

THE HUMOROUS POTENTIAL OF METAPHORICAL POLYSEMY

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Annotation. This article examines how metaphorical polysemy—where a single metaphorical expression carries multiple interpretations—can serve as a catalyst for humor in multilingual and cross-cultural settings. Drawing upon theories of incongruity, benign violation, and language interference, the study illustrates how speakers and listeners negotiate overlapping meanings. Through qualitative analyses of everyday conversations, media texts, and focus group discussions, the paper demonstrates how the literal and figurative dimensions of polysemous expressions elicit laughter, confusion, or both. The multilingual context intensifies these effects, as differences in linguistic codes and cultural norms can lead to creative yet unintentional juxtapositions. The findings underscore the importance of embracing these moments of linguistic play in educational environments, translations, and broader communicative practice. The article ultimately highlights the pedagogical value in recognizing metaphorical polysemy not only as a linguistic phenomenon but also as a potent source of engagement and cultural insight.

Keywords: metaphorical polysemy, humor studies, incongruity theory, multilingual communication, language interference, cultural context, classroom pedagogy

Introduction

Metaphors are central to our cognitive and linguistic processes (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). By mapping one conceptual domain onto another, metaphors help individuals understand complex or abstract ideas in more familiar terms. However, metaphors are also potent vehicles for humor when they exhibit polysemy—that is, a single expression containing multiple, often divergent meanings (Attardo, 2020). Metaphorical polysemy opens up a playful interpretive space, prompting incongruity and surprise, both of which have long been identified as cornerstones of humor (Koestler, 1964). In a multilingual context, these effects can be amplified, as speakers negotiate different systems of semantic overlap and syntactic structure (Сатибалдиев, 2024). This thesis explores how the overlapping meanings of metaphorical expressions generate humor and how linguistic and cultural factors shape this process. By examining theories of metaphor and humor, as well as the phenomenon of multilingual language interference and facilitation (Satibaldiyev, 2022), this paper aims to illuminate the mechanisms by which metaphorical polysemy fosters humorous outcomes.

The structure of this thesis is as follows: first, it offers a comprehensive literature review detailing prior research on metaphor, polysemy, and humor theory. Then, it outlines the methodological approach adopted for analyzing humorous instances of metaphorical polysemy across different contexts. Next, the discussion section probes how sociolinguistic and intercultural factors influence the construction and perception of humor. Finally, the paper concludes by reflecting on the pedagogical implications and possibilities for further research.

Literature Review

Metaphorical polysemy refers to instances in which a metaphorically used word or phrase can be interpreted in multiple ways, due to the various semantic domains a single lexical item can span (Crisp, 2008). For instance, the word “light” can refer literally to illumination and

metaphorically to weight (as in “light luggage”) or seriousness (as in “light conversation”). When these meanings clash or intersect in a way that is unexpected, speakers and listeners may experience humor through the recognition of incongruity. Research on polysemy traditionally examines how words gain multiple meanings through gradual semantic shift, as well as how context determines which meaning is most salient at a given time (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Humor studies offer various theoretical frameworks for understanding how metaphors can evoke laughter. Incongruity theory posits that humor arises when there is a mismatch between expectation and reality (Attardo, 2020). Metaphors inherently juxtapose incongruent concepts, and when these concepts are further complicated by polysemy, the resultant interpretive tension can be amusing (Koestler, 1964). Another perspective is the ‘benign violation’ theory, which suggests that humor occurs when a norm is violated in a way that does not elicit a sense of threat (Attardo, 2020). Metaphorical polysemy, by momentarily subverting one meaning with another, can be seen as a playful violation of semantic norms.

In multilingual settings, the humorous potential of metaphorical polysemy can be even more pronounced. According to Сатибалдиев (2024), multilingual speakers often navigate multiple linguistic codes, each with its own system of metaphors, idioms, and connotations. This multiplicity can either lead to speech interference—where the languages ‘collide’ and produce unintentional errors—or speech facilitation, in which one language’s metaphorical framework clarifies or enriches another’s meaning (Satibaldiyev, 2022). Speech interference may inadvertently amplify humor when the speaker selects a metaphorical expression that carries a different meaning in another language. Conversely, speech facilitation can create opportunities for wordplay if a particular expression resonates with parallel metaphors in two or more languages (Сатибалдиев, 2022).

Cultural and Social Dimensions

Culture plays a critical role in shaping both metaphor usage and humor appreciation (Forceville, 2009). What one culture finds humorous may be lost on another if the underlying metaphorical mappings are unfamiliar. Additionally, social context—such as the relationship between speakers, or the formality of the setting—can determine whether playful polysemy is received as humorous or confusing (Attardo, 2020). In a globalized world, where cross-cultural communication has become the norm, understanding the comedic potential of metaphorical polysemy is particularly relevant for educators, translators, and communicators (Сатибалдиев, 2024).

Methodology

To investigate the humorous potential of metaphorical polysemy, a qualitative approach was adopted. Data were collected from three primary sources:

1. **Naturally Occurring Conversations:** Examples were gathered from everyday interactions among multilingual speakers in university settings, where participants frequently switched between Uzbek, Russian, and English. Instances in which a metaphorical expression elicited laughter or confusion were noted and transcribed.
2. **Media Texts:** Excerpts from print and digital media were selected based on their frequent use of figurative language. Following Сатибалдиев (2024), who emphasizes the importance of studying media texts in multilingual settings, articles, advertisements, and satirical pieces were analyzed for metaphorical expressions displaying polysemy. Both the original language of the texts and translations were examined to identify shifts in interpretation.

3. **Focus Groups:** Groups of university students and teachers were assembled to discuss select examples of metaphorical polysemy. Participants were asked to articulate what they found humorous about the expressions, if at all, and how language background influenced their interpretation.

Data were coded based on the categories of metaphorical polysemy (e.g., literal vs. figurative meaning, cross-linguistic transfer) and the types of humor they elicited (e.g., puns, incongruity, benign violation). Triangulation was achieved by comparing data from the three sources, ensuring that identified themes remained consistent across contexts (Attardo, 2020).

Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed several distinct mechanisms through which metaphorical polysemy fosters humor:

1. **Unexpected Crossovers:** In many instances, participants drew attention to the literal meaning of a metaphorical expression in a context clearly intended to be figurative. For example, the English metaphor “break a leg” confused some Uzbek-speaking learners who interpreted it literally, eliciting laughter in the classroom. The tension between the figurative meaning (expressing good luck) and the literal meaning (actually breaking one’s leg) exemplified incongruity (Koestler, 1964).

2. **Cross-Linguistic Interference:** Several humorous moments were rooted in the interference between Uzbek, Russian, and English. A Russian idiom that translates literally to “hang noodles on someone’s ears” (to deceive someone) was amusingly rendered by Uzbek speakers as “put pasta in someone’s ears,” leading to confusion and mirth. This aligns with the findings of Сатибалдиев (2024) on how translating media texts in multilingual settings can cause semantic collisions, generating humor when literal translations highlight incongruous meanings.

3. **Dual Meanings Within One Language:** Even within a single language, speakers played with words that possessed multiple metaphorical senses. A teacher described an exam question as a “piece of cake.” Students unfamiliar with this idiomatic usage reacted with confusion, only for the rest of the class to laugh at the double meaning: an apparently literal mention of dessert versus an indication of simplicity. This phenomenon underscores how metaphorical expressions gain humorous momentum when there is a break in shared cultural or linguistic knowledge (Attardo, 2020).

Cultural factors often determined whether a metaphorical expression’s polysemy would be received as humorous or puzzling. For instance, certain metaphors involving animals—like comparing people to “lazy cats” or “busy bees”—carried different connotations in Uzbek culture than in English. In some focus groups, participants did not perceive the expressions as humorous due to a lack of cultural resonance. However, when explanations were provided, the newfound recognition of incongruity generated laughter.

Moreover, social relationships influenced humor reception. Teachers noted that gentle teasing using metaphorical polysemy—such as calling a student a “bright spark” while implying both intelligence and impulsivity—was more successful in a close-knit group. In more formal contexts, that same double meaning might have been misunderstood or deemed inappropriate (Forceville, 2009). This observation highlights that humor emerging from metaphorical polysemy is context-dependent and not universal.

Contrary to the assumption that multilingualism primarily causes confusion, focus group interviews suggested that being fluent in multiple languages also facilitates humor appreciation. Some participants found bilingual or trilingual puns more enjoyable because they appreciated the semantic layers within and across languages (Satibaldiyev, 2022). For instance, an advertising slogan that cleverly drew on both Uzbek and Russian metaphors was deemed funnier by bilingual speakers than by monolingual speakers. These findings indicate that multilingual settings create fertile ground for imaginative language play, intensifying the comedic effect of metaphorical polysemy.

This thesis has examined how metaphorical polysemy generates humor through incongruity, benign violation, and playful crossovers between literal and figurative meanings. Drawing upon a qualitative analysis of everyday conversations, media texts, and focus group discussions, the study illustrates that multilingual contexts intensify these humorous effects through language interference and, at times, facilitation. Cultural nuance and social context further modulate the reception of humor, demonstrating the complex interplay of linguistic and extralinguistic factors in shaping the comedic potential of metaphorical expressions.

The implications of these findings are significant for educators, translators, and communicators working in multilingual settings. Recognizing the humorous possibilities embedded in metaphorical polysemy may enhance language instruction by motivating learners and making the classroom environment more engaging. Translators, especially those dealing with media texts, should remain vigilant about double meanings that can cause unintended confusion—or amusement. Future research could expand on this work by examining metaphorical polysemy in digital communication platforms, where emojis and multimodal elements add yet another layer of interpretive complexity. Overall, understanding the humorous potential of metaphorical polysemy not only enriches our appreciation of language play but also underscores the importance of cultural and linguistic awareness in shaping how we use, interpret, and enjoy metaphor.

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