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PUNS IN ONE-LINER JOKES, BASED ON BIBLICAL STORIES

Abstract

The present research deals with the study of the ways wordplay and humour are employed in one-liner jokes, using the example of humorous one-liners based on biblical stories. The data of the research are one-liner jokes containing puns, collected from different online sources.

One of the main issues regarding the research lies in the difficulty of defining the methodology of the analysis of one-liner jokes. Another research question focuses on identifying specific features and classification of such jokes and their structural patterns. As is known, linguistic ambiguity forms a crucial element regarding the substantial proportion of jokes which also makes up the specific humorous effect. In order to build ambiguity, the fragment of the text must be capable of yielding two possible semantic interpretations. However, in a typical context-heavy environment achieving ambiguity is not a simple task. One-liner jokes, created on the basis of biblical stories are analysed from different perspectives, specifically from lexical, semantic and structural points of view.

Keywords: one-liners, semantic structures, biblical jokes

1. Introduction

The issue of identifying the essence of humour was frequently posed in earlier writings and numerous definitions were presented by different scholars (Martin, 2007; Clarke, 2008; Lefcourt, 2001; Oring, 2003).

The present research is a study of the ways wordplay and humour are employed in one-liner jokes, using the example of humorous one-liners based on biblical stories. The data of the research are one-liner jokes containing puns, collected from different online sources.

As is known, many jokes rely on the “playing” with language. The adequate interpretation of humour, in many cases, depends on decoding the real meaning hiding behind contextual actualization of words or phrases that sound the same (or almost the same) but have different meanings.

2. Methodology

Following theoretical and methodological bases of research, we use the descriptive, qualitative and analytical methods of research. This implies that we only describe the facts on the existed data and make analysis of one-liner jokes based on biblical stories. The data is taken from online sources. There are 12 items of data (one –line jokes) identified in this research. In order to obtain reliable results which create humour, we discuss the jokes under three categories, according to the classification of humor theories – incongruity, superiority and relief theories. In terms of classification of the research data it is clear that in most of the cases ambiguity creates pun and humour is formed based on incongruity theory (6 examples), superiority theory (3), and relief theory (3).

Thus the results of the study show that 50 % of the data are created on the basis of incongruity theory, 25% - superiority, 25% - relief. The figure shows that the incongruity theory plays an essential role in humour creation.

3. Pun as the Main Source of Humour Creation

Some scholars use the term *wordplay* for different kinds of play with the language, such as parody, pun, anagram, spoonerism, wellerism, transformed allusion, etc. (Low, 2011). However, according to Schröter (2005) wordplay forms no more than a prominent subcategory of the language-play, which he labels as a general term. Crystal (1998) gives the following definition of the language-play: "We play with language when we manipulate it as a source of enjoyment, either for ourselves or for the benefit of others. We mean 'manipulate' literally: we take some linguistic feature – such as a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters – and make it do things it does not normally do. We are, in effect, bending and breaking the rules of the language. And if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun" (p.1). Furthermore, wordplay is often used interchangeably with the term pun. Delabastita (1993), for example, literally says: "I will consider pun synonymous with "instance of wordplay" (p.56). Yet, not all authors agree on the full synonymy of the two terms. In this article pun *is* considered as one of the types and the subcategory of the wordplay and the latter is looked at as an umbrella term including many other subtypes of wordplay, besides the pun,

such as spoonerism, malapropism, wellerism, onomatopoeia, palindrome and other linguistic units. This approach makes the pun one of the forms of wordplay that suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect.

3.1. Ambiguity and Theories of Humor

The basic principle of pun creation is ambiguity (Attardo, 1993), which arises when expressions have different meanings. However, Attardo (1994) and Ritchie (2004) later stated that ambiguity in itself does not suffice as a condition for punning. Attardo (1994), for instance, proposes two other elements to transform ambiguity into a pun. Firstly, the meanings of the two punning expressions should be opposed. Secondly, the puns should be “authored”, meaning someone has to point out the ambiguity.

Theories of humour (in the wider sense) make attempts to solve the issue regarding the mechanism of humour. They may be classified into three main types: Relief theory, Incongruity theory and Superiority theory

More than 100 "theories" of humour have been identified (Schmidt & Williams, 1971). These notions include general theories about humour or laughter, statements of the circumstances in which humour may occur, and characterisations, or descriptions. One very influential review is that of Patricia Keith-Spiegel (1972), who created a typology of eight categories of humour theories: (biological, superiority, incongruity, surprise, ambivalence, release, configuration, and psychoanalytic theories). Finally, it is correctly proposed by Keith-Spiegel (1972) that these myriad theories can be sorted further into just three neatly identifiable groups: **incongruity**, **superiority** and **relief theories**.

3.2. The Incongruity Theory in One-liner Jokes

In Martin's text (1998), contrary to Psychoanalytic theory, which emphasizes emotion and motivation, incongruity theories focus on the cognitive elements of humour. According to the approach, “humour involves the bringing together of two normally disparate ideas, concepts, or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner.” (Martin, 1998: 20). In other words, that which is originally perceived in one (often serious) sense is suddenly viewed from a totally different

perspective, and the original expectation bursts like a bubble, resulting in a pleasurable experience accompanied by laughter. Similarly, Schopenhauer stated that “the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity.... All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox.” (quoted by Piddington, 1963:172).

Koestler, (1964) further elaborated the incongruity approach to humour by linking up the relationship of humour and creativity as follows: “The term “bisociation” refers to the juxtaposition of two normally incongruous frames of reference, or the discovery of various similarities or analogies implicit in concepts normally considered remote from each other. According to Koestler, the process of bisociation occurs in scientific discoveries and artistic creativity as well as humour. Humour is thus seen as part of the creative activity of humans”(p. 25-26).

a) - Did Eve ever have a date with Adam?

- **No, just an apple.**

In the given example a polysemous word **date** creates the pun.

Date – 1. an appointment to meet at a specified time; *especially*: a social engagement between two persons that often has a romantic character

2. the oblong edible fruit of a palm

After reading/listening to the first part of a joke - **Did Eve ever have a date with Adam**, in the recipient’s mind comes a situation/image of a date (romantic meeting), but in the last part of the joke - **No, just an apple**, the recipient’s expectation is broken and pun is created. A joke becomes funny when we predict one outcome and another happens. In the answer line of this joke it becomes clear that the word “**date**” was intentionally used with another meaning (fruit). We find a simple lexical ambiguity, where in the utterance “**date**” may refer to either fruit or a romantic engagement between two people.

In this joke, we experience two sets of incompatible thoughts and emotions suddenly have to change, that represents the theory of incongruity.

b) - Who was the fastest runner in the bible?

- **Adam, because he started first in the human race.**

Race - 1. A group of people united or classified together on the basis of common history, nationality; a genealogical line.

- 2. A competition between runners, horses, vehicles, etc. to see which is the fastest in covering the set course.

The word “**race**” creates the humorous effect in the joke with its meanings. In this example, the noun “**race**” is used as a pun because in the answer it stands for “**ethnicity**”, whereas in the question it stands for the “**competition**”. Thus, a homonym is used of which only one meaning is appropriate to the joke's context so that the other meaning serves to express incongruity.

- c) – **Why didn’t Cain bring God an acceptable offering?**

- **Because he wasn’t Abel!**

The ambiguity is created on the basis of homophones. The similar sounds of the phrases “**Wasn’t Abel**” and “**was not able**”. These are the key points of forming the pun and creating a humorous effect.

Specifically the humour in this example derives from punning and therefore involves a type of linguistic ambiguity that consists of running words together in spoken language. It results from the similarity of the pronunciation of two words, which is the basis for the humorous comment in the end. Whereas “**wasn’t Abel**” stands for the name of the person, the stream of sounds also gives us another interpretation “**was not able**” that becomes clear in the answer.

The solution of the one-liner joke generally elicits laughter through its incongruity. The unexpected and surprising end forces the recipients to figure out the way in which it really makes sense.

- d) - **How did Moses make his tea?**

- **“Hebrewed” it.**

The sound of “**Hebrewed**” is just like “**He brewed**”, while the question is that about making tea, the key point of forming homonymous pun is in the answer of this joke.

The joke (d) can be analysed in the same way as the example (c).

e) - Who is the shortest man in the Bible?

- Nehemiah

Pun is created on the basis of homophone of the word “**Nehemiah**” that sounds as “**Knee-high Miah**”. Thus, here is the example of homophonous play on words.

The analysis of the previous one-liner joke follows the same parsing patterns as in the examples of (c) and (d).

f) – Why didn’t Noah go fishing?

- He only had two worms.

In the given one-liner biblical joke it is essential that one must have the background knowledge from the Bible, that Noah took with him pairs of every kind of animal (a male and a female of each) in the ark. Decoding happens only in the answer line of the joke on the basis of the mentioned background information of the Bible story.

The solution of the one-liner joke generally elicits laughter through its incongruity in an answer and in a question. The unexpected answer makes the situation funny.

3.3 The Superiority Theory in One-liner Jokes

Superiority or disparagement theories are among the oldest theories of humour, dating back to Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle concluded that “laughter arises primarily in response to weakness and ugliness”. The superiority approach, suggested by a famous statement of Thomas Hobbes that, the passion of laughter is nothing else but some sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formality (quoted by Piddington, 1963:160). Thus, “humour is thought to result from a sense of superiority derived from the disparagement of another person or of one’s own past blunders or foolishness.” (Martin,2007:44).

Martin (1998), in his paper “*Approaches to the sense of humor: A historical review*” suggested a possible implication of this theory,”... sense of humour is positively related to general traits of aggression, hostility, or dominance. If humour always involves some aggressive element, then those

who enjoy and express humour most, regardless of the content or type of humour involved, would be expected to be most aggressive” (p.30).

Why do people tend to laugh when someone slips over a banana skin? According to the superiority theory of humour, we laugh because these types of situations make us feel superior to other people. The person who tripped over the banana skin has been made to look silly and that makes us feel good. In fact, it makes us feel so good that we laugh (Morreall, 1989: 248).

The superiority theory also explains why we laugh at certain types of jokes. Many jokes make us feel superior to other people. In these types of jokes, people appear stupid because they have misunderstood an obvious situation, made a stupid mistake, been the hapless victim of unfortunate circumstance or have been made to look stupid by someone else. According to the theory, these jokes cause us to laugh because they make us feel superior to other people (Morreall, 1989: 243-265).

g) - How do we know Adam was a Baptist?

- **Only a Baptist could stand next to a naked woman and be tempted by a piece of fruit.**

In the given example, humorous effect is created on the basis of polysemy of the word “**Baptist**”.

Baptist – 1. a member of a Protestant Christian denomination advocating baptism only of adult believers by total immersion.

2. a person who baptizes someone.

The question (the first part) of a joke is ambiguous. Ambiguity is created due to the polysemy of the word “**Baptist**”. This joke can be parsed in two different ways, it depends how we understand the meaning of the word “**Baptist**”. On the one hand superiority theory explains the situation and on the other hand the theory of incongruity matters. To understand a joke a recipient should have some cultural knowledge.

According to the theory of superiority the meaning of the word “**Baptist**” is described as a humiliated one, in the position of disparagement. The passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from a sudden conception of this unfavorable situation.

On the other hand the meaning of the word “**Baptist**” creates vagueness and has a punning effect as is known from the above mentioned, that a joke becomes funny when we predict one outcome and another happens so that the other meaning serves to express incongruity.

h) -Why did God create man before woman?

- **Because He didn't want any advice on how to do it.**

In the previous joke content is important. Humorous effect is created due to the stereotyped situation that women every time bother men with recommendations and some advice. Thus, the above mentioned serves to express superiority as men are superior to women in the specific given situation.

i) - What kind of man was Boaz before he got married?

- **Ruth-less.**

In the given example of a one-liner joke, pun is created on the basis of the word “**Ruth-less**”. The answer can be deciphered into two different ways. 1) **Ruth-less** - without Ruth; without a wife; 2) **Ruthless** – adj. feeling or showing no mercy; hardhearted.

According to the content of the above mentioned example, Boaz, as a married man is superior more than he was before - Ruth-less (without Ruth, his wife).

3.4 Relief Theory in One-liner Jokes

This is primarily a psychological theory of humour, most famously associated with Freud. “According to Freud, humour (as distinct from jokes) is a sort of *defence mechanism* that allows one to face a difficult situation without becoming overwhelmed by unpleasant emotion” (Martin,1998:18-19). The main claim of Freud’s Psychoanalytic Theory is that “humour” is considered as a kind of defence mechanism for us to deal with or overcome our negative, unpleasant emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger. The *pleasure* of humour (in this narrow sense) arises from the release of energy that would have been associated with this painful emotion but has now become redundant.” (Martin, 1998:35).

Freud proposed that there are *three* different types or categories of mirthful experience: **jokes** (German *Witz*, sometimes inaccurately translated as “wit”), the **comic**, and **humour**. (Martin, 1998:18). From Freud’s interpretation, the third category of mirthful experience, that is, the term

“humour”, “occurs in situations in which persons would normally experience *negative emotions* such as fear, sadness, or anger, but the perception of amusing or incongruous elements in the situation provides them with an altered perspective on the situation and allows them to avoid experiencing this negative affect (Martin, 1998:18).

Relief theory maintains that laughter is a homeostatic mechanism by which psychological tension is reduced. Humour may thus serve, for example, to facilitate the relief of tension caused by one's fears. Laughter and mirth, according to relief theory, result from this release of nervous energy. The general principle here is that there can be no laughter without some prior arousal of tension (Meyer, 2000: 310–331).

(j) Moses leads his people to cross the Red sea and says: “Doesn’t seem too deep”.

In the previous example, humour is created on the basis of the relief theory as after seeing the sea Moses says “Doesn’t seem too deep” to release himself for tension and fear .

(k) Adam looked at Eve and said: “You are naked”.

Humour is created on the basis of the relief theory. Humour is considered here as a kind of defense mechanism to overcome unpleasant emotion. It can easily be seen in Adam’s words “**You are naked**”.

(l) - What do a Christmas tree and a priest have in common?

- Their balls are just for decoration.

According to the work of Sigmund Freud, “*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*”, his so called relief theory works for dirty jokes. In the previous example pun is created on the basis of the polysemous word “**ball**”.

- Ball** - 1. Round object, used as a toy by children or various sports such as tennis or football.
2. A man's testicles where sperm is produced.

4. Conclusion

According to this research ambiguity is a convention of punning, but as Attardo points out, not every ambiguous word constitutes a pun (1994, 133). The pun has to have a context to build upon, and be opposed to (Attardo, 1994).

The theories of humour - incongruity, superiority and relief theories provide important insights, but they all fail to provide a complete and convincing answer to what makes things funny.

It should also be mentioned that the above discussed classification of one line jokes according to the theories of humour is not strictly defined, as in some cases one and the same example represents the situation, where humour can be analysed according to different theories.

Following the analysis of the above mentioned one-liner joke examples, it is singled out that the incongruity theory is the main instrument for humour creation, as its characteristic feature is the bringing together of two normally disparate ideas, concepts, or situations in a surprising or unexpected manner.” (Martin, 1998).

Humor is interesting as it reveals a lot about culture, social structures, trends, social attitudes, how language works and so on. That’s why it can be defined as a culture specific mechanism.

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Meri Giorgadze obtained her Ph.D. degree in 2014. It was entitled “Wordplay: Functions, Semantics, Pragmatics and Translation (On The Basis of the English and Georgian Material). Her research areas include pragmatics, cultural parameters of humor, wordplay functions, using humour as a pedagogical tool, etc. Meri has published several articles related to the topics mentioned above and participated in different regional and international conferences. Currently she works at the Caucasus University as a teacher of English.