

## INTRODUCTION

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*“Man walks into a bar, orders a Corona  
and 2 Hurricanes. Bartender says,  
that’ll be \$20.20...” [2]*

The main theme of this monograph is ambiguity as a linguistic phenomenon in English verbal humour. Ambiguity is an attractive phenomenon for linguistic research and has been theoretically analysed from the point of view of particular language levels or for special types of discourses (literary, journalistic, etc.). Our interest in ambiguity in general or ambiguity in verbal humour in particular stems from the fact that although there exist a few thorough studies presented by respected English or American theoreticians<sup>1</sup>, as well as some scientific articles scattered in

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<sup>1</sup> Oaks, 1994; Tabossi, 2001; Ruby, 2001; Attardo, 1991; Raskin, 1985, 2014; Böhmerová, 2010;

various papers,<sup>2</sup> ambiguity in verbal humour still provides some interesting insights into the topic.

In this monograph, we shall examine the specific relationship between ambiguity and verbal humour and analyse various types of ambiguity and its use in jokes. Our research is based upon a linguistic corpus consisting of 1966 English jokes found in literary sources or on the Internet.

We take into consideration only those types of ambiguities that are linguistic in nature, which means that their indeterminacy arises entirely from linguistic properties. The main research question of the monograph will be: what types of ambiguity are most productive in producing humorous effect in jokes in contemporary English.

In the first chapter of Part I we present underlying general cognitive and linguistic principles which enable us perceive ambiguity as a specific linguistic phenomenon. We define the essence of ambiguity and discuss its various types – phonological ambiguity,

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Štulajterová, 2008, 2013; Záborská, 2018; etc.

lexical ambiguity, semantic ambiguity, syntactical ambiguity, as well as some minor subtypes – discourse ambiguity, scope ambiguity, gender ambiguity, etc. We also aim at synthesizing some of the results of linguistic research of ambiguity and at suggesting our own definition of the term. Furthermore, based on our survey research and analysis of collected data, we present our own typological categorization of ambiguity in verbal humour in English in Chapter 2.

Because of the fact that ambiguity sometimes overlaps with vagueness, we attempt to outline the essence of this linguistic phenomenon (Chapter 3).

The theoretical background necessary for better understanding of the relationship between ambiguity and verbally expressed humour will be outlined in Chapter 4. We discuss the notion of verbal humour by presenting prominent philosophical and linguistic theories that account well for jokes based on ambiguity.

The essence, mechanism and structure of jokes are dealt with in Chapter 5. We try to

determine basic prerequisites needed to understand an ambiguity based joke, especially the language competence, cognitive processes, and communication competence. Besides the description of the corpus and relationship between ambiguity and humour, we present the main four types of ambiguity identified in jokes excerpted from various sources. Each type of ambiguity found in the corpus will be analysed in detail and illustrated with appropriate examples.

Subsequently, we summarize our findings about ambiguity in verbal humour, its types, frequency, and communicative function. Collected data excerpted from theoretical works on ambiguity in humorous discourses, as well as from books, periodicals and the Internet form the material for our study of the final typological categorization of ambiguity in English. Our earlier studies of some aspects of ambiguity in verbal humour in English<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ŠTULAJTEROVÁ, A. 2008. Lexical ambiguity in English press advertisements. In *Teória a prax prípravy učiteľov anglického jazyka* 6. Zborník katedry anglistiky a amerikanistiky FHV UMB. Banská Bystrica : UMB, 2008. ISBN 978-80-8083-648-1.

motivated us to extending our research, and to answering the questions concerning the existence, linguistic character and systemic interpretation of ambiguity. We hope that our research of ambiguity in verbal humour in English could form the basis for initiating discussions on this linguistic issue.

The data collected had been empirically examined to see whether they report appropriate qualities that could qualify for ambiguity in verbal humour. Collected linguistic corpus has been analysed horizontally – from the phonological, lexical, semantic and syntactical points of view. Final phase of the research can be characterised by an inductive approach connected with synthesis and generalisation of obtained data.

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ŠTULAJTEROVÁ, A. 2009. Ambiguity in English. In: *Teória a prax prípravy učiteľov anglického jazyka 7. Zborník katedry anglistiky a amerikanistiky FHV UMB. Banská Bystrica : UMB, 2009. s. 87-92. ISBN 978-80-8083-881-2.*

ŠTULAJTEROVÁ, A. 2013. Semantic Ambiguity in Humorous Discourse. In: *Lingual Processes in Discourse. Collection of Linguistic Papers. Samara : Samara University Publishing House. 2013. pp. 35-40. ISBN 978-5-86465-599-3.*

Interdisciplinarity of the monograph is reflected in the intersection of several scientific disciplines – primarily general linguistics, philosophy, psychology and sociolinguistics.

In the Conclusions, observations on the analysis of the systemic status of ambiguity in verbal humour in English and the results of research have been summarized. We try to explain systemic motivation of the use of ambiguity in English jokes, and suggest their possible interpretations. We apply the functional-structural methods of research for a systematic synchronic treatment of ambiguity in verbal humour in English.

In spite of all the recent efforts and achievements in this field, we aim at contributing to a more complex view of ambiguity in verbal humour in English. We believe we managed to provide satisfactory answers to several questions, and explain and systematize the treatment of some aspects concerning ambiguity itself, as well as ambiguity in verbal humour. We hope that our work will be an inspiration for further study

and research of this linguistically attractive phenomenon.

## **THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO AMBIGUITY**

### **1 GENERAL REMARKS ON AMBIGUITY**

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In this chapter we present a survey of the results of the research into linguistic ambiguity in English, though a complex treatment of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this monograph. Our ambition is to outline basic notions related to ambiguity, some of the existing definitions, as well as some theoretical and pragmatic problems related to them. Furthermore, we want to present a survey of the most prominent research works dealing with linguistic ambiguity in English.

In general, ambiguity is the quality of being interpretable in more than one way in



terms of meaning. According to Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles (1968, p. 58) the word ambiguity had been taken over into English in the Middle English period from French (“*ambiguité*”) and its original meaning was “*hesitation*” or “*doubt*”.

As a linguistic term, ambiguity is explained in the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary of Current English (2000, p. 36) as “1. state of having more than one possible meaning; 2. a word or statement that can be understood in more than one way; 3. a state of being difficult to understand or explain because of involving many different aspects.”

From a traditional point of view, most prominent scholars (Leech, 1969; Lyons, 1977, 1992; Quirk et al. 1991; Wales, 1995; Crystal, 1996; Murphy, 2010) agree that ambiguous means having one or more meanings, or something not clearly stated or defined and therefore **confusing**. They state that this phenomenon may also cause uncertainty and point out that the difficulty to understand an

ambiguous phrase or a sentence may also arise due to elliptical or puzzling information.

As ellipsis and puzzles are context dependent, it is the context, which plays an important role in resolving some ambiguities, because the same word, phrase or sentence may be ambiguous in one context and unambiguous in another. The context in which an ambiguous word is used often makes it evident which of the meanings is intended.

For instance, if someone says: "*I buried one thousand pounds in the bank*", most language users would not imagine that someone used a shovel to dig the money under a tree. However, some linguistic contexts do not provide sufficient information to disambiguate a used word.

As our ambition is to arrive at a more complex definition of ambiguity we now offer a brief survey of linguistic investigations of ambiguity in English. Within the recent century and a half, the interest in the research of ambiguity has brought a number of definitions, examples and approaches.

According to Crystal (1996, p. 45) in Chaucer's times we can observe examples of grammatical ambiguity caused by the fact that auxiliaries "*have*" and "*be*" competed for the expression of perfect aspect. "In Canterbury Tales, we find instances of both *ben entred* ('been entered') and *han entred* ('have entered') each in context expressing past time. This used to cause potential ambiguity, as was also used in passive constructions." Crystal states that the problem was eliminated when "*have*" came to be used for perfective aspect, and "*be*" for the passive and progressive. (ibid., p. 45)

Crystal (1996) states another example of ambiguity, which appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lord Castlereagh, the Duke of Wellington, gave his speech in the House of Commons saying: "The subjects which have occupied our attention have been *more numerous, more various* and more important than are usually submitted to the consideration of Parliament *in the same Session*." According to Crystal (1996, p. 193) "*various*" has no meaning at all, unless it means that the subjects were variegated in

themselves, which would be only one degree above sheer nonsense. "Next comes "*in the same Session*". He may mean "*in one and the same*" but the word "same" seems to be redundant there. He could have said "*during one Session or during a single Session*" (ibid. p. 193) If such examples of ambiguity and lack of clarity were produced by people of eminence, what about average users of language and their errors in the age of prescriptive grammatical tradition.

As ambiguity is generally taken as a property of signs that bear multiple interpretations, we should include Saussure in our survey as well. He initiated the discussion related to the arbitrariness of the sign as described in his *Course of General Linguistics*. The signifier may stay the same but the signified will shift in relation to context. In terms of change over time, Saussure (1983, p. 75) states: "Whatever the factors involved in [the] change, whether they act in isolation or in combination, they always result in a shift in the relationship between the sign and the signification."

Though not directly in relation to what we term ambiguity, Freud (1910) in his early work *The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words* states that every experience must have a double meaning or for every meaning there must be two aspects and that there is no meaning in any stable or absolute sense; meanings are multiple, changing, and contextual.

One of the first definitions of ambiguity, however, can be found in Empson (1930, p. 1) who defines the term as “any verbal nuance, however slight, which adds some nuance to the direct statement of the prose, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.”

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ambiguity in English has attracted the attention of numerous authors, whether native speakers of English or other Anglicists. Kooij (1971) points out that while some disciplines see the notion of ambiguity through a negative, positive, practical, or aesthetic stance, linguistics treats ambiguity as a natural property of language.

According to Channell (1994, p. 216) ambiguity arises when “a sentence has two or more competing but distinct meanings attached to it.” She claims that ambiguity is seldom a factor in real communication, because hearers read off a meaning without even realizing that there could have been another one.

Ambiguity becomes interesting and descriptively relevant when it can be observed as being actually used by conversational participants, for example in jokes, puns, or where a breakdown can be attributed to a wrong reading being given to an utterance. Furthermore, ambiguity is an effective narrative device used to engage a hearer in conversation and to move it to a level of deeper comprehension. (ibid., p. 35)

Recent studies of ambiguity are cognitively and pragmatically oriented. As far as the approach of cognitive linguistics, Sennet (2016) states that ambiguity is an important feature of our cognitive understanding and interpretative abilities – studying ambiguity and how we resolve it can give us insight into both thought and

interpretation. From the pragmatic point of view, the use of words with multiple meanings requires the author or speaker to clarify their context because the aim of successful concise communication is that the receiver(s) have no misunderstanding about what was intended to be conveyed. (Tabossi, 2001)

We are of an opinion that, ambiguity is a special case of dual interpretation, however, none of the above explanations and definitions of the term state that possible function of ambiguity may also be that it produces **humorous effect**. On the one hand, ambiguity may arise as a result of unconscious, unintentional or spontaneous communication error, for instance:

- “*Terry loves Jane more than Jason.*”

It is not clear, whether Terry loves Jane more than he loves Jason or that Terry loves Jane more than Jason loves Jane.

On the other hand, ambiguity may arise as an expressive stylistic intent in order to accomplish humorous effect based on a multiple meaning a word or a phrase:

- *A: My wife's an angel!*  
*B: You are lucky, mine's still*  
*alive ... [1]*

This joke is based on the ambiguity of the word “*angel*” which has two underlying meanings: 1. “a person who is very good and kind; or 2. a spirit who is believed to be a messenger or servant of God.” (OALD, 2000, p. 40)

### **1.1 Definition of ambiguity in English**

Linking our research to the studies on ambiguity in all of its aspects, and assessing available data, as well as our own excerpted material, our aim is to summarise the findings and to propose our own definition of ambiguity. We aim at arriving at such specification, which would include the widest possible range of this phenomenon.

Ambiguity involves the following features:



- bearing multiple interpretations of a word, phrase or sentence in a given context;
- having doubtful, confusing or uncertain meaning and therefore causing difficulty understanding it;
- being context dependent;
- providing alternative responses to the same linguistic message;
- comprising phonological, lexical, semantic, grammatical, and cognitive considerations;
- sometimes having two or more underlying meanings producing **humorous effect.**

As one of the objectives of this monograph is to propose our own definition of ambiguity, we would like to define ambiguity as follows:

**Ambiguity can be defined as the context dependent quality of being interpretable in more than one way in terms of meaning; or the quality of not being clearly stated or defined. It is therefore confusing or causes alternative responses due to different cognitive perception of a**

**word, phrase or a sentence, based on phonological, lexical, semantic, morpho-syntactical and pragmatic aspects of a given language.**

## 2 AMBIGUITY AND ITS TYPOLOGICAL CATEGORIZATION

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Ambiguity occurs in many forms in language processing. There are several types of ambiguity that can be divided into various categories according to different classification schemes. Generally, most linguistic literary sources distinguish lexical, semantic and syntactical ambiguity. However, we will examine also the types of phonological, categorical, referential, and other less frequent types of ambiguity. It is under debate whether these ambiguities are the subtypes of lexical, semantic or syntactical ambiguity or whether they are unique types of ambiguity. It is difficult to fit them into the above mentioned categories because they can arise at the level of a word, as well as at the level of a phrase or a sentence.

For example, phonological ambiguity may occur at the level of words such as “*Kant*

– *can't*”(E.g.: “*Immanuel Kant. But Immanuel at least tried.*” [2]); as well as at the level of phrases or sentences if they sound identically or similarly:

“*What did the intransitive verb say when told it was pretty?*”

“*Nothing. Intransitive verbs can't take complements.*” [2]

Unlike other types of ambiguity, phonological ambiguity is recognisable only in the spoken language when a phonologically ambiguous word or phrase is pronounced. The boundaries of each category are therefore blurred. Various linguists proposed many different classification schemes. Sennet (2016) states the following categorization of ambiguity: 1. **lexical** based on homophony, homonymy and polysemy; 2. **syntactic** ambiguity which he further divides into subtypes related to a) phrases, b) quantifier and operator scope, and c) pronouns; and 3. **pragmatic** which he subdivides into ambiguity related to speech acts, truth conditional pragmatic ambiguity, and presuppositional ambiguity. Lyons (1992, p. 27) characterises

ambiguity grammatically, and states types of sentences with more than one structural description. He focuses on syntactically ambiguous constructions from the point of view of transformational grammar (ibid., pp. 42-44) and from the point of view of transitivity and ergativity (pp. 68-90). Quirk et al. (1991) also prefer grammatical aspects of ambiguity and characterize this phenomenon from the following aspects: multiple class membership of verbs, coordinated subject, ellipsis of predicate or predication, the complex noun phrase, premodification by genitives, etc.)

We will look closely at **the most frequent types of ambiguity** distinguished by Tabossi (2001):

1. **lexical** ambiguity, which arises if a word may have more than one interpretation;

2. **semantic** ambiguity, which arises when several interpretations result from the different ways in which the meanings of words in a phrase can be combined;

3. **syntactical** ambiguity, which arises when several different interpretations result

from the different ways in which a sequence of words can be grammatically structured;

4. **pragmatic** ambiguity, which arises when the context of a phrase results in there being alternative interpretations of that phrase. However, besides above mentioned central categories we will not overlook some peripheral categories which we treat as unique types of ambiguity.

## 2.1 Phonological ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity arises when a combination of sounds in a word or phrase sounds identical with a different word or phrase that has a different meaning. For example, the sound of the word *shake* is identical with the sound of the word *Sheik* that has a different meaning:

- *Do Arabs dance **sheik** to **sheik**?* [1]

It can also occur if there is more than one way to break up the sounds into words, e.g. the word *illegal* sounds the same as the words *ill eagle*. Phonological ambiguity occurs at the

level of a word or phrase and therefore it overlaps with syntactical ambiguity.

- A: “*What is the difference between unlawful and **illegal**?*”

B: “*Unlawful is against the law. **Illegal** is a sick bird.*” [3]

This type of phonological ambiguity is closely related to the one based on supra-segmental features of language. This type differs from the previous one, as it arises only when a word or phrase are read aloud; e.g.:

- “*You can’t give her any chocolates!*”

The sentence is ambiguous in the written language (“*any*” or “*special*” chocolates) and unambiguous in the spoken language because intonation will clarify whether we mean “*any chocolates*” or “*special*” ones.

Similarly, Sennet (2016) states that two utterances may sound the same (if they contain words that sound alike) without being spelt identically (if the words are not co-spelled) thus resulting in phonological ambiguity in the spoken variety without corresponding ambiguity in written variety.

According to Crystal (1996) and Ruby (2001), phonological ambiguity may arise when we want to emphasise a word in a sentence. For instance, if we want to avoid ambiguity, the word “only” should be next to the word to which it relates: one should not say “*I only saw Mike*”, when s/he means “*I saw only Mike*”, although the context usually makes it obvious what is meant. The language user, however, should be careful in written variety, where ambiguity can arise more easily because of absence of supra-segmental features such as stress, intonation, emphasis, etc. From this point of view, spoken variety is not so ambiguous, because “*only*” is always linked with the next word that carries a strong stress. There is therefore clear difference between “*I only saw MIKE.*” (and no one else) and “*I only SAW Mike.*” (I didn’t talk to him). (Crystal 1996, p. 194) An example of ambiguity in emphasis in humorous discourse:

- *Clive: “Tony, is it true you married Cynthia for the money **her grandfather** left her?”*



*Tony: "Of course not! I would still have married her if someone else had left her the money."*,[3]

In the joke, humour arises when a listener or a reader realizes that the emphasis is on a different word or phrase than he or she initially expected. In a certain extent, this type of ambiguity overlaps with phonological ambiguity explained above.

## **2.2 Morphological ambiguity**

Lyons (1992) explained morphological ambiguity in terms of phonological vs. orthographic correspondence. "Just as we must distinguish between the morph as the phonological (or orthographical) representation of the morpheme, so we must distinguish phonological (or orthographical) words and the grammatical words which they represent." (ibid. p. 196) Thus for example the word "cut" represents three different grammatical words:

the present tense *cut*, the past tense *cut* and the past participle *cut*.

Other examples of morphological ambiguity include derivational morphemes of Latin origin such as *uni-*, *mono-*, *bi-*, *di-*, etc. For instance “*bimonthly*” is notoriously ambiguous and can mean both: 1. every two months; or 2. twice every month. “*Biweekly*” has the same ambiguity, “*biennial*” normally means every two years (in contrast with “*biannual*” meaning twice a year). However, some speakers of English find it as ambiguous as *bimonthly*. (Crystal, 1996) This is also a suitable example illustrating how some types of ambiguity overlap. When considering these derivational morphemes, we can talk about morphological ambiguity. But we could also look at these morphemes from the point of view of word formation processes as examples of number prefixes– in that case we talk about lexical ambiguity. (cf. Quirk, 1991)

## 2.3 Categorical ambiguity

Categorical ambiguity can be classified within more generally productive types of ambiguity. It could be a subtype of morphological ambiguity, as it is characterized by the change of a word class of (*a kiss* – vs. *to kiss*, *to walk* vs. *a walk*, etc.)

Some linguists (Lyons, 1992; Tabossi, 2001) consider categorical ambiguity to be a subtype of lexical ambiguity, other theoreticians (Aitchinson, 1992, Quirk et al., 1985 and so do we) claim that this type of ambiguity belongs to syntactical ambiguity. Categorical ambiguity springs from conversion and occurs if one word belongs to more parts of speech and consequently to more syntactic categories. For instance, the word “*right*” can be used as a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb, so syntactically it may function as subject or object (noun), predicate (verb), modifier (adjective) or adverbial. As it has several distinct meanings, it could also be considered a subtype of lexical ambiguity.

Similarly, the sentence “*It has four wheels and flies.*” – “*flies*” can either represent the verb “*to fly*”; or the plural form of small flying insect (“*fly*”), the sentence is therefore ambiguous. Example of categorical ambiguity in humorous discourse:

- *On her way home she drove past another sign that said: ‘CLEAN RESTROOMS 8 MILES’. By the time she drove eight miles, she had cleaned 43 restrooms. [1]*

By conversion from one part of speech into another part of speech, also the meaning of the word is changed and therefore it is sometimes difficult or to determine whether categorical ambiguity is lexical or syntactical.

## **2.4 Lexical ambiguity**

Lexical ambiguity, probably the most common type in all natural languages, arises with respect to the meaning of individual words. This is also due to constant language change and the fact that new items need to be

named, languages borrow words from one another and thus words with identical spelling and pronunciation have two or more unrelated meanings. Generally, a word is lexically ambiguous if it has two or more distinct meanings in a context, for example:

- Mother: “My son can't stop biting **nails**.” Doctor: “How old is your son?”  
Mother: “Fifteen.”
- Doctor: “That's not unusual. Even at his age some people bite their nails when they're nervous . . .”
- Mother: “But he bites long **nails** he's pulled out of the floorboards!” [4]

From a traditional point of view, lexical ambiguity is usually taken to stem from homonymy (Leech, 1969; Lyons, 1977; Wales, 1995; Crystal, 1996, Štulajterová – Jesenská, 2013) which arises when a form has two or more **unrelated** meanings. In the joke below, a homonymous word *contraction* denotes either a sudden and painful tightening of muscles that

happens when a woman is giving birth to a child, as well as a short form of a word, usually an auxiliary verb. (OALD, 2000) E.g.:

- “*Why do sperm cells look like commas and apostrophes?*”  
“*They often interrupt **periods** and lead to **contractions**.*” [2]

Some theoreticians claim that lexical ambiguity stems from polysemy. Hirst (1992) distinguishes three types of lexical ambiguity: homonymy, polysemy, and so-called categorical ambiguity which occurs when ambiguous words do not belong to the same part of speech (e.g. *bear* as a noun and as a verb). However, we think that categorical ambiguity belongs to grammatical ambiguity<sup>4</sup> and polysemy belongs to semantic ambiguity respectively.

According to Small, Cottrell and Tannenhaus (1988), lexical ambiguity can be of two types: syntactic and semantic. Here syntactic lexical ambiguity denotes what Hirst

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<sup>4</sup> The reason is that categorical ambiguity can arise not only at the level of a single word but also at the level of phrase or a sentence and thus gives rise to more than one syntactic structure.

(1992) calls categorical ambiguity. Semantic lexical ambiguity, on the other hand, may be subcategorized into polysemy and homonymy. However, we are of an opinion that these types overlap and the categorization of these authors is rather confusing.

Tabossi (2001) distinguishes four subtypes of lexical ambiguity:

- word-sense ambiguity (e.g. *mint* may refer to *the edible substance* or to *the place making money*),
- syntactic ambiguity (e.g. “*They can fish.*” This is an ambiguous sentence as it has two underlying meanings: 1. S – V – O sentence pattern: they put fish into cans; 2. S – V sentence pattern: they are allowed to fish, they know how to do it, etc.); in the first case the word *fish* functions as a noun, while in the second interpretation *fish* is a verb.
- morphological ambiguity (e.g. *dotted* = past tense or past participle),

- referential ambiguity (a word can refer to more than one entity in the discourse, e.g. *She cannot bear children* – does she have serious problems when being pregnant or she cannot stand them?).

Besides homonymy, Böhmerová (2010) distinguishes two other subtypes of lexical ambiguity: onomatological ambiguity and enantiosemy. Böhmerová (ibid.) maintains that onomatological ambiguity arises when a word contains a derivational morpheme which has more than one function (e.g. *clockwise* can be both an adjective and a verb owing to the bifunctional suffix *-wise*). As for enantiosemy, Böhmerová (2010, p. 29) defines it as “coexistence of lexias of opposite polarity in one polysemantic lexeme, thus representing the highest degree of meaning difference.” An example would be the word *terrific* meaning *fantastic* as well as *horrendous*. Similarly Crystal (1996, p. 128) states that ambiguity arises with prefix “in-“ which has locative, intensifying, as well as negative meaning. For instance, the word



“*inflammable*”, which derives from “*inflamm*” – that is, an inflammable object will burn. But, a lot of language users have interpreted the form to mean “*non-flame*” – that is it will not burn – there has been a gradual change in usage. As a result, objects tend to be identified using the contrast of *flammable* vs. *non-flammable* (or *inflammable* vs. *noninflammable*). (ibid., p. 128)

Lyons (1992) comments on lexical ambiguity from the point of view of semiotic trichotomy: semantics – pragmatics – syntax, as there are some differences between oppositions of linguistic (literal) meaning and cognitive (ontological) content. On the one hand, with an expression displaying more than one meaning we face a case of ambiguity, e.g. “*old*” is an ambiguous expression, as it is opposite of “*young*” as well as opposite of “*new*”. On the other hand, vagueness or indistinctness (see also Chapter 3) is a property of meaning, rather than of expression, e.g. “*now*” means time point as well as interval, “*book*” may be a text as well as physical object. So, another difference between ambiguity and vagueness is that

ambiguity can be resolved in tectogramatics while vagueness can only be resolved in the domain of cognition in a given context. (ibid.)

Although classifications of lexical ambiguity are numerous and tend to vary according to different scholars and their approaches, we are of an opinion that it is necessary to strictly distinguish between lexical ambiguity, which springs from homonymy and semantic ambiguity, which springs from polysemy.

## 2.5 Semantic ambiguity

As stated above, lexical ambiguity occurs when a single word has two or more (but finite number of) distinct context-dependent and lexicographically recorded meanings. This is to be contrasted with **semantic ambiguity** as it occurs when a word has infinite number of possible meanings, none of which may have a standard agreed-upon meaning, for example:

- “Will the band *play* anything I request?”  
“Certainly, sir.”

*“Then tell them to **play** dominos.” [5]*

Words are rarely used only in their primary meaning, they are often used figuratively. As a result, in different contexts words acquire multiple **related** meanings or undergo certain semantic shifts. This linguistic phenomenon is called polysemy, which rises when several **related** meanings are associated with the same group of sounds within one part of speech (e.g. the word *bank* can denote both a *financial institution* and at the same time the *building, which houses this institution*). This is to be distinguished from homonymy, which occurs when a form has two or more **unrelated** meanings, e.g. *bank* denoting *the side of the river* – this meaning is not related to the previous ones whatsoever.

According to Nordquist (2019), semantic ambiguity is closely related to syntactic ambiguity, i.e. two or more possible meanings within a single sentence. For example, "*We saw her duck*", is semantically as well as syntactically ambiguous sentence, as the words "*her duck*" can refer either:

1. to the person's bird (the noun "*duck*", modified by the possessive pronoun "*her*"), or
2. to a motion she made (the verb "*duck*", the subject of which is the objective pronoun "*her*", object of the verb "*saw*"). (ibid.)

Our research proved that as far as ambiguity in humorous discourse is concerned, semantic ambiguity is the most effective type in English jokes (cf. Chapter 6.3)

## **2.6 Syntactical ambiguity**

Syntactical ambiguity, which is sometimes referred to as structural or grammatical ambiguity, arises at the level of phrases or sentences. A sentence is structurally ambiguous if it has two different underlying interpretations because its constituents function differently. (Lyons, 1992) The sentence "*The lamb is ready to eat.*" has two interpretations: 1. 'The lamb is ready to eat food,'; 2. 'The lamb is ready to be eaten.' The

ambiguity arises from the fact that it is not clear whether the lamb is the subject or the object. Example of humorous discourse based on syntactical ambiguity:

- *Doctor: "Have you ever **had your eyes checked?**"*

*Patient: "No, doctor. They've always been brown."<sup>5</sup>*

Quirk et al. (1985) listed various syntactic patterns open to ambiguity. With the reference to their classification, we will briefly outline patterns productive in ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus:

(1) **adjective + noun in possessive case + noun**; e.g. "*stylish gentlemen's suits*" – the adjective may modify either the noun in the possessive case or the second noun;

(2) **adjective + noun + noun**; e.g. "*modern language teaching*" – the adjective may modify the immediately following noun or the second noun;

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<sup>5</sup> *To have sth. checked* - 1. have something done - to examine something to see if it is correct, safe or satisfactory; 2. *checked* as an adjective - having a pattern of squares, usually of two colours.

(3) **noun + noun + noun**; e.g. “*fish blood system*” – the first noun might modify the compound noun formed of the next two nouns or the compound noun formed of two first nouns modifies the following noun.

(4) **adjective + series of nouns**; e.g. “*She raised wonderful tulips, hyacinths, and crocuses.*” – the adjective may modify only the first noun or the whole series of nouns.

(5) **movable prepositional attachment**, which can modify various parts of the sentence, e.g.: *The hostess greeted the girl with a smile.*

Tabossi (2001, p. 245) claims that “structural or syntactic ambiguity results from carelessly constructed sentences that lack formal signals to clarify their sentences structure”. However, we are not of an opinion that it necessarily relates to carelessness in constructing sentences. E.g.:

- “*Our American history teacher is a handsome man.*”

The sentence is carefully constructed and still is ambiguous, as it is not clear whether the teacher comes from the U.S.A. and teaches

history in general, or whether s/he comes from Europe and teaches American history.

Aitchinson (1992, p. 11) uses the term “structural ambiguity”, and subdivides it into surface structure and deep structure ambiguity. While **surface structure** ambiguity occurs when the words can be grouped in different ways (e.g. “*hot soup and pie*” – it is not clear whether both *soup* and *pies* are *hot* or only the *soup* is *hot*.); **deep structure** ambiguity arises “when the source of the ambiguity is less easily identifiable.” (ibid., p. 11) For example in the sentence ‘*The mayor asked the police to stop the drinking,*’ it is not clear of who is drinking.

To conclude, syntactic ambiguity arises when various sentence elements perform different structural functions within a sentence. Unlike the lexical ambiguity, which relies on multiple meaning of a word, structural ambiguity is based on various possible interpretations of a phrase or a sentence. So, to disambiguate syntactic ambiguity it is necessary to identify what

grammatical functions the words in a sentence perform.

## 2.7 Discourse ambiguity

We propose to use the term discourse ambiguity for those sub-types, which relate to cohesion and cohesive devices within discourse. Discourse ambiguity falls into three categories: referential ambiguity, elliptical ambiguity, and substitutional ambiguity:

a) **referential ambiguity** arises when anaphoric or cataphoric reference is made to two entities mentioned in the text. (McCarthy, 1991) Reference items, which cause referential ambiguity, are usually personal pronouns *she*, *he*, *it*, *they*; demonstratives *this*, *that*; or phrases like *the latter*, *such...* For instance:

- “*The teacher told the student that he has to leave.*”

In this example ambiguity arises out of the fact that from anaphoric reference chain *teacher* – *student* – *he*, it is not clear whether



*he* refers to the teacher or to the student.  
Example of referential ambiguity in humorous discourse:

- *Voice on the phone: "Hello? Is that the maternity hospital?"*

*Receptionist: "Yes."*

*Voice on the phone: "Can you send an ambulance round, the wife is about to have a baby."*

*Receptionist: "Is **this** her first baby?"*

*Voice on the phone: "No. **This** is her husband." [5]*

On the one hand, referential ambiguity is context dependent (as in the example above); on the other hand it is closely related to cognitive processes, e.g.:

- *"There was a pineapple on the table, so I ate it."*

In the sentence, the anaphoric reference chain *pineapple – table – it* does not cause ambiguity as due to our knowledge of the world we understand that people normally eat pineapples, not tables. This, of course, relates to another important phenomenon – coherence. (Cook, 1989)

## **b) elliptical ambiguity**

Quirk et al. (1991, p. 82) perceive ellipsis as “grammatical process whereby elements of a sentences which are predictable from context can be omitted”. They point out to the principle of verbatim recoverability, i.e. “the actual word(s) whose meaning is understood or implied must be recoverable” (ibid., p. 884). Thus elliptical ambiguity spring from elliptical constructions formed by the omission of contextual signals in a phrase or sentence:

- *Q: “What animal can jump as high as a tree?”*

*A: “All animals. Tress can’t jump.”*

[1]

In the joke, humorous effect arises due to the omission of a part of the sentence. Expected response should be: “*All animals can jump as high as a tree.*”

## **c) substitutional ambiguity**

Substitution functions similarly to ellipsis: it is context dependent and may cause

ambiguity as well. It occurs when a word or group of words which has appeared in an earlier statement is replaced by substituting words like ‘one’, ‘so’ or ‘do’.

In humorous discourses, substitutional ambiguity occurs is formed by the omission of contextual signals, or by the replacement of words by e.g. substituting “one”:

- *Two men were sitting on the bank of a river in Africa, dangling their feet in the water. Suddenly one let out a yell and the other said: “What's the matter?” The first man replied: “A crocodile has just bitten off one of my feet!” “Which **one**?” the other asked. “What does it matter?” came the reply. “Those crocodiles all look alike to me.”*<sup>6</sup> [3]

Examples of “misunderstandings” presented in the case of discourse ambiguity are sometimes amusing, however, quite often may cause difficulties in casual communication.

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<sup>6</sup> One can refer to the foot which has been bitten off or to a crocodile.

## 2.8 Scope ambiguity

Scope ambiguity is one of less frequent subtypes. It occurs if the scope of a quantifier like *all*, *some*, *none*, is unclear, e.g.: “*Everybody needs somebody*.” This sentence is ambiguous because it is not clear whether everybody needs the same person or for every person that needs somebody there is one person he or she *needs*. So, quantifiers such as *many*, *no*, *each everybody*, *one*, *any* usually cause this type of ambiguity.

## 2.9 Gender ambiguity

Gender ambiguity is our own term as well. In recent years attention of some theoreticians has been focused on gender sensitive language (cf. Jesenská, 2009, cf. Urbancová, 2019). Although this type of ambiguity has not been mentioned in linguistic literature, we are of an opinion that **gender ambiguity** exists as well, and it arises when we use nouns such as *friend*, *clerk*, *neighbour*, etc. and the context

does not make it clear, whether the person is male or female, e.g.:

- *I think I'm next. Said Alice to **the clerk** in a crowded store";*
- *"After moving to a new house, Nancy went next door and introduced herself to **a neighbour.**"*

In examples above, context did not help resolve gender ambiguities, i.e. whether the clerk or the neighbour are male or female. Theoretically, if someone is supposed to translate such sentences into Slovak, then only traditional stereotypes would help a translator choose between equivalents: "*predavačka / susedka*", vs. "*predavač / sused*". This type is marginal and rather rare, yet with some productive potential.

## 2.10 Pragmatic ambiguity

Pragmatic ambiguity arises when the context of a phrase results in there being alternative interpretations of that phrase. (Tabossi, 2001) For example, a speech act "*The cops are coming*" can be ambiguous

between various types: an assertion, a warning, or an expression of relief. Numerous sentences can be used in multiple ways and their ambiguities are not always signalled by the content of the sentence. Some of them differ in their potential for use in speech acts though they seem to express similar content.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Categorization of ambiguity in English**

Linking our research to the studies on the typology of ambiguity, and analysing available data, as well as our own excerpted material, our aim is to summarise the findings and to propose **our own categorization** of ambiguity. We aim at arriving at such specification, which would clarify boundaries and exclude overlapping interpretations quoted or paraphrased from the above mentioned sources. First of all, ambiguity could be divided into:

1. **unintentional ambiguity** which springs from unconscious or spontaneous communication “error”, for example:

- “*Terry loves his wife and so do I.*”

2. **intentional ambiguity** which depends on the purpose of communication and relates to certain intention, for example to produce humorous effect.

- “*I don’t approve of political jokes ... I’ve seen too many of them get elected.*” [1]

As stated above, our survey research on the typology of ambiguity revealed that categorizations presented by various theoreticians sometimes overlap, or do not provide exact borderlines between particular types of ambiguity. In our monograph, we aim at our own categorization of ambiguity, which is based on its linguistic character and is therefore in compliance with systemic linguistic. Based on these outcomes, we distinguish between the following four main types and their subtypes:

1. **phonological ambiguity** which arises when two or more words or phrases sound identical (homophony) but in different contexts acquire different

meanings. This type of ambiguity can be further subdivided into:

- a. **homophonic ambiguity** – which occurs when two or more words or phrases sound identical, but have different spelling and different meaning(s), for example:

- “*Waiter! What is this stuff in the bowl?*”

“*It's **bean** soup, sir.*”

“*I don't want to know what it's **been** - what is it now?*”

[1]

- b. **suprasegmental ambiguity** which arises because of the absence of supra-segmental features such as stress, intonation or emphasis. This sub-type of ambiguity occurs only in the written language. In the spoken language this type of ambiguity is eliminated by means of the supra-segmental features.

2. **lexical ambiguity** stems from **homonymy** and occurs when a word, or a sequence



of words have two or more distinct and **unrelated** meanings in a given context, for example:

- *First patient: "I see they've brought in another **case of diarrhoea**."*

*Second patient: "That's good! Anything is better than that awful lemonade they've been giving us." [3]*

The ambiguous word "case" is homonymous with completely unrelated meanings of 'a person suffering from a disease or an injury' and 'a crate or box'. Since these two meanings are described in two separate dictionary entries, they are homonyms.

Marginally included can also be the cases of **homohrathy** – two or more words with identical spelling, but different meaning and different pronunciation. This type of lexical ambiguity can only be perceived in the written language.

- *Reading next stop. He closed his book.*

Ambiguity springs from the fact that a reader who is a non-native speaker of English understands the word “*Reading*” in initial position of the sentence as a gerund form of the verb “read”, not as the city in the UK. This misunderstanding is supported by the fact that the word “*book*” is mentioned in the second sentence.

3. **semantic ambiguity** which stems from **polysemy** occurs when a word, or a sequence of words have two or more **related** meanings in a given context. Semantic ambiguity arises due to the fact that words are rarely used only in their primary meaning, they are often used figuratively and acquire new transferred, contextual meaning(s), for example:

- “*Don’t imagine you can **change** a man, unless he’s in diapers.*” [1]

The ambiguous word “*change*” has two polysemous meanings: *to make*

*different and simultaneously to put a clean diaper on.*

4. **syntactical ambiguity** functions structurally and arises at the level of phrases and sentences, when they have two different underlying interpretations because their constituents have multiple functions, for example:

- *Policeman: "Here! Why are you crossing the road in this dangerous spot? Can't you see there is a zebra crossing only fifty yards away?"*

*Pedestrian: "Well, I hope it's having better luck than I am." [3]*

In this example, *zebra crossing* can be interpreted as the noun phrase ('an area of road marked with black and white lines', or as the verb phrase, i.e. animal going across the road.

After having delimited and classified main types of ambiguity in English it comes into consideration to point out that other above mentioned types such as morphological, pragmatic, elliptical, etc. are included in four major types of ambiguity presented above, depending of the purpose of communication.

### 3 AMBIGUITY VERSUS VAGUENESS

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Various linguistic investigators (Lakoff, 1970; Lyons, 1981; Channell, 1994; Ruby, 2001; Murphy, 2010) have argued that many instances of ambiguity are in fact instances of vagueness. Hence, it has been important to distinguish between vagueness and ambiguity. Weinreich (1966, p. 411) claims that if “a word can be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context, it has two dictionary entries, if it cannot be understood as ambiguous in a neutral context, but different meanings seem possible, it is vague.” According to Lakoff (1970) confusing vagueness with ambiguity may lead to false attribution of polysemy. The example sentence (*John has gone to the study.*) is vague as it is not clear whether John is now in the study or outside it. Thus dictionaries often multiply polysemy because lexicographers tend to identify vagueness as ambiguity. Vagueness arises if a word, phrase

or sentence is not clear because the boundaries of meaning are indistinct whereas ambiguity arises if they are unclear because it is possible to interpret them in more than one way.

Lyons (1981, p. 203) describes the attitude to ambiguity as “a highly prejudiced and unbalanced view.” He continues that “not only is it frequently, and erroneously, associated with the view that all sentences have precise and determinate meanings; its avoidance of vagueness and equivocation are always desirable, regardless of what language game we are playing. (Lyons, *ibid.* p. 203)

In more recent studies Ruby (2001, p. 323) says that “an ambiguous word has several distinct referents; a vague word lacks precision and definiteness in its reference”. Similarly, Murphy (2010, p. 84) states that if “an expression is vague then its sense is imprecise, but if it is ambiguous, it has at least two separate senses.” He uses an example with the word “*friend*”:

*Jane: Do you have a friend?*

*Eve: Yes, Sue is my friend.*

*Jane: No, I didn't mean a friend, I*

*meant a friend.*

*Eve: Oh, yeah. Perry and I have been  
together for 5 years.*

Murphy (2010) claims that the word is vague with respect to the sex of the friend, but it is not ambiguous between separate “*male friend*” and “*female friend*” senses. However, “*friend*” may also refer to “a person with who one has a relationship of mutual affection”, or “a person with whom one has just a friendly relationship.” (ibid.)

The general approach to distinguishing vagueness from ambiguity may be summarized as follows: In both cases, hearers do not know exactly what they should understand. While ambiguous sentence has two or more distinct meanings, in vague sentence distinct meanings cannot be identified.

## **AMBIGUITY BASED HUMOUR IN ENGLISH**

### **4 AN INTRODUCTION TO HUMOUR AND HUMOUR THEORIES**

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#### **Introduction**

Humour is a significant feature of human behaviour and an important part of our everyday lives. Hence, the notion of humour has been of interest for disciplines as diverse as psychology, sociology, philosophy, cognitive science, neuro-psychology, and more recently linguistics, which underlines the complexity of humour as a global phenomenon. Various theoreticians (Bernstein, 1986; Hudson, 1996; Carrol, 2004; Sennet, 2016; Laš, 2020) studied various aspects of humour –



its essence, origin and development.<sup>7</sup> For example, culturologists define humour as a cognitive process included in cultural experience of particular community and use humour for comparing different cultures. As in different societies humour occurs in different forms, they view culture as a cognitive system of common public and collective phenomena in a particular community. (Popa, 2014 In: Záborská, 2018) Thus what one finds amusing, someone else might not – that is why the transfer of humour between different languages and cultures represents a difficult task for translators.

Psychologists deal with such aspects of humour as: **social** (humour in human relations), **personal** (the relationship between sense of humour and other personal qualities), **psychological** (what makes humans laugh at various stages of their lives) and **clinical** (the relationship between humour and person's mental health). (Martin, 2014; In Záborská,

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<sup>7</sup> Greengross (2014) explains that according to evolution theories humour played an important role in a natural selection of individuals as being the consequence of evolution changes.

2018) Psychological studies of humour were strongly stimulated by Freud. In his work *Jokes and their Relations to the Unconscious*, Freud (1905) suggested that humour provides much-needed relief from ‘nervous energy’ and repressed emotions. (In Zijderveld, 1983)

Philosophers studied humour since the days of Aristotle and Plato. In previous centuries, major philosophers who studied humour include Hobbes, Bergson, Kant and Schopenhauer. Hobbes believed that we laugh because we feel superior, Kant and Schopenhauer argued that humour stems from a sense of incongruity.<sup>8</sup> However, contemporary philosophy was greatly influenced by Bergson and his classic essay “*On Laughter*”, in which he perceives humour as an assertion of freedom and spontaneity, not only against the determined regularities of nature, but against the routines of conventional society. (Bergson, 1899; In Atkinson, 1993) Although his theory retained elements of the incongruity and

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Herring, E. 2019. Laughter is Vital. In *Psyche: The Past, Present and Future of Integrated History and Philosophy of Science*.

superiority theories of humour, it also opened entirely new perspectives on the problem.

According to sociologists, humour is a social phenomenon as we cannot fully appreciate comic in isolation. They study social functions of verbal humour and claim, that it requires deliberate skill and creativity.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, an interesting study of humour has been presented by Laš (2020).<sup>10</sup> The author outlined specific features and styles of British humour and applied a diachronic approach analysing it from the Victorian era to contemporary tendencies presented in various forms of media (TV, Netflix, YouTube, Amazon Prime, etc.).

As far as the classification of humour is concerned, different scholars present different typologies. A comprehensive typology is presented by Berger (1998) who states 42 types of humour divided into four categories:

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<sup>9</sup>cf. Jesenská, P. 2010. *Essentials of Sociolinguistics*. Ostrava: Universitas Ostraviensis, 2010. pp. 119. ISBN 978-80-7368-799-1.

<sup>10</sup> cf. LAŠ, M. 2020. *Dejiny britského televízneho humoru v historicko-kultúrnej perspektíve. Od impéria k brexitu*. Banská Bystrica: Belianum, 2020.

1. verbal humour (irony, puns); 2. creative humour (analogy, repetition); 3. existential humour (caricature, parody, stereotype); and 4. non-verbal humour.

Multiple ways to categorise humour refer to social interactions in which humour is typically used. A sociolinguistic approach to humour is preferred by Schmidt-Hidding (1963), who states five humour styles comprising cynicism, sarcasm, irony, benevolent humour, and nonsense humour. They are in compliance with social goals, for instance, intentions of hurting other persons and demonstrating superiority are attributes of cynicism, sarcasm, or irony. To brighten others up and point up funny sides in order to make others laugh are goals of the benevolent humour style. In our monograph, we focus on linguistic approach to humour as we study it in the context of ambiguity which is also a language related phenomenon.

## 4.1 Linguistic approach to humour

Humour is traditionally divided into two types: **verbal** (humorous acts that are verbalized in either written or spoken form), and **non-verbal** (humour delivered physically by gestures or visually). The term verbal humour is sometimes used rather confusingly, denoting either humour that is simply delivered via language or humour that is dependent on specific linguistic properties. As a result, Ritchie (2003) uses the term **verbally expressed humour** in order to avoid needless confusion. In Ritchie's terminology, verbally expressed humour represents a type of humour, which is conveyed in language, but need not necessarily be verbal. (ibid.)

Attardo (2008) states that although the first records about a scientific study of humour appeared already in Ancient Greece, real linguistic approach to humour had not been applied until the last century. As stated by Attardo (1994), Delabastita (1997) and Raskin (2014), towards the late 1970s, the linguistic research of humour was mainly

focused on the study of puns.<sup>11</sup> In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, linguistics significantly contributed to the study of verbally expressed humour in different kinds of humorous discourses and analysed their content, form and expressive means.

Verbally expressed humour, which is sometimes referred to as language-bound humour, is often defined as humour that depends on language and is presented by a text or speech in natural language. According to Veisbergs (1997), verbal humour attracts attention of a reader or hearer to a certain point or feature in the text that is intended to be humorous.

Delabastita (1997) described verbal humour as a communicative strategy aim of which is to produce a certain effect (e.g. a climax). He also claims that in verbal humour, incongruity arises from the incompatibility in various linguistic forms. It is important to point out that verbally expressed humour does not have

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<sup>11</sup> Berson and Freud studied language mechanisms in jokes, however, later research of this topic proved that described mechanisms were not specific only to verbal humour – they related to any language forms as well. (In Attardo, 1994)

to be necessarily verbal. Some theorists claim that translatability is a criterion in determining whether humour is referential or verbal. The common view is that it is not an easy task to translate verbally expressed humour into other languages – in fact it is untranslatable. (ibid.)

Similarly, Attardo (1994) states that while verbal humour is usually untranslatable into other languages due to differences among them, it is referential humour, which is considered to “travel” quite well. Attardo (1994) distinguishes between **verbal humour**, which depends on the use of language, and **referential** humour, which refers to humorous items that are delivered via language with regard to the content. He claims that while verbal humour denotes a type of humour that is indeed verbalized and depends on specific language devices such as homonymy, homophony or polysemy, referential humour depends on the context. (ibid.)

We believe that to understand why some discourses based on ambiguity lead to amusement and others do not, it is necessary

to present those theories that offer background material for the present study.

## 4.2 Ambiguity related theories of humour

Although there are many theories of humour that cover its various aspects, we will deal only with those theories that account for verbally expressed humour based on ambiguity. There exist several theories searching the essence, origin and function of humour.

**Superiority theory** supported by Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes springs from conviction that humour and laugh are expression of superiority over other people or over own deeds.<sup>12</sup> Some significant philosophers such as Schopenhauer, Bergson and Kant regarded this theory insufficient and supported **the theory of incongruence**: laugh is caused by the presence of something senseless, incongruent, i.e. something, which is in contrast with our expectations. (In: Atkinson, 1993)

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<sup>12</sup> cf. HERRING, E. 2019. Laughter is Vital. In *Psyche: The Past, Present and Future of Integrated History and Philosophy of Science*.



The third theory is **the relaxing theory** represented by Freud and Spencer: humour is inborn human need, which through laugh eliminates stress and evokes feeling of satisfaction and enjoyment. (In Zijderveld, 1983) However, a theory of humour that best describes the relationship between ambiguity and humour and therefore is of special concern is **the incongruity theory**.

Many theoreticians claim that incongruity in a text is an essential condition for verbal humour and therefore incongruity theories are the most relevant humour theories. The basic concept of these theories is that humorous effect is conditioned by the juxtaposition of the incongruous. The humour arises out of the conflict between what is expected and what actually happens in the joke.

- *“It’s funny how full stops are known as **periods** in the US. Ask any girl, it’s never a full stop.” [2]*

In the example the humour comes from incongruity. It is sudden realization that the word *periods* is ambiguous which forces a reader or hearer to see the sentence from a

completely new perspective. “The comic effect arises when an alternative, non-favoured and therefore non-expected interpretation is revealed, at the punch line, as the correct one.” (Ritchie, 2003, p. 84)

Until today, several versions of **the incongruity theory** have arisen. One of the contributors to the incongruity theory is Koestler (1964) who introduced the term *bisociation*, which he used for the collision of two lines of thought.

Raskin (1985) elaborated humour universals and presented linguistic theory of humour called **script-based semantic theory of humour**. This theory is based on the idea of a “script”. Raskin (1985, p. 99) explains that “*the script is an enriched, structured chunk of semantic information, associated with word meaning and evoked by specific words*”. According to Raskin (1985), a text is humorous when two conditions are satisfied. The first is that the text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts and the second is that these two scripts are opposed and have to be revealed unexpectedly. He also

points out that ambiguity itself is not sufficient for a text to be funny. (ibid.)

In 1991, Raskin and Attardo extended this theory into **the general theory of verbal humour**, which represents another version of the incongruity theory. It also suggests the concept of a ‘script’, however, according to this theory, a text is funny if it contains two overlapping or different scripts and these scripts are opposed, such as real and unreal, logical and illogical, good and bad. The theory takes into consideration new areas of linguistics: text linguistics, speech acts theory and **pragmatics**.<sup>13</sup>

There is a debate whether the presence of the incongruity is sufficient for a joke or a text to be humorous. Some theorists claim that it is not. For example, Ritchie (2004) suggests that also the resolution of incongruity is inevitable for humour to arise. Theories that favour incongruity and resolution of jokes are called **incongruity-resolution theories**. Ritchie (2003) claims that two different

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<sup>13</sup> cf. Záborská, A. 2018. *The Ethnolinguistic Dimension of Humorous Texts*. Banská Bystrica: University of Matej Bel, 2018.

models for incongruity resolution exist. These are *the two-stage model* and *the surprise disambiguation model*.

The first model describes two-stage process for comprehension and appreciation of humour in which in the first stage a reader or hearer perceives the incongruity and in the second stage, the incongruity is resolved. Although the first model does not necessarily have to involve ambiguity, the surprise disambiguation model does. Ritchie (2003, p. 68) says that “the punch line creates incongruity, and then a cognitive rule must be found which enables the content of the punch line to follow naturally from the information established in the set-up”.

As far as the topic of our monograph is concerned, ambiguity-based humour exploits clash of dual meanings of words, phrases or sentences that may be interpreted in more than one way. Although verbally expressed humour includes jokes, puns, epigrams, humorous quotations, retelling amusing incidents or humorous cartoons, we will restrict our research only to jokes. So our ambition is to

examine types of ambiguity as a driving force  
for verbally expressed humour in jokes in  
English.

## 5 STRUCTURE AND TYPOLOGY OF JOKES

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To examine the mechanism of jokes in detail is not the aim of this monograph. Therefore, we will discuss only those aspects of jokes and their structure that are of any relevance to our study. The traditional definition says that a joke is a story with a punch line. Hetzron (1991, p. 45) adds that “a joke is humorous narrative where the funniest culminates in the final section”. Ritchie (2003, p. 67) defines jokes as a “short texts that involve the production of an amused reaction and the possibility of their repetition in a wide range of contexts”. He claims that jokes usually have obvious and hidden meanings. The obvious meaning conflicts with the punch line, while the hidden meaning does not. (ibid.)

Bernstein (1986, p. 66) listed the elements that are a source of humour in jokes. They include:

1. understanding multiple meaning of words, metaphors and idioms;
- 2. detecting ambiguity;**
3. perceiving incongruity;
4. appreciating that the unexpected or a sudden shift of perspective is possible.

Bernstein (1986) further suggests that to understand what makes discourses humorous, it is necessary to analyse their linguistic aspects (phonological, lexical, grammatical, etc.). Ritchie (2003) distinguishes between **linguistic** and **propositional** class of jokes. The first class relates to the linguistic form, while the latter relates to the propositional meaning. Propositional jokes rely on a delivery mechanism, in which interpretations arise from the linguistic processing. It usually involves a contrast between two interpretations or the inappropriateness of possible interpretations. Linguistic jokes involve linguistic elements, such as homonymy, polysemy, or phonetic similarity (homophony).

Generally, jokes typically consist of a **set-up** and a **punch line**. The set-up is a part of a

joke that conveys one meaning, which is understood by a listener or reader. However, the punch line reveals another meaning of the word or phrase that is in conflict with the set-up and thus breaks the expectations. A reader or listener has to find a different interpretation that is not in conflict with the set-up. In a joke, it is important that the punch line remains unknown until the very end. In the jokes based on ambiguity, ambiguity is not resolved until the punch line. Example:

- *Postmaster: "Here is your five-cent stamp."*

*Shopper: "Do I have to **stick it on myself?**"*

*Postmaster: "Nope. On the envelope."*

[1]

In example, the first two lines represent the set-up and the third line represents the punch line. The first, more obvious interpretation is that shopper is asking postmaster whether he should stick the stamp on envelope himself. However, the punch line reveals the second conflicting interpretation that is that the shopper is asking the postmaster whether he



should stick the stamp on his body. The first interpretation conflicts with the punch line whereas the second one makes sense. The difference between the two meanings creates a conflict by breaking expectations. According to our research, we may generalize that ambiguity based jokes in English base their punch line heavily on polysemy, homonymy and homophony (cf. Chapter 5).

Raskin (1985) points out that a joke relies on two assumptions:

1. the set-up is interpreted before the punch line is read. A reader or hearer is surprised by the punch line;
2. a reader or hearer goes back to the beginning of the joke to find another interpretation and s/he is able to perceive both interpretations simultaneously, otherwise the joke cannot be understood.

If we want to disambiguate discourse and thus be entertained by ambiguity based jokes, we need language knowledge, world knowledge and ability to switch a frame of reference in

order to recognize all possible meanings.<sup>14</sup> Joke has to be coherent and relevant to the world knowledge of a listener or reader. Thus the appreciation of jokes based on ambiguity depends on our beliefs, knowledge of the world, as well as our cultural background.

From the pragmatic point of view, we distinguish between **endophoric** and **exophoric** jokes. Záborská (2018) states that while in case of endophoric jokes one knows only the notional meaning of words and phrases found in a joke, exophoric jokes require knowledge of pragmatic and connotative meaning of selected words (allusions, nonce-words, language specifics, cultural or ethnic specifics, awareness of political or social situation, etc.) According to this view, ambiguity based jokes are exophoric as they comprise words with multiple or transferred meaning and basic prerequisites to understand them are cognitive processes, as well as language, communication and humour competences.

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<sup>14</sup> According to Carroll (2004, p. 78) world knowledge is “a cognitive structure that represents some aspect of our environment”.

## **6 TYPOLOGICAL CATEGORIZATION OF AMBIGUITY BASED JOKES**

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The investigations of ambiguity in humorous discourses, above all Lyons (1981), Bernstein (1986), Hirst (1987), Raskin (1991), and Attardo (1994) presented a mixture of types based on different criteria. Our research revealed that it is possible to propose a more transparent and detailed classification of ambiguity based humorous discourses in English. Therefore, the main objective of this part of our monograph is to attempt at synthesis of the individual categorizations, and provide varied typological complexity of ambiguity based jokes. Our attempt at a transparent categorization will stem from systemic classification of ambiguity based jokes according to a particular language levels (phonological, lexical, semantic, syntactical). This will result in quantitative analysis of corpus consisting of 882 ambiguity based

jokes, as well as quantitative analysis according to their occurrence and productivity. Our corpus of linguistic material consists of 1966 instances of verbal humour out of which, only 882 (42,7%) were based on ambiguity. The main sources for our corpus were found in the book *The Huge Joke Book* (1995) and various Internet sources. Mainly the book served as a valuable source for our study as it contains jokes based on various types of ambiguity.

Certain part of jokes based on ambiguity is taboo humour that usually involves a sexual connotation. Such jokes are pervasive in the history of humour and despite the fact that they are socially unacceptable, they still find their way to be spread. However, jokes that convey indelicate meanings referring to sexual intercourse, reproductive organs and bodily functions or might appear to be offensive or cause discomfort to members of any minority are not included in our corpus.

Ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus are characterized by monologic or dialogic narration and are intended to amuse

and entertain. Numerous jokes, however, have storytelling mode, usually in an informal or colloquial style and rely on the logical and causal order of their thematic and compositional segments.

In the following chapters, jokes illustrating various types of ambiguity come with numbers in square brackets, which are identical with the order of excerpted sources listed at the end of this monograph. Each ambiguous element in the corpus, whether it is a word or a phrase, is highlighted.

## **6.1 Jokes based on PHONOLOGICAL ambiguity**

A basic characteristics of jokes based on phonological ambiguity is that they mostly work in the spoken language. We will offer a detailed analysis of all possible phenomena creating phonological ambiguity in verbal humour detected in our corpus. Genuine phonological ambiguity mostly arises out of homophones – words that have different

written forms but are pronounced identically or similarly, such as:

- *Proud father: “Our household represents the whole UK. I’m English, my wife’s Irish, the nurse comes from Scotland, and the baby **wails**.” [1]*

In this joke ambiguity springs from homophony. The pronunciation of the word “*wails*” is similar to the one of “*Wales*”, therefore the first intended meaning is misunderstood and the word is interpreted as “*Wales*”. Ambiguity presented above operates at the level of a single word. However, phonological ambiguity often arises when one homophone is a single word and the other one consists of two or more words. When these words are uttered aloud, they sound as a single form. This is the case of:

- *Doctor: “Miss Boyle, you have **acute** appendicitis!”*

*Patient: “I came here to be examined – not admired.” [4]*

- *A policeman in a patrol car noticed that the woman driver in a car that passed him was knitting. He chased after her and, drawing alongside said: “**Pull over**,” to which she replied: “No, socks.” [4]*

In examples above ambiguity springs from homophones “*acute, pull over*” vs. “*a cute, pullover*”, and therefore the first intended meaning is misunderstood and the words are interpreted as “*a cute, pullover*” respectively.<sup>15</sup>

Phonological ambiguity sometimes arises when both ambiguous elements consist of two single forms (*two tyred* vs. *too tired*) and sound identical. Such jokes rely on phonological ambiguity based on two context dependent words understood completely differently:

- *A: “Why can’t a bicycle stand up?”*

*B: “Because it’s **two tyred**.” [4]*

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<sup>15</sup> The punch line of the second joke reveals that the phrasal verb *pull over* which consists of two words is understood as one word *pullover* due to the fact that in speech the pause between uttered words is minimal or none. Therefore, in speech this type of ambiguity can easily arise.

- “*Why did the cookie cry?*”

“*Because its mother had been  
a wafer so long.*” [3]

In this example the pronunciation of the indefinite article and the noun *wafer* corresponds to the pronunciation of the adverbial phrase *away for*.

To conclude, phonological ambiguity in humorous discourse is the second most productive type of ambiguity in English. Out of 882 ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus we found 202 examples (22,9%) which were based on phonological ambiguity. We are of an opinion that this type of ambiguity is productive due to a high occurrence of homophonic words and strong tendency towards monosylabism in English.

## 6.2 Jokes based on LEXICAL ambiguity

Generally, a word is lexically ambiguous if it has two or more distinct meanings in a given context. Lexically ambiguous jokes depend on playing with meanings of words, which are absolute homonyms, e.g.:



- *Clifford: "The Postmaster General will be making the toast."*

*Woody: "Wow, imagine a person like that helping out in the kitchen!"*

The criterion according to which we distinguish homonymy from polysemy is a relatedness of meanings of ambiguous words. If the multiple meanings of words are unrelated, they were considered homonymous, for example:

- *A policeman stops a lady and asks for her license:*

*Policeman: "Lady, it says here that you should be wearing glasses."*

*Woman: "I have **contacts**."*

*Policeman: "I don't care who you know! You're getting a ticket!" [4]*

Ambiguity springs out of the word "*contacts*" which is a colloquial form of "*contact lenses*". The meaning was misunderstood and interpreted as persons that

we know, especially if they can be helpful at work, institutions, authorities, etc.

Proper names represent another phenomenon that can lead to lexical ambiguity in verbal humour. Homonymy based ambiguity arises when a proper noun, which identifies a certain entity (*Boots* – *boots*), trade name (*MINI* (cooper) – *mini* (skirt)) or a person (*Stone* (Sharon) – *stone*) is taken literally and thus interpreted as common noun and vice versa:

- *I went to the local chemist and said:  
“Have you any poison that would kill  
mice?”  
He said: “No, have you tried  
**Boots**?”  
I said: “I want to poison them,  
not kick them to death!” [1]*

Another source of lexical ambiguity based on absolute homonymy stems from mathematical or physical notations as in:

- *The answer to the problem was ‘**log**  
(1+x)’. A student copied the answer  
from the student next to him, but did  
not want to make it obvious that he*

*was cheating, so he changed the answer slightly, to 'timber (1+x)'. [4]*

In the example above, mathematical notation of **logarithm** is interpreted literally as a thick piece of wood.

Quite frequently lexical ambiguity in jokes relates to slang or colloquialisms:

- *“Granny, can you do an impression of a frog?” asked three-year-old Sarah. “Why?” asked Granny. “Because,” replied Sarah, “I heard mummy and daddy saying we'd get a small fortune when you **croak**.” [3]*

The punch line of the joke springs from the fact that in slang, the word *croak* has a negative connotation and means ‘to die’, while the same word interpreted as a neutral one means “to make a harsh sound, like a frog”.

To sum up, lexical ambiguity in humorous discourse is the third most productive type of ambiguity in English. Out of 882 ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus we detected 144 examples (16,3%) which were

based on lexical ambiguity. This fact stems from the historical development of the English language and the fact that homonymous words do not have to have the same etymological roots. Due to various influences (Latin, Scandinavian, Norman, Italian, Dutch etc.), which had a significant impact on the richness of the English vocabulary, homonymy arose gradually, as many borrowings, which had been taken over from other languages into English and acquired multiple unrelated meanings.

### **6.3 Jokes based on SEMANTIC ambiguity**

The vast majority of ambiguity based jokes are the jokes based on semantic ambiguity, which springs from polysemy. Words are rarely used only in their primary meaning, they are often used figuratively. Semantic ambiguity occurs when a word has infinite number of possible meanings, none of which may have a standard agreed-upon meaning, for example:

- *Customer: "Waiter! This egg is bad."*

*Waiter: "Don't blame me. I only lay tables."* [4]

The multiple meanings of the verb *to lay* (to arrange and to produce eggs) are defined within a single entry and have the same etymological roots, the word is therefore polysemous.<sup>16</sup> There are **two subtypes of polysemy**: polysemous words **with metaphorical extension** (e.g. *ocean – ocean of tears, fire – fire in her eyes*) and **polysemous words with metonymic extension** (e.g. *the stage – theatre, the press – newspapers, the White House – the U.S. Presidency*). The main difference between these two principles lies in the fact that metaphorically motivated polysemy arises due to non-literal, figurative use of language and exhibits both literal as well as figurative meaning of a particular lexeme in a given context, whereas metonymically motivated polysemy only

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<sup>16</sup> As a rule, various polysemous meanings of a lexeme are generally listed as one entry in a dictionary, whereas each homonymous meaning is usually given a separate dictionary entry.

accounts for two or more literal meanings of one lexeme.

Apresjan (1974) claims that two polysemous words with metaphorical extension are related in the sense that there is analogy between the meanings of the words. One meaning is literal, the second one is figurative – superimposed on the primary meaning. Furthermore, both meanings are supposed to be perceived simultaneously, e.g.:

- *Whenever I feel blue, I start breathing again.*<sup>17</sup>

Words with metaphoric extension can often be taken literally and thus give rise to humour. Metaphor is almost always ambiguous. Koestler (1964) clarified the relationship between humour and metaphor. He claims that both humour and metaphor are the results of psychological operations called *bisociation* that combines structures that are more possible. Thus, metaphor can refer to more concepts and due to the reason that the

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<sup>17</sup> Humour here is triggered by the last part of the sentence which urges us to return back to the first part and notice the second, and more improbable meaning of the adjective that also makes sense in the joke.

relation between them is not specified it gives rise to various possible interpretations. An example using metaphoric extension:

- *A woman was telling her married daughter that the cold weather was bad for her rheumatism. Her little granddaughter was present and overheard the conversation. She didn't say anything then, but that night when she went to bed she knew what she was going to do. After she had said her usual prayers she concluded by saying: 'And please, God, make it **hot** for Grandma!' [4]*

Primary meaning of the word *hot* (in this context was supposed to be *producing heat*, whereas in the joke above it was intended to convey its metaphoric sense. The humour arises when a hearer or reader realizes that *hot* also means 'difficult or dangerous to deal with and making you feel worried or uncomfortable'.

The second subtype of polysemy is words with metonymic extension. according to Štulajterová and Jesenská (2012, p. 44)

“metonymy is a substitution of a name for another name, denoting a person or an object by using the name of another object which stands to the former in close, typical or representative relation.” Such a close relation may usually be contained in the relation between the cause and the effect, the part and the whole, the thing and the person who usually has or carries it, for example: *to read Shakespeare, to have a roof above one’s head*. Various kinds of metonymic extensions can be recognized, for instance count/mass metonymic extension (e.g. *lamb*), container/ containee metonymic extension (e.g. *bottle*), place/people metonymic extension (e.g. *Washington*), and producer/product metonymic extension (e.g. *Christie*).

- *A man walked through the streets of Southampton today wearing only a newspaper. He said he liked to dress with **The Times**.*

The relation between two words with metonymic extension is based on contiguity or connectedness. Both meanings of two words



are literal. Ambiguity arising from polysemy with metonymic extension can be observed in:

- *A man was amazed to find a restaurant advertising: 'Chicken dinners only 90p.' He decided to try one of these dinners so he paid his 90p and his taste buds began to anticipate the pleasant chicken dinner that was to come until the waiter brought him a plate of corn. [5]*

In the set-up of the joke, the intended meaning of the word *chicken* is 'meat from a chicken', whereas the punch line offered another possible interpretation, which is 'a large bird that is often kept for its eggs or meat.

To conclude, semantic ambiguity in humorous discourse is the most productive type of ambiguity in English. Out of 882 ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus we detected 372 (42,2%) which were based on semantic ambiguity. This fact stems from the fact that certain words used in combination with other words or in various

contexts/situations, acquire new meanings, which are to various extents related to their primary (dictionary) meaning. When the deviation of/from the primary meaning is so significant that it causes an unexpected turn in the recognized meaning and we perceive both meanings simultaneously (as the two meanings interact) a word or phrase becomes humorous.

#### **6.4 Jokes based on SYNTACTICAL ambiguity**

Syntactical ambiguity arises at the level of phrases or sentences. A sentence is structurally ambiguous if it has two different underlying interpretations because its constituents function differently. Quirk et al. (1991) outlined essential patterns of syntactical ambiguity in English. Out of 882 jokes based on ambiguity in our corpus, we identified 96 examples of syntactical ambiguity falling into 8 different patterns:

**Table 1 Patterns of syntactical ambiguity in jokes**

	<b>Patterns of syntactical ambiguity</b>	<b>Number of jokes</b>
1	adjective + noun + noun	20
2	movable prepositional phrase	18
3	gerund + noun	16
4	phrasal verb or verb + adverb	12
5	phrasal verb or verb + preposition	12
6	infinitive without “to” or noun	2
7	infinitive without “to” or adjective	3
8	infinitive without “to” or verb	1

Ad 1) The pattern of ambiguity consisting of an **adjective** + **noun** + **noun** was present in twenty jokes, for example:

- *He was thrown out of the Serious Crime Squad for laughing.* [4]

Ambiguity arises from the fact that there are two possible structures and thus two possible interpretations. The adjective “*serious*” may modify the immediately following noun “*crime*”, as well as the second noun “*squad*”. A listener or reader first interprets that ‘He was thrown out of the Squad dealing with serious crime,’ but when the adverbial phrase “*for laughing*” is revealed, the listener or reader realises the

second possible interpretation: ‘He was thrown out of the Crime Squad which was serious.’

Ad 2) Another productive type of syntactical ambiguity is caused by a **movable prepositional phrase** occurred in 18 cases, as in:

- *One morning I shot an **elephant in my pyjamas**. How he got into my pyjamas – I’ll never know. [3]*

In the joke, the prepositional phrase “*in my pyjamas*” can either refer to the shooter or the animal. However, the humorous effect arises when the prepositional phrase is interpreted as attached to the elephant and thus another possible interpretation of the joke arises.

Ad 3) The pattern consisting of **noun + gerund / gerund + noun** was the third most productive pattern of syntactical ambiguity in our corpus. Example:

- *Question: How can you prevent diseases caused by **biting insects**?*

*Answer: Don't bite any. [5]*

Ambiguity arises because “*biting insects*” can be interpreted as the noun phrase – ‘insects that bite’. In this case the interpretation of the question could be: ‘How can you prevent diseases caused by insects which bite?’. The second interpretation is revealed when we perceive “*biting insects*” as the gerund of the verb “*bite*” which produces humorous effect of the joke: ‘How can you prevent diseases caused when biting insects?’.

Ad 4) Another productive pattern of syntactical ambiguity that occurred in the corpus was the one comprising **phrasal verb or verb + adverb**. For a better illustration of this type, we provide the following joke as an example.

- *Joe Bloggs, a small-time jewel thief, came home after robbing a nearby country house and began to saw the legs off his bed. When his wife asked him what he was doing he replied that he wanted **to lie low** for a while. [1]*

In this joke it is not clear whether the word “*low*” represents the second part of the phrasal verb “*to lie low*”, which means ‘to be

inconspicuous’, or whether it is an individual adverb “*low*”.

Ad 5) Our list of most productive patterns of syntactical ambiguity will be concluded by the one consisting of **phrasal verb or verb + preposition**, e.g.:

- *Late last night a large hole was made in the walls surrounding Sunny view Nudist Camp. Police are **looking into** it.* [4]

In the joke, preposition “*into*” which is initially interpreted as the second part of the phrasal verb “*to look into something*” – ‘to examine’, can be also interpreted as an individual preposition “*into*” – ‘to a position in or inside something’. The source of humorous effect is in the clash of meanings of these two possible structures.

A type of ambiguity on the intersection between lexical and syntactical ambiguity, present in many jokes in English, is called **categorical ambiguity**. It occurs when a word belonging to one word category passes into another word category without any prefixes or

suffixes. Its productivity in jokes is caused by the fact that conversion is quite common word formation process in English. The most frequent ambiguity was based on the confusion between noun and verb, as in:

- *Butch: "Hey, Steve, why are you staring at that carton of orange juice?"*

*Steve: "Because it says 'Concentrate'. [1]*

In the joke, the word "*concentrate*" can be interpreted as an imperative form of the verb (give all your attention to something), or as a noun "*concentrate*" (strong thick substance without water). The above was the only instance of categorical ambiguity in our corpus.

Although categorical ambiguity occurs at the level of words, it usually changes the whole structure of a phrase or a sentence and thus contributes to syntactical ambiguity.

## 7 CONCLUSIONS

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This monograph has an ambition to contribute to the linguistic research on ambiguity in humorous discourse. We have been motivated by the fact that although there exist a few thorough studies presented by respected Anglicists, ambiguity in verbal humour still provides some interesting insights into the topic.

We examined **the specific relationship between ambiguity and verbal humour** and analysed various types of ambiguity and its use in jokes. Our research was based upon a linguistic corpus consisting of 1966 English jokes found in literary sources or on the Internet. We analysed only those types of ambiguities that were linguistic in nature, i.e. their indeterminacy has arisen from linguistic properties. **The main research question** of the monograph was: **what types of ambiguity are most productive** in producing humorous effect **in contemporary jokes in English**.



In the first part of the monograph we presented ambiguity as a specific linguistic phenomenon. We presented interpretations of respected theoreticians, their definitions and categorizations. At this phase, we illustrated theoretical parts with examples from our own – humorously oriented – corpus. We aimed at synthesizing some of the results of linguistic research of ambiguity and at suggesting our own definition of ambiguity. Additionally, based on the analysis of our data, we presented our own typological categorization of ambiguity in verbal humour in English in Chapter 2. We had an ambition to propose our own subtypes of ambiguity; namely **gender ambiguity**, which occurs when nouns with dual gender are used, and **discourse ambiguity** which relates to those cases when ambiguity is connected with cohesive devices within a discourse and falls into three categories: referential, elliptical and substitutional ambiguity.

Furthermore, we introduced terms **unintentional** and **intentional ambiguity**. While the first one refers to unconscious or

spontaneous communication “error”, the second one depends on the purpose of communication and relates to certain intention – to amuse, confuse, or produce humorous effect.

The second part of our monograph was devoted to the essence of verbally expressed humour and various theories of humour that accounted well for jokes based on ambiguity. Additionally, we focused on mechanisms and structure of jokes in general and ambiguity based jokes in particular. Each type of ambiguity found in the corpus was analysed in detail and illustrated with appropriate examples.

We attempted to map the situation with regard to ambiguity in English humorous discourse and our findings can be summarized as follows:

Typically and prevailingly, based on horizontal analysis of the collected linguistic corpus we may conclude that **the most productive type of ambiguity in verbal humour is semantic ambiguity**. Out of 882 ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus

we detected 372 (42,2%) which were based on this type of ambiguity. This fact stems from the fact that certain words used in combination with other words or in various contexts/situations, and consequently acquire new meanings, which are to various extents related to their primary (dictionary) meaning. which has been detected in 42,2% of jokes.

**The second most productive type of ambiguity was phonological ambiguity** with 202 examples (22,9%). We concluded that this type of ambiguity is so productive due to a high occurrence of homophonic words and a strong tendency towards monosylabism in English.

**Lexical ambiguity in humorous discourse was the third most productive type of ambiguity in English.** Out of 882 ambiguity based jokes included in our corpus we detected 144 examples (16,3%) which were based on lexical ambiguity. This fact relates to the historical development of the English language and the fact that homonymous words do not always have the same etymological roots. Due to various influences (Latin, Scandinavian,

Norman, Italian, Dutch, etc.), which had a significant impact on the richness of the English vocabulary, homonymy arose gradually, as many new words were taken over from other languages into English and acquired multiple unrelated meanings.

**Final phase of our research** can be characterised by an inductive approach connected with **synthesis and generalisation** of obtained data. Our aim was to obtain new knowledge about the essence of searched area of study. Interdisciplinarity of the monograph is reflected in the intersection of several scientific disciplines – primarily general linguistics, philosophy, psychology and sociolinguistics.

As evident from the classification, the typology of ambiguity in humorous discourses is highly varied and complex, which can be explained by the fact that ambiguity allows for creativity, as well as lexical and semantic playfulness. In the monograph, observations on the analysis of the systemic status of ambiguity in verbal humour in English and the results of research have been summarized.

After identifying the similar and different features, we try to explain their systemic motivation, and suggest their possible interpretations. We apply the functional-structural methods of research for a partial, but systematic synchronic treatment of ambiguity in verbal humour in English.

Despite all the recent efforts and achievements in this field, we aim at contributing to a more complex view of ambiguity in verbal humour in English. We believe we managed to provide satisfactory answers to several questions, and explain and systematize the treatment of some aspects concerning ambiguity in verbal humour. We hope that our work will be an inspiration for further study and research in this linguistically interesting phenomenon. The monograph has an ambition to contribute to language specific studies of humour in English. Its universal linguistic character is underlined by the formation of systemic classification of ambiguity based jokes that may be applied to humorous discourses of any type.

*“Vtip je útok aj obrana.  
Je to prejav prevahy  
i zbraň slabšieho.”  
(Karel Čapek)*

Vedecká monografia sa zaoberá problematikou ambiguity a jej postavením v tvorbe anglického humorného diskurzu. Cieľom publikácie je preskúmať doterajšie dostupné zdroje, podať ich syntetizujúci a čiastočne aj kritický prierez a sprostredkovať výsledky výskumu v oblasti ambiguity a jej systémového postavenia v angličtine na fonologickej, morfolologickej, syntaktickej, lexikálnej a sémantickej jazykovej rovine. Metodologicky vychádzame z tvrdenia, že lingvistická ambiguita má hlbšie kognitívne korene, vďaka ktorým sa aj v súčasnosti využíva pri tvorbe humorných diskurzov na báze originality a kreativity.

V úvodnej časti práce uvádzame hlavné znaky a princípy lingvistickej ambiguity a uvádzame synchrónny prehľad doterajších dostupných publikácií o nej, s cieľom poskytnúť syntetizujúci pohľad na tento lingvistický jav.

V ostatných desaťročiach sa výskum ambiguity v angličtine dostáva do popredia záujmu lingvistov, ale vzhľadom na metodologické problémy vyplývajúce predovšetkým z jej rôznorodosti stále neexistuje zhoda v samotnom vymedzení pojmu ambiguity. Podrobným štúdiom doterajších výsledkov výskumu, ako aj na základe zozbieraného korpusu jazykového materiálu k monografii predkladáme vlastnú definíciu ambiguity a vlastného typologického členenia ambiguity, s cieľom komplexnejšie a exaktnejšie vymedziť tento pojem.

V druhej časti práce sa zaoberáme podstatou humoru ako jazykového fenoménu v angličtine pričom vychádzame z Attarda (2001, 1994) – uznávaného teoretika v oblasti vedy o humore. Prezentujeme známe teórie

humoru (teória nadradenosti<sup>18</sup>, teória inkongruencie a pod.), pričom podrobnejšie opisujeme Raskinovu (1985) sémantickú teóriu humoru založenú na opozitných skriptoch.

V ďalšej časti teoreticky vymedzujeme pojem vtip, jeho podstatu, štruktúru a typológiu. Následne v anglických vtipoch sledujeme konotačnú funkciu ambiguity a schopnosť odhaliť primárne a sekundárne významy a jej súvis s predpokladom pochopenia vtipu v angličtine. Vychádzame z predpokladu, že nestačí poznať len primárne a prenesené významy slov, ale aj mimotextovú realitu. Zároveň skúmame, ako sa tieto atribúty podieľajú na výslednej pointe vtipu.

Analýza excerpovaného materiálu a teoretické úvahy nás priviedli k poznaniu, že pri zachovaní ambiguity je možné ten istý vtip interpretovať rôznymi spôsobmi bez vplyvu na jeho pointu. Na základe spracovania korpusu jazykového materiálu konštatujeme, že ambiguita je v anglickom humornom diskurze najproduktívnejšia na sémantickej, fonolo-

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<sup>18</sup> Aj príslovie „*Kto sa smeje naposledy, ten sa smeje najlepšie*“ je prejav istej nadradenosti v bežnej životnej situácii.



gickej a lexikálnej rovine. Znamená to, že v anglických vtipoch prevláda pointa zakotvená v homonymii, homofónii a polysémii – v nich vidíme potenciál tvorivosti a obraznosti. Komický efekt vtipov teda priamo súvisí s foneticko-fonologickou a lexikálno-sémantickou tenziou výrazových prostriedkov.

Výsledky výskumu v práci uvádzame s cieľom prispieť k doterajšiemu bádaniu v anglickej lingvistike. Veríme, že výsledky výskumu poslúžia ako podnet pre budúce lingvistické skúmanie ambiguity v humore.

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Author: PaedDr. Alena Štulajterová, PhD.  
Title: Linguistic Ambiguity in English  
Humorous Discourse  
Lingvistická ambiguita v anglickom  
humornom diskurze

Reviewers: doc. PaedDr. Petra Jesenská, PhD.  
PhDr. Andrej Timko, PhD.

Publisher: Belianum. Matej Bel University  
Publishing House, Banská Bystrica

Edition: Faculty of Arts

Printed by: EQUILIBRIA, Comp. Ltd.

Extent: pp. 128

Format: A5

Printing: 70 copies

First edition

ISBN 978-80-557-1742-5