

The Formation and Humorous Effect of Network Puns under Relevance Theory and Graded Salience Hypothesis

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how puns in contemporary stand-up comedy generate humor by integrating Relevance Theory (RT) and the Graded Salience Hypothesis (GSH). Based on the corpus phenomenon of 10 episodes of *ROCK & ROAST* Season 5, we conduct discourse-pragmatic analysis of pun instances. Results indicate that, consistent with GSH, a salient meaning is accessed first; speech- and semantics-driven ambiguity then creates a mismatch with contextual expectations. Following RT, audiences make minimal additional inferential effort to revise interpretation, producing surprise and enabling parallel access to dual meanings. The study offers an integrated pragmatic account of pun processing in performance contexts, which is insightful for future work on humor comprehension in networked comedy.

KEYWORDS

Relevance theory; Graded salience hypothesis; Stand-up comedy; Puns

1 Introduction

Puns, as a common rhetorical device, achieve the purpose of carrying two or more distinct meanings simultaneously by deliberately confusing words or phrases with similar pronunciations or related meanings, whether in a single word, a complete sentence, or even a passage. Therefore, the value and core of puns lie in whether the words or phrases themselves possess exploitable ambiguous attributes, whether it is to create humor or to convey more serious connotations (Giorgadze, 2014). On the current situation is that research on puns not only covers the rhetorical function, pragmatic function and literary function of puns, but also involves their role in specific texts (Qiu & Yang, 2014). Domestic scholars tend to categorize and summarize the types of puns from different perspectives, such as Li (2000) classifies puns based on their linguistic foundation (phonetic similarity and polysemy of words) into two categories: “homophonic puns” and “homonymic puns”; Li (1986) divides puns by their creative methods into “lexical type”, “grammatical type” and “other rhetorical types”; Bai (2011) classifies puns through their actual dynamic interpretation paths into four categories from breaking away from the static perspective: “killing two birds with one stone (simultaneously activating dual meanings)”, “garden path (dual meanings activated successively and mutually exclusive)”, “breaking one piece into parts (deconstructing the literal meaning of idioms)” and “jumping out of the ring (breaking out of the text context and combining with external knowledge reserves)”. Foreign scholars have examined puns across definitional, structural, cognitive, and pragmatic dimensions. For example, Brown (1956) emphasizes context and, on the basis of *contextual compatibility*, contrasts “good” puns (natural associative links) with “bad” puns (forced associations). Bates (1999) offers a functional taxonomy, grouping puns into information transmission, cultural connection, and emotional expression. Partington (2009) provides a lexicogrammatical classification, including collocational rule-breaking, semantic-preference conflict, and grammatical ambiguity types. Collectively, these accounts indicate that contextual, functional, and structural factors jointly shape pun interpretation and support cognitively informed pragmatic analyses of humor. However, studies that trace how puns dynamically form and produce effects in performance contexts, especially networked stand-up comedy, remain limited. A pragmatically oriented analysis of puns in online stand-up comedy can therefore deepen our understanding of humor processing and offer practical guidance for comedic practice. Existing literature shows two limitations relevant to this study: (1) many classification studies are descriptive and do not connect types of puns to real-time interpretive processes in performance; (2) there is relatively little work on how puns are shaped by interactive features of contemporary online comedy. Addressing these gaps is theoretically important for integrating lexical salience and inferential pragmatics, and practically useful for understanding comedic strategies in a rapidly expanding digital performance space.

In China, online stand-up comedy has emerged as a dominant platform for pun-driven humor, with *ROCK & ROAST* standing out as a cultural phenomenon. Launched in August 2017, the show has aired five seasons, and its fifth installment (2022) garnered unprecedented attention: as of December 2022, related hashtags on Weibo (China’s leading microblogging platform) accumulated over 15.9 billion views, reflecting the program’s widespread resonance and its

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status as a representative corpus of contemporary Chinese humorous language. The fifth season, in particular, featured a proliferation of puns tailored to online audiences' cognitive habits that are characterized by conciseness, contextual anchoring and dependence on shared cultural knowledge. This linguistic design renders it an ideal case for exploring the functional mechanisms of puns in digital performative contexts.

Given that, this paper draws on a corpus of puns extracted from all 10 episodes of *ROCK & ROAST* Season 5, adopting Giorgadze's (2014) classification of puns as "lexical-semantic pun(having two or more meanings in the language), structural-syntactic pun(having two or more different meanings because of the structure of the sentence and its syntax), structural-semantic pun(having a word or phrase that contains more than one meaning)". Guided by the Graded Saliency Hypothesis (GSH for the short) and Relevance Theory (RT for the short) as complementary frameworks, this study pursues two focused objectives: 1. How do performers use contextual cues to guide the activation of the salient meanings of puns and prompt reinterpretation toward non-salient humorous meanings? 2. How does the tension between saliency and the cognitive effort required for optimal relevance jointly generate the surprise that yields laughter?

2 Theoretical overview

2.1 Theoretical review

This paper deploys Relevance Theory (RT) and the Graded Saliency Hypothesis (GSH) as complementary lenses for analyzing puns in stand-up comedy. The Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson, centers on the "cognitive principle" and the "communicative principle" (Sperber & Wilson, 1996), stating that human cognition naturally tends to pursue optimal relevance, and each explicit communicative act has the "optimal relevance", at the same time, communicators need to make reasonable or even extra efforts based on cues such as context and background knowledge to achieve the best contextual effect (Xie & Cui, 2023). This theory not only explains how puns create humor and evoke resonance in the show, but how puns of different styles transform and change their rhetorical functions. Furthermore, to make up for the lack of language understanding, Giora (2003) proposed the Graded Saliency Hypothesis. The core of this hypothesis is centered around the saliency (the first reaction meaning automatically associated in language expression), the role of context (non-graded saliency adapted to context), the mechanism of meaning processing (meaning processing follows the principle of graded saliency), and the processing of language phenomena (prioritizing the expression of high-frequency meanings such as metaphors and idioms) (Gong, 2009; Wang & Yang, 2019). The hypothesis provides key support for explaining the resonance generation of humorous language in stand-up comedy, the achievement of punchlines, and the activation of meaning through puns in contextual interaction. In the existing studies on English puns, the process of understanding English puns can be divided into two stages: semantic initial processing and meaning integration. In the processing stage, the saliency principle plays a dominant role; while in the integration stage, the association principle becomes the core factor that restricts the outcome (Liu, 2023; Lin, 2009). Together RT and the GSH explain the dynamic sequence typical of pun comprehension: initial expectation (driven by saliency), contextual mismatch and surprise, effortful reinterpretation guided by relevance, and eventual resonance when the non-salient meaning is adopted. In short, GSH answers "why a particular meaning is accessed first," while RT answers "why and how hearers move away from that meaning to restore or increase relevance". Therefore, their interaction accounts for the trajectory of humor which is created in and through the sequences.

2.2 The formation process of online puns and the path to their humorous effects

Under the synergy of the RT and GSH, stand-up comedy puns achieve their humorous effects following the operational path of "activating semantics - finding associations - generating puns". Firstly, the GSH guarantees semantic activation. When stand-up comedians perform, through visual (expressions or body movements, etc.) and auditory (speech, intonation, rhythm, etc.) dual sensory stimulation, they directly trigger the audience to activate the salient meaning of puns. At this time, the traditional meaning of the puns is preferentially invoked in the conventional context and cognition, for example, "apple" preferentially activates the salient meaning of "fruit"; "Pigeon" prioritizes the saliency of "animal". This process occurs automatically without the need for contextual reasoning or a high level of cognitive effort. Secondly, the conflict triggers semantic reinterpretation. The formation of humorous language depends on breaking conventional thinking and logic to create cognitive conflicts and contrasts. When the semantic interpretation of puns is saliency that is the conventional meaning, the semantics cannot have conflict with the context and cognition, and lacks expressiveness, and thus cannot produce expressive effects such as surprise, satire, and exaggeration, and thus cannot create a funny point and produce a humorous effect. At this point, the specific context becomes crucial. The audience, by comparing the context and the saliency meaning, discovers the "disharmony (the mismatch between the salient meaning of words and the requirements of context)", acquires the information that the conventional saliency meaning does not meet the requirements of communication at this time, and then is driven by this information to make an additional cognitive effort to form the need for semantic reinterpretation. Finally, RT completes the semantic screening. The audience, guided by context, enters the process of putting in extra cognitive effort by invoking certain background knowledge to deduce and

filter the non-salient meaning of puns. Among them, the “optimal relevance” principle of RT will become the criterion for determining semantics: viewers will, based on a specific context, prioritize the semantics that best fits the context that is the non-prominent semantics, to complete the transition from “conventional semantics” to “unconventional semantics”. This transformation dissolves the “disharmony”, and makes the puns precisely match the theme and the actor's intention. The audience also successfully gets the punchline because of the “unexpected semantic reversal” and the “reasonable (logically consistent) optimal relevance”, and then creates satirical, exaggerated, self-mocking and other humorous effects to complete the performance. In conclusion, the GSH provides a “ticket” to puns, ensuring that the audience has a basis for understanding the puns and a standard of reference; context leads the audience to form a need for semantic reinterpretation; RT provides the audience with directions for the “optimal relevance” (that is semantic activation-context-association regulation), enabling them to complete semantic screening, create conflicts, generate jokes, and complete humor.

3 Case analysis

This paper will use Giorgadze's classification criteria (Giorgadze, 2014) to categorize puns into three types: lexical-semantic puns, structural-syntactic puns, and structural-semantic puns, and analyze them specifically based on the corpus selected from the 10 episodes of *ROCK & ROAST* Season 5.

3.1 Lexical-semantic puns

Lexical-semantic puns mainly rely on the linguistic attributes of the word itself or the phrase, namely semantics and form (phonetics and glyphs). In a specific context, this type of puns will activate two or more independent semantics. The fundamental cause of their ambiguity lies in the word itself and has nothing to do with syntax. Therefore, they can be classified into three major categories: polysemantic puns, homophones, and homographs. Since the corpus does not involve homographs, only the first two are discussed in this article.

Example 1

Because guys can do everything. I know eight or nine ways to make eggs, and there are dozens of dishes. Some friends have praised my cooking skills like this, saying that hens can fight with me when they see it. I just keep thinking, why hasn't the hen come and fight me? You say, what's the use of my cooking skills? I really need a hen's life. Then I thought, if a hen really came, it would be awkward, right? It came, knocked on the door and I said, “Who are you?” It said, “Oh, hen (means I don't know in Cantonese)!” (From contestant Wang Jianguo of the first episode)

In the first example, the core pun is “hen”. “Hen” and “don't know” have similar pronunciations in Mandarin but different forms and meanings, so they can be regarded as homophones. In the early context setting, viewers have already prioritized the traditional salience of “hen” – poultry. During the context progression, the actor personified the “hen” with the act of “knocking on the door interaction”, shifting the narrative context from “poultry cognition” to “interpersonal question-and-answer scenes”. At this point, the salience meaning of the “hen” (poultry) deviates from the actor's intended expression (to convey the message of “not knowing”): the poultry is unable to perform the human act of “knocking on the door and answering questions”, and let alone carry out the semantic function of “responding to questions”, resulting in “disharmony between semantics and context”. This dissonance breaks the audience's initial expectations, making them realize that the salience meaning does not fit the current context and thus generating the cognitive need that is finding non-salience meanings to fill the semantic void. After receiving the above information, the audience, based on the “optimal relevance” principle of RT, after understanding the context's intention to express “I don't know”, retrievals dialect knowledge and makes an additional cognitive effort to sift the semantics. When the pronunciation of “hen” is associated with “hen” (pronunciation of “I don't know” in Cantonese), it satisfies the contextual need to “respond to the question” and also achieves logical self-consistency of “similar sound but different semantic”, successfully resolving the previous semantic disharmony. It lays a reasonable contrast foundation for the subsequent “semantic reversal from poultry to dialects” and eventually forms a funny point, completing the humorous expression.

Example 2

I still have to win. Winning is the cure for my life. If I lose, I still have to go to the hospital. Winning really doesn't have any effect on the body. At most, it's just “Ying Ma Le (a complete victory)”. (From contestant House in Episode 3)

In this example, the core pun is “Ying Ma Le (means win big in Mandarin)”, which can be judged as a polysemantic pun based on its lexical characteristics. In the performance, House directly triggers the audience's automatic semantic activation of “Ying Ma Le” by emphasizing the definite tone of “win” and combining it with visual and auditory stimuli such as casual body expressions. This meaning conforms to the presupposition context of “winning is the antidote to life” and is a conventional cognition that the audience can call upon first without additional reasoning. In the previous context, the actor has already constructed the conventional logic that “winning has no effect on the body”, and if “Ying Ma Le” is interpreted only in the prominent sense of “complete victory”, although it is in line with the theme of

"winning", it cannot break the conventional thinking, lacks "surprise" and expressive tension, and naturally cannot generate a funny point. At this point, the implicit context of "losing and going to the hospital" in the previous text forms a subtle "disharmony" with the salience meaning of "Ying Ma Le": "Winning" is supposed to bring about a positive outcome, but "Ma Le" implies "an abnormal state after excess", and this semantic tension prompts the audience that "the salient meaning still has expressive intention", thereby driving them to make an additional cognitive effort and generate the need to explore the non-salient meaning. Guided by the context, viewers invoke the polysemous background knowledge of "Ma Le" (referring to both "the physiological state of numbness" and "the extreme degree of exaggeration"), and combine the superficial expression of "winning has no effect on the body" with the implicit contrast of "losing the medical treatment", derived the non-salient meaning of "Ying Ma Le" - here "Ma Le" does not actually refer to physiological numbness, but rather an ironic exaggeration of the state of "winning to the extreme but seemingly insignificant", which is in line with the core idea that "winning is the antidote" and reinforces the self-mockery through the contrast between "ultimate victory and understatement". This interpretation is highly consistent with the theme of the performance and the actor's intention, forming the optimal relevance of "the balance of cognitive effort and contextual reward", successfully completing the semantic transformation from "total victory" to "exaggerated irony". This semantic reversal dissolves the "disharmony" between the salience meaning and the context, and makes "Ying Ma Le" both convey the obsession with "winning" and downplay its importance with humor. The audience gets a laugh point from the "unexpectedness of the semantic reversal" and the "reasonableness of the associative deduction", achieving a complete landing of self-mocking humor.

3.2 Structural-syntactic puns

The structural-syntactic type of ambiguity mainly arises from various ways of dissecting and analyzing sentence structures and grammatical usage, mainly focusing on subject-verb combinations, word combinations, and word class conversions.

Example 3

The sea not only provides inspiration but also makes one more openminded. I also go to the seaside for inspiration. I was thinking, if I say I'll sit for a whole day, will anyone recognize me, look at me or something? It turned out to be by the sea, and the lifeguard kept looking at me. He thought this person was in so much pain, maybe he wanted to jump into the sea, but he was not well-educated either. This suicide note has been here for three days and still hasn't been finished. (From Hu Lan, contestant of Episode 10)

In this example, the joke comes from the last sentence: "This suicide note has been here for three days, and still haven't finished it". From a syntactic perspective, "suicide note" as a static text cannot produce subject-dynamic verbs such as "come" and "finish", that is, the subject-verb collocation in this sentence is inappropriate and causes syntactic problems. Therefore, this sentence, as a core pun expression, belongs to structural-syntactic puns. Based on the previous context setting ("go to the seaside for inspiration"), the audience formulates syntactic expectations for the pun content, that is, the person serves as the subject and the text as the object. This conforms to the conventional syntactic emphasis of language, and the audience can automatically activate it without having to exert additional cognitive effort, thereby forming a syntactic assumption for understanding the sentence. After fully receiving the sentence, the viewer realizes that the sentence structure has been disrupted, the original subject "the author himself" has become "suicide note", and the static object "suicide note" has a conflict with the collocation and cognition of the main dynamic verb "come", thereby reminding the viewer and creating the need for correct grammar. Based on the "optimal relevance" principle of RT, the audience actively retrieved context cues for syntactic reconstruction, using rhetorical devices as a means of additional cognitive effort, choosing to personify the "suicide note", correcting verb collocations, and completing the best syntactic screening. At the same time, in context, the personified "suicide note" is delayed by "three days" and "not yet finished", creating an emotional conflict between the negative emotions and the positive word "open-mindedness" that conveys the self-mocking sense of "creative anxiety", ultimately achieving a humorous effect.

3.3 Structural-semantic puns

The Structural - Semantic ambiguity arises from the inherent fuzziness of words or concepts due to their widespread use and informal usage. Idiomatic expressions are a typical example: their definitions are often unclear and can only be understood by relying on the broader contextual framework (which usually guides a specific interpretation).

Example 4

Later I found out that I was bullied that day because one of them had broken up and hit me to relax. It was also the first time in my life that I was hurt by love. (From Episode 2 Xu Zhisheng)

The core pun of this example is "Hurt because of love". "Hurt by love" is a common term, often referred to as "emotional hurt" or "psychological problem", which is a conventional perception. In this paragraph, "Hurt by love" is extended to "hurt physically and physically because of love", and this semantic disconnection indicates that this type of puns is structural-semantic puns. Throughout the comedy, when the audience hear "Hurt by love", they subconsciously

associate it with emotional events such as heartbreak or betrayal, which is an activation of the salient meaning without the need for additional cognitive effort. However, the pre-set context of “beating me to clear my mind” sets up a scene of “physical harm” for the audience, which conflicts with the conventional perception of “emotional harm” and creates disharmony, which prompts the audience to have a need for semantic reinterpretation. After receiving the demand, the audience, based on RT and in context, made an additional cognitive effort of vocabulary recognition to sift out the optimal relevance for “hurt by love”, that is, literally “hurt by love physically”. This interpretation achieves logical consistency between love and hurt, eliminating context conflicts and creating a sense of surprise through unconventional interpretations of conventional expressions, ultimately achieving a self-mocking humor effect.

4 Conclusion

Based on RT and the GSH, this paper analyzes the cognitive mechanism of puns comprehension in the context of the 10 episodes of *ROCK & ROAST* Season 5. The analysis shows that pun processing follows a characteristic sequence, that is, audiences first access the most salient meaning of an expression (as predicted by GSH); when this initial interpretation conflicts with contextual cues, a need for reinterpretation arises. Based on RT, the audience makes an extra cognitive effort to break through conventional semantics, seek the optimal relevance, eliminate the “disharmony”, thereby creating a funny point and creating humorous effects such as satire, self-mockery, and exaggeration.

The findings have practical implications for performance practice. Lexical strategies that transform buzzwords or link items to current hot topics increase the likelihood that an initially salient meaning will be reinterpreted in a humorous direction. Strategic repetition of key words or lines creates memory anchors that speed audience integration of reinterpretation and amplify the punchline. This study contributes an integrated pragmatic account of how salience and inferential effort interact to generate pun-based humor in contemporary online performance and identifies observable markers (e.g., lexical choice, contextual scaffolding, and audience interaction) for future empirical work. Limitations include the single-program, single-season corpus and the predominantly qualitative treatment of multimodal features; therefore, generalization across programs, languages, and cultural contexts requires further testing. Future research should combine corpus analysis with experimental methods (e.g., reaction-time measures, physiological recording, or eye-tracking) and quantify prosodic and gestural parameters to assess their relative contributions to reducing processing cost and enhancing humorous effect.

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