

# LINGUISTIC FEATURES OF PUN, ITS TYPOLOGY AND CLASSIFICATION

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the analysis of pun as one of the categories of wordplay and its manifestation in one-liner jokes in the English languages. The data of this research are all of one-liner jokes containing puns which were collected from different books and online sources. On the basis of various classifications created by different scholars and according to the research material, a new classification of pun as one of the types of wordplay is introduced and defined.

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**Keywords:** Pun, linguistic features, one-liners, semantic structure

## Introduction:

The research deals with the study of **Linguistic Features of Pun, Its Typology and Classification**. The objective of the research is to investigate the phenomenon of pun as one of the types of wordplay and its specific features at phonological, graphological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and textual levels.

The significance of the present article lies in the factor according to which linguo-semantic structure of pun is discussed from the point of general theoretical as well as contextual-pragmatic positions. I make an attempt to answer the following questions presented in the research: What is the typology and classification of pun? What kind of specific semantic features are characteristic for pun? - These are the main issues discussed in the given article.

## 1. Pun as one of the forms of wordplay

As pointed out by Leppihalme (1997), wordplay can be based on several different features of the language(s) involved. These features are pronunciation, spelling, morphology, vocabulary or syntax.

According to its form, wordplay can be expressed in ambiguous verbal wit, orthographic peculiarities, sounds and forms of the words, in breaking the grammar rules and other linguistic factors. It should be also mentioned that context has a vital importance for the actualization of the wordplay (pun), as its pragmatic role (mainly humorous, satirical, sarcastic, etc) is fulfilled and actualized in a specific context.

It is obvious that there is not a universal definition of wordplay or pun; that the difficulties created by the complexity of wordplay and its various classifications are caused by the complexity of the phenomenon and its categories and subcategories.

As a result of different perceptions and understanding of wordplay there are also various approaches as to how it should be classified.

As it is known, there is not a consensus among scholars on the difference between a wordplay and a pun. Some scholars consider these two terms mostly interchangeable and synonymous elements (Delabastita, 1996; Gothlib, 2005). I do not follow their opinions and consider *pun* as one of the types of wordplay, whereas wordplay is classed as an umbrella

term denoting all the subclasses, such as spoonerism, malapropism, wellerism, onomatopoeia, palindrome and other linguistic units.

Thus, wordplay can be discussed in its *narrow* and *broad* senses. Wordplay in its narrow sense is equal to pun. (Delabastita, 1996; Gottlieb 2005; Redfern, 1985). Discussion of this phenomenon in a broad sense implies wordplay and its categories. Namely, from this point of view, wordplay includes pun, wellerism (tom swifty), spoonerism, anagram, palindrome, onomatopoeia, mondegreen, malapropism, oxymoron, etc.

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.

## 2. Classification of pun

As a result of the different perceptions of the pun there are also various approaches as to how it should be classified.

Regarding to the various classifications created by different scholars and discussed in our research, I formulate and introduce my own classification of pun as well as discuss its linguistic ambiguity and characteristic features on the basis of research material.

Delabastita defines wordplay (a term which he uses interchangeably with pun) as: "Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomenon in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistics structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings." (Koponen, 2004).

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

1. Homonymy (identical sounds and spelling);
2. Homophony (identical sounds but different spellings);
3. Homography (different sounds but identical spelling);
4. Paronymy (there are slight differences in both spelling and sound).

Gottlieb considers wordplay and pun as synonymous linguistic units. His classification of a pun is the similar to Delabastita's one. He only adds and singles out three subcategories of homonymy:

1. Lexical homonymy (the central feature is single-word ambiguity);
2. Collocational homonymy ( the word-in-context ambiguity is the central feature);
3. Phrasal homonymy (the clause ambiguity is the central feature).

The classification of pun worked out by the Chinese scholar Yuan Chuandao is different. He claims that the creation of pun is connected not only to the meaning and the

homophony of a word, but also to the context, manner of speech and logic. So he singles out the following types of pun:

1. Homonymic pun (identical sounds and spelling);
2. Lexical meaning pun (polysemantic words);
3. Understanding pun (through the particular context implied meaning of a sentence is revealed).
4. Figurative pun (a simile or a metaphor as its surface meaning and the figurative meaning as its deep meaning).
5. Logic pun (a rhetorical device, a kind of implication in a particular context).

As research revealed a pun is one of the most important types of wordplay. There are several subcategories of pun and consequently its various classifications and types are formulated by different scholars.

On the basis of the mentioned types and various classifications of pun and the analysis of the empirical material examples in the article, a new classification form of pun including all the main types of pun is introduced below:

1. **Lexical-Semantic Pun;**
2. **Structural-Syntactic Pun;**
3. **Structural-Semantic Pun.**

As pointed out by Raskin, pun (one of the forms of wordplay) could be considered as one of the varieties of a joke (anecdote), as its semantic structure is characterized by juxtaposition of two similar but opposite scripts. (Raskin, 1985).

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). Mostly ambiguity focuses on its resourceful applications in the creation of jokes. Such ambiguity is therefore regarded as something to be exploited in language rather than avoided. I consider that linguistic vagueness is mostly created by means of ambiguous “elements”, such as lexical, grammatical or syntactic ones.

The lexical ambiguity of a word or phrase pertains to its having more than one meaning in the language to which the word belongs.

Semantic ambiguity happens when a sentence contains an ambiguous word or phrase - a word or phrase that has more than one meaning.

Syntactic ambiguity arises when a sentence can have two (or more) different meanings because of the structure of the sentence - its syntax.

That is why, understanding “pun” involves multiple cognitive processes, which are still to be studied from both theoretical and experimental perspectives.

### **Lexical-Semantic Pun**

Lexical ambiguity may result from **homonyms**, words spelt and pronounced in the same way but have different meanings, as well as from **homophones**, words pronounced in the same way but have different meanings or spelling and **polysemantic** words. In the following examples lexical-semantic ambiguity is clearly seen on the basis of polysemy, homonyms, homophones, etc.

One of the one –liner jokes is discussed as an example under the category of Lexical – Semantic Pun.

- (1). I like **kids**, but I don’t think I could eat a whole one.

In the given example polysemous word **kid** creates pun.

**kid** – 1. a baby; 2. a baby goat.

- (2). Where do fish learn to swim?

They learn from a **school**. (Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*)

In this example, the word **school** is ambiguous because it can mean either the place kids go to learn or a group of fish. Here, ambiguity is based on a single homonym and polysemy. One has to have a certain background knowledge to guess this witty answer or in other words should know the meanings of this word (**school**).

(3). Woman: What is the brightest *idea* in the world?

Man: Your *eye, dear*.

The similar sounds of '**idea**' and '**eye, dear**' are the key points of forming the pun.

### Structural-Syntactic Pun

Structural – syntactic ambiguity arises when a complex phrase or a sentence can be parsed in more than one way. For example:

(1). - How do you stop a fish from **smelling**?

- Cut off its nose.

Two different grammatical structures of the given example can be parsed. In both cases the core importance is the word **smelling** in its different interpretations. Specifically, **smelling** means **stink** as well as **to smell**.

Therefore, it is possible for one and the same sentence with the same structure to be interpreted in different ways as in the following example.

How do you stop the fish from smelling?

1. How can we keep the fish from smelling ?
2. How can you stop the fish to smell?

(2). Man in Restaurant: I'll have two lamb chops, and make them **lean**, please.

Waiter: To which side, sir? (Clark, 1968 :191).

If the word "**lean**" is discussed as different types of parts of speech, namely as a verb or an adjective, two different grammatical structures can be parsed and interpreted. This joke involves a class ambiguity because the meaning of **lean** is ambiguous between an adjective and a verb . The difference in the meanings of **lean** represents more than just a particular word having more than one meaning; the difference helps to create a structural ambiguity. Because the two interpretations of **lean** represent separate constituent types ( in this case, parts of speech), the varying interpretations also represent different sentence structures.

In the question of the joke, the meaning of the word **lean** as an adjective implies (meat, that is not fat). In the answer of the waiter and surprise effect is created "To which side, in what position?"

(3). - Have your eyes ever been **checked**?

- No, they've always been blue.

The previous one-liner joke can be interpreted in two different ways because of ambiguous structural-syntactic constructions. The word "**checked**" creates ambiguity with its different meanings. 1. Checked – as a verb (past participle in the given example);

2. Checked – as an adjective.

### Structural-Semantic Pun

Structural - semantic ambiguity arises when a word or concept has an inherently diffuse meaning based on its widespread or informal usage. This is often the case, for example, with idiomatic expressions whose definitions are rarely or never well-defined, and are presented in the context of a larger argument that invites a certain conclusion. For instance:

(1). - Did you **take a bath**?

-No, only towels, is there one missing?

**(Take a bath)**, as a fixed phrase means to *have a shower*, but its direct, word for word translation can be - *carry away a bath, to carry it from one place to another*. This two-way perception and understanding of one and the same phrase creates ambiguity and causes laughter.

- (2). -When do parents complain because of eye pain?  
- When they **have their eye on you!**

In this specific example ambiguity is created by the phrase **(to have an eye on)**. In the question the word **eye** implies the part of the body and the answer is quite incongruous. It can be argued that this witty, unexpected answer together with the semantic ambiguity creates a structural-semantic pun.

(3). My friend has difficulty sleeping, but I can do it **with my eyes closed**. (Shmuel Breban) .

**(with (one's) eyes closed)** originally means - *unaware of the risks involved*, when it is used as a regular phrase. But here it can be understood in different way as well. Of course we sleep with our eyes closed. Two-way interpretation creates humorous effect here.

There are many syntactic constructions which, although identical in their surface structure, differ in the relations and/or syntactic functions of their components. The result is the ambiguity of such construction in discourse.

### **Conclusion:**

Research shows that, puns used in the examples of the given article are created on the basis of syntactic, semantic, structural and lexical ambiguity.

Regarding the subclasses and subcategories of pun and the analysis of the examples in the article, a new classification of pun is worked out and introduced :

- 1. Lexical - Semantic Pun**
- 2. Structural – Syntactic Pun**
- 3. Structural – Semantic Pun**

According to the given research ambiguity is a convention of punning, but as Attardo points out, not every ambiguous word constitutes a pun (1994 :133). The pun has to have a context to build upon, and be opposed to.

Wordplay and its categories are changeable expressive means and together with the development of languages, new types are formed and developed. However, because of its interesting nature, wordplay and its categories will always be of the central interest for scholars.

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