

Over the last few decades, puns have become increasingly common in commercial texts ranging from print advertising ("Campbell's has something that will bowl you over") to T-shirts ("The Puck Stops Here.") The trend is surprising both because the pun is an intricate as well as a literary device and because advertisers usually avoid the risks of using humor as a selling strategy. The appeal of the pun appears to be its stylishness, which provided it with a place in the pop art movement and the culture of the 1960s, and its simultaneity, which has made it the print medium's competitor of the attention-grabbing television commercial. Recent studies argue that the word play of T-shirts and bumper stickers represents a non-establishment, anti-elitist voice. But in this essay the author suggests that puns used by both corporate advertisers and car owners alike reflect a commercial influence on the language of public texts all across the culture, and a mingling of business and art that is characteristic of postmodernism.

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puns, public discourse and postmodernism

They are everywhere.

In print ads — for soup,
"Campbell's has something that will bowl
you over,"
— for the Toyota Camry,
"A styling so classic, in fact, over two million
people have been moved by it,"
— for Chinese stir-fry,
"Create a wok of art in 8 minutes."
As names of businesses — the restaurant called
"The Grill from Ipanema."
On shopping bags — for a department store, in December,
"We have the gift for giving."
Even on the cover of the 1995 federal tax form packet:
"Get the credit you deserve."
Bumper stickers —
"Get a Life. Be a Christian."
Billboards —
"Children should be seen and not hurt."
Trucks — on the side of the exterminator's,
"The Bug Stops Here."
T-shirts — for a hockey team,
"The Puck Stops Here."
Academic offerings —
"The Cyberpowers That Be,"
at New York University.
Book titles — about education and community service,
Service Matters, and its statistical sequel,
Service Counts.
Magazine headings and headlines — from one issue of
Psychology Today:
"The FDA opens its mind"
(about psychedelic drugs),
"Model existence"
(fashion models);
and puns on syntax rather than word meaning, from the same issue,
"Like mommy, like baby,"

"To fight or not to fight,"

And the close relative of the pun, the rebus, on all those license plates
in which letters and numbers stand for words —

"FREE₂B."

And the telephone "numbers" —
1-800-CONTACT.

I have been intrigued over recent years that such tricky — sometimes even obscure — word play has become so popular, so vastly appealing that advertisers will spend big money on it and so many proud car owners will glue it to their cars. Who would have thought that this rather refined humorous device, the pun, would become such a routine way to address a mass audience in late-twentieth-century America (and England as well — less so on the Continent)? Other cultures and periods have their distinctive genres of short, colorful, public texts — the proverb, the haiku, the headline. We have the pun. What's going on here?

Puns in some of the contexts illustrated above have been discussed in individual studies that this essay will summarize, but I also want to look at them across the board, as a verbal device whose distinctiveness is its unexpected popularity. It is the range of use of the public pun, its commonality in everything from corporate ads to countercultural bumper stickers, that suggests its potential relevance for questions about the current level of society-wide literacy and about the postmodern relationship among the consumer, culture and capitalism.

ANATOMY OF THE PUN

In an era when not only products but images and ideas as well are for sale, the pun has some unique qualifications for the task of public relations. Consider its anatomy. Like their literary siblings, public puns get their punch not only from the play of sound and word meaning but also from the play between the literal and the metaphoric (or at the very least between the concrete and the abstract) (Redfern, 138). The advertising pun

usually starts from the metaphor embodied in a cliché and then turns us to the concrete product. A stunning example is the favorite of one English copywriter, for an airline that transported passengers directly from the plane to their hotel: "Out of the flying plane into the foyer" (Bernstein, 147). The metaphorical frying pan that in the original proverb reads as a symbol, an equation, loses this dimension and conflates to a literal object that is the focus of the sale — the flying plane. Conversely, the puns on T-shirts, bumper stickers and other displays that are selling not a product but a group's or a person's reputation usually work the other way around, taking a literal object and turning it metaphorical. "Nurses call the shots"; the injections that they give become a metaphor for the authority they carry. (The rebus license plates operate similarly — working from literal numbers and letters to the colorful claim.)

So puns are useful in this era of publicity in part because they are ambidextrous; either the literal or the metaphorical side can be foregrounded; they can either throw the spotlight on an actual object or they can jazz up the imagery of the bombast.

THE RISE OF THE PUBLIC PUN

Still, there is an agility in all this that is more than one might expect from the consumer or the casual reader. Amid all the concerns about the popular state of print literacy, here is a particular literacy that is evidently widely practiced and yet little noticed — an eagerness to decipher and a practiced skill at sorting out simultaneous verbal meanings. I think that ironically television commercials have probably helped at honing this ability. Puns themselves rarely appear on television commercials. Television ads are too busy — voices, pictures, graphics, captions, music, a story line, all thrown at us at the same time — for the moment of leisure that a pun requires. But television commercials have trained us to decode and synthesize simultaneous fragments of a single message and to do so very quickly. The pun in its simultaneity is electronic. It is the print media's equivalent of the television ad.

But aside from the influence of television, why now? What is there about the culture of the last couple of decades that has so nurtured the public pun? For even in print advertising, puns were a rarity until recently. Advertisers have generally and understandably been skeptical about the selling power of the joke. What early puns there were, were more likely to be found in England than in America, or France. Posters offered more room for humor than the cramped ads of early newspapers. One English poster showed a package of Golfer Oats in the foreground and Queen Victoria behind it over the caption, "The Two Safeguards of the Constitution" (Nevett). Such thoughtful wit was rare, though.

But in this century, as Greg Myers traces the trend in his book *Words in Ads*, humorous advertising has gradually become more common. After World War I, business leaders fretted about a post-war depression as post-war assembly lines produced a wider range than ever of consumables from cheap automobiles to bathroom fixtures. As a result, advertising agencies turned into the big businesses that they are today, and their new campaign strategy was to sell not just a product or a brand but a way of life. Laundry soap came to mean not cleaner clothes but relaxation and confidence. This strategy characterized advertising until after the next world war half a century later, but from the 1960s on, the challenge was that of addressing "the jaded consumer." "Ads now compete for attention in a world where they are ubiquitous, and where it is taken for granted that they are not to be trusted. One solution for the advertiser is to treat the consumer as an active and disenchanting interpreter." (Myers 26) The playfulness that characterized the work of the small creative firms of the sixties — in the funny Volkswagen ads, for example — faded in the 1970s as advertisers resumed their customary caution about using humor. But in a society increasingly saturated with electronic media, where ads sell not just soap but presidential candidates and universities as well, the entertaining and sophisticated approach to grabbing the reader's attention has made a steady comeback.

The psychodynamics of the advertising pun and similar devices have been thoughtfully studied, much of the analysis derived from Judith Williamson's influential 1978 work *Decoding Advertisements*:

Ideology and Meaning in Advertising. In Williamson's view, ads involve ideology in two ways. First, although ads seek to change behavior, they are constrained to do so in a fashion that is consistent with the ideology of a liberal democracy — that the individual has free choice and is not coerced. To this end, ads use the strategy of ideologies themselves: they make a particular point of view seem obvious and normal. One of the ways that ads allow readers/viewers to feel un-coerced and comfortable at the same time that they entice them into a "normal" point of view is by representing an absence that requires filling in — usually the link between the product and the life picture shown, between a cigarette and a cowboy on a horse. Ads work because as we fill in the absent link, as we make the connection ourselves between product and life (and as we feel we are free and entertained while doing this), we give that connection credibility. Advertising puns provide a "short cut between a product and a referent system" (86). "Puns perform the correlating function seen in all ads, but in a way that begs to be deciphered" (87). This deciphering is a conscious, thoughtful activity, during which we experience ourselves as freely discovering meanings — and during which we momentarily create for ourselves the point of view favorable to the product.

THE CULTURE OF THE BUMPER STICKER

The same creative mass marketing of the 1960s that prompted humorous advertisements also encouraged the sloganeering T-shirts and bumper stickers for presidential campaigns, antiwar protests, the drug culture and general bravado. The bumper stickers that read "I've gone to pot" and "Air traffic controllers tell pilots where to go" date from that era. Once the "pages" of the back end of an automobile and the front end of the human chest had been discovered, the genre of the pun, the parody and the rebus license plate could be refined. Two recent studies help fill out the picture here.

In "Badges, Buttons, T-Shirts and Bumperstickers: The Semiotics of Some Recursive Systems," Herbert Smith argued in 1988 that we are seeing a blossoming of folk parody in such humorous displays, and that this parodic tradition has its semiotic roots in the badge. The badge — whether as heraldic shield, Christian cross, civilian armband or police badge — replaces the person of the authority figure (the signified) with an icon (the signifier). The authority and humorlessness of badges beg for parody. "Is it any wonder then that the counterforce they produce should be humorous, semantically and semiotically sophisticated, puckish in revolt? Badges are rectangular, 'protective' and distinctive; buttons reverse all those qualities purposefully to reflect parodically their iconic origin and to comment upon it" (142-3). The button as iconic parody was the work of the avant-garde artist Marcel Duchamp in the 1920s, when he produced buttons with complex punning sentences written in inward spirals, apparently as paro-

dies of the square, legible, single-minded badge. The current crop of punning and sexually joking buttons (Duchamp apparently intended some buttons as joking forms of the nipple), T-shirts, billboards, logos and bumper stickers sustain this folk/artistic tradition of subverting authority. We see the process at work in the signs that run in a series — the variations on the original "I ♥ NY," for example, and on the progression from the official "This vehicle stops at all railway crossings" to the silly "I brake for coffee." Public puns, too, participate in this venerable tradition of turning the tokens of high seriousness on their heads.

In 1992 Charles Case, in his article "Bumper Stickers and Car Signs: Ideology and Identity," reported the results of a survey of any and all signs (including personalized license plate frames, window decals, Garfield animals) on 2,160 vehicles in several California parking lots — including malls, a high school and a hospital. Case's hypothesis was that while elite groups in an urban society have access to institutions and the mass media to express and enforce their ideologies, those without such access will use private automobiles disproportionately to express their viewpoints, and thus the viewpoints expressed on automobiles will tend to be those of the non-elite. And indeed he found that among relatively new cars (up to three years old), signs were more likely to appear on the less expensive models. But he also found that political and ideological statements (presidential preferences, feminist and environmental slogans) accounted for only a small proportion (five percent) of all the messages in the sample. By far the largest category of signs were those expressing identity — school decals, recreational preference, sexual and social status ("Electricians Do It Without Shorts"), family attachment, occupation ("Nurses Call the Shots"). It appears from the study that "ordinary" people use cars not so much to express political consciousness but to assert entertaining statements of their identity to the mass audience of the urban highway.

Both Smith's and Case's studies assume that the bumper sticker/T-shirt genre follows divisions of social class and political attitude. They posit a bifurcation between the elitist, authoritative voice and the parodying, individualist, non-establishment one. But this bifurcation is not wholly consistent with the data themselves. Bumper stickers, it seems, do not express political consciousness nearly as often as they express fairly traditional values. And the element of parody in buttons and bumper stickers is as much an imitation or spin-off of bureaucratic discourse as it is a "revolt" or "counterforce." Moreover, the pun itself, although neither study deals with it separately, cuts across this social divide. It is as likely to be found in the corporate advertisement as on the irreverent T-shirt. The bumper sticker and the T-shirt are, after all, products that are bought and sold. In advertising, one "buys" the pun in the figurative sense of giving it one's attention on the way to considering the product. On bumper stickers and the like, one buys the pun literally; the pun is the product. But the two cases are not so different in their relation to the marketplace.

And it is fundamentally the driving extension of the marketplace, more than the television commercial or the automobile *per se*, that has brought the pun to the foreground. On bumper stickers and T-shirts, I think we are seeing the influence of marketing language, with its colloquial, pseudo-informality, over other spheres of public language, an instance of what has been called the "the conversationalization of public discourse" (Fairclough). Specifically, the public pun seems to have followed from the rise of the entertainment and communications industries within the marketplace. For the pun of the bumper sticker and the ad alike meets the desire of the consumer to be entertained and to be entertained no less through modern communications systems — preferably electronic, but the pun, as I have suggested, may be the nearest thing in words to an electronic effect. The pun is to the traditional commercial slogan what the Disney stores in malls are to the traditional department store — a statement of style and entertainment as goals in themselves, both youthful and nostalgic at the same time, flexible and hip in presentation.

PUNS AND POSTMODERNISM

Another focus on the cultural significance of the public pun is through the lens of the notion of postmodernism, contentious though the term may be. The opening sentence of Charles Jencks' first chapter on *Postmodernism*, from 1987, certainly offers the pun as an element of postmodern style: "After more than twenty years the Post-Modern Movement has achieved a revolution in western culture without breaking anything more than a few eggheads." The difference within an earlier modernist culture between the world of the egghead artists and intellectuals and the world of commerce has been blurring. In place of the high modernist disdain for the popular and the crass, the pop art movement of the 1960s set in motion an intermingling of art with mass commerce that has not ceased. The new pop art itself "was an ingredient in a process which has been referred to as the 'aestheticization' of daily living" (Whiteley, 130). Fashion and stylishness — in clothing, furnishing and products — became paramount over good sense or even good taste. The stylish pun has been part of this trend

as well. Fashion in humor acquired commercial value. The humorous genre of the egghead and the wit found a new home at Walmart.

The public pun is thus part of the shifting relationship between culture and commerce that puts the consumer in a seemingly new position, but one that is difficult to interpret and assess. Do such puns really reflect a widening literacy? Do they reflect a consumer who is more acute about the language of commerce? Or do the puns sail past nearly all of the readers who see them, and are they essentially the self-indulgences of clever copy writers who have run out of other ways to try to reach the "jaded consumer"? Are they a cause for new optimism about popular literacy, or new dismay about the corporate character of our era?

The sunny view is that the pun along with other changes in public language might be viewed as a sign of greater consumer interaction with the discourse of commerce. I mentioned above the theory of the conversationalization of public discourse, the extension of the pseudo-informal, pseudo-private style of the market towards other types of traditionally formal public texts. This shift is often regarded by commentators as part of the shift from the traditional authority of the economic elites towards a greater authority for the masses of consumers. The capacity to determine the communicative style of commercial culture, and even to determine the nature of goods and services that will be successful in the marketplace, is no longer the domain of the producers as it was under earlier, manufacturing capitalism. In this view, the ubiquitous pun reflects a more literate consumer, one who is accustomed to, and even selects for a bumper sticker, language that has some richness to it, one who is less responsive to the condescending sales language of an earlier era.

But Norman Fairclough, in an essay about conversationalization and the supposed authority of the consumer, is skeptical about the significance of such shifts. The "strategic, instrumental use of simulated conversational language" seems

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to have "more to do with shifting goods than conceding authority" (265). For such language is imposed in a top-down manner and is hardly a genuine popular creation. And it is very selective about "whose conversational language is being drawn upon as a model" (264; emphasis in the original). Puns, although Fairclough does not discuss them directly, are a primary example of a very particular type of conversation — an educated and self-consciously clever type — that is promoted as casual and friendly. Fairclough concludes that the widely-used colloquial style of commerce is ambivalent in its relation to democratic tendencies on the one hand and capitalist control of the marketplace on the other. "For even manifestly synthetic and engineered conversationalization puts democratization, and new forms of social relation and social identity in public, on the social agenda.... And even the most authentically democratic conversationalization in intention may be suspect in a society where strategically and instrumentally motivated action is so pervasive" (265).

CONCLUSION

I agree with Fairclough's cautions about the complexity of an aspect of our culture that is, after all, too recent to see with much perspective. The commercial pun, whatever its sources and motivations, does put bits of intriguing language in the public eye, and yet one cannot rush to conclusions about a new sophistication in public taste when public language is so strategically designed by private interests. Similarly, while it is reassuring to see that our commercial culture has not lost its sense of humor, it is not clear what kind of tension underlies the laughter. The pun may be an appropriate verbal icon for the ambiguities of postmodernism, for as we are all negotiating the twin roles we play as buyers and sellers, as consumers and creators of images, the pun itself is the essence of two-sided language, of controlled ambiguity, of enthusiastic contradiction.

Any room will do.

You just wait.

You wait in limbo.

And then it happens.

Many utopia writers emphasized the book's importance in any ideal world. Some imagined ways to enhance the book aesthetically. Many imagined new written languages ranging from sign systems analogous to Chinese ideograms to syllabic writing, modified alphabetic systems and phonetic languages. Though the utopia writers asserted the value of their imaginary written languages for enhancing thought and communication, each system, if implemented, would alter the reading process profoundly. In some utopias, technological media supersede the codex. Those who incorporated the phonograph foresaw three possible futures for the phonographic book: in some utopias, the phonographic recording and the printed book coexist; in others, the phonographic book completely replaces the codex; in yet others, the phonograph is combined with telephonic or telegraphic communication.

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the book in AMERICAN UTOPIA LITERATURE, 1883-1917

Would the book still be around in the utopian future? In other words, would the codex, a bound volume made from stitched and folded gatherings of paper divided into leaves, survive? Or would it be replaced with some kind of phonographic way of storing or telegraphic way of transmitting information? The turn-of-the-century utopia writers pondered such questions, and many came up with creative answers. While several evinced much scorn for other aspects of print culture — notably, the newspaper — most had considerably higher opinions of the book. In many of the fictional utopias, the book not only survives, but it undergoes great improvement in terms of aesthetics and readability. In some, however, phonographic recordings and telegraphic communication do replace the codex.

The utopia writers enhanced the book's importance with aesthetic improvements. Some gave utopian books fine bindings. In James M. Galloway's *John Harvey: A Tale of the Twentieth Century*, for example, the narrator meets a woman who shows him her full library and brings him a copy of Goethe, "elegantly bound and exquisitely illustrated, a gift worthy of a king." As a special feature, a "little golden case set in the leather on the side of the book, and closed by a slide" contains the giver's name and the book's presentation note.¹ In *Unveiling a Parallel*, Alice Ilgenfritz Jones and Ella Merchant imagined utopian shelves filled with books bound in either white cloth or white leather, their spines lettered in gold.² The description shows that elegant bindings not only enhance the appearance of individual volumes, they also give a striking appearance to a whole shelf of books. Anna Adolph's utopian community at the North Pole takes the idea of aesthetically pleasing bindings to its extreme. Upon entering the library, her narrator finds himself inside a picture gallery. Somewhat puzzled, he asks his utopian guide where the books are. She presses on one picture frame. The painting moves out from the wall and becomes a book. The cover of the book was the painting.³

The utopian book need not be judged by its cover, though. Other writers imagined ways to enhance the book page to make it easy on the eyes. Some suggested a printed page which was aesthetically pleasing and which reduced eyestrain. In David

NOTES

¹ GALLOWAY, JAMES M. 1897. *JOHN HARVEY: A TALE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY*. (BY ANON MOORE, PSEUDONYM) CHICAGO: CHARLES H. KERR, 60.

² JONES, ALICE ILGENFRITZ AND ELLA MERCHANT. 1893. *UNVEILING A PARALLEL: A ROMANCE BY TWO WOMEN OF THE WEST*. BOSTON: ARENA, 25.

³ ADOLPH, ANNA. 1899. *ARQTIQ: A STUDY OF THE MARVELS AT THE NORTH POLE*. N.P.: FOR THE AUTHOR, 58.