

POLYSEMY AND ITS ROLE IN UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH HUMOR: A  
COGNITIVE-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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**Annotatsiya.** Polisemiya, ya'ni bir leksik birlik ichida bir-biriga bog'liq bo'lgan bir nechta ma'nolarning birga mavjudligi nafaqat ingliz tili lug'at boyligining asosiy jihati, balki hazil yaratishning asosiy mexanizmlaridan biridir. Ushbu tezis polisemiyaning ingliz tilidagi hazil, xususan, so'z o'yinlari, qo'shma'noli iboralar va lingvistik o'yinlarni yaratish va tushunishga qanday hissa qo'shishini o'rganadi. Tadqiqot kognitiv-pragmatik yondashuvdan foydalangan holda ingliz joklari, sitkomlari va ijtimoiy tarmoqlardagi haqiqiy misollarni tahlil qiladi. Topilmalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, muvaffaqiyatli hazil tinglovchining polise mantik so'zning turli ma'nolari o'rtasidagi siljishni taniy olishiga bog'liq. Bu tanib olish lingvistik kompetentsiyani va madaniy bilimlarni talab qiladi. Shuningdek, tadqiqot o'zbek tilida so'zlashuvchi ingliz tili o'quvchilari uchun ta'sirlarni muhokama qiladi; ular til tuzilmasidagi va madaniy birlashmalardagi farqlar tufayli bunday hazilni tushunishda ko'pincha qiyinchilikka duch kelishadi. Tezis polisemiyaning hazilli misollar orqali o'rgatish so'z boyligini o'zlashtirish va madaniy xabardorlikni oshirishi mumkin degan xulosaga keladi.

**Kalit so'zlar.** Polisemiya, hazil, so'z o'yinlari (punlar), lingvistik o'yin, kognitiv pragmatika, ingliz tilini o'qitish

**Abstract.** Polysemy, defined as the coexistence of multiple related meanings within a single lexical unit, represents not only a fundamental aspect of English vocabulary but also a primary mechanism for generating humor. This thesis examines how polysemy contributes to the creation and understanding of English humor, specifically puns, double entendres, and wordplay. Using a cognitive-pragmatic approach, the study analyzes authentic examples from English jokes, sitcoms, and social media. The findings reveal that successful humor depends on the listener's ability to recognize the shift between different meanings of a polysemous word. This recognition requires both linguistic competence and cultural knowledge. The study also discusses the implications for Uzbek learners of English, who often struggle to understand such humor due to differences in language structure and cultural associations. The thesis concludes that teaching polysemy through humorous examples can enhance vocabulary acquisition and cultural awareness.

**Keywords.** Polysemy, humor, puns, wordplay, cognitive pragmatics, English language teaching.

Humor is an essential part of human communication. It makes conversations enjoyable, relieves tension, and builds social bonds. However, understanding humor in a foreign language is not easy. (Cruse, Alan. *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, -P.78-85.) One of the main sources of difficulty is polysemy. When a speaker uses a word with two meanings at the same time, the result can be humorous. The listener must recognize both meanings and appreciate the unexpected shift. English is particularly rich in polysemous words. Many English jokes, puns, and witty remarks are based on the double meanings of words. For example, the joke "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana" plays on two meanings of the word "flies" (verb: moves through air; noun: small insects) and two meanings of "like" (preposition: similar to; verb: enjoy). A listener who does not recognize these meanings will not understand the joke. For Uzbek learners of English, such humor is especially challenging. Uzbek belongs to the Turkic language family, while English belongs to the Indo-European family. The polysemy patterns in the two languages are different. What is humorous in English may not be humorous in Uzbek, and vice versa. (Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, -P.3-15).

This thesis aims to examine the role of polysemy in understanding English humor. The research questions are: How does polysemy create humor? What types of humor are based on polysemy? Why do Uzbek learners struggle with such humor?

**Polysemy as a Basis for Humor.** Polysemy creates humor through the unexpected shift between meanings. When a word has multiple meanings, the listener usually selects the most likely meaning based on context. (Nash, Walter. *The Language of Humour*. London: Longman, 1985, -P.55-62.) The speaker, however, deliberately uses a word that allows two interpretations. The listener starts with one meaning, then suddenly realizes the second meaning. This surprise creates laughter.

Cognitive linguists argue that humor arises from the resolution of incongruity. The listener expects one meaning but encounters another. The brain must resolve the conflict. When the resolution is quick and clever, the result is humor. Polysemy provides the perfect mechanism for this. The same word form carries two meanings. The listener must access both meanings and understand how they relate. For example, consider the joke: "Why did the scarecrow (Dala qo'riqchisi; Daladagi qushlarni qo'rqitish uchun qo'yilgan odam qiyofasidagi qo'rqinch) win an award? Because he was outstanding in his field." The word "outstanding" has two meanings: excellent (figurative) and standing outside (literal). The word "field" also has two meanings: area of expertise and agricultural land. The listener first understands "outstanding in his field" as "excellent in his profession." Then the listener realizes the literal meaning: a scarecrow stands outside in a field. Both meanings are true. The surprise creates humor. Not all polysemy creates humor. For humor to occur, several conditions must be met. First, both meanings must be plausible in the context. Second, the shift between meanings must be sudden. Third, the listener must recognize the shift. If the listener does not know the second meaning, the joke fails. (Redfern, Walter. *Puns*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, -P.30-38.)

Types of Humor Based on Polysemy. Based on the analysis of English humorous texts, three main types of polysemy-based humor can be distinguished.

Type 1: Puns (Homophonic and Homographic). Puns are the most common type of wordplay. A pun uses a word that has two meanings or sounds like another word. Homophonic puns use words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. For example: "I used to be a baker, but I couldn't make enough dough." "Dough" sounds like "dough" (bread mixture) and "doe" (female deer), but here the pun is on "dough" meaning money. Homographic puns use a word with two meanings. For example: "A chicken farmer's favorite car is a coupe." The word "coupe" sounds like "coop" (chicken cage). The listener understands both;

Type 2: Double Entendre. Double entendre is a phrase that has two meanings, one of which is often humorous or risqué. Unlike puns, double entendres are usually longer phrases. For example: "Marriage is a fine institution, but who wants to live in an institution?" The word "institution" has two meanings: a respected organization (Nikoh – hurmatli, muqaddas ijtimoiy tuzum yoki an'ana) and a mental hospital (Ruhiy kasalliklar shifoxonasi, psixiatrik muassasa). The humor comes from the unexpected second meaning;

Type 3: Irony and Sarcasm. Irony depends on the contrast between literal and intended meaning. Polysemy makes irony possible because words have both literal and figurative meanings. For example, someone says "That was a bright idea" after a mistake. The word "bright" literally means shining but figuratively means intelligent. The speaker uses the literal meaning to imply the opposite of the figurative meaning. (Grice, H. Paul. "Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics, Vol. 3: Speech Acts*, edited by Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan, 41-58. New York: Academic Press, 1975, -P.45-48).

The listener must recognize the gap between what is said and what is meant.

Analysis of Examples. This section analyzes authentic examples of polysemy-based humor from various sources.

Example 1: Pun from Social Media. "I'm reading a book on anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down." The word "put down" has two meanings: to place something on a surface and to stop reading. The first meaning suggests the book is so interesting that the reader cannot stop reading. The second meaning suggests the book literally cannot be placed down because of anti-gravity. Both meanings work simultaneously. The humor lies in the unexpected literal interpretation of an idiomatic phrase.

Example 2: Pun from a Sitcom (Friends). Chandler: "I'm not great at the advice. Can I interest you in a sarcastic comment?" The word "interest" has two meanings: to arouse curiosity and to offer something. Chandler offers a sarcastic comment as if it were a product. The humor comes from treating a comment as a commodity. The listener understands both the literal and figurative meanings.

Example 3: Double Entendre from a Joke. "What do you call a fish with no eyes? A fsh." This joke plays on the homophonic relationship between "eyes" and the letter "I". The word "no eyes" sounds like "no I's". Removing the letter "I" from "fish" leaves "fsh". The listener must recognize the sound pattern. This joke requires both linguistic and metalinguistic awareness.

Example 4: Wordplay in Advertising. "Time to re-tire" (tire company slogan). The word "re-tire" is a play on "retire" (stop working) and "tire" (to become weary) and "tire" (the rubber part of a wheel). The slogan suggests that it is time to replace old tires. The multiple meanings create a memorable and clever advertisement. (Attardo, Salvatore. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994, -P.120-128).

These examples show that successful humor depends on the listener's ability to recognize polysemy. A listener who knows only one meaning of each word will not understand the joke.

Implications for Uzbek Learners of English. Understanding polysemy-based humor is difficult for Uzbek learners of English for several reasons.

First, the polysemy patterns in English and Uzbek are different. A word that has two meanings in English may have only one meaning in Uzbek, or vice versa. For example, the English word "light" has meanings that are expressed by different Uzbek words: "yorug'" (illumination), "yengil" (not heavy), "och" (pale). An Uzbek learner who thinks of "light" only as "yorug'" will not understand the pun in "light reading" (yengil o'qish).

Second, cultural associations differ. English humor often references cultural knowledge that Uzbek learners do not have. For example, jokes about cricket, Thanksgiving, or British television require cultural background. Without this background, the polysemy alone is not enough. For example: "I used to play cricket, but I had to stop. I kept getting caught in the slips." "The word 'slips' has two meanings. In cricket, 'slips' is a fielding position behind the batsman (maydondagi himoyachilar turgan pozitsiya). The second meaning is to fall down (yerga sirpanib yiqilish). Only a person who knows cricket can understand the second meaning of this joke." Consider the example "Why did the turkey cross the road? To prove he wasn't chicken!" This joke requires cultural knowledge in two ways. First, turkey is eaten on Thanksgiving. Roasted turkey is considered the main dish of the holiday. Second, the word "chicken" has a double meaning. "Chicken" does not only mean the bird, but it also means "coward" or "afraid". The turkey wants to prove that he is not a chicken, meaning that he is not a coward. Only a person who knows the traditions of Thanksgiving and understands the second meaning of the word "chicken" in English can fully understand this joke.

Third, learners tend to process language literally. They translate word by word. They do not automatically consider alternative meanings. This literal processing prevents them from recognizing the shift that creates humor.

To address these difficulties, teachers can use humorous examples to teach polysemy. When learners encounter a pun, they must think about multiple meanings. This activates deeper processing. Research shows that humor increases motivation and improves memory. Teaching polysemy through jokes makes learning more enjoyable and more effective. Teachers can start with simple puns that use high-frequency words. They can explain both meanings explicitly. They can ask learners to create their own puns. This active production reinforces learning. Over time, learners develop the ability to recognize and appreciate English humor.

This thesis has examined the role of polysemy in understanding English humor. The analysis has shown that polysemy is a major source of humor in English. Puns, double entendres, irony, and

wordplay all depend on the multiple meanings of words. Successful humor requires the listener to recognize the shift between meanings. This recognition requires linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, and cognitive flexibility. The thesis has also discussed the implications for Uzbek learners of English. Learners struggle with polysemy-based humor because the polysemy patterns in English and Uzbek are different, cultural associations differ, and learners tend to process language literally. Teachers can help by using humorous examples to teach polysemy. This approach makes learning more engaging and effective.

In conclusion, polysemy is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also a gateway to understanding humor, culture, and cognition. Teaching polysemy through humor is a promising approach for English language education.

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