SEMANTIC AMBIGUITY IN HUMOROUS DISCOURSE

There has been much research carried out on verbally expressed humour, however not as much has been focused on ambiguity-based humorous discourse which exploits the clash of dual meanings of words, phrases or whole sentences. Verbally expressed humour depends on language and attracts the attention of a reader or hearer to certain point in the text that is intended to be humorous. It is a communicative strategy aimed at producing certain effect such as climax. Attardo et al. made an effort to define verbal humour by distinguishing it from other types of humour and pointed out that verbal humour contrasts with referential humour. The authors state that in referential humour, the humorous effect arises from what a joke says whereas verbal humour depends on the use of language. Humorous discourse based on ambiguity is categorized as verbal humour because ambiguity is a linguistic phenomenon [1, p. 19].

Ambiguity occurs in many forms of language processing. An expression, phrase or utterance is structurally or semantically ambiguous
when it has two or more underlying interpretations and it is therefore (sometimes) confusing, e.g.: *James loves his wife and so do I.*

As is generally accepted, linguistic ambiguity can be divided into three central categories of grammatical ambiguity of phrases or sentences: those with more than one structural interpretation; semantic ambiguity of words which arises because of polysemy and homonymy; and phonological ambiguity which arises due to homophony. Tabossi distinguishes the following types of linguistic ambiguity: 1. **lexical** ambiguity which arises if a word has more than one possible interpretation; 2. **semantic** ambiguity which occurs when several interpretations result from the different ways in which the meanings of words in a phrase can be combined; 3. **syntactic** ambiguity which arises when several different interpretations result from the different ways in which a sequence of words can be grammatically structured; 4. **pragmatic** ambiguity which arises when the context of a phrase results in alternative interpretations of that phrase [9, p. 17].

Wales claims that “linguists would see ambiguity as a linguistic universal, common to all languages, one of the inevitable consequences of the arbitrariness of language, i.e. the lack of one-to-one correspondence between signs and meanings” [10, p. 19] and divides linguistic ambiguity into two central categories: **grammatical** ambiguity of phrases or sentences (more than one structural interpretation), and **lexical** ambiguity of words which arises because of polysemy and homonymy. Furthermore, Wales states that “when ambiguity does occur in discourse, it may not be tolerated if it hinders interpretation seriously,” and points out that one of the rules arising from the general co-operative principle of conversation is that of clarity of meaning (be clear) and is in this sense closely related to the maxim of manner (avoid ambiguity) [10, p. 19].

Despite the classifications mentioned above, we believe that there are only two types of genuine semantic ambiguity relevant to our study – the semantic ambiguity based on homonymy and the semantic ambiguity based on polysemy. There are two criteria used when distinguishing between homonymy and polysemy. The first criterion is etymological derivation: polysemous words have the same etymological roots, whereas homonymous words do not. Therefore, etymology is considered an infallible test for polysemy [6, p. 119]. The second criterion is relatedness of meaning. If
meanings of two words are unrelated, the words are homonymous, whereas if relatedness between meanings of words occurs, the words are polysemous. Besides, polysemous words can have two subtypes: words with metaphorical and words with metonymic extension [3, p. 26]. Polysemous words with metaphorical extension are related in the sense that there is an analogy between the meanings of the words. One meaning is literal, the second is figurative (fire – fire in her eyes). The second subtype – words with metonymic extension include count/mass metonymic extension (e.g. lamb), container/containee metonymic extension (e.g. bottle), place/people metonymic extension (e.g. Washington), and producer/product metonymic extension (e.g. Christie). The relation between two words with metonymic extension is based on contiguity or connectedness [8, p. 380].

The semantic ambiguity in humorous discourse arises, when two meanings are suddenly and unexpectedly brought together and the incongruity makes us laugh. Semantically ambiguous jokes, humorous quotations or some popular press newspaper headlines are often based on play with the meanings of words. The following examples of humorous discourse comprise semantic ambiguity based on homonymy:

- Question: How can a leopard change his spots? Answer: By moving.
- Question: Is life worth living? Answer: It depends on the liver.
- Family firm friends – relative way to build a business (newspaper headline).

All examples of humorous discourse with homonymy have a linguistic basis. They accomplish their humorous effect through a play on words relying on ambiguity of meaning or puns in which words that are identical in sound and different in meaning are interchanged.

Polysemy is a semantic relation arises when several related meanings are associated with the same group of sounds within one part of speech, for example big tree (literal usage) – family tree (figurative usage). So a lot of words when in combination with other words or in context/situation acquire new meanings which are in a certain extend related to their primary meaning [2, p. 138].
following example of humorous discourse is based on ambiguity that arises due to polysemy:

- Guest: ‘Waiter! This egg is bad.’
  Waiter: 'Don't blame me, I only lay the table.'

The multiple meanings of the verb to lay which reports relatedness of meanings: ‘to put in order to arrange’ and ‘to produce eggs’.

- A model mother (newspaper headline).

The word model has two related meanings; a good example of something, or a person presenting clothes. The article is about a super model having a child.

A great part of humour in humorous discourse arises from exploiting polysemous words with metaphorical or metonymic extension. Words with metaphoric extension can often be taken literally and thus give rise to humour. Koestler clarified the relationship between humour and metaphor. He claims that both humour and metaphor are the results of psychological operations called bisociation that combines structures that are more possible [5, p. 141]. Thus metaphor can refer to multiple concepts, and because the relation between them is not specified, this gives rise to various possible interpretations. The following example illustrates the use of metaphoric extension in humorous discourse:

- A woman was telling her married daughter that the cold weather was bad for her rheumatism. Her little granddaughter was present and overheard the conversation. She didn't say anything then, but that night when she went to bed she knew what she was going to do. After she had said her usual prayers she concluded by saying: 'And please, God, make it hot for Grandma!' [2, p. 49].

The word hot in the joke was intended to convey its metaphoric sense. The humour arises when a hearer or reader realizes that hot also means ‘difficult or dangerous to deal with and making you feel worried or uncomfortable’.

The semantic ambiguity may also spring out of informal language, slang, proper names, trade names or abbreviations used between friends or in a relaxed or informal situation, for example:

- A policeman stops a lady and asks for her license.
  Policeman: ‘Lady, it says here that you should be wearin glasses.’
Woman: ‘Well, I have contacts.’

Policeman: ‘I don’t care who you know! You’re getting a ticket!’ [1, p. 55].

The expression “contact lenses” instead of which an informal expression “contacts” was used was misunderstood and interpreted as the word contacts which is the plural from a person that you know, especially somebody who can be helpful to you.

Proper names and trade names represent another phenomenon that can lead to ambiguity. The ambiguity arises when a proper noun which identifies certain entity is taken literally and thus it is interpreted as a common noun or vice versa:

- *Tiger* roars ahead. – newspaper headline praising sporting achievements of Tiger Woods.

- *I went to the local chemist and said:* 'Have you any poison that kills mice?'
  
  *He said:* 'No, have you tried *Boots*?'

  *I said:* 'I want to poison them, not kick them to death!' [8, p. 390].

Slang words and colloquialisms are another popular source of semantic ambiguity in humorous discourse. The use of aggressively informal slang may show deliberate lack of dignity and rejection, for example:

- *Butcher of the year? Bloody good idea.* (newspaper headline)

- *Granny, can you do an impression of a frog?* asked three-year-old Sarah.

  *'Why?' asked Granny.

  *'Because,' replied Sarah, 'I heard mummy and daddy talking and they said we’d get a small fortune when you *croak*'* [1, p. 66].

To conclude, linguistics sees ambiguity as a universal common to all languages, one of the inevitable consequences of the arbitrariness of language. The analysis of semantic ambiguity in humorous discourse reveals that the elements capable of producing humorous effects can be summarized as follows: 1. understanding multiple meaning of words, metaphors, idioms, etc.; 2. detecting ambiguity; 3. perceiving incongruity; 4. appreciating that the unexpected or a sudden shift of perspective is possible.
References