TESTING THE LIMITS OF THE PUN: THE CASE OF "SCRIPTED" WORD-RELATED MISUNDERSTANDINGS

RALUCA SINU
Universitatea Transilvania din Braşov

1. Introduction

"It is usually taken for granted that the province of wordplay has universally recognized borders, a stable regime, and a definite number of duly registered citizens; but the story that follows will tell of border incidents, of refugees and mass emigration, and of the homeless" (Delabastita 1993: 58). As pointed out by Delabastita, it is not always evident where the wordplay or pun (terms used interchangeably in this paper) ends and non-pun begins. In this paper we will focus on one such border case represented by (comic) word-related misunderstandings. Starting from the idea that verbal puns are built on and operate with words at the level of their form and meaning, this paper presents cases of misunderstandings of words built by sitcom writers and attempts to determine to what extent they can be treated as (paradigmatic) puns. By misunderstandings of words we refer to misinterpretations caused mainly by speakers who confuse a certain word form with a similar sounding one and, respectively, by speakers who incorrectly guess the meaning of words they are not familiar with. We will try to show that sitcom writers test the limits of puns when they exploit these situations using the mechanisms of punning, which is possible because wordplay covers such a wide range of situations.

The first part of the paper will examine the differences between wordplay and linguistic misunderstandings highlighting their specific features, according to the specialized literature (Delabastita 1993, Attardo 1994, Ritchie 2004). The second part includes a discussion of several examples of word-related misunderstandings extracted from television scripts.

2. Wordplay vs. word misunderstanding

As specified in the title of this section, the meaning of linguistic misunderstanding in our case is the misunderstanding of an uttered word. Moreover, we will be focusing on cases of misunderstandings triggered, from a structural point of view, by similarities between elements of the linguistic code, but which combine with factors related to the speaker (i.e. speaker's use of ambiguous forms) and the interlocutor (i.e. interlocutor's knowledge problems, such as false beliefs, lexical incompetence, gaps in encyclopedic knowledge), according to Bazzanella and Damiano (1999: 821). Linguistic misunderstanding does not cover other types of misunderstandings or ambiguity, such as *speech-act ambiguity*, i.e. "a single sentence may

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carry different types of illocutionary force" (Delabastita 1993: 89), *referential equivocality*, i.e. related to the interpretation of deictic elements, or *referential vagueness* (Delabastita 1993: 89-96).

As far as the concept of wordplay is concerned, Delabastita (1993: 57) describes it as

> "the general name indicating the various textual phenomena (i.e. on the level of performance or *parole*) in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language used (level of competence or *langue*) are exploited in such a way as to establish a communicatively significant, (near)-simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings (signifieds) and more or less similar forms (signifiers)".

The above definition underlines important features of wordplay which the author investigates, such as the fact that it operates both at the level of form and of meaning; that it is contextually-bound, which means all the possible interpretations cannot be triggered outside a context; or that it is intentional, which differentiates it from the misuse of a word, from unintentional ambiguities or unplanned repetitions; or that it must have a communicative function, which is not necessarily to generate humour. In what follows we will discuss each of these features of wordplay with reference to word-related misunderstandings as well.

2.1. Word-related misunderstandings occur when speakers are incapable of correctly interpreting the uttered item because of various factors, such as structural similarities with other words, factors related to the speaker or the interlocutor, or to the relationship between them. The similarities between elements of the linguistic code often lead to confusions and ambiguity, defined as the possibility to interpret the item in at least two different ways. As observed by Attardo (1994: 133), all words are ambiguous when taken out of a context, but this inherent ambiguity of linguistic units is reduced and, eventually, eliminated in the context of a sentence (we would add that this is an essential condition for effective communication). However, puns "preserve two senses of a linguistic unit; therefore, puns exist only as a byproduct of sentential and/or textual disambiguation" (Attardo 1994: 133). Talking about the differences between puns and ambiguity, Attardo (1994: 133-134) mentions the fact that, unlike in the case of ambiguity, "the two senses involved in a pun cannot be random, but have to be 'opposed' (i.e. semantically incompatible in context)", otherwise, according to the same author, the paradigmatic relations of the lexicon would be an immense collection of puns.

For Delabastita, what differentiates wordplay from other textual-rhetorical phenomena (including ambiguity) is the fact that it "confronts different linguistic meanings and not just different interpretations of single linguistic meanings" (1993: 96). The author argues that "the components of a pun should be sufficiently differentiated semantically besides showing sufficient formal relatedness" (Delabastita 1993: 87). In his attempt to delimit the field of wordplay, Delabastita investigates the two dimensions at work: phonetic and semantic. As far as the formal relationships are concerned, his conclusion is that it is hard "to provide a general definition of any minimal degree of formal correspondence still 'permitting' genuine wordplay" (Delabastita 1993: 83), thus separating wordplay from phenomena such as alliteration, rhyme, assonance. Semantic dissimilarity is also a matter of degree: the upper limit of the scale is of no particular interest since the aim is to obtain sufficient semantic difference, however, the lower end is as difficult to determine as in the case of formal similarity (Delabastita 1993: 87).

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2.2. Refining the definition of the pun, Ritchie (2004: 116) highlights the importance of the context. He underlines three central aspects of the pun:

> "(a) there is an implicit comparison between two textual strings which are to some extent phonetically similar […], (b) one of these strings is part or all of the utterance, (c) at least one of the strings is semantically linked to the context in some way".

The author mentions the textual or linguistic context through its phonetic and semantic dimensions, as well as the non-textual/non-linguistic context, made up of "facts about the world, cultural information, salient objects in the surrounding environment, recently mentioned concepts, etc." (Ritchie 2004: 114). The following example illustrates the role played by the two types of context.

(1) *C.C. (looking at her plate): Niles, my **eggs** are all dried up.*
*Niles: The **gene pool** is saved!* (The Nanny, season 2, ep. 23)

C.C.'s remark about the *eggs* (more specifically, chicken eggs used as food) in her plate is intentionally reinterpreted by Niles to refer to the female reproductive cell. Phonetically, the pun is built on the one form carrying two different meanings. The first interpretation is the expected one triggered by the context on the screen, i.e. people having breakfast, while the second interpretation also depends on the non-linguistic context, i.e. background knowledge of the relationship between the two characters involved: C.C. and Niles do not have a good opinion of each other, and their verbal attacks are quite common in the show.

Coming back to the features of puns identified by Ritchie, it is also worth mentioning that the pun can display one or both of the textual strings. In the first case, when only one of the phonetic strings being compared is present, we are dealing with paradigmatic (vertical) puns, which rely heavily on the non-linguistic context. The second case, when both of the similar strings occur, is a syntagmatic (horizontal) pun. Linguistic misunderstandings in which the characters unwillingly misinterpret words are usually built in the absence of the form that generates the second string, in the manner of paradigmatic puns. The presence of the second form would mean that the speakers are aware of the second form/interpretation which would eliminate the misunderstanding:

> "Ambiguity only covers wordplay of the vertical type. It is, moreover, restricted to cases of homonymic wordplay, homographic wordplay (in written communication), or homophonic wordplay (in spoken communication)" (Delabastita 1993: 78).

Attardo (1994: 135) believes that puns must have a context to build on: if ambiguities are cleared by the context, puns rely on the maintenance of the ambiguity until the end of the context, by introducing contextual elements that cancel or complicate the first attempt at disambiguation. The conclusion that Attardo arrives at, shared also by Ritchie (2004: 112-116), is that ambiguity is not a sufficient condition for puns: "simple use of a phonetic-lexical ambiguous word does not constitute a pun; it is not a sufficient condition" (Ritchie 2004: 114). Moreover, Ritchie believes that "phonetic-lexical ambiguity is not a necessary condition for a pun" either, as puns may involve a looser form of phonetic similarity (Ritchie 2004: 115).

2.3. As for intentionality, Attardo is of the opinion that "puns are concocted" (1994: 133). Developing the same idea, Partington (2006: 114) claims that "all puns are deliberate, then, in

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the sense of knowingly constructed" or scripted, the punster identifies features of the context of an utterance to force a second reading. Unlike misunderstandings that occur in real life conversations, those found in screenplays are "scripted", which means they are intended even in the cases where the characters are not aware of playing with words:

> "a pun is a pun insofar as we can be sure that it was meant to be one, whereas a slip of the pen, no matter how apt or funny, can never be considered a genuine pun owing to its involuntary character" (Delabastita 1993: 123).

However, in the case of authored texts, whose intentions should be taken into account, that of the author or of the characters? The answer is both, which leads to the distinctions introduced by Delabastita (1993: 123-127) between "overt punning" (recognized by the characters) and "covert punning" (understood mainly by the audience), or between "character puns", which have been intended both by the character and by the author, and "author-puns", intended by the author and unperceived by the character delivering them.

Given their intentionality, it can be argued that puns perform a certain function in the film dialogue. In the examples discussed below, in addition to the humorous effect created by mistaking "trepidation" for "perspiration", or "consternation" for constipation", to give just two examples, misunderstandings are also used as "markers of character" (Delabastita 1993: 139), which happens in the situations presented in the following section. In fact, the sitcom writers regularly use misunderstandings to underline the "gap" between the two main characters: a British theater producer and the Jewish nanny of his children, who was born and raised in New York.

3. Word-related misunderstandings

In this section we intend to draw attention to comical word misunderstandings whose mechanisms resemble that of puns, namely the characters confuse the word with a similar sounding one, or they assign, without being aware of it, an incorrect meaning to a word simply because they do not know its meaning. Various examples extracted from the American sitcom *The Nanny* will be analysed against the theoretical framework in section 2 in order to highlight a range of linguistic situations which can be assimilated more or less to puns.

It should be mentioned from the very beginning that, if situations like the ones illustrated in the examples below occurred in real life, they would not be treated as puns because of the lack of intention: the characters are not intentionally comical. Lack of intentionality disqualifies these situations from being considered puns. However, comical misunderstandings in screenplays are scripted, they are deliberate and serve a specific function. So, we will assume that this feature cannot be used to separate them from puns.

(2) *Fran: Wow, you must be some big tipper!*
Tony: The owner is in the ***family****.*
Fran: Oh, a cousin?
Tony: No, no relation. (The Nanny, season 3, ep. 13)

Example 2 is an "involuntary" pun that the characters are not aware of, but the audience notices at once. Fran and her date, Tony, are having dinner in an Italian restaurant. Although it is very crowded, the owner, who knows Tony, clears a table for them immediately. It is a

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paradigmatic pun built on two phonetically identical forms: family (a group of related people) and the Family (Mafia). Fran misunderstands Tony's initial explanation, and only realizes the error when her date clarifies it. The non-linguistic context plays a very important role through the clues it provides: Tony is Italian, so is the owner of the restaurant, had they been Greek, for instance, this interpretation would not have been obvious. With the exception of the fact that the two characters have no intention of being funny (but the sitcom writers do), this example is a pun in the classical sense as it meets Ritchie's conditions: (a) the two scripts being compared are phonetically identical; (b) one of them, i.e. family as a group of related people, is part of the utterance; (c) both of the strings are semantically linked to the context: the restaurant owner's behaviour can be seen as that of an obliging cousin/relative, but also as that of a subordinate in a hierarchical organization such as the Italian Mafia.

In example 3 the situation changes: Maxwell is talking about "consternation" referring to work-related worries and stress, whereas Fran understands "constipation". The second form is not present in the dialogue, but it can be guessed from the character's explanations focused on diet and digestion.

(3) *Maxwell (angry with C.C. about a business decision she made): How can you cause me such* ***consternation****!?*
Fran: Well, I think it's the banana bran muffins myself. I mean banana, bran. Your colon's confused. (The Nanny, season 3, ep. 13)

What distinguishes this example from the previous one is that the second script has no semantic link with the first one, although they are built on phonetically related words. Nevertheless, this example also meets Ritchie's condition that at least one of the scripts should be semantically linked to the context.

The same mechanism is at work in example 4, where the word *trepidatious*, i.e. apprehensive, afraid, nervous, from the noun *trepidation*, is mistaken for *perspiration* as signaled by Fran's gestures and reaction.

(4) *Maxwell (to Fran before her blind date): Now, now, Miss Fine, there's no reason to be so* ***trepidatious****.*
Fran (looking at her armpits): I can't help it! I'm nervous! (The Nanny, season 3, ep. 1)

Both scripts, i.e. trepidation and perspiration, are semantically linked to the context, but also to each other: perspiration might be a consequence of trepidation (i.e. a nervous or fearful feeling of uncertain agitation). However, Maxwell's upbringing and class would have prevented him from bringing up the subject of perspiration in the presence of a lady, but it does not prevent Fran.

In examples 3 and 4 the characters are not aware of and do not intend to create a pun, however, the audience in the recording studio notices immediately the intentions of the scriptwriters and the phonetic resemblance between the initially uttered forms and the ones understood by the interlocutor in the scene, and they signal it by laughing.

Another interesting case is the one in example 5, the source is again a confusion between two different words and meanings. Maxwell talks about his confidence around and success with the ladies as a young man, as *Jack the Lad* in British slang refers to a self-assured, carefree and brash young man, popular with men and women, streetwise, not entirely trustworthy, but likeable.

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(5) *Maxwell (to Fran, while they are waiting for her blind date): Actually, if you have to know, I was quite a* ***Jack-the-lad*** *in my day.*
Fran: That's ok, everybody goes through a curiosity phase. (The Nanny, season 3, ep. 1)

Fran bases her interpretation on the meanings of the words *Jack* (i.e. fellow, man) and *lad* (i.e. a young man who does things typical of young men, for example drinking a lot of alcohol and being very sexually active) and believes Maxwell is referring to his sexual "curiosity" about men.

The two phonetically identical strings are "Jack-the-lad" and "Jack + lad". This could be seen as a case of delexicalization, the meaning of an expression is reinterpreted as the sum of the meanings of its elements, which Partington (2006) considers a source of punning. The two strings are semantically related to the context: being popular with the ladies and experimenting with relationships as a young person.

Moving further away from the classical pun, we encounter the situation in example 6 in which Fran misunderstands the word *aperitif*, however it is not clear which word she has in mind. She refuses Maxwell's offer for an *aperitif*, but says she will have a "before dinner drink" which is what an aperitif represents, i.e. a small alcoholic drink taken to stimulate the appetite before a meal.

(6) *Maxwell (to Fran, while they are waiting for her blind date): Would you care for an* ***aperitif****?*
Fran: No, I'll just have a little before dinner drink. (The Nanny, season 3, ep. 1**)**

A look at the pun conditions discussed above reveals the absence of a second string, although it can be assumed that the character thinks of one. It was impossible for us to determine the second phonetically related form, more likely the character had no such form in mind, she just had no idea what the word *aperitif* meant. Both "aperitif" and "a little before dinner drink" are semantically related to the context, but since they mean the same thing we cannot talk about two different strings. In other words, this example is closer to ambiguity than to a pun because it confronts two different interpretations of a single linguistic unit, not two different linguistic meanings (according to Delabastita (1993: 96) quoted above).

An interesting case of misunderstanding occurs in example 7, when Fran is asked to pick up a shopping list from Maxwell's desk and she mistakes it for a page of a Shakespeare manuscript which is also on the desk.

(7) *Fran: "****Hamlet of Denmark****?" Why can't he just write "****a small Danish ham****"? "****Montagues Capulets****?" Well, is that* ***regular or extra strength****? Oh, I guess it's whatever I want. It says here, "****as you like it****".* (The Nanny, season 2, ep. 24)

The entire example can be interpreted as a pun arising from confusion. The phonetic similarity between the two unrelated strings, i.e. Shakespeare manuscript page and a shopping list, is forced by Fran who reinterprets the text of the manuscript to make it fit the shopping list scenario she expected.

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Shakespeare manuscript page	shopping list
Hamlet of Denmark	small Danish ham
Montagues, Capulets	the brand of an unspecified product (regular or extra strength)
As You Like It	shopping instructions

The first string is part of the utterance and it is related to the context of this specific episode: Maxwell has been invited to display the Shakespeare manuscript page owned by his family. However, the other script is also related to the context: the nanny was asked to do some shopping while she was running other errands. The comical effect derives from the difference between the two scripts: the confusion between the titles of Shakespearean plays and the names of their characters and the items on a shopping list can be considered highly unlikely. Again, the character is unaware of the comical situation, but the audience is. This scene also serves to describe Fran's character as ill-read.

4. Discussion and conclusions

All the examples discussed in section 3 have in common the fact that they stem from word-related misunderstandings whose mechanisms resemble, more or less closely, those of puns, if we take into consideration the conditions that puns have to fulfill in order to be classified as such. The scenes mentioned involve the presence of two phonetically related or identical forms, except for example 6 where the second form cannot be reconstructed. As far as the two strings are concerned, in all the examples at least one of them is semantically related to the context, which is the major argument in favour of the examples being considered puns.

In the examples discussed (2-7), the characters are not made aware of the misunderstanding, or at least not immediately, in example 2 Fran realizes eventually that she is out on a date with a member of the Mafia, or in example 7 that she used the wrong shopping list. In all these situations we are dealing with covert puns or near-puns, built by sitcom writers, which makes them intentional, and understood only by the audience. One can notice that sitcom writers apply a recipe for humour, which is understandable when you want to make every scene funny in order to attract the audience and keep viewers in front of the TV.

The main function of the word-related misunderstandings discussed above is to cause laughter, but they are also aimed, as previously mentioned, at highlighting the different cultural and educational backgrounds of the two characters involved in examples 3 to 7: Maxwell and Fran. Thus, in all the examples Fran is characterized in opposition to Maxwell, she is depicted as lacking in education, as not being very well read. The fact that the two characters come from the two sides of the Atlantic is reflected, for instance, by Fran's ignorance of a British slang item, i.e. Jack the Lad, to which she attributes a different meaning. From the point of view of their triggers, although the misunderstandings are caused by the structural similarity between two forms, e.g. consternation vs. constipation, trepidatious vs. perspiration, the main trigger is the interlocutor, because she displays lexical incompetence, like in the case of "aperitif" and "Jack-the-Lad", or gaps in encyclopedic knowledge, mistaking a page of a Shakespeare manuscript for a shopping list.

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SURSE OF EXAMPLES

The Nanny, American television sitcom produced by CBS from 1993 to 1999. (The samples were transcribed from season 2 (episodes 23 and 24) and season 3 (episodes 1 and 13) broadcast on Romanian television.)

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(*Abstract*)

Misunderstanding and/or misusing words are often a source of humour, resorted to particularly in comedies. One of the situations in which a word may be misinterpreted is when it is mistaken for a similar-sounding one, but with a completely different meaning. The aim of this paper is to investigate whether such situations arising in audiovisual comedies can be treated as puns, especially considering Schröter's (2005: 212) opinion that "if they [misunderstandings] have ultimately been intended by authors or scriptwriters, they can, if they fulfill the other requirements for a pun, function as such". We will begin by presenting some of the feature of puns, as identified in the specialized literature (Delabastita 1993, Attardo 1994, Ritchie 2004). Then we will analyse several comic misinterpretations of words extracted from television scripts in order to determine to what extent they fit into the theoretical framework previously discussed, allowing them to be classified as puns.

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