



## The Role of Semantics in Humor: A Study of Wordplay and Double Meanings

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### Abstract

This article aims to analyze the role of semantics in constructing humor, specifically through mechanisms of wordplay and double meanings. Using a literature review method, this study synthesizes findings from recent linguistic and pragmatic research related to humor strategies. The analysis shows that lexical ambiguity, especially involving homonyms and polysemy, serves as the primary foundation for verbal humor. Patterns of phonological wordplay, morphological manipulation, and shifts in meaning are identified as key strategies that enable multiple interpretations and the emergence of humorous effects. The study also emphasizes the important role of context and pragmatic knowledge in interpreting ambiguity and resolving semantic contradictions. These findings imply that humor is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a cognitive process that requires the active involvement of listeners in understanding semantic structures and contextual information.

**Keywords:** *Semantics; Humor; Wordplay*

**Abstrak:** Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran semantik dalam membangun humor, khususnya melalui mekanisme permainan kata dan makna ganda. Dengan menggunakan metode tinjauan pustaka, penelitian ini mensintesis temuan-temuan dari penelitian linguistik dan pragmatik terkini yang berkaitan dengan strategi humor. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa ambiguitas leksikal, terutama yang melibatkan homonim dan polisemi, berfungsi sebagai fondasi utama humor verbal. Pola permainan kata fonologis, manipulasi morfologis, dan pergeseran makna diidentifikasi sebagai strategi utama yang memungkinkan interpretasi ganda dan munculnya efek humor. Penelitian ini juga menekankan peran penting konteks dan pengetahuan pragmatis dalam menafsirkan ambiguitas dan menyelesaikan kontradiksi semantik. Temuan ini menyiratkan bahwa humor bukan hanya sebuah fenomena linguistik, tetapi juga sebuah proses kognitif yang membutuhkan keterlibatan aktif pendengar dalam memahami struktur semantik dan informasi kontekstual.

**Kata Kunci:** *Semantik; Humor; Permainan Kata*

## INTRODUCTION

Humor is a universal feature of human communication that transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries. It serves as a fundamental element in social interaction, fulfilling various functions such as entertainment, criticism, persuasion, and even psychological coping mechanisms. However, despite its apparent simplicity, humor involves complex linguistic and cognitive processes. One of the key aspects that make humor effective is its reliance on language—specifically, the strategic manipulation of meaning to create surprising or incongruous effects. This phenomenon places semantics, as the study of meaning in language, at the heart of humor analysis.

Within this linguistic domain, two particularly intriguing techniques are wordplay and double meanings. Wordplay, commonly realized through puns, operates by exploiting sound similarities (homophones) or multiple meanings within a single lexical item (polysemy). This creates a humorous twist when the audience shifts from one interpretation to another. Similarly, double meanings enable a single word or expression to convey two different interpretations simultaneously, often leading to an unexpected realization that triggers laughter. The humorous effect relies on the audience's cognitive ability to recognize, process, and resolve semantic ambiguity within a communicative context.

However, despite its relevance, the role of semantics in humor remains underexplored compared to other linguistic studies, such as phonology or syntax. Existing research has highlighted that humor challenges conventional language structures by encouraging deeper engagement with the multiplicity of meanings embedded in words and expressions. Moreover, humor is not solely dependent on linguistic form but is also shaped by contextual and cultural factors that influence interpretation. This intersection of semantics and pragmatics positions humor as a communicative phenomenon requiring both linguistic knowledge and pragmatic awareness.

Previous studies have examined semantic ambiguity in various forms of humor, particularly focusing on lexical ambiguity, homonymy, and polysemy as central mechanisms. Research in digital communication, conversational jokes, and media advertising consistently shows that humor is constructed through deliberate ambiguity and reinterpretation of meaning. Contributions from scholars such as Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor and Attardo's General Theory of Verbal Humor have provided foundational insights into the role of semantic opposition and script switching in humor. Nonetheless, many studies are limited to specific genres or contexts, indicating the need for broader analyses that encompass varied forms of wordplay and double meanings.

The study of the role of semantics in humor, particularly through wordplay and double meanings, has been of particular interest in linguistic

research in recent years. A study by Haryadi et al. (2021) showed that homonyms and polysememes in digital memes trigger the humor effect through simultaneous access to multiple meanings. Similar findings were reinforced by Romadlani (2021) who showed how the manipulation of semantic meaning shapes humor in the sitcom *Mind Your Language*, utilizing lexical relationships such as homonymy, polysemy, and homophony. In addition, Pujianti et al. (2024) affirm that lexical and structural ambiguity complement each other in the construction of humor, with pragmatic context being key in decoding ambiguous meanings. Charina (2021) reinforces the importance of audience engagement in capturing syntactic ambiguity, while Makrum (2021) highlights the role of cognitive switching in the processing of alternative semantic scripts. A study by Widiatmika (2024) on English memes also proves that the exploitation of ambiguity of meaning is the main strategy of humor in digital communication. The findings show that a combination of semantic features, cognitive processing, and pragmatic context is the main basis for the construction of modern verbal humor.

Based on this gap, the present study aims to explore how semantic features contribute to the construction of humor through the mechanisms of wordplay and double meanings. Employing a literature review approach, this research analyzes various humorous expressions to uncover the linguistic strategies underlying comedic language. The goal is to identify how semantic principles—particularly ambiguity, lexical multiplicity, and contextual interpretation—serve as core elements in producing humorous effects, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of humor as both a linguistic and cognitive phenomenon.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach through the library research method, focusing on analyzing existing theories and literature regarding the role of semantics in humor, specifically in wordplay and double meanings. Data are sourced from scientific journal articles, academic books, and previous research, both national and international, published within the last ten years. Foundational works in linguistic humor theories are also utilized to strengthen the analysis.

Data collection involves identifying relevant publications using keywords such as “semantic ambiguity in humor,” “wordplay,” and “double meanings.” The collected data are then categorized based on semantic features, types of ambiguity, and forms of wordplay. Analysis is carried out descriptively through content analysis, examining how semantic principles contribute to the construction of humor across various examples.

To ensure data validity, source triangulation is applied by consulting multiple references from reputable publishers and indexed journals. This

method allows the researcher to build a comprehensive understanding of semantic mechanisms in humor without relying on primary field data.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Semantic Ambiguity as the Core of Verbal Humor**

Semantic ambiguity serves as the foundational mechanism in the construction of verbal humor, functioning as the catalyst that enables multiple layers of interpretation within a single utterance. In the present study, lexical ambiguity emerges as the most prevalent type, specifically through the use of homonyms—words that share the same form but have unrelated meanings—and polysemous expressions, where one word carries several related senses. This form of ambiguity creates a linguistic space where a single lexical item can simultaneously activate two or more semantic interpretations. Cognitively, this dual accessibility engages the listener in a complex interpretative process, wherein the initial, surface-level or literal meaning is processed first, only to be destabilized by the recognition of an alternative, often incongruent, secondary interpretation. The humor arises precisely at the moment this semantic shift occurs, producing a sense of surprise or incongruity that is characteristic of much verbal humor.

A clear example of this phenomenon is found in the phrase: "I used to be a baker, but I couldn't make enough dough." In this instance, the lexical item "dough" operates dually—as a concrete noun referring to the mixture used in bread-making, and as a colloquial term for money. The humor here hinges on the listener's ability to retrieve both meanings and recognize their relevance within the context of the utterance. Initially, the audience is likely to process the literal interpretation associated with the baker's profession. However, the unexpected activation of the slang sense of "dough" forces a reinterpretation of the utterance as a whole, generating a moment of cognitive dissonance that resolves into humor upon recognition of the double meaning.

This linguistic mechanism aligns closely with Raskin's Script-Based Semantic Theory of Humor (1985), which posits that humor is produced when two conflicting semantic scripts are activated within a single communicative frame. In the baker joke, the two scripts—professional labor versus financial insufficiency—interact in a manner that causes them to clash, creating what Raskin describes as script opposition. Importantly, the listener's recognition of this opposition is what actualizes the humor; it is not merely the presence of ambiguity that suffices, but its resolution through script switching that triggers the comedic response.

From a cognitive linguistics perspective, this example also demonstrates how semantic processing in humorous contexts demands both linguistic competence and cognitive flexibility. The audience must possess sufficient lexical knowledge to recognize both senses of the ambiguous term

and must also be adept at shifting interpretive frames when confronted with the incongruity. This ability to switch between interpretations is not an automatic process but rather an active, often subconscious, engagement that underscores the cognitive depth involved in humor comprehension.

Therefore, lexical ambiguity, far from being a mere linguistic curiosity, emerges as a sophisticated tool for humor generation. Its effectiveness lies in the capacity of language users to exploit the inherent multiplicity of meaning within words, and of listeners to navigate between these meanings. This dynamic interplay between ambiguity, cognitive processing, and interpretive resolution forms the crux of how semantic structures contribute to verbal humor.

In addition to lexical ambiguity, structural ambiguity is also found that provides room for double interpretation at the syntactic level. Phrases like "Kids make nutritious snacks" can be interpreted literally as children making healthy food, but at the same time it can be interpreted humorously as children themselves become food. This suggests that sentence structure can be exploited to create deliberate ambiguity of meaning for humorous purposes.

From a linguistic perspective, this ambiguity shows the flexibility of the language system in allowing the construction of multiple meanings. However, the success of such humor remains highly dependent on the listener's cognitive readiness to catch the misalignment. In the context of communication, listeners play an active role in solving semantic puzzles presented by speakers.

Overall, it can be concluded that semantic ambiguity is not just a linguistic phenomenon, but also a complex cognitive process. Mental readiness to move between two meanings is the main requirement in understanding and appreciating ambiguity-based humor. Therefore, language mastery and mental flexibility are crucial factors in this type of humor decoding process.

### **Patterns of Wordplay as Linguistic Strategies**

Word-based humor, or wordplay, represents one of the most linguistically creative forms of humor, exploiting multiple layers of language structure to produce humorous effects. This type of humor typically operates at the intersection of phonology, morphology, and semantics, using the formal properties of language as a playground for ambiguity and reinterpretation. Each linguistic level contributes distinct mechanisms that enable the manipulation of meaning, thereby surprising the listener and triggering a humorous response.

At the phonological level, wordplay relies heavily on homophones—words that sound identical or similar but differ in meaning and, sometimes, spelling. The phonetic similarity of these words creates an intentional

ambiguity that deceives or momentarily confuses the listener, only to be resolved upon recognition of the intended double meaning. A classic example is the joke: *"Why do cows wear bells? Because their horns don't work."* In this case, the word "horns" functions as a homophone, referring either to the cow's anatomical horns or to vehicle horns, playing with the listener's expectations regarding which semantic frame should apply. The humor arises as the audience realizes the shift in reference from the expected agricultural context to a mechanical one, highlighting how phonological ambiguity serves as an effective strategy for embedding incongruity within otherwise ordinary expressions.

Moving beyond sound, morphological manipulation introduces humor through creative alterations of word structure. This strategy often involves adding or modifying prefixes, suffixes, or other morphological components to generate words or expressions with double meanings. In the joke, *"I'm reading a book on anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down,"* the humor stems from the ambiguity in the phrasal verb "put down." Morphologically, no new words are created, but the phrase exploits the dual interpretation of "put down" as both a literal action (physically placing the book on a surface) and an idiomatic expression (ceasing to read). Here, humor is not reliant on phonetic resemblance but rather on the polysemy inherent in multi-word constructions, underscoring how morphological and syntactic flexibility can facilitate semantic reinterpretation.

The cognitive processing involved in understanding morphological wordplay requires an awareness of how small changes in form can lead to substantial shifts in meaning. Listeners must be familiar with both the literal and idiomatic uses of expressions like "put down" and be able to quickly alternate between these interpretations in response to contextual cues. This dynamic reflects the intricate relationship between morphology and semantics, where even minor structural variations have the potential to activate entirely different interpretive pathways.

At a broader level, these forms of wordplay reflect the speaker's linguistic creativity and the audience's cognitive agility. Humor is constructed not merely through randomness or absurdity but through deliberate manipulation of language structures in ways that challenge the listener's expectations and interpretive habits. It is precisely this interplay between the familiar and the unexpected—between linguistic convention and subversion—that forms the essence of word-based humor.

In conclusion, phonological and morphological wordplay exemplify how humor leverages the formal aspects of language to generate semantic surprises. By operating within the boundaries of linguistic rules while simultaneously bending them, speakers craft humorous expressions that invite the audience into a game of reinterpretation. Such humor is not only a

source of entertainment but also a demonstration of the inherent flexibility and richness of human language itself

Semantic shifts display the transition of meaning in the same context, as in the example "The duck said to the bartender, 'Put it on my bill.'" Here, the word "bill" can be interpreted as a bill or a duck's beak, depending on how the context is accessed by the listener. This kind of semantic shift suggests that a single word can metamorphose in different contexts, presenting a surprising new meaning.

These three wordplay patterns show that humor is not just a play on sound, but a full exploration of all aspects of language. The humor process works by instilling a literal meaning at first, then presenting an alternative meaning that contradicts it. When the audience realizes the second meaning, laughter arises in reaction to the semantic inconsistency.

Thus, these wordplay patterns can be seen as linguistic strategies that not only enrich verbal expression, but also reflect the cognitive intelligence of the user. Humor is a reflection of the dynamic interaction between the language system and the human mind, showing that meaning is something that can be negotiated, played with, and even twisted for rhetorical purposes.

### **The Role of Context and Pragmatic Knowledge in Humor Interpretation**

The results of this study confirm that context has a vital role in the interpretation of ambiguity-based humor. Many humorous expressions would not be understood without cultural background, situational knowledge, or pragmatic cues guiding interpretation. For example, in the phrase "Put it on my bill," the audience needs to understand that the character in the context is a duck in order to grasp the dual meaning of the word "bill."

In the perspective of Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), communication is an inferential process that depends on the relevance of available information. In humor, listeners make inferences by connecting ambiguous statements with relevant contexts until they find the hidden meaning behind literal interpretations. If context fails to be accessed, then ambiguity becomes blurry, not funny.

Furthermore, the pragmatic aspect emphasizes that humor involves common ground. Many jokes rely on specific cultural references or social expectations that are formed within a group of people. This means that the success of a humor relies heavily on the audience's capacity to recognize cultural conventions, communication norms, and the speaker's goals in a particular context.

In addition, the role of context also reflects that humor is not always universal. An effective joke in one cultural community may not necessarily be understood or appreciated by audiences from other cultural backgrounds.

Thus, humor is a very contextual and pragmatic communication phenomenon, depending on a mutually agreed exchange of meanings.

In conclusion, the role of context in humor cannot be ignored. The interpretation of humor is an active process that involves access to pragmatic and cultural knowledge, as well as an awareness of situational dynamics. This shows that humor is not just a language game, but also a social and cultural practice that reflects the complexity of human interaction.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that semantics plays a central role in the construction and interpretation of verbal humor. Through the analysis of various jokes and humorous expressions, it was found that semantic ambiguity—especially lexical ambiguity involving homonyms and polysemous words—is a key mechanism in generating humor. Wordplay and double meanings invite multiple interpretations, and the humor often arises from the contrast between an expected meaning and an unexpected reinterpretation.

The findings also highlight that humor is not produced by semantics alone, but in close interaction with pragmatics. Context, shared cultural knowledge, and inferential reasoning are crucial in resolving ambiguity and fully appreciating the humorous effect. Without these elements, many jokes would fail to deliver their intended impact. Moreover, the study confirms that humor is a cognitively engaging phenomenon. It requires linguistic awareness and mental flexibility from the audience to identify and shift between meanings quickly. The creative use of language in humor—through puns, semantic shifts, and ambiguous structures—demonstrates the richness and complexity of meaning in communication.

In essence, humor is a dynamic interplay between meaning, sound, structure, and context. By studying humor through the lens of semantics, we gain deeper insight into how language can be used not only to inform but also to entertain, persuade, and connect. This research contributes to the broader understanding of linguistic creativity and opens further avenues for exploring humor across different languages, cultures, and media.

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