EFL learners' Understanding of Linguistic Ambiguity in Language-based Jokes

Öznur Semiz[1]

Abstract

*T*his study aims to examine the comprehension of linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes by investigating the responses of a group of EFL learners to twelve English jokes. Seventy Turkish university students were asked to read and evaluate whether they have understood the jokes in a questionnaire and then write an explanation if they agreed that they understood the joke. They were also asked to judge the humour of the each joke. Twelve texts, classified as lexical jokes, syntactic jokes and phonological jokes, were given. Findings indicated that Turkish EFL learners achieved an average level of performance in understanding linguistic ambiguity in jokes. Another finding was that the type of joke affected students' comprehension of ambiguity in jokes. The learners performed better in understanding the jokes involving lexical ambiguity than in the jokes involving phonological and syntactic ambiguity. Lexical jokes were found to be the funniest. The implications of the findings for language teaching are also discussed.

Key words: joke comprehension, linguistic jokes, linguistic ambiguity.

[1] Öznur Semiz, Karadeniz Technical University, Turkey

EFL learners' Understanding of Linguistic Ambiguity in Language-based Jokes

Öznur Semiz

Introduction

Humour as a teaching tool has a good potential to be used in language classrooms by offering a rich source of authentic linguistic and cultural input. Indeed, many researchers suggest the use of homour in the language classroom (Bell, 2009; Gomes de Matos, 1974; Trachtenberg, 1979; Maurice, 1988; Deneire 1995; Schmitz, 2002; Ziyaeemehr, Kumar & Abdullah, 2011). In fact, research has shown that the incorporation of humour into EFL classes have positive effects on learning (Askildson, 2005; Hayati, Shooshtari & Shakeri, 2011; Stroud, 2013).

However, understanding humour in a foreign language may be a great challenge for language learners. Deneire (1995) notes the necessity of specific linguistic and cultural proficiencies to understand and appreciate a joke. As Bell (2007) states, ''the construction and comprehension of verbal humor in an L2 constitutes a great challenge even to advanced L2 learners, as it often requires sophisticated linguistic, social and cultural competence''(p.28). One reason for this may be the linguistic ambiguity often found in the context of humour. As studies have shown (Bell, 2005; Bouton, 1999; Cook, 2000; Davies, 2003), in order to understand humour, language learners need to be able to comprehend the literal meaning as well as the implied meaning, which needs a certain level of language proficiency.

Linguistic ambiguity often serves a source of humour in verbal jokes. Attardo et al. (1994), in their study of a corpus of 2000 jokes, found that 431 of the 441 verbal jokes were ambiguity-based. Pepicello and Weisberg (1983) state that linguistic humour in jokes is achieved through the manipulation of phonological, morphological or syntactic features in the sentences. Ross (1998) also proposed that the humour of a text lies in the wit hidden in ambiguous structures which include phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical ambiguities.

Jokes may be classified according to the type of ambiguity they involve. Several taxonomies of joke types have been identified by researchers (Attardo (1994a); Attardo et al. (1994b); Chiaro,

1992; Ross (1998); Green & Pepicello (1978)). Quite pertinent to the objective of this study is the taxonomy of jokes developed by Lew (1996, 1997) in which jokes were classified into three different categories: (i) lexical, (ii) phonological, and (iii) syntactic. In other words, the linguistic ambiguity may depend on variance in sound (phonological), variance in meaning (lexical), or variance in sentence structure (syntactic).

Lexical ambiguity often relies on "homophones, homonyms, or polysemes where sounds remain the same and the ambiguity lies in the lexical unit or lexeme" (Attardo et al. 1994b, p. 34). Oaks (1994) defines lexical ambiguity as conveyed by ''a word with more than one possible meaning in a context'' (p.378) as in this example where an alternative interpretation of the word 'suit' creates ambiguity and humour:

> "Have you ever appeared as a witness in a suit before?" asked the judge.
>
> "Why of course!" replied the young girl.
>
> "Will you please tell the jury what suit it was?"
>
> "It was a pink suit," she replied quickly, "with red collar and cuffs, and buttons all the way down the front"
>
> (Misztal, 1990, as cited in Lew, 1997)

Phonologically-based jokes depend on "the modification of a sound, a unit smaller than the word" (Lew 1996, p. 130). They are usually based on a sound that can take multiple meanings when pronounced in a similar way and involve an ambiguity based on "similar phonological strings of a word that correspond to two distinct readings (Nguyễn,2012). Here is an example:

> Man: "I'd like to buy a pair of nylon stockings for my wife."
>
> Clerk: "Sheer?"
>
> Man: "No, she is at home." (Hoke, 1965, as cited in Lew, 1997)

In the jokes based on syntactic ambiguity, meaning is produced through the interpretation of how words, phases, and clauses are arranged. According to Pepicello & Green (1984), syntactic ambiguity involves "phrase structure ambiguities, since the syntactic difference is revealed in the underlying trees, or phrase structure syntactic configurations of the ambiguous constructions" (p. 24). Below is an example of a syntactic joke where the phrase 'empty sack in the kitchen' may be interpreted either as a noun phrase or an imperative clause:

> A homeowner in Minehead, England, wished to return an empty coal sack to his coal delivery
>
> man, so he left a note on the front door saying, "Empty sack in kitchen." When he returned home,
>
> he found a pile of coal on his kitchen floor. (Lew, 1997)

While the topic of humour comprehension in a second or foreign language has received some attention in the field of SLA, not so many studies have been carried out concentrating on the comprehension of jokes by EFL learners. Hsin (2006) investigated the factors influencing the comprehension of English jokes by a group of Chinese EFL learners by asking them to judge

whether the texts in a questionnaire are jokes and to write the punch lines if they answered affirmatively. In the study, jokes were classified as universal jokes, linguistic jokes and cultural jokes. Linguistic jokes were further divided into phonological, syntactic, lexical and morphological types. Her findings revealed that Chinese EFL learners found universal jokes the easiest to understand, followed by linguistic jokes and cultural jokes. Among the linguistic jokes, morphological jokes were found to be easier than lexical jokes and syntactic jokes. Phonological jokes were found to be the most difficult by the learners.

In another study, Li and Chen (2006) explored the gender difference in ambiguity perception in the three aspects: (a) the learnability of linguistic and cultural jokes (b) the understanding of ambiguity in linguistic jokes, including phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic jokes c) length effect of English joke on learners' comprehension. Their findings showed that EFL college learners were better at understanding linguistic jokes than in cultural jokes. Gender effect was seen in comprehending lexical jokes, although females achieved higher scores in four subcategories.

Hodson (2008) examined the challenges EFL learners face in understanding humorous texts by investigating their responses to five English jokes differing in types and levels of humour. His findings showed that shorter jokes, which tend to be more lexically dense, were rated as less funny than longer, narrative jokes.

There is very little information from Turkey about the comprehension of linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes by EFL learners. This study therefore aims to add to the scarce literature by addressing the following research questions:

1. What is the level of competence of EFL learners in understanding linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes?

2. Is there gender difference in comprehending linguistic ambiguities (including three subcategories) in language-based jokes?

3. Among the three types, what type of joke do learners consider the funniest and the least funny?

Methodology

A quantitative method was used to measure the comprehension of linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes by Turkish EFL students. A joke test comprising 12 English jokes was given to the students. The sample consisted of 70 randomly- chosen EFL learners studying at Karadeniz Technical University in Trabzon, Turkey. Of these, 47 (67 %) were female and 23 (33%) were male, with an age range of 18 - 24. All 70 were intermediate students

of English and can therefore be considered to have no difficulty in reading and understanding English.

The English Joke Test

In constructing the English joke test, 12 jokes were chosen from a variety of sources and were classified into jokes of phonological, lexical, and syntactic types. This classification was based on the taxonomy of Lew (1976, 1977) of linguistic jokes as phonological, syntactic, and lexical. Each category was represented by four jokes. Appendix A provides a sample of the classification of jokes.

First, students were asked to read each joke and indicate whether they understood it by answering yes or no. If the answer was negative, they were told to proceed to the next joke. If they answered yes, they were to indicate the punch line of the joke and explain why it was humorous. Students also rated the funniness of the jokes on a scale from 1 (not funny) to 4 (very funny).

To score the answers, one point was given to each participant who stated they have understood the joke and wrote the correct explanation. However, if one failed to give the correct explanation and only stated that he or she understood the joke, he or she was given 0, 5 points. Funniness ratings, if any, were not evaluated if the students stated they did not understand the joke.

Results

In order to analyze the level of competence of EFL learners in understanding linguistic ambiguity in jokes, the data were analyzed through descriptive statistics for the overall scores. First, the answers were summed up to an overall score and then converted in to a percentage score. Participants received a score on a 0 to 12 scale, 12 being the highest score students can receive. For each joke type category, the same analysis was performed but this time the scores were calculated out of 4, the highest score the students could receive for each category. Table 1 shows the results:

Table 1

Level of Joke Competence among EFL Learners

Joke type	N	Average score (max 4)	SD	Percentage %
Lexical	70	2,20	1,064	55,18
Syntactic	70	1,76	1,125	44,10
Phonological	69	1,51	,958	37,86
Total	69	(max 12) 5,47	2,57	45,59

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for each joke type category as well as the overall score for three categories. As seen in the table, the total score is a little below average (M=5, 47, %45, 59), suggesting an average level of performance in understanding linguistic ambiguity in jokes. The table also shows that the types of joke also affect students' comprehension of ambiguity in jokes. The results indicate that EFL learners perform better in understanding the jokes composing of lexical ambiguity than in the jokes composing of phonological and syntactic ambiguity, as illustrated by the mean scores (2,20> 1,76 > 1,51) in Table 2.

Table 2

Joke Competence According to Gender

Joke Category	Gender	N	M	SD	t	p
Lexical	M	23	2,2174	1,16605	,053	,956
	F	47	2,2022	1,02487		
Syntactic	M	23	2,3696	1,09977	3,37	,001*
	F	47	1,4681	1,02366		
Phonological	M	23	1,6087	1,09707	,574	,568
	F	46	1,4674	,89071		
Total	M	23	6,19	2,85	1,573	,124
	F	46	5,10	2,36		

* indicates p < .05

The next analysis was aimed at investigating the gender difference in comprehending linguistic ambiguities (including three subcategories) in language-based jokes. In comparison of the score means of two groups of learners, a t-test proved that gender effect is only significant in syntactic jokes (*p =0.001 <.05), although males achieved higher scores in all three categories. Probably, it can be inferred that, as also concluded by Hsin (2006), male learners in this study possess better grammatical knowledge and a larger amount of English lexicon, in comparing to female counterparts.

Table 3.

Means of Perceptions of Funniness of Jokes by Joke Type

Joke type	N	M	SD
Lexical	9	2,5000	,69597
Syntactic	5	1,9500	,81777
Phonological	1	2,0000	.

An examination of the means and standard deviations in Table 3 indicate that lexical jokes were perceived as most funny, with a mean on a four-point scale of 2,50. Syntactic jokes were

considered as least funny, with a mean of 1, 95. The joke identified as the funniest was Joke 7 (a lexical joke, see Appendix A), with a mean rating of 3, 23. The participant considered Joke 9 (a phonological joke, see Appendix A) the least funny (M=2, 12). The overall pattern suggests that students find lexical jokes the funniest and phonological jokes least funny.

Conclusion

Bell (2007) states that humour is culturally and linguistically complex and sophisticated. Reading and understanding jokes in a foreign language is clearly different from reading a normal text and requires linguistic as well as cultural knowledge. To be able to understand English jokes, one must have a certain level of English proficiency and an awareness of the culture associated with the language. Hsin (2006) reports that non-native speakers of English often have difficulty understanding whether a piece of text is joke. Even when they understand, they still misunderstand and misinterpret the jokes due to linguistic ambiguity inherent in jokes. The present study investigated the comprehension of linguistic ambiguity in language-based jokes by Turkish EFL learners. The findings showed that Turkish EFL learners achieved an average level of performance in understanding linguistic ambiguity in jokes.

It was also found that the type of joke affected students' comprehension of ambiguity in jokes. Among the jokes given, the hierarchy of difficulty is lexical, syntactic and phonological jokes. Namely, learners performed better in understanding the jokes composing of lexical ambiguity than in the jokes composing of syntactic and phonological ambiguity. An explanation would be that jokes of these three types require varied abilities of comprehension of EFL learners. The lexical type is on the word level and is easier to understand than the syntactic and 4phonological types. This finding is congruent with those reported by Hsin (2006).

The results also revealed that gender factor affects the performance of the joke test. In general, males achieved better scores in all three categories than females. Besides, the results of T-test proved that males performed better on syntactic jokes in comparing the three categories of the jokes. One explanation is that male learners in this study have better grammatical knowledge compared to females. Another finding was that students found lexical jokes the funniest and syntactic jokes least funny.

The findings of this study imply a need for language teachers to incorporate jokes into the language classroom. As a teaching tool, humour in the form of jokes may help learners gain a better knowledge of the use of language and the culture associated with it. As Ziyaeemehr and Abdullah (2011) state "avoiding humor in the classroom may limit the learners' access to L2 linguistic and cultural resources inherent in humorous exchanges." Many learners in this study

reported that they did not understand the jokes or consider them funny due to lack of vocabulary and grammar. Despite its limited scope, this study showed that there is a case for using jokes in language classrooms. As Trachtenberg (1979) notes, humour in the form of jokes can be used to teach and reinforce grammar, vocabulary and speaking.

References

Askildson, L. (2005). Effects of humor in the language classroom: Humor as a pedagogical tool in theory and practice. *Arizona Working Papers in SLAT*, *12*, 45-61.

Attardo, S., Attardo, D. H., Baltes, P., & Petray, M. J. (1994). The linear organization of jokes: Analysis of two thousand texts. *HUMOR: International Journal of Humor Research*.

Bell, N. D. (2007). How native and non-native English speakers adapt to humor in intercultural interaction. *Humor*, *20*(1), 27.

Bell, N. D. (2009). Learning about and through humor in the second language classroom. *Language Teaching Research*, *13*(3), 241-258.

Bucaria, C. (2004). Lexical and syntactic ambiguity as a source of humor: The case of newspaper headlines. *Humor*, *17*(3), 279-310.

Carrell, A. (1997). Joke competence and humor competence. *Humor-International Journal of Humor Research*, *10*(2), 173-186.

Chiaro, D. (1992). The language of Joke: analyzing verbal play. New York: Routledge.

de Matos, F. G. (1974). *Humo (u) r, a neglected feature in foreign language teaching*. ERIC Clearinghouse.

Deneire, M. (1995). Humor and foreign language teaching. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*.

Hayati, A. M., Shooshtari, Z. G., & Shakeri, N. (2011). Using humorous texts in improving reading comprehension of EFL learners. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, *1*(6), 652-661.

Hodson, R. (2008). Challenges for EFL learners in understanding English humour: a pilot study. *研究紀要*, (9), 25-36.

Hsin, Ai-li. 2006, Comprehension of English Jokes in Chinese EFL Learners. 2006 International Conference on English Instruction and Assessment. April. Chung-Cheng Univ. Jia-yi, ROC.

Lew, R. (1997). Towards a taxonomy of linguistic jokes. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, *31*, 123-152.

Maurice, K. (1988). Laugh while learning another language: techniques that are functional and funny. In *English Teaching Forum* (Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 20-25).

Nguyễn, H. H. (2012). *Examining linguistic ambiguity as a source of constructing funniness in English verbal jokes* (Doctoral dissertation, H.: ĐHNN).

Ross, A. (1998). *The Language of Humor*. London: Routledge.

Stroud, R. (2013). The Laughing EFL Classroom: Potential Benefits and Barriers. *English Language Teaching*, *6*(10), p72.

Schmitz, J. R. (2002). Humor as a pedagogical tool in foreign language and translation courses. *Humor*, *15*(1), 89-114.

Trachtenberg, S. (1979). Joke-telling as a tool in ESL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 89-99.

Ziyaeemehr, A., Kumar, V., & Abdullah, M. (2011). Use and non-use of humor in academic ESL classrooms. *English Language Teaching*, *4*(3), p111.

APPENDIX A: Joke Categorization

1. Lexical Jokes

1.1. One day a man was walking and bumped into a building and was taken into a hospital.
When he woke up, the doctor said to him. "Sir, your brain has been divided into two parts.
The left part of your brain has nothing right and the right part of your brain has nothing left!"

1.2. "I have changed my mind."

   "Thank Heavens! Does it work any better now?" **(Joke 7)**

2. Syntactic Jokes

2.1. A homeowner in Minehead, England, wished to return an empty coal sack to his coal
delivery man, so he left a note on the front door saying, "Empty sack in kitchen." When he
returned he found a pile of coal on his kitchen floor.

2.2. A pretty girl walked into a little dress shop and said to the manager:

   "May I try on that two-piece suit in the window?"

   "Go right ahead" said the manager, "It might help business."

3. Phonological Jokes

3.1. "Waiter!"

   "Yes, sir."

   "What's this?"

   "It's bean soup, sir."

   "No matter what it's been. What is it now?"

3.2. I keep reading 'The Lord of the Rings' over and over. I guess it's just force of hobbit.

(Joke 9)