LEXICAL AMBIGUITY AS A SOURCE OF HUMOUR IN *DAD SAYS JOKES* POSTS

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Abstract

This study explores the linguistic phenomenon of ambiguity, recognising its dual nature in communication. Despite its tendency to cause confusion, ambiguity serves as a source of humour in particular contexts. This study specifically examines the role of lexical ambiguity, a subtype of ambiguity, in creating humour. The data for this study were collected from posts on the 'X' account, *@Dadsaysjokes*, spanning from October 2023 to January 2024. The study applied a qualitative methodology and aimed to identify lexically ambiguous words in the posts and examine the humour they create, drawing on Kreidler's theory of ambiguity and Krikmann's theory of humour. The analysis revealed that 10 posts incorporated lexically ambiguous words, highlighting their prevalence in creating verbal humour. This study has contributed to the mechanisms of humour production, highlighting the interplay between lexical ambiguity, incongruity, and humorous effect. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of considering ambiguity not only as a potential obstacle to effective communication but also as a valuable source of humour production and entertainment.

Keywords: incongruity, lexical ambiguity, verbal humour

INTRODUCTION

Language, as the fundamental mode of human expression, inherently embodies a dual nature that complicates comprehension, commonly referred to as ambiguity. The presence of ambiguity in language indicates the capacity of an expression to be understood in more than one way (Chinelo and Macpherson, 2015). This flexibility may hinder the audience or listener from grasping the information accurately, thereby disrupting the flow of communication (Demir, 2020).

Kreidler (1998) categorizes ambiguity into three distinct types: Syntactic ambiguity, referential ambiguity, and lexical ambiguity. Syntactic ambiguity emerges when a statement can be parsed or structured in various ways, resulting in different interpretations. Referential ambiguity, alternatively termed anaphoric ambiguity, arises when a word or phrase refers to something or someone in a given context, and it remains unclear to which specific entity or element it is referring. Meanwhile, lexical ambiguity occurs when a word itself possesses multiple meanings, and it is not always evident which meaning is intended solely based on the word's definition or lexical entry.

There are some previous studies which concerned with examining the case of ambiguity. Studies conducted by Nwala & Umukoro (2017), Chang & Mutty (2022), and Jannah (2021) focused on investigating both lexical and syntactic ambiguity in newspaper headlines. Their studies described how ambiguity hindered the effectiveness of communication between writers and audiences. On the other hand, Bucaria (2004) and Wahyuni (2014) studies investigated how lexical and Syntactic ambiguity resulted in humour.

Ambiguity in Nwala & Umukoro (2017), Chang & Mutty (2022), and Jannah (2021) cases are therefore a problem in communication. However, there are not many studies have investigated that ambiguity has a role in certain communication contexts. While ambiguity can sometimes lead to confusion, it plays an important role in creative communication and entertainment. This is apparent when ambiguity is used to create a sense of humour (Makroum, 2021).

Attardo (2011) defines humour as anything funny, amusing, or laughable. It is characterized as anything that elicits laughter, or amusement or is generally funny. There are two primary categories of humour: verbal humour and non-verbal humour (Makroum, 2021). The key distinction between these categories lies in the type of language employed to convey humour. Verbal humour arises through language, whether spoken or written. According to Attardo (2020), verbal humour is defined as humour that relies on semantics (meaning) and the similarity or identity of two linguistic forms, either phonemic (sounds) or graphemic (spellings). Humour often depends on double meanings of words or ambiguities in sentences (Kreidler, 1998). In contrast, non-verbal humour exists beyond language, manifesting through funny actions or gestures.

There are three main theories of humour, namely incongruity, superiority, and relief theory (Krikmann, 2006). Incongruity theory suggests that humour comes from perceiving a mismatch between expectations and reality. Superiority theory proposes that laughter stems from feeling intellectually, socially, or morally superior to others. Relief theory suggests that humour serves as a release from tension, often related to taboo topics or social norms, with laughter providing relief from this tension.

Therefore, the present study explored the phenomenon of ambiguity contributing to humour based on the incongruity theory. Specifically, this study centred on lexical ambiguity, given its prevalence as a form of linguistic ambiguity that served as a basis for generating verbal humour. The sample jokes were taken from an 'X' account, identified by the username @*Dadsaysjokes*, uploaded from October 2023 to January 2024.

The first study reviewed was conducted by Nwala & Umukoro (2017) who explored how ambiguity in headlines from newspapers like the Guardian, Vanguard, and Punch that hindered the audience interpretation. Their study identified two forms of ambiguity: lexical and structural ambiguity. Another study conducted by Chang & Mutty (2022) similarly analyzed ambiguity in vaccine-related headlines from The Star News, finding both lexical and syntactic ambiguity but noting minimal impact on audience interpretation. Jannah (2021) examined ambiguity in business news headlines from BBC News. The study found 37 instances of ambiguity in 11 articles, with 27 words showing lexical ambiguity and 9 phrases and 1 sentence demonstrating syntactic ambiguity. It identified ambiguity types such as homonymy, polysemy, and figurative sense, as well as surface structure issues. However, it did not definitively establish whether ambiguity was deliberately employed in headline composition.

On the other hand, Bucaria (2004) focused on humorous headlines, demonstrating both voluntary and involuntary ambiguity created by writers. Lastly, Wahyuni (2014) studied lexical ambiguity in the script of Romeo and Juliet, particularly through puns and wordplay, highlighting the deliberate use of ambiguity for humorous effects. The present study distinguishes itself by focusing on how writers deliberately employ lexical ambiguity for creative communication and entertainment, expanding on previous research by illustrating how lexical ambiguity contributes to verbal humor, aligning with the incongruity theory.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative descriptive research design. The data source of this study was taken from an 'X' account @*Dadsaysjokes*, consisting of posts uploaded from October 2023 to January 2024. In the process of conducting the study, the data were collected using the documentation method and note-taking technique. This involved reading @*Dadsaysjokes* posts, finding the lexically ambiguous words in the posts, and taking notes of the lexically ambiguous words.

The collected data were analysed using qualitative methods and content analysis techniques. This approach involved a systematic examination of the ambiguous words in @*Dadsaysjokes* posts. Several steps were employed in the data analysis process. Initially, the collected data were interpreted using the Oxford Learner's Dictionary. Subsequently, the data were analysed using the theory of ambiguity proposed by Kreidler (1998). Finally, conclusions were drawn from the interpretation and analysis, applying the theory proposed by Krikmann (2006). The results of data analysis in this study were presented using the textual method. This method was used to provide a verbal description and interpretation of the lexically ambiguous words and their humorous senses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
There are ten data analysed in this study. Each datum applied lexical ambiguity and generated humour.

Datum 1
My wife asked me, "Are you sometimes surprised at how little people **change**?"
I said, "Actually the process is the same. They just have tiny clothes."

(Source: @Dadsaysjokes 02/10/2023)

The humour of this joke arises from the lexical ambiguity of the word "change." There are two distinct interpretations of "change" employed in this joke. The word "change" can refer to the process of personal growth and character development. It can also signify the act of putting on a different or clean cloth, representing a distinct interpretation from the former.

The wife's question, "Are you sometimes surprised at how little people change?" sets up an expectation regarding the topic of discussion. She expects the conversation to centre on how children develop and how their quick development frequently surprises adults. However, the husband's response, "Actually, the process is the same. They just have tiny clothes," subverts the wife's initial expectation. Instead of engaging in a discussion about the growth and development of children, the husband interprets the word "change" with its meaning related to clothing. He implies that to see children "change" is not something surprising because there is no significant distinction in how adults and children put on their clothing, except for the size.

This unexpected shift from the expectation to discuss personal development to the size of children's clothing creates a subversion of the wife's expectation which results in humour.

Datum 2
Person A   : "Why do cows wear bells?"
Person B   : "I'm not sure?"
Person A   : "Because their **horns** don't work."
(Source: @Dadsaysjokes 04/10/2023)

This joke employs the lexical ambiguity of the word "horn." There are two common interpretations of the word "horn" used in this joke. The word "horn" can be interpreted as a device in a vehicle that produces a loud sound as a warning or signal. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as a hard-pointed part on the heads of some animals.

The question "Why do cows wear bells?" sets up an expectation for a logical or practical explanation. The question implies that there must be a functional reason behind why cows wear bells, such as for identification or to alert farmers of their presence. However, the response, "Because their horns don't work," subverts the expectation by introducing a different interpretation of "horn." Instead of providing a serious or factual answer to the question, "horn" is interpreted as the hard part on the heads of cows. The joke implies that cows wear bells because their horns (a pair of little pointed bones on their heads) are ineffective or "don't work" for making sound.

Datum 3
Son   : "Dad, I'm cold."
Dad   : "Go stand in the corner, I hear it's 90 **degrees**."
(*Source: @Dadsaysjokes 11/10/2023*)

The humour in the joke primarily arises from the lexical ambiguity of the term "degree" which means either temperature units or angular measurements. When the son says he is cold, he likely means he feels cold due to the low temperature in the room. However, the father's response, "Go stand in the corner, I hear it is 90 degrees," plays on this alternative meaning of the word "degrees." Instead of addressing the son's coldness in terms of temperature, the father interprets "degrees" as referring to the angle of the corner in a room, suggesting that the corner has an angle of 90 degrees.

Therefore, the humour in this joke lies in the father's unexpected response "stand in the corner," which is humorously followed by a clarification that the corner has "90 degrees" in terms of its angle, not warmth as the son might have expected.

Datum 4
A man is told the local bank offers mortgages with no **interest.**
The man enters the bank.
Man   : "I'm here to find out about the mortgage."
Bank Manager: "I don't really care."
 (*Source: @Dadsaysjokes 25/10/2023*)

This joke plays on the double meaning of the word "interest." In the context of banking and finance, "interest" typically refers to the additional money paid by a borrower to a lender in exchange for the privilege of borrowing money. In a general sense, "interest" can also refer to someone's attention, concern, or curiosity about something.

The setting in this joke establishes an expectation that the man is interested in exploring the possibility of obtaining a mortgage without paying interest in a local bank. This expectation is based on common financial practices where mortgages typically involve additional money or interest payments. However, the response of the bank manager, "I don't really care," creates a new scenario where the bank manager responds with indifference, indicating a lack of "interest" in terms of wanting to discuss a mortgage. The humour arises from the incongruity between the man's expectation of receiving information about a mortgage and the bank manager's dismissive response.

Datum 5
My kids put together a PowerPoint presentation explaining why we should go to the water park.
It has several **slides.**
(Source: @Dadsaysjokes 01/11/2023)

This joke plays on the double meaning of the word "slide." In the context of a PowerPoint presentation, a "slide" typically refers to a single page or screen that contains information. However, in the context of a water park, a "slide" is a steep slope that children use for sliding down.

The use of the term "PowerPoint presentation" sets an initial expectation. This expectation is grounded in the conventional understanding of PowerPoint presentations as informational content. While the initial assumption is that "slide" refers to the screen or page within the PowerPoint presentation, the joke reveals that it refers to the water park attraction where people slide down into a pool.

The sentence, "It has several slides," leaves the audience to think whether it refers to the PowerPoint presentations which have several informational pages, or to the steep slopes in the water park. It can be applied to both contexts. However, this joke only refers to one object and one concept which is a steep slope in the water park.

Datum 6
I asked my wife when her birthday was. She said **March** 1st. So, I walked around the room and asked again.
(Source: @Dadsaysjokes 04/11/2023)

This joke employs lexical ambiguity through the exploitation of the double meaning of the word "March." The word "March" possesses two distinct meanings. Primarily, it denotes the third month of the year, between February and April. However, it also serves as a verb, indicating a rhythmic walk with stiff regular steps like a soldier.

Initially, the husband's inquiry about his wife's birthday sets up the expectation of a straightforward response, typically comprising a date. The audience anticipates a conventional exchange centred on information about his wife's date of birth. The humour unfolds as the husband misinterprets his wife's response, "March 1st," not as a date but rather as a directive to physically "march." Therefore, he walked around the room first and then asked his wife again to give him the answer of when her birthday was. The funny thing here is that the husband has received the answer to his question but he misinterpreted it and did something funny, walking around the room like a soldier.

Datum 7
Waiter   : I'm glad you enjoyed your dinner. How did you **find** the steak?"
Customer: "Super easy. It was right next to the potatoes."
(Source: @Dadsaysjokes 27/11/2023)

The humour in the joke stems from the lexical ambiguity of the word "find." In this case, "find" can mean both to physically locate something and to have a particular feeling or opinion about something.

This joke takes place in a restaurant showing a waiter and a customer. When the waiter asks the customer "How did you find the steak?" he is inquiring about the customer's opinion or experience with the steak. Therefore, "find" in this context refers to an opinion of something. Typically, in a restaurant setting, when a waiter asks how a customer "found" their food, they are asking for feedback on its taste, quality, or preparation.

However, the customer interprets "find" literally, as in physically locating the steak. His response, "Super easy. It was right next to the potatoes," subverts the waiter's expectation by interpreting the question literally, as if the

waiter was asking about the physical location of the steak on the plate. Instead of providing feedback on the steak's taste or quality, the customer humorously points out that finding the steak was easy because it was placed conveniently next to the potatoes.

Datum 8
I had a **date** last night, it was perfect.
Tomorrow I'll try grape.
(*Source: @Dadsaysjokes 11/12/2023*)

The humour in this joke arises from the ambiguity of the word "date," which can refer to both a romantic meeting and a sweet sticky brown fruit that grows on a tree called a date palm.

Initially, the audience is led to believe that the speaker is referring to a romantic meeting or social engagement. However, the statement, "Tomorrow I'll try grape," reveals a shift in meaning, as the speaker unexpectedly refers to the fruit "date" instead. The humour is further amplified by this absurdity. Eating a grape is a mundane and trivial activity compared to the expectations set up by the initial statement about having a perfect date. The unexpectedness of these meanings contributes to the surprise experienced by the audience.

Datum 9
My sister told me to take the spider out instead of killing him.
So we went in a bar, had a few beers, it was fun. It turns out he was a **web** designer.
(*Source: @Dadsaysjokes 03/01/2024*)

The humour in this joke arises from the unexpected twist created by the double meaning of the word "web." In the context of the internet, "web" refers to a system for finding information on the internet which enables users to engage in various online activities. On the other hand, it also refers to a fine net of thread made by a spider to catch insects.

Initially, when the sister suggests taking the spider out, she means taking it outside to release it. The joke takes an unexpected turn when the speaker reveals that instead of simply taking the spider outside, he decided to take the spider out to a bar. This twist adds an element of surprise and humour to the scenario, as it is absurd to bring a spider to a social setting like a bar.

The humour of the joke then comes with the revelation that the spider he took to the bar is a "web designer." This statement initially prompts the audience to interpret "web designer" in the conventional sense - someone who designs websites. However, the joke subverts this expectation by revealing that the spider is a literal "web designer," as it creates webs for catching insects.

Datum 10
What's worse than a lobster on a piano?
Crabs on your **organ**.
(*Source: @Dadsaysjokes 19/01/2024*)

The humour in this joke is intricately tied to the dual meaning of the word "organ." It can refer to both a musical instrument and an anatomical organ, particularly a male reproductive organ.

The setup of the joke establishes a scenario involving a lobster on a piano. The joke primes the audience to expect a continuation related to the musical instrument, as the setup involves a piano. The next statement in this joke then subverts expectations by introducing a different interpretation of the word "organ." The subversion occurs with the statement, "Crabs on your organ."

Instead of continuing with the theme of musical instruments, it introduces a completely different context: a reference to a sexually transmitted infestation of crabs (pubic lice) on one's genitalia. This condition, therefore, contrasts with the initial scenario of a lobster on a piano, which may be unusual but does not cause physical discomfort to the person while "crabs on your organ" may be an uncomfortable and shameful condition for someone.

CONCLUSION

This study has clarified the role of ambiguity in producing humour. While most of previous studies have often focused on how ambiguity hinders communication effectiveness, this study suggests that ambiguity can be a significant source of humour, particularly in verbal humour contexts. Analysing a corpus of 10 jokes utilizing lexical ambiguity has provided empirical evidence that lexical ambiguity contributes to the production of verbal humour.

Moreover, the results of this study have revealed a strong connection between lexical ambiguity and incongruity. Lexical ambiguity presents multiple possible interpretations of a word, while incongruity functions as a mechanism within the setup of a joke. The initial expectation established within the setup of a joke is subsequently contradicted or subverted by the multiple interpretations of the word. The joke exposes that only one interpretation is applied, often diverging significantly from the initial expectation, thereby generating a humorous effect.

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