

STRATEGIES CREATING HUMOR IN FICTION

Cristina Gherman, studentă, Facultatea Limbi și Literaturi Străine,
Universitatea de Stat „Alecu Russo” din Bălți
Conducător științific: **Viorica Condrat**, lector universitar

*“Humor is by far the most significant behavior of the human brain ...
Humor ... shows how perceptions set up in one way can be reconfigured
in another way. This is the essence of creativity.”*

Edward de Bono

Sumar: *Umorul este o formă de comunicare, orală sau scrisă, realizarea căruia implică utilizarea mai multor strategii comunicative. Scopul emițătorului este de a provoca o anumită reacție la destinatar, construindu-și discursul în așa fel încât să fie înțeles corect. În acest articol sunt analizate strategiile folosite de autorul britanic J. K. Rowlings pentru a crea umorul în opera sa „Harry Potter”.*

Key-words: *humor, mimesis, incongruity, homonymy, tongue-twister, limerick, pun, antonomasia.*

The New Encyclopedia Britannica defines humor as “a form of communication in which a complex mental stimulus illuminates or amuses, or elicits the reflex of laughter”. This means that humor provokes laughter as a result of some funny and enjoyable speech. The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* terms humor as “the quality in something that makes it funny or amusing; the ability to laugh at things that are amusing”. Humor is also a strategic means in communication which helps people communicate easier, reach a final accord, or just share positive emotions.

Its importance in a person’s life cannot be overlooked. In his essay „Humor”, Freud said that humor does for adults what make-believe play does for children – it allows our thoughts to proceed according to the „pleasure principle” rather than „the reality principle” (Attardo 1994: 92). In a nutshell, like children amuse themselves playing in different games, so the adults amuse each other joking, they do this as long as it brings them pleasure. Humor has as its purpose to save the spirit of seriousness, it involves the ability to process our perceptions, memories, and imagined ideas in a way that rises above what is real, here, now, personal, and practical.

Several studies have been conducted on the strategies creating humor. First of all, it should be mentioned that humor can be realized in two ways: linguistically and non-linguistically. We will particularly focus on the linguistic strategies creating humor.

One of the most productive resources of creating verbal humor is the sound, which can take such different forms as homophony, juncture, sound symbolism, assonance, alliteration, rhyme and rhythm.

Humor based on phonemes can explore two mechanisms: homophonic words and homophonic phrases. The first mechanism represents words with similar pronunciations but different spelling and meaning, and the second is constructed on the basis of juncture, according to which the same segmental elements can form more than one morphemic structure.

Example (homophonic words):

(1) –*Why couldn't the pony talk?* – *Because he was a little horse* [hoarse].

(2) –*How can you tell if a bucket is not well?* – *When it is a little pail* [pale].

Example (homophonic phrases):

(1) –*Why can you not starve in the desert?* – *Because of the sandwiches* (sand which is) *there*.

(2) –*Why did the nutty kid throw butter out of the window?* – *He wanted to see a butterfly* (a butter fly) (Ermida 2008: 42).

Mimesis is the imitation of the way in which the real world and human behavior are represented (4 1989: 932). Humor exploits sound mechanisms which are related to morphology and popular etymology. They consist of distorted, phonetically suggestive forms, which borrow parts of words and attach them to phonetically similar ones through a principle of mimesis. Alternatively, entire words are imported into distorted original ones (Ermida 2008: 45).

Examples:

–*What do cats read?* – *The mews of the world*. Here the onomatopoeic word mimics *news*.

–*Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration*. It is an example on the game of prefixes.

–*Lord, what food these mortals eat!* It is the mimetic phrase of the Shakespeare's Puck exclamation –*Lord, what fools these mortals be!* In these cases, deciphering the mimetic phrase requires knowing the text parodied (Ermida 2008: 45).

Rhyme and rhythm is also a rich resource for the humorists. Beattie remarks that: „Similarity of sound in contiguous verses gives pleasure to all children and illiterate people, and does not naturally offend the ear of any listener” (Ermida 2008: 45). Thus, the humorists use the rhyme and rhythm with the intention to gain the attention of both literate and illiterate audience, making his humorous text flowing and comfortable to be listened. A type of poem based on the principle to create humor between the listeners is the limerick - a kind of a witty, humorous, or nonsense poem, in which each verse was sung by a different singer. The characteristics of this literary genre – the fantastic plot, the easy rhythm, the ingenious rhyme and the climax- proved to be very popular (Ermida 2008: 45).

Example:

*There once was a student named Bessor,
Whose knowledge grew lesser and lesser,
It at last grew so small
He knew nothing at all,
And now he's a college professor.*

The concluding sentence provokes humor as the receiver is not normally expecting such an outcome.

Rhythm is not, however, a mere phonological phenomenon, carrying instead interesting semantic implications. According to Attardo, the more distant words are semantically, the stronger the rhyme effect is, because of the semantic distance between the two terms and the incongruous effect that their unsuspected phonetic similarity produces. Then, if the rhyming potential increases in an inversely proportional relation to the semantic proximity between words, so does its humorous potential. It is because rhyme plays on desperate words that humor happens more easily (Ermida 2008: 48).

Alliteration and assonance are also sources of humor production related to sound. A similarity of sound in the beginning of contiguous words, or rather in their initial consonants, has later been called alliteration (Ermida 2008: 50). Like rhyme and rhythm, allite-

ration produces humor because of the semantic distance between the two terms and the incongruous effect that their unsuspected phonetic similarity produces. An example of alliteration is the following: *Love me little, love me long*. Assonance is the refrain of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases and sentences. This alternative, assonant and rhyming twist of everyday language is, as Lederer shows, deliberately exploited in games. Consider the following cases, of all of which are humorous definitions: *What's a ...a) comical hare? –a funny bunny; b) an indolent flower? –a lazy daisy; c) a horrible couple? –a gruesome twosome; d) a meat robber? –a beef thief; e) a drunk fortune-teller? –a tipsy gipsy; f) the first fruit? – Adam's apple; g) an annoying insect? – a bee in her bonnet; h) a story that grew up a lot? –a tall tale* (Ermida 2008: 51).

Nowadays people communicate using the computer. Today's use and abuse of computer has led to the spelling failure whose result is the humorous text. Humorists, well aware of this fact, take advantage of it. Be that as it may, the rigidity of spelling laws appeals to humorists, who openly deride the distance between the written code and oral realization of the language (Ermida 2008: 52). In this way, the humorists making humor on the oral realization of the language, they emphasize and somehow criticize the fact that people break the spelling laws, which conducts to the failure in communication.

Consider this poem, by W. S. Gilbert which constitutes a kind of visual tongue-twister:

*A right-handed fellow named Wright,
In writing „write” always wrote „rite”
Where he meant to write right.
If he'd written „write” right,
Wright would not have wrought rot writing „rite”* (Ermida 2008: 53).

It is a clear example how people treat their language. As the English is rich in homonyms, homophones and homographs many persons, especially the non-native speaking people find difficult to understand the correct meaning of what they heard or read, that's why it is very important to keep the law of the language.

There are several ways to use morphology to generate humor. One way to do that is to play around with different affixes that sound the same or with parts of free morphemes that look or sound like affixes.

Example: A: *What's a baby pig called?*

B: *A piglet.*

A: *So what's a baby toy called?*

B: *A toilet* (Ermida 2008: 55).

Compounding is also a source of humor-generating incongruity as seen in this example:

Seagoon: *Lady Marks. Where is her ladyship at the moment.*

Headstone: *My lady hasn't got a ship at the moment* (The Goon Show).

Morphology, or the study of how morphemes make up words, is accessible, in a simplified form, to all those who take an interest in playing with language. An interesting form of morphological play consists of the so-called blend. By bringing together two words, which lose some of their elements along the way, it creates neologisms that usually have humor potential.

Example: *-If buttercups are yellow, what colour are hiccups?*

-Burple (the punch-word in this example is a contamination resulting from mixing burp and purple) (Ermida 2008: 56).

All these cases are about manipulating language with humorous purposes at the level of the morpheme that is, at the minimal unit of meaning or grammatical function. The

popularity of these comic neologisms shows that people are keen on, rather than wary of, tackling word composition with humorous intentions.

Homonymy/ polysemy is a commonly used lexical source of humor. Homonymy takes place whenever the same signifier has two or more signifieds among which there is no relation (Ermida 2008: 57). Homonymy is, simpler, a group of words that share the same spelling and the same pronunciation but have different meanings. On the other hand, polysemy occurs whenever the same signifier has several signifieds which are related to which over. According to Ricoeur, a polysemous language allows to create innumerable meanings from the finite set of lexical entities codified by the dictionary (Ermida 2008: 58). In other words, polysemy is the capacity of the word to have multiple meanings.

Example: (1) A: *What makes a tree noisy?*

B: *Its bark.*

(2) *Very well. Mr. Dyall, the floor is yours but remember, the roof is ours.*

In the second example, the speaker uses the metaphorical meaning of the word “floor” in the first case, while in the second- the literal meaning of the word “roof”. The incongruity of two produces a humorous effect.

The specialists study humor from different perspectives, such as: psychological, linguistic and literary. We have thought carefully about the different possibilities of creating humor, and chose to examine the nature and structure of humorous fragments from the book „Harry Potter”, by the British author J. K. Rowling. *Harry Potter* is a series of seven fantasy novels. The books chronicle the adventures of the adolescent wizard Harry Potter and his best friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, all of whom are students at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Although the novel is far from being realistic we chose it because of J. K. Rowling’s sense of humor. In her book she tried to depict the education of a wizard with a definite intention not only to reveal some fabulous stories but also to amuse her reader. As the book is definitely aimed at children she applied various strategies in order to make her book interesting. Her gained popularity proves that she has attained her communicative goals.

In the below example there is a case of humor creation by means of homonymy.

„Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside. “Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?--Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him? But Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwick’s class looking confused.” (Rowling 1997: 150).

In this illustration we have two interpretations of the word „wood”. The first one is Harry Potter’s erroneous interpretation of his teacher’s utterance: he thinks wood is a cane Professor McGonagall will use to punish him because he broke the school’s rules again. Yet, when instead of a cane Harry sees a boy, he is relieved. However, his misinterpretation amuses the reader who has the same expectations as the main character. In both cases the word „Wood” is capitalized, so the reader can assume that it is the name of someone on the one hand, and on the other, the reader can imagine that this is a magic cane with special powers, as he may think that by using the capitalization the author wanted to emphasize Professor McGonagall’s anger. It is worth mentioning that the author did not only use homonymy or capitalization, but she also chose the boy’s name according to the situation. Harry has a sense of guilt and it would not have had the effect of bewilderment if the author did not use namely the noun „wood”, with the meaning of a stick - the object with which, as a rule, children were punished. Thus, it is a case of antonomasia.

As a matter of fact, *antonomasia* is the preferred stylistic device of the novelist. It helps not only depict better the true nature of a character, but also produces a humorous effect. For example in the case of Professor Binnis, the author could have thought of a bin used as a large container for storage. At the same time, a container for rubbish is called *dustbin* in English. Thus, the name of this teacher emphasizes the nature of the character and explains in a way the students' attitude towards him. They saw him as a ghostly storage of information considered as rubbish by them. Dudley is Harry's cousin. His name derives from 'dud' which is British slang for 'a very boring person'. Indeed, this character was far from being agreeable.

J. K. Rowling also used the polysemy of phrases to make up a pun, which is a form of word play which suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, for an intended humorous effect.

Dudley, who was so large his bottom drooped over either side of the kitchen chair, grinned and turned to Harry. "Pass the frying pan." "You've forgotten the magic word," said Harry irritably. The effect of this simple sentence on the rest of the family was incredible: Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples. "I meant 'please'!" said Harry quickly. "I didn't mean —" "What have I told you," thundered his uncle, spraying spit over the table, "About saying the ,M' word in our house?" "But I —" "How dare you threaten Dudley!" roared Uncle Vernon, pounding the table with his fist. "I just —" "I warned you! I will not tolerate mention of your abnormality under this roof!" (Rowling 1999: 2).

In the above example, the author achieves her communicative goals by using the polysemantic word combination "the magic word". Mr. Dursley being a Muggle, born into a non-magic family and is incapable of magic, understood the literal meaning of the word combination- a magic formula or spell. Mr. Dursley was afraid that Harry wanted to use charms in his house. Once, Mr. Dursley experienced the power of magic words, when Rubeus Hagrid came to lead Harry at his new school of wizardry. Humorous is the Dursley's reaction on hearing only the word "magic", he was even afraid to repeat one more time the word "magic", saying only "M word".

In fact, this is a case of intertextual meanings. In the real world a taboo word will begin with the letter 'F'. Actually, such words are called 'F' words. In this way the author wanted to emphasize the degree of prohibition of any magic in that house as well as to point to the ridiculousness of such an interdiction.

The effect of this phrase on the rest of the family was incredible: *Dudley gasped and fell off his chair with a crash that shook the whole kitchen; Mrs. Dursley gave a small scream and clapped her hands to her mouth; Mr. Dursley jumped to his feet, veins throbbing in his temples.* (Rowling 1999: 2). The reader cannot help laughing at this funny representation of a scared family.

The humor, in the example above, is also the result of communication failures. The participants of this verbal interaction did not manage to decode correctly the sender's intended meaning. Thus, it resulted in a big misunderstanding. Although it is not amusing to the characters, it is funny to the readers who are the ultimate target of this interaction.

In conclusion we may say humor has the ability to amuse, to make someone laugh not only at things that are amusing but also at unexpected situations. From the analyzed examples we notice that in fiction humor is created by linguistic as well as contextual means. The reader has to share the same knowledge of the world as the author in order to decode her intentions correctly. As fiction is the representation within another

representation, the author should carefully select among the variety of strategies in order to make herself clear to the reader.

References:

1. Attardo, Salvatore, *Linguistic Theories of Humor*, Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.
2. Ermida, Isabel, *The Language of Comic Narratives. Humor Construction in Short Stories*, Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008.
3. Morreal, John, *Comic Relief- A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, New York, A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd Publication.
4. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1989.
5. Rowling, Joanne, *Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, U.S.A, Arthur A. Levine Books, An Imprint of Scholastic Press, 1999.
6. Rowling, Joanne, *Harry Potter and The Prisoner of Azkaban*, U.S.A, Arthur A. Levine Books, An Imprint of Scholastic Press, 1999.
7. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Chicago Publish Inc., 15th edition, Volume 6, 1968.