

The Semantic Analysis of Jokes

(A Study of some Lexical Relations in The Reader`s Digest`s Humor in Uniform)

May Salih Abu Joloud

Al-Mustansiriyah University
College of Arts\ Translation Department

Abstract

Jokes can create an occasional picture of the world .It can break the known common script, violate norms or pushes them together .The interesting thing about jokes is the fact that they form some kind of altering of the logicity of our thinking.

Humor has always been a part of military life. Within the military , under the stress of military operations or training, spontaneous humor is a way to deal with the pressure and form bonds of common experience. Therefore, there is a huge body of humorous stories, cartoons, as well as songs and shows by comedians, all with the military as the theme and subject matter.

Service members and intelligence personnel always submit their comic musings to Reader`s Digest and such musings are usually published in a popular section entitled (Humor in Uniform) which feeds from real and actual incidents , because humor is still the best way to cope with the stress of events. And since lexical ambiguity is the core of language - based jokes, this paper examines and reviews this ambiguity and the humorous effect presented by (homonymy, paronym and polysemy).

A joke can be a helpful tool in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages .It is conducive and essential to learning as well as providing the language, definitions of linguistic phenomena and illustrating them with examples easy to understand and memorize.

1.1 Humorous Discourse

Humor is an important tool to achieve certain purpose. Humor is at first a type of language behavior, (Attardo,2003) defines humor by two criteria: the first one is whether the event elicits laughter or smiling; the second one is whether it was produced with the intention of eliciting laughter or smiling. Even though humor , as a linguistic and interactional process, appears to be a universal human phenomenon, it is more obviously embedded in situational sociocultural context than most other communication. "humor presupposes a highly developed intellect and can

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only exist within the framework of specific sociolinguistic conditions” (Pocheptsov,1990:12).

The presupposition of sociocultural\sociolinguistic context for the production of jokes includes its perception also. The perception of a joke is determined by many factors, not the least of which being language competence and knowledge of characteristic features pertaining to a specific cultural environment. The perception of a joke is quite often caused by the fact that a recipient not only understands the language and external shapes of the characters in the joke, but also is familiar with the scripts and cliché-phrases. This is the reason behind that jokes are not clear for the carriers of other cultures, even if they know the language of the joke very well.

(Serveite,2005) distinguishes at least two types of humor: situational humor and linguistic humor. Usually a situational joke is based on situational ambiguity when a situation allows for different interpretations. For a certain period of time , the ambiguity remains unnoticed, and this leads to a wrong interpretation of the situation.

The discrepancy between two possible interpretations causes the humorous effect; some humor relies on funny actions, while some relies on a comedy of errors. Ambiguity also seems the most general principle underlying the majority of linguistic jokes , and it can be created by different linguistic means . The most common humorous effect in linguistic humor rests on non- discrimination or confusion of two linguistic items that are essentially different but comparable in some respects.

Within the realm of linguistics, jokes make use of linguistic ambiguity and there also appears a corpus of jokes that distinguishes itself not by actions or situations , but based on certain linguistic attributes or “ features of natural language for their effect. These jokes are known as language- dependent jokes, or more commonly as puns” (Zabalbeascoa,1996:253). Ambiguous statements are a common aspect of comedy ,(Suls,1972:45) points out that “ linguistic ambiguity is a common way that humor provides incongruity and potential resolution”. It is important not mistake ambiguous statements for vague statements because there is a certain difference. Vague statements usually confuse the audience, whereas ambiguous statements suggest two or more distinct interpretations.

Linguistic analysis proves that most jokes are of a complex character. In a number of cases, the core phenomenon , responsible for the funniness is reinforced by other types of linguistic phenomena. The most

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popular linguistic phenomena to cause a humorous effect seem to be: synonymy, antonym, homonymy, polysemy, and paronym.

1.2 Lexical Relations and Ambiguity

Our mental vocabulary is highly organized. There are a lot of relations between the single words of a language and the meanings of these words. Among linguists, these relations are called “semantic relations “ sense relations” , or “ lexical relations “. Semantic relationships are associates that exist between the meanings of words. The association relationships encapsulate this chunk of meaning that extends beyond the boundaries of the individual entities.

Lexical ambiguity is very common in languages. A single string of words may lead to more than one interpretation simply because one of the words has more than one meaning . This can be clearly shown in: synonymy, antonym, hyponymy ,homonymy ,polysemy, and paronym. The followings are general definitions and overviews of the three main lexical relations discussed in the next section accompanied with examples taken from the Reader`s Digest ; namely : homonymy, paronym and polysemy.

Homonymy is the relationship that exists between two (or more) words which belong to the same grammatical category , have the same spelling , may or may not have the same pronunciation, but have different meanings and origins (i.e. they are etymologically and semantically unrelated) ; e.g. to lie (to rest, remain, be situated in a certain position) and to lie (not to tell the truth) (Zapata, 2008:3)..

According to (Fromkin and Rodman,1998: 211) homonyms may create ambiguity. A word or a sentence is ambiguous if it can be understood or interpreted in more than one way. The fact that words can be understood in more than one way is the core in the analysis of jokes.

Polysemy can be defined as “ a term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings “ (Crystal, 1997: 297). Crystal gives as an example for polysemy the lexical item “ plain” which has the different meanings :(clear), (unadorned), and (obvious).(Crystal ,2007: 191) says that most everyday words are polysemic: don't have one single use in language as in the case in scientific or technical terms like : at alotogy or semiconductor ; these words are monosemic. And since “ polysemy occurs when the form of a word suggests different meanings, but the meanings are all related by semantic extension. They are not always clearly distinct “ (Hudson, 2000: 313) it is not easy to make this distinction. In a dictionary , homophonous words have separate entries , whereas the various meanings of a polysemous word occur within the same entry.

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According to (Apresijan, 1974) polysemy can be further divided into two types: the first type is motivated by metaphor. In metaphorical polysemy, a relation of analogy is assumed to hold between the senses of the word. The basic sense of metaphorical polysemy is literal, whereas its secondary sense is figurative. For example, the word (eye) has the literal basic sense (organ of the body) and the figurative secondary sense (hole in a needle). Metaphorically motivated polysemy seems to be quite unconstrained. There are cases where the primary and derivative meanings keep a sufficiently large part in common, but there are also cases where the relatedness in meaning is not so obvious.

The other type of polysemy is motivated by metonymy. Metonymically motivated polysemy (ibid) respects the usual notion of polysemy, which is the ability of a word to have several distinct but related meanings. In metonymic polysemy, both the basic and the secondary senses are literal, e.g. the word (chicken) has the literal basic sense referring to (the animal) and the literal secondary sense of (the meat of that animal) thus, it seems that some types of metaphorically motivated polysemy are closest to homonymy.

As for paronym which is the third type of lexical relations discussed through the examples in the next section, they can be defined as words that sound similarly but mean different things. Paronymic attraction is defined by (Grigrev, 1979:264) as follows "1-it implies semantic connection between the (two or more) words\ lexemes involved 2- the lexemes involved share at least two identical consonants 3- the lexemes are not connected by derivational proximity, i.e. do not share the (etymologically) same root". In this definition, Grigrev departs from the widespread use of the term paronymy in linguistics, where it does refer to different forms derived from the same root.

1.3 Examples of (Humor in Uniform) from the Reader`s Digest

1.3.1 Polysemy:

1- "When my very pregnant niece, a sergeant in the New York National Guard, accidentally knocked over a glass of water, one of her soldiers volunteered to clean it up. As he was mopping up the mess, an officer walked in "Private, what is going on here?" he asked. To the officer's horror, the private replied "Sir, the sergeant's water broke, and I'm helping her cleanup"

Here the humorous effect lies in the polysemic meanings of the word (broke). The private meant that she (knocked the glass over): to hit something with a short quick action so that it moves or falls. While the other meaning which creates the joke (based on the fact that the sergeant is

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pregnant) is : the placenta has broken , enabling the baby to begin travelling down the birth canal, some liquid is usually released when this happens, hence the term water.

2-“ When he received his identity card from the militia and found his complexion listed as ‘ fair’, my 18- year-old son was not happy. I asked him what he thought it should have read. ‘well,’ he replied ‘ they could at least have said ‘ good ‘ ! “

What the son meant and made him angry is one of the meanings of the word (fair) which is: clear , legible , fine . While the intended meaning is : not dark (fair skin).

1.3.2 Homonymy

1- “ Just after I was posted to CFB Calgary, our furniture arrived at our new house. My wife was outside directing the movers. I was inside and noticed the hallway was full of boxes. On my way out to ask her why they were all being stocked there, two fellows passed me and added more to the clutter. That`s when I realized the ‘ Hall ‘- our family name- was marked on each of the boxes.”

The humorous effect lies in the homonymous relationship of the two interpretations of the word (hall) : 1- the family name 2- large space enclosed by roof and walls.

2- “ Archdeacon John Comfort, an Anglican cleric, was stationed in Newfoundland during World War 2. When his telephone rang one day and he answered with his usual ‘ Comfort here ‘ , the caller replied ‘ that is just what I need ! ‘ “

Once again the joke lies in the homonymous interpretations of the word (comfort) : 1- the family name of the archdeacon 2- a state of physical ease and freedom from pain or constraint, the easing or alleviation of a person's feelings of grief or distress., or ease the grief or distress

3- “ My husband , Honorary Colonel of the British Columbia Dragoons , assisted in the organization of an army reunion. After several phone calls from VIPs, I wasn`t surprised when I answered the phone and a gentleman said, ‘ this is General Paint calling ‘ . I quickly asked ‘ would you like to speak to my husband sir ? ‘ , he answered me ‘ It doesn`t matter, I`m just calling to tell you the wall paper you ordered is in ‘

The homonymous relationship in which the humorous effect lies is represented in the different interpretations of the word (General Paint) : 1- The name of the paint company 2- liquid ,liquefiable, or mastic composition that, after application to a substrate in a thin layer.

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1.3.3 Paronym

1-“While on patrol with the Canadian Navy off the coast of Vancouver Island, I was just finishing a set of fire- prevention rounds. As I passed through the bridge , I asked the officer of the watch where we were. ‘ we are on the ocean ‘ , he replied. ‘ Could you be more Pacific ?’ I asked “

As it was explained previously, paronymcan create ambiguity because two or more words can sound similarly (sharing at least two consonants) although they are quite different. In this example the words (specific : clearly defined or identified and Pacific: the Pacific ocean) are paronymous causing a humorous effect.

2-“ First soldier: pass the chocolate pudding, would you ?

Second soldier : no way

First soldier : why ever not ?

First soldier : it is against regulation to help another soldier to dessert ! “

The joke lies in the two paronymous words (dessert : sweets and deserts (the verb) : to leave or abandon).

3-“ I was the deputy airfield commander in Mogadishu with the Canadian forces in Somalia. The Russian helicopter crews who lived in town were to move to the airfield and the Romanian Field Hospital was to prepare their food. ‘ The rations are on their way ‘ , I told the Romanian Commanding officer. The Russians couldn’t come until the extra food arrived, he stated emphatically. I reiterated the rations are on their way . Again we repeated ourselves. The Romanian was angry now. But then the interpreter realized the problem. The Romanian understood me to be saying ‘ The Russians are on their way ‘.

The humorous effect is realized through the two paronymous words (rations: food served to military personnel and Russians : east Slavic ethnic group native to Russia).

Conclusions

1-The underlying principle of linguistic jokes seems to be ambiguity, caused by the lack of one- to –one correspondence between form and meaning in a linguistic unit. The different interpretations of the unit create a humorous effect.

2-As demonstrated by the examples quoted from the Humor in Uniform\ Reader`s Digest, the humorous effect makes use of the associations that exist between the meanings of the words, i.e. the lexical or semantic relations. The fact that a single string of words may lead to more than one interpretations as in : homonymy, polysemy , and paronym is the fundamental core of the formulation of linguistic jokes.

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- 3- Jokes provide an important and useful tool in understanding, learning and memorizing languages. They serve to capture and preserve the student`s or learner`s attention- by creating friendly and relaxed atmosphere- and facilitate the process of learning and acquiring a new language.
- 4-Jokes present a challenge and a test of the learner`s language skills: perception of a joke is caused by the fact the recipient not only understands the language, but also is familiar with cliché- phrases and scripts. It requires a good knowledge and a very good feeling for the language to appreciate a joke.

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- التحليل الدلالي للنكات

دراسة لبعض اشكال العلاقات الدلالية في نكات مجلة ريدرز دايجست (المختار)

م . مي صالح ابو جلود

الجامعة المستنصرية \ كلية الاداب \ قسم الترجمة

ملخص البحث

يمكن للنكات ان تخلق صورة مغايرة للعالم . اذا انها قادرة على كسر بعض المعايير و
النظم واساليب التفكير المنطقية السائدة . ولطالما كانت النكات والفكاهة جزءا من الحياة
العسكرية وذلك لقدرتها على التخفيف من العبء وامتصاص التوتر والحد منه . ويوجد مخزون
كبير من النصوص الفكاهية متخذة اشكالا مختلفة (نصوص كارتونية ، افلام سينمائية
واعلانات) وفي مايتعلق بمجلة (ريدرز دايجست) فيوجد قسم متخصص للنكات المستوحاة
من الاجواء الحربية الامريكية ويقوم جنود بارسال مساهماتهم الى المجلة مما يجعل هذه النكات
حقيقة ومن اجواء الواقع .

ونظرا لأن الغموض او اللبس اللغوي هو عنصر اساسي في تكوين النكتة والنصوص
الفكاهية عامة ، فيختص هذا البحث في دراسة ثلاثة اشكال دلالية محددة في النصوص الفكاهية
العسكرية وهي : (الالفاظ المتجانسة ، الالفاظ ذات المعاني المتعددة ، الالفاظ مشتركة
الجدور)