

ZÁPADOČESKÁ UNIVERZITA V PLZNI

FAKULTA PEDAGOGICKÁ

KATEDRA ANGLICKÉHO JAZYKA

**NEJČASTĚJI POUŽÍVANÉ JAZYKOVÉ PROSTŘEDKY ZA
ÚČELEM DOSAŽENÍ HUMORNÉHO EFEKTU**

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Patrik Vrzal

Plzeň, 2014

UNIVERSITY OF WEST BOHEMIA

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

**THE MOST FREQUENT LANGUAGE MEANS USED WITH
THE AIM TO REACH HUMOROUS EFFECT**

UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

Patrik Vrzal

Plzeň, 2014

Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracoval samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

Plzeň, 15. dubna 2014

.....
vlastnoruční podpis

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to my supervisor, PhDr. Naděžda Stašková, Ph.D., for her patient guidance throughout the completion of this thesis.

ABSTRACT

Vrzal, Patrik. University of West Bohemia. April, 2014. The Most Frequent Language Means with the Aim to Reach Humorous Effect. Supervisor: PhDr. Naděžda Stašková, Ph.D.

The topic of this undergraduate thesis is the most frequent language means with the aim to reach humorous effect. The aim of this work is to discover the frequency of these means with the use of a suitable and practical classification system. The first main section, the theoretical background, describes the problematic of definition of humour, the approaches to linguistic theories of humour and explains the most common and agreed upon classification of linguistic theories of humour – the tripartite division into *incongruity* theories, *superiority* or *aggression* theories, and *release* or *relief* theories. The main focus is the incongruity theory and it is further divided into *structural ambiguity* (Phonetics, Morphology, Graphology, Lexis, Syntax), and *contextual incongruity* (Semantics, Pragmatics, Discourse, Register).

This work also contains an analysis which applies the proposed theoretical division on a selected material to uncover the most frequent linguistic means of English humour. An English survey, which revealed the 50 funniest jokes, was selected as a source material and the results confirmed that the incongruity is the most frequent element. Specifically, lexical ambiguity and semantic incongruity were the most common means to reach a humorous effect, as either one of them, or a combination of both, appeared in 70% of the jokes. The analysis also demonstrates that often two or more linguistic means create the humorous effect of a joke and it is not always possible to classify it under just one category.

Keywords: linguistic means of English humour, humorous effect, incongruity, superiority, release theories, phonetics, morphology, graphology, lexis, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, discourse, register, jokes, ambiguity, categories

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	2
2.1 THE “DEFINITION” OF HUMOR	2
2.2 LINGUISTIC THEORIES OF HUMOR	3
2.3 INCONGRUITY THEORY	4
2.3.1 <i>Structural ambiguity</i>	5
2.3.1.1 Phonetics	6
2.3.1.2 Spoonerisms, malapropisms, mondegreens and eggcorns	8
2.3.1.3 Morphology	9
2.3.1.4 Graphology	10
2.3.1.5 Lexis	11
2.3.1.6 Syntax	12
2.3.2 <i>Contextual incongruity</i>	12
2.3.2.1 Semantics	13
2.3.2.2 Pragmatics	14
2.3.2.3 Discourse	15
2.3.2.4 Register	16
2.4 SUPERIORITY THEORY	17
2.5 PSYCHIC RELEASE	18
3 METHODS OF RESEARCH	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
4 ANALYSIS	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
RESULTS	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
CONCLUSION	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.
PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH	ERROR!
BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.	
REFERENCES	ERROR! BOOKMARK NOT DEFINED.

1 INTRODUCTION

Humor is a phenomenon that has existed and has been noticed by many people for a long time. Many people are experiencing it on regular basis, listening to other when they tell a funny story that has happened to them, telling a joke to a friend, watching a comedy movie, or some have even devoted their entire live to humor and have a career as professional comedians. Yet the precise definition that would cover humor in all of its forms and shapes is still to be formulated. Humor has proven to be an incredibly complex and difficult matter when it comes to attempts to describe and define it. Many theories have been developed by theorists and experts over the years in various fields of human understanding. The fact that perception of humor can be, and undeniably is, a matter of a personal opinion complicates the endeavors even further.

Probably most forms of humor are firmly connected with the ability of people to communicate via the use of language. Linguistics is the science that studies language, therefore it should be possible to study this phenomenon from the linguistic point of view, to find the most agreed upon theory of humor, to try to categorize it, explain the means that create the humorous effects and find the most frequent ones. These are the main reasons for the choice of this topic.

The chapter *Theoretical background* begins with brief explanations of the problematic of defining humour and the approaches to linguistic theories of humour. This chapter mainly focuses on the description of the most common linguistic classification of humour. The main part of this chapter is the *incongruity theory* and its division into *structural ambiguity* and *contextual incongruity*, which is explained and even further divided into several subcategories supplemented with suitable examples. This chapter also describes the *superiority* and *release* theories.

The third chapter, *Methods of research*, describes the working procedure, the reason for the choice of literature as a theoretical background and the choice of the material for the analysis. Chapter four contains the actual analysis where the theoretical classification and findings are applied on the 50 jokes to determine which of the linguistic means of humour appeared most frequently, how they were realized and presents the *results*. The work ends with a *conclusion* of the whole research and presents a brief suggestion for a *pedagogical implications* and *further research*. *Summary* in Czech language is included at the end.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The “definition” of humor

Before discussing linguistic theories of humor it may be helpful to address one metatheoretical issue which is the definition of the humor itself. Here are few examples of definitions of the word ‘humor’ from various easily accessible sources:

- (1) “Humour or humor (American English spelling) is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement.” (Wikipedia)
- (2) “The ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is amusing, comical, incongruous, or absurd.” (The Free Dictionary)
- (3) “the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny” (Merriam-Webster, dictionary)
- (4) “the ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being funny” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online)

These definitions mostly present the effects of humor, effects like amusement, laughter or being funny, and that it is a human ability to experience them. But even in these brief definitions a theorist may find something to disagree with. For example, Salvatore Attardo argues, in his *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, that the assumption that what makes people laugh is funny and what is funny makes people laugh is incorrectly symmetrical as laughter can also be a sign of being nervous or embarrassed. And that it leads to humor being identified as a mental phenomenon with laughter being its neurophysiological manifestation.

Attardo proposes that an idea of developing some unifying general theory of humor may actually be impossible. He states that the problem is simple: “What counts as ‘humor’?” For a viable **essentialist theory** (discussed in unit 2.2) the choice of the corpus of phenomena as the basis for definitions is necessary, but in the case of theory of humor, according to Attardo, this presents a serious issue. The number of various fields and disciplines humor can be involved in and their dissimilarity is just too great. Attardo (1994) provides a fitting example:

Moreover, different disciplines see the issues differently: where the psychologist sees indifferent manifestations of “humor,” the folklorist or the literary critic see “genres” like the joke, the humorous anecdote, the tall tale,

etc. Thus, in transporting findings and methodologies, researchers must be careful to evaluate the scope of the research they face correctly. (p. 5)

Greame Ritchie, in *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, shares a similar opinion to Attardo. He claims it would be very difficult to create an extremely general theory, which he terms *universalist*, that would cover all examples within the chosen areas of humor. Again, the problem lies within the vast and highly varied array of data, or as Ritchie (2004) phrases it: “To cast a theoretical roof over such a broad church without a reasonably detailed descriptions of the workings of the individual types of humor is very ambitious” (p. 8). He then proposes an approach he calls *descriptive* which aims to describe thoroughly the various genres of humor. Even though Ritchie seems to prefer this approach, he also mentions its main disadvantage: the acquired data would probably be too specific for the particular area of the humorous genre to find any commonalities in the other classes of jokes that it could be compare it to.

2.2 Linguistic theories of humor

Although it seems that the theorists have not yet agreed upon a general theory that would describe and define humor as a whole, there are some common and frequently occurring theories and classifications of the linguistic means of humor. Attardo (1994, p. 1) divides them into three categories:

1. Essentialist theories
2. Teleological theories
3. Substantialist theories

Essentialist theories aim to explore the necessary and sufficient conditions in which the phenomenon occurs and to define the basis for, or ‘essence’ of humor. Teleological theories describe what the aim of a phenomenon is, and how it forms and establishes the mechanisms of the phenomenon. Substantialist theories try to find a common factor of what is humorous in a particular area or context of humor.

Faced with the problem of describing a bicycle, an essentialist theory would describe it, in part, as a lever and a mechanism to redistribute animal force. A teleological theory would describe it as a means of transportation, and a

substantialist theory would describe it as an arrangement of wheels, pedals, a frame, etc. (Attardo, 1994, p. 2)

These theories all share in common, according to Attardo, that they account for large scale phenomena by reducing them to simpler ones and that they use data outside of the corpus to establish the theory. Attardo also adds, that this classification is only a heuristic tool, in a sense that it should only help the potential research, because each theory may end up incorporating elements of the other types. Most of the linguistic theories are, however, essentialist, claimed by Attardo (1994, p. 2) and also observed by Ritchie (2004, p. 10).

The most common classification, and the most suited for the purposes of this work, seems to be the division into three specific groups: *incongruity* theories, *hostility* theories and *release* theories. This classification is proposed, with slight variations, by several theorists and shares the most similarities. Here are few examples:

- Raskin (1985): **incongruity** theories, **superiority/aggression** theories and **relief/release** theories.
- Attardo (1994): **Cognitive** (Incongruity, Contrast), **Social** (Hostility, Aggression, Superiority, Triumph, Derision, Disparagement) and **Psychoanalytical** (Release, Sublimation, Liberation, Economy)
- Ross (1998): **incongruity** theory (structural ambiguity, the unexpected), **superiority** theory and **psychic release**

2.3 Incongruity Theory

Incongruity is probably the most common aspect of linguistic means of humor. Ritchie (2004) describes it as “most widely supported candidate for the role of ‘essential ingredient’ in humor” (p. 46). This theory mostly focuses on the element of surprise and the conflict between what is expected and what actually happens. Cambridge Dictionaries Online come with this definition when the word ‘incongruous’ is searched: “unusual or different from what is around or from what is generally happening”. And this seems to be precisely how most of the humor is generated, by its tendency to break the conventions and to differ from what is generally expected to happen. The other term that is often associated with incongruity in humor is ‘resolution’. The proposal is, as Attardo (1994) or Ritchie (2004) summarizes, that incongruity alone is not sufficient enough to create humor, and that the incongruity must be

‘resolved’ for humor to be perceived. In other words, the act of realization of the incongruity is also important for effectiveness of the humorous effect. This has been proposed by several theorists and has been called the *incongruity-resolution* theory. It might be appropriate to include an opinion of someone whose career is based around a practical use of humor. English comedian Jimmy Carr, in a video available on the internet, describes the function of humor, particularly jokes:

They all work in exactly the same way. Basically, it’s the sudden revelation of a previously concealed fact. Bit more explanation required? Right you are. Simply put, it’s: set-up, punchline, laugh. The set-up forces you to make an assumption and the assumption you were forced into making is showed to be erroneous by information imparted in the punchline. You’re surprised, and delighted, and relieved, and you laugh.

(Jimmy Carr, *Five Interesting Things about Jokes*, Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwmqQHjktpl>)

The notion that Jimmy Carr has described, which suggests that the one interpretation is more obvious, is termed by Ritchie (2004) as *forced reinterpretation* model. This work follows the division proposed by Ross (1998) and retains the term ‘incongruity theory’, however, the idea of resolution and forced reinterpretation are not ignored as they are merged under the one term. Incongruity theory is then divided into two sections: structural ambiguity and contextual incongruity.

2.3.1 Structural ambiguity

Arguably the most common linguistic means to achieve humorous effect is ambiguity, especially in English language. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the 500 words used most in the English language have an average of 23 different meanings each. Due to this variety of word meanings the language allows the construction of ambiguous statements, either intentionally or unintentionally. The fields of linguistics in which ambiguity is most likely to occur can be divided into phonology, morphology, lexis and syntax. A written or a spoken statement may be then interpreted in several ways and different people can provide different interpretations based on the context and their expectancy which may render the

meaning humorous. This is may be an effect of a process called **word sense disambiguation** (WSD) which refers to a problem of identifying which meaning of a word is used in a particular context. This is mostly an issue in computational linguistics, which deals with “the statistical or rule-based modeling of natural language from a computational perspective” (Wikipedia), but similar process naturally occurs in people and appears to be largely unconscious. This process appears almost identical to the idea of resolution in the incongruity-resolution theory discussed in the previous chapter.

2.3.1.1 Phonetics

The key factor for the functionality of the humor that is based on phonemic ambiguity is the possibility of multiple interpretations of the same group of sounds. The term **homophone** is used for the words with the same pronunciation but different spelling: ‘bare’ and ‘bear’, ‘missed’ and ‘mist’, ‘throne’ and ‘thrown’, etc. The English language contains many homophones as the English system of spelling does not represent each phoneme with a distinct symbol. Ross (1998) claims that due to the difference in spelling in written form, this type of ambiguity can only occur in spoken language, which is definitely true in some cases, for example:

(1) What’s black and white and *read* all over?

A newspaper.

(2) On a sign: NO *CHECKS* ACCEPTED.

(1) is a well-known riddle where the punchline of the joke is based on the same pronunciation of the adjectives ‘red’ and ‘read’ which is /rɛd/. In this case it is true that the riddle only works in spoken form as the humorous effect is supposed to occur because of the listener’s disambiguation of the phoneme /rɛd/ as the word ‘red’, which is a logical assumption after the words ‘black’ and ‘white’. In written form the writer is forced to write the word with either the correct or incorrect spelling, which in both cases eliminates the process of false disambiguation of the word. (2) works in exactly the same way as the first one, the word ‘checks’ can be also interpreted as ‘Czechs’ as both words are pronounced /tʃɛks/. Even though the phrase is clearly in written form, the joke again only works if the person who is it told has not seen the sign and can, therefore, make a wrong assumption about which word was meant.

In these two examples it is true, that the ambiguity can only occur in spoken language, but I have to disagree with that ‘the possibility for confusion can happen only in spoken language’ (Ross 1998, p. 9). There are few examples which illustrate that jokes based on phonemic ambiguity can also work in written form:

(3) Why was the mortgage sad?

Because it was a loan.

(4) What do you call a deer with no eyes?

No idea.

These riddles are also humorous because of two possible pronunciations of one phrase. But the key difference is that the humorous effect of these riddles works also in written form. In (1), ‘a loan’ has the same pronunciation /ə ləʊn / as the word ‘alone’. The humorous effect occurs because of phonological and semantic ambiguity of the utterance. Not only the similarity of ‘a loan’ and ‘alone’ is amusing, it even makes sense in both cases on a lexical level where ‘mortgage’ semantically links with ‘loan’ and ‘sad’ with ‘alone’. In the second example, the pronunciation of ‘no idea’ /no aɪdiə/ is, in British English, identical to the phrase ‘no eye deer’. This again makes the realization of similarity in pronunciation amusing and the fact that both options are viable answers to the question create the humorous effect. The reason why these work in written form is the fact that the phonological ambiguity does not occur in the riddle itself but in the answer/punchline. Therefore, the listener, or reader in this case, still goes through the process of disambiguation.

In spoken English, ambiguity can be caused also by intonation and the position of the stress in the sentence or a phrase. Here are few examples to illustrate how much the position of stress can alter the meaning of a sentence:

(1) I **‘did not** say you stole my red hat.

(2) I did not say **‘you** stole my red hat.

(3) I did not say you **‘stole** my red hat.

(4) I did not say you stole **‘my** red hat.

In (1), the speaker puts a stronger emphasis on denying he did such thing. In (2), the speaker is clarifying that he is not implying that the listener stole the hat, probably after being accused of doing so. In (3), the speaker is specifying that he/she is not accusing the listener. And In (4), the speaker is pointing out that the hat did not belong to him.

This dependence of the language on the intonation does not occur only on a syntactical level, but also within a single word and its syllables. It is a process called ‘Initial-stress derivation’ in which the stress is moved to the first syllable of the verb, creating a noun or an adjective. Here are few examples:

pro‘ject (verb)	re‘cord (verb)	ad’dress (verb)
‘project (noun)	‘record (noun)	‘address (noun)

The dependence of the language on the intonation can cause ambiguity and confusion in communication which can lead to some humorous misinterpretations. Here is an example of joke where the slight difference in intonation can cause a different interpretation:

- (1) What’s the best way to make your dog drink?
Put him/her in a blender!

2.3.1.2 Spoonerisms, malapropisms, mondegreens and eggcorns

In the context of phonetic ambiguity few phenomena that has earned they own classifications should be mentioned. They are called spoonerisms, malapropisms, mendegreens and eggcorns. In her article, Mignon Fogarty provides a useful definition of these ‘funny errors’. **Spoonerisms** are phrases with the initial sounds of words mixed up. They are called after Reverend William Archibald, a tutor at Oxford University, who became famous by mixing up these initial sounds. According to Ross (1998), many of the examples attributed to him have been proven to be invented.

You have tasted two worms and must leave by the town drain

The expression ‘tasted two worms’ is a spoonerism of ‘wasted two terms’, and ‘town drain’ of ‘down train’.

Malapropism is derived from French phrase *mal á propos* which means ‘inappropriate’. The term became popular because of Sheridan’s play *The Rivals* in which a character called Mr. Malaprop had a habit of mixing up words. Malapropism is a substitution of a similar-sounding word for another word. For example:

Illiterate him, I say, quite from your memory.

In this case, the word ‘illiterate’ is used mistakenly instead of the word ‘obliterate’.

The term **mondegreen** was established due to Sylvia Wright who misheard a line of an old Scottish ballad. Instead of ‘And laid him on the green’ she heard ‘And Lady Mondegreen’ which gave the phenomenon its name. It is used for mishearing of something so a new meaning is created.

Lastly, **eggcorns**, according to Fogarty, are a recent phenomenon (2003) which was a result of discussion on the Language Log website. A woman in the discussion misheard the word ‘acorn’ as ‘eggcorn’. This is similar to a mondegreen, but the difference is that in this case a new meaning is not created.

2.3.1.3 Morphology

This type of ambiguity is based on formation of individual words. The smallest part of a word that is capable of carrying a meaning is called ‘morpheme’. Words can be made of a single morpheme with no possibility for splitting into smaller parts, or they can be made of multiple morphemes. And this can lead to a humorous effect since, according to Ross (1998), “people’s distinctive knowledge of the ways that morphemes are used to form meanings can be exploited in jokes which point out the possible ambiguities” (p. 14). Depending on the context, the same group of letters can be a free morpheme, a bound morpheme (prefix or suffix) or a syllable. Ross presents a suitable example:

‘What’s a baby pig called?’

‘A piglet’

‘So what’s a baby toy called?’

‘A toilet’

(Ross, 1998, p.15)

Ross explains that the confusion created by this jokes is due to the suffix ‘-let’, which is often used for the meaning of small. But when the same suffix is used with the word ‘toy’ it creates a word that sounds the same as ‘toilet’.

Another frequent way of creating an incongruity in language is the use of compound words. They are made of two free morphemes grouped together with the meaning that can be drastically different than meanings of the individual words if they would stand alone. Also the

order of the words is important and a change can either alter the meaning or remove it completely. Ross (1998) provides example for both situations:

(1) Have you heard the one about the man who bought a paper shop?

It blew away.

(2) I should have been a country-western singer. After all, I'm older than most western countries.

(p. 15)

In the first example the confusion occurs because of the compound words 'paper shop' which can evoke a shop made out of paper or a shop that sells it. The second one alters the meaning from 'a singer from a western country' to a 'singer of a country-western genre of music'.

2.3.1.4 Graphology

Graphology refers to the graphical representation of language via the use of letters and other symbols. In terms of humor, jokes based on graphology are likely to be very frequent, as in most cases they require a written form. Common areas for this type of humor are writings on walls, birthday cards or postcards, but it is also possible for a verbally expressed humour to include this type. Ross (1998) provides good examples of this humour in variations on the typical writing: '*something* rules OK'.

Yo-Yos rule O

-

-

-

K

In this case, the humour is achieved solely on visual level as the word 'OK' has its two letters separated in a manner so it resembles a yo-yo and its string. This can only achieve humorous effect in written form as it would be difficult to recreate the conditions in spoken form.

Dyslexia lures KO

Amnesia rules O

These two variations, on the other hand, can function in both spoken and written form as the notion is more important than the visual presentation, although the written form is more suitable. The first one mocks the concept of a dyslexic person creating the writing and the second one is the same concept but with someone who suffers with amnesia.

2.3.1.5 Lexis

Another very common source of ambiguity is the English vocabulary as many words have been borrowed from various other language sources. That caused some words to have the same spelling and the same pronunciation but two different meanings. They are known as **homonyms**. Ross (1998) presents a nice example:

A fishmonger who calls him/herself a 'Sole Trader' is referring to the two meanings for the word 'sole': one comes from the Latin 'solum' meaning 'bottom' or 'pavement', so is used to name the bottom of a shoe or a fish with a similar shape; the other comes from the Latin words 'solus' meaning 'alone'.
(p. 17)

The humorous effect can occur either because of the confusion caused by the two meanings or because of the sudden realization of the ambiguity. For example:

What makes a tree noisy? Its bark.

'Bark' as a noun can either mean 'the harsh sound uttered by a dog', or 'the tough covering of trees'. Both of these meanings make sense because in the set-up of the joke the words 'tree' and 'noisy' have been mentioned and can be semantically linked to both meanings.

Some humour can also be caused by the phenomenon known as **polysemy**. It refers, again, to words with the same spelling and pronunciation but one lexeme can have various related meanings. For example, the word 'ring' can be used as 'a wedding ring' or 'a boxing ring' where both uses of the word shares a similar notion of being bordered or bounded. The distinction between homonymy and polysemy may not always be clear.

2.3.1.6 Syntax

Humor can also occur due to syntactical ambiguity. It is caused by the meanings that are created by the structure of words in a sentence. In this case, the humorous effect is not produced by the double meanings of the individual words, but by the fact that it is possible to group the words in relation to each other in more than one way. Newspaper headlines are a very common area where this kind of ambiguity can occur, as they are deliberately abbreviated, so they can unintentionally cause a double meaning, or intentionally to catch attention. For example, 'Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim'. But it is not the case of just newspaper headlines, many jokes may be constructed on such basis. Here is an example of relatively popular saying: 'Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.' Two possible English sentence patterns can be interpreted here:

(1) Subject + Verb + Adverbial:

Time ^S/ flies ^V/ like an arrow ^A.

(2) Subject + Verb + Object:

Time flies ^S/ like ^V/ an arrow ^O. Fruit flies ^S/ like ^V/ a banana ^O.

Interpretation (1) would simply imply that time is fast moving, thus having similar quality to a flying arrow, where 'flies' is a verb and 'time flies' presents a common collocation. But when followed by the second sentence (2), where 'flies' is converted into a noun and the conjunction 'like' is converted into a verb, the logical semantic interpretation suggests 'a special type of insects and what they like to eat', the similarity in structure causes the second possible interpretation to be applied to the first sentence creating a very bizarre meaning.

2.3.2 Contextual incongruity

As the previous chapter examined incongruity that happens 'inside' the language, this chapter examines 'the outside' of language of the sources of incongruity, since it is practically impossible to use language without any form of context. Ross (1998) compares 'structural ambiguity' to language having a surface with something underneath, whereas 'contextual incongruity' (as it is called in this work) suggests "a net for the complex web of conventions that construct meaning" (p. 26). For example, meaning of certain words may differ depending

on the context they are used in. Some words may be considered inappropriate in front of certain groups of people, during various rituals and traditions that are celebrated, or simple conventions and rules to which people are accustomed to. In this work, these are divided into semantics, pragmatics, discourse and register.

2.3.2.1 Semantics

Semantics refers to the meaning of words and examines the relations of sense between them, for example **synonymy** and **antonymy**. Semantics also operates with the communicative value the words have apart from reference, i.e. their **connotations**. Ross (1998) provides an example of some connotations:

For some people ‘lady’ signifies more respect than ‘woman’, as it has connotations of gentility. Connotations can vary and change; today some people find the term ‘woman’ more acceptable. This is partly caused by the collocations of these terms, i.e. the way they are used and the words that tend to occur with them. The collocations of the terms ‘woman’ and ‘lady’ are not the same: we say ‘dinner-lady’ not ‘dinner-woman’. (p. 30)

This is slightly similar to the register category, which will be mentioned later, therefore it might be sometimes difficult to distinguish and decide between them. It is also reasonable to expect these two categories to overlap between each other. This communicative value is not likely to create a humorous effect on its own, but may create an amusing background or a ‘flavor’ to the text.

What is more likely to create a humorous effect on its own is creating contradictory or nonsensical ideas. Ross (1998) states that “the strange thing is that, rather than rejecting such odd examples of language, the human mind often reacts by trying to make sense of them” (p. 31). These **apparent contradictions** can often make a creative use of language, just like in poetry for example. Humor can also point out and ridicule some clichés, fixed ideas and things with a weird logic behind them that people might not have noticed in their everyday lives. This is a very common phenomenon in stand-up comedy. For example, Jimmy Carr in one of his stand-ups talks about gift vouchers:

Who here’s bought gift vouchers? What were you thinking? You walked into a shop and went “Excuse me, I wonder, could you help me? I’ve got some money here. This is accepted everywhere. Could you fix it for me so it just

works in this one shop for a limited time period. I should explain: it's a gift and I'm a f***ing idiot." (Jimmy Carr, 2013, "Laughing and Joking")

Another, more specific, examples of semantic incongruity even have their own names. Such as **paradox**, used for self-contradictory statements ('if you didn't get this message, call me'), or **oxymoron**, used for the combination of two contradictory terms ('bitter-sweet'). A **tautology**, on the other hand, is a statement which is undeniably true, but the truth factor is so obvious that mentioning it seems pointless ('he can either win or lose'). Ross (1998) also mentions a form of **surreal** humor, where humor "pushes the boundaries of language beyond a strange but conceivable idea," and presents an example:

When do elephants paint their toenails red? When they want to hide upside-down in strawberry jam. (p. 36)

2.3.2.2 Pragmatics

Where semantics refers to the way words acquire meaning inside the sentence, pragmatics refers to the way sentences acquire their meaning, either in relations between them, or in some extra-linguistic context. For example, if one told one of the many jokes about Chuck Norris, the listener would have to be familiar with two things: who Chuck Norris is, and that there are many jokes about him, always with the same premise. Ross (1998) also mentions a distinction between 'the sense' and 'the force' of an utterance, and presents a fitting example:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Do I make good coffee? | You make great coffee. |
| 2. Do you think I'm a good cook? | You make great coffee. |
| 3. It's your turn to make the coffee. | You make great coffee. |

(p. 39)

The information that 'You make great coffee' would impart in isolation is its 'sense'. But when used in various contexts, it can convey different meanings. The variety of meanings is its 'force'.

Grice (1975) proposes a way to explain the relations between sense and force. He claims, that when people communicate, the communication is not "a succession of disconnected remarks" (p. 45). In other words, there should be some logic behind what, when

and why people communicate. He also points out that communication is cooperative effort, as people interact with one another, and proposes the term **cooperative principle**. He then distinguishes this general principle into four categories with more specific maxims, formally known as **Grice's Maxims**:

- Maxims of Quantity
 1. Make your contribution as informative as is required.
 2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- Maxims of Quality
 1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Maxim of Relation
 1. Be relevant.
- Maxims of Manner
 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 2. Avoid ambiguity.
 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 4. Be orderly

(Grice, 1975, p. 45 – 46)

This presents a very useful classification of the humorous incongruity that can occur in language. The violation of these maxims, either intentionally or unintentionally (which seems more likely, in this case), has a potential to create a humorous effect based on the context.

2.3.2.3 Discourse

This section describes linguistic rules and conventions of language in larger sections of spoken or written text. An utterance may contain some set expressions or phrases which signalize and give clues to what is going to happen next. For example, the phrase 'Once upon a time' signalizes that the discourse is going to deal with a fairy-tale or similar setting. Or, that after 'Ladies and gentlemen' comes some public introduction. When one of these conventions is broken an incongruous and potentially humorous situation may occur. Ross (1998) provides a nice example citing comedians Morecambe and Wise:

‘Sorry to trouble you.’

‘Not at all.’

‘Thank you very much. Good day.’

(p. 41)

This is very applicable to specific jokes as they also developed their own conventions and expectations. Many jokes follow a similar previously established structure, usually it is the way the jokes is set-up. For example: ‘What is the difference between’, ‘A guy walks into a bar’, or ‘Englishman, Scotsman, Irishman’ jokes. The humor then can be solely based on the fact that the usual pattern is not followed.

2.3.2.4 Register

Register (sometimes referred to as “tenor”) in linguistics refers to the variety of language that is used depending on the social setting. The simplest division is into ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ language. The choice of register, in case of just formal or informal, is usually intentional as people are aware of the situation they are in and adjust the vocabulary to it. The choice might be affected by the topic of a discussion, talking to a stranger, talking over the phone, talking to a friend, etc. Joos (1961) describes five degrees of formality that people shift to in various everyday contexts:

1. **Intimate** – characterized by complete absence of social inhibitions
2. **Casual** – used in relaxed or normal situation that appropriate to the conversation with friends
3. **Consultative** – a mix of formal and casual register, words are chosen with some care
4. **Formal** – the word choice and sentence structure used by the business and education community
5. **Frozen** – the words are always the same, ritualized forms

Intimate register refers to the private language developed within families, lovers or very close friends. The content of these intimate conversations might be considered embarrassing outside the register. In *Casual* register the conversation language is not usually formal, use of slang and addressing by the first name is common. *Consultative* register usually implies most common everyday conversations with some level of formality, e.g. in business environment between colleagues, people who do not know each other very well, etc. *Formal* register is

used for important or serious situation, often in written form which can stand alone with no participation from audience, e. g. scholar or technical reports. *Frozen* register refers to printed unchanging language, like Biblical quotations, or various pledges and oaths. The humorous effect can then occur when a wrong register is used in a situation, or a mixing of register can create an incongruous expression.

2.4 Superiority theory

This theory is based around the use of humor as a mockery or assumption of power and higher status over someone else, usually exploiting various stereotypes. It may be a psychological factor of the urge to laugh at the misfortunes of others (German language has the expression ‘Schadenfreude’ for it), or it may be caused by the differences of the groups of people in a society. Philosopher Thomas Hobbes, author of *Leviathan*, characterized laughter as a ‘sudden glory’ at a triumph of our own or at indignity suffered by someone else. Hobbes claimed that laughter momentarily releases one from their own lack of ability and that people, who are more likely to laugh at others, are more conscious of their lack of abilities and make themselves feel better by observing the imperfections of others.

The term ‘butt of the joke’ refers to the target of the mockery. It does not have to be just one person who is mocked; often various groups of people are the target, for example: ‘mother-in-law jokes’, ‘Irish jokes’, ‘policeman jokes’, etc. The size of a group can represent a significant portion of a demographic, in the case of jokes about nationality, race or gender. This type of humor, however, can cause more hate than laughter as it may be viewed as prejudice or discrimination based on a stereotype and be labeled ‘politically incorrect’. Discovering which groups are the butt of humor can reveal something about the attitudes of that society, according to Ross (1998). She also mentions two opposing claims:

Some people claim that language simply *reflects* existing attitudes, that sexism and racism exist ‘in the world’ and that words do not change anything. Others maintain that language is a powerful weapon, and that making conscious decisions about the use of language can help to form or change attitudes. (p. 53)

This kind of humor is a very sensitive subject and some people may not consider it humorous at all, or even morally wrong and bad to be amused by it. This is a difficult issue to tackle, as it was mentioned earlier, humor essentially is very subjective therefore it is

impossible to simply classify something as funny or not funny. This combined with the fact the entire premise of morality, in the sense that something can be viewed as good or bad, is also a matter of subjective opinion, and this makes this potentially a problem with no solution. But what might possibly solve is the fact that this kind of humor is often misinterpreted. Sometimes just a mere mention, for example in a joke, of something which is not usually appropriate as a subject of humor, like a race or a taboo subject, is misunderstood as the butt of the joke and can render the joke inappropriate. British comedian, director and actor Ricky Gervais, who is often accused of being politically incorrect, voiced his opinion about humor in his interview for Time magazine:

There's no line to be drawn in comedy in the sense that there are things you should never joke about. There's nothing that you should never joke about, but it depends what that joke is. Comedy comes from a good or a bad place. The subject of a joke isn't necessarily the target of the joke. You can make jokes about race without any race being the butt of the joke. (Ricky Gervais, The Difference Between American and British Humour)

2.5 Psychic release

This theory presents the idea that “humor releases tensions, psychic energy, or that humor releases one from inhibitions, conventions and laws” (Attardo, 1994, p. 50). As society developed, rules and laws to obey were formed and, among people, certain conventions and tradition were established. To disobey them is either illegal or social unacceptable and inappropriate – it is a **taboo**. Taboos such as sex, death or religion are probably the most frequent to be used as means for humorous effect. Ross (1998) also states that this theory explains “the triggering of laughter by the sense of release from a threat being overcome – such as a reduction of fears about death and sex” (p. 61). Another form of release might be a use of **bad language**. What all these spheres of language and life, that are inappropriate to discuss, share is the strange, sometimes uncomfortable and awkward, feeling that they can trigger.

Sex is probably the most frequent taboo that is being used in a humorous context. It is probably due to the fact that this subject is still widely considered inappropriate to discuss openly or publicly, but as it is this completely natural it is easy to relate to. As it is not appropriate to talk about it explicitly, it is common to refer to it via the use of euphemisms.

Very popular form of humor relating to sex exploits this convention to create obscure and forced euphemisms and **innuendos**. For example, the phrase ‘That’s what she said’, which is used after a message that could be even vaguely interpreted as something sexual:

“Make sure it’s long enough.”

“That’s what she said!”

This particular type of humor is more based on the silliness and obscurity than a clever use of an innuendo. **Death**, as a topic for humor, is probably more likely to be used in contrast with the amusing nature of humor, for it is something that many people fear or feel sad when someone dies. And **Religion** is mostly used a target of provocation, as many people still hold religious beliefs which some might find odd and outdated in a modern society. The psychic release is not likely to be the means for humorous effect on its own. It is more likely that the presence of this element will enhance or supplement the point or the punchline of the joke.

3 METHODS OF RESEARCH

The first important step was to decide which approach would be most appropriate for tackling the issue of the linguistics of humor, which has proven to be very complex. As it was mentioned, there is currently no theory of how humor works. To explore the functionality and possible most agreed upon theories, and to propose a classification that can be used for the analysis seemed most appropriate. The main foundation for the background of the linguistic functionality of humor was mostly based on the findings of Salvatore Attardo's *Linguistic Theories of Humor* and Greame Ritchie's *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, with other authors and their works mostly supplementing and or contrasting with their ideas.

The result of the research was that the most common division that can be used for the analysis is the tripartite division into Incongruity theory, Superiority theory and Release theory. Alison Ross' *The language of Humor* then provided the basis of the most logical and practical, for the purposes of this work, internal subdivision of the classification.

After the decided classification of humor, it was necessary to choose a suitable corpus as a source of data for the analysis. The internet research carried out by www.OnePoll.com from 2010, in which 1,000 jokes were examined and 36,000 then voted to select the 50 funniest ones, seems suitable for this work. Each joke is briefly described to explain the reason for classifying it under one or more of decided categories. The results provide an insight into the frequency of the means of English humour. The classification is as follows:

- Structural ambiguity
 - Phonetics
 - Morphology
 - Graphology
 - Lexis
 - Syntax
- Contextual incongruity
 - Semantics
 - Pragmatics
 - Discourse
 - Register
- Superiority
- Psychic release

When describing the functionality of the joke, it was necessary to decide on which elements are dominant, or at least significant enough to classify them under the means of the humorous effect. It has become apparent that many jokes use combinations of the proposed classes. It was sometimes difficult to decide which element was central to the structure of the joke and which just enhanced the effect. Especially difficult to decide upon was the category of Contextual incongruity – Semantics. Whether the semantic incongruity, for example, was necessary to achieve the humorous effect might have been arguable in some cases, therefore it should be mentioned that in some instances the decision might have been more of author's opinion than a fact.

4 ANALYSIS

- (1) A woman gets on a bus with her baby. The bus driver says: "Ugh, that's the ugliest baby I've ever seen!" The woman walks to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming. She says to a man next to her: "The driver just insulted me!" The man says: "You go up there and tell him off. Go on, I'll hold your monkey for you."

The point of the joke is that the woman's baby was described as "ugly" and subsequently as a "monkey", which is a semantically a bad quality for one's appearance. This joke almost makes use of the concept of superiority, more concretely, the misfortune of others. The baby is the 'butt of the joke', combined with the annoyance of the mother, and this creates the humorous effect.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics; Superiority**

- (2) "I went to the zoo the other day. There was only one dog in it. It was a shitzu."

This joke is an example of phonetic ambiguity. The dog breed called 'shitzu' /ʃitsu/ sounds very similar to an expression 'shit zoo' /ʃɪt zu:/. The presence of a vulgar expression enhances the humorous effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics; Psychic release**

- (3) "Dyslexic man walks into a bra"

Very short joke, yet it covers three categories. The structure of the joke is the 'walks into a bar' stereotype (discourse). The main premise is that the fact that 'bra' is an anagram for 'bar' (graphology) and can be considered a misspelling, which is a mistake that dyslexic person might make (butt of the joke).

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Graphology;** Contextual incongruity – **Discourse; Superiority**

- (4) A young blonde woman is distraught because she fears her husband is having an affair, so she goes to a gun shop and buys a handgun. The next day she comes home to find her husband in bed with a beautiful redhead. She grabs the gun and holds it to her own head. The husband jumps out of bed, begging and pleading with her not to shoot herself. Hysterically the blonde responds to the husband, "Shut up...you're next!"

This joke uses a typical 'stupid blonde' character (discourse). Even though this notion is very sexist and degrading to certain and large demographic, it still remains relatively acceptable (Superiority). Her response makes no sense on the semantic level, as it contradicts the situation (Semantics).

Means: Structural ambiguity—**Semantics**; Contextual incongruity – **Discourse**; **Superiority**

- (5) A classic Tommy Cooper gag "I said to the Gym instructor "Can you teach me to do the splits?" He said, "How flexible are you?" I said, "I can't make Tuesdays".

In this case the humorous effect occurs due to lexical ambiguity of the word 'flexible'. It can mean either 'being able to flex or bent' or 'being adaptable' (Lexis). This situation also breaks the maxim of relation as it is more logical to assume that the Gym instructor meant the physical flexibility (Pragmatics).

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**, Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

- (6) Police arrested two kids yesterday, one was drinking battery acid, the other was eating fireworks. They charged one - and let the other one off.

This joke is based purely on lexical ambiguity. 'To charge' can mean both 'to indict' and 'to load to capacity'. These meanings both make sense this context of the police and the battery acid. The same goes for the phrase 'let someone/something off', meaning either 'release' or 'launch' in the context of the fireworks.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(7) Two aerals meet on a roof - fall in love - get married. The ceremony was rubbish - but the reception was brilliant.

This one is also based on pure lexical ambiguity. 'Reception', in this case, can be interpreted both as 'party after a wedding ceremony' and 'reception of signal'.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(8) Another one was: Doc, I can't stop singing the 'Green Green Grass of Home'. He said: 'That sounds like Tom Jones syndrome'. 'Is it common?' I asked. 'It's not unusual' he replied.

To understand this joke, it is necessary to know that 'It's not unusual' is the title of one of Tom Jones' most famous songs.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

(9) I'm on a whiskey diet. I've lost three days already.

The concept of 'whiskey diet' is semantically bizarre collocation, but a logical assumption can be made out of it, as some diet based on drinking whiskey (Semantics). The punchline is then delivered as a clever twist on the typical information about 'losing weight' which often follows the mentioning of a diet (Discourse).

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics, Discourse**

(10) A man walks into a bar with a roll of tarmac under his arm and says: "Pint please, and one for the road."

This is a variation of the 'walks into a bar' joke (Discourse). The punchline creates a humorous effect due to the lexical ambiguity of 'one for the road', which usually means 'drink before leaving a bar', but in this case it can be taken literally as drink for the roll of tarmac (Lexis).

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**; Contextual incongruity – **Discourse**

(11) I went to the doctors the other day and I said, 'Have you got anything for wind?' So he gave me a kite.

The word 'wind' can be used as euphemism for flatulence, when referring to medical problems. The doctor interpreted it simply as 'natural motion of air in an atmosphere'.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(12) My mother-in-law fell down a wishing well, I was amazed, I never knew they worked.

This joke takes the basic idea of wishing wells and slightly modifies their concept (Pragmatics). The mother-in-law presents the butt of the joke as the notion of person who annoys their son-in-law (Superiority).

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics; Superiority**

(13) I saw this bloke chatting up a cheetah; I thought, "He's trying to pull a fast one".

This is an example of lexical ambiguity. The phrase 'to pull a fast one' is an idiom meaning 'to succeed in an act of deception'. In this case, it can also be taken literally as 'a fast one' can be referring to the cheetah.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(14) A woman has twins, and gives them up for adoption. One of them goes to a family in Egypt and is named 'Amal.' The other goes to a family in Spain, they name him Juan'. Years later; Juan sends a picture of himself to his mum. Upon receiving the picture, she tells her husband that she wished she also had a picture of Amal. Her husband responds, "But they are twins. If you've seen Juan, you've seen Amal."

In this joke, phonetic ambiguity achieves the humorous effect by cleverly altering known saying (Discourse). The sentence 'If you've seen Juan /wʌn/, you've seen Amal /əmal/,' sound very similar to the saying 'If you've seen one /wʌn/, you've seen them all /ðɛm ɒl/.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics; Contextual incongruity – Discourse**

(15) There's two fish in a tank, and one says "How do you drive this thing?"

This is another joke based solely on lexical ambiguity. 'Tank' can either mean 'container for fluids' or 'military vehicle'. The fact that a fish is saying that makes it ambiguous.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(16) I went to buy some camouflage trousers the other day but I couldn't find any.

The premise of this joke is based on semantics. The purpose of camouflage trousers is to be difficult to spot, and the speaker could not spot them, which is just a silly notion.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(17) When Susan's boyfriend proposed marriage to her she said: "I love the simple things in life, but I don't want one of them for my husband".

The phrase 'I love the simple things in life' signals that something commonly accepted as a 'simple thing' is going to be mentioned. When it is revealed that she meant her husband, it creates an amusing incongruity.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Discourse**

(18) "My therapist says I have a preoccupation with vengeance. We'll see about that."

This joke exploits the semantics. The statement 'We'll see about that' implies a desire for vengeance, and because it is a result of being accused of 'preoccupation with vengeance', it makes the reaction absurd.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(19) I rang up British Telecom, I said, "I want to report a nuisance caller", he said "Not you again".

The response 'Not you again' to a nuisance caller report suggest that the person who is reporting it are the nuisance caller themselves. The fact they became the nuisance caller by the act of reporting it makes it semantically a very silly situation.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(20) I met a Dutch girl with inflatable shoes last week, phoned her up to arrange a date but unfortunately she'd popped her clogs.

In this joke the idiom 'pop ones clogs', which means to die, can be interpreted literally as the girl was wearing inflatable shoes ('clog' refers to the old-fashioned wooden shoes). The taboo of death is not necessary for the joke to function, but it probably enhances the effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis; Psychic release**

(21) A jump-lead walks into a bar. The barman says "I'll serve you, but don't start anything"

A 'jump-lead' refers to the heavy cables that are used to charge a battery of a motor vehicle which helps the vehicle to 'start'. The phrase 'don't start anything', when used in a bar, usually refers to not making any trouble, and is therefore ambiguous in this case. The discourse of the joke, the 'walks into a bar' stereotype, as well as the ridiculous idea of a cable walking into a bar (Semantics), enhances the effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis; Contextual incongruity – Semantics, Discourse**

(22) Slept like a log last night..... Woke up in the fireplace.

The phrase 'to sleep like a log' is an idiom meaning 'to sleep well or soundly'. Which would suggest lexical ambiguity, just like in (21), but in this case, the humorous effect is due to the use of ridiculously concrete connotation between a log and a fireplace.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(23) A priest, a rabbi and a vicar walk into a bar. The barman says, "Is this some kind of joke?"

This is good example of use of discourse in humor to create the humorous effect on its own. This is the typical 'walks into a bar' set-up combined with the typical characters of a priest, a rabbi and a vicar. The punchline is then built of the fact that the barman realizes how stereotypical it is.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Discourse**

(24) A sandwich walks into a bar. The barman says "Sorry we don't serve food in here"

The sentence 'we don't serve food in here' can be interpreted in two ways. The logically interpretation of the sentence is with the word 'food' as indirect object and omitted direct object (meaning serving food to people). But because a sandwich is a character the sentence can be interpreted as 'food' being a direct object. The semantically odd idea of a sandwich walking into a bar, which is a cliché, enhances the effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Syntax**, Contextual incongruity – **Semantics, Discourse**

(25) The other day I sent my girlfriend a huge pile of snow. I rang her up, I said "Did you get my drift?".

The phrase 'to get someone's drift' is an idiom meaning 'to understand what someone is saying'. In this case it is lexically ambiguous as 'drift' also means a large mass of snow.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(26) I cleaned the attic with the wife the other day. Now I can't get the cobwebs out of her hair.

This is an example of syntactical ambiguity. The first sentence can be interpreted in two ways: either that the husband cleaned the attic together with his wife, or that he used the wife

as a means to clean it, which is the suggested interpretation. Superiority is also part of the humorous effect, as the wife victim to such practice.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Syntax; Superiority**

(27) Went to the paper shop - it had blown away.

This joke exploits the ambiguity of ‘paper’ used as a modifier for ‘shop’. It is a common collocation which means ‘shop that sells papers’ but this suggests ‘shop made out of papers’.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Morphology**

(28) A group of chess enthusiasts checked into a hotel and were standing in the lobby discussing their recent tournament victories. After about an hour, the manager came out of the office and asked them to disperse. "But why?" they asked, as they moved off. "Because," he said "I can't stand chess nuts boasting in an open foyer."

To understand this joke, it is necessary to be familiar with famous English Christmas song ‘Chestnuts roasting on an open fire’ (Pragmatics). The title of this song is phonetically very similar to the phrase ‘chess nuts boasting in an open foyer’ which refers to the chess enthusiasts.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**, Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

(29) I was in Tesco's and I saw this man and woman wrapped in a barcode. I said, "Are you two an item?"

This joke exploits the ambiguity of the idiom ‘being an item’, which means ‘two people in a romantic relationship’, and a word ‘item’, used in this case for wares in a shop.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(30) I'm in great mood tonight because the other day I entered a competition and I won a years supply of Marmite..... one jar.

This joke makes fun of and expects the listener to be familiar with the Marmite brand of food spreads (Pragmatics). This is originally a British food paste with a distinctive and powerful flavor that divided the consumer into two groups which either “Love it or Hate it” (slogan of the company). The idea of a single jar being the typical ‘year’s supply price’ is also amusing on a semantic level.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics, Pragmatics**

(31) So I went to the Chinese restaurant and this duck came up to me with a red rose and says "Your eyes sparkle like diamonds". I said, "Waiter, I asked for a-ROMATIC duck".

‘Crispy aromatic duck’ is a very popular dish in the United Kingdom. ‘Aromatic’ is phonetically similar to ‘a romantic’ which creates the ambiguity in this joke. The semantically ridiculous scene of a duck with a red rose saying romantic clichés enhances the humorous effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**, Contextual ambiguity – **Semantics**

(32) Four fonts walk into a bar the barman says "Oi - get out! We don't want your type in here"

The phrase ‘We don’t want your type in here’ is typically used when a barman wants a particular group of people to leave. In this case the statement is lexically ambiguous because the barman is referring to an alphabetic font, which can be also referred to as ‘type’. The typical ‘walks into a bar’ structure and the semantically ridiculous scene enhance the humorous effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**, Contextual incongruity – **Semantics, Discourse**

(33) I was having dinner with Garry Kasparov (world chess champion) and there was a check tablecloth. It took him two hours to pass me the salt.

The fact that a chess player intuitively used the tablecloth a chessboard when passing a salt is just an amusing and silly idea.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(34) There was a man who entered a local paper's pun contest. He sent in ten different puns, in the hope that at least one of the puns would win. Unfortunately, no pun in ten did.

This is a good example of phonetic ambiguity. The phrase 'no pun in ten did' is phonetically identical to the phrase 'no pun intended', which is typically used to announce that a pun has been accidentally made. In terms of humor discourse, this phrase is often used to stress out the pun.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**; Contextual incongruity – **Discourse**

(35) I went down the local supermarket, I said, "I want to make a complaint, this vinegar's got lumps in it", he said, "Those are pickled onions".

This joke just presents a ridiculous a scene, in which a person does not recognize pickled onions. It might also be a commentary on a quality of the product. The formal register of the speech enhances the effect.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics, Register**

(36) I backed a horse last week at ten to one. It came in at quarter past four.

This joke exploits the ambiguity of the phrase 'ten to one'. In the context of betting it suggest a ratio of how much the potential winning would be multiplied, which is the interpretation the first sentence suggests. The phrase can also refer to a time period, which is the meaning revealed by the second sentence. This is an example of the forced interpretation (see p. **).

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(37) I swear, the other day I bought a packet of peanuts, and on the packet it said "may contain nuts." Well, YES! That's what I bought the buggers for! You'd be annoyed if you opened it and a socket set fell out!"

This makes fun of the phrase 'may contain nuts', which is used as a warning for people with nut allergies. The fact that the warning is on a packet of peanuts makes it a tautology.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(38) A lorry-load of tortoises crashed into a trainload of terrapins. What a turtle disaster

The phrase 'turtle disaster' is phonetically similar to the common collocation 'total disaster'. It is also semantically a very silly situation.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**; Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(39) My phone will ring at 2 in the morning, and my wife'll look at me and go, "Who's that calling at this time?" "I don't know! If I knew that we wouldn't need the bloody phone!"

In this joke the humorous effect is caused by the man's reaction to his wife's question. The phrase 'Who's that calling at this time' is commonly used in this kind of situation and is rhetorical. By answering it, the man violated the convention.

Means: Contextual incongruity – **Discourse**

(40) I said to this train driver "I want to go to Paris". He said "Eurostar?" I said, "I've been on telly but I'm no Dean Martin".

In this case, the word 'Eurostar' is lexically ambiguous. The train driver was referring to a proper noun which is the name of high-speed railway service. The speaker misinterpreted it as compound word that would refer to a famous European person. By this he also broke the maxim of relation.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**; Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

(41) Two Eskimos sitting in a kayak were chilly. But when they lit a fire in the craft, it sank, proving once and for all that you can't have your kayak and heat it.

The phrase 'you can't have your kayak and heat it' is parody of a popular English proverb 'You can't have your cake and eat it', as the phrases are phonetically similar. Knowing the proverb is necessary to understand the joke.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**; Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

(42) I've got a friend who's fallen in love with two school bags, he's bisatchel.

This joke works on a quite complex logic. The term 'bisatchel' is phonetically similar to 'bisexual'. It also makes sense semantically as the friend has fallen in love with two school bags, and even morphologically as the word 'satchel' has the prefix 'bi-' which evokes duality.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics, Morphology**; Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(43) You see my next-door neighbour worships exhaust pipes, he's a catholic converter.

The phrase 'catholic converter', which would suggest a person that converts other people to Catholicism, is phonetically similar to 'catalytic converter', which is a part of a vehicle exhaust system. The semantically silly idea enhances the humorous effect.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**; Contextual incongruity – **Semantics**

(44) A three-legged dog walks into a saloon in the Old West. He slides up to the bar and announces: "I'm looking for the man who shot my paw."

This joke makes fun of the typical 'Old West' clichés. The word 'paw' is phonetically similar to 'pa' (informal expression for 'father') and ambiguous since the dog is missing a leg. The revenge for the death of one's father is very typical for the Western genre.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**; Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

(45) I tried water polo but my horse drowned.

The term 'water polo' usually refers to a team water sport. In this joke the word 'water' is interpreted as a modifier for 'polo', a team sport played on horseback.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Morphology**

(46) I'll tell you what I love doing more than anything: trying to pack myself in a small suitcase. I can hardly contain myself.

The phrase 'to contain oneself' has an idiomatic meaning of 'to control one's excitement or emotions'. In this case, the word 'contain' can be also interpreted somewhat literally, so that the person cannot get into the suitcase.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

(47) So I met this gangster who pulls up the back of people's pants, it was Wedgie Kray.

It is necessary to be familiar with two things this makes reference to in order understand it. Firstly, 'Wedgie Kray' is a parody of the name a famous gangster Reggie Kray. Secondly, the term 'wedgie' refers to an act of "pulling up of another person's underwear as high as possible to cause pain in the butt". This joke exploits phonetic ambiguity of the two words.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Phonetics**, Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics**

(48) Went to the corner shop - bought 4 corners.

Morphological ambiguity achieves the humorous effect here. The modifier 'corner' can be interpreted both as 'shop that is on a corner of a street' or as 'shop that sells corners'.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Morphology**

(49) A seal walks into a club...

This joke is very short, yet quite complex. It uses the typical 'walks into a bar' structure with a slight modification. The word 'club' can either refer to 'place where people meet' or to 'blunt weapon'. It is also important to know that 'seal clubbing' is an infamous seal hunting practice.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**, Contextual incongruity – **Pragmatics, Discourse**

(50) I went to the Doctors the other day, and he said, 'Go to Bournemouth, it's great for flu'.
So I went - and I got it.

The phrase 'it's great for (a disease)' has an idiomatic meaning which suggests it is great for preventing or curing the disease. In this case, it is suggested that it was great for catching flu.

Means: Structural ambiguity – **Lexis**

RESULTS

This list shows the means in an order of most frequent to the least (the number in the brackets is the count of the occurrence):

1. Structural ambiguity – Lexis (18)
2. Contextual incongruity – Semantics (17)
3. Contextual incongruity – Discourse (13)
4. Structural ambiguity – Phonetics (11)
5. Contextual incongruity – Pragmatics (10)
6. Superiority (5)
7. Structural ambiguity – Morphology (4)
8. Structural ambiguity – Syntax (2)
9. Psychic release (2)
10. Structural ambiguity – Graphology (1)
11. Contextual incongruity – Register (1)

According to the result, the most frequent means for humorous effect were **lexical ambiguity** and **semantic incongruity**, at least for this survey of English humour. Lexical ambiguity was the most frequent central element on which the jokes can be solely based¹, in other words, there were no other elements present to complement or enhance the effect. Semantic incongruity was also very frequent, but not always as the central element of the jokes. In several instances² the semantically silly and bizarre notion only supplemented the effect.

Discourse, **Phonetics** and **Pragmatics** were three categories with quite frequent occurrences. Phonetic means were usually cable of being the central element of the jokes, while Discourse and Pragmatics usually served just to enhance the effect. The combination of phonetic ambiguity and pragmatics occurred several times³, usually as a parody of famous phrase. There were also several instances of solely discourse based jokes⁴, but more often discourse served only to enhance the effect in a form of typical setting for the joke. **Register**, as a means of humorous effect, appeared only once in joke (35) and only to slightly enhance it.

¹ Jokes (6), (7), (11), (13), (15), (22), (25), (29), (36), (46) and (50)

² Jokes (21), (24), (31), (32), (38) and (43)

³ Jokes (28), (41), (44) and (47)

⁴ Jokes (17), (23) and (19)

Superiority was a present element only in five cases⁵ and never as the primary means for the humorous effect, but it was present in 3 of the 4 top voted jokes. In some cases the factor of superiority is very subtle and it might be a matter of opinion whether it is significant enough to enhance the effect. The same can be also applied to the **psychic release**. Only two jokes⁶ can be assigned with the factor of being slightly inappropriate, and in both cases the element is, again, very subtle.

Morphology, Syntax and Graphology were not very frequent. For the graphology based humor, only joke (3), it was reasonable to expect that it will not be very frequent in the format of usually spoken jokes, although it was voted the third funniest joke. Morphologically based humour used the same means in 3 out of 4 jokes – the ambiguity of the modifier of the noun⁷.

⁵ Jokes (1), (3), (4), (12) and (26)

⁶ Jokes (2) and (20)

⁷ Jokes (27), (45) and (48)

CONCLUSION

This work focuses on the most frequent language means used with the aim to reach humorous effect and offers a theoretical and practical insight into the problematic of linguistic theories of humour. It also deals with humour in broader terms as it is a rather complex matter which has been, and still is, studied and argued over. The main goal is to find a suitable classification system for the various categories of linguistics. This classification should then provide a practical use and reveal the most frequent elements of English humour.

Overall, linguistics of humour has proven to be a very complex and difficult issue to tackle. Not only that simply defining humour appears much greater issue that one might suspect, the areas, fields and sources combined with that fact that humour is in most cases a matter of subjective opinion, creates a gigantic corpus of potential data for an empirical research. Even when narrowed down to “just” the linguistics of humor, it still presents vast area of data with many variables with no general theory which can all be classified under. Theorists have been arguing and still argue over the various concepts and approaches to this phenomenon. Fortunately, several theories and classifications have been widely accepted and agreed upon, namely the arguably most common tripartite: *incongruity* theories, *superiority* or *aggression* theories, and *release* or *relief* theories. This classification has proven to be practical and useful for the purposes of this thesis.

The internet survey of the 50 funniest jokes, used as the source of material for this work, provided enough diverse data for the analysis and use of the proposed classification. The survey consisted mostly of English based jokes and humour. According to the results, lexical ambiguity and semantic incongruity seems to be the dominant element of English jokes, with 35 out of the 50 jokes (70%) containing either one of these means, or a combination of both. Humour based on a grammatical ambiguity or incongruity (syntax and morphology) does not seem to be as frequent. Only 6 jokes (12%) contained these means. Graphology based humour was only present in one joke, but it was more to be expected as the format of the humour was exclusively jokes.

Discourse and pragmatics, means which presume some extra-linguistic knowledge, were relatively frequent. They were present in 23 jokes (56%), although mostly to enhance the effect of other means. Phonetic ambiguity was also relatively frequent, for a single category, with being present in 11 jokes (22%). Register, as a means of humorous effect, was present in one joke and only to enhance the effect. This is also probably due to the format of the humour, as register may require more complex texts to convey a humorous effect.

Superiority theory or psychic release was also not very frequent, most probably due to more public nature of the survey. Elements of these two theories were more or less secondary to the predominant presence of the means which could were classified under the incongruity.

The results have also revealed that, in many cases, one category might not be enough to fully describe the linguistic means of the humorous effect. Some of the more complex jokes covered multiple categories of linguistic means, usually with one means being central to the function and the others to enhance the effect. Even within a limited corpus of data, some patterns have reoccurred, for example a combination of phonetic ambiguity and pragmatics, when parodying some known phrase, or lexical ambiguity and semantics, when homonymy or polysemy creates semantically absurd notions.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Jokes appear to be a good source of various linguistic phenomena. They sometimes present quite complex and creative combinations of linguistic and extra-linguistic categories, which might provide good examples of functions of language. Humour also has a good potential to be positively accepted by students and it is something which usually keeps one's interest and is easy to relate to. Students could be, for example, asked to describe linguistic means of realization of various jokes, or other humorous texts. The ambiguity and often possibility for different interpretations has a potential to provoke a discussion on the topic. More complex humorous items could help students to understand some of the more problematic linguistic and extra-linguistic phenomena.

The proposed classification of the linguistic means of humour might be further modified and used to cover other spectra, areas and disciplines that deal with humour. With sufficiently covered data from various diverse sources it might be possible to observe further patterns and similarities that would be useful for forming a more general theory of linguistic humour.

REFERENCES

- Attardo, S. (1994). *Linguistic theories of humor*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter
- Carr, J. (2008). *Five Interesting Things About Jokes* [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwmqQHjktpl>
- Carr, J. (2013). *Jimmy Carr Live – Laughing and Joking* [DVD]. UK: Channel 4 DVD
- Fogarty, M. (2007). Spoonerisms, Mondegreens, Eggcorns, and Malapropisms. Retrieved from <http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/>
- Gervais, R. (2011) The Difference Between American and British Humour. *Time*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/>
- Grice, P. (1975). “Logic and conversation,” *Syntax and Semantics*, vol.3 edited by P. Cole and J. Morgan, New York: Academic Press
- It’s not just the way you tell ‘em: researchers find the official 50 funniest jokes of all time (2010, October 21). *Mail Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1322475/Researchers-official-50-funniest-jokes-time.html>
- Joos, M. (1961). *The Five Clocks*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt P
- Raskin, V. (1985). *Semantic mechanisms of humor*. Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co.
- Ritchie, G. (2003). *The linguistic analysis of jokes*. London: Routledge
- Ross, A. (1998). *The language of humour*. London: Routledge

SUMMARY IN CZECH

Tématem této bakalářské práce jsou nejčastěji používané jazykové prostředky za účelem dosažení humorného efektu. Cílem této práce je zjistit četnost těchto prostředků za použití vhodného a praktického systému pro jejich klasifikaci. První hlavní sekci je teoretická část, která popisuje problematiku definování humoru, přístupy k lingvistickým teoriím humoru a vystvěluje nejběžněji používanou klasifikaci humoru – rozdělení na *teorie inkongruence*, *teorie superiority* a *teorie relaxace*. Práce je zaměřena především na teorii inkongruence, která je dále rozdělena na *strukturální ambiguitu* (Fonetika, Morfologie, Grafologie, Lexikologie, Syntax), a *kontextuální inkongruitu* (Sémantika, Pragmatika, Promluva, Registr).

Součástí této práce je také analýza zvoleného textu, která aplikuje navrženou teoretickou klasifikaci na daný text, za účelem zjištění nejčastějších anglických prostředků vyjadřujících humor. Internetový průzkum anglických vtipů, formou ankety, který odhalil padesát nevtipnějších vtipů, byl zvolen jako zdroj a výsledky potvrdily, že inkongruitu je tím nejčastějším prostředkem k dosažení humoru. Především *lexikální ambiguita* a *sémantická inkongruitu* byly těmi nejčastějšími prostředky, které dosahovaly humorného efektu. Alespoň jeden z těchto dvou prostředků, či kombinace obou dvou, byl obsažený v 70% zkoumaných vtipů. Analýza také ukázala, že humorný efekt jednoho vtipu může často tvořit více lingvistických prostředků, a není tedy vždy možno vtip zařadit pouze pod jednu kategorii.