

## **Pun: Good For Selling Goods**

### **-- The Application of Pun in English Advertising**

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**ABSTRACT.** *Pun is one of the most significant components of rhetoric. It makes a play on the title with the result of receiving the effect from one by referring to another, thereby filling the language with liveliness and vividness. The pursuit of artistic language used in advertisements for esthetics is based on the direct utilitarian goal, in which using puns is preferred by the advertisers for the fact that it either produces the best contextual effects or achieves the greatest economic benefits. Here, this paper is offered as a preliminary probe into a study on pun application in advertisements through a categorically analytic approach.*

**KEYWORDS :** *pun; English advertising; rhetoric; translation*

#### **1. Introduction**

Advertising is a product of rapid economic development. Not only as an economic activity which brings new goods and services to people, but also it is a cultural exchange, which provides a main medium for giving publicity to a nation or a country. In addition to having the content and characteristics of the product clearly expressed, a good advertising must be vivid and concise, in order to be attractive enough to arouse the strong interest of consumers and stimulate their desire to purchase and consequently result in the purchase behavior. How to properly understand and use the language in English advertising to achieve a wide-ranging purpose is a real problem faced by importers, exporters, advertising creators and many consumers. As a common rhetorical means in advertising English, pun can increase the attractiveness and novelty of advertisements, making them more easily come into people's minds. It has the ability of giving a sense of humor to advertisements, and meanwhile helps to achieve the effect of products' promotion and sales[1]. The following paper intends to make a preliminary discussion on puns' usage in English advertising.

## **2. The Definition and Function of Pun in English**

### ***2.1 The Definition and Features of Pun***

Pun is a common rhetorical device in English. Compared to the “pun” in Chinese, the word comes from Latin word “Paronomasia”, which means “similar in appearance” and “semantic similarity”. Joel Sherzer said in the book *Pun and Jokes*: “A pun is a form of speech play in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings.” The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the pun as “the humorous use of a word in a way that suggests two or more interpretations”, meaning that puns are a humorous usage in which a word can be interpreted in two or more ways. In the Oxford English Dictionary, it is given the definition of “The use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different association, 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 effect.” In the explanation from The American Heritage Dictionary, puns are “A play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word or sometimes on the similar or the same sound of different words. Also called paronomasia.” As the statements above, it can be seen that pun is a rhetorical device, which uses a homonym or polysemy in a language to enable a word or a sentence related to two things. As a result, readers can have two different understandings from the context. It is a rhetorical means of relying on the meaning of words to convey emotional color[2]. In short, the use of pun is able to have the text contained more than two meanings. A pun is regarded as a homogeneous phenomenon of semantic ambiguity and can also be considered as a manifestation of semantic ambiguity. It is obvious that the pun has a multi-functional rhetorical effect, which can enhance the expressive force of the language, making the text rich in humor and subtle taste. Furthermore, it can be used to portray the character and psychology, consequently making it easier to convey the emotion from writers for the sake of improving the presentation of works.

### ***2.2 The Function of Pun***

#### ***2.2.1 Aesthetic function***

The pun is the earliest word game for fun that has been circulated in the folk. In the Congman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Webster's New World Dictionary, the interpretation of the pun is invariably the same. The expression “play on word” is used to describe this rhetorical device. This kind of word game features on humorousness, expressiveness, and conciseness, and only by few words, readers will be brought to enter another world. In this aspect, the aesthetic function of the pun has been achieved, which is showing readers its unique effect and the rigor in humor. Based on the first step of being interested and attracted, people will in turn think the deep meanings behind the pun so that they can be aware of the authors' good intentions and hardships, which leads to the stored memory of this advertisement[3]. So the aesthetic function plays a fundamental role in appealing to

potential consumers.

### ***2.2.2 Humorous or Satirical Functions***

For the unique characteristic of “indicating one by referring to another” or “killing two birds with one stone”, pun often appears in the literature works because it is a good choice for authors to achieve humor and satire at the same time. The meaning of a word depends on specific contexts, such as the speaker’s intention or the tone, which provides a good chance for readers to have different interpretations about one word in various contexts. Li Xinhua clearly pointed out in his book *The English Rhetoric Detailed Theory* that dual context is important and necessary for puns. Besides, there is also a strong link between the two contexts, and the link is the pun itself. However, this aspect is mostly reflected in the literature works for the reason that the commercials tends to be in a positive attitude instead of criticizing someone because they need to show their friendliness and welcome to customers[4].

### ***2.2.3 Persuasive Function***

It is determined that the pun is more likely to attract the attention of people than many other forms because of its characteristics of implication to achieve the gaze of eyes, which is the primary purpose in advertising creation. If there is no attention, how to bring the interest of knowing more and complete the final purchase? The pun also satisfies the simple and powerful principle that slogans follow, so it is not surprising that this rhetorical device is used in a large number of advertisings. When evaluating the quality of an advertisement, the following five rules will be taken into the consideration: whether the advertisement has information value, attention value, interest value, aesthetic value and memory value[5]. The final goal of these five values is to persuade people to make a purchase, which is the original aim of commercials.

## **3. Application of Pun in English Advertisements**

### ***3.1 The Relationship Between Pun and Advertisements***

Advertising is the place where “pun” is on its big show. Advertising creators often intentionally use the characteristics of puns to offer people two or more interpretations[6]. However, people will generally exclude the most superficial and direct meanings, allowing themselves to enter the roles described in the advertisements and completely immersed in the creation of advertisements to comprehend the deeper content as what advertisers expect in this context. Advertisers attract readers' attention through this special and truly ingenious language communication method. For example, there is a slogan for an English teaching tape: “A Sound Way to Learning English.” This advertisement is clever in the use of “sound”, which has two meanings: first is a kind of voice, and second it

has the same meaning as “perfect”. In this way, it indicates that listening to the sound is the correct and also the best way for people to learn English, which can immediately stimulate the purchasing desire of potential customers who are English learners. Another wine advertisement: “The Unique Spirit of Canada. We Bottle it.” The success of this advertisement is that it subtly applies the pun “spirit” and “bottle”. The former one refers to both wine and the mentality, and the latter one means to gather and also a kind of container[7]. On one hand, it can show the incomparable spirits. On the other hand, it reflects the unique spirit of Canada so that it spurs the people's emotion. In a word, using puns in commercials makes it easier to establish a relation between the product and the customer and expand the effectiveness owing to the fact that people are willing to spend more time knowing this advertising when they are attracted by the “trick” played by the pun.

### ***3.2 The Application of Pun in Advertising***

#### **3.2.1 Homophonic Pun**

A homophonic pun is a pun that uses words with similar spellings and the same or similar pronunciation. In other words, words that have the same or similar pronunciation but different meanings are used to replace the meanings to be expressed. This method is more common in advertising. It has a funny, humorous and playful language style, which greatly increases the persuasiveness and appealing of advertising, thus leaving the audience under the deep impression. There comes an example:

“Have a nice trip, buy-buy!”

This is the slogan of an airport store. The highlight of the sentence is the word “buy-buy” because the word “buy-buy” is synonymous with “bye-bye”. Therefore, it has a double meaning: one is to take leave of the passengers; the other is to remind everyone of not forgetting to buy something before leaving. This sentence makes a use of the homonymous characteristics of the two words “bye” and “buy”, making the advertising slogan impressive. Here is also another example:

“Forget hot taste,

Only Kool, with pure method has the taste of extra coolness.

Come up to Kool.”

This is an advertisement for cigarettes. In this expression, kool is a homophonic pun, which refers to both the cigarette itself and the feeling of coolness in the interest of highlighting the distinctive cool features of the product. The advertisement maker created a word “kool” as the name of the cigarette, and through using it with the same cool and the first “hot” as the opposite of “cool”, the meaning of “cool” has been further strengthened. In such a contrast, it brings out the cool taste of the kool cigarette.

#### **3.2.2 Homographic Pun**

A pun can be used as either homonyms or polysemy, and it is closely linked to the dual context to express two layers of meaning, resulting in a witty effect. The prerequisite for a semantic pun is polysemy. It has two situations: first, a word appears only once, and its literal meaning is different from its connotation; the other is that a word appears multiple times, but the meaning differs from each other because of different moods. English humor is often achieved by this kind of method. For example:

“Make time for Time.”

This is the advertising slogan of Time magazine. Here the word “time” appears twice: the first time just means the normal “time”, but the first letter of the second “Time” is capitalized, referring to the name of “Time” magazine. The example cleverly uses the characteristics of puns and homonyms. After reading it, readers can be deeply impressed. Here comes another example:

“Which lager can claim to be truly German?

This can.”

This is an advertisement for “Lager” brand ale, with a can of “Lager” beer standing in the illustration. The highlight of the full text is on the “can”, which can be used as a modal verb and also as a noun (beverage can). On the other hand, the brand’s name “Large” means “a big can of beer” in German, so the name itself has already contained two meanings since it appeared. From this aspect, some commercials not only use puns in their slogan but also apply it when giving the name to a product especially in the homographic way.

### 3.2.3 Grammatical Pun

The grammatical pun is to make the sentence have a double meaning through grammatical changes. For example:

“Less bread, no jam.”

This is an advertisement for the London Underground. At first glance, people may think of bread, jam and other foods, because bread and jam are inseparable from the daily life of the British. However, when these two words are placed in the slogan, they have the effect of the pun. The word “bread” can be extended to “make a living”, meaning money; the word “jam” can be expressed as traffic jam, which is expressed in an extended meaning, that is “Less money, no traffic jam”.

### 3.2.4 Pun From Idiom

This kind of pun is based on some well-known idioms or proverbs, which are modified or recreated. These advertisements are based on people's original social background and cultural knowledge, and result in interpretations depending on their distinct and unique languages. For example:

“A Mars a day, keeps you work, rest and play.”

When people read this slogan, they will feel that this seems to be familiar to them. The original proverb is famous: “an apple a day keeps a doctor away.” The

slogan has adapted the original sentence of the proverb so it is much easier to memorize.

#### **4. Translation of Pun in Advertisements**

##### ***4.1 Separation***

The translation method is to separate the object into several parts and then translate respectively. In the process of translation, for the reason that a language form can express more than one meaning, a meaning is in turn not merely expressed in one language form. As a result, if the double meaning of the pun wants to be fully reflected in the translation, it is necessary to sacrifice the formal correspondence and divide the pun semantics into two parts to faithfully convey the original meaning. For example:

“Ask for More.”

This is a classic advertisement set up by Moore Cigarettes. There are two meanings, one is the meaning of “more”, so some people translate it into “还吸一支, 再来摩尔”; and the second is the brand name of cigarettes. Therefore, only the separation in the translation can achieve the effect of this pun. The translation of puns is difficult for the fact that languages all have their unique features, so the translator sometimes has to give up part of it to make the original information completely presented. It is agreed that the standard of advertising translation, which is based on functional equivalence, is to achieve the principle of equivalence.

##### ***4.2 Having a Stress***

This method requires a focus in the process of translation. There are some puns in the advertisements, but are difficult to fully represent them in the translation. Therefore, it is often encountered that the corresponding puns may disappear, or the content appears to be cumbersome after the translation. At this time, translators have to sacrifice the formal meaning, homophonic meaning and implicit modality of the original language, and adopt a partial translation method to retain its conceptual meaning. Consequently, the pun in the original text no longer exists. For example:

“The driver is safer when the road is dry.

The road is safer when the driver is dry.”

This slogan aims at warning people not to drive after drinking alcohol. In English, the word “dry” has two meanings: the first means the contrary of the word “wet”, and the second is to describe a person is not drunk. So when the sentence is to be translated into Chinese, this pun has to be abandoned owing to the limitation in Chinese characters in expressing the same effect.

### **4.3 Compensation**

When translating a layer of meaning of the pun, another layer of meaning cannot be fully expressed, then some should be taken to compensate. For advertising, it is said that the most commonly used means of compensation is the media that carries advertisements, such as television, broadcast audio and video images or graphic design of newspapers and magazines. For example:

“OIC!”

This is another classic eye advertising, in which three simple capital letters look like a pair of glasses, pronouncing “Oh, I see.” This advertising uses both visual language and auditory language to attract the attention of the public to make the customers who have a poor eyesight feel more comfortable. However, the translation of the advertisement is difficult to balance both visual and auditory, so it can only be translated from the auditory aspect: “Oh! I see it!”

### **5. Conclusion**

The rhetorical method of puns have the feature to be concise, attractive, expressive, vivid and unforgettable, so it is popular among advertising planners and is widely used in advertising language. Because of its flexible and diverse expression techniques, the language is full of humor and novelty, and this rhetorical method is loved by many viewers and readers. It not only enhances the artistic appeal of language, but also highlights the expression function, and meanwhile achieves the fundamental purpose of promotion. When introducing goods, English slogan uses a language that is not revealing but meaningful to bring consumers into fantasy. It can stimulate people's consumption motives, influence people's consumption concepts, and finally induce people's consumption behavior. For the translation of advertising puns, it is expected to adopt different methods according to the specific situation. Translators are supposed to choose the most appropriate one, and faithfully and concisely convey the original purpose. In addition, the translators' creativity and the ability to control language are also in an equally important place. The translation should be repeatedly scrutinized to give the target readers the same information and aesthetic feeling as the original readers. In conclusion, pun is a common rhetoric in English advertising, but it is also a difficult point in translation. Pun has insurmountable barriers to translatability in the language structure and expression. Advertising language is a kind of agile and inducing language. Therefore, in order to better translate advertisements and create public advertising, it is crucial to have a full understanding of the target culture to achieve the equivalence in translation.

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