



# Analysis of the Relationship Between Presupposition Theory and Humour Generation—Taking Automobile Advertising as an Example

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<https://ss.damray.com>

## OPEN ACCESS

DOI: 10.26855/oajrcss.2023.02.006

Received: February 12, 2023

Accepted: March 8, 2023

Published: April 6, 2023

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## Abstract

The purpose of advertising is to introduce and promote a product to the advertising audience in order to entice them to come and buy the product. The primary purpose of a car advertising slogan is to develop and grow a car brand and to demonstrate the advantages of the advertised car product in order to attract potential customers to come and buy that car product. Through computer technology and the use of the information internet, new media technology can spread information faster around the world in a short period of time. Compared to traditional media such as radio, television and the press, the transmission of information and data in new media is more efficient, specifically in terms of faster dissemination, wider scope, more flexible methods and easier data collection. In car advertising slogans, the choice of language expression plays a very important role in the transmission of information. In the new media era, it is difficult for advertisements to meet the psychological and aesthetic needs of audiences in a straightforward and didactic way, and humorous film and television public service announcements are gradually gaining favour and popularity among the majority of audiences. In this paper, we will analyse the different expression structures of humorous logic and explore the creative expression of humorous logic in car advertisements, in order to improve the effectiveness of advertising message delivery, by combining actual car advertisement cases.

## Keywords

Presupposition Theory, Humour Generation, Automobile Advertising

## 1. Introduction

Humour is a good and unique quality that exists only in human society and has always played a very important role in human social activities—good humour brings people and things closer together, relaxes people and creates a pleasant mood. Of course, this is no exception in arts, where works of art that contain humour are often more popular with the public. A comedy, a cartoon or a humorous story can often appeal to people of all ages and levels. Especially in today's society, the increasing pace of people's lives and the pressure of work make modern people need more kinds of entertainment, so humour in works of art becomes more and more important. Having briefly analyzed humour, let us turn to

television commercials. The reason for including television commercials in the art category is that they have not only commercial properties but also artistic properties that have an equally important place. Like many film and television programmes, television commercials require the use of acting, music, camera work, stunts and other film and television elements in the expression of their content. A large proportion of them have considerable artistic value, and even for many television viewers, enjoying the commercials has become part of their television viewing habits, and many major international advertising events also consider the artistic value of television commercials as part of the judging of their work.

The artistic value of television commercials is one of the most important criteria for judging their work.

A presupposition is a premise identified in reasoning. For example, “Her daughter is a nurse” presupposes the fact that “She has a daughter”. This concept was first introduced by the German philosopher and founder of modern logic, G. Frege, in 1892 in his article “Meaning and denotation”. In the 1960s and 1970s, semanticists elaborated on the semantic aspects of presupposition, and the concept became an essential topic of linguistic research. The language of Chinese advertising is witty and humorous, and is very popular with audiences. It is short and straightforward, but it is also philosophical. Advertising is a linguistic art, and the use of presupposition is an essential factor in the production of humorous advertising language. This paper analyses the humorous effects in advertisements by means of examples from the nature of linguistic presuppositions.

## **2. Overview of Presupposition Theory**

The presupposition is the analytical study of the logic of thought conveyed by natural language, a linguistic phenomenon discussed by logicians and philosophers of language in the study of denotation. According to the German philosopher Frege (1981), there is always an obvious presupposition in any proposition, i.e. the specific noun used in the vocabulary must have a reference. The understanding of language in life is not limited to logic but derives more from people’s perceptions of the world based on personal experience. People feel the emotions inherent in words as they receive facts, and this understanding derives from the contextual and cultural knowledge of the linguistic environment. Thus, presupposition theory extends from a purely semantic understanding to the field of pragmatics. Pragmatic presuppositions add to semantic presuppositions the people and contexts in which language is used, viewing presuppositions as pre-determined and restricted information between the communicating parties. Factors such as time, place and occasion of speech in the context and the speaker’s state of knowledge are all relevant to presuppositions. Linguistic presuppositions are characterized by stability, variability and transferability.

In a wide range of linguistic phenomena, the exploitation of the structural features of the language used leads to the formation of two meaningful linguistic structures that are similar in structure but not identical in meaning, a phenomenon known as puns. Puns are divided into semantic and pragmatic puns. Pragmatic puns are generated when the reference in the text depends on the similarity outside the text and when the more vague and non-specific the word, the more ambiguous the meaning. All conceptual functions become apparent when explicit markers are present, or some of them are hidden. At the end of a joke, all possible functional concepts may be retained as possibilities or some of them may be removed and filtered out. The trade-offs, dislocations and collisions of double or multiple minds produce comic effects. A presupposition is “a fact or proposition that is mutually accepted in the course of a communication” (Pan & Zhou, 2021). In the perspective of presupposition, pun humour arises when the presupposition of text conflicts with the result conveyed in the text, creating two interpretations that intersect and contrast to form a pun. Presuppositions arise from the understanding of facts, behaviours, beliefs, the current situations, etc., which are inherent in the shared knowledge of the communicative function of language and constitute a deeper understanding.

As an important linguistic theory, presupposition theory is widely used in verbal communication, while verbal humour is a refined and specific form of verbal communication, where more presuppositions exist and where many of the verbal effects of humour are the direct result of presuppositions. Presuppositions are, therefore, closely related to verbal humour. In the following section, we will examine how presuppositions lead to verbal humour in terms of their type, nature, usage and presuppositional triggers.

## **3. Types of Presuppositions and the Generation of Verbal Humour**

According to the different characteristics of presuppositions, they can be divided in different categories, namely semantic presuppositions, pragmatic presuppositions, direct sentence presuppositions, interrogative presuppositions, imperative presuppositions, existential presuppositions, and factual presuppositions, while most scholars believe that presuppositions have different bearers at the semantic and pragmatic levels, they classify presuppositions into semantic and pragmatic presuppositions.

The existential presupposition is the perception of the existence of things and people in the world by both parties

during communication, and this presupposition is inferred without context. It is often triggered by deterministic descriptors such as proper nouns, noun phrases and noun possessives. The economic principle of language is the theoretical basis on which presuppositions of existence operate. The economy of language principle states that people should try to say as much as possible in as few words as possible. Existential presupposition means that something already exists, providing sufficient information for both parties when communication occurs.

A factual presupposition is a factual situation that both parties in communication affirm or deny in advance, often in the form of an empirical proposition or a set of empirical propositions that characterize a specific fact, a fact that already exists without the need for context. Such presuppositions are usually accompanied by a predicate expressing the nature or relationship of the fact contained, such as “surprised”, “sorry”, “strange”, etc. A fact is brought to people’s attention because it is presupposed, regardless of their attitudes to it. In verbal humour, facts are generally presupposed to be determined in favour of the speaker, and through this means, the listener is induced to continue the communication in accordance with the speaker’s verbal intentions, which then produce a result that is different from the facts or from people’s common knowledge. For example, the speaker uses a mere adjective to presuppose the “fact” that the listener is ill, and due to human curiosity, the listener understands the speaker’s words in accordance with the speaker’s factual preconceptions and undoubtedly believes that he or she is ill. Whether the presupposition is true or false, the direction of the verbal exchange is always in accordance with the speaker’s verbal intentions, which is what produces the humorous effect of induction. In fact, in the course of the sketch, each “package” of events is essentially a factual presupposition. The speaker always tries to get the listener to accept his factual preconceptions and then confirms the “facts” step by step at his own pace. The listener is never able to get out of the language trap set by factual presuppositions, and this verbal exchange produces a different result from the truth, thus producing a humorous effect.

### 3.1 Pragmatic Presupposition and Verbal Humour

Linguistic presupposition as an important linguistic theory is a major topic of research in cognitive pragmatics. From a pragmatic perspective, the presupposition is a speaker’s strategy for organizing information and is influenced by the speaker’s intentions and familiarity with what is being said. Prerequisites are context-sensitive and relate to the beliefs, attitudes and intentions of speakers and listeners. He suggests that presuppositions are common knowledge that both parties in communication already know, or at least can always infer from the context after hearing the words.

Linguistic presuppositions are characterized by appropriateness, consensus, subjectivity, unidirectionality, concealment and revocability. These features are exploited to create humour through the use of misplaced presuppositions, transformed presuppositions, revocable presuppositions, etc. The following are some examples of how the consensual, revocable and covert nature of presuppositions can be used to create humorous speech.

(1) Consensuality: Consensuality is also known as information that is shared by both parties, and the existence of this information ensures the effectiveness of communication. If there is a lack of common information between the two parties, it will lead to “discord”, which will generate the humorous effect.

(2) The revocability of presuppositions: revocability means that the speaker adds to the presupposition after having said it before, thus negating the previous presupposition and causing it to be abrogated. The speaker sometimes sets up this kind of suspenseful presupposition, either intentionally or unintentionally, and then produces a humorous effect through the negation of the presupposition or through words that contradict it.

(3) The concealment of presuppositions: The so-called concealment refers to the presupposition that the speaker will conceal in the discourse through the special context and language expression to imply the presupposed information. By using concealment, the speaker can imply in the discourse what he or she does not wish or is not comfortable saying explicitly. This is an implicit message outside of the discourse and is not the basic message of the discourse.

### 3.2 Preset Triggers and Verbal Humour

In actual verbal communication, presuppositions may be triggered by certain words in an utterance, “those lexical items or forms of surface structure that serve as a basis for presuppositions” (Bock, 1977). In fact, much humour is triggered by presuppositions.

Semantic presupposition triggers are words that produce presuppositions, which are included in the semantics of these words. For example, words that indicate repetition are words that indicate the continuation of a state or the repetition of an action, presupposing that an action has occurred or that a state has existed, and such words include verbs, adverbs and so on. For example, the words “again, still, no longer, resume, repeat” in Chinese, and “stop, still...” in English. The presupposition of the trigger is that they presuppose that the action or state following the verb has occurred or existed. There are many humorous effects that are reflected in the presupposition of repeated triggers.

Syntactic presuppositions are largely presupposed by certain syntactic structures. For example, emphasis structures

are an important type of syntactic presupposition trigger, and sometimes they can produce a humorous effect.

#### **4. Humour Effect in Automobile Advertising**

Automotive advertising has a huge global reach, with a large share of well-known international companies, resulting in higher costs than other types of advertising and often a higher level of creativity and technical skills. As for the use of humour in automobile advertising, European advertisers seem to have a better say. A quick look at automotive TV commercials around the world shows that European manufacturers have a wide range of humorous ideas, with nearly half of all civilian car commercials being highly creative and humorous, while American manufacturers do not have the same proportion of humorous commercials as Europe, but their humorous style is broadly in line with European commercials. Compared to Europe and the United States, Asian countries, especially China, use less humorous elements in their car commercials. Most of the commercials are based on visual and comprehensive descriptions of basic attributes such as performance, comfort level and technological features and rely more on stunts.

The Volkswagen Group's Volkswagen has a number of classic TV spots in Europe. Two of the brand's key features are its gentrification and its focus on innovation, and the fact that its audience is mainly an open-minded and humorous group of Europeans means that Volkswagen has gone to great lengths to create humorous commercials. For example, in one commercial a person is surprised by his sharp braking and shows a panicked look, clearly a novice. The driver looked embarrassed and put the car into forwarding gear again. The car started quickly and then was braked again, the passengers looked at the car helplessly, and the driver had a desperate look on his face (Dore, 2019).

The 45-second version of the new FAW Volkswagen Sprint TV commercial is an idea that has impressed many Chinese viewers: a man drives the new Sprint down the street and operates the car's many functions with great confidence as he does so. Everywhere he passes, passers-by look at the car with amazement, and the man looks satisfied because of other people's reactions. He then pulled up in front of his house and grabbed a present for his wife from the back seat. At this point his beautiful wife came out and angrily hit the man on the head with a pan, saying: "Are you crazy? Didn't I tell you to buy a Sprint? Why did you buy such an expensive car!" The man explained, "But honey, this is the new Sprint." The wife became excited immediately: "Really? That's great!" And it ends the VW logo appeared on the screen.

The POLO GTI is slowly pushed from the front to the petrol pumps with a little help when the slogan "The POLO GTI is not for beginners" appears on the screen. The ad is only 28 seconds long, with no lines, no music and no complicated production techniques, but it does a good job of showing the car's excellent acceleration and braking performance. The plot uses exaggeration to make the audience laugh as a novice stops several times in embarrassment, and the petrol station staff look on in bewilderment. Imagine if we had seen a car speeding down a mountain road for half a minute, or if the car's power had been presented directly, or if a skilled driver had been confidently handling the car, we would not have felt so impressed about the ad.

The use of animal elements in automotive advertising is also an effective way of enhancing its humour. In the seventh-generation Golf ad, the strange behaviour of a dog obsessed with the Golf car makes the owner who takes it for a walk quite confused - waiting for the pavement signal, the dog makes a barking sound like a car engine, and when the signal turns green, it rushes out at once; running in a circle around the owner, while making a shrill barking sound. As the owner led him forward, he ran up as if he had seen something - a seventh-generation Golf - and ran alongside it until the owner stopped the car and locked it with the remote control, barking twice as fast as the two alarms for locking the car. The dog mimicked the two alarms by giving two quick barks. It turned out that the dog had been imitating the features and functions of the seventh-generation Golf, such as excellent acceleration, reversing radar and drifting. Obviously, it disturbs its owner, but the audience will understand that the dog has fallen in love with the new seventh-generation Golf and is thinking about it every minute of every day.

This is the kind of anthropomorphism and exaggeration that will make the viewer smile from the bottom of their hearts, and their love for this cute dog will be transformed into an endorsement of the content. This is a brilliant way to create a sense of humour by using an animal element that can easily capture the hearts of people.

A 30-second commercial for the autonomous brand BYD Speedy's remote control driving technology: Two cars parked side by side are too close together, making it impossible for the two owners to open the door and get out. The slightly fatter owner on the right is holding a bouquet of flowers in his hands and struggling to climb out of the sunroof, while the owner on the left is moving his body out of the driver's side window. At this point a couple walked past and were amused by the embarrassing situation which the two car owners are in, who also greeted the couple awkwardly. The man then stood aside and took out a remote controller to move their BYD Surrey out of the small space between the two cars parked alongside it, and then they easily got into the car and drove away. The two owners, trapped in the sunroof and windows, stared in amazement and envy at the distant BYD Speed. The shot afterwards shows a brand new

BYD Sprinter being operated remotely by them and parked side by side at the same time.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have studied how presupposition theory triggers speech humour in terms of the classification of presuppositions, the nature of presuppositions, the use of presuppositions and presuppositional triggers. As an important linguistic theory, presupposition theory is widely used in verbal communication, and humour is a refined and special form of verbal communication in which there are many presuppositions, and the verbal effects of humour are often the direct result of presuppositions. Therefore, the use of presupposition theory to study verbal humour not only broadens the theoretical scope of the study of verbal humour but also provides a new perspective for its study.

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