The Impact of Semantic Ambiguity on Social Media Jokes: A Study of Wordplay and Relevance Theory

[1]Ikram Ullah, [2]Maryam Mukhtayar, [3]Kiran Zahir, [4]Laiba Aziz

[1,2,3,4] Department of English Linguistics and Literature, Riphah International University, Pakistan, E-Mails; [1]ikramullah.uom888@gmail.com, [2]Kspogmai632@gmail.com, [3]kiranzahir172@gmail.com, [4]laibaaziz048@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores how introducing double meanings through semantic ambiguity contributes to humour in-jokes. The research aims to identify the dual role of ambiguity in facilitating humour while preventing communication failure. The research data were collected from diverse sources including Google and Instagram digital platforms. This comprehensive collection analyzed nine thoughtfully chosen jokes to give a well-spread example of types of humour. The nine jokes were chosen for their differences in structures and context in the language of the corpus. The analysis was underpinned by two main theoretical frameworks: Wordplay Theory and Relevance Theory. They were key in the analysis of the jokes to uncover what semantic ambiguity is about and how it works with listeners' understanding processes. The results reveal that allowing semantic ambiguity serves to enrich humour with a playful untidiness regarding meaning yet can also prove problematic to miscommunication. The only reason is misinterpretation because of the ambiguity that leads listeners to interpret a message that is not meant or misinterpret what the words mean. One of the most important findings is that double meanings make for better comedy but then add confusion to communication, meaning that people cannot always tell what exactly the relevant message is. This demonstrates that the relationship between language, meaning, and humour is complex and everyday communication.

Key Words: Semantic Ambiguity, Humor, Miscommunication, Jokes Theoretical Frameworks Double Meanings

Introduction

Traditionally, semantics is the study of the meaning of linguistic expressions, and getting to the core of how language conveys meaning was where my degree took me. In this field, we concentrate on word and phrase meanings detached from the pragmatic factors that modulate language in various circumstances. The word 'semantics' came from the ancient Greek word "semantics", essentially meaning its relationship to signs: the word "semion" means "sign". Eco (1976) emphasizes the etymology of this notion of a sign and the foundational truth of signs in the elaboration of semantic theories. Distribution over the 'sense' and 'reference' of linguistic expressions is taken care of in the study of semantics. 'Sense' refers to the mental associations and concepts relating to a linguistic expression which constitute an internal net of meaning. However, 'reference' is straight to the objects and entities that our ideas or expressions refer to. Frege (1892) elaborated this distinction, and subsequent linguistic studies have elaborated this further (Lyons,

1995). Semantics, the interpretation of meaning, is an important ongoing matter of study throughout linguistics, with many scholars taking their views. Indeed, scholars such as Lyons (1995) and Cruse (2004) have elaborately assessed how semantics can contribute to an understanding of linguistic structures, and how they play a defining role in communication. Because each scholar provides a different perspective, the reader gains a deeper understanding of how language is used to communicate both the concrete and the abstract constituents of thought. Semantic research continues with an exploration of these multiple views on the relationship between language and meaning (Cruse, 2004). Semantics, according to Ogden and Richards (1923), is the study 'of the relationship between words, thoughts, and things', as it puts this in a triangle that links linguistic elements to human thought and external reality. According to de Saussure (1916) a pioneer of structural linguistics, semantics is the study of relations between signs and the concepts they represent, or between signifier and signified. What Chomsky did is expand this framework to talk about how sentence structure plays a crucial role in semantics in translating meaning from the structures of sentences. According to Lyons (1981), semantics is "the study of the meaning of language," including how words, phrases, and sentences mean things. During the same period, another radical notion of sense was promoted: 'embodied semantics', developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980); meaning is inscribed only in our bodily experiences, within our behavioural interactions with the environment. Verhaar (1981) adopted a wider stance, defining semantics as a 'theory of meaning' that mainly deals with meaning as such.

Semantic Role
Thematic roles, or semantic roles, are basic concepts in linguistics. A sentence has different entities and each sentence belongs to a diverse structure; hence understanding the semantic roles of entities in a sentence will determine the function of those entities in a sentence (Fillmore, 1968). Language understanding and communication depend a lot on semantics. It helps us to cope with the meaning of a language on the complexity level, thus helping us with clear and accurate communication (Jackendoff, 1990). Semantics plays two main roles in the interpretation of meaning; it helps understand the structures of language, it helps in communication, and it helps in understanding meaning between different contexts (Dowty, 1989). Deciphering and interpreting words, phrases, and sentences is of paramount importance because if we do not understand, we are not better off. This one explores the language, to bring to the surface those meanings which are necessary for successful communication (Levinson, 2000). Contextual understanding is also essential by showing how the meanings of words change by which words we use, how we intend to use the words, and the conversation context. Interpreting language in its actual usage scenario is critical and this is what the aspect of semantics deals with. (Yule, 1996). Semantics supplies necessary insights for drawing inferences and comprehending overall meanings by analyzing word-to-word semantic relationships and analyzing the structure of a sentence or text. Because of this, you learn about language deeply and as a result, your reading skills and listening skills are improved (Cruse, 2004). Words or phrases in language necessarily have ambiguity, there are multiple possible interpretations. The ambiguities of these two issues are resolved by semantics when the meanings, which are meant to be intended within their appropriate contexts, are interpreted (Saeed, 2003). Understanding semantics is basic in language acquisition. Language learning is effective when words are understood with different interpretations from one context to another and the vocabulary is expanded accordingly (Ellis, 1994; Li & Akram, 2023, 2024). One way that semantics is important to the creation of words and sentences and choosing the right word to capture exactly the thought one wants to express is in the making of meaningful language (Pinker, 1994). Semantic tasks in natural language processing, like machine translation, semantic analysis, question-answering information retrieval, etc. need semantic methods. Semantically, these applications process and understand human language computationally (Goddard, 2011). Semantics is the study

of meaning, the intended meaning beyond just words. How words, phrases, and sentences mean different things in different contexts, tones, and cultural backgrounds; the implied meanings, and the speaker's real intentions (Goddard, 2011).

Aspect	Details
Understanding Semantic Ambiguity	*Semantic ambiguity occurs when the meaning of a word or phrase is unclear due to a lack of contextual clarification, resulting in multiple interpretations. This may arise from linguistic properties such as homonyms, polysemy, or syntactic structures (Hirst, 1988). Language's inherent vagueness and contextual nuances often cause this multiplicity of meanings.*
Example 1	***Phrase****: "It's hot here"* ***Meanings****:* *1. Referring to high temperature.* *2. A request to turn on a fan or open a window.* ***Significance****: Demonstrates how context influences interpretations, potentially leading to misdirection or misunderstanding.*
Example 2	***Sentence****: "I saw a man on a ladder with a hammer."* ***Interpretations****:* *1. The man was on a ladder and had a hammer (possession).* *2. The man was using a hammer while on the ladder (action).* ***Ambiguity Source****: Syntactic structure impacts meaning interpretation.*
Example 3	***Sentence****: "The professor's appointment was shocking."* ***Interpretations****:* *1. The professor's job appointment was shocking.* *2. The professor had a shocking meeting with someone.* ***Ambiguity Source****: Word meaning ("appointment") depends on contextual interpretation.*
Example 4	***Sentence****: "Lisa finally decided on the boat."* ***Interpretations****:* *1. Lisa decided which boat to buy.* *2. Lisa made her decision while on the boat.* ***Ambiguity Source****: Prepositional phrases create multiple interpretations.*
Humor and Semantic Ambiguity	Humour often exploits semantic ambiguity by playing with polysemy to create jokes with literal or figurative interpretations (Attardo, 1994). The cleverness of such jokes lies in the subtlety of language, which some listeners may miss. Language nuances enrich the humour by layering meanings over simple sentences.
Analytical Approach	*Semantic analysis explores grammatical text and deeper meanings by analyzing word relationships in specific contexts (Gardin, 1973). It helps uncover how language nuances and context shape humour and dual meanings.*
Research Focus	*-How do double-entendre jokes work?* *-How do audiences interpret dual meanings?* *-Why are some jokes more successful due to linguistic structure or cognitive schemata?* ***Goal****: To dissect how comedians use ambiguous language to engage audiences and the universal appeal of wordplay.*

Semantic ambiguity is present in words or phrases that yield multiple interpretations concerning each of the three properties of context structure, and linguistic properties of homonyms and polysemy. The phenomenon of this type of humor enriches it by the layers of meaning, and use of slight language nuances. When analyzing semantic ambiguity in jokes it is shown that they use dual meanings and thus give an example of the interdependence between linguistic structure and audience interpretation.

Literature Review

An important role of semantic ambiguity in humour is the delicate construction and delivery of jokes. There is a myriad of studies that show the effect of ambiguous language and how it can be used to produce different interpretations which simultaneously increase the comedic effect (Aarons, 2012; Ritchie, 2004). Having joketellers' capability to manipulate language to create surprising and unsuitable meanings, which are often the pillars of humour (Attardo, 1994). It is interesting to see the application of the theory of semantic ambiguity. These studies lay the groundwork for further study of how ambiguity resolves within verbal humour and how this resolution is part of joke comprehension because of the resolution of ambiguities. As a theoretical lens, wordplay provides essential insights into the role of language manipulation in humour. The mechanisms of puns, malapropisms, and other forms of wordplay that utilize phonetic and semantic properties of language to produce laughter have been researched extensively by researchers such as Dynel (2009). According to the theory, humorous wordplay is not just the result of the unexpectedness of a twist of language, but also the effort of the mind put into reconciling multiple meanings upon encountering this twist of language (McGhee. 1979). Sperber and Wilson (1986) developed the Relevance Theory which posits that human communication consists of the speaker inferring that the audience will infer the speaker's intention, based on optimally relevant utterances. Humour scholars have adopted this framework to explain how audiences come to find humour in what at first glance appears incongruous or irrelevant, but in retrospect, appropriate (Yus, 2003). The theory offers a strong model for predicting how listeners move through the layers of meaning in-jokes, particularly semantics ambiguity-based in-jokes. Linder et al. (1977) have shown that the same semantic ambiguity that can facilitate humour can also detract from communicative success. Raskin (1985) finds that the 'script switch' mechanisms, documented for punchlines elsewhere, operate for joke punchlines, causing a new semantic framework to reinterpret the setup, providing the source for inference, prediction, and evaluation. According to Mann (2008), it is true that the funniest jokes have the greatest semantic ambiguity without going over into incomprehensibility and thus lie on the fine line between confusion and clarity. Although much research has been applied relating to the linguistic features of humour, less attention has been given to studying the interconnection of theories of humour and how their combination can contribute to a fuller understanding of joke reception. Furthermore, these theories are not well explored in terms of cross-cultural applicability, where most studies focus only on Western contexts. In future research, a more intersectional approach to ambiguity and ambiguity humour is proposed, integrating cultural, linguistic, and social characteristics for a more in-depth understanding of the interpretation and enjoyment of ambiguous humour. On this basis, this literature review identifies important theories employed and findings that provide a strong basis for your study on semantic ambiguity in-jokes about Wordplay and Relevance Theories. Meanwhile, English literature is extremely important for expanding our knowledge of human experiences and world issues, including ecological concerns (Akram, 2020; Amjad et al., 2021; Ramzan et al., 2025, 2023), because of its rich history and diversified body of work (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023; Ramzan et al., 2021). Its universality enables it to cut across cultural divides, offering a forum for considering and addressing urgent environmental issues (Ahmad et al., 2022; Abdelrady & Akram, 2022; Ramzan et al., 2020).

Methodology
This study applies qualitative research methodology that requires investigating semantic ambiguity in jokes sheds light on its downside risk and comprises an in-depth study into linguistic structures and their interpretation effects on humor. With this approach, the complexities of language play, including how semantic ambiguity creates humour's complexity and appeal, can be analyzed in nuance. To fully understand how semantic ambiguity works in-jokes, for this study data is meticulously collected from different sources to provide a complete data set. In the digital age, technology has completely changed how people communicate and exchange ideas (Akram et al., 2021; 2022; Ma et al., 2024). In society, social media in particular has grown to be a potent tool for disseminating visual content (Ramzan et al., 2023). Stronger visual communication has been made possible by this technology advancement (Al-Adwan et al., 2022), creating a more engaged and connected atmosphere (Akram & Li, 2024). Given this, dataset of nine curating jokes, sourced from popular media books, movies, stand-up comedy specials, as well as social media channels will constitute the primary data for analysis. Specifically, the jokes selected for this dataset are chosen based on the premise of semantic ambiguity as the vehicle for eliciting humour. The jokes are selected based on a range of contexts and styles, including puns and wordplays, as well as more complex jokes that are formed through syntactic ambiguities or double propagates. The size of this sample permits a wider analysis of how different kinds of semantic ambiguity play out across different types of humour and cultural contexts. This analysis is based on two main theories: Relevance Theory and the General Theory of Verbal Humor. Focusing on how context affects, Relevance Theory aims to explain how an audience will interpret ambiguous language. This uses the General Theory of Verbal Humor to begin to explain how and why certain linguistic structures are defined as humorous and how we can investigate the techniques used to produce and resolve ambiguity in-jokes. The jokes collected are analyzed through a qualitative content analysis. In a continuous attempt to characterize the elements of ambiguity within the world of humour, each joke is broken down to determine both the individual elements of semantic ambiguity and catalogue the type of ambiguity (i.e., lexical, syntactic, or pragmatic). Finally, how the context in which each joke is told affects the interpretation of the meaning of the joke is also analyzed. In particular, different interpretations are followed, or followed divergently, along the path toward the expected humorous ending. The data are then interpreted after the content analysis through the theory lens. This dual theoretical approach enables a multi-layered account of how semantic ambiguity blends with cognitive and linguistic factors to create humour. Interprets involve finding shared patterns and trends of the data in the data set, including common ambiguities mechanisms, which types of jokes work and how in different contexts. All stages of the study process are conducted with ethical issues in mind. Where necessary sources are anonymized, and all data comes from public sources or was used with permission. The goal of the study is to adhere to the intellectual property of the comedians and writers that jokes come from. By offering such a comprehensive methodology for understanding the complex relationship between language and humour, in addition to informing a solid foundation for developing a framework in the realm of linguistics, this methodology strengthens this broader field by identifying the sophisticated cognitive processes at work in interpreting humour through semantic ambiguity. Enriched by a well-chosen dataset rich in variety this qualitative approach provides deep coverage of the project research question.

Data Analysis
This section considers data mainly on semantic ambiguity in jokes, pausing to ask how language nuances contribute to humorous perception based on semantic ambiguity. We study the types of ambiguity (lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic), as well as provide interpretations for a sample of the collected jokes through theories such as Relevance Theory, and the General Theory of Verbal

Humor. Understanding the dynamics of joke formation, as well as cognitive processes involved in humour interpretation, through this analysis, helps understand how one can effectively use ambiguous language to make people laugh.

Joke1. *"Why was the math book sad? Because it had too many problems" (Jentzsch, 2023).*

Description

Wordplay is used to make people laugh in the joke based on the math book, whose punchline of 'it had too many problems' is doubly useful because of the wordplay. Here, the term "problems" operates on two levels: It refers to both the mathematical exercises in the book and the challenges in life, Anthropomorphizing the book and attributing human-like emotions to it is what lends the humour even more meaning as the joke is layered. It poses through the imagery of a math book who is burdened by their 'problems' a whimsical personification, something of such justice any heart burdened by an impossible task will feel. That the joke is both anthropomorphic and linguistic play further amplifies the comedic effect on top of making the joke relatable: it's easy to project that feeling of being overwhelmed to every sense of not knowing what the hell I am doing.

Joke2. *"Waiter, call me a taxi, please. Okay, sir. You are a taxi" (Kolker, 2015).*

Description

The joke is a semantic ambiguity joke, which by cleverly getting words to mean dual things spoils the understanding. Recall a driver receives a simple request to take someone somewhere. But the joke is that the waiter misunderstands this request and thinks that the person is calling him by the nickname 'taxi.' However, its common occurrence occurs due to the dual meaning of the word 'taxi', as both the vehicle for hire, and in the silliest of these confusions, as the name of a particular person. This type of semantic ambiguity enriches the joke, this is classic miscommunication which when it comes to jokes, tickles us because words can mean so many things. It also shows the complexity of language use in everyday verbal interactions, [among] them how humour arises from unexpected turns of meaning.

Joke3. *"Can February march? No, but April may" (Goodman, 1988).*

Description

Semantic ambiguity is used artfully to generate humour with double meanings. The ambiguity of the word, March on the other hand is between the month and the meaning of a type of military parade. At first, this can lead to confusion because readers have to make their way through the various meanings nested inside the same context. There's also the ambiguity of the word May in the joke. In the sense that here, it's not only the month that follows March, it's also the May that we think of the possibility it could happen. The use of such language in a joke is a really good use of language because it draws out the comedic space in English, where the terms are multi-meaning and thus, we get such misunderstandings that are hilarious and make you look at the joke for the first time again. Having an ambiguity like this that enriches the humour is a nice bit because it cues your cognitive skills to decipher what the actual puns are supposed to be.

Joke4. *"What is the longest word in the English language? (Smile) because there is (Mile) between its first and last letter" (Sweet, 1888).*

Description

This joke uses semantic ambiguity in the operation of the word 'the longest', which has a dual meaning and could be misconstrued. Usually "longest" means how long something lasts i.e. time. But in this joke, 'longest' is utilized playfully to mean physical distance. This joke works because of the funny misdirection or you get a different interpretation of the word 'longest' than the one you would have expected. This shows what neatly manipulating language can do in terms of

semantic ambiguity, in that the words play with one another in an unanticipated way to confound the listening audience's understanding of the joke as well as inject wit into it.

Joke5. *"Why did the bicycle fall –over? Because, it was too tired" (Jentzsch, & Kersting, 2023).*

Description

This joke skillfully plays with the phrase "two-tiered," which cleverly introduces semantic ambiguity to create a double entendre. Ordinarily, "tired" might refer to exhaustion or a lack of energy. However, in the context of this joke, "two tired" also humorously describes the state of a bicycle, which, being "two-wheeled," is prone to tipping over if not properly supported—hence, "two tired." This pun invites the audience to juggle two interpretations: the physical condition of being weary and the literal description of a bicycle with two tyres. Such wordplay can lead to a moment of confusion as the listener or reader works to reconcile these meanings, ultimately delivering a humorous revelation. This manipulation of language not only underscores the fun of wordplay in-jokes but also showcases how semantic ambiguity can enrich humour, engaging the audience's cognitive abilities in deciphering the intended pun.

Joke6. *A. "Do you have a mousetrap, please?*
B. Certainly, madam.
A. And could you be quick? I have a bus to catch.
B. I am sorry, madam, we do not make traps that big."

Description

To provide a delightful twist of semantic ambiguity on a lady's misunderstanding about a mousetrap and a rush to catch a bus. Out of the gate, the conversation goes without a hitch, a lady requests a mousetrap to catch a mouse and the seller obliges. But when the lady says she needs the trap urgently because she has to 'catch a bus,' the seller misunderstands this, humorously. You see, he thinks that instead of a way of transportation, she meant a 'trap' big enough to get a bus into it. This misunderstanding is because the word 'catch' doubles for catching someone physically or only boarding on a vehicle. The two meanings of this joke play off each other, combining in hilarity as the result of a semantic ambiguity so that we get a laugh by a confusing misinterpretation.

Joke7. *"Diner: waiter! There is a fly in my soup! Waiter: Please do not shout so loudly- everyone will want one."*

Description

The semantic ambiguity in this student joke plays nicely into this sort of misunderstanding in a restaurant setting. It starts when a customer finds a fly in her soup, and loudly speaks up to the waiter about it. The problem is that her shouting is open to interpretation by the waiter who hears her. The waiter instead enjoys her excitement, assuming her to be telling others at the table about her unique dish, and woefully warns her not to shout too loudly, because if everyone hears, they will insist on flies in their soup as well. The dual meaning of shouting as a complaint as well as an expression of enthusiasm—enables this humorous scenario to derive humour from semantic ambiguity, as well as resulting in amusing exchanges and misunderstandings which are ironic in that the expectations of the characters and audience are subverted.

Joke8. *"Why did the computer go to the doctor? Because it had a virus."*

Description

This is a great semantic ambiguity joke where the word 'virus,' which has dual meanings is set up to end up with a joke. A "virus," traditionally, refers to something like a biological agent that instigates disease in living organisms. In computing, however, it simply means malicious software which affects the working of a computer. The punchline of the joke hinges on this ambiguity: "I

think the computer went to the doctor because it had a virus." This humour and these meanings are generated by the absurdity of a machine needing medical help by behaving as though it were a biological being suffering from a disease. By playfully mixing these contexts the comedy potential of words with more than one meaning is emphasized, and the dynamic way in which semantic ambiguity can contribute to humour is emphasized, as the audience is encouraged to enjoy the use of language outside of the most literal possible meanings.

Joke9. *"Why did the stadium get hot after the game? All of the fans left"*

Description

This joke plays on semantic ambiguity being clever with terms like hot and fans. In a hot space, for example, hot can refer to a high temperature and a condition of high excitement or disappointment. In the same way, "fan" can also mean a mechanical device that cools the air and the enthusiastic followers of a sports team. It's the ambiguity of a line about the stadium being "hot" once the fans have gone. It might be that the temperature has gone up with the absence of air conditioning fans, or it could mean the excitement has gone down or more tension is brewing, due to the human fans missing out on victory after a loss. But the joke relies on these own dual meanings to spin a scenario that can be read in more than one way, each casting the physical scenario into the emotional as the humour becomes slightly more sophisticated.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the complex part semantic ambiguity has in the funniness of jokes in their creation and perception. Researchers through careful inspection have concluded that the heart of the semantic ambiguity issue often has to do with double intenders in which two meanings and puns are cleverly interwoven within humor. These findings highlight the role semantic ambiguity plays to both increase the complexity and enhance the comedic layer of the joke while undermining conventional linguistic interpretations of utterances. In addition, the underlying process in which double meanings and laughter are conjured up in the same joke in the same instant is explained as a dynamic tension between confusion and comprehension in humorous communication. Wordplay is used effectively, combined with knowledge of when and how to deliver a joke for maximum fun, whilst keeping it to a minimum of confusion. Semantic ambiguity is not only an entertaining tool but a powerful trick for engagement and expansion of language and interaction. This research confirms that it is humour, with its inherent complexities and semantic ambiguity, is a reflective and transformative aspect of human communication. The focus of this semantic ambiguity in the jokes study demonstrates the intricate relationship between language and humour and provides important information for many applications. For the benefits of these findings to be extended it is suggested that further research involve a larger collection of jokes from different cultures and languages that would provide insight into the nature of semantic ambiguity across different comedic and linguistic contexts. These insights can be incorporated into education curricula of linguistics, cognitive psychology, and communication studies so that they add to student understanding and mastery of language facets. In addition, comedy writing workshops could be incorporated to train wannabe comedians and writers in the fine art of writing jokes that have a good combination of wordplay to enhance their abilities. These findings are relevant to computational linguistics and could help make natural language processing tools, like those of an AI system, better able to understand and invoke humour. Last but not least, professionals who work in the field of public speaking and communication might also find training in the use of strategic semantic ambiguity to captivate and entertain their audience helpful, for whom the use of such semantic ambiguity might help them give their presentations more impact and better stick in their audience's memory. It is with this goal in mind that these recommendations seek to apply the study for academic, professional, or creative enrichment.

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