

Review of the Ph.D. thesis submitted by Anna Stwora, MA

Title of the thesis: *Synergistic application of metaphorical and humorous elements in Polish and English advertising discourse*

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L'Aquila, 18th May 2020

To the Scientific Council of the Institute of Linguistics at the University of Silesia:

I am extremely pleased to offer the following review of Anna Stwora's doctoral thesis entitled *Synergistic application of metaphorical and humorous elements in Polish and English advertising discourse*. The thesis fully complies with the requirements of Art. 13.1 of the **Act from March 14, 2003**, "Law on Academic Degrees and Title and Degrees and Title in the Arts", that is, it "constitutes an original solution to a scientific problem or an original artistic achievement, provides evidence of the Candidate's general theoretical knowledge in a given discipline of science or the arts, as well as shows the Candidate's ability to conduct independent scientific or artistic work." There is no doubt, in fact, that Anna Stwora's research seeks to answer an original research question and to cover an area of investigation that, as the author herself states and demonstrates, is to this day fairly under-analysed.

As for the question of originality, Stwora focuses on a theoretical problem, namely that of establishing the enhanced communication value of the synergistic operation of metaphorical and humorous language in multimodal texts. The genre she aims at investigating is that of advertising, and more specifically, press advertising campaigns with a marked multimodal quality which feature both humour and metaphors. To further add to the complexity of the research field, the thesis sets out to explore such matter in a comparative perspective, offered by the parallel interrogation of two distinct corpora of advertising in English and Polish, thus adding a sociocultural element to the array of issues it tackles. The main question, that is, the multimodal functioning of metaphors and humour in advertising, sits at the intersection of several fields of study, all of which are examined by the candidate in the first part of the dissertation in order to position her research within the specific declinations or subfields that are relevant to her discourse.

The result is an extended review of existing academic literature from advertising to communication studies, from theories of metaphor to cognitivism, from the study of humour to multimodality, an authentic tour de force by which the candidate traces concepts and ideas to the original scholarship that introduced them, and then pursues their development to the most recent contributions for each of them, with a specific focus on semiotic and linguistic approaches.

This vast review of scientific literature, intertwined with the reiterated claim of her own positioning within a multimodal semiotic discourse, occupies at least half of the candidate's work. The organisation of the material thus successfully aims at attaining clarity by keeping the most original part of the work separate from the preliminary mapping of established academic terrain. Yet, it occasionally gives the reader the impression of repeatedly postponing the heart of the discussion, which is announced and displaced several times to make room for the presentation of theoretical and methodological issues that are inevitably offered as preliminary. The latter, however, rather than merely introductory remarks, are of paramount importance given the complexity of the theoretical intersection the thesis pursues. Therefore, the overall presentation of the thesis argument would have gained effectiveness beyond what it already achieves in its present form by way of a discussion of the relevant academic taxonomies and theoretical formulations integrated within the presentation of original standpoints by the author. However, Stwora's excellent command of the metalanguage pertaining to each of the different academic fields her thesis engages, coupled with the remarkable number of bibliographic records she appropriately quotes and refers to, reveals the candidate's attitude as a committed, thorough and precise scholar, who is undoubtedly ready to take this further step in her future contributions to the her elected field of research.

The second half of the thesis is devoted to the presentation of the candidate's original investigation and analyses, which stem from her interest toward a comparative study of the communication strategies deployed in multimodal advertising in the two linguistic and cultural domains she is familiar with, namely English and Polish. The methodology here extends to include reception studies, as well as data collection and sampling procedures from multimodal corpus linguistics. Having established in the previous chapter that metaphor and humour cognitively function in similar ways and that their multimodal interaction contributes to the communication value of advertising, Stwora devotes this part of her thesis to illustrating how these theoretical points are found valid through her corpus analysis and survey interviews. As the author herself states, "This specific topic was brought into focus also because of the fact that past literature on metaphor and humour operating simultaneously in multimodal ads is still rather scarce" (252).

The methodology is rigorous and consistently deployed, with an accurate and detailed account of findings, both expected and unexpected. As for the corpora she collected, the candidate explains that she has used heterogeneous sources (from magazines to online archives) to put together 100 ads in English and an equal number in Polish. Out of these, she then sampled 20 ads per group “to investigate the way in which metaphorical constructs may be used as vehicles for humorousness in advertising discourse” (253). In this part of her work, Stwora devises her own categories of analysis building on the vast theoretical ground she has covered in the first part of the thesis. For each ad in the sample, she reports in a chart eight features that are relevant to her discussion and that cover the mode as well as the content: metaphor, humour, meaning operation, visual structure, script opposition, humour type, function, metaphor type. There is one aspect that the author does not address and that, given the comparative character of her research questions, is suggested as a relevant addition to any further development of this work, which is anticipated and encouraged: no mention is made of the cultural background(s) behind the English corpus, which might affect the findings of this part of the research in ways that are not mapped here. Where a certain ad was produced and for which intended audience might be relevant questions to ask, especially when one of the parameters that is analysed is humour. Since the internet is one of the resources used to identify suitable ads for the analysis, this opens up the field to the possibility of having a corpus that is coherent only in linguistic terms, but not in cultural terms. Furthermore, even from a purely linguistic point of view, the matter is complicated by the current global spread of English: what variety/varieties of English were included in the sample? Could such a factor influence the perception and understanding of specific instances of humour by the surveys’ respondents based on their own likely partial access to and command of English-speaking cultures? How relevant to this analysis would be the fact that English is often used in advertising as an international language with transnational cultural references?

These questions are inspired by the very presence of a monolingual corpus in Polish that is studied in a comparative perspective alongside the one in English, thus raising the issue of the possible relevance of national, cultural, and linguistic categories, especially with reference to the part of the research that interrogates reception. The samples are in fact submitted to a group of surveys’ respondents in order for them to evaluate the communicative potential and effectiveness of each ad, as well as the perception on their part of the multimodal use of humour and metaphors. The questionnaires Stwora has used and that are reported in the appendixes to the thesis are devised with the precise aim of checking “how the informants understand and interpret the mechanisms inducing humour and metaphor in advertisements” (254), thus shifting the focus from her own

analytical categories to the reception of cultural artefacts, inviting a more nuanced approach to the linguistic issues in compiling the corpora.

The selection process of informants is also accurately reported: 150 participants, selected among “the students and graduates of the Institute of English and the Institute of English Cultures and Literatures of the University of Silesia” (266), that is, a quite homogeneous community of young, educated, and essentially bilingual people whose capacity to “read” ads both in English and Polish could be taken fairly for granted. The group reflects the demographics of the community within which it was selected, that is, it comprises more women than men (73% vs. 26%; 1% marked their gender as “other”), with 99% of the participants being in their twenties. Since “the results were not that different across genders” (267), gender-inflected investigations of response to humour were explicitly placed outside the scope of the thesis. Yet, given the candidate’s attention to this aspect in her detailing the composition of the research group, it is quite surprising that “he” is the pronoun consistently used to refer to the hypothetical and/or prototypical viewer and respondent to the ads under investigation. Despite the objective difficulties the English language poses to avoid implicit sexism when it comes to the use of pronouns, the writer might want to consider this aspect in future research and explain what choices she makes and why.

Several findings deserve attention and are rich with possibilities for future research. The amount of data the candidate produces by way of statistical interrogation and analysis of her corpora and surveys is indeed impressive and presented with sufficient clarity through diagrams, charts, and discursive illustration. I will refer here only to the ones that I personally found more compelling and that I wish to see further developed in future research.

First of all, Stwora’s research demonstrates that, despite the considerable amount of figurative and humorous content in advertisements, “the combination of the metaphorical and the humorous seems not as frequent as solely metaphorical or exclusively humorous ads” (360). In other words, the cognitive similarity is unmistakably there between the two domains, yet it is not widely exploited in advertising discourse. The reasons may be manifold and connected to factors lying outside the mere complexity of the message packaged and conveyed by a specific ad and, as Stwora’s research intimates, pertaining to a wider context within which advertising discourse is produced. The analysis of the data shows in fact that “combining metaphor and humour in press ads in English was a common trend, whereas Polish ads that used humour and metaphor synergistically were radically less numerous as compared to the English corpus” (360-61). The question is all but idle, as it seems to confirm that linguistic and sociocultural factors deserving of future research are at work that influence the ways in which a ubiquitous form of communication

such as advertising occurs within specific linguistic and even national contexts. Even though Stwora does not extend her research here to a discussion of such contexts, her own assessment of the specificity of advertising discourse gets to the conclusion that “it is virtually impossible to view ads as abstracted from their sociocultural surroundings” (91).

As for the semiotic aspect, multimodality is confirmed as a crucial aspect of advertising communication. Yet, even in this domain the comparative analysis of the two corpora highlights differences between the two samples. As Stwora herself points out, “The results obtained from the sample in English indicate that the visual mode carries the greatest amount of the figurative burden” (361), whereas in the sample in Polish “it turned out that there were more multimodal than visual metaphors” (362).

It is clear, as witness also the cross-references to already published academic articles on the subject, that the candidate has identified and cultivated a fruitful research niche over the past few years and that in the process she has been preparing to eventually test her findings in terms of transferability and offer them to the academic community for the exploration of new possible frontiers, such as neurolinguistic investigations of the response to humorousness in advertisements.

Based on the observations and comments presented above, there is no doubt that the thesis under review fulfils all the requirements to be accepted: at its heart lie in fact both a thorough, theoretically-informed application of existing scholarship and an attempt to further push theory to cover intersecting disciplinary grounds, such as cognitivism (under the guise of humour and metaphor) and multimodality (within the field of advertising studies). I therefore fully recommend that Anna Stwora be admitted to further procedures toward completion of her doctoral degree as she is a mature scholar who is ready to give her best in academic professional environments and to contribute further original research to her elected field of study.

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