TWISTING LINGUISTIC AMBIGUITY IN WRITTEN VERBAL HUMOR: collegehumor.com

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ABSTRACT: Twisting linguistic ambiguity in verbal humor is such a new and unique phenomenon to be studied in the study of linguistics. This study intends to (1) identify the types of twisting linguistic ambiguity used in collegehumor.com, (2) count the frequency of the occurrence of each type of humor, then (3) analyze the probable reasons behind the different frequencies. This study uses descriptive qualitative method by using the researcher as the main instrument. The findings show that the most frequent type that occurs is twisting lexical instrument. The findings show that the most frequent type that occurs is twisting lexical instrument.

Humor, according to Bill Cosby (an actor and comedian) is something which can turn the pain into the laughter and it is something that you can find everywhere (citation). From that statement, it is obvious that people cannot get rid of humor and laughter. People also say that humor is like a place where you can go in everytime you feel exhausted or sad. We also agree that through laughter people can easily forget their problem in a while. Harris (1972:60) as quoted by Shibles assumed that "You can't laugh when you try to laugh-ha-ha-ha-haha! Here was a little fowl not much bigger than a jay-bird laughing herself blind when there wasn't a thing in the round world for to laugh at". One way to elicit laughter is by twisting language when you have a conversation. For example, “In Japanese management, they manage their company in a Japanese way. At the English Department, we teach our students how to depart in an English way” (Kadarisman, 2002: 45). These two utterances can be used to elicit laughter, since they are classified as humors.

Humor itself is classified into two categories: non-verbal and verbal. Non-verbal humor deals with performance (costume, make up, gesture) while verbal humor deals with language. According to Aziz (2009; i) the definition of verbal humor is when comedians twist one meaning of a word or sentence into another meaning. Talking about verbal humor, it also deals with twisting linguistic ambiguity at a particular level -- phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic level; and different levels of ambiguity have different characteristics. One of the examples of ambiguity humor is culture and society mould one's mind. But who wants a mouldy mind?” (Shibles).

In this study, the researcher attempts to explore twisting linguistic ambiguity found in one of the most popular sites, which is www.collegehumor.com. The reason why
the researcher chooses that website is that many people all around the world access it, approximately 1000 up to 23,000 people in almost 26 big countries. Here, the researcher analyzes the twisting linguistic ambiguity found at HUMOR US column since we can find many examples on that column. According to Seeswoester (2009:03) “…few studies comprehensively explore patterns and frequencies of specific types of linguistic ambiguity, especially in the context of language-based jokes”. That is why the researcher expects that this study would be useful for everyone who is interested in studying humors.

This study intends to identify the types of twisting linguistic ambiguity used in collegehumor.com, count the frequency of the occurrence of each type of humor, then analyze the probable reasons behind the different frequencies.

METHOD

The researcher conducted a descriptive qualitative study that analyzed what kind of twisting linguistic ambiguity found in Humor Us at collegehumor.com. According to Mack and Woodsong (2005:03), the characteristics of qualitative research are seeking for exploring phenomena, using more flexible instruments, analyzing the written data (collected from audio or video recording, field notes, and transcripts). While descriptive study according to Jacobs (2010) in his educational research recognizes and identifies a topic to be studied, selecting an appropriate sample of participants, collects valid and reliable data, and reports conclusions.

The researcher only uses the data from Humor Us column since the humor in this column usually twists the linguistic ambiguity. The data were taken from July 2012 edition to March 2013 edition. The researcher took the data which are in a form of sentences in each edition.

In this study, the researcher herself was the main instrument in collecting the data. The researcher was supported by a laptop to access the site and write the items there. Then, the data analysis of the study were done in three steps; coding (giving the name in each data), data displaying (Identifying and discussing the types of twisting linguistic ambiguity in terms of their structural levels then counting the frequency of each type of twisting linguistic ambiguity), drawing probable reasons and concluding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Types of Linguistic Ambiguity in Humor Us column at collegehumor.com a.
Twisting Phonological Ambiguity
Twisting phonological ambiguity deals with homophone (same pronunciation but different spelling and meaning), homograph (same spelling but different meaning and pronunciation), and twisting the juncture. The examples are:

1) Twisting homophone

_I dropped E with the author of the Harry Potter series. I was like, "do you feel anything yet?" And she was like, "no...J/K, rolling!!"

In that data, the writer twists the name of Harry Potter’s author JK Rowling” into _J/K rolling_ since it has the same sound when you pronounce it. The word _Rowling_ can be pronounced as /rʊlɪŋ/, the same pronunciation as the word _rolling_.

2) Twisting homograph

_I make Old Testament jokes like it’s my Job_

The word _Job_ has two meanings, which are work or a man who continued to have faith in God even when God destroys everything in his life. From that sentence, the writer may say that his job is making Old Testament or the word _Job_ belongs to the name of a man that we can find in the Old Testament of the Bible. The word _Job_ has the same spelling but different in meaning and pronunciation. It is pronounced as /dʒɒb/ if it is defined as work, but it is pronounced /dʒəb/ if it is defined as a man who continues his faith in God.

3) Twisting juncture

_Is "Big Love" that show about the hand covering that swings both ways or is that "Bi Glove"?_

In that example, the phrase _Big Love_ and _Bi Glove_ have almost the same pronunciation and this is why the homophone occurs. In a _Big Love_, it is pronounced /bɪ lʌv/, while _Bi Glove_ is pronounced /baɪ glʌv/. Here the writer puts the juncture in a different place of those two phrases. In the phrase _Big Love_, it is between the word _Big_ and _Love_, while in the second phrase it is between the word _Bi_ and _Glove_.

**Twisting Morphological Ambiguity**

Twisting morphological ambiguity, the writer plays on some words, it can be in the form of abbreviation, blending, or multiple process of morphological change. The first example is on abbreviation.
Maybe people would take the #HarryPotter author more seriously if she changed her name from JK Rowling to OMG Rowling?

The writer of that example simply abbreviates the word Just Kidding into JK, while OMG still means Oh My God. The JK here stands for Just Kidding since it is a paradoxical to the word more seriously that precedes. The next is an example of blending,

Website idea – papayapal. Electronically send and receive papayas with your friends.

In that example we can see the word papayapal as the result of blending words papaya and pay pal. If we can pay something through pay pal, we can also send papaya through papayapal.

This is an example of multiple processes, #JustinTimberlake got married? Un-biel-ievable!

That example includes the phonological and morphological process. The word un-biel-ievable comes from blending the words unbelievable and the name of Justin Timberlake’s girlfriend Jessica Biel. The next process is changing the orthography into un-Biel-ievable. This kind of twisting the word unbelievable by blending it with Jessica Biel’s name is unpredictable.

Twisting Lexical Ambiguity

In twisting lexical ambiguity, it involves a manipulation of multiple meanings of a word to arise amusement.

Whenever you get upset at how many followers you have, remember that Jesus only had 12.

The word followers based on the Longman Dictionary has the meaning “someone who believes in a particular system of ideas”. Nowadays in one of the social media, which is twitter, the word follower means a friend that you have in your account. Teenagers nowadays will feel proud if they have many followers in their twitter account. If we look at the second example, it seems like a suggestion that it does not matter if you have few followers since Jesus only had 12. The follower that Jesus had is not like the follower you have on twitter.

Twisting Syntactic Ambiguity

Twisting syntactic ambiguity deals with the manipulation of arrangement of words in a phrase, clause, and sentence that is ambiguous.
"Jennifer Love Hewitt" — Cavewoman named Jennifer, professing her love for Hewitt

Jennifer Love Hewitt is the name of an actress. However, in that sentence the writer defines that name into a sentence whose meaning is Cavewoman named Jennifer, professing her love for Hewitt. Jennifer as the subject, love as the verb which has to be added by -s and becomes loves, and Hewitt is the object. Actually, if it has that meaning, the structure of the sentence should be “Jennifer loves Hewitt”, so it can be defined as a woman named Jennifer declares her love for Hewitt.

**Twisting Pragmatic Ambiguity**

The last is twisting pragmatic ambiguity that involves the mistake of the hearer or reader in interpreting the message conveyed by the speaker or writer to make a humorous effect (Aziz, 2009:30).

*So if I'm setting up a Facebook event for my Mayan apocalypse party, and it wants me to pick an "End Time"...........?*

First, on *facebook* there is application of creating event. We can create a certain event and invite our friends through *facebook*. If we want to create an event there should be a date or time when the event is going to be held. Nevertheless, in creating a *facebook* event, we have to put a certain date, but it is written as “end time” because we do not know the exact time of apocalypse. The writer’s intended meaning is the Mayan apocalypse as the usual event or even it is a party, yet the Mayan apocalypse refers to the end of the world where we cannot hold a party on it.

**Miscellaneous**

From the data, the researcher did not only find twisting linguistic ambiguity.

*Heaven is nothing but aisle seats.*

Example three is using a metaphor. A metaphor is a way of describing something by referring to it as something different and suggesting that it has similar qualities to that thing. In that sentence heaven is described as the row of the church’s aisle.
The Frequency of Each Existing Type of Written Verbal Humor in *Humor Us* Column in collegehumor.com

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Twisting phonological ambiguity</th>
<th>Twisting morphological ambiguity</th>
<th>Twisting Lexical Ambiguity</th>
<th>Twisting pragmatic ambiguity</th>
<th>Twisting syntactical ambiguity</th>
<th>Miscellaneous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total of Percentage (%)</td>
<td>11,99</td>
<td>21,1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2,6</td>
<td>5,3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From that table, it is clearly seen that the most frequent types of linguistic ambiguity in *Humor Us* column written humor is *Twisting Lexical Ambiguity* (43% out of 99.99%). The second is *Twisting Morphological Ambiguity* (21, 1%). The third is *Twisting Pragmatic Ambiguity* (16%) The fourth is *Twisting Phonological Ambiguity* (15, 99%). The fifth is miscellaneous (5, 3%). The least frequent one is *Twisting Syntactical Ambiguity* (2, 6%). In conclusion, it is obvious that *Twisting Lexical Ambiguity* has the biggest occurrence on the data.

**Probable Reasons Determining the Different Frequencies of Different Types of *Humor Us* Column at collegehumor.com**

From the table, it can be seen that Twisting Lexical Ambiguity occurs more than other types. The *Humor Us* column writers like to manipulate the multiple meaning of a word in order to arise amusement. The humorists that use this type of twisting linguistic ambiguity can make use of words that have multiple meaning, since the „word” belongs to a small linguistic unit.

From the data, there are 32 items that manipulate Lexical Ambiguity. The sentence that uses that kind of ambiguity can be noticed by looking at a certain word which has more than one meaning so that it arouses an amusement. One of the examples is the word *followers*. In that sentence, followers can be defined as friends we have in our *twitter* account or people who believe in a particular system of ideas. The result will be different if we look at the bigger linguistic unit such as syntax. We have already known that syntax deals with the manipulation of arrangement of words in a phrase, clause, or sentence that is ambiguous which will be more complicated to be twisted. It is not as simple as the meaning of the word like if we twist the lexical ambiguity. It is shown by the table that the percentage of *twisting syntactic Ambiguity* is only 2, 6%. For *Twisting Morphological Ambiguity* which also play on a word occur 21, 1%, higher than that at the syntactic level.

There are some similarities as well as differences in terms of research findings especially dealing with types of twisting linguistic ambiguity in oral verbal humor and written verbal humor compared to Aziz findings (2008). Both studies reveal that twisting phonological ambiguity, twisting lexical ambiguity, and twisting pragmatic ambiguity are employed in humor. In the other hand, this study obviously found that twisting lexical ambiguity particularly contains twisting lexical and the semantic ambiguity, whereas the previous study shows that it consists of twisting polysemy, literal translation, and twisting
connotative meaning into denotative.
In this study we can find the twisting syntactical ambiguity, which is also in line with Pramitaswari (2007) research toward the written verbal humor, while in research about oral verbal humor done by Aziz (2008) we cannot find the twisting syntactical ambiguity. Actually this research finds the new findings which can differentiate the type of linguistic ambiguity in oral verbal humor and written verbal humor.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The researcher concludes that in term of linguistic ambiguity on the structural levels, humors in *Humor Us* column are classified into twisting phonological ambiguity, morphological ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, syntactical ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity. The researcher also obtained another finding which is miscellaneous. The findings show that the most frequent type that occurs is twisting lexical ambiguity. The second place is twisting morphological ambiguity. The third is a type which deals with the contextual meaning that is twisting pragmatic ambiguity. Twisting pragmatic ambiguity also involves the mistake of the hearer or reader in interpreting the message conveyed by the speaker or writer to make a humorous effect. There are 12 examples of the data related to this level of ambiguity. This level of ambiguity usually occurs in written verbal humor and it is rather difficult to be found in oral verbal humor, next is twisting phonological ambiguity. In the data, the humorists like to twist some words which have the same pronunciation. As we all know that in English there are a lot of words which have the same way of pronouncing, so it makes people easy to just twist it.

Twisting syntactical ambiguity occurs less in the data. The humorists rarely twist the structure of the sentence that is why there are only two examples on this type since this type is also more complex than others. Another finding that the researcher finds is miscellaneous. In the data the researcher finds that some humorists twist the English proverbs. It is not directly included in the types of twisting linguistic ambiguity.

The reason why the humorists tend to twist in the lexical level is because it is the small linguistic unit (deals with the word), that is easier to be twisted and there are many sources of producing verbal humor in this type.

From the study, the researcher here suggests that students and lecturers should be more aware of this phenomenon because it is also a part of linguistic study. Then, for people in general, since this research discusses twisting linguistic ambiguity, people can use this method to create humor which can help people in socialization. The comedian who usually
entertains people by using oral verbal humor can also use this method to enrich their way in entertaining people. For other researchers, if they are interested in studying twisting linguistic ambiguity, perhaps they can dig out more the data from other sites since we can find so many sites which contain verbal humor.

REFERENCES


