

Laughter Guaranteed: A Research Programme for the Analysis of Humour in Propaganda

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1. Introduction

The introduction of the new Bachelor-Master structure for the Dutch universities in 2002 had an enormous impact on the curriculum for CIW, Communication and Information Studies. All students were going to follow the same programme, characterized by three components: a humanities component (the study of language and communication), a social-scientific component (the study of communication processes), and the study of a modern European language. We also needed a theme for the programme, a theme that would unite as many research groups within our faculty as possible, and which would be appealing to many students while being up-to-date. Of course it was Rod Lyall who came up with the suggestion to focus on orality and literacy in language and communication.

We also needed a number of core courses, in which the diverse topics that the students had encountered would converge, so-called bridge courses or integration courses. In those courses teachers from different research groups would collaborate on a common topic. Communication in Art and Society was one of

those topics, and it was co-taught by a specialist in history, a specialist in literature, and a specialist in the study of language use. The first crew consisted of Henk Reitsma from History, Rod, and myself, and our topic was propaganda. It is one of the most exciting courses that I have ever taught. The formula still is a success, as it is one of the most popular courses in the faculty, and I think it is a model for the way we could arrange our interdisciplinary programmes in the near future.

My contribution to the course consisted of a discussion of a range of linguistic phenomena in propaganda: issues like humour, metaphor, and argumentation. The general question that I tried to answer was: is it possible to distinguish propagandistic communication from non-propagandistic communication using a standard linguistic methodology? More specifically, is the language of propaganda different from the language of other classes of discourse, for instance because of its humour?

My final example comes from a Dutch periodical 'De Gil', which appeared from March until October 1944. It had an interesting disguise: it was published as an anti-German magazine, promoting such un-German aspects of modern life as jazz music, but in reality it was issued by the *Hauptabteilung für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*. A typical 'De Gil' article tries to confuse the readers about the invasion, about the strength of the Germans, and the intentions of the illegal press. An example is the following (the beginning of the 11th issue August 2, 1944).

Our division of labour gave Rod the task to define what we mean by propaganda, and to distinguish propaganda from non-

propaganda. Serious consideration of this issue shows that we will not be able to find a definition that will satisfy everybody. For instance, let us take the following definition of propaganda, by Jowett and O'Donnell.

Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 6).

To me, this definition could just as readily apply to advertising. Therefore I decided to take my own view of propaganda, as a form of advertising, more specifically political advertising. What is special about propaganda is the object of advertising, namely an ideology. This means that I expect standard advertising mechanisms to be operative in propaganda. It also means that we can expect to gain insight from the study of advertising when we look at propaganda.

2. Humour and Advertising

In a contribution to a book offered to yet another colleague who recently said goodbye to our faculty, I have tried to describe the possible effects of humour in advertising (Spooren). Advertisements belong to the class of persuasive texts, which aim to influence the behaviour of the consumer (for instance to buy the advertised product, to donate to a charity, and so on).

Advertisements cannot determine this behaviour directly. That is why advertisements do not target behaviour, but readers' attitudes towards the behaviour. In general, there is a positive correlation between a person's attitude towards a particular behaviour and the behaviour itself (if you are positive about buying the new novel by Ian McEwan then there is a better chance that you will buy it than when you are negative about buying the book), but that correlation is far from perfect (if you are out of money you will not be able to buy the book). The relationship between attitude and behaviour is described, among others, in Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen; cf. O'Keefe).

In general it is assumed that there are two, maybe three, ways of influencing the reader's attitude. Readers can be persuaded on the basis of their careful examination of the arguments in the text (*systematic* or *central* processing of the information) or by applying so-called heuristics or attending to peripheral cues (*heuristic* or *peripheral* processing). These two ways of persuasion differ in the amount of cognitive effort that is required to reach a particular attitude. The systematic route of information processing requires much more attention and cognitive effort than the peripheral route. Consequently it will only be taken when a reader's motivation and capacity to process the information are sufficiently high. The central and peripheral routes are described in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo) and their systematic and heuristic variants in the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Eagly and Chaiken).

Recently a third way of attitude formation has been described: the so-called experiential route (Meyers-Levy and Malaviya). This route is characterized by a minimal amount of cognitive effort to process the information. An experientially-based attitude is the product of more or less automatic reactions, like feelings of familiarity created by a company's logo. Another example of experiential persuasion is the use of hidden persuasion techniques like subliminal cues (described by for instance Packard). Since the processing of humour requires more than a minimal cognitive effort, I assume that the experiential route is not relevant for humour and propaganda.

Humour is expected to influence persuasion mostly via the peripheral route: the use of humour will create a pleasant feeling in the reader, which will be attributed to the advertised object. Hence humour will generate a favourable response to the attitudinal object. An indirect effect on central processing also seems possible, in the sense that the use of humour may increase the reader's willingness to process the ad.

What is the empirical evidence for the effectiveness of humour? There are a number of overviews in the literature (Cline, Altsech, and Kellaris; Weinberger and Gulas). Effects can be differentiated into three categories: drawing attention, understanding the message, and accepting the propagated standpoint. With respect to the first category the effects are clear: humour helps in attracting and maintaining the reader's attention. However, whether that attention is used to process the message in the intended sense is less clear: using humour in an ad may alternatively work as a seductive detail (Harp and Mayer),

in fact distracting the attention from the main argumentation. Cline and colleagues mention an experiment in which the use of humour in combination with weak arguments was more effective in generating favourable attitudes than combining it with strong arguments.

With respect to understanding the message, the effect is much less positive and indirect at best. Weinberger and Culas suggest that the best effects are found when mixed measures of attention are used and that differential effects are found for different humour types (with mere comical wit being least successful). The type of object promoted is a factor of importance. Humour works best when ads are about real products and when the product is a so-called low involvement product. The indirect effect of humour on understanding works as follows: humour can bring readers into a positive mood, which will help them process the message more intensely, and consequently they will understand the message better.

Does humour persuade? It seems that the answer is negative. If humour in ads has been found to lead to positive effects, it does not work better than in their serious counterparts. The effects that are reported seem to depend on other factors (gender of the reader, product type, etc.). What humour does effect is an increase in the liking of the source: advertisers who use humour are better appreciated. And this in itself may have a strong effect on the effectiveness of the ad: strong correlations are known from the literature between liking a source and being persuaded by that source. Good news for humorous advertising then.

Of course there are other factors that are of importance: age of the target group (young audiences respond more favourably to humorous ads), medium (the use of humorous ads works best on TV and on the radio), and product type (so-called 'low involvement feeling' products like alcohol and tobacco are better suited for using humour than 'high involvement thinking' products like insurances and family cars). In sum, it seems that humour has strong effects on drawing attention and source liking, provided that you use the right medium, target the right audience, and sell the right product. In terms of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, humour seems to function as a peripheral cue that determines attitude formation at best indirectly, through liking of the source.

3. Humour Mechanisms

How does humour create its effects? In general three explanations have been proposed (see Buijzen and Valkenburg; Spotts, Weinberger, and Parsons for overviews). According to relief theory, humour is a product of the release of nervous energy. In this view, humour is related to suppressed feelings and desires. The themes that relief theory can deal with are humour based on sexuality and humour based on aggression.

The second view is superiority theory: people laugh because of feelings of superiority over others. Mock, satire and irony are typically explained by superiority theory. Superiority theory is a sociological theory of humour.

The third type of explanation for humorous effects is incongruity theory, which regards humour as a cognitive phenomenon. In this theory, humour is created by a violation of expectations, usually based on schematic knowledge. Absurdity and surprise are typical manifestations of incongruity-based humour.

Of the three theories of humour, incongruity theory has been given most attention. Most of the standard one-liner joke studies in humour research are analyses of incongruity-based humour. Work by linguists like Attardo and Coulson focuses on examples like the following:

[said by old man] I still have sex at 74. I live at no. 75, so it's no distance for me.

This kind of joke gets its interpretation on the basis of the expectation generated by the first sentence, that the man is talking about his age. This interpretation then has to be rejected and the first sentence needs to be reinterpreted to create a coherent interpretation. Hence the humour.

The above example was also discussed by Veale, who raises the issue whether incongruity is the prime factor in creating humour. He suggests that it might also be a by-effect of a more sociological nature, namely the conspiracy of joke-telling. Veale thus seems to favour the superiority theory of humour. But several studies of the frequency of different humour types in ads show that incongruity humour is by far the most frequent: at least 75 percent or more of all humorous ads use some sort of

incongruity as its basic mechanism (Spotts et al.).

4. Humour and Propaganda

The discussion so far allows us to take a look at the use of humour in propaganda. The field has hardly been studied in any depth. It is not my ambition to fill this gap. I want to restrict myself to presenting some examples of the use of humour in propaganda and discuss them in terms of the analysis of persuasive techniques used in advertising. Next I will sketch some contours of an interdisciplinary research programme for the use of humour in propaganda.

The U.S. presidential election campaign of 1964 was not noted for its subtlety. Both camps used sneers to incriminate the opponent. An example is the cartoon from the Goldwater camp displayed in Figure 1. In this adapted dollar bill, the statesman in the centre has been replaced by the symbol of the Democratic Party¹ and for stupidity, the donkey. In the corners of the dollar bill, which normally exhibit the value of the bill, we find question marks. The message is obvious. If the Democrats win the election, you will not know what your money is worth. This is an instance of sarcasm that can be explained by superiority theory, and which is intended to caricature the opponent's position.

A similar mechanism is used by the Johnson camp, in their reaction to the Goldwater slogan "In your heart you know he's right" (Figure 2). Again we see sarcasm being used, mocking the opponent.



Figure 1. Goldwater "Donkey Administration" dollar bill attacking the Democratic Congress. 1964.

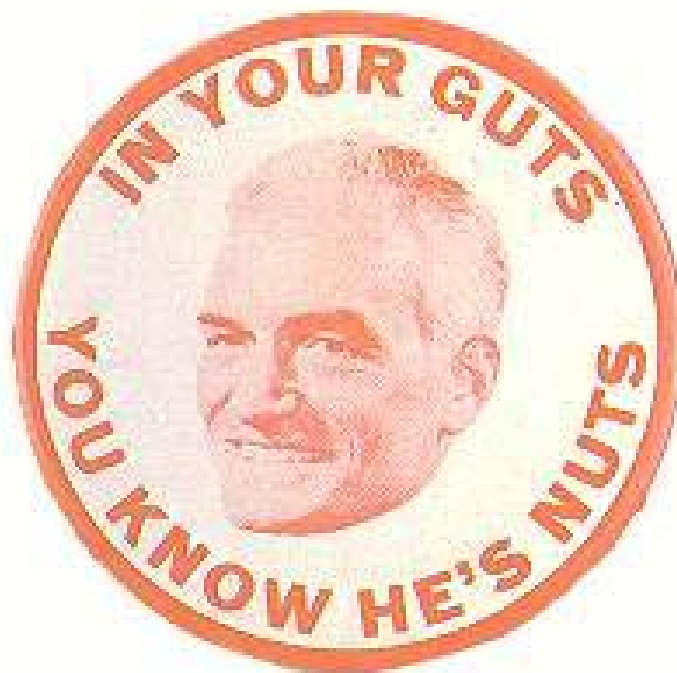


Figure 2. Democratic reaction to the Goldwater slogan "In your heart you know he's right" (presidential election campaign 1964)

My next example comes from a Dutch periodical *De Gil*, which appeared from March until October 1944. It had an interesting disguise: it was published as an anti-German magazine, promoting such un-German aspects of modern life as jazz music, but in reality it was issued by the *Hauptabteilung für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*. A typical *De Gil* article tries to confuse the readers about the invasion, about the strength of the Germans, and the intentions of the illegal press. An example is the following text (the beginning of the 11th issue August 2, 1944).

NU HET UUR DER
BEVRIJDING NADERT,

blijkt dat ons land en volk
niet, zooals verwacht en
gehoopt werd, bedreigd
wordt door een Opstand der
Horden of door een
Bijltjesdag, maar door een
Oproer van Hypochon-
drische Dominees van de
Illegale Pers.

Lach niet, lezer, want
het is bittere ernst.

Wat is er namelijk
gebeurd?

NOW THAT THE HOUR OF
LIBERATION IS APPROACHING,
it turns out that our country
and people are not, as expected
and hoped, threatened by a
Rebellion of the Hordes or a Day
of Reckoning, but by an Uproar
of Hypochondriac Preachers of
the Illegal Press.

Don't laugh reader, because
this is serious.

For what is the case?

LONDON HAS HAD THE NERVE
TO PUT THE PREACHERS OF

MEN HEEFT TE LONDEN
DEN EUVELEN MOED
GEHAD OM DE DOMINEES
VAN DE ILLEGALE PERS
ONDER CENSUUR TE
STELLEN!!!

THE ILLEGAL PRESS UNDER
CENSORSHIP. !!!

As in the previous cases we see that the humour is used to make fun of the opponent's point of view, from feelings of superiority.

What makes *De Gil* particularly interesting is that it does not eschew self-mockery, as becomes clear from the following ad (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Ad for De Gil ["Be sure not to read De Gil. Available at all newspaper stands"]

De Gil's use of naughtiness (writing things that the official press would not dare) and self-mockery may well explain the success of the magazine.

My final example comes from the Soviet Union during the Second World War, a poster from 1941 by the cartoonist Boris Efimov (Figure 4). Again this is a clear case of mocking the opponent, and hence an example of humour based on superiority. The cartoon parodies the Nazi's claim that Aryans are *Übermenschen*, by reminding us that one of their leaders, Joseph Goebbels, is as small and ugly as he is.

What do these examples have in common? Note first of all that almost are all cases of negative propaganda, propaganda aiming at incriminating another's position (the exception being *De Gil's* self-mockery). This may well be a trend in propaganda. What is also noticeable is the use of sarcasm: contrary to ads, incongruity-based humour seems to be rare in propaganda.

Another issue is the 'product category' advertised in propaganda. From the review of ad research it has turned out that humour is used most often in ads for 'low involvement feeling' products like alcohol and tobacco. Ideologies and political views hardly seem to fall into that category.

That brings us to an estimate of the success of using humour in propaganda. In the absence of serious research it may be somewhat premature to conclude on the basis of Johnson's re-election and the circulation of the magazine *De Gil* (200,000 copies) that humour in propaganda works. Nevertheless it is a popular strategy in propaganda. A safe inference, then, is that



Figure 4. Boris Efimov: anti-German 1941 poster.

makers of propaganda assume that it is effective. So how does humour in propaganda work?

In advertisements humour works best as a peripheral cue, which creates positive feelings about the product, without much cognitive effort on the part of the reader. It is unlikely that propaganda uses humour in the same way. All examples that I discussed above require serious cognitive effort on the part of the reader. Therefore I expect humour to be most effective in creating either a positive image of the sender of the message (liking of the source) or a negative image of the opponent.

5. Conclusion: A Research Programme

My original question was: can propaganda be distinguished from other types of communication by its humour? I hope to have demonstrated that a positive response to this question is not absurd. At the same time I hope to have shown that the systematic study of humour in propaganda has hardly begun. That is why I envisage a multidisciplinary research programme, in which historians, literary scholars, linguists and students of communication could cooperate to achieve a multidimensional view of humour in propaganda.

What we need is something like the following:

- a serious corpus of advertisements and propagandistic messages from different times and cultures

- a serious model of analysis to study large amounts of ads and propagandistic messages
- a serious theory of humour
- in-depth analyses of instances of humour in ads and humour in propaganda
- experimental research into the effects of humour in ads and propaganda
- models that can explain the working of humour in ads and propaganda

This is the kind of programme that crosses traditional boundaries within the faculty and that will attract attention from students and colleagues. If it is to come, we will have to thank Rod for being the source of inspiration for this programme. And yes, I would like to use quantitative techniques to analyse my part of the data.

Note

1 Thanks to Rod Lyall for bringing this interpretation to my attention.

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