Research note

Lexico-semantic means of pun creation in Spanish jokes about La Gomera by Caco Santacruz

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Abstract

The research note deals with the analysis of lexico-semantic means used in the creation of the pun, such as homonymy, polysemy, and also morphological and syntactical means including re-grouping of syllables inside the phrase. Research material comprises puns by the Spanish author Caco Santacruz about the inhabitants of La Gomera Island. The aim of the article is to reveal lexico-semantic ways of creation of the author's jokes based on the use of the pun. Therefore, the definition of the pun in multilingual resources has been analysed. To reveal the ambiguity, the context in which the pun is used is needed, which we define as a communicative situation of ambiguity created by the author to reach the humorous effect. Most of the analysed jokes contain a dialogue of two people who understand the meaning of the phrase in their own way, creating an apparent misunderstanding based on polysemy or homonymy. The regrouping of syllables and polysemic grammatical meaning of prepositions are among the morphological and syntactical means of pun creation. The means of making a pun used by Santacruz include pseudo-words or pseudonyms, based on the creation of new words by analogy in terms of word-formation to reach the humorous effect. Future studies of the use of the pun as a source of humour may be focused on the analysis of linguistic means of pun creation on the material of other European languages in order to reveal the common patterns of pun creation and differences conditioned by linguistic peculiarities of the correspondent language systems. The term "pun context" may be applied to further studies of ambiguity created by the author.

Keywords: pun, polysemy, homonymy, ambiguity, La Gomera jokes.

1. Introduction

The use of the pun as a stylistic device in writing is frequently observed in literature, including jokes. Such jokes are called pun jokes or jokes based on the use of puns. The comic effect transmitted by the use of a pun makes the reader think about the meaning of words, prompting one to decipher the ambiguity.

The use of the pun belongs to joke language or wordplay. As Chiaro (1996: 13) describes the amusing function of wordplay: "Wordplay is used with the intent to amuse." We agree with V. Sannikov (2005: 3) who states that joke language has a double meaning, where besides creating a comic effect and laughing at people or life situations, there is also laughing at the language itself, or at something unusual in it, such as homonymy and polysemy.

The definition of a pun differs depending on the resource. Thus, in Spanish dictionaries, a "pun" is defined as a literary means, consisting of the regrouping of syllables inside the phrase in order to create ambiguity or different meanings (Alonso Pedraz 1958: 847; Moliner 2014: 278). Cambridge Dictionary, on the other hand, defines pun as the humorous use of a word or a phrase, possessing a few meanings or a word or a phrase which sounds like another word (Cambridge Dictionary online 2020). In the Spanish dictionary, the emphasis on the regrouping of syllables is made, whereas the English dictionary is focused more on the ambiguity while defining a pun. The illustrative material taken from Caco Santacruz's jokes proves the tendency to use syllable regrouping as one of the means of pun creation.

As Crystal (1995: 405) puts it: "A pun may constitute a joke in itself or be the punch-line of a much larger joke." Though the term "humour" covers anything that is perceived as amusing or laughable (Attardo 2020), this does not preclude the possibility of establishing sub-categorisations in certain areas, i.e., "genres" such as puns, jokes, etc. We agree with Attardo (2020) that "the terms such as 'pun' and 'joke' are not technical terms and are ultimately fuzzy."

Pun itself was known and used in ancient times and described, e.g., in the works of Aristophanes, Plato, and Cicero. In French literature, the use of the pun was popular among such authors as Pierre Montmor in the 17th century and Marquis de Bievre in the 18th century. In the Spanish language, in turn, the use of the pun was especially widespread in burlesque baroque poetry (Diccionario de terminos literarios 1998: 252).

Miller and Turković state that the deliberate use of lexical ambiguity, that is, pun creation, is the source of humour (Miller & Turković 2016: 59). A pun is a kind of wordplay based on a humorous collision of meanings. We agree with the definition of wordplay suggested by Delabastia (1996: 128): "Wordplay is the general name for the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings."

The following research is focused on the study of puns by Caco Santacruz about the residents of La Gomera, whose inhabitants, according to the stereotypes, are known for being especially clumsy and absent-minded. We suppose that the inhabitants of La Gomera are represented like this due to the distant geographical location from Europe and small population of the island. When the book of jokes was written in 1995, the internet was not so popular, so the inhabitants of La Gomera lived in their own, a little bit isolated world. The aim of this research is to reveal the lexico-semantic, morphological and syntactical means used by the author to create puns.

2. Analysis

2.1. Research material and methods

Our **research material** comprises the book of jokes by Caco Santacruz *Chistes de La Gomera* (Jokes about La Gomera), where many of the author's jokes are based on the use of pun. The overall number of jokes in the mentioned book is 169, among which we found 38 puns. The sample presented in the paper includes the examples of pun creation as executed by Santa Cruz. **The research methods** include lexico-semantic, syntactic and contextual analyses. Lexico-semantic analysis is based on the studies of homonymy and polysemy as the main ways of pun creation. Contextual analysis proves the necessity of pun context as the basis for ambiguity and apparent misunderstanding between the interlocutors participating in the ambiguous conversation. Syntactical analysis reveals the importance of syllable re-grouping to form a new meaning, thus creating homonymic phrases as a basis of a pun. The examples of the puns used in the research include homonyms, polysemic words, pseudonyms or pseudo-words and regrouping of syllables as means of pun creation.

2.2. Findings and discussion

Caco Santacruz' jokes about La Gomera published in 1995 contain puns. In the research note, six jokes are presented as typical examples of lexico-semantic means of Caco Santacruz's pun creation, in particular, polysemy, homonymy, and regrouping of syllables. The author's puns are embedded in a communicative situation in which the inhabitants of La Gomera participate. As a basis for pun creation, ambiguity is displayed in the analysed jokes by Caco Santacruz.

Puns are jokes based on ambiguity, polysemy of words (semantic factor), homonymy (phonetic factor), and the regrouping of syllables (morphological and syntactical factors). We analyse each factor separately on the examples of Caco Santacruz's puns.

> *Cuando el Papa se murió, estaba en la puerta del cielo – de portero – un gomero, por encargo de San Pedro. Llama el Papa a la puerta y pregunta el gomero:*
> *- ¿Quién anda ahí?*
> *- Soy yo, <u>el Sumo</u> Pontífice – contesta el Papa.*
> *Y dice el gomero:*
> *- ¿Y eso qué es, algún refresco nuevo?*

(Santacruz 1995: 7)

English translation:

> *When the Pope died, one inhabitant of La Gomera was at the heaven's door – as a porter – by Saint Peter's charge. The Pope knocks at the door and the Gomera inhabitant asks:*
> *"Who is there?"*
> *"It's me, the Supreme Pontiff," answers the Pope.*
> *The Gomera inhabitant asks:*
> *"What's that? A new soft drink?"*

This pun joke is based on the homonymy of *zumo* (juice) andel *Sumo Pontífice* (religious title), taking into consideration the same pronunciation of the sounds *z* and *s*, characteristic of Canary pronunciation.

It should be mentioned that the apparent misunderstanding of interlocutors is crucial in a pun. As a rule, a pun is revealed in a dialogue in which each speaker thinks about the definite meaning of his/her utterance, which is different from the meaning perceived by the listener.

> *Dos borrachos de La Gomera van caminando por San Sebastián a altas horas de la madrugada.*
> *Dice uno al otro:*
> *- Oye, ten cuidado, que viene una <u>curva</u> muy <u>cerrá</u>.*
> *- ¡Hombre, claro, no va a estar <u>abierta</u> a estas horas!*

<div align="right">(Santacruz 1995: 6)</div>

English translation:

> *Two drunkards from La Gomera walk along San Sebastian at night hours. One says to the other:*
> *"Look, watch out, a very sharp turn is coming."*
> *"Well, of course, it's not supposed to be open at this time."*

To intensify humour, the dialogue between two drunken individuals is used, in which the first and the second interlocutor refer to a different meaning of the word *abierta* (open) and *cerrá* (closed, meaning sharp curve).

The presence of an interlocutor is not obligatory in a pun, though the question-answer dialogue structure is usually present, as in the following joke:

> *- ¿Por qué en el equipo de fútbol de San Sebastián de la Gomera llevan todos los jugadores los números de la camiseta negros y uno de ellos lo lleva rojo?*
> *- Porque se llama <u>Domingo.</u>*

<div align="right">(Santacruz 1995: 9)</div>

English translation:

> *"Why are the football players of San Sebastian football team wearing black numbers on T-shirts and one of them is wearing a red number?"*
> *"Because his name is Domingo."*

In the example above, homonymy is based on the coincidence of the proper name *Domingo* and common name *domingo* (Sunday).

Besides homonymy and lexical polysemy, grammatical polysemy can also be the basis for pun creation, as in the joke below, in which we observe polysemy of the preposition *de* in the word combination *zapatos <u>de</u> cocodrilo* (shoes from crocodile (skin) and crocodile's shoes):

> *Dos gomeros van a Santa Cruz a hacer unos asuntos. Al pasar por una zapatería, dice uno a otro:*
> *- Mira qué bien, compadre, tenía que comprarme unos zapatos….*
> *- A ver, unos zapatos preciosos.*
> *- Son <u>zapatos</u> auténticos <u>de cocodrilo</u>.*
> *- ¿Cuánto valen?*
> *- Estos, como ve, son muy buenos, pero son un poco caros: cuestan sesenta mil pesetas.*
> *- Entonces no quiero <u>zapatos de cocodrilo</u>.*
> *Vuelven a La Gomera. Ya de regreso, en el Ferry, comenta uno:*
> *- ¿Tú quieres que tengamos unos buenos <u>zapatos de cocodrilo</u>? ¡Pues vamos a volvernos!*
> *Vuelven y toman el vuelo a El Cairo. Ya en el Nilo, cuando llevan cogidos seiscientos cocodrilos, dice con desesperación uno al otro:*
> *- Como el próximo cocodrilo no tenga zapatos, nos vamos a La Gomera.*

<div align="right">(Santacruz 1995: 11)</div>

English translation:

> *Two Gomera inhabitants go to Santa Cruz to do some business. Passing by a footwear shop, one says to the other:*
> *"Look! How well it looks, my friend, I'd like to buy a pair of shoes…"*

> *"Let me see, these are beautiful shoes."*
> *"These are authentic crocodile shoes."*
> *"How much are they?"*
> *"These, as you see, are very good shoes, but they are a little bit expensive: they cost sixty thousand pesetas."*
> *"Then, I don't want crocodile shoes."*
> *They are coming back to La Gomera. On returning, on a ferry, one of them comments:*
> *"Do you want good crocodile shoes? Let's come back!"*
> *They come back and take a flight to Cairo. At the Nile, when they have been catching six hundred crocodiles, one of the Gomera inhabitants says in despair:*
> *"If the next crocodile doesn't wear shoes, we'll go back to La Gomera."*

Next, regrouping of syllables in order to form phrases with different meaning belongs to morphological and syntactical or lexico-grammatical means of pun creation:

> *En la casa de la Cultura de San Sebastián de La Gomera pusieron una vez una exposición de un pintor de la isla. Uno de sus cuadros, que representaba a una mujer casi desnuda por completo, tenía debajo este título: "<u>ESTÍO</u>".*
> *Uno de los gomeros asistentes se detuvo a contemplarlo y, cuando ya llevaba un rato reflexionando, exclamó con firmeza:*
> *¡Que no, compadre, que no…, digan lo que digan eso <u>es una tía</u>!*

<div align="right">(Santacruz 1995: 14)</div>

English translation:

> *At the Cultural Centre of San Sebastian de La Gomera, they once made an exposition by a local island painter. One of his paintings, representing an almost naked woman, had the title 'SUMMER.'*
> *One of the La Gomera inhabitants visiting the exposition stopped to contemplate on the picture and after some reflection, exclaimed firmly:*
> *"In any case no, no. Let them say whatever they want but it's a woman."*

In the joke given above, the pun is formed by the rearrangement of syllables in the word *estío* (summer) and the phrase *es tío* (this is a guy), and, similarly: *es tía* (this is a girl, woman).

The participants in pun dialogues are deliberately represented as unconscious of the ambiguous communicative situation. We observe the pragmatic function of pun creation here. Therefore, the occasional misunderstanding appears, which intensifies humour. The speakers' misunderstanding contributes to pun creation not only on the basis of polysemic words, but also by the creation of pseudo-words by analogy between word-formation models. Wordplay in the following joke, for instance, is based on the interlocutors' apparent unawareness of the existence of the German city of Baden-Baden:

> *Dos compañeros de trabajo han ingresado hace poco en la misma empresa y empiezan a conocerse. Uno de ellos dice:*
> *- Aunque vivo aquí hace ya muchos años, yo nací en <u>Baden-Baden</u>.*
> *Y el otro, gomero, contesta:*
> *- Pues yo soy de <u>San Sebastián de La Gomera-San Sebastián de La Gomera.</u>*

<div align="right">(Santacruz 1995: 24)</div>

English translation:

> *Two colleagues started work at the same enterprise and got acquainted. One of them says:*
> *"Though I have lived here for many years, I was born in Baden-Baden."*
> *And the other La Gomera inhabitant answers:*
> *"Well, I am from San Sebastian de La Gomera-San Sebastian de La Gomera."*

Thus, the humorous nature of the pun is reached by an apparent misunderstanding of the real meanings of lexical units in a certain communicative situation; as a result, pseudonyms may appear, based, according to Ilyasova and Amiri, on pseudo-motivation for creating new meanings as a wordplay method (Ilyasova & Amiri 2012: 62).

The use of a pun as a kind of wordplay is a multifunctional phenomenon. V. Sannikov singles out the following functions of wordplay: educative, masking, entertaining, and psychotherapeutic (Sannikov 2005: 9). We consider entertainment the main function of puns in this context. Though, considering that wordplay needs specific deciphering of the sense created by the author, we can state that the pun performs intellectual-entertaining and aesthetic functions as well.

We suggest the term *pun context* as a specific grammatical and syntactical surrounding which contributes to wordplay. On the one hand, a pun can be used as a separate wordplay. On the other, the author's introduction of a communicative situation by the use of a pun may lead to the creation of a joke. Thus, the notion of "pun context" may be defined as a communicative situation of ambiguity created by the author, which fulfils the pragmatic and aesthetic function of the comical.

3. Conclusion

The author's pun jokes about the inhabitants of La Gomera depict them as limited people, isolated from the world exterior to La Gomera, who are unaware of all the possible meanings of polysemic words. The humorous effect is purposely created by the author who presents the characters as ignorant of the ambiguity. Lexico-semantic analysis of pun jokes by Caco Santacruz shows that puns are mainly based on polysemy, homonymy, regrouping of syllables, and the creation of pseudo-words as a result of pseudo-motivation in word formation, which, actually, reflects the international character of lexico-semantic means used in pun creation.

Future studies can thus be focused on research into lexico-semantic means of pun creation including lexico-grammatical framework of analysis (polysemy of prepositions, other auxiliary words, and regrouping of syllables) in other contexts, both in Spanish and in other languages, in order to reveal common patterns of pun creation and differences conditioned by lexico-grammatical and syntactical peculiarities of different language systems.

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