

A Semantic-Syntactic Study of Ambiguity in Humorous Contexts

Asst. Prof. Hussein Hameed Ma'yuuf (PhD)

Department of English Language

University of Babylon, College of Education for Human Sciences, Babylon, Iraq

and

Asst. Lect. Omar Osama Nashaat

Department of English Language

University of Babylon, College of Education for Human Sciences, Babylon, Iraq

Abstract - Ambiguity occurs when the sentence comprises of more than one single meaning. Ambiguity is of two kinds: lexical ambiguity in which a single vocabulary has more than one meaning and syntactic ambiguity when the syntactic structure of a sentence is ambiguous. Context has a great role in determining whether the sentence can be interpreted and become ambiguous. Ambiguity usually resulting in dilemma and it became a subject matter in many linguistic studies especially semantics. This study examines ambiguity that creates humors in which the data were collected in from resources in forms of newspaper headlines, puzzles, jokes and narratives. The data collected includes 25 cases of ambiguity; (12) statements concerning lexical ambiguity and the rest are syntactic ambiguity. The result shows that lexical and syntactic ambiguity are major apparatus used to create puns in humor. The results also suggest that ambiguity is a vital source of humor when it involves double interpretations in which one interpretation suggests the actual meaning and the other interpretation suggests a humorous one which is not normally occurred in normal context.

Keywords – semantics, ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, semantic ambiguity, humor, polysemy, homonymy

I. INTRODUCTION

Statements contains humors and jokes usually find the power of humor through ambiguity (Seewoester, 2009). Ambiguous sentences always have more than one interpretation and sense. Divergence in meaning can produce various and humorous senses in particular contexts. Wordplay is often used in numerous jokes and humors. Accordingly, ambiguity is a vital tool of creating puns in humors. Another advantage of using ambiguity in many contexts is that to produce a sense of wit and to make sentences more attractive to attention or trigger people's curiosity about it. Ambiguity can sometimes be used in newspaper headlines and commercials. Ambiguity is a language tool used to create puns in humors and create insights of how words can control the interpretation of meaning resulting from witty senses. The confusion resulted from double interpretations of can produce humors in certain contexts. Several studies analyze this kind of

processes such as Duffy, Kambe, and Rayner (2001), Giora (2003), Gorfein (2001), MacDonald, Pearlmutter, and Seidenberg (1994), Tabossi (1988), Antonopoulou (2004), Laurian (1992), Lew (1996), Ptaszynski and Mickiewicz (2004), and Zabalbeascoa (1996). These studies concluded that ambiguity is the core of creating humor.

There are two kinds of ambiguity; syntactic and lexical ambiguity. The former concerned with word order ambiguity, referential ambiguity and the arrangement of prepositional phrase while the latter occurs through homonymous strings and polysemous words (Hirst, 1987).

The study investigates how humor is created in spite of multiple explanations of the sentence by analyzing the meaning and senses. The study goes to answer the following questions:

- a. What type of ambiguity does the word or sentence contain?
- b. How does the explanation of meaning make the sentence humorous?

The hypotheses suggest that there are two kinds of ambiguity: syntactic and semantic. The syntactic means the word order inside the sentence can create ambiguity and semantically means the double meanings of the word within the sentence can create ambiguity. Hypotheses also suggest that ambiguity create stronger meaning when it bears double different interpretations. It is also the context that plays an effective role in determining the meaning of the word or phrase.

The aim to this study is to clarify the kinds of ambiguity utilized in sentences which can create humor or pun, whether lexical or syntactic ambiguity and how ambiguity create strong meaning within the sentence.

One of the essential reason which makes ambiguity so important is that it gives us a chance to be creative and innovative when we interpret a vague sentence or a text. It is also gives us the chance use our own ideas and judgements to find meaning when we face a vague text or a sentence.

The study is limited to two types of ambiguity as they are the most adopted and employed kinds of ambiguity in humor. It is also limited to 25 examples of humorous sentences found in internet websites.

II. SYNTACTIC AND LEXICAL AMBIGUITY AS A PROCESS OF PRODUCING HUMORS

As mentioned above, types of ambiguity that create humorous meanings include lexical and syntactic/ structural ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity occurs in the semantic level and involves a manipulation of meaningful morpheme/ lexeme which produce two kinds of interpretations: serious and humorous (Seewoester, 2009). This kind of ambiguity uses polysemy and homonymy in producing ambiguity. Homonymy indicates the unrelated senses of the same phonological word (Kreidler, 2002). Homonymy includes homophones (senses of the same spoken word) and

homographs (senses of the same written form). Polysemy is the same at some point is that it deals with double senses but it is used if these senses are judged to be connected (Kreidler, 2002).

Some instances of lexical ambiguity resulted from double interpretations.

I. I saw a tall tree outside the house.

According to this sentence, one can have double interpretations of the lexeme (saw). This word can act as the past tense of (see) but at the same time it can mean a tool that is used to cut wood. Thus this sentence can be interpreted as either *I saw (past tense of see) a tree* or *I saw (cut by saw) a tree*. This sentence is classified within lexical ambiguity since the interpretation caused multiple meanings of the verb (saw). Oaks (1994: 378) states that lexical ambiguity is “a word with more than one possible meaning in a context”.

The other type of ambiguity is the syntactic one which occurs in the structure of the sentence. Lew (1996: 128) argues that the syntax of the jokes based on “a duality of interpretation motivated by the structural patterns of the language systems”. Attardo et al (1994: 35) states that ambiguity occurs in the sentence level because of the structure not because of the lexical items. For example:

II. I shot an elephant in my pajama.

The sentence above has more than one interpretations. The first one, the sentence can be interpreted as *In my pajama, I shot an elephant* and the second interpretation is that *I shot an elephant (which is) wearing my pajama* or *(which is) in my pajama*. Accordingly, the double interpretations are resulted from the structure of the sentence, how words are ordered within the sentence, and are not caused by the meaning of the lexeme. The structure does not cause violation to any syntactic requirements and because this ambiguity resulted from the structure of the sentence, thus this ambiguity lies within syntactic one.

III. AMBIGUITY INTERLOCK

When word class change occurs, there will be an overlap in lexical and syntactic ambiguity. The change in word class takes place in lexical level and the lexeme shows various syntactic functions. The result will be different meanings that produced by double interpretations. To handle the dilemma, syntactic ambiguity resolution suggested by Mac Donald et al (1994) is adopted. Mac Donald et al (1994: 682) argues that “lexical and syntactic information in sentence comprehension is governed by common lexical processing mechanism and syntactic ambiguities are based on ambiguities in lexical level”. Chiaro (1992) suggests that the change in word class lies within lexical domain but of parts of sentences but he distinguishes syntactic ambiguity which is not based on lexical item but on sentences at a syntactic level. Consequently, the ambiguity resulted from various different word class will be categorized under lexical ambiguity. In addition, NPs and compound nouns are considered within syntactic ambiguity. Consider the following sentence:

- *Reagan wins on budget, but no more lies ahead.*

The ambiguity in this sentence can be found in the word (lies). In spite of the ambiguity found in one lexeme but it is categorized under syntactic ambiguity instead of lexical one. This is because the lexeme (lies) is ambiguous in this context according to word category (noun-verb ambiguity) that resulted in different meanings.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009: 422) state that “In a qualitative study, the researcher is supposed to understand the holistic description of the phenomena”. This study is content-based one. Content-based study is a research method which can be applied in written materials (Ary et al, 2010). The data consists of 25 sentences from newspaper headlines, commercial slogans and jokes. The data were collected from various internet sites and as follows:

- a. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-lexical-ambiguity-1691226>
- b. <http://www.allfishingbuy.com/Fishing-jokes.htm>
- c. <https://www.criticism.com/linguistics/types-of-ambiguity.php>
- d. <https://www.quora.com/>
- e. <https://upjoke.com/mother-in-law-jokes>
- f. <http://www.ling.upenn.edu/~beatrice/humor/contents.html>

Words definitions were taken from *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. The analysis was conducted by explaining the possible meanings of sentences by identifying the definitions taken from the dictionary or the syntactic requirements in which the ambiguity occurred.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis involves the categorization of ambiguity and the analysis of interpretations of meaning. From the total data, 12 were identified as lexical ambiguity and 13 as syntactic ambiguity. The data was collected in the form of sentences and phrases from newspaper headlines, narratives, riddles and short stories. Each type of ambiguity is discussed separately including how meanings can create pun due to multiple interpretations.

5.1. Lexical Ambiguity

The results of the study listed a total of (13) lexical ambiguity from the data collected in forms of sentences and phrases. On the other hand, sentence and phrase selected contain double meaning resulted from the ambiguity of lexemes.

1. They passed the port at midnight.

This sentence was considered ambiguous since the word ‘port has two interpretations. The first possible meaning is ‘a harbor’ and the other possible meaning is a strong and sweet wine made in Portuguese. The ambiguity created by this word lies in two different interpretations.

2. Ross was told what to do by the river.

The humor in this sentence is produced by the word (by). Two different meanings: the first, indicates the agent of the passive and the second, indicates location. The noun phrase (the river) make this sentence ambiguous and humorous because it is illogical that inanimate things could tell Ross what to do. The actual meaning is that Ross is told what to do (by someone, animate) near the river (showing location), while the humorous meaning is that Ross was told to do something by the river (an inanimate, the agent of the passive).

3. A fisherman went to the bank

In this sentence, the ambiguity created by the word (bank). This word can have two different meanings. The first, an organization in which people and businesses invest or borrow money. the second, sloping raised land especially alongside of the river.

4. Stolen painting found by tree.

This sentence is similar to sentence No. 2. The ambiguity resulted from the word (by) which can be interpreted as the agent of the passive as well as indicated location. The humorous meaning is that it is impossible for the tree to found the stolen painting. This finding is supported by the previous one by Bucaria (2004) which states that humorous dimension of the meaning can be created by the double interpretation of (by) not because of its indication of location but as an agent of the passive.

5. We saw her duck

The multiple interpretation of the word (duck) caused ambiguity in the sentence above. According to this sentence, 'duck' has two different meanings. First, a bird lives by water and has a webbed leg. The actual meaning of the sentence is that we saw the birds that she possesses. The other meaning is that the movement that she made with her head in order not to be hit by something.

6. Take your mother-in-law out back and shoot her.

The ambiguity in this sentence resulted from the word (shoot). The first actual meaning is that (shoot) means to take a photograph or to film but the second humorous meaning is that to kill or to hunt someone down using a gun.

7. Farmer Bill dies in House.

In the abovementioned sentence, we have two lexemes (Bill) and (House) that cause ambiguity. The first word (Bill) can be interpreted as a proper name of someone or a written draft for a new law which is brought to parliament in order to be discussed. The second word is (House) which means either a building where someone lives in or a group of legislatives who create the law of a country, for instance House of Representatives/ Common. Accordingly, the sentence means either Bill (written draft) for farmer is rejected by the House (parliament). This is a figurative meaning while the actual meaning is that Bill dies in his house (where he lives).

8. Did you say you are looking for mixed nuts?

The riddle is ambiguous and humorous at the same time because of the meaning of the word (nuts). The answer to the question seems to be interpreted differently. The first actual meaning of the word (nuts) is a kind of food and the other meaning is a kind of hardware used to fasten things. As a result of double interpretations, the answer is not the one which is expected.

9. "I have a really nice stepladder. Sadly, I never knew my real ladder".

The ambiguity resulted from the word (stepladder). The word (step) has two different meanings. The first is a stair/ a flat narrow piece of wood that you can put your foot on when you are up or down especially used outside the buildings. The other possible meaning is a prefix which is used to indicate that someone is related to someone else by birth. This second definition is used here to create humor; that's why the comedian continues I never knew my real ladder.

10. She is looking for a match.

The ambiguity in this sentence resulted from the word (match). It has two different meanings. The first, it can be interpreted as a marriage and the second is a good opponent. The humor in this sentence resulted from the double meaning of this lexeme.

11. The tailor pressed one suit in his shop and one in municipal court.

The ambiguity created in this sentence by the word (suit). The first meaning refers to article of clothing. The second meaning refers to a legal action. The purpose of ambiguity is to create a blurred atmosphere in which the audience have to interpret the ambiguous sentences and their tendency to humorous one.

12. Iraqi head seeks arms.

The ambiguity resulted in this sentence because of the words (head) and (arms). The word (head) has more than one meaning, the first, the top part of the body that has a face and supported by neck. The second meaning is a leading position. The second ambiguity in this sentence resulted from the word (arms). This word has two different meanings, the first, the two long parts of your body between the shoulders and hands. The second meaning refers to a weapon used in wars.

The sentence has actual meaning as an Iraqi leader seeks weapons. And because of lexical ambiguity, this sentence bears another interpretation which is an Iraqi head (top part of the body) seeks arms (part of the body).

5.2. Syntactic Ambiguity

The results of the study listed (13) instances of syntactic ambiguity collected from newspaper headlines, advertisements and riddles. The sentences produce humorous senses as a result of double interpretations of the structure of the sentences. The analysis of syntactic ambiguity is as follows:

13. A: I saw a man-eating shark at the aquarium.
 B. That's nothing. I was a man eating herring at the deli.

The ambiguity resulted from the phrases (a man-eating shark) and (a man eating herring). These two phrases have multiple interpretations because of their syntactic structures. (a man-eating shark) means a man who eats sharks or vice versa, sharks that eat a man. The two meanings are acceptable.

The same structure with different noun can create humor. The humor is strengthened in the response (a man eats herring) or (herring – a small fish- which eats a man) which can also be regarded as humorous because with this structures we have different interpretations. Accordingly, both meanings depend on the way in which the sentence structured.

14. The professor said on Monday he would give an exam.

The structure of this sentence makes it possible to be interpreted in two various ways. The actual interpretation is that on Monday the professor will tell the class about the exam or he told them that the exam will be given one Monday.

15. Dealers will hear car talk at noon. (newspaper headline)

This headline is ambiguous. The structure of the phrase within this sentence makes it interpreted in two possible ways. the ambiguity resulted from the phrase (car talk). The first meaning is the talk about cars as in the NP mentioned above. The second suggests that dealers will hear the can talks in which the can is resemble an agent which has the ability to talk. The humor in this sentence is that a can is personified as a person who can talk which is impossible. This is supported by Bucaria (2004) who states that humor takes place because of the possibility of interpreting the word (talk) as a noun or a verb.

16. Ross baked the cake in the freezer.

The ambiguity in this sentence lies in the phrase (in the freezer). This phrase can either means that Ross baked the cake which was frozen or he baked the cake inside the freezer. The second interpretation is humorous and silly at the same time because it doesn't make sense to bake a cake inside the freezer.

17. The chicken is ready to eat.

This sentence becomes ambiguous and humorous because of the phrase ready to eat). This structure is possibly two explanations. The actual interpretation is *the chicken is cooked and ready for lunch*, while the humorous one suggests that *the chicken is ready to be fed*.

18. Include your children when baking cookies

The ambiguity and humor in this sentence resulted from the dual form of the sentence. It can be interpreted as imperative as command *include your children when you bake cookies* and it can also

be interpreted as *you should include your children when you bake cookies*. The humorous interpretation in this sentence occur because of the verb *include* and the reduced for after *when* which can have two different interpretations: *you should include your children (in the time) when you bake cookies* or *include your children in the cookies when (if) you bake*.

19. Visiting relatives can be boring.

This sentence is ambiguous because of the word order in the phrase *visiting relatives*. Syntactically, the sentence has two different interpretations: the actual one *refers to the act of visiting one's relative can cause boredom*. The other one is *the coming relatives can be boring*. The syntactic ambiguity in this sentence is formed because of the function of the phrase *visiting relatives*.

20. Stud tires out (newspaper headline)

The ambiguity in this sentence is resulted from the difference in spelling between British English and American English. The American use *tyres* while British usually use *studded tyres*. Here we have structural ambiguity in which the word *tyres* is considered verb or noun. In this example, the ambiguity becomes more confusing because of the dual meaning of the word *stud*. This word can be interpreted as *the use of animal for breeding* or *a piece of metal stuck on the surface for the purpose of decoration*. The confusion resulted from the fact that in newspaper headlines, it is unlikely to include main verbs within the headline.

21. Hospitals are sued by 7 foot doctors (headline)

The ambiguity resulted from the NP *7 foot doctors*. The noun phrase can be interpreted as *7 doctors who specialized in foot diseases* or *7 feet tall doctors*. The noun phrase requires syntactic features of a singular form of foot such as *a 3 years old child*. Accordingly, the ambiguity in the instance is syntactic one.

22. The village blacksmith finally found an apprentice willing to work hard for long hours. The blacksmith immediately began his instructions to the lad, "when I take the shoe out of the fire, I'll lay it on the anvil; and when I nod my head, you hit it with this hammer." The apprentice did just as he told. Now he's the village blacksmith.

The humor in this instance is created because of the double meaning of the pronoun *it* in *... you hit it with this hammer*. There are two nouns which can be replaced by the pronoun *it* : *the shoe* and *my head*. In this anecdote, the hearer misinterprets what the blacksmith says and can be interpreted as *hits the blacksmith's head instead of the shoe*. The kind of ambiguity here is referential exemplified by the pronoun.

23. Come meet our new French pastry chef.

The ambiguity resulted from the NP in this sentence *French pastry chef*. This noun phrase can be interpreted differently because of its structure. The first interpretation is that *a chef who is French* or *a chef of French pastry*.

24. One morning I shot a huge lion in my pajama.

In this sentence, the ambiguity created by the function of the prepositional phrase *in my pajama*. It can function as a modifier of the pronoun *I* or the noun phrase *a huge lion*. The humor resulted from the structural ambiguity because of humorous interpretation that *a huge lion in one's pajama*.

25. Call me a taxi, please!

The structure of this sentence can cause ambiguity. In English we can say, for example, *the book is hard to understand* which referring to the content of the book which is difficult or confusing. But in this context, the sentence has two different interpretations. The actual one is that *to call for a taxi to give him/her a lift* or his/ her name is taxi.

VI. CONCLUSION

According to the analysis of the ambiguous sentences mentioned earlier, humors are produced as the ambiguity allows two possible interpretations which makes the reader conclude it from the sentences. There are two types of ambiguity which create pun in humors: syntactic and lexical ambiguity. Semantically speaking, the double lexical meaning can cause confusion to the readers and can create an amazing interpretation. Consequently, it is a language tool which is used to create pun in humors. Syntactically speaking, the word orders within the phrase, clause and sentence can create ambiguity. Syntactic ambiguity can be created depending on different syntactic requirements such as form and function (the ambiguity in prepositional phrase, noun phrase, active-passive construction, pronoun and different word categories which resulted in different meanings). Ambiguity can make humorous meaning strong especially when there will be two different interpretations, actual and humorous ones. In addition, the context and word selection play an important role in the process of creating humor. Ambiguity occurs in certain context in which relevant choice of syntactic orders and words are achieved. Accordingly, contexts play a vital role in making words or structures interpreted in two different ways.

REFERENCES

- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Soronsen, C. (2010). Introduction to research in education (8th ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Attardo, S. (1994a). Linguistic theories of humor. Berlin: Walker de Gruyter.
- Bucaria, C. (2004). Lexical and syntactic ambiguity as a source of humor: The case of newspaper headlines. *Humor*, 17(3), 279-309.
- Chiaro, D. (1992). The language of jokes: Analysing verbal play. London: Routledge.
- Fraenkel, J. R., & Wallen, N. E. (2009). How to design and evaluate research in education (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hirst, G. (1987). *Semantic interpretation and the resolution of ambiguity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kreidler, C. W. (2002). *Introducing English semantics*. London: Routledge.

Lew, R. (1996). Exploitation of linguistic ambiguity in Polish and English jokes. *Papers and Studies in Contrastive Linguistics*, 31, 127-133.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. (2009) (5th ed.). Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

MacDonald, M. C., Pearlmutter, N. J., & Seidenberg, M. S. (1994). Lexical nature of syntactic ambiguity resolution. *Psychological Review*, 4, 676-703.

Oaks, D. D. (1994). *Creating structural ambiguities in humor: getting English grammar to cooperate*

Seewoester, S. (2009). *Linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes*. College of Communication M.A. Thesis. Paper 3.