

# CATEGORIES OF VISUAL PUNS

*Meri Giorgadze, PhD*

Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

---

## Abstract

The paper deals with the creative aspects of visual (pictorial) pun and its subcategories. The aim of the research is to study the lingvo-semantic structure of visual (pictorial) pun and its subcategories. It explores the benefits of the cognitive approach to the stylistic aspects of language in use and focuses on perception and comprehension of the textual and the visual. A visual representation of the image serves to create a new mode of narrative, which is both visual and textual. Comprehension and interpretation rely on the ties between the visual and the verbal, as well as the knowledge of the sociocultural background and the symbolic implications.

---

**Keywords:** Pun, visual, pictorial, semantic structure, ambiguity

## Introduction

The research deals with the study of **Categories of Visual Puns**. The objective of the research is to investigate the phenomenon of pun (visual pun), its subcategories and specific linguistic features.

The significance of the present article lies in the factor according to which linguo-semantic structure of visual pun is discussed from the point of general theoretical as well as contextual-pragmatic positions.

Keeping all the mentioned aspects in mind, it is interesting to know how a visual (pictorial) pun is created and what its subcategories and pragmatic values are.

## What is a pun?

The **pun**, also called paronomasia, is a form of wordplay which suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect. (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2009).

Henri Bergson defines a pun as a sentence or utterance in which "the same sentence appears to offer two independent meanings, but it is only an appearance; in reality there are two different sentences made up of different

words, but claiming to be one and the same because both have the same sound" (Augarde, 2003).

As John Dryden puts it, punning is to torture one poor word *ten thousand ways*. (*Dryden's quotes*).

Walter Redfern succinctly says: "To pun is to treat homonyms as synonyms".

Considering the above mentioned definitions and the study of empirical material, we can come to the conclusion and say that the pun is a figure of speech which consists of a deliberate confusion of similar words or phrases for rhetorical effect, whether humorous or serious. It is a way of using the characteristics of the language(s) to cause a word, a sentence or a discourse to involve two or more different meanings. So humorous or any other effects created by puns depend upon the ambiguities words entail.

Puns, acknowledgedly regarded as a rhetorical device and a communicative strategy, are widely employed both in literature and in daily life and have gradually received more and more scholarly attention. As a figure of speech, puns have been widely used in advertisements, jokes, riddles, literary works and the like, to make the language lively and impressive and to produce a humorous, jocular or sarcastic effect.

### **Classification and the types of puns**

The delicate classification of puns has always been a headache for scholars. As a result of the different perceptions of the pun there are also various approaches as to how it should be classified.

Vittoz-Canuto (Attardo, 1994) puts forward a detailed classification of puns as follows: exploitation of the signifier, exploitation of the signified, homonyms, exploitation of the signified (polysemy), exploitation of the connotations, neologisms (new signified added to the preexisting ones), and others.

Sherzer (1985) also holds that puns can be produced by manipulating different levels and aspects of language such as sound patterns, morphology, syntax and semantics.

Besides, Vickers (1988) puts forward a very general classification of puns. According to him, puns consist of three types, that is, syllepsis, paronomasia and antanaclasis.

According to Delabastita (1996:128) pun is divided into four categories: homonymy, homophony, homography, paronymy.

Gottlieb's (2005) classification of a pun is the similar to Delabastita's one. He only adds and singles out three subcategories of homonymy: lexical homonymy (the central feature is single-word ambiguity), collocational homonymy (the word-in-context ambiguity is the central feature), phrasal homonymy (the clause ambiguity is the central feature).

My own classification form of pun (worked out in my PhD thesis) is different, it includes all the main types of puns - lexical-semantic pun, structural-syntactic pun, structural-semantic pun. (Giorgadze, 2014).

As research revealed there are many different ideas, several categories of pun and consequently its various classifications and types are formulated by different scholars.

As we have already mentioned, the creation of all the above mentioned types of pun happens at different levels of language(s) and is expressed verbally. Besides verbally expressed puns there is also a category of visual puns.

### **What is a visual pun?**

Pun as a linguistic phenomenon increasingly attracting the interest of the researchers from the last few decades. The review and analysis of numerous books, articles and conference materials are devoted to the subject. It should also be noted that almost all of the above mentioned works are concerned the form of verbally expressed puns.

Thus, puns are so predominantly verbal in their character that one is apt to forget that they may be visual (pictorial) as well and hence make their appeal through the eye rather than the ear.

Besides, Salvatore Attardo (2005) believes that puns are verbal humour. He talks about Pepicello and Weisberg's linguistic theory of humour and believes the only form of linguistic humour is limited to puns. I do not fully agree with the idea that puns are only language specific, as the visual representation of an image can create an ambiguity which is considered to be a central figure of creating a pun.

As Koestler defines, an image presenting visual puns typically has a double meaning, as if two events were connected; in other words, multiple meanings can lead an audience to the same conclusion (Koestler, 1964).

Visual puns are a type of visual expression in which the concept of word play is applied to an image (Hempelmann & Samson, 2007).

So, we can come to the conclusion that a visual pun is the use of symbols or pictures to suggest two or more meanings or different associations. A visual pun is an image that depicts objects or the arrangement of objects, in such a way that the names of the objects or their arrangement creates a pun.

It is interesting, how a pun is created in the case of visual play. Ambiguity is a common phenomenon that cannot be avoidable in any natural language. Usually it is defined as expressions which have more than one meaning. As we have already discussed, pun is a figure of speech depending upon a similarity of sound and a disparity of sound and a disparity of

meaning. So it means that ambiguity is the main source of creating pun and it can be expressed verbally and visually.

Puns can be regarded as a special form of ambiguity that happens at different levels of language(s). e.g. (phonological, graphological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and other levels). In the case of visual puns ambiguity is created on the bases of symbol or a picture and it, may also happen at different levels of language(s). Therefore puns can be divided into two main types: verbal and visual puns.

On its side visual puns can be classified in the following categories:

### Visual (pictorial) pun

A visual pun, when the pictures occur without any verbal accompaniment. It is a way of combining images to create a pun.

A)



For example, in the first picture “**Burger King**” is created by combining a burger + crown + scepter = Burger King.

On the second picture combination of the images ear + four + music notes = “**Ear for Music**”. This expression has a figurative meaning and means to have the ability to learn and understand music well. Unlike the first picture visual pun is created on the basis of images and the homophony of the image “four (for)”.

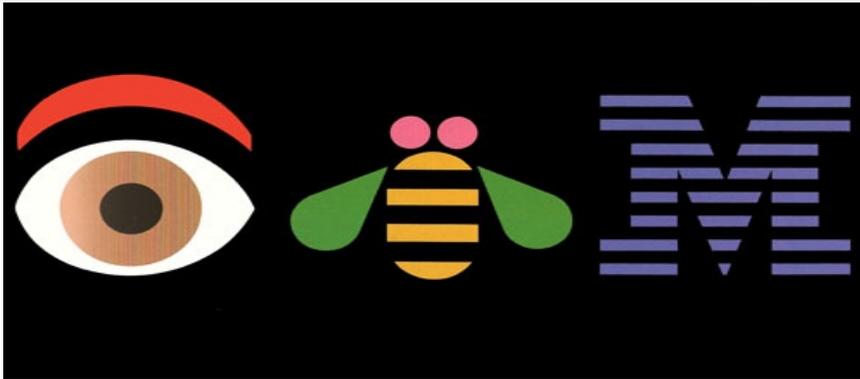
On the third picture combination of the images couch + potato = “**couch potato**“. **Couch potato** (n. slang) - A person who spends much time sitting or lying down, usually watching television.

When these combined images are viewed, the visual pun on the word becomes evident. First simply brainstorm for ideas. You can use a word or commonly known phrase.

This kind of puns can be discussed as **visual (pictorial) puns**.

**B)** Another type of visual (pictorial) puns uses a visual symbol that has the same meaning as the word it replaces (like a red heart shape instead of the word “love”), or that has a similar sound to the sound of the word it replaces, as in Paul Rand’s 1981 design for IBM. The word “eye” sounds

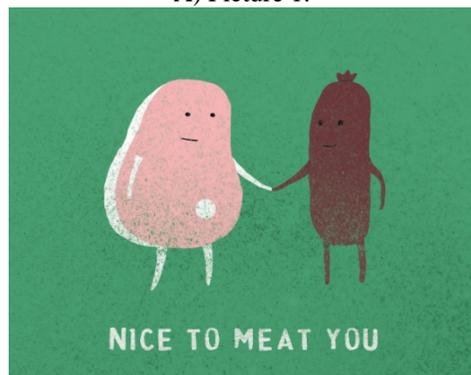
like the letter “I”, the word “bee” sounds like the letter “B”, and the letter M remains an M.



### Verbo-visual or verbo-pictorial pun

The case, when the visual effect works together with the verbal in creating a visual pun.

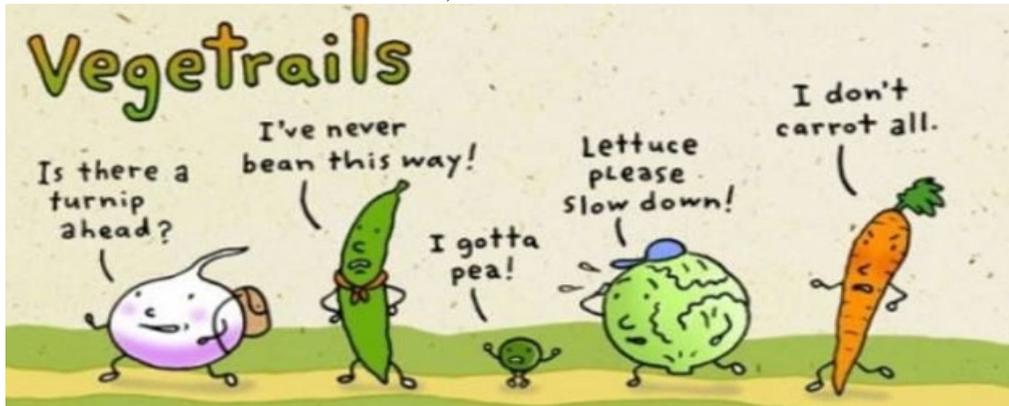
A) Picture 1.



In the given example pun is created on the basis of homophony of the word meat (meet).

Visual image of the sausages (meat) and also the background knowledge of the fixed phrase “nice to meet you” gives the viewer a hint to guess the pun.

B) Picture 2.



According to the online urban dictionary, the word “**vege**” is a short hand way of saying vegetarian.

(<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=vege>). The word “**trail**” means - a path, track, or road. In the presented example, the word “**trail**” can also be understood as a “**train**” in fluent speech. So, we can interpretate the compound word “**vegetrails**” in two different ways – 1. Vegetarians’s road or 2. Vegetarian’s train.

Horizontal arrangement of different types of vegetable on the picture gives us the chance of two-way interpretation – trail or train.

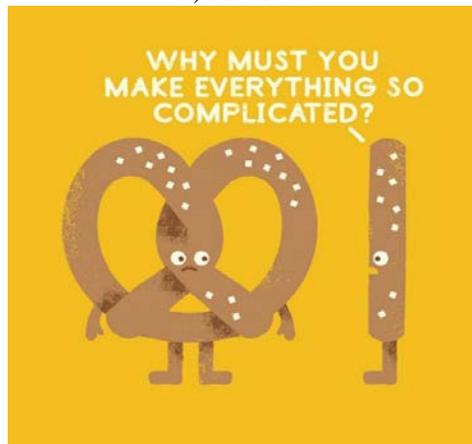
In the given example verbo-visual or verbo-pictorial puns are based on homophones of the names of different types of vegetable:

**Turnip - turn up, bean-been, pea-pee, lettuce -let us, carrot -care at.**

The visual effect works together with the verbal in creating a verbo-visual or verbo-pictorial pun and makes the situation funny.

According to the analysis of empirical material and the examples discussed in the article, it becomes clear that the visual puns (based on the homophony) are formed in two ways. When the homophone of the original (notional) word is given on the picture (e.g. Pic. 1) and the case when the viewer must guess the homophone of the original word (e.g. Pic. 2) given on the picture. In both cases visual manifestation of the image helps and makes the viewer guess the pun.

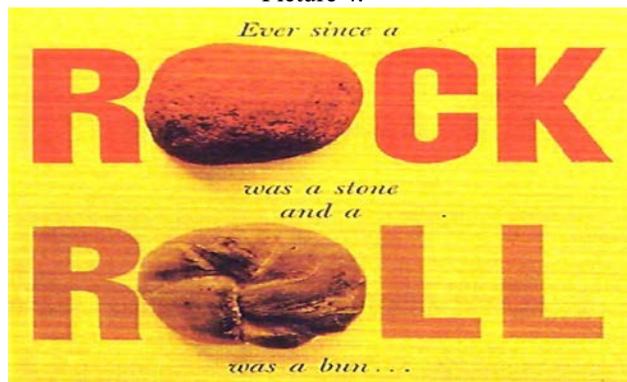
C) Picture 3.



In the given verbo-visual pun example, visual image plays an important role of forming a pun. If we take the sentence “why must you make everything so complicated?” separately, without any context, it does not create a pun. Here the visual image and their forms makes the situation humorous. Thus, the actualization of this type of verbo-pictorial pun is context specific.

**D)** The occasion when verbo-visual (verbo-pictorial) puns comprises of symbols that replace letters that are similar in shape, such as in the “Rock & Roll” design for an insurance company magazine cover, designed by Herb Lubalin in 1956, where the letter “o” in the word “Rock” is represented by a round rock image, and the letter “o” in the word “Roll” is replaced by an image of a round bread roll.

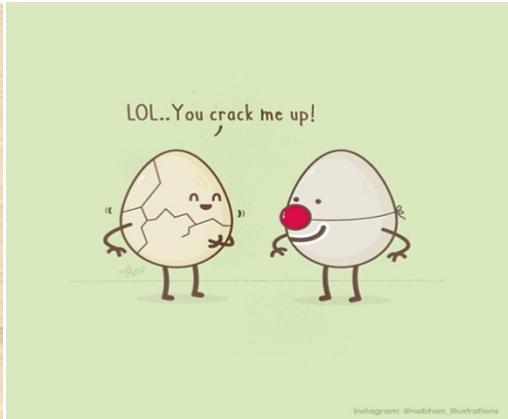
Picture 4.



**E)** In the following examples verbo-visual or verbo-pictorial puns are based on structural ambiguity.



Picture 5.



Picture 6.

**Picture 5** - “*Sleeping pill*” is a tablet of a drug which helps to induce sleep. On the one hand, there is nothing unusual in the above mentioned expression until we have a look at the visual image on the picture. The play happens between a verbal and a visual representations.

**Picture 6** – The expression “*Crack someone up*” has different meanings:

1. to damage someone or something.
2. to make someone laugh very hard; to make someone break out laughing
3. to crash something; to destroy something (in an accident).

The expression without a visual representation of the image does not create a verbo-pictorial pun. Pun occurs between verbal and pictorial signs. Ambiguity is created on the multiple meanings of the idiomatic expression.

Thus, the visual representation of the image becomes a genuine part in pun perception and cognition.

As pointed out by Laviosa (2005) visual puns resemble verbal puns and are a type of visual statements; visual puns adopt visual structure to be persuasive.

On the basis of the discussed material and analysis of the above mentioned examples, it becomes clear that a verbally and a visually expressed puns have the same linguistic features and characteristics.

## Conclusion

As the research revealed the pun (generally) is a figure of speech which consists of a deliberate confusion of similar words or phrases for rhetorical effect, whether humorous or serious. It is a way of using the characteristics of the language(s) to cause a word, a sentence or a discourse to involve two or more different meanings. So humorous or any other effects created by puns depend upon the ambiguities words entail.

As a feature of language, ambiguity occurs when a word or phrase has more than one meaning and accordingly one linguistic expression allows more than one understandings or interpretations. So ambiguity is a convention of punning, but as Attardo points out, not every ambiguous word constitutes a pun (1994:133).

What's worth mentioning is that context plays a crucial role in the process of pun production and pun interpretation.

Visual pun combines two or more symbols (pictures and / or texts) to form a new meaning. The viewer must mentally elaborate on the visual stimulus to interpret the message.

Thus, there is not a distinct difference between a verbal and a visual pun. They, both can be created at different levels of languages (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, textual and others).

As for their pragmatic functions, they can be used for creating humorous, sarcastic, ironic, or simply ambiguous situation: to attract recipients' attention or spark their interest.

The only difference that lies between a verbal and a visual pun is that a visual pun plays on the possible double meaning in certain *kinds of* images. A verbal pun is a play on various possible meanings of a word or phrase. Visual puns are triggered by verbal quirks. In visual language, it's often necessary to substitute one image for another, or one symbol for another—not just for purposes of jest, but to enhance meaning.

In conclusion a pun is “a play on words” therefore a visual pun is “a play on visual images”.

### **References:**

Attardo, S. *Linguistic Theories of Humour*. Berlin and New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.

Attardo S. "Puns, Relevance and Appreciation in Advertisements." *Journal of Pragmatics* 37.5 707-21, 2005.

Augarde, Tony. *The Oxford Guide to Word Games*, 2nd ed., Oxford: OUP, 2003.

Delabastita, D. *Wordplay and Translation: Introduction*. In *The Translator. Studies in Intercultural Communication*. Volume 2, Number 2; special issue. Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1996.

Giorgadze, M. *Linguistic Features of Pun, Its Typology and Classification*, *European Scientific Journal*, /SPECIAL/ edition vol.2 ISSN: 1857 – 7881 (Print) e - ISSN 1857- 7431, November 2014.

Gottlieb, Henrik. “You Got the Picture?” *On the Polysemiotics of Subtitling Wordplay*. In

Gottlieb, Henrik: Screen Translation. Eight Studies in Subtitling, Dubbing and Voice-over.

Copenhagen, 2005.

Hempelmann, C. F., & Samson, A. New approaches to the linguistics of humor. Popa, D., & Attardo, S. (Eds.), Galati. Editura Academica, 180-196; 2007.

Koestler, A. The act of creation. London: Hutchinson; 1964.

Laviosa, S. Wordplay in advertising: Form, meaning and function. Scripta Manent, 1(1), 25-34; 2005.

Redfern, W. Puns. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell; 1984.

Sherzer, J. Puns and jokes. In Teun A. Van Dijk (Ed.). Handbook of discourse analysis. (Vol. 3, pp. 78-92). London, England: Academic Press Inc; 1985.

Vickers, B. In defense of rhetoric. Oxford, England: The Clarendon Press; 1988.