Verbal Humor in American Situational Comedy the Office: Semantics View

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Abstract: The semantic analysis attempts to define and completely comprehend the word’s meaning. The purpose of this study was to delve into the types of lexical relations in verbal humor and investigate the humor styles of the American sitcom The Office. This study used a qualitative design to collect data on verbal humor. The findings revealed that The Office frequently uses homonym, polysemy, hyponym, antonym and synonym in the construction of humor and potentially creates a humorous effect. Additionally, the humor style of the sitcom is sarcastic humor. It can be concluded that linguistically the use of homonym, polysemy, hyponym, antonym and synonym in the punchline provides an amusing effect and generates a comical situation. On the other hand, it also creates an ambiguity effect which results in a double interpretation of certain jokes due to the multiple meanings of a single word.

INTRODUCTION

Humor can be found in our daily lives through television, radio, books, and from our environment (e.g. school, workplace, etc). Humor is a form of communication that serves as a symbol of social boundaries (Salem et al., 2020). In other words, humor is defined as anything that can make people laugh, whether it is audio or visual (Wahyuni et al., 2019). According to Attardo (Straßburger, 2019) humor is defined as an activity, event, or object which involves a creative use of language elements that results in laughter. Thus, the important aim of humor is to obtain a playful result by using language elements in speech.

Humor can be expressed through physical gestures or verbal language (Romadlani, 2021). Further, verbal humor is usually conveyed through rhetorical techniques of sarcasm, mockery, irony, puns, etc (Hidayati, 2019). A sitcom is an entertaining show that refers to comedic situations with awkwardness and dark jokes (Sarnika, 2018). The Office is an American sitcom, depicted the daily lives of employees at a company called Dunder Mifflin Paper Company.

Furthermore, verbal humor uses linguistic aspects as a humor construction. On the other hand, the primary objective of semantics is to determine the proper meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence and to eliminate any misunderstanding that might lead the reader to believe that a word has multiple meanings (Sasri et al., 2020). The meaning of language units like words, phrases, sentences, and discourse can be classified not only by its component features but also by its relationship to other words (Setianingrum et al., 2021). This is referred to as lexical relation.
When people laugh at a joke, it means they understand what the joke is about. According to Moram (Jiang et al., 2019) cultural differences in humor perception have a direct impact on humor usage. In fact, the audience, particularly English learners, sometimes does not perceive a joke as an amusing. This occurs because the context and unusual words used in the construction of humor. These issues led to the development of this study. English learners, in particular, will inevitably struggle to understand a joke in English language.

However, previous studies had discovered and found the linguistic structural of verbal humor in various parameters such as absurd interpretation used by Dodit Maulana an Indonesian Stand Up’s comedy (Mulyadi et al., 2021). Another study was conducted to analyze various of verbal humor in different perspective of certain area of studies and theories such as semantic (Nurfajri et al., 2021; Sun, 2020), and analyze verbal humor with GTVH and SSTH perspectives (Mansour, 2021).

Therefore, this research seeks to fill the gap on deeply analyzing the lexical relation from a semantic perspective on verbal humor. This research using a theory proposed by Cruse (1986) about semantic specifically on types of five lexical relation (synonym, polysemy, antonym, hyponym, homonym). Another, to acknowledge the style of American humor used in the sitcom The Office, this research also shed lights on the aspect of Incongruity theory especially with the analysis on the punch-line and the set-up.

THEORETICAL SUPPORT

Language is a system that someone must learn from other members of the language speaker's community (Sasri et al., 2020). In a conversation, both interlocutors' understanding must be moving in the same direction. The hearer is inevitable to misinterpret what the speaker intended to convey because a word can have multiple meanings. However, Palmer (Szymański, 2019) defines semantic as the study of how words can have different meanings for different people based on their experimental and emotional backgrounds. According to Cruse (Kroeger, 2018), semantics is the study of how words, phrases, and sentences interact to create meaning in language.

As Cruse stated, lexical relation is used to analyze the exact meaning and make certain utterances clear, so the author chose to use the five types of lexical relations: homonymy, polysemy, synonymy, antonym, and hyponymy. A joke is an example of verbal humor. Jokes are made up of various linguistic elements that elicit humorous utterances and cause people to laugh. Humor can be produced by semantic ambiguity; this humor may contain multiple meanings that are interpreted incorrectly or incongruously. Incongruity theory, first proposed by Kant, holds that the punchline and set-up are the elements of humor. The set-up, creates a situation that introduces the hearer into the story framework, and the punchline elicits humorous utterances. The punchline brings the incongruity that leads by the set-up (Xie et al., 2019).

However, humor does not always translate across cultures. Again, to get an incongruous joke, the audience must recognize a specific concept or knowledge base (Henrigillis et al., 2021). Due to the different cultural backgrounds and the use of unusual linguistic constructions, particular humor experienced by English learners may not be understood as being funny. As a result, the incongruity theory will be used in this study to measure the humor utterance style through the punch line and set up of jokes.

Humor Styles of American Sitcom

According to Knox et al. (2019), the book "Friends: A Reading of the Sitcom" exposes the development of the US sitcom over several decades. Furthermore, Henri
Bergson believes that comedy is a game, a game that imitates life. In other words, humour and comedy provide a useful framework for understanding life, which brings us to the concept of sitcom. On the other hand, Arthur Schopenhauer stated that all humour is based on the perception of incongruity. Something that does not fit our usual accepted behavior, customs, and patterns which perceives as ‘silly’ (Knox et al., 2019).

METHOD

To analyze the study, the researcher applied a qualitative method by directly observing the data sources. The researcher took 14 episodes in the season 4 with the length of the duration each episode is 25 minutes. This research also uses content analysis to determine the meaning of word or phrases.

There are some procedures which used in this study to collect the data, (1) first step is watching the sitcom to comprehend each verbal humor, (2) reading and observing the dialogue to analyze the verbal humor from the sitcom’s script, (3) finding five types of lexical relation use in the sitcom The Office script and find the punch line and the set up from the jokes, (4) writing the types of lexical relation then analyze the meaning relation of the jokes, as well as analyze the kind of styles of humor in The Office.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Result

The results of Lexical Relation in Verbal Humor from Sitcom “The Office Season 4” are homonym, polysemy, hyponym, antonym and synonym.

a. Homonym

Homonym lexemes have the same form of spelling, phonology and spoken word but has unrelated sense or different meanings.

Excerpt #1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Isn’t 7 pm a little late for a lunch party?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Lunch party? It’s supposed to say launch party! What is wrong with you?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Angela is in charge of organizing the party to celebrate the new project, and she asks Phyllis for help with a banner for the event. Unfortunately, Phyllis misheard Angela's words, which were meant to be launch not lunch. Kevin then noticed a banner that said Lunch Party and states that a lunch party at 7 pm is too late. From the sentence above, the word lunch (lʌntʃ) sound similar like launch (lɔːntʃ) yet have different meanings. According to the Oxford Dictionary, a 'lunch' is a midday meal, while a 'launch' is the process of making a new activity or product available to the public for the first time. These two words raise ambiguities, especially in this context. This is an amusing statement because Phyllis misunderstands what Angela said, which confuses everyone in the room.

b. Polysemy

The term "polysemy" is used to describe a word with multiple related meanings or senses.

Excerpt #2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>So, I am about to do something very bold at this job that I’ve never done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>before. Try.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3
Jim will be meeting a potential client and trying to make a good impression in order to obtain a good position in his workplace. Furthermore, he aspires to be brave enough to take chances and face duties that he has never done before. The term bold has numerous meanings in related contexts. According to Oxford dictionary, the word bold has the following connected meaning or concept of meaning; ‘bold\(^1\)’ as someone who brave and confident while ‘bold\(^2\)’ is to have powerful or clean appearance. Those meanings share ideas or concepts that are easily observed and have a strong appearance. Those connected sense are nonetheless tied to lexical meanings, which give rise to various and ambiguous meanings. The overlap in meaning and various interpretations generate a humorous effect.

c. **Hyponym**

Hyponym is a relationship between two words occurs when the meanings of the two words are closely linked. The relationship is one of inclusion.

*Excerpt #38*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Oh, I’m sorry, could you put her on please?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy’s phone operator</td>
<td>Dude, this is a <strong>Wendy’s restaurant</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Excerpt #39*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>OK Michael, you know what? I might have someone for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Oh really? What’s her name? <strong>Burger King</strong>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kevin suggested that Michael phone his girlfriend Wendy. But since Kevin is lying about the girl, offer him Wendy's restaurant's phone number instead. Whereas excerpt 39 is another example of a hyponym. Pam is attempting to introduce her friend to Michael, but Michael is skeptical of her and believes it is another name for fast food restaurant, Burger King. Wendy’s and Burger King are hyponym for fast food restaurant. Because it exploits Michael's perception of the word Wendy’s, which is used to be a girl's name other than the name of the restaurant, the usage of a hyponym in this context produces a hilarious utterance. In the excerpt 39, Wendy’s and Burger King are specific terms known as hyponyms (specific), and fast-food restaurants are superordinate terms known as hypernyms (general).

d. **Antonym**

Antonym refers to the word of oppositeness in meaning.

*Excerpt #47*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td><strong>Ladies and gentleman</strong>, would you please open your supply catalogs and kindly turn to page 85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Michael uses a similar antonym in the word ladies/gentlemen. Those words represent to call a different gender of people in the room. The word ladies and gentlemen to his client in formal way. According to the Oxford Dictionary, ladies/girl means a word used to mean woman whereas gentlemen/guy refer to a man.

e. **Synonym**

Synonyms are described as having the same meaning and refers to similarity of meaning.
Excerpt #52

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Utterance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>You know, I want this to be cutting edge. I want it to be fast, quick cuts, you know, youthful, sort of a MTV on crack kind of thing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Michael hires a producer to assist him in shooting the video. Michael, on the other hand, used the words fast and quick, which added a lot of repetition and redundancy to the straightforward instructions. According to the Oxford dictionary, the words fast and quick signify moving or happening in a short period of time. These two words, particularly in this context, might elicit amusement due to their use of repetitive terms and exaggerated effects in describing or expressing something. Because the employment of synonyms and word choice creates the playfulness of the jokes, this sentence generates a hilarious utterance.

B. Discussions

The Office mostly used two types of lexical devices in the construction of humor; homonym and polysemy. The use of polysemy in the construction of humor as the term "bold" has multiple different meanings. Those meanings share ideas or concepts that are easily observed and have a strong appearance. The overlap in meaning and various interpretations generate an ambiguity that leads to laughter. While homonyms also create an ambiguous context as the word 'lunch' and 'launch' sound similar yet have different meanings.

Further, a single word can change the whole meaning and create an incongruity in the multiple interpretations. This study found that the use of polysemy and homonym in the construction of humor potentially creates a humorous effect. This occurs because homonym and polysemy word have multiple meaning and hearer possibly give various interpretation of the jokes then makes it amusing. Lexical ambiguity follows if a word has more than one interpretation and sense (Charina, 2017). It happens in homonymous and polysemous words. Otherwise, ambiguity can be caused by overlapping in meaning and lead to confusion for the hearer resulting from the double interpretations. This study also sheds light on a component of Incongruity theory, specifically the investigation of the set-up and punch-line of verbal humor to determine the style of humor.

CONCLUSION

The Office mostly used two types of lexical devices in the construction of humor; homonym and polysemy. Linguistically, the use of homonym and polysemy in the construction of humor creates an ambiguous meaning and lead to a humorous effect. The Office style of humor is sarcastic, and the humor is constructed using metaphor terms. The sarcastic punchline in the construction of humor also includes a metaphor term, which is employing the word not in the literal sense or in contrast with the actual state. The use of absurdity in a metaphor word, particularly in the punchline, generates an incongruity and results in a comical situation.

On the other hand, those types of linguistic in the construction of humor also creates an ambiguity effect which makes hearer difficult to understand a joke and make jokes unfunny for English learners (foreigners) due to the many meanings of a single word. Finally, this study suggest that future research should focus on what extent English learner understand cross-cultural humor. Further, certain jokes are inevitably influenced by
politics, culture, and social life, resulting in the humor representing a specific country and becoming unique. The analysis could be applied to another branch of linguistics.

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