

THE USE OF WORDPLAY AND IDIOMS IN BRANDS

Pop Anamaria Mirabela

Universitatea din Oradea, Facultatea de Științe Economice, Str. Universității 1, Oradea, mipop@uoradea.ro, +40-259-408-799

Abstract: English advertising exploits from the high adaptability of the English language which enables the creators of advertisements to use word puns, figurative language, and to mix individual styles and types of texts. Brands have an extraordinary capacity to compact complex and subtle nuances of differences in values, beliefs and desires. Combining the history of a particular brand with careful marketing manipulation of its current ideological profile as demonstrated in advertisements, sponsorship, use by high-profile celebrities etc., a brand becomes a powerful instrument.

Key words: brand, language, wordplay, idioms

1. Introduction

1.1. Brands. Defining the concept of brand

Brand is defined as a label of ownership: name, term, design, or symbol. However, today it is what it does for people that matters much more, how they reflect and engage it, how it defines their aspiration and enables them to do more. Powerful brands can drive success in competitive and financial markets, and indeed become the organization's most valuable assets.

The most compact and potent of visual signalling systems, brands allow consumers to express complex beliefs and values instantaneously. But as the lifestyle message becomes the product, companies need to constantly monitor and precisely shape what it is that the brand signifies.

The general presumption regarding the question how brands have become ever more powerful and omnipresent in the landscape of contemporary consumption is that the increasing shift towards brands simply reflects our culture's on-going obsession with displays of wealth and status: the big name brand signalling that you can afford the best. While there is no doubt truth in this view (especially amongst those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds eager to signal success) it neglects or obscures an understanding of how most brands and consumption patterns have altered over the last two decades.

The rapid rise in importance of brands in the 80s coincided with a political landscape epitomised by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher which (breaking with the questioning of wealth for its own sake which had begun with the middle-class Beats and the Hippies) saw no stigma in success. Within this Yuppie worldview, a brand's capacity to signal that you could afford the best was clearly desirable and the shift away from brands (or, at least, to obscure, smaller brands) which began in the 60s was reversed.

However, even before the 80s were over, this rather simplistic language of brands was beginning to be overstepped by something far more complex: the Lifestyle Brand. When Benetton began a series of advertising campaign which featured neither their clothes nor the message that their brand was the most costly, they demonstrated an understanding of the fact that more and more consumers wanted brands which signalled the values and beliefs of potential consumers - and that, for many, these values and beliefs were (if not anti-success, wealth and consumerism) at least seeking to display concerns and philosophies which went beyond a purely materialistic definition of the good life.

The rise of the lifestyle brand parallels the rise of social fragmentation and communication breakdown which lies at the heart of the post-modern condition. While only a generation or two ago one's identity was prescribed according to traditional groupings of class, religion, nationality, region, race, ethnic background and so forth, the world has today rapidly become one enormous, undefined and unstructured mass where identity is more problematic.

2. The verbal impact of brands

Brands have an extraordinary capacity to compact complex and subtle nuances of differences in values, beliefs and desires. Combining the history of a particular brand with careful marketing manipulation of its current ideological profile as demonstrated in advertisements, sponsorship, use by high-profile celebrities, etc., a brand becomes a powerful instrument in the activity of an enterprise.

What people desperately need in the world today are signalling systems which allow them to project and advertise their own personal values and objectives. The added value of a brand is semiological: what it allows the consumer to say about him or herself. That is, what the consumer is paying over the odds for is an adjective and if this is just the right one then it is remarkably good value for money. In the process, the product ceases to be an object such as a jumper or a bottle of beer, and becomes the signification of that object - or, more precisely, the signification of the way of life around which the brand has come to be positioned.

It is, therefore, of the greatest importance that those whose job it is to promote and shape the future of particular brands have a full and accurate understanding of what their brand *says* and to compare and contrast this message with what numerically and economically significant clusters of current and potential consumers wish to say about themselves. The starting point for such an analysis might be verbal:

fun ----- serious/ concerned
active ----- contemplative
wealth oriented -----street
urban ----- rustic
hot -----cool
laid-back -----controlled
formal -----casual
hard -----soft
unisex -----gendered
positivistic -----nihilistic
minimal -----baroque

Brand names communicate denotatively and connotatively. When it comes to naming the product in the first place, there is considerable purpose to invest it with particular meanings and associations. The manufacturer has to give the product a name in the mass market. The name should do more than just label and identify the product: it should also bring associations to it which will help the product sell. The names given to cosmetics and other beauty products recall images of beauty, cleanliness and sophistication: Sunsilk, Dove, Sephora. Sometimes the names of the products convey scientific authority: Clinique, Normaderm. Men's toiletries (not "beauty products") also have evocative names: Denim, Old Spice. It does not take much imagination to work out why there are cars called Jaguar, Mustang, Corvette.

3. Linguistic means used in brands: wordplay and idioms

Wordplay

Wordplay (or pun) is a rhetorical device that often relies on the different meanings of a polysemic word, the literal and non-literal meaning of an idiom or on bringing two homonyms together in the same utterance to produce a witticism. Punning is frequently used in commercial advertising to attract the reader's attention and maintaining her/his interest in keeping with the AIDA principle whereby the language of advertising must attract the Attention of the prospective buyer, maintain her/his Interest, create a Desire, and get her/him into Action.²⁷⁷ By playing with the similarity of form and the difference in meaning of given lexical items, the advertiser entices the reader to grasp the double meaning conveyed by the message, as if it were a sort of puzzle, as a result, Tanaka observes, "the effort made by an audience in recovering the intended effects of the advertisement is actually increased by punning".²⁷⁸ Moreover, the reader is gratified for having understood the witticism, this contributing to fulfilling the text's conative function. Delabastita defines wordplay as a textual phenomenon, a fact of language which is inextricably linked to the structural features of language,²⁷⁹ puns are also intimately bound up with the culture of a

²⁷⁷ Cf. Lund, J.V., *Newspaper Advertising*, New York: Prentice-Hall, 1947, p.63.

²⁷⁸ Tanaka, K., *Advertising Language*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, p.64.

²⁷⁹ Delabastita, D., *Introduction*. In D. Delabastita (ed.), *Wordplay & Translation*. Special Issue of *The Translator*, 2(2),1996, p.129.

language, reflecting particular values, tastes and lifestyles. Furthermore, because of their humorous effect, puns are ideally suited to render commercial advertising witty, effective and memorable, as required by most big companies worldwide.

A really good pun can work miracles. However, there are examples of adverts lacking brand identity. Almost any competing brand could use these lines.

Moss Security: Alarmed? You should be.

Wyborowa Vodka: Enjoyed for centuries straight.

Pioneer: Everything you hear is true.

The Economist: For top laps.

Range Rover: It's how the smooth take the rough.

Holiday Inn: Pleasing people the world over.

Casio: Precisely what you're looking for.

Weight Watchers Taste. Not waist.

Frozen Meals:

Northern Telecom: Technology the world calls on.

Zanussi: The appliance of science.

Source: http://www.e-sgh.pl/cia/lexical_stylistic_devices.pdf

In the following table, the brand name appears, but as the solution or promise rather than part of the fun.

Flowers Fine Ales: Always pick Flowers.

Barbados: Barbados. Goodness. Gracious.

Finish Detergent: Brilliant cleaning starts with Finish.

British Steel: British Steel: British mettle.

First National Bank of Chicago: First relationships last.

Kenco Really Rich Coffee: Get Rich quick.

St. Ivel Shape Yogurt: Get your family into Shape, without them even noticing.

Kodak Gold: Is your film as good as Gold?

Asda: It 'asda be Asda.

HMV: No HMV, no video.

Ritz Crackers: Nothing fitz like a Ritz.

John Deere Tractors: Nothing runs like a Deere

Mumm's Champagne: One word captures the moment. Mumm's the word.

Money Magazine: Reap the rewards of Money.

Red Star: Send your parcels Red Star and pull out all the stops.

Tetley Tea: Tetley make teabags make tea.

Tic Tac Candy: Tic Tac. Surely the best tactic.

Impulse Deodorant: You just can't help acting on Impulse.

Source: http://www.e-sgh.pl/cia/lexical_stylistic_devices.pdf

In the following table, the brand goes to work, inextricably part of the pun.

Absolut Vodka: Absolut magic.

Citibank: Because the Citi never sleeps.

Frosted Chex: Chexcellent, or what?

Quavers Snacks: Do me a Quaver.

Thomas Cook: Don't just book it, Thomas Cook it.

Nytol Sleeping Pills: Good mornings follow a good Nytol.

IBM: I think, therefore IBM.

Abbey National Investments with Abbey endings.
Building Society:

Cutty Sark Whisky: Live a Cutty above.

Comet Electrical Lowering prices forever, that's Comet sense.
Stores:

Arthur's Cat Food: Nothing else is Arthur's good.

Skoda Favorit: Put your money on the Favorit.

Farley's Baby Food: So Farley's, so good.

Thomas Cook Travel: Take a Thomas Cook at our prices!

Immac Depilatory: The look is Immac-ulate

Visa Delta Debit Card: Visa's Delta blow to cheques

Cadbury's Wispa Candy: You can't keep quiet about a Wispa Candy:

Campari Aperitif: You'll find there is no Camparison.

Wike Farms Cheese: You'll Wike it too.

Source: http://www.e-sgh.pl/cia/lexical_stylistic_devices.pdf

The following advertisement by MG Rover Cars promoting its Land Rover is an example of wordplay which exploits the homonymy between spring meaning "a long thin piece of metal in the shape of a coil" and spring as "the season of the year between winter and summer", which is particularly pleasant in England. In turn spring is portrayed as a man or woman receiving advice on "how to be beautiful", thus providing a good example of what Haug calls Warenasthetic, that is the aestheticization of commodities, whereby advertising makes products appear as pleasing and appealing as possible.²⁸⁰ The message in small print consists in fact of a list of instructions corresponding to the different stages of what appears to be a kind of beauty treatment. The association between the various phases of manufacturing a metal spring and the routine activities aimed at acquiring an ideal figure is obtained through the metaphorical use of the verbal phrases "feed yourself", "take a dip" and "stretch [...] your entire body".

How to be beautiful. First, feed yourself through a furnace.

ANOTHER

Then take a dip in hot oil. (About 10000C should be OK.)

BEAUTIFUL

After that, get blasted by small metal balls. Finally, stretch

ENGLISH

and compress your entire body to the limit 250,000 times.

SPRING.

Then, and only then, can you be fitted to the most stunning 4x4.²⁸¹

3.2. Idioms

"An idiom is an expression (i.e. term or phrase) whose meaning cannot be deduced from the literal definitions and the arrangement of its parts, but refers instead to a figurative meaning that is known only through conventional use. In linguistics, idioms are figures of speech that contradict the principle of compositionality (the principle, which tells that the meaning of a complex expression is determined by the meanings of its constituent expressions and the rules used to combine them.)."²⁸²

Idioms have multiword character, they are fixed and they have common figurative meaning. The phrase 'to be in the same boat' has the literal meaning 'to be in the same boat', and also the idiomatic figurative meaning 'to be in the same difficult situation'. We write more about figurative meaning in a part Semantic aspect. A proverb is a

²⁸⁰ Haug, W.F., *Kritik der Warenästhetik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971, p.15.

²⁸¹ *The Telegraph Magazine*, 1997

²⁸² <http://www.wikipedia.org/>

type of idiomatic construction. It is “a well-known phrase or sentence that gives advice or says something that is generally true.”²⁸³

e.g.: ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth.’

It means that if too many people are involved in something, it will not be well done. Copywriters use idioms and proverbs in advertisements, because these constructions are familiar to most potential customers in a society. The idiom or a proverb in a text may be used without formal changes, or in a creative way, where an element of a proverb or idiom is slightly changed or replaced by another word to create a pun and, consequently, a connection with a product. If the picture accompanies the text, the picture usually does not represent the figurative - and, of course - correct and common meaning of the idiom, but it represents the image and representation of the literal meanings of its constituents.

e.g. “Challenge us – and get yourself *a bigger slice of the cake*.”²⁸⁴

An idiom ‘a bigger slice of the cake’ means a share of the available money or benefits that you believe you have a right to. A picture represents two happy young women eating a cake.

Idioms that have both a literal and an idiomatic meaning are often used creatively in wordplay. Idioms vary from being semantically opaque such as to break the ice meaning “to say or do something to make people feel relaxed and comfortable”, to being semi-opaque such as to pass the buck meaning “to pass the responsibility”, or being relatively transparent such as to see the light meaning “to understand”. Idioms that are difficult to recognize are those that have a literal as well as an idiomatic meaning, such as to go out with somebody, to take someone for a ride, to put one’s feet up, to pull somebody’s legs, to have cold feet, or to put something on ice.

*e.g. Thorntons new chocolates bars. Not everyone’s a fruit and nut case. Thorntons bring you a new selection of chunky chocolate bars. Milk chocolate. Dark chocolate. Autumn Nuts. Toffee. Winter Nut and Fruit. And Ginger. You’re spoilt for choice. So spoil yourself.*²⁸⁵

The advertisement promotes a new selection of chocolate bars produced by *Thorntons*, the famous British chocolate company since 1911. The witticism is created by playing with the idiom “to be a nut case” which means “to be mad or to behave in a strange way”. *Thorntons*, the advertiser intends to say, is not at all made but wise, because it does not limit its range of products to fruit and nut chocolate bars, like its competitor Cadbury, but it offers a delicious variety of fillings. The play on words - based on the literal and idiomatic meaning of the word nut as well as the addition of fruit and to form the coordinated noun phrase fruit and nut - which evokes Cadbury’s “fruit and nut chocolate bars” - has the effect of making *Thorntons* stand out to the detriment of its business rival, thus conveying what in advertising is known as the Unique Selling Proposition.²⁸⁶ This is a clear example where knowing about the specific cultural context that gives rise to an ad is often essential to disambiguate the subtle intended meanings conveyed by the creative use of promotional language.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, wordplay (or pun) is a witticism that relies for its effect on playing with different levels of language, i.e. phonological, graphological, morphological, lexical, syntactic, and textual. Puns and idioms are frequently used in commercial advertising as a rhetorical device to promote a given product or service by creating humour, attracting the reader’s attention and adding persuasive force to the message. They also reflect the cultural preferences and traditions of a country, therefore they can be fruitfully used for pedagogic purposes to raise awareness of the specific linguistic and cultural features of the foreign language.

²⁸³ *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* 2001

²⁸⁴ w1.siemens.com/

²⁸⁵ *The Guardian Weekend*, 1997

²⁸⁶ Goddard, A., *The Language of Advertising*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 4.