

THE ANATOMY OF A JOKE

Laimutė Servaitė

Klaipėdos universitetas

Anotacija

Juoką galima sėkmingai panaudoti užsienio kalbos užsiėmimuose: jis ne tik patraukia auditorijos dėmesį, kuria draugiškumo ir laisvumo nuotaiką, bet ir padeda pateikti trumpus ir taiklius lingvistinių reiškinių apibrėžimus, iliustruoti juos lengvai suprantamais ir įsimenamais pavyzdžiais. Labai daug anglų kalbos juokų remiasi įvairiomis visų struktūrinių lygmenų kalbos priemonėmis ir figūromis. Straipsnyje aptariamas lingvistinis juokų pagrindas, pateikiama jų klasifikacija ir siūlomos naudojimo galimybės mokant užsienio kalbos.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODŽIAI: juokas, nevienareikšmiškumas, kalbos priemonės, fonetiniai, leksiniai-semantiniai, sintaksiniai juokai.

Abstract

A joke may serve as a helpful ingredient of a foreign language class: it is able to catch the attention of the audience, to create friendly and relaxed atmosphere, moreover, it contributes to providing pithy and concise explanations of linguistic phenomena and /or illustrating them with examples easy to understand and memorise. A great number of jokes in English are based on different linguistic means on all the structural layers of the language. The article attempts to reveal the linguistic basis of a joke, to categorize them and to consider their use in a foreign language class.

KEY WORDS: joke, ambiguity, linguistic means, phonetic, lexico-semantic and syntactic jokes.

Introduction

A joke may serve as a helpful ingredient in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. It contributes to catching and maintaining the learners' attention, to creating friendly and relaxed atmosphere, it is conducive to learning, as well as to providing pithy and concise explanations and definitions of linguistic phenomena and illustrating them with examples easy to understand and memorize. English boasts a huge number of linguistic jokes: "the Anglo-Saxon love of ambiguity, innuendo and word-play, which remains a distinguishing characteristics of the English language to this day" (McCrum, 1997, p. 42) accounts for it. Jokes can be found in all the structural levels of the English language and can be successfully employed in teaching both the language and its theoretical foundations.

The aim of the article is to review the linguistic joke and to consider the possibilities of its use in the teaching/ learning of a foreign language.

The tasks of the article is to disclose the underlying principle of linguistic jokes, to categorize them and to consider their use in theory and practice of teaching foreign languages.

1. Structural analysis of humour

Can the analysis of poetry help the reader to understand it or to explain it? Poetry is often defined as "something that gets lost in translation", with "something" evidently being the elusive, fleeting, difficult-to-grasp soul of poetry. However, apart from its aesthetic aspect, poetry has a clearly definable structural nature that is open to scholarly analysis and description.

Can humour be submitted to analysis? Probably every one of us will remember a case of trying to make a joke and failing. When one watches confusion registered on the face of the listener and tries to save the situation by explaining the essence of the joke, things seldom get better. One either sees the funny side of the situation or not. It is difficult, or often impossible, to

translate a joke into a foreign language. And it is not always one's sense of humour that is to be blamed for failure.

A joke has been defined as "a short humorous piece of oral literature in which the funniness culminates in the final sentence, called the punchline" (Lendvai, 1993, p. 89). Humour as an aesthetic category is subtle, evasive and extremely difficult to describe. However, humour, like poetry, surely has some underlying fundamental structural principles. In a huge number of cases, the principles are based on specific linguistic phenomena and the patterns of their usage. Consequently, often in order to appreciate a joke one needs to have a good knowledge of and a fine feeling for language. "Humour presupposes a highly developed intellect and can only exist within the framework of specific sociolinguistic conditions, the most important among these being a love for the mother tongue and the aesthetic pleasure derived from its use" (Pocheptsov, 1997, p. 12).

At least two types of humour may be distinguished: situational humour and linguistic humour. Usually a situation joke is based on situational ambiguity when a situation allows for different interpretations. For a certain period of time, the ambiguity remains unnoticed, and this leads to a wrong interpretation of the situation. The discrepancy between two possible interpretations causes the humorous effect.

Ambiguity also seems to be the most general principle underlying the majority of linguistic jokes, and it can be created by different linguistic means. The most common humorous effect in linguistic humour rests on non-discrimination or confusion of two linguistic items that are essentially different but comparable in some respects (cf. Pocheptsov, 1997, p. 16). The absence of one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning in a linguistic unit often results in linguistic units not being discriminated or in their being confused due to a coincidence or similarity in their formal manifestations. There is quite a number of linguistic means capable of creating ambiguity that is a semantic phenomenon of a wide scope and diversity. By means of those linguistic

means two situations are projected: an ordinary one and a “wrong” one, resulting from non-discrimination, confusion or erroneous interpretation of the linguistic item. The wrong interpretation may be generally possible, but it is unimaginable or inappropriate in that particular situation.

In any linguistically based joke one can distinguish its linguistic core, i.e. the linguistic item (ranging from a word to a sentence) the inherent feature of which is made use of in order to cause a humorous effect. Among the linguistic means employed in linguistic jokes, G. Pocheptsov enumerates lexical, word formative and syntactic homonyms, lexico-semantic variants of words (polysemy), words used metaphorically as opposed to those used literally, phraseologisms vs. free syntactic combinations with superficially identical components etc (Pocheptsov, 1997, p. 13). He also adds polysemy and homonymy of syntactic constructions, as well as sentences with implications and presuppositions. Other authors exemplify as many as 25 types of jokes based on different language phenomena: alphabetic jokes (based on individual letters), syllabics, abbreviations, parts of speech, prefixes and suffixes, compounds, synonymy, antonymy, gender, idiomatics, lexicography, ambiguity, spelling, misuse, punctuation, grammar, negation (misuse of negatives), rhyming English, name play, questions, style, numerical English, and advertense and novelty English (cf. Raskin, 1987, p. 43).

We shall attempt to demonstrate how humour can be created on different structural levels of the language: phonetic, morphological, lexical, phraseological and syntactical.

2. Types of linguistic jokes

2.2. Phonetical jokes

One of the underlying principles in phonetic jokes is ambiguity, caused by an identical or very similar pattern of sounds conveying different meanings and causing misunderstanding:

- (1) *The ladies at the club were talking about a conversation they overheard between a man and his wife.*
“They must have been at the Zoo”, said Mrs. A, “because I heard her mention ‘a trained deer’.”
“What queer hearing you must have”, laughed Mrs. B. “They were talking about going away, and she said ‘Find about the train, dear’.”
“Well did anybody ever?” exclaimed Mrs. C. “I am sure they were talking about musicians, for she said ‘a trained ear’ as distinctly as could be. The discussion was beginning to warm up, when in the midst of it the lady herself appeared and was asked for a settlement.
“Well, well, you do beat all!” she exclaimed after hearing the story. “I’d been out to the country overnight, and I was asking my husband if ‘it rained here’ last night.

Another type of this category is based on regional differences in the pronunciation of a lexical item. The British and American Englishes are known to boast significant differences in pronunciation patterns, as demonstrated by the following joke:

- (2) *American traveler (to a porter of an Irish country hotel): “How many mails a day are there in this hotel?”*
Porter: “Three, sir; breakfast, dinner, and tay.”

The American visitor is interested in ‘mail’, i.e. in the postal service of delivering letters and parcels, while the Irishman accepts the word for the ‘meal’, i.e. the occasion when people eat, in analogy with his dialectal pattern of replacing /i:/ by /ei/, cf. /ti:/:/tei/.

2.2. Morphological jokes

- (3) *Clerk to a spinster: “Are you unmarried, lady?”*
Spinster (with indignation): “Unmarried? I have never been married!”

The prefix “un-” is polysemantic, conveying either a purely negative meaning, or a reversative meaning, defined as ‘bringing back to the previous or original situation’. The clerk in his routine question uses the word “unmarried” with the first meaning of the prefix implied, while the lady chooses the reversative interpretation.

2.3. Lexico-semantic jokes

Linguistic analysis proves that most jokes are of a complex character. In a number of cases, the core phenomenon, responsible for the funniness, is reinforced by other types of linguistic phenomena. The most popular linguistic phenomena to cause a humorous effect seem to be synonymy and antonymy, homonymy, polysemy and paronymy. We might also add lexico-semantic innovation defined by E. Lendvai as “deviance against the existing lexico-semantic rules” (see 2.5).

2.3.1. Antonymy

In the category of lexico-semantic jokes, the items based on synonymy and antonymy are the least numerous. According to the hypothesis of E. Lendvai (1993), these phenomena do not maintain semantic tension to such a degree as other types.

- (4) *“Strange Alice should invite that horrid woman to her wedding; she has such a disagreeable past.”*
“Yes, but she is rich enough to furnish a very agreeable present.”

The last punch line contains double antonymy: the opposition of ‘agreeable vs. disagreeable’, on the one hand, and of ‘a past vs. a present’, on the other hand. The latter opposition contains pun: “the past”, as ‘a period of time that precedes the present moment’ should be normally opposed to “the present” in the meaning of

‘a period of time that coincides with the moment of speech’. Instead, in (1) it is set against the meaning of its homonymous form ‘something one gives to somebody on some occasion.’ The ambiguity of the interplay of the two meanings serves as a source of funniness.

2.3.2. Homonymy

In the jokes of this sub-category, two phonetically identical but semantically different words are brought together with the aim of creating a humorous effect:

- (5) *The professor rapped on his desk and shouted: “Gentlemen – order!”*
The entire class yelled: “Beer!”

The humorous effect rests on the meanings of two phonetically identical verbs “to order”: a) ‘to tell people to stop causing disturbance’ and b) ‘to ask for something to be brought to you’. The class intentionally misinterprets the professor’s command. Homonyms create a humorous effect based on semantic distance.

- (6) *“An anecdote is a tale,” said the teacher. “Now, Sidney, use it in a sentence.”*
“I tied a tin to the dog’s anecdote.”

In this joke, funniness is caused by the confusion of two homophones: “a tale” as ‘a story’ and “a tail” as ‘the part of an animal extending behind his body’.

- (7) *Guest: “And the flies are certainly thick around here.”*
Hotel manager: “Thick? What can you expect for two dollars a day? Educated ones?”

The two meanings of “thick” can be clearly distinguished at the end of the joke. The recognition of the two different meanings realized simultaneously (a) ‘having a large number of something together’, b) ‘stupid, dull’) that calls forth the humorous effect is facilitated by the manager’s exclamation. The humorous effect is achieved in two steps: first, “educated” inspires the switch from the appropriate meaning of “thick”, i.e. ‘dense’ into the unrealistic ‘stupid, uneducated’, and next, the absurd idea of stupid and uneducated flies emerges.

2.3.3. Polysemy

Polysemy is “a term used in semantic analysis to refer to a lexical item which has a range of different meanings” (Crystal, 1983, p. 274). In any language, a large proportion of vocabulary is polysemic. The English language is known as highly polysemic, thus polysemic jokes make up a large group in the corpus of jokes in English. In fact, theoretically there are many possibilities for creating distant semantic oppositions or, in other words, funny coincidences among the numerous meanings of polysemantic lexical units.

- (8) *She: “It’s no use bothering me, Jack. I shall marry whom I please.”*
He: “That’s all I am asking you to do, my dear. You please me well enough.”

The joke illustrates the co-occurrence of two meanings of the verb “to please”: a) ‘to think something desirable or satisfying’, and b) ‘to make somebody happy and satisfied’. The two meanings of “to please” have some semantic properties in common and might be considered too similar to create the appropriate semantic tension. However, the semantic distinction is increased by the difference of the syntactic position that in the first remark allows for the ambiguity of the key word.

- (9) *The weather forecaster hadn’t been right in three months, and his resignation caused little surprise. His alibi, however, pleased the city council. “I can’t stand this town any longer”, read his note. The climate does not agree with me.”*

In (9), the verb “agree” appears in two meanings: a) ‘to have the same opinion about something’ and b) ‘to make you feel healthy and happy’. The weather forecaster uses the word in the second meaning, while the city council favors different implication and accepts the word in the first interpretation.

2.3.4. Paronymy

Paronyms are words that sound similarly but mean different things. Paronymy is a lexico-semantic phenomenon that relies on the interaction of formal similarity of lexical items and their distant semantic content (cf. Lendvai, 1993, p. 92).

- (10) *Sonny: “Mother, Dolly is using fearful swear words.”*
Mother: “Well, what did she say?”
Sonny: “She said she wouldn’t wear those darned stockings any more.”

The humorous effect of (10) comprises a case of paronymy built up from two words with similar phonetic appearance: a) “darned” ‘with a hole mended’ and b) “damned” ‘a swearing word used when angry or frustrated’. In similar cases, it is the phonetic effect that plays the decisive role, and the punch line is easier to catch when perceived aurally. Contextual elements also participate in the joke organization: “swear words” with the negative connotation help the hearer to prepare for an intended version.

2.3.5. Lexico-semantic innovation

The category embraces old vocabulary items provided with new meanings or new coinages and can be illustrated by the following jokes:

- (11) *Traffic cop: “Use your noodle, lady! Use your noodle!”*

Lady: "My goodness! Where is it? I've pushed and pulled everything in the car!"

(12) *Man to a friend: "I am taking a honey-day vacation this year. You know that is when you stay home and the whole time your wife says: "Honey, do this and honey, do that."*

In (11), the lady takes the slang word "noodle" 'head' for some unknown technical term, some part of the car. In (12), the speaker coins a new term after the model existing in the language (cf. "honeymoon") and provides it with a funny interpretation. All the jokes in this subcategory make use of the interrelation between words and their meanings, either existing in reality or born in the joke teller's fantasy.

2.4. Syntactic jokes

In syntactical jokes, it is the context that is responsible for the humorous effect: contextual elements establish proper links among the constituents of the joke. In fact, all jokes can be said to be contextual, as it is the context that renders one interpretation out of two possible ones inappropriate, even absurd, and therefore funny.

In the category of syntactic jokes, the first participant unintentionally offers a statement or a question that can prove ambiguous and have more than one interpretation. The second speaker intentionally chooses to interpret the original sentence in the wrong way, and his response produces humorous effect.

(13) *An officer was halted on his approach to the camp by a green sentry. In disgust to the sentry's challenge of "Who is here?" the officer shouted: "Me, jackass".*
"Advance, jackass," was the solemn answer, "to be recognized".

The misinterpretation of the sentence "Me, jackass" is based on its syntactic structure: "jackass" in that position can be interpreted either as a form of address or as an apposition (a noun referring to the same person as the pronoun after which it is placed). The officer uses the word for addressing the sentry, whereas the latter chooses to interpret it as an apposition referring to the speaker. The joke is based on syntactic homonymy, i.e. two syntactic patterns identical in form but possessing different meanings.

Another case of syntactic homonymy is presented in the following joke:

(14) *A Sunday-school visitor asked the children what he should talk about, and got an immediate answer: "Talk about three minutes."*

The meaning of the syntactic pattern to 'talk about +N' depends on the lexical meaning of the noun: as illustrated by the joke, the noun can denote either the

subject of the talk or an approximate period of time. The children choose to misinterpret the visitor's question.

In the next dialogue, a case of syntactic polysemy (a syntactic pattern possessing more than one meaning) is represented:

(15) *A census clerk, in scanning over the form to see if it had been properly filled up, noticed the figures 120 and 112 under the headings "Age of Father, if living" and "Age of Mother, if living." "But your parents were never so old, were they?" asked the astonished clerk.*
"No", was the reply, "but they would have been, if living."

The pattern "if living" can represent both the case of real condition "if he / she is still alive", as meant by the census form, and of unreal condition "if they were alive", as understood by the respondent.

As it has already been mentioned and demonstrated, different lexical means often combine to create a humorous effect. A combination of syntactical and lexical means is illustrated by **zeugma**, "a rhetorical figure in which a single word, standing in relationship to two others, is correctly related to only one" (Beckson, 1994, p. 303).

(16) *I know that boys, in books at all events, often did this and had thrilling adventures before they married a fortune and an earl's daughter.*

(17) *He had been butler in very good families, and wore side-whiskers and a perfect manner.*

The predicate "wore" stands in the same grammatical, but different semantic relation to two adjacent words in the context, the semantic relations being, on the one hand, literal (an earl's daughter (16), whiskers (17), and, on the other hand, transferred (a fortune (16), a perfect manner (17) (cf. Galperin, 1977, p. 151).

Conclusions

1. As demonstrated by the examples quoted above, linguistic jokes in English can be made on any structural level of the language (phonetics (1, 2), morphology (3), semantics (4–12), syntax (13–15), idiomatic, etc). They are usually based on a clearly identifiable linguistic device. In numerous cases, the core device responsible for the funniness is reinforced by other linguistic devices.
2. The underlying principle of linguistic jokes seems to be ambiguity, caused by the absence of one-to-one correspondence between form and meaning in a linguistic unit. The wrong (intentional or unintentional) interpretation of the unit creates a humorous effect.
3. Due to their pithy and concise way of formulating the message, jokes provide a helpful tool in the transparent definition and explanation, or il-

lustration, of linguistic phenomena and devices in any branch of linguistics, as they facilitate the understanding and memorizing of the materials taught. Jokes serve as an ultimate test of the learner's language skills: appreciation of a joke requires a good knowledge and a fine feeling for the language.

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JUOKO ANATOMIJA

Laimutė Servaitė

Santrauka

Juokas, kaip žodinės literatūros žanras, gali būti sėkmingai naudojamas mokant(-antis) užsienio kalbą. Humoro tyrinėtojai skiria bent du jo tipus: situacinį ir lingvistinį. Abiejų tipų humoro pagrindas yra tas pats: nevienareikšmiškumas. Situacinis humoras grindžiamas situacija, kurią galima interpretuoti daugiau nei vienu būdu. Semantinis atstumas tarp realiosios ir klaidintosios, net absurdiškos interpretacijų kelia juoką. Anglų

kalboje nemažai juokų ir anekdotų turi lingvistinį pagrindą: humoristinį efektą kuria aiškiai identifikuojamos įvairių struktūrinių kalbos lygmenų – fonetikos, morfologijos, semantikos, sintaksės ir t. t. – priemonės. Kai kurie tyrinėtojai skiria net 25 lingvistinių juokų tipus (alfabetinius, skiemeninius, skyrybos, neigimo, žodžių darybos ir pan.). Atrodytų, kad produktyviausios humoro kūrimo priemonės priklauso leksinės semantikos sričiai ir dažniausiai remiasi homonimija ir polisemija, rečiau sinonimija ir antonimija. Nemažai yra fonetinių juokų, kai tapačios ar labai panašios garsų sekos suprantamos klaidingai: pirmame straipsnio pavyzdyje ta pati garsų seka gali būti interpretuota kaip 'dresuotas elnias', 'traukinys, brangioji', 'išlavinta klausa' arba 'čia lijo'. Žodžių sandara ar daryba grindžiami juokai remiasi sudėtinių žodžių dalių polisemija: trečiame pavyzdyje humoristinį efektą sukuria dvejopa priešdėlio *un-*, turinčio paprasto neiginio ar pradinės būklės atkūrimo reikšmės, interpretacija. Leksinės semantikos juokai rečiau remiasi sinonimija ar antonimija, nes sinonimų ir antonimų poros nesukuria didelės semantinės įtampos (plg. Lendvai, 1993), o homonimai ir polisemantiniai žodžiai yra puikūs humoro šaltiniai; semantinis atstumas tarp fonetiškai tapačių, bet semantiškai skirtingų žodžių sukelia humoristinį efektą (plg. (5), (6), (7), (8), (9) pavyzdžius). Sintaksinį humorą kuria kontekstas: vieno situacijos dalyvio teiginį ar klausimą antrasis dalyvis interpretuoja klaidingai ar net absurdiškai, tuo sukeldamas juoką (plg. (13), (14), (15)). Dažnai pagrindinę kalbos priemonę, kuriančią humoristinį efektą, paremia ir sustiprina kitos: plg. (8) pavyzdį, kur polisemijos kuriamą efektą sustiprina sintaksinė polisemantinio žodžio pozicija.

Lingvistinius juokus sunku, dažnai net ir neįmanoma išversti į kitą kalbą, o kitakalbio gebėjimas juos suprasti ir įvertinti laikytinas puikios užsienio kalbos mokėjimo įrodymu. Juokus ir anekdotus galima sėkmingai naudoti užsienio kalbos mokymo praktiniuose užsiėmimuose ir teorinėse paskaitose: jie ne tik patraukia dėmesį, sukuria darbui palankią atmosferą, bet ir padeda trumpai ir taikliai paaiškinti sudėtingus kalbos reiškinius, iliustruoti juos lengvai suprantamais bei greitai įsimenamais pavyzdžiais.