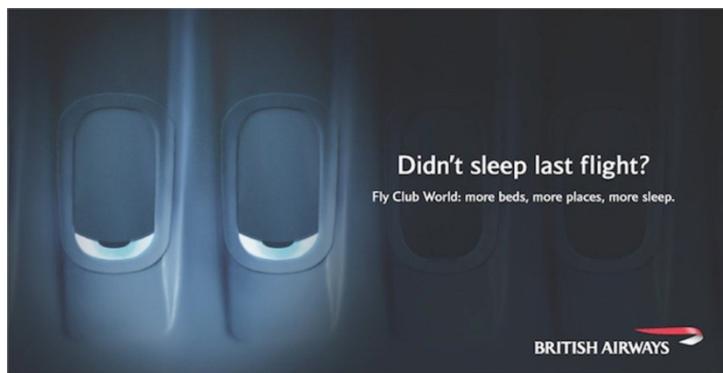


Figure 1. British Airways Ad Slogan

Let us have a closer look at the sample above.

(1) British Airways: Didn’t sleep last flight?

The linear perception of the text allows for the message to be read in an anticipatory way, as triggers from input space 1 (the contextual information containing words *sleep* and *last*, as well as negation *didn’t* and the syntactic structure of an informal question, supported by the iconic

image of *subdued light*) turn the process of perception into a set of anticipatory hypotheses, based on the recipient’s prior linguistic and ontological experience, i.e. input space 2. The anticipatory hypotheses the recipient constructs in his mind are based on the principles of logics and are strongly supported by the syntactic and semantic structures of a given language. Hence, the recipient anticipates the upcoming material and expects it to proceed

along the lines he has already constructed in his mind (a).

#### *Model:*

*Didn't sleep last (a) NIGHT?*

*Didn't sleep last (b) FLIGHT?*

However, what follows in the form of a paronymous pun (b) denies it (a). The recipient is left with no time to adjust to the abrupt departure from his expectations. Any logical implications are no longer relevant, bringing (a) and (b) into conflict.

Another example presented below involves the use of a homonymous pun operating on the same principles.

(2) Sleepy's: For the rest of your... life

#### *Model:*

*For the rest of your (a) BODY*

*For the rest of your (b) LIFE*

Sleepy's mattress store used this slogan in its theme song not only promoting a product and persuading a potential consumer to buy Sleepy's products, but generating loyalty of its potential consumers. Just because the company sells mattresses, the recipients immediately reads the trigger rest as something that he has a rest on. Thus, he develops a model, a construct in his mind based on his observations and prior experience, that channelises the ways in which

he anticipates the upcoming material. However, what follows brings confusion as it challenges his construct. Life acts as a trigger for incongruity to occur, thus bringing a cognitive shift from the first script (a) to the second (b). The recipient re-processes the first trigger rest and re-reads it in the figurative meaning (for the rest of one's life), resolving incongruity, thus, comprehending and appreciating humour.

#### **Conclusion**

This all given, humour, namely puns, can be used to influence perception and cognition of consumers, manipulating them into buying things or services they would not otherwise want. The present paper is far from suggesting that humour is used in ad slogans on purely cognitive grounds. There are other mechanisms and factors involved: social, pragmatic, psychological, etc. However, this question needs further investigation and clarification. Currently, the main obstacle is providing experimental evidence that advertising content significantly affects demand and quantifying the long-term effects of advertising on consumers' decisions to buy or stay loyal. We see this as an important direction for future research.

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