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'Pun' as a Metalinguistic Comment

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This paper is particularly inspired by the study of mixed metaphor carried out by Semino (2014, forthcoming), both in terms of methodology and of research questions. In a pun, two meanings are incongruously combined in the same utterance (Ross 1998: 8, Chiaro 1992: 34), making it similar to mixed metaphor, which also involves incongruity. Like mixed metaphors, puns have also been criticised, more specifically for constituting a simple and less sophisticated form of humour, although they have also been defended (cf. e.g. Nash 1985: 137).

The present study is based on corpus material from The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and the British National Corpus (BNC), totalling some 550M words. The data is collected by searching for occurrences of the word pun in order to identify instances where the presence of a pun is either generally signalled or more specifically evaluated in terms of positive and negative qualities. The main focus is on spoken language, since metacomments there can be assumed to be more spontaneously produced.

The material is analysed with respect to 1) the characteristics of the puns that are signalled, i.e. how the ambiguity is created (metaphor, metonymy, other type of polysemy, homonymy etc.)

and what type of scenarios are involved (e.g. specific or schematic), and 2) what pragmatic motivation lies behind the metacomment. The reason for looking at the characteristics of the pun is that the quality is usually understood to depend on the relation between the two senses involved and the scenarios they invoke. By comparing the characteristics of the pun to the metacomments that are used, different patterns can be identified.

In relation to the characteristics of the puns, there is a similarity to the mixed metaphors in Semino's study, in that puns seem to display a sensitivity to "specific scenarios rather than broad source domains" (2014: 28). In terms of pragmatic motivation, preliminary results indicate that a negative evaluation is more common than a positive one and that metacomments are often made in connection with excuses. This is similar to the results obtained by Semino (2014), but apologies in connection with the use of puns seem to refer to the quality of the pun in terms of its effect, rather than to objectionable or incorrect language use.

Keywords: puns, conceptual scenarios, levels of specificity, metacomments, pragmatic motivation

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