

A Linguistic Analysis of Sentence Structures in English Language Jokes

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Abstract:

The research writer this paper investigates the role of syntax in the production of humor within English jokes .He performs this task by analyzing the linguistic structures that contribute to comedic effect. This study demonstrates how the structure of sentences influences the setup, misdirection and punch lines of jokes by using the three theories of humor, namely the incongruity theory, the superiority theory and the relief theory and relief. (Raskin, 1985, p.99) Through syntactic analysis of English jokes, including examples of ambiguity, parallelism, and ellipsis, the paper highlights the ways in which syntax functions as a communicative tool and as a pivotal mechanism for humor as well. (Chiaro, 1992, p.45) It is thought that by examining these structural elements, this research may contribute to the linguistic understanding of humor and provide insights into how syntactic choices impact meaning and emotional response in humorous contexts. (Morreall, 2009, p.67)

KeyWords: Sentence structures; English jokes; Humor production; Linguistic analysis; Syntactic patterns

التحليل اللغوي لتراكيب الجملة في نكت اللغة الإنجليزية

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المخلص

يستقصي هذا البحث دور النحو في إنتاج الفكاهة في النكات الإنكليزية. يقوم بهذه المهمة من خلال تحليل البنى اللغوية التي تسهم في التأثير الكوميدي. تُظهر هذه الدراسة كيف يؤثر بناء الجمل على تقديم النكتة، وتغيير التوقعات، وخط النهاية، باستخدام ثلاث نظريات للفكاهة، وهي نظرية التناقض، ونظرية التفوق، ونظرية التنفيس (راسكين، 1985، ص. 99) من خلال تحليل نحوي للنكات الإنكليزية، بما في ذلك أمثلة على الغموض، والتوازي، والحذف، يبرز البحث الطرق التي يعمل بها النحو كأداة تواصل وآلية محورية للفكاهة (تشيارو، 1992، ص. 45). يُعتقد أنه من خلال فحص هذه العناصر التركيبية، قد يُسهم هذا البحث في الفهم اللغوي للفكاهة وتقديم رؤى حول كيفية تأثير الخيارات النحوية على المعنى والاستجابة العاطفية في سياقات الفكاهة (موريل، 2009، ص. 67)

الكلمات المفتاحية : بنية الجمل؛ النكات الإنكليزية؛ إنتاج الفكاهة؛ التحليل اللغوي؛ الأنماط النحوية

1. Introduction

The introduction embraces definitions of theories of humor, aim, significance and methodology.

1.1 Definitions of the Theories of Humor

Various disciplines such as psychology and linguistics have postulated some theories to explain the underlying mechanisms of humor. Some of these prominent theories are the incongruity theory, the superiority theory and the relief theory. Below is a brief overview of each theory. (Raskin, 1985, p.99)

1.2 The Incongruity Theory

The incongruity theory states that humor is realized when the listener or reader discerns a departure from what he or she expects. In syntax, the structure of jokes often involves building up expectations and then subverting these expectations. (Kant, 1790, p.45) Raskin (1985, p.99) explains this viewpoint when he asserts that “the punch line of a joke often introduces an unexpected syntactic or semantic twist that creates a humorous effect by challenging expectations”. (p.99). Sentence structure is mainly used as a tool to achieve this sort of deviation which is crucial for creating humor because it produces the element of surprise and unpredictability. Thus, this hypothesis maintains that humor arises from the perception of incongruities between expectations and reality. Laughter occurs when there is a violation of a norm or a surprise that leads to a cognitive shift. This cognitive shift is usually resolved upon the recognition of the incongruity. (Morreall, 2009, p.112)

Kant (1790) advocated this theory of humor. He maintained that humor derives from the difference between a concept and the real object. Kant was of the opinion that Laughter a function of a prompt change of a strained expectation into nothing, thus, it is stressed that humor appears when our expectations are prevented unexpectedly. Schopenhauer (1818) thought that humor is a kind of surprise and that it happens when we see something that is totally different from what we expect. (p.89). Thus, it is clear that Schopenhauer’s viewpoint stresses that the role of surprise and the change in understanding are a prerequisite for humor to be appreciated.

Morreall (2009) believes that the contradiction arises when there is a clash between what we expect and what actually takes place. He states that humor usually stems from a contrast between the anticipated and what actually happened. The fact that incongruity is in line with cognitive dissonance is the most important element in understanding various forms of humor such as puns, situational comedy, and irony. (p.78)

1.3 The Superiority Theory:

Aristotle in Poetics and Hobbes (Leviathan), were the first to advocate the superiority theory of humor? This theory claims that laughter comes from a feeling of triumph over others’ faults or mistakes. Sentence structure plays a vital role in

the production of jokes. What causes humor is that characters or situations are arranged in such a way as to reveal their flaws or ignorance. This notion can be detected clearly in some blunder or misunderstanding jokes. (Bergson, 1911, p.35)

The structure of the sentence alludes to a mistake which the audience comprehends to be laughable owing to the character's misinterpretation of the expression.

Nowadays, the superiority theory claims that people laugh when they notice that other people commits errors or when they see that other people encounter embarrassing situations because, these comic situations reinforce their own feeling of competence and worth. (Morreall, 2009, p.114)

We can see that this theory can be applied to many types of humor, from slapstick to social satire. The reason is that these kinds of humor provide the amused person with the opportunity to feel that they are superior to the characters or individuals who are being depicted. For instance, Bergson (1911) thinks that laughter always suggests a sort of hidden or unconscious assumption of superiority over the individual who is the subject of the joke. Bergson thinks that laughter has a social function by implicitly enforcing norms and mocking deviations from expected behavior. (p.56)

1.4 The Relief Theory:

The relief theory is usually attributed to Freud (1905). He believed that laughter yields a means of relieving pent-up emotions and anxieties. According to him humor enables us to express repressed wishes and or feelings in a manner accepted by society. (Freud, 1905, p.214)

He points out that laughing relieves tension and therefore it changes discomfort into amusement despite the fact that it is done in a playful or indirect way. Thus, in accordance with this view humor has a double function. For one thing, it approves the idea that there are pent-up emotions; for another, it proves an outlet for their expression that is socially acceptable. Thus, the view of stress release is employed as an instrument for studying the relief theory of humor. For example, Derks (Derks et al., 2012) explains that humor may be employed as a coping device to facilitate emotional relief by providing a safe space for studying difficult topics. They back the view that laughter can greatly mitigate stress and promote psychological well-being. (p.89). accordingly, the therapeutic benefits of this view have become clear.

To summarize, the relief theory which is rooted in the work of Freud, suggests that humor allows for the release of social tensions or suppressed emotions. In many jokes, syntax is structured to delay the revelation of humorous content, creating a buildup that releases tension upon the punch line. Freud (1905) noted that "jokes allow the suppressed to surface in socially acceptable forms" (p. 214). In terms of syntax, this means that the arrangement of clauses or pauses can heighten

anticipation, resulting in greater comedic payoff when the punch line is finally delivered.

In the above three theories of humor it can be seen that humor functions on both a semantic and syntactic level, setting the foundation for an analysis of syntax's role in structuring English jokes.

1.5 Aim:

This research paper aims at studying the role of syntax in producing humor within English jokes. In particular, it attempts to understand how syntactic structures such as sentence length, clause arrangement, and the order of information may contribute to humorous effects. It is believed that analyzing syntactic patterns in a sample of English jokes, may point out the linguistic techniques that underlie humor and also illustrate how sentence structure shapes comedic timing and punch line delivery. (Raskin, 1985, p.99)

1.6 Significance:

The writer of this paper is of the opinion that analyzing the syntax of humor provides insights into the intersection of language structure and cognitive processing in comedic contexts. It is also believed that this study may contribute to linguistic research by offering a detailed examination of how syntax can function beyond typical communicative aims to produce an aesthetic and emotional response in the form of laughter. (Chiaro, 1992, p.45)

Additionally, understanding the syntactic elements that drive humor has practical implications for fields such as computational linguistics and artificial intelligence in which humor generation and recognition have significant importance. (Morreall, 2009, p.112)

1.7 Method:

The writer of this paper adopts a qualitative approach. He uses discourse analysis and syntax analysis to examine the linguistic structures present in English jokes. The analyzed jokes in this study are selected from the following documented sources:

"The Language of Jokes" by Delia Chiaro (1992) – A collection of analyzed jokes focusing on linguistic mechanisms.

"An Anatomy of Humor" by Arthur Asa Berger (1993) – Discusses various forms of humor, including linguistic jokes.

Humor websites like Pun of the Day and Reader's Digest Humor Section, which offer diverse samples of English jokes sources

Each joke's syntactic structure is analyzed for elements such as clause arrangement, word order, and sentence complexity, with a focus on how these factors influence the humor caused by the joke. (Bergson, 1911, p.35)

2. Analysis:

In this part of the paper the selected jokes are analyzed in terms of the research's aim and method.

Jokes Analysis - Individual Tables:

Joke 1 Analysis *Incongruous Sentence Structure*

Joke	I told my wife she was drawing her eyebrows too high. She looked surprised.
Analysis	The humor in this joke arises from the double meaning in the phrase 'looked surprised.' The structure leads the reader to expect a typical reaction from the wife; however, the incongruous interpretation suggests that her 'surprised look' is due to her exaggerated eyebrows, not her reaction to the comment. This joke aligns with Morreall's Superiority Theory, as the speaker subtly mocks the wife's appearance in order to create a light-hearted sense of superiority. (Morreall, 2009, p.114).

Joke 2 Analysis *Incongruous Sentence Structure*

Joke	I asked my dog what's two minus two. He said nothing.
Analysis	The setup prepares the audience for a mathematical or logical response, but the punchline twists this expectation to demonstrate the incongruity in treating a dog as capable of arithmetic. This aligns with Bergson's Mechanistic Humor, as treating animals in human-like ways becomes amusing when it feels incongruous. (Bergson, 1911, p.35).

Joke 3 Analysis *Syntactic Ambiguity*

Joke	Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.
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Analysis	This joke is a play on the ambiguity of 'flies like,' which has different interpretations in each clause. 'Time flies like an arrow' uses a conventional comparison, whereas 'fruit flies like a banana' reads as both a literal statement about insects and a humorous misinterpretation of 'flies like.' Bergson would see this as mechanical or 'automatic' humor in language, where syntax drives the sentence to an absurd reading. (Bergson, 1911, p.56)
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Joke 4 Analysis *Syntactic Ambiguity*

Joke	Letting my hair grow was the highlight of last year.
Analysis	The humor lies in the double meaning of 'highlight.' It may mean the 'best part' of the year and also implies a hair highlight (dye) in this context. This joke aligns with Morreall's Superiority Theory through indirect self-deprecation, presenting a modest activity as significant. (Morreall, 2009, p.112).

Joke 5 Analysis *Parallel Structures and Misleading Syntax*

Joke	My therapist told me, 'Write letters to the people you hate and then burn them.' I did, but now I don't know what to do with the letters.
Analysis	The joke humorously misinterprets the therapist's instruction to 'burn' the letters, taking it literally. This aligns with Morreall's Superiority Theory, as the audience finds amusement in the speaker's misunderstanding, fostering a sense of superiority. (Morreall, 2009, p.114)

Joke 6 Analysis *Parallel Structures and Misleading Syntax*

Joke	I told my friend 10 jokes to make him laugh. Sadly, no pun in ten did.
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Analysis	This joke's setup uses a parallel structure that makes 'no pun in ten did' sound like 'no pun intended.' The humor is caused by a phonetic play on words and expectation reversal. Bergson would interpret this as mechanical humor, playing on the similarity between expected and actual phrases. (Bergson, 1911, p.35).
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Joke 7 Analysis *Ellipsis and Minimal Syntax*

Joke	I used to be indecisive, but now I'm not so sure.
Analysis	This joke relies on minimal syntax to express a contradiction concisely. The brevity allows the joke to capitalize on irony without elaborating. This aligns with Morreall's Superiority Theory, as the audience perceives the speaker's indecision as an ongoing flaw, creating an opportunity for humor. (Morreall, 2009, p.112).

Joke 8 Analysis *Ellipsis and Minimal Syntax*

Joke	Did you hear about the mathematician who's afraid of negative numbers? He'll stop at nothing to avoid them.
Analysis	The humor in this joke resides in the phrase 'stop at nothing,' using minimal syntax and ellipsis to suggest both persistence and the literal avoidance of zero (a negative number threshold). This aligns with Morreall's Superiority Theory, as audiences find humor in the exaggerated fear of negative numbers. (Freud, 1905, p.214).

Joke 9 Analysis *Ellipsis and Incongruity*

Joke	I told my computer I needed a break, and now it won't stop sending me Kit-Kat ads.
Analysis	The phrase 'I need a break' is interpreted literally by the computer, contrasting human intention and machine response. Bergson would see humor in the computer's literal, automatic response to language, showing the mechanical function versus human intention. (Bergson, 1911, p.56).

3. Discussion

The analysis of syntax in English jokes shows clearly that syntactic structures play a significant role in the production of humor. Syntactic structures operate subtly within sentence length, clause arrangement, and the placement of information. It can be seen clearly that these syntactic choices are of vital importance in the creation of timing, incongruity, and the element of surprise, which are foundational to humor. (Raskin, 1985, p.99)

By examining different syntactic strategies, such as incongruous sentence structure, syntactic ambiguity, parallel structure, misleading syntax, ellipsis, and minimal syntax, this study has manifested the way by means of which syntactic manipulation can create a range of comedic effects.

The above analysis has shown that in jokes where expectations are subverted by an unexpected clause or unusual word order, incongruity leverages the structure of sentences to surprise the reader or listener. (Morreall, 2009, p.112)

For example, in jokes where syntax presents two meanings such as syntactic ambiguity or misleading syntax, the humor lies in the reader's cognitive recognition of an alternate interpretation. This technique is in line with theories of humor, such as Morreall's (2009) incongruity theory, which posits that humor arises from a discrepancy between expectation and reality.

Syntactic structures that delay the punchline by placing it at the end or constructing an ellipsis can increase this effect, building anticipation before the incongruity is revealed. It is evident from the findings arrived at by the above analysis also reveal the role of minimal syntax and ellipsis in producing a compact, punchy humor. When jokes boil down sentences to their essential elements, they highlight the incongruous word or phrase in order to draw attention to the humor more directly. (Bergson, 1911, p.35). Theory of humor as a mechanical process can be seen in these syntactic techniques. In these syntactic techniques where words are arranged in repetitive or predictable patterns, the created expectation is eventually disrupted by the punchline. The analysis has demonstrated that these minimalistic syntactic structures, such as parallelism and ellipsis, contribute to the aesthetic quality of humor by making it precise and efficient, thereby maximizing its impact. The study shows that syntactic humor taps into cognitive processing because it requires the audience to recognize and resolve ambiguities or incongruities. This cognitive engagement with syntax-driven humor supports the significance of studying humor produced by syntax for fields like artificial intelligence and computational linguistics. It is believed that understanding how syntax can be used to create humor may help in developing systems that can both recognize and produce humor. This is an area in which human ability is currently ahead of computational capabilities. (Derks et al., 2012, p.89)

4. Conclusion:

This study has shed some light on the syntactic mechanisms that may contribute to the study of humor in English jokes. It has shown how syntax shapes humor by creating incongruity by enhancing timing and engaging cognitive processing.

The analysis carried out in this paper has made it clear that syntactic structures such as ambiguity, misleading syntax, parallelism, and ellipsis are pivotal in delivering punchlines effectively and creating a humorous impact. (Raskin, 1985, p.99)

The writer of this paper thinks that the findings arrived at by this study go beyond traditional linguistic studies because it has stressed the aesthetic and emotive functions of syntax in producing humor. (Chiaro, 1992, p.45)

These insights provide a foundation for further studies in computational linguistics, where developing an understanding of humor syntax can improve the generation of humor in AI. All in all, this study has stressed the versatility of syntax, as it has demonstrated its role not only in communication but also in creating laughter which is an emotional response that is widely spread across cultures and languages. (Bergson, 1911, p.35)

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