

# A Semantic Interpretation of Ambiguity in Punchlines

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**ABSTRACT:** A punchline is a sentence at the end of a joke which makes the joke, a creative linguistic form ubiquitous in our lives for people's amusement, sound so funny as to make people laugh. The reason why punchlines effectively drive their humorous effects home to the audience lies in the fact that they are unexceptionally imbued with ambiguity. This paper addresses the ambiguity in punchlines from a semantic perspective with a purpose to reveal how the ambiguity at different levels contributes to humorous effects of jokes. This study not only helps us to better understand English jokes but also improves our capability of using the English language for create humorous effects.

**KEYWORD:** punchline; ambiguity; semantic interpretation

## 1 INTRODUCTION

According to Merriam Webster's dictionary, a punchline is a sentence, statement, or phrase in a play, musical comedy, speech, cartoon, humorous story, or advertisement that drives home the point. Here in this paper, a punchline refers to the final sentence or phrase of a joke, which is a creative linguistic form ubiquitous in our lives for people's amusement (Widdowson, 1992:13). The punchline catches the key point and make people laugh. If a joke does not have such a key phrase or sentence, then the joke fails to be a joke.

Ambiguity refers to the phenomenon that a linguistic item, be it a word, a phrase or a sentence, has more than one possible meaning in a particular context (Saeed, 2009:61; Hurford et al, 2007:135). It is widely accepted that ambiguity exists in every language and English is no exception. The ingenious use of ambiguity is one of the most popular methods taken by writers to achieve humorous effects.

Semantically speaking, three factors contribute to ambiguity in punchlines. They are polysemy, homonymy, and meaning shift of the word in question. In the following sections of the paper, they will be addressed one by one.

## 2 AMBIGUITY CAUSED BY POLYSEMY

Polysemy refers to the phenomenon that a word has several meanings which are interrelated. In

dictionaries, the different meanings of the same word are usually listed under the same lexical entry. In the following example, various senses of the word *hook* are treated as polysemy and therefore listed under one lexical entry (Saeed, 2009:64).

**hook** (huk) *n.* **1.** a piece of material, usually metal, curved or bent and used to suspend, catch, hold, or pull something. **2.** short for fish-hook. **3.** a trap or snare. **4.** *Chiefly U.S.* something that attracts or is intended to be an attraction. **5.** something resembling a hook in design or use. **6.a.** a sharp bend or angle in a geological formation, esp. a river. **b.** a sharply curved spit of land. **7.** *Boxing.* a short swinging blow delivered from the side with the elbow bent. **8.** *Cricket.* a shot in which the ball is hit square on the leg side with the bat held horizontally. **9.** *Golf.* a shot that causes the ball to swerve sharply from right to left. **10.** *Surfing.* the top of a breaking wave, etc.

A polysemous word which is used in a particular context, in most cases, will not lead to ambiguity. However, if all the meanings of a polysemous word can be understood or applied in the same sentence at the same time, then, this sentence will sure be ambiguous. What follows is a typical example.

(1) A little girl was playing outside the door. A man came by and asked: I wonder if I can see your mother, little girl. Is she *engaged*? The little girl: *Engaged*? She is married.

In this example, the little girl is too young to understand the overall meaning of the word *engaged*. From her response, it can be known that

the little girl understood the word *engaged* as meaning “pledged to be married to somebody”, which is definitely not the intended meaning of the speaker. The speaker actually just wanted to know if her mother was busy or not. The meaning he chose for the word in question is “having ones attention or mind or energy occupied”.

When different meanings are picked up by the addresser and the addressee, ambiguity arises. When a reader whose English proficiency is high enough to understand the two meanings of the word *engaged*, he or she will appreciate the humorous effects contained within the punchline. The following is another example of ambiguity caused by polysemy.

(2) I was very inexperienced and distinctly apprehensive when I arrived to teach my first class at a prison. I decided, therefore, that I had better start with the basics. But my first question could hardly have more ill chosen: I suppose you all know what a *sentence* is?

The punchline in this example lies in the polysemous word *sentence*. As is known to all, this word has two basic explanations: one is “a set of words expressing a statement, a question or an order, usually containing a subject and a verb”, and the other is “the punishment that is given by a court”. Because of their different cognition and background knowledge, readers usually have different understanding of the same *sentence*, thus resulting in the ambiguity and the humorous effects of the joke. To the teacher, he or she must refer to the first meaning; while for those prisoners, the teacher maybe expresses the second meaning by the same word. Both senses form a contrast. The contrast of senses contributes to the humorous effects of the joke.

### 3 AMBIGUITY CAUSED BY HOMONYMY

Homonymy refers to the phenomenon that two different words with different meanings have exactly the same spelling and pronunciation (Davis & Gillon, 2004:81). Mistaking one for another on the part of the reader often results in ambiguity. The following is a case in point.

(3) When my husband was a civilian working overseas for the Air Force, he entered a golf tournament sponsored by the air base in Moron, Spain. He won the tournament, but he has always been reluctant to show off his award. The trophy reads, “First Prize *Moron*”.

The punchline in this example lies in the homonym “moron”. At its face value, *moron* means “a person of subnormal intelligence, a fool or an idiot” in oral English. However, in the phrase “First Prize Moron”, *Moron* is the name of a place in Spain. Because this phrase can probably mean “a first-rate fool or idiot”, the husband feels reluctant to

show off his award. This is the key point which makes us laugh.

(4) The judge noticed a noise in the back of the courtroom. “What’s going on there?” he shouted. “I’ve lost my jacket and I’m trying to find it.” replied a young man. “Son,” smiled the judge, “people often lose whole *suits* here without all that fuss.”

Similarly, the punch line in Example (4) lies in homonym “*suit*”. The word *suit* has two senses: one is “a set of garments (usually including a jacket and trousers or skirt) for outerwear all of the same fabric and color”, the other is “a comprehensive term for any proceeding in a court of law whereby an individual seeks a legal remedy”. Here, the judge makes a deliberate use of ambiguity to create an effect of giving an irrelevant answer. In addition to making humor, he also indirectly suggested that the boy’s behavior have disturbed the others.

### 4 AMBIGUITY CAUSED BY MEANING SHIFT

Since words are the reflection of the objective reality, their meanings are always on the change with the development of society, science and technology. It is quite common that a word picks up a new meaning when speakers shift its meaning to fit new conditions while its original meaning is still current and alive (Saeed, 2009:15). The meaning shift is likely to cause the ambiguity of a sentence, as shown in the following joke:

(5)The master and his pupil were walking on the street. When passing by a smoke vendor’s stand, the master said to her pupil: “Please give me a *camel*”. “Not until we get to the desert.” the pupil replied.

The punchline in Example (5) was caused by the meaning transference of the key word *camel*. The original meaning of *camel* is “a cud-chewing mammal used as a draft or saddle animal in desert regions”. However, with the changing of society and the development of science and technology, this word was endowed with a new meaning “A kind of cigarette named CAMEL”. Obviously, judging from the context, we know the master asks his pupil to buy a carton of cigarette for him, because they are walking on the street, rather than in the desert. Thus, the pupil’s misunderstanding of the word *camel* makes us laugh.

### 5 AMBIGUITY CAUSED BY CLASS SHIFT

In English, it is common that a word belongs to different word classes, or parts of speech. When the word class which a word belong to changes, the meaning of the word will change correspondingly. The switch of a word between different word classes is a major source of ambiguity in punchlines. What follows is a joke caused by class shift.

(6) You can *cage* a *swallow*, can't you?

But you can't *swallow* a *cage*, can you?

Here in this joke, the word *cage* can be interpreted both as a noun, meaning "an enclosure made of wire or metal bars in which birds or animals can be kept", and as a verb meaning "to put into a cage or confine in a cage". The word *swallow* can be interpreted both as a noun meaning "a kind of small long-winged songbird noted for swift graceful flight and the regularity of its migrations" and as a verb meaning "to pass through the esophagus as part of eating or drinking". The punchline, by inverting the first sentence, makes the joke full of humor.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Many semanticists who study language ambiguity believe that we ought to make our best endeavors to express our ideas and views as accurately, precisely and vividly as possible when we are speaking or writing. In their view, only in this way can our hearers and readers have a comprehensive and correct understanding of what we want to convey. In this sense, we should try to avoid ambiguity when we are conducting oral or written communication. However, as has been shown in the present paper, the conscious utilization of ambiguity is conducive to bringing about humorous effects. The semantic interpretation of ambiguity in punchlines of English jokes will help us to have a brand-new understanding when we are exposed to English

humor and jokes, and help us to get rid of the attitude of indifference, so that we can truly understand the punchlines in English jokes and appreciate their humor.

In summary, the punchlines in English jokes are mainly caused by the ambiguity, while the generation of ambiguity has more complex and diverse reasons, such as polysemy, homonymy, meaning shift, etc. Through a brief study on punchlines of English jokes from the perspective of semantics, this paper helps us to have a clear understanding of the causes and effects of English jokes, and also lets us understand that during the process of English learning and teaching, we should pay enough attention to the flexibility of language use. We ought to keep improving the ability to analyze and use the language in practice continuously, and make full use of humorous effects arising from ambiguity, so as to achieve the purpose of smooth and effective communications.

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