The Impact of Puns on Tunisian Students of English: Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Sfax as a Case Study

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Abstract

Using figures of speech in advertisement has increased in the last decades. Pun, also known as wordplay, is one of the most used figures of speech in advertisement. This research aims at investigating the impact of puns used in print advertisements on Tunisian consumers. The results show that the presence of pun in a slogan has a significant impact on the respondents. In addition, slogans containing one relevant meaning pun and which are presented to the respondent within their context (visual) are more appreciated than slogans which are presented without their visual. Moreover, this current research shows that slogan with one meaning- pun is more appreciated than slogans with two meaning- pun. Last but not least, the presence of a visual does not have a direct impact on making the pun more humorous.

Introduction

During the last decades, advertisements have witnessed a considerable change in terms of the use of artful and persuasive tools. Among these tools, one can state the use of puns. In fact, 40 % of todays' ads contain wordplay (Leigh, 1994). In the same vein, Suntherland (2006) points out that "Just as we appreciate a public speaker for a clever delivery, so advertisements that endear themselves to us have the potential to wash-over onto our feelings about the brand advertiser. This importance is manifested by the increase in using pun". Despite their importance in advertisements, the impact of puns on consumer's appreciation has not been widely investigated. Phillips and McQuarrie (2002) state that "there has not been sufficient research on changes and developments in advertisements over time". Furthermore, Mark (2001) says that "although figures of speech are used widely in print advertisements, the effect of these messages structures on cognitive processing attitude and memory has not been investigated systematically" . on the other hand, the few studies that investigated the effect of puns in ads have come up to contradictory results. In fact, Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken (2005) show that the presence or absence of puns had a significant impact on the respondent's appreciation of the slogans. However, a pun containing two relevant interpretations or only one did not have an influence on the extent to which they are considered funny. Dimofte and Yalch (2007) suggest that the effectiveness and positive impact of polysemous brand slogans depend heavily on three factors which are: the nature of the recipient, the possible meaning of the slogan and the context in which the slogan is received. On the contrary of the aforementioned researchers, who claim a positive impact of the use of puns on readers, Grice (1975, as cited in Abass, n.d, p.50) argues that figurative language needs more cognitive efforts because such sentences violate conversational norms. In the same context, Redfern (1982, cited in Abass, n.d. p.52) states that "puns are bastards, immigrants, barbarians, extra terrestrial, they intrude, they infiltrate". Moreover, Attridge (1988, cited in Dattamajumdar, p. 93) claims "In a place of a context designed to suppress latent ambiguity, the pun is a product of a context deliberately constructed to enforce an ambiguity to render impossible the choice between meanings and to leave the reader or hearer endlessly oscillating in semantic space".

These controversial claims along with the lack of studies studying the impact of puns on consumers led to the main research questions, which are the following: (1) What is more appreciated: slogan without a pun or with a pun? (2)What is more appreciated: slogan with one relevant meaning pun or two relevant meaning pun? (3)What is more humorous: slogan with one relevant meaningpun or two relevant meaning pun? (4)Does the presence of the slogan in its real context (visual) moderate the appreciation of the pun? (5)Does the presence of the slogan in its real context (visual) moderate the humorous effect of the pun?

Research Objectives

The objectives of this current research are two folds: (1) Revealing Literature background for the use of puns in advertisements. (2)Detecting the impact of the use of puns on Tunisian consumers.

Literature Review

Puns can be defined, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, as "the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effects". This figure is classified to three main types, namely; general puns, antanaclasis and Resonant puns Dattamajumdar (n.d). The first type has two meanings; a denotative meaning and a connotative meaning. Using these two meanings is meant to convey a "comic" effect. Antanaclasis is frequently used in advertising language and lies on repeating the same lexical word in two different senses in a single discourse involving a comic effect. The last type, Resonant puns, are a linguistic construction which conveys different meanings along with a comic effect anchoring picture Dattamajumdar (n.d) . These three types of puns are widely used in the world of advertisement. Their impact on consumers, however, is controversial. In fact, Noveck, Maryse and Castry (2001), Gibbs and Raymond (1994), Toncar, and Much (2001), and Mothersbaug, Huhmann and Franke (2002, cited in Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken, 2005, p. 710), claim that the use of puns is not well advised as it requires extra mental effort from the receiver. Put differently, the extra interpretation found in the wordplay does not necessarily provide extra meaning. The use of puns in this case seems to violate the principle of relevance. In addition, Redfern (as cited in Abass, n.d. p.52) states that "puns are bastards, immigrants, barbarians, extra terristeral, they intrude, they infiltrate".

On the other hand, Tanaka (1994) and Yus (2003, cited in Mulken, Dijk, and Hoeken, 2005, p. 710) claim that the use of puns can be explained within the framework of relevance theory. They claim that the humorous effect caused by the use of pun will recover the extra effort spent for the interpretation of the wordplay. To put it clearer, Yus (2003, cited in Mulken, Dijk, and Hoeken, 2005) says that " A more relevant interpretation worth being processed may be activated, despite the supplementary mental effort required. Humorous effect such as the enjoyment in the resolution of incongruity is worth this extra-cognitive effort" (p. 710).

More importantly, Suntherland (2006)[1] claims that puns are not an obstacle towards the understanding of the advertisement. They rather help us understand ads with no effort, little attention and often less retention. Furthermore, Suntherland strengthens his claim via the experience done by scientists which examined people's reaction to puns and jokes by using a scanning machine. The experience shows that the part triggered in the brain when we get a reward for something is the same part that is triggered when we appreciate puns and jokes. Furthermore, Krishman and Chakravarti (2003) find that moderate humor used in puns "may facilitate encoding by attracting more processing resources to the advertisement" (p.242).

These controversial claims about whether puns are appreciated and cause humorous effect in the advertisement lead to the two first hypotheses:

H1: Advertisements with pun are more appreciated than advertisements without pun.
H2: Advertisements with pun are more humorous than advertisements without pun.

Moreover, some scholars distinguish between pun with one relevant meaning and pun with two relevant meanings. The latter, as defined by Yus (2003, cited in Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken, 2005), is a pun in which the two interpretations are relevant for understanding the slogan. In other words, "the two processed meanings are appropriate and applicable to the present utterance and neither has to be discarded" (p.710). Yus insists on the fact that "the hearer, unable to choose one candidate as consistent with the principle of relevance, moves back and forth entertaining both humoursly" (p.711).

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[1] www.sutherlandsurvey.com

An example given by Tanka (1994, cited in Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken, 2005, p. 710) for Mazda brand is: "The perfect car for a long drive". In this slogan both the interpretations of "long drive" vs "long ride" and a "long driveway" are relevant and applicable in order to understand the slogan.

As far as puns with one relevant meaning are concerned, Yus (2003) claims that in these puns one of the interpretations has to be rejected. Put differently, the receivers will reject the first accessible interpretation in case it does not yield such a favorable meaning. They will look for another interpretation in order to understand the slogan. In this context, Yus gives the following example for Cadbury"s Chocolate brand: "Roses grow on you". In this slogan, the first meaning is that roses grow and develop on you. This interpretation, however, will be discarded when the receiver becomes aware that the advertisement refers to the Cadbury's chocolate. Therefore, he will relate the meaning "grow" with another meaning, which is to become "irresistible" to Cadbury's. More importantly, one relevant meaning -pun and two meaning- pun have been studied from the perspective of their impact on the receivers. Some studies raised the issue of which pun engenders more relevancy and pleasantness: one meaning- pun or two meaning- pun. In this context and according to some researchers[2] , two-meaning puns are more relevant. They attract the addressee's attention and raise their interest by adopting all the possible interpretation and there is no need to reject one of the meanings and devote extra effort to look for another one. The aforementioned researchers give the example of Nux slogan, which says: "You will go nuts for the nuts you get is Nux". In this slogan there are two relevant interpretations. The first one is that Nux is very delicious and the second one is that you will feel crazy and energetic whenever you eat Nux.

More importantly, Quintilian (2001, cited in Mulken, Dijk, Hoeken, 2005, p. 708) distinguishes between puns in which both meanings are relevant and those in which one meaning is relevant. He finds that it is better to opt for two relevant meanings. This finding was confirmed by Tanaka (1994) and Yus (2003, cited in Mulken, Dijk, Hoeken, 2005, p. 710) by stating that puns containing two relevant meanings are appreciated more than slogans containing puns with only one relevant meaning.

On the other hand, however, Mulken (2009) finds that slogans containing a pun with two relevant meanings are not considered more appreciated than slogans with one- meaning pun (p. 716). These controversial claims whether one meaning pun is more appreciated than two meaning pun lead us to the third hypothesis:

H3: one meaning- pun is more appreciated than two- meaning pun.

More importantly, According to s Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken, (2005), the appreciation and the humorous effect of puns can be initiated and better achieved when the pun is seen in its real context. In other words, reading a slogan using a visual or a picture may have an effect on its appreciation and on causing humor on the addresses. Some researchers[3] state that relevance theory believes that context is cognitive. They also add that context is framed in relevance theory which affects the interpretation of explicature and implicature during the communication. According to the same source, the process of understanding and assimilating the advertisement language relies heavily on context. In other words, in order to know the communicator's communicative intention, the audience should seek the relevance between the utterance and context. It is compulsory to understand the advertisement language to analyze the combination of utterance and the cognitive context of the receiver. Furthermore, Gibbs and Raymond (1994, cited in Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken, 2005, p. 710) claim that context decides on how easily readers process irony. They also show that while interpreting the pun, the receiver has to process more than one meaning in the message and this generally involves additional processing effort which may differ from context to context.

On the other hand, Mulken, Dijk and Hoeken (2005, p.714) find that presenting the slogan in its original context does not influence the appreciation scores of the slogan types. In other words, there is no effect of the context on the judgment of the well-choosiness or of its pleasantness.

This disagreement about whether the context affects the appreciation and pleasantness of puns leads us to the two last hypotheses.

H4: Pun presented in its real context (visual) is more appreciated than pun presented outside its context.
H5: Pun presented in its real context (visual) is more pleasing than pun presented outside its context.

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[2] http://www.essaydepot.com/doc/25383/On-ApplicatiOn-Of-Pun-In-Advertisement
[3] http://www.essaydepot.com/doc/25383/On-ApplicatiOn-Of-Pun-In-Advertisement

Methodology

The Corpus

To test the five hypotheses a sample of slogans was required. The selection of the slogans followed certain guidelines. In fact, in order to test whether the presence of pun impacts respondents, the sample of this current study includes slogans with no puns, slogan with a one relevant meaning-pun and other slogans containing puns with two relevant meanings. In addition, to test the moderator effect of context the corpus included slogans with their visuals. The analysis of these slogans is described in what follows.

2.1.1. Corpus Description

The Corpus selection came up with 18 slogans. Three of these slogans do not contain a pun. Eleven slogans contain a pun with one relevant meaning and four slogans having a pun with two relevant meanings. The unbalance between the number of the different slogans may be explained by the fact that our purpose in this study is to focus on the difference between pun with one relevant meaning and pun with two relevant meanings. Therefore, I chose not to include so many slogans in which there is no pun, though they are widely present, to avoid a very long questionnaire. Moreover, choosing four slogans with twomeaning- pun and not eleven like with one meaning pun is because these slogans were extracted from other scientific studies, which have the same research objective. Therefore, the unbalance is due to what I found in similar studies. Consequently, the selected brand slogans which do not include pun are: Nokia, Kit Kat and Pepsi. For slogans with one- meaning pun, I found Diamond Brand- Apple- Self Magazine-Mexican Restaurant-Estee Lauder- Cadbury"s-Mortan Salt- Don"t Aid Aids Organization- Greenpeace Organization- London Transportation- Lioyd Bank. As for slogans with two-meaning pun, this research included the following brands: More- Four Square-Mazda Car and Calvin Klein. The sources from which these slogans were extracted vary. Some of them were found on websites, while others were taken from scientific papers.

Results and Discussion

Among the five hypotheses tested in this research, four hypotheses have been confirmed and one has been rejected. In fact, according to the first hypothesis, slogans containing puns are appreciated better than advertisements without puns. The second hypothesis confirms the assumption that slogans which include puns are more humorous. More importantly, the third hypothesis proves that one meaning-pun is more appreciated than two- meaning puns. Furthermore, the fourth hypothesis which is partially confirmed shows that context has an effect only on slogans containing pun with two relevant meanings. In other words, when presented with visual, slogans with two relevant meaning- puns are better appreciated than slogans containing pun with one relevant meaning. In fact, context, which refers to the presence of the advertisement with a picture, helps proceed and appreciate slogans with two relevant meaning- puns. This result is not applicable to puns with one relevant meaning, which are more appreciated without the presence of the visual. These findings may have managerial as well as theoretical contributions.

The main practical contribution of this study is that it gives an idea about the impact of puns on Tunisians, more specifically on the students of English, who belong to the young population. This demographic portion represents an important target for many brands. Therefore, local managers or international investors may find, in this study, an answer about the way some Tunisians appreciate and perceive puns in slogans. This study also gives an idea about the effect of context on making the slogan more appreciated and humorous. In fact, managers should take into account that the pleasantness and appreciation of a pun is not only dependent on context but may be also related to some cultural factors. To put it differently, what may be pleasant in one country may not be pleasant in another country.

As far as the theoretical contribution is concerned, this current study helps through its quantitative analysis better understand the debate found in the literature about the impact of puns on consumers. The results agree with some previous results and disagree with others. More importantly, this current research has enriched the literature focusing on the impact of puns in advertisement. It has also enriched the literature as it deals with Tunisian context which according to my modest knowledge, there is no research until now focusing on the impact of puns on Tunisians. Despite these contributions, this study does not escape from some limitations which should be taken into consideration in the future.

1. Limitations of the Study

Two main limitations are present in this study. The first major limitation lies in the generalization concern. Indeed, the methodology has focused only on a very specific population, which is the student of English at the University of Sfax. This limitation restricts the generalization and validation of our results. The second major result lies in the data corpus, which is considered small compared to other research. Therefore, it is highly recommended to increase the corpus of data and to enlarge the sample size by making it more representative of the Tunisian population.

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