

LEXICAL AMBIGUITY AND HUMOR IN DIGITAL DISCOURSE: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF DAD JOKES ON YOUTUBE

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Abstract

Dad jokes are short-simple forms of humor that rely heavily on puns and lexical ambiguity to create incongruity and surprise. With the rise of digital platforms such as YouTube, dad jokes have become increasingly popular, especially in unscripted and dialogic video content. This study investigates lexical ambiguity as a key linguistic and pragmatic strategy in dad jokes featured on the *YeahMad* YouTube channel. Using a descriptive qualitative method, 109 dad jokes were analyzed, with 29 jokes (26.6%) identified as containing lexical ambiguity, including homophones, homonyms, and puns. Data were transcribed and examined through content and discourse analysis, informed by Incongruity Theory and the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). The findings show that lexical ambiguity functions not only as a structural linguistic feature but also as an effective strategy for humor in digital interaction. However, humor success depends on audience linguistic competence, shared cultural knowledge, and contextual appropriateness, as some jokes fail due to vagueness or sensitivity. This study contributes to humor linguistics and digital pragmatics by highlighting the role of audience-context alignment in online humor.

Keywords: Dad Jokes, Lexical Ambiguity, Incongruity, Puns, Discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

Dad jokes, which are known for being easy and full of puns, are immensely popular on sites like YouTube. They were first intended to assist fathers and children get closer, but now they are popular worldwide with people of various ages. One distinct type of humor is purposeful discomfort and wordplay, primarily through lexical ambiguity, when a word or phrase can mean more than one thing. What makes things hilarious is when people hear something that makes them think differently and laugh. This is called lexical ambiguity. This is why dad jokes are an excellent topic for language study, especially when talking to each other online.

Dad jokes are amusing because they use wordplay and awkwardness on purpose. They generally use phonological and semantic ambiguity to make people

laugh. For instance, "A Mexican magician said he could disappear by counting to three" is a joke. The phrase "*Uno, Dos...*he disappeared without a *Tres*" depends on both the fact that the words are ambiguous and the fact that the audience knows some basic Spanish. This incident shows how language, culture, and the internet are becoming more and more connected.

Digital comedy is getting increasingly popular, but little research has been done on the words used in dad jokes, specifically how they exploit lexical ambiguity to make people laugh. This study intends to learn more about how lexical ambiguity works in dad jokes on YouTube and when it is most likely to make people laugh. We do not know how simple language patterns can entertain individuals worldwide because not enough studies have looked into this universal cultural and linguistic tendency. This study shows that lexical ambiguity is a big reason why dad jokes are funny, but it only works in certain situations and with certain types of language. Research on language and humor has demonstrated that lexical ambiguity is key to making jokes (Attardo, 2024). In (Gallor Guarín, 2020) book, he writes about how puns and confusing language are often used to make things seem out of place. This is a fundamental aspect of humor theory. (Siew et al., 2022) claim that humor often arises from the audience's ability to find new meanings in a remark and give it a new meaning. More and more, people who make material for the internet are taking advantage of the lack of clarity in short-form media. However, most of the research has centered on scripted humor, such as sitcoms or stand-up comedy (Korkut et al., 2022). Many people watch humorous videos on YouTube, but not much research has been done on how language can be unclear and hilarious simultaneously (Dumitrica, 2022).

This study is noteworthy because it adds to humor linguistics by examining how lexical ambiguity operates in everyday online interactions. This study uses dad jokes from the YouTube channel YeahMad to learn more about how language, humor, and digital communication function together (Attardo, 2024; Ilbury, 2022; Ruch et al., 1993).

This study uses descriptive qualitative methods to look at several YeahMad videos with dad jokes to add to what is already known. They look at the jokes more closely if they are hard to understand, like puns, and they put them into groups based on their type. The study looks at things like homophones and puns, communication roles like making someone laugh or making fun of them, and cultural references to see how these affect how well ambiguity makes people laugh. This method shows how lexical ambiguity impacts both the process of producing jokes and the practical side of having fun online.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lexical Ambiguity in Humor

Lexical ambiguity comes when a word or phrase can signify more than one thing. This is common with homonyms or polysemes (Hogeweg & Vicente, 2020; Siew et al., 2022). People often employ this kind of ambiguity in jokes, especially language jokes, to show the gap between what is expected and what is truly meant (Attardo, 2024). According to the incongruity theory, humor emerges when an unexpected solution makes a difference between what people think and what is genuine (Israel et al., 2022). The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) explains in further detail how six different types of knowledge are used to make fun. Language and script opposition are the most essential (Ruch et al., 1993). Lexical ambiguity is a common sort of script resistance regarding dad jokes.

Humor and Incongruity Theory

Humor has long been studied in philosophy and psychology, with Freud (1905) viewing jokes as expressions of repressed impulses. In modern linguistics, humor studies advanced through semantic and pragmatic frameworks. (Kotthoff, 2007) noted that jokes typically involve semantic script conflict, while (Bitsch et al., 2021) emphasized the moment of surprise followed by resolution. (Ruch et al., 1993) classified humor within GTVH, showing how ambiguity contributes to script opposition. (Israel et al., 2022) highlighted that incongruity is most effective when it invites reinterpretation, particularly in wordplay. These theories underline how lexical ambiguity creates cognitive shifts that produce humor.

Wordplay, Ambiguity, and Joke Structure

Puns exemplify how phonological or semantic ambiguity generates humor by prompting dual readings (Siew et al., 2022). (Parkinson, 2023) stressed that the success of puns depends on their clarity and cultural accessibility. (Lion & Dhaenens, 2023) analyzed jokes as performance acts, relying on timing, ambiguity, and shared context. (Leicht, 2023) demonstrated how puns are used in political discourse to entertain and persuade, confirming ambiguity's persuasive function. These insights are directly relevant to dad jokes, which, while simple on the surface, exhibit complex lexical play. (Kotthoff, 2007) noted that repetition and predictable structures in dad jokes enhance humor through anticipation. (Israel et al., 2022; Kotthoff, 2007; Shin et al., 2020) recognized that “bad” jokes often showcase high linguistic creativity, with ambiguity at their core.

Lexical Ambiguity in Digital Humor

With the rise of digital platforms, humor has evolved into a multimodal and participatory form of communication. (Lehman et al., 2016) argued that digital humor including memes, tweets, and short videos is shaped by brevity, intertextuality, and

audience interaction. On YouTube, humor is scripted, visual, and often designed for immediate impact. (Tsakona & Chovanec, 2020) observed that digital humor increasingly relies on textual compression and visual cues, while (Dynel, 2021) described online humor as a hybrid of written and spoken discourse. (Ilbury, 2022) showed that linguistic ambiguity in social media fosters identity construction and playful engagement. (Dynel, 2021; Papapicco & Mininni, 2020) added that ambiguity in digital discourse frequently serves ironic or humorous ends. (Herbenick et al., 2023) emphasized semantic distortion in internet humor, while (Lion & Dhaenens, 2023) argued that online humor is both context-sensitive and multimodal.

These studies underscore that lexical ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon and a dynamic tool in digital humor. However, systematic linguistic analysis of how such ambiguity functions in short-form video humor, especially dad jokes on YouTube, remains limited.

Key Findings and Gaps in the Literature

Research consistently confirms that lexical ambiguity, especially in puns and wordplay is a core mechanism in humor creation. Incongruity-based theories such as GTVH provide robust frameworks for analyzing humor, particularly where ambiguity is used to subvert audience expectations. Despite being dismissed as simplistic, Dad jokes demonstrate linguistic sophistication through the strategic use of ambiguous language. Additionally, digital platforms like YouTube offer a distinct environment for humor short, scripted, and often multimodal, yet have received little attention in lexicosemantic research.

While lexical ambiguity has been studied in traditional joke formats, there is a lack of focus on dad jokes in user-generated video content. Similarly, although digital humor has been explored across formats like memes and tweets, there is limited linguistic research on how ambiguity functions in YouTube dad jokes, particularly using formal semantic and pragmatic frameworks.

To address these gaps, this study investigates how lexical ambiguity creates humor in YeahMad YouTube dad jokes. It categorizes the types of ambiguity used (homophones, homonyms, puns), examines their communicative functions (e.g., amusement, critique), and analyzes the role of context and audience knowledge in joke interpretation. This study contributes to humor linguistics and the emerging field of digital pragmatics, offering a unique lens on how ambiguity operates in real-time, participatory, and multimedia environments.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how lexical ambiguity functions in humorous digital discourse, specifically within YouTube

dad jokes. The data source for this research comprised humorous verbal content from the YeahMad YouTube channel, which features spontaneous joke exchanges using pun-based humor. A total of 20 videos were purposively selected as rich data sources based on criteria such as relevance to the research objective, clarity of audio-visual presentation, and the presence of lexical ambiguity (e.g., puns, homophones, homonyms).

The selection was not intended for statistical generalization but to ensure depth of understanding and adequate representation of the phenomenon under investigation. This aligns with the goals of qualitative research, which prioritize contextual insight and interpretive depth over breadth or frequency.

The main research instrument was a researcher-designed coding sheet to systematically identify and categorize types of lexical ambiguity (e.g., homonymy, polysemy, syntactic ambiguity) and their humorous effects. This tool enabled structured documentation of each joke's linguistic form, type of ambiguity, and communicative function (e.g., amusement, teasing, critique).

To support contextual interpretation, the researcher also employed field notes to record non-verbal and situational cues such as delivery timing, speaker intonation, interactional dynamics, and audience reactions (if available in the video). These instruments ensured consistency in data interpretation and supported a holistic analysis of humor as a multimodal, context-bound discourse phenomenon.

IV. FINDING

Lexical Ambiguity as a Humor Mechanism

This study analyzed 109 jokes from the YeahMad YouTube channel to explore how lexical ambiguity generates humor. Of these, 29 jokes (26.6%) featured lexical ambiguity, confirming its role as a dominant mechanism in humorous communication. These ambiguous jokes employed homophones, homonyms, and blended words to elicit amusement, teasing, or critique. The data revealed that ambiguity functions both structurally through phonological and semantic manipulation and pragmatically by inviting reinterpretation based on audience knowledge.

The use of homophones was particularly common, as illustrated in the joke:

- (1) "A Mexican magician said he can disappear by counting to three. Uno, Dos... he disappeared without a *Tres*."

Here, the pun hinges on the homophone "Tres" (Spanish for "three") and "trace," allowing the joke to deliver a punchline through incongruous reinterpretation. Homonyms also emerged as a key device. In:

- (2) "So my sister stole my cow. I said it's all good. It must have been a case of *mistaken* identity."

the word “misteaken” fuses “mistaken” and “steak,” producing layered meaning. This blend achieves humor via dual interpretation, fulfilling the incongruity-resolution model.

Blended forms such as:

(3) “Did you know Bruce Lee had a vegan brother? His name is Brocc Lee.” demonstrate linguistic creativity through semantic blending, combining “broccoli” and “Bruce Lee” for comic effect. This supports findings by (Gallor Guarín, 2020) that blended forms amplify ambiguity and cognitive engagement.

Functions and Communicative Intent of Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity was not only a structural device but also served clear communicative functions. Ambiguity here served three primary purposes:

Amusement: e.g., (4) “What’s Hitler’s favorite part of fixing a Russian computer? Unin-Stallin.” blends “uninstalling” and “Stalin” to create a harmless pun.

Teasing: e.g., (5) “Where do horses live? In the *Neiggghhborrhoods*.” mocks pronunciation for playful ridicule.

Critique: e.g., (6) “What disease is rampant in the Catholic Church? Parkinson’s.” although intended as satire, may offend, highlighting the risk of ethical ambiguity (Demir, 2020).

These functions affirm lexical ambiguity as a pragmatic strategy shaping tone and reception based on intent and social sensitivity.

Importance of Cultural and Contextual Knowledge

The audience’s understanding proved crucial. Jokes like:

(7) “I gave my daughter an Afghan purse and she said, thanks for the Ba gh-Dad.”

(8) “I burnt my Hawaiian pizza the other day, I should have used *aloha temperature*.”

requires familiarity with “Baghdad” and the pun on “Dad” as well as “Hawaiian pizza” and “aloha temperature”.

Failures, Contradictions, and Ethical Limits

While most jokes were effective, some failed due to cultural or ethical misalignment. For instance:

(6) “What disease is rampant in the Catholic Church? Parkin-son’s.” was frequently viewed as offensive rather than funny. This supports conclusion that humor must account for cultural values and audience ethics, especially in online settings where visual and prosodic cues are absent.

Interconnection of Linguistic Creativity, Audience, and Intent

The three thematic pillars linguistic creativity, audience interpretation, and communicative intent are interdependent. Linguistic creativity enables multiple interpretations; audience understanding filters these possibilities; and intent guides how ambiguity is framed (e.g., as playful or critical). For example, the joke:

(9) “Knock knock! Who’s there? Cargo. Cargo who? No, Sath, owls go hoo, car goes beep beep.”

requires shared knowledge of knock-knock structures and onomatopoeia. This humor is successful only when linguistic and cultural expectations align.

Impact of External Factors

Cultural literacy, linguistic proficiency, and sociolinguistic norms greatly influenced joke reception. Jokes referencing *Juan, Tres, Adolphin, or Unin-Stallin* required intertextual familiarity.

These findings enhance our understanding of humor linguistics and digital discourse. They show how ambiguity acts as both a creative and strategic device in shaping online comedic narratives useful for discourse analysts, educators, and humorists alike.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that lexical ambiguity plays a central role in generating humor, as over a quarter of the analyzed jokes from the *YeahMad* YouTube channel relied on this mechanism. The frequent use of homophones, homonyms, and blended forms confirms that ambiguity is not incidental but a deliberate linguistic strategy in online humor. This supports Attardo’s (2024) General Theory of Verbal Humor, which posits that humor emerges from incongruity resolved through reinterpretation. By manipulating phonological and semantic similarity, the jokes prompt audiences to momentarily misinterpret meaning before recognizing an alternative, humorous reading, thereby reinforcing ambiguity as a core structural feature of comedic discourse.

Among the types of lexical ambiguity, homophones were the most salient, as they allowed jokes to exploit sound similarity while maintaining semantic contrast. Examples such as the “Uno, Dos... Tres/trace” joke illustrate how phonological ambiguity facilitates rapid incongruity and resolution, enhancing comedic impact. This finding aligns with Siew et al. (2022), who argue that phonological overlap increases cognitive accessibility and humor appreciation. Homonyms and blended forms similarly contributed to humor by enabling layered meanings within a single lexical item, confirming Israel et al.’s (2022) claim that successful humor often depends on the audience’s ability to navigate multiple semantic frames simultaneously.

Beyond structural manipulation, the study shows that lexical ambiguity fulfills distinct communicative functions, including amusement, teasing, and critique. In line with Meyer's (2000) humor function framework, ambiguity was used to create lighthearted entertainment, playful mockery, and social commentary. However, jokes intended as critique occasionally crossed ethical boundaries, as seen in humor targeting sensitive religious or political themes. This supports Demir's (2020) and Humă's (2023) arguments that ambiguous humor carries pragmatic risks, as interpretation depends heavily on audience values and sociocultural norms. Thus, ambiguity functions not only as a humorous device but also as a pragmatic tool shaping interpersonal stance and social meaning.

The findings further emphasize the crucial role of cultural and contextual knowledge in humor comprehension. Jokes relying on intertextual references, such as geopolitical names or culturally specific foods, were only effective when audiences shared the necessary background knowledge. This corroborates Kamiloğlu et al. (2022) and Lion and Dhaenens (2023), who highlight that humor decoding requires alignment between linguistic cues and cultural schemas. In digital environments, where audiences are diverse and cues such as intonation and facial expression are absent, mismatches in cultural literacy can lead to misunderstanding or offense rather than amusement.

Finally, the study reveals that linguistic creativity, audience interpretation, and communicative intent are deeply interconnected. Lexical ambiguity enables multiple interpretations, but humor succeeds only when audience expectations and ethical sensibilities align with the speaker's intent. Failures in this alignment resulted in jokes being perceived as inappropriate or offensive, reinforcing Parkinson's (2023) view that ethical considerations are integral to humor production. By proposing an audience–context alignment model, this study extends earlier humor research (Ruch et al., 1993) and contributes to contemporary discussions on digital humor (Dyner, 2021). Overall, the findings underscore lexical ambiguity as a strategic, context-dependent resource in online humor, with implications for linguistics, discourse analysis, and media studies.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study found that lexical ambiguity using homophones, homonyms, and blended words plays a central role in generating humor in YeahMad YouTube dad jokes. Out of 109 jokes analyzed, 29 employed lexical ambiguity as the primary comedic device to amuse, tease, or critique. The success of these jokes depended on shared cultural and linguistic knowledge between the speaker and the audience, including the audience's cultural knowledge and language proficiency. Based on the analysis, the hypothesis is accepted that lexical ambiguity contributes significantly to creating humor in digital dad jokes. This research offers a novel contribution to humor

linguistics by focusing on spontaneous, user-generated verbal humor in digital contexts. It introduces the concept of audience-context alignment as a critical factor in the success of ambiguity-based humor, which has not been emphasized in previous studies.

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