

Some Aspects of Paronomasia in Arabic Humor: Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

The present paper is an endeavor to give a deep insight into puns as an intrinsic source of Arabic humor. It explicates the different linguistic basis upon which punning rests. The paper also investigates the linguistic and cognitive dimension of paronomasia (punning). Linguistically speaking, the paper highlights the morphological structuring of a pun at the syllabic levels. At the phonological level of analysis, puns will be analyzed emphasizing the phonological resemblance and its role in activating humor especially in puns. Further, the paper sets out to explore the semantic motivation of puns where proper nouns and different sense relations such as polysemy, homonymy, homography, synonymy and homophony help activate the humorous aspect of a pun. The study also addresses paronomasia at both interlingual and intralingual level of analysis. Humor in Arabic can involve other languages like English. Furthermore, the study will shed light on incongruity which is core to paronomasia as it is the main stimulus to almost all kinds of jocosity.

Keywords: pun, humor, sense relations, semantic motivation, intralingual, interlingual, incongruity

1. Data

For the sake of politeness, no group of people will be mentioned in narrating a punning joke; instead, we will use the phrase “a stupid person” to ascribe the punning joke to. As undoubtedly understood, exhaustiveness of all puns is not claimed or to be expected; we will take representative examples on each category and subcategory of puns which are very common in Jordan in particular and some neighboring countries on a broader scale of analysis. For the sake of clarity and because humor is culturally restricted, the pun will be translated literally into English and followed by a short analysis especially the first example of each kind. It is worth saying that the literal translation will sound very awkward to a native speaker of English and non-native speakers as well. The analysis, however, will make it clear. The collection of punning jokes consists of the puns we gathered, jotted down and categorized over a period of a year from many sources, the Internet included. It is also essential to heed attention to the fact that all of the puns incorporated in this paper occur in the context of colloquial Arabic not standard Arabic with very few exceptions where standard Arabic is used in part of a couple of examples.

2. Introduction

There is more to humor than just enjoying the present moment and killing time joyfully; humor is a human trait that sets humans apart from all other creatures on Earth. Humor is more than that; it is a stress reliever, painkiller, and health improver. Humor, which is a mental state in the first place, is so mysterious and intriguing that it becomes the domain of many academic disciplines including, but not restricted to, linguistics, medicine, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy. Some linguists tried to explicate why and how human beings laugh and to which extent does language play a role in this whole process.

Language and humor are strongly interconnected. Humans use language, which is a means of communication in the first place, to enjoy themselves by using rhyming words in place of each other, or creating ambiguity in the language of riddles, using one sense of a word in a situation where another sense of that word is called for, and replacing a syllable with a word or part of a word. Thus, linguistically, the sources of humor can be semantic, morphological or phonological in nature.

Generally speaking, human beings tend to be jocose in various ways; one of the commonest ways is by means of punning. Puns, which are jokes depending on the various meanings of one word or arising from the fact that two words sound the same but with different meanings, are used in everyday situations as rhetoric tools to, verbally or in writing, make fun and create humor every now and then.

Language is a human peculiarity that changes and evolves over time. This holds true of its ability to borrow, improvise and add to its existing repertoire of lexicon; it also holds true to language's punning as well. Languages, Arabic included, have long exhibited examples of inter and intra-lingual puns. One need to look no further than Facebook or teen and educated adult text messages to find ample examples of puns at the interlingual and intralingual level of humor.

English language is a semantic Language. This means that native speakers of English can use the system of their language to find meanings of unfamiliar words and create new ones. Furthermore, the semantic motivation is typical of Arabic puns as the case of other languages. In Arabic, punning finds its home in many linguistic phenomena. These include, among others, polysemy, homonymy, homophony, homography and synonymy.

According to many humor theorists like Vandaele (2002), the two most prominent characteristics upon which humor rest are *superiority* and *incongruity*. The former, is related to the humorous effect itself, whereas the latter is strongly related to the humorous effect resulting from the unexpectedness direction of a joke discovered at the punch-line which concludes the joke. This conflict between what is normal and what is abnormal, contained in the joker's intention, result in laughter. However, in this paper attention will be exclusively heeded to the semantic motivation and incongruity as puns heavily rely on them to create the humorous effect desired.

Incongruity is core to jocosity not only in puns. It seems that human beings are genetically ready to laugh at jocose manners in almost all incongruent situations. Casting with a scrutiny glance the behavior of my four-year child the other day, I found that she seems to be genetically ready to laugh at any incongruent behavior. I asked her to get me a glass of water; she said, "Shall I walk there?" I said, "No, you can take a taxi." She abruptly laughed. A slip of a tongue triggers humor because it is not the normal thing; it is incongruent. If you trip in place with children, it will be an embarrassing situation because of the roar laughter of those children. This, however, does not mean that grown-ups don't find it jocose but they know how to behave and they are also busy with other things, not to mention the stressful life they lead. This genetic readiness is not peculiar to humor; human beings are genetically ready to learn a new language and so on.

Finally, it remains to be said that humor has an intrinsic psychological aspect, among other ones. This, however is beyond the scope of this paper and for the limitation of space, they will not be addressed or handled but on a very narrow scale.

3. Literature review

Delabastita (1993) defines punning as a phenomenon depending for its existence on the juxtaposition of (at least two) similar/identical forms and (at least two) dissimilar meanings, where, broadly speaking, the subtler the formal contrast, and the sharper the semantic one, the finer the punning effect. Punning (also paronomasia) requires that both the punsters and the receivers of the wordplay enjoy a vast lexical repertoire. Roughly speaking, comedy writers like Shakespeare, among others, have long mastered the use of puns as a source of humor and laughter.

Veatch (2009) states that people who laugh at puns are generally, in his cultural experience, bookish people. They, as a result of their academic activities demonstrate their own pleasure in manipulating language forms. He suggests that those people care about linguistic properties violated in puns, to which others, less bookish in orientation, may have no effective commitment and thus do not hold as part of their moral system. By and large, this holds true of the Arabic culture; those who tend to play on words have usually obtained a good level of education especially in the case of interlingual punning.

In their book, Pepicello and Green (1984) hold the common view that humor is closely related to ambiguity. They also argue that this ambiguity could be in the language of the riddle itself (such as the phonological ambiguity in a punning riddle), or in the situation the riddle describes. Moreover, the humor occurs when that ambiguity is resolved unexpectedly by the listener. Not surprisingly, both interlocutors laugh, the producer of the pun knows it beforehand though.

Pepicello and Green (1984) divide linguistic ambiguity into three kinds: phonological, morphological, and syntactic ambiguity. These could be best illustrated using the following examples: In "Ali lives near the bank" the sentence has phonological ambiguity, because the noun "bank" can refer to either a financial institution, or the side of a river. This ambiguity can be ascribed to the fact that the word "bank" has more than one sense. The speaker, however, uses one sense in place of the other to crack a joke or pun. Sometimes the source of ambiguity occurs below word level when a syllable is replaced by a word or part of a word to create punning humor. Ambiguity and incongruity are closely related that it suffices to depend on incongruity as a basic factor in puns alongside with the semantic aspect. However, the syntactic level of humor is not going to be addressed in this paper.

Punsters make witticisms which rely for their effect on playing with the many senses that polysemous, homonymous, and synonymous words have. Further, because of the semantic motivation, polysemy and homonymy are going to be given more attention in punning. According to Palmer, (1976) polysemy is when the same word has a set of different meanings. Moreover, lexicographers define polysemous words within a single dictionary lemma or simply entry and homonyms with different lemmata. Examples of polysemous word are all-pervasive in English "flight" is: "a journey in an aircraft", "when something flies through the air", "a set of steps or stairs", "escape", etc.

The relatedness of the many senses of the word, being literal or metaphoric, has been a controversial issue

for lexicographers; there is no room to investigate it in depth in this paper though. It suffices to say that when the two or more senses of a word are related then we are dealing with a case of polysemy. For example, “eye of a hurricane” and “eye of a needle” are related to each other in so far as the cognitive image is concerned. Unlike polysemy, when the two or more senses are not related, we are handling a case of homonymy. For example, “left” (the opposite of right) and “left” (past form of leave). Lexicographers, however, illustrate this difference by giving a single lemma for polysemous words in the dictionary and different lemmata for homonyms.

It remains to be said that there are many subcategories of every word that has several senses is polysemy and homonymy. “lead” (metal) and “lead” (winning position) are orthographically the same but pronounced differently. These are called homographs; homographs are simultaneously homonyms. Homographs and homophones are subcategories of homonyms. Words like “red” and “read” (past of read) are pronounced in the same way but they are orthographically different; they are termed homophones. All these sense relations can readily be sources of humor and laughter in so far as paronomasia is concerned.

Roughly speaking, the reason behind laughter depends on the receiver of the humor or on the two interlocutors. In some cases, culture plays an intrinsic role in the perception of a bilingual (interlingual) pun. People have different interests and they handle them differently. Consider the following famous punning riddles:

1. What do you get when you cross a sheep and a kangaroo? A woolly jumper.
2. Why is a river lazy? Because it seldom gets out of its bed.

Generally speaking there is a relative complexity of the sort of knowledge a receiver of a punning joke requires to have the message conveyed. As a non-native speaker of English, I could, as most non-native speaker of English do, only laugh at a punning riddle as in (1) above after I have read its analysis or when someone else explains it to me. Perhaps, deeper thought might be helpful as well. I tried this joke with my English major students. Not surprisingly, it did not have the desired humorous effect at all. This happened because the joke belongs to an utterly different culture. A kangaroo to an Arab is like a camel to a German, for instance. An Arab has a prototypical image of a kangaroo that does not help his/her to work out the humorous aspect of a pun. Similarly, a German, in the normal run of things, has a prototypical image of a camel in his mind, not a detailed one based on a real life experience.

Attardo and Raskin (1991: 306) note that, in the “joke telling mode of communication” the truth of statements and their consistency become less important. The pseudo-logic of the joke, therefore, need not be valid, just vaguely persuasive - persuasive enough that the listener will go along with the joke. Sometimes if it were not for culture, one would need a vast lexical repertoire to get a joke and therefore laugh. In (2) above, humor can only be enjoyed by a non-native speaker of English if he/she has a good knowledge of English and the many senses that the word “bed” has.

In Arabic, the equivalent of the concept of punning using polysemy, homonymy, homophony, and in a few cases homography is not straightforward; it is scattered under diverse semantic phenomena. “Al-Jinas”, with its many subcategories, is probably the closest one and the one that best conveys the meaning inherent to the above mentioned sense relations. “Tawriah” is another rhetorical tool used in the context of creating humor. Due to the limitation of space such linguistic concepts will not be addressed as they are very complex and they do not serve our purposes.

4. Discussion

The pages to follow, will explore the semantic dimension of puns in Jordanian Arabic in particular and in Arabic on a broader scale of analysis highlighting incongruity as the basic contributing factor to humor in Arabic paronomasia at both the interlingual and intralingual levels.

4.1. Intralingual punning

Intralingual pun is a pun that is contained within the same language with no reference to any other one. Interlingual pun, on the other hand, necessitates that at least two languages be involved in the process of creating humor. Within the same language, Arabic in this case, proper nouns and polysemous words a leading position in so far as punning is concerned.

4.1.1. Proper nouns puns

In this kind of puns, the proper noun is the same as a well-established word that is used in every day Arabic. This, however, is ubiquitous in Arabic. In this sort of punning, the proper noun invokes two senses of the same word; one of them being a proper noun. Hence, it is a special kind of polysemy. A joker strives to make a witticism by reminding his/her interlocutor that the name of a person “the proper noun” is also used as a “common noun”, this creates that jocose mood at the punch-line which concludes that pun. The following examples illustrate the idea further:

1. غبي قاعد بتفرج على مباراة ريال مدريد. سمع المعلق يقول فاول لصالح رونالدو، قال: بتصدقوا أول مرة بعرف إنو إسم رونالدو الأول هو لصالح.
2. مرة في واحد غبي راح على البحرين أخذ معاه مايو هين.

Literal meaning of the punning joke: “a stupid person watching a football match of Real Madrid hears the commentator saying “foul to the benefit of Ronaldo”. He says (obviously to his company). You know? I just realized that Renaldo’s first name was “saaleh” (which is the literal equivalent to the English phrase “to the benefit of”)

Punning joke analysis

Incongruity is a pivotal element in almost all examples of punning alongside with the semantic elements. In (1) above the term “صالح” /saaleh/ has many meanings: “it is used as a proper noun”, “it refers to a righteous man”, “something good”, “not expired”, among others. Moreover, in the prepositional phrase “لصالح”, means “to the benefit of”. The source of humor can be ascribed to the mere fact that the joke cracker uses sense X (proper noun) instead of Y (common noun) where the word lends itself to both senses: X and Y and the situation necessitates that we use sense Y. There is some kind of instant cognitive action that has been taken to achieve the humorous effect desired by overcoming the contradiction. Obviously, the other interpretation, that the phrase lends itself to, remained vague and when it became clear the listener’s surprise triggers the humorous effect desired.

In (2) above, moreover, البحرين is the name of a country “Bahrain”. This proper noun literally means “the two seas”. When the word “Bahrain” is used, the receiver of the word expects the conversation to go in a certain direction related to Bahrain as a country. The joker floats this flow of expectations by using the word “مايوهين” that is “two bikinis”. This unexpected use of “bikini” evokes the literal meaning of “Bahrain” rather than the meaning necessitated by a proper noun. The conflict between what is expected by the listener and what the joker intends to achieve triggers the humorous effect and the emotions of laughter. Examples of common nouns used as proper nouns in Arabic are very prevalent. Table (1) below provides some examples of such nouns with their literal translation.

Table (1) proper and common nouns

proper noun	common noun	translation
صالح	صالح	good
مفيد	مفيد	useful
بسمة	بسمة	smile
نور	نور	light
بدور	بدور	full moons
محمود	محمود	commendable
تغريد	تغريد	chirp
فايز	فايز	winner
رفاه	رفاه	luxury
رنين	رنين	resonance

4.1.2. Polysemy

Polysemy, as other sense relations, has an important role in creating punning jokes and intentional humor. This being the case, Polysemy and homonymy are among the best linguistic phenomena to initiate puns. They create a conflict in the mind of the listener by conjuring up two or more cognitive schemata only one of them is called for in the particular context in question. The following examples illustrate further enough the point in discussion:

3. "غبي شاف لوحة على محل انترنت مكتوب عليها "الساعة" بدبنار " دخل للمحل وقال: هي ضد الميه؟"
4. أ: هذا واحد أمي.
ب: أمي ولا أبي.

Literal meaning of the punning joke: A stupid person saw a shop sign on an internet café that reads “1 dinar per hour”. He enters the café and says: “Is it water-resistant”.

Punning joke analysis:

The source of humor in such a punning joke is attributable to the many senses that the Arabic word “ساعة” has. “ساعة” means “hour”, “watch”, “the Day of Judgment”, “short period of time”. In other words, the same phonemic representation is used to communicate many senses. When one of the senses is used in place of the other the incongruity sparks laughter. In (3) above, the meaning of “الساعة” is “a period of time” for which you pay a certain amount of money that is the cost of the service you get. The humorous effect occurs when that person enters the café and asks his/her question. The listener imagines a situation where a café attendant would be shocked for a while trying to find out what that person intends. Obviously, incongruity, ambiguity, social factors, and the amount of time that will take the recipient to find out the different sense of the term “الساعة” will make the punning joke a successful one.

Apparently, example (4) follows the same mechanism of punning where one word is exchanged with another. The word “أمي” /ummi/ literally means “an illiterate person”. In Arabic, the same morpho-phonemic structure can be reached when we join the Arabic word “أم” /umm/, (mother) with the first person possessive pronoun “ي” /i/. The new word “أمي” has the same pronunciation as the first one which means “an illiterate person”. The second speaker in (4) uses the word “أمي” together with the word “أبي” /?bi/ “my father” to evoke

the domains of “mother”. These and such examples are scattered in the Arabic humor and they represent a well established phenomenon of jocosity.

4.1.3. Intralingual Punning at the phonemic level:

The phonemic resemblance can occur only in intralingual puns simply because the dissimilarity between two words in the same language might be attributed to the substitution of one phoneme with another. This is not that easy across languages though. Hence, in intralingual puns, humor can take place, other conditions are met, when two words differ with respect to one phoneme. Consider the following examples:

5. غبي ببسال صاحبه: شو رأيك تشتغل فنان تشكيلي وأنا فنان أشكياك؟
6. أ: أحمد لم يهرب قط.
ب: قط ولا بس.

Literal meaning of the punning joke: A stupid person asks his friend, “What do you think of you becoming a fine artist and me becoming an artist complaining to you.

Punning joke analysis: In Arabic, the word "تشكيلي" /tashkeele/ which means “fine artist” is pronounced almost in the same way as the word “تشكيلي” /tishkeele/ which means “to make a complain to me”. The dissimilarity between the two words in (5) above is in one phoneme. This is represented, in Arabic, by means of two diacritics: above the first letter in the former and under it in the latter. The joker made the witticism by reminding the listener with the similarity between the two words. The humor is activated, as usual, at the punch-line after the conflict between what is expected and what is actually used is solved. In other words, the meaning is never explicitly stated, rather it is a cooperative effort between the two interlocutors. Moreover, this type of puns is linguistically very advanced as it needs close scrutiny of words and advanced linguistic competence.

In example (6) the same phonemic phenomenon is part of the pun. In writing, the word “قط”, without diacritics on the first letter, lends itself to two different meanings: a common noun “a cat” /قط/ with a diacritic under the initial letter and an adverb “never” /قط/ with a diacritic above the initial letter. It was used by the first speaker to mean the adverb “never” and the listener seized the opportunity to make a witticism by creating a clash in the mind of his/her interlocutor between the normality and abnormality in that context. This kind of puns at the phonemic level of language occurs now and then in Arabic humor especially in intralingual puns.

4.2. Interlingual punning:

The practice of interlingual or bilingual punning is common in Arabic, as the case in other languages, among educated people to enjoy jocosity. Roughly speaking, this kind of puns requires that both interlocutors be well-educated and have an average knowledge of at least two languages, of course, Arabic must be one of them.

4.2.1. Interlingual punning at word level:

Generally speaking, this kind of punning is activated at the word level where one word replaces another because they phonologically resemble one another across languages. This, phonological resemblance triggers humor because a word has the same sound as another word in Arabic. Similarly, at the syllabic level, part of a word, a morpheme, in English or another language phonologically resembles a word in Arabic. The following example illustrates the idea further:

7. "واحد بيحكى لصاحبه بتعرف وين كانت سدني 2000 (بطولة رياضية)؟ قاله: ليش شو أخذت منك؟"

Literal meaning of the punning joke: A stupid person asks his friend, “When will “Sidney 2000” take place?” His friend said, “What on earth did I take from you?”

Punning joke analysis:

In (7) above, the speaker asks about the 2000 Summer Olympics Games commonly known as Sidney 2000. The listener makes a punning joke resting on the fact that the English “Sidney” word is pronounced in the same way as a well-established word in Arabic which is “سدني”. Orthographically speaking, the two words have the same spelling and the same pronunciation in Arabic and English, therefore, they are homographs and homophones simultaneously. So, a word in one language might have the same pronunciation as a word in another language which makes it a subject for creating a pun in a situation where two or more people have a good knowledge of the two languages.

Farghal (2006) mentions a joke that was common among the Jordanian educated people in the 1986 based on a question that was posed to Ronald Reagan in a press conference, “Mr. President, what do you think of (*al wi fak* and *al 'iti fak* Summit Conference in Amman?) The president who seemed to have no idea about it, responded: “I think we fuck, but we don’t declare it”. The source of jocosity in the context arises from the fact that a phrase in Arabic “wifaq” which literally means “reconciliation” and an English phrase “we fuck”.

4.2.2. Treating homophones as synonyms:

To put it in semantic terms, when two words have the same sound but spelt differently and have different meanings this represents a case of homophony, of course in two different languages. In puns, the joker treats homophones as synonyms. The following examples illustrate the idea:

8. "واحد ببسال صاحبه؟ توكل بيتي فور. قاله: لأ، باكل بيتي تري."
9. واحد بيحكى لصاحبه هذا too much, رد عليه لأ هذا three much.

Meaning of the punning joke: A stupid person asks his friend: Would you like a petit four? He says: No, I'd like a petit three.

Punning joke analysis:

In order for the punning joke in (8) above to trigger laughter, the joke receiver has to have some basic schemata in his/her cognition. "Petit four" is a small savory appetizer; of course it has many more varieties nowadays. "Petit" is a French word that means "small" and although "four" is French word which means "oven", in English it is a homophone of number "four". A word or phrase in English, or any foreign language, is replaced with a word from the target language, Arabic in this context. Obviously, when the two above conditions are met, the joke will have its desired effect otherwise the addressee would not process the pun in the few seconds he or she is reading or hearing. As can be noticed, the joke heavily depends on the recipient.

In Jordan, academics and educated people usually use English words in many contexts. This happens because they study English for 12 years in school. At the university, they study most majors in English and Jordanians have to have good knowledge of English to get a job easily. Not surprisingly, we find examples of puns, as example (9) above, in many situations. The two English words "too" and "three" made the humorous effect. The punster evoked the domain of numbers by treating the two words "too" and "two" as synonyms which is contrary to the fact and in turn incongruent. Treating homophones as synonyms is one way of creating puns.

4.2.3. Interlingual punning below word level:

In some case, this kind of puns occurs below the word level; a syllable of an Arabic word is replaced with a word or part of a word from English. The replaced syllable may correspond to a word in Arabic or the other way round.

10. "واحد غبي يبسالوه : إنت ساكن وين؟ قالهم: بتعرفوا بيتهوفن قالوا: أه، بنعرفه قالهم: أنا ساكن بالبيت إلي جمبه."
11. أستاذ بيحكّل لتلميذه "ضع كلمة dog في جملة مفيدة. حكااله: "دقي يامزيكه" (نكتة مصرية)

Meaning of the punning joke: Someone asks a stupid person where he lives. He says, "You know Beethoven". The other one says, "Certainly". He says, "I live next door."

Punning joke analysis

In order for the punning joke in (10) above to have the humorous effect, the addressee must activate the following pieces of linguistic and background knowledge: (i) "بيتهوفن" is the famous German musician "Beethoven". (ii) as it is pronounced in both Arabic and German, the three first letters are pronounced in almost the same way as the Arabic word "بيت" (house) is pronounced. In other words, the first three letters make a homophone of "بيت". In (11), the English word "dog" has almost the same pronunciation as the Arabic word "دق" which literally means "hit" as in "to hit the drum". The joke maker used this phonological resemblance to create an interlingual pun by treating the English word "dog" as the Arabic word "دق" which is treated as a syllable in the word "دقي". These and such puns are many in Arabic humor. This being said, the phonological resemblance is a fertile soil for punsters because it spawns in large number of puns.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, humor is a thrilling human trait that is not randomly encoded in language; on the contrary, it is a systematic phenomenon that follows fixed patterns. It is encoded in language at different levels: the phonological, morphological and semantic levels. Semantically speaking, sense relations like polysemy, homonymy, homography, homophony and synonymy have an essential part in the creation of humor. Apart from language, there is another characteristic that is integral for humor to be activated which is incongruity. Incongruity activates humor at the linguistic level as it create clash between what is expected and what is words of the joker say. Moreover, all puns heavily depend on the two interlocutors to be successful. It remains to be said that humor is not a totally fuzzy concept; on the contrary, it is a systematic process that finds its roots in language as well as other disciplines.

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