

## A Relevance-Theoretic Interpretation of Puns in English Advertisements

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### Abstract

Commercial advertising is the product of a highly developed modern commodity economy, which can rapidly expand product popularity, shape product image, and promote the rapid and healthy development of the commodity economy. Puns are favored because they can maximize cost savings and stimulate customers' desire to purchase. From the perspective of the cognitive process, pun advertising is a combination of contradictions, which increases the difficulty of understanding the content but can attract the attention of the audience. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, advertising communication is an ostensive-inferential process, and a cognitive process in which the listener identifies the speaker's intention. Under the viewshed of Relevance Theory and Abrams' four literary coordinates, the communication strategies contained in English pun advertisements have been thoroughly analyzed, and the mechanism of their action has also been elaborated in detail. Analysis can not only help the audience better understand the English advertising pun strategy but also provide a reference for the production of the commercial advertisements and the shaping of commodity images, which can promote the sustainable and healthy development of commodity economy.

### Keywords

**Pun; Relevance Theory; English advertisement; ostensive-inferential.**

### 1. Introduction

With the globalization of the world economy and the increasing frequency of international trade, products from various countries are being promoted through a variety of English advertisements. Advertising, as a means of widespread communication, plays a crucial role in the marketing of goods. As Wu Xiaohuan (2007: 157) pointed out, "The true effectiveness of an advertisement lies in the actions taken by the audience after viewing it, rather than in the copy itself." The audience interprets the communicative intent of an advertisement based on the information conveyed in the copy, which requires advertisers to invest significant effort in crafting the text. As Liu Lihua (2011: 86) stated, "The unique function of advertising demands that its language and form be attention-grabbing, easily understandable, and memorable—in other words, advertisements must possess attention value and memorability." Puns, with their humorous artistry, concise form, and rich content, have become highly favored. However, puns inherently carry multiple interpretations, characterized by ambiguity and dual contexts, requiring the audience to exert more effort to grasp their deeper meanings. Since Sperber and Wilson proposed Relevance Theory in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, it has become a prominent topic in pragmatics research. According to Relevance Theory, communication is a

process in which the audience infers and perceives the communicator's intent. To understand the speaker's meaning, the listener must first receive an ostensive stimulus, which typically comes from the speaker's own ostensive behavior. The receiver then infers the speaker's intent based on the provided ostensive stimulus. In other words, advertising communication is an ostensive-inferential process. With the continuous development of advertising, linguists have conducted extensive research on advertising language. However, studies on puns in advertising have primarily focused on their rhetorical functions and translation techniques, with less attention paid to the process by which audiences comprehend and derive the meaning of puns in English advertisements. Furthermore, Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, proposed the four elements of literary criticism: work, world, artist, and audience, which have been widely adopted as criteria for evaluating literary works. Advertising, as a form of literary work, can benefit from applying Abrams' theories of pragmatism and expressionism to the study of puns in advertisements, thereby providing a deeper analysis of the use of pun strategies in English advertising language. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze puns in English advertisements within the framework of Relevance Theory, exploring the "ostensive-inferential" process in verbal communication and the crucial role of context construction in information exchange. By doing so, it seeks to help audiences better understand puns in advertisements and enable advertisers to use puns more effectively.

## 2. Puns in Advertising as Ostensive Communication

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, verbal communication is a cognitive process that involves two modes: the code model and the inference model (Sperber & Wilson, 1986: 27). In verbal communication, the speaker encodes meaning into sounds, and the listener decodes those sounds into meaning, thereby completing the communication. However, during the communication process, encoding and decoding are subordinate to the cognitive-inferential process (He Ziran & Ran Yongping, 1998: 94). In verbal communication, the speaker's intention to convey certain information is referred to as "ostension," which includes both the informational intent and the communicative intent. The informational intent refers to the literal meaning of the utterance provided by the speaker, while the communicative intent refers to the implied meaning behind the literal words (Qu Jiadan, 2005: 123). In advertising communication, the audience derives the literal meaning, or the advertiser's informational intent, from the copy, while the deeper meaning hidden beneath the literal words represents the advertiser's true communicative intent. According to Li Conghe (2003: 2), the implicit information in Relevance Theory is relative to the explicit content. It is not an extension of the logical form of the utterance but is entirely derived through pragmatic inference as an ostensive assumption. Some implicit information consists of contextual assumptions intended by the speaker, serving either as the premise or the conclusion of the inferential process. When the listener successfully understands the speaker's implied meaning through pragmatic inference, the speaker's communicative intent is realized, meaning that the ostensive behavior becomes manifest to the listener, resulting in "mutual manifestness." In verbal communication, "ostension" is the premise, and based on the ostensive stimuli provided by the speaker, numerous contextual assumptions arise. The listener then seeks the optimal relevance between the speaker's utterance and the context, a process known as "inference." Chen Kaiju (2002: 30) pointed out that both parties in communication have their own assumptions or understandings of the same object or environment. Their sets of cognitive contextual assumptions may overlap partially, forming a common ground that serves as the basis for communication. In other words, the establishment of "mutual manifestness" relies on the intersection of the contextual assumptions of both parties. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 54) proposed that inferential communication, ostensive communication, and ostensive inferential communication essentially refer to the same process, where inference and ostension are complementary and

occur simultaneously. That is, in the communication process of English pun-based advertisements, both inferential and ostensive communication occurs when the audience derives the meaning of puns. Consider the following example:

(1) Love didn't meet her at her best, it met her in her m $\grave{e}$ ss. (Herm $\grave{e}$ s)

This is an advertisement slogan displayed on the fencing of a new Herm $\grave{e}$ s store in Milan, behind which the store was under renovation. The slogan is adapted from a famous quote by writer J. S. Park: "Real love doesn't meet you at your best. It meets you in your mess."

English puns, as meticulously crafted creations by designers, captivate and sustain the audience's attention with their unique linguistic charm. Li Xinhua (2000: 193-195), in *\*A Detailed Discussion of English Rhetorical Devices\**, proposed that puns have two characteristics: ambiguity and dual context. Puns exist at the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic levels, encompassing multiple layers of meaning. In English pun-based advertisements, advertisers skillfully create dual contexts through homophonic puns and semantic puns, generating explicit stimuli. In the case of Herm $\grave{e}$ s' slogan, the creator uses "her m $\grave{e}$ ss" to create a pun with "Herm $\grave{e}$ s," resulting in a multi-layered context that makes the advertisement exceptionally brilliant. Comparing the advertisement with its original sentence, it is evident that the creator changed the object from the second-person "your" to the third-person "her" and altered "mess" to "m $\grave{e}$ ss." "M $\grave{e}$ ss" means "chaos," and the entire slogan can be translated as "Love may not happen when she is at her best, but it may come when she is in a mess." This leaves the audience with a positive psychological hint: even in difficult times, one should not give up easily, and visiting Herm $\grave{e}$ s during low moments might bring good fortune. Additionally, "in a mess" means "in disarray," which, combined with the background information that this is a newly renovated Herm $\grave{e}$ s store, effectively conveys the communicative intent of "stay tuned."

However, fully understanding the meaning of this English pun-based advertisement requires assistance from external information. Hill (1985: 449) from the University of Texas at Austin proposed that the analysis and construction of puns involve three elements: dual context, hinge, and trigger. The "hinge" refers to the pun itself, while the "trigger" is the intention and background behind the pun that the audience uses to decode it. Advertisers present pun-based advertisements, requiring the audience to use the "trigger" to decode the "hinge." When the advertisement slogan enters the audience's view and "her m $\grave{e}$ ss" leads them to associate it with "Herm $\grave{e}$ s," the "ostension" from the advertiser becomes "manifest," and the dual context of the pun begins to take effect. The creator cleverly alludes to the brand "Herm $\grave{e}$ s," implying "finding love at Herm $\grave{e}$ s," meaning that consumers might find their desired products here or even meet a significant other. In summary, through this slogan, Herm $\grave{e}$ s conveys to the audience the ostensive stimulus that "entering Herm $\grave{e}$ s will result in a positive emotional experience," thereby sparking customers' desire and anticipation.

The perfect interpretation of product qualities in English pun-based advertisements is inseparable from the advertiser's ingenuity. Abrams, in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, proposed the famous four elements of literary interpretation, among which the expressive theory, focusing on the relationship between the work and the author, posits that a work of art is essentially the external product of the inner world, the result of a creative process driven by sensory impulses, and a synthesis of the author's perceptions, thoughts, and emotions (Abrams, 1971: 22). As a special form of literary work, the creation of advertising language requires advertisers to integrate their understanding of the product, their emotions, and the commercial requirements for product sales, internalizing and externalizing their thought processes. The creator's choice to present this slogan on a Herm $\grave{e}$ s-orange background framed by narrow black borders is based on their deep understanding of the brand, allowing the audience to recognize it as Herm $\grave{e}$ s' classic packaging even from a distance. Additionally, when replacing the object with a third-person pronoun, the creator chose "her" instead of "his." On the one hand, this was to pair with "mess" to create the pun with "Herm $\grave{e}$ s," and on the other hand, it targeted the female

consumer demographic. Moreover, luxury brands often present themselves with an image of perfection and pride, while the tone of "mess" is clearly at odds with Hermès, a synonym for luxury. However, this contrast is precisely the eye-catching element of the advertisement, making the slogan more unique and innovative, thereby enhancing consumers' cognitive and emotional experiences. At the same time, the creator adjusted the tense, shifting from the present tense to the past tense. Using the third person to narrate a past event significantly enhances the credibility of the story. As Jiang Fei and Dong Hongxue (2008: 76) stated, to achieve coherence in communication, the speaker must make their informational intent ostensive to the listener and ensure it becomes manifest to the listener as well. This "mutual manifestness" requires the listener and speaker to share the same cognitive environment, meaning the advertiser must provide new information that is relevant to the existing information processed or stored in the audience's cognitive environment. When the audience sees the advertisement, their thinking begins to be guided and inspired by the advertiser, and the process of their attempting to understand is precisely the process of inference. This implies that a certain 默契 (tacit understanding) must be achieved between the advertiser and the audience, requiring the advertiser to inject appropriate and resonant information into the advertisement.

### 3. Puns in Advertising as Inferential Communication

The listener's inference is the core of Relevance Theory's view of communication. Ostension is the speaker's task, while inference is the listener's task. Meng Jiangang (2016: 127) revised the definition of ostensive-inferential communication as "the communicator generates a behavioral stimulus that simultaneously conveys communicative and informational intent. This stimulus prompts the listener to notice the communicator's communicative intent and then engage in deductive reasoning about the informational intent, thereby achieving optimal relevance." In other words, the listener decodes the speaker's utterance, but the evidence obtained from decoding serves only as a partial premise for understanding the true meaning of the utterance. Wang Weiming (2005: 67) argued that in the ostensive-inferential process, the communicator employs non-demonstrative deductive reasoning rather than pure logical reasoning. This means that the inferential process also requires the listener to combine their background knowledge to correctly interpret the speaker's meaning. Since the purpose of human language communication includes the desire to improve one's understanding of the world, the listener always expects the new assumptions provided by the speaker's utterance to alter their own contextual assumptions (Miao Xingwei, 1999: 11). The audience learns about the product through the advertisement, and their task in advertising communication is to find the contextual assumption that best relates to the advertisement. This search process constitutes the listener's inferential communication in response to the "ostensive" stimulus. "The process of utterance inference is one of seeking relevance between newly presented information and contextual assumptions" (Yu Yan, 2008: 151). According to Dai Weidong and He Zhaoxiong (2002), contextual assumptions consist of shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener, and there are two types of shared knowledge: the knowledge used by both parties and knowledge about the world, including general knowledge about the world and specific knowledge about the linguistic communication situation. Based on the above, successful advertising communication requires the advertiser to produce ostensive stimuli based on the audience's cognitive structure, while the audience combines context to find the optimal relevance to the utterance, completing the inferential communication. To illustrate this, let us refer to another pun-based advertisement from Hermès.

(2) Orange turns red. (An advertisement for rouge.)

This concise and impactful advertisement is a promotional slogan created by Hermès for its lipstick line. Accompanied by a close-up poster of red lips, the combination perfectly captures the aesthetic beauty of the pun.

The popularity of English pun-based advertisements is inseparable from the aesthetic appeal brought by ambiguity. Given the multiple contexts and ambiguity of puns, the audience needs to exert more effort in deductive reasoning. However, as Xue Bing and Li Yue'e (2000: 36) pointed out, this extra effort by the audience is not in vain. By understanding the advertiser's true intent through the principle of optimal relevance, they will find that the product or service is beneficial to them, meaning "effort is rewarded, and effort will be repaid." From the perspective of Relevance Theory, when faced with English advertisements containing multiple layers of meaning, the audience will unconsciously engage in inference. The English pun-based advertisement, as new information, requires the audience to make assumptions based on logical information, encyclopedic knowledge, and lexical information. Due to differences in individuals' cognitive structures, the environments formed by these three types of information vary significantly, leading to different inferential outcomes. The inferential process of puns provides the audience with a maze-like emotional experience.

First, based on the literal meaning, the audience generates the most superficial contextual assumption: orange turns red. However, this lacks a clear brand or product reference, prompting the audience to adjust their cognitive environment and re-infer. Relying on existing encyclopedic knowledge, the audience attempts to connect the colors with the brand. Orange can be considered Hermès' signature color, as phrases like "Hermès orange" are frequently used in daily life. Therefore, it becomes clear that "orange" here refers to the Hermès brand. Combined with the image of the model's red lips in the poster, the audience can deduce that "red" refers to rouge, i.e., lipstick. Thus, a deeper contextual assumption emerges: Hermès orange transforms into rouge. In other words, when customers unwrap the orange Hermès packaging, they will see Hermès lipstick. As Kang Xiaoyun (2015: 39) stated, to truly achieve the purpose of pragmatic communication, not only must the speaker have intentionality, but the listener must also consciously reinterpret the speaker's literal conventional meaning based on experience. Since Hermès is a brand renowned for its leather goods, lipstick represents a new venture for the brand. This advertisement, with its concise and accessible wording, effectively informs consumers that Hermès has begun selling lipstick, achieving excellent promotional results. Compared to advertisements with only one layer of meaning, the audience's process of finding the most suitable contextual information to infer the advertiser's informational intent not only increases familiarity with the product but also, through a winding path, leads to a moment of realization that reinforces the slightly aroused desire to purchase.

The quality of English pun-based advertisements depends on the audience's feedback. Based on the exploration of the relationship between the work and the reader, Abrams proposed the pragmatic theory. This theory views artwork as a means to achieve certain ends, a tool to accomplish something, and tends to judge the value of an artwork based on whether it achieves its intended purpose (Abrams, 1971: 15). Advertising language is a means to promote product sales and a tool to achieve commercial goals. Understanding consumers' needs enables advertisers to use advertising strategies more accurately, attracting more consumers. As a top luxury brand, Hermès products are expensive and symbolize consumers' wealth and status. Moreover, the unique and fashionable design philosophy of luxury goods aligns with the cold, high-end impression conveyed by the extremely concise sentences in the advertisement. The brand charm reflected in the advertisement satisfies consumers' sense of superiority and vanity to some extent. However, as a consumable, lipstick is not generally perceived as a high-end product, and its price is often within the acceptable range for most consumers. Therefore, for long-time loyal customers, this advertisement informs them of Hermès' latest product; for new customers who have long admired luxury brands, the production of Hermès lipstick provides

an opportunity to own a luxury product; and for customers in need of lipstick, Hermès' excellent reputation may stimulate their desire to learn more and make a purchase. In short, the information conveyed by this advertisement is highly attractive and compelling to most consumers. It is evident that this pun-based English advertisement is grounded in consumers' needs. Through just three simple and unadorned words, it skillfully constructs a pun context that fully showcases the brand's unique charm, effectively fulfilling the advertisement's mission of promoting product sales and stimulating customers' desire to purchase. Of course, this success is inseparable from the audience's initial effort in inferring contextual assumptions. It is precisely because the audience actively seeks the most relevant context to infer the meaning of the English pun-based advertisement and grasp the advertiser's true communicative intent that the use of pun strategies is fully realized.

#### 4. Context and Optimal Relevance

Context refers to the environment in which language is used. Internal context pertains to the environment within the linguistic segment itself, while external context refers to the social environment surrounding the linguistic segment. In previous pragmatic studies, such as Grice's Cooperative Principle, context was considered fixed and predetermined. However, Relevance Theory argues that the traditional concept of context cannot objectively reflect the psychological states of the communicators during language use, and thus, it refers to context as "contextual assumptions" (Chen Ya, 2007: 136). According to Relevance Theory, context is not predetermined but is seen as a matter of dynamic selection. In other words, context is not determined before interpreting an utterance but is adjusted and established by the listener during the process of seeking relevance. Every ostensive act conveys an assumption of its own optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 2001: 158). To achieve optimal relevance, we must reconstruct our cognitive context, which requires a certain amount of cognitive effort (Xie Hua, 2016: 115). Relevance Theory posits that the communication process involves two principles of relevance: the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. The cognitive principle states that human cognition tends to adapt to maximal relevance, while the communicative principle states that every ostensive communicative act conveys an assumption of its optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 260). In other words, "human cognition is oriented toward maximal relevance, while linguistic communication is oriented toward optimal relevance" (Li Kaning, 2005: 96). Optimal relevance refers to achieving sufficient contextual effects with reasonable processing effort, whereas maximal relevance refers to obtaining the greatest contextual effects with the least effort. An utterance is most appropriate only when it is sufficiently relevant to warrant the recipient's processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 267, 270). People tend to pay more attention to things that are relevant to them. Therefore, in English pun-based advertisements, the creator must select the most relevant stimulus between the product and the advertisement to derive the implied communicative intent, laying the groundwork for the audience to achieve optimal relevance. Here, we will discuss an example of a pun-based advertisement for a German beer brand:

(3) Brewed with love. (An advertisement for beer.)

Accompanying this beer advertisement slogan is a poster featuring several men with protruding bellies.

Context plays a crucial role in the ostensive-inferential process of English pun-based advertisements. Scholar Chen Kaiju (2002: 30) pointed out that an individual's cognitive context is the result of the interaction between their physical environment and cognitive abilities. When this advertisement appears, people are first drawn to the image in the poster. Combined with the slogan, "brewed" means "conceived" or "pregnant," suggesting "conceived with love." This is the contextual effect the audience obtains with minimal inferential effort,

achieving maximal cognitive relevance at this stage. However, the audience will realize that this interpretation has little to do with a beer advertisement and will continue to infer to achieve optimal relevance. Subsequently, the audience will feel puzzled by the men with "pregnant bellies," as this clearly contradicts their real-world knowledge. From the perspective of the most prominent feature of puns, "puns replace contexts aimed at suppressing potential ambiguity; they are the product of deliberately constructed contexts that reinforce ambiguity, leaving the reader or listener unable to choose between meanings and endlessly oscillating in semantic space" (Attridge, 1988: 141). Since puns use ordinary expressions to convey unusual meanings, the audience's original cognition is often 颠覆. To achieve optimal relevance, the audience will reject the initial contextual assumption. They then begin to exert further inferential effort based on their cognitive background and the advertisement's context. When realizing that this is an advertisement for a beer brand, the audience will associate it with the phenomenon of a "beer belly" and recall another meaning of "brewed," which is "to brew." Thus, a second contextual assumption emerges: this brand of beer is brewed with love. Combining this with the initial contextual assumption, the audience continues to infer the advertiser's intended communicative intent—that the beer brewed by this brand is like a child born after ten months of pregnancy, filled with love and care. At this point, the audience achieves the optimal relevance of the ostensive communication conveyed by the advertiser. It can be said that the extra effort made by the recipient yields additional results. The advertisement creator uses the double meaning of "brewed" to create a pun context, guiding the audience to exert inferential effort and ultimately achieve optimal relevance, enriching their emotional experience. While promoting their brand's product, the advertisement also expresses praise and admiration for the hard work of mothers in nurturing life, establishing a positive brand image.

Contextual effects influence the generation of optimal relevance. Relevance Theory posits that contextual effects arise when new information interacts with existing assumptions in the following three ways: new information strengthens existing assumptions, new information contradicts existing assumptions, or new information combines with existing assumptions to produce contextual implications (Sperber & Wilson, 2001: 117). This is a common phenomenon in puns. When readers find that their assumptions do not align with the context, they attempt to adjust their cognitive context to fit the current situation. According to Relevance Theory, the strength of relevance is determined by the balance between processing effort and contextual effects. Under the same conditions, the greater the contextual effects, the stronger the relevance. Advertisers of pun-based advertisements must not only ensure that the ostensive stimuli they provide are sufficiently connected to the audience's existing cognitive assumptions to generate contextual effects but also strive to make the advertisement highly relevant. This allows the audience to achieve optimal relevance with minimal processing effort in the shortest possible time, making the advertising communication process more fluid.

This beer advertisement consists of a slogan and a humorous poster featuring men with "pregnant bellies." The image of men with pregnant bellies contradicts the audience's existing cognitive assumptions. However, when the audience realizes that this is an advertisement for beer, the phenomenon of a "beer belly" enters their imagination, generating new contextual effects. Of course, not all inferential efforts by the audience will necessarily yield contextual effects. He Zhaoxiong (2000: 194) pointed out that whether a discourse achieves contextual effects depends on three factors: the complexity of the discourse, the clarity of the context, and the amount of effort the audience expends to derive sufficient contextual effects in a specific context. In this pun-based advertisement, the creator avoids complex expressions. The advertisement copy consists of commonly used words in English communication, paired with an eye-catching poster that clarifies the context for the audience, creating the prerequisite for the audience to exert sufficient effort in inference. Therefore, considering that the audience

needs to grasp the communicative intent of the advertisement in a short time, advertisement creation should adhere to the above three conditions. English puns, known for their humor and conciseness and characterized by multiple contexts, 恰好 help advertisements achieve sufficient contextual effects.

## 5. Conclusion

The principle of relevance governs the whole process of linguistic communication. The concepts of “explicit-inferential” communication, context, and optimal relevance provide a clear theoretical framework and guiding principles for analyzing puns in English commercials. In punning communication the advertiser delivers explicit stimuli to the audience, while the audience mobilizes their existing knowledge, puts in extra reasoning efforts, adjusts the cognitive context to obtain the best association, and finally achieves a smooth communication in the advertisement. As a combination of culture and language, punny English advertisements use puns as a mechanism, combine rich linguistic and cultural connotations, utilize double contexts and ambiguity to attract consumers’ attention, improve the interest and influence of commercial advertisements, persuade consumers to take purchasing actions, achieve the purpose of advertising and marketing, and gradually expand the influence and competitiveness of the brand. The study of punning English advertisements under the threshold of association theory better clarifies the comprehension process of puns in commercial advertisements, provides ideas for the advertising and marketing strategies of brands, and helps to promote Chinese commodities to the international market in a more elegant manner.

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