

Lexical and syntactic ambiguity as a source of humor: The case of newspaper headlines

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Abstract

The paper analyzes some forms of linguistic ambiguity in English in a specific register, i.e. newspaper headlines. In particular, the focus of the research is on examples of lexical and syntactic ambiguity that result in sources of voluntary or involuntary humor. The study is based on a corpus of 135 verbally ambiguous headlines found on web sites presenting humorous bits of information. The linguistic phenomena that contribute to create this kind of semantic confusion in headlines will be analyzed and divided into the three main categories of lexical, syntactic, and phonological ambiguity, and examples from the corpus will be discussed for each category. The main results of the study were that, firstly, contrary to the findings of previous research on jokes, syntactically ambiguous headlines were found in good percentage in the corpus and that this might point to differences in genre. Secondly, two new configurations for the processing of the disjunctive/connector order were found. In the first of these configurations the disjunctive appears before the connector, instead of being placed after or coinciding with the ambiguous element, while in the second one two ambiguous elements are present, each of which functions both as a connector and a disjunctive.

Keywords: Ambiguity; headlines; lexical; syntactic; disjunctive; connector.

Introduction

The present paper sets out to analyze some forms of linguistic ambiguity in English in a specific register, i.e. newspaper headlines. In particular, the

focus of the research is on examples of lexical and syntactic ambiguity that result in humor. The analysis of examples from the corpus highlighted two main points of interest that will be discussed in the paper: 1) the number of headlines based on syntactic ambiguity is inferior to that of lexically ambiguous headlines but much higher than that found by previous research regarding jokes; 2) an analysis in terms of the disjunctor/connector¹ model (Attardo 1994: 99, 104–105) revealed the presence in the corpus of two new processing configurations never considered in the literature, to the best of my knowledge: a disjunctor preceding the connector, and an element functioning both as a connector and a disjunctor.

Point 1) above refers to the fact that the breakdown of the headlines into different categories will clearly show that lexical ambiguity is the common type with 52.59 percent of the total, while syntactic ambiguity is present in 46.66 percent of the headlines and phonological ambiguity only in one example (0.74 percent). This result shows considerable variation from the results of Attardo et al. (1994), who found that the verbal jokes relying on lexical ambiguity were the vast majority of their corpus of 2000 jokes and that syntactically ambiguous jokes were only present in very small quantity. Since in the corpus considered here almost half of the headlines present syntactic ambiguity, I conclude that differences exist between the humorous mechanisms of the register of jokes and that of headlines.

The position of connector and disjunctor in the new processing configurations identified in point 2) contradicts Attardo's (1994: 99) claim that the disjunctor is always placed after or coincided with the connector. Since the present corpus analyzes headlines and not jokes, the possibility must be considered that additions to the taxonomy of distinct and non-distinct disjunctor configurations might be derived from humorous genres other than jokes and of course that other configurations might still be possible.

The corpus

Newspaper headlines are an interesting field to research, given the specific kind of linguistic phenomena that can be observed in this particular register. Indeed, some of the ambiguities that will be studied originate in the peculiarities of the register of headlines, especially its elliptical nature. Features of newspaper headline register can range from the deliberate use

of rhetorical devices, such as alliteration and rhyme, to the creation of sensational phrases to attract the readers' attention (Reah 1998). Headlines may feature specific strategies used to create humor, such as the use of puns and intertextuality both by means of quotations and culture-specific references. However, within the area of humorous headlines, this paper will focus on the more restricted number of headlines, which readers perceive as funny because of the possibility to interpret them in more than one way. Although it is virtually impossible to distinguish between headlines presenting voluntary and involuntary humor, it is worth noticing that most headlines here appear as involuntarily ambiguous, with one meaning originally intended by the authors and the other humorous meaning added by an unfortunate phrasing of that particular piece of information. No theoretical significance is attached to the original intention (or lack thereof) to produce an ambiguous headline; in other words, whether the writer intended the headline to be funny or it just happened to be that way is irrelevant (on the significance of intentionality for humor, see Attardo 2003).

The linguistic phenomena that contribute to create this kind of semantic confusion will be analyzed and divided, as is customary, into the three main categories of ambiguity:

- Lexical
- Syntactic
- Phonological

The first category includes headlines that become ambiguous because of the double meaning of a lexical item present in the headline, which will be further divided into noun, verb, and preposition ambiguity. The category of syntactic ambiguity, which will be further subdivided into class ambiguity and other types of ambiguity, considers the semantic shifts created by confusion between grammatical categories on the one hand, and, for example, phrasal attachment and elliptic phenomena on the other. Within the category of syntactic ambiguity, attention will be also dedicated to the fewer examples of referential ambiguity. The only example of phonological ambiguity will be dealt with separately in the last section.

The corpus of headlines consists of 135 newspaper headlines found on Internet web sites containing jokes and other humorous bits of information. These web pages identify the headlines as "real" or "genuine," but few of them give actual sources. The web sites were found through Internet searches in a search engine for "funny headlines" or "humorous

headlines.” The search results produced a very broad selection of headlines that are considered funny for a number of different reasons, without distinguishing between humor derived from linguistic ambiguity and humor linked to the content of the headlines. Among the latter, for example, are to be found headlines that strike the reader for their lack of newsworthiness (e.g. “Alcohol ads promote drinking”), their poor wording (e.g. “Economist uses theory to explain economy”), or even the editing inaccuracies they contain (e.g. “Governor’s penis busy” instead of “Governor’s pen is busy”). Therefore I distinguished between headlines containing linguistic ambiguity and those that simply report funny or incredible stories. This corresponds to the verbal vs. referential humor distinction, common in humor research (see Attardo 1994). No further headlines were excluded on other criteria from the corpus. An interesting issue (Oaks, personal communication), is whether a corpus of headlines collected under controlled circumstances (i.e., from sources that provide verifiable references) would yield the same results. The present paper cannot address this issue, which is left for further research.

The analysis of headlines collected on web sites is complicated by the absence of the context in which the headlines originally appeared, which could have provided useful information for their semantic disambiguation. When necessary, native speakers of English were used to ascertain the presence of ambiguity in the headlines and to provide the necessary linguistic information to make sense of otherwise obscure headlines. The headlines in the corpus were then divided into the categories already mentioned and will be examined in detail below. The sources and web sites used for the research are listed in the Appendix.

Studies on ambiguity

The phenomena related to linguistic ambiguity have attracted the attention of numerous scholars in the past, and while many studies on linguistic ambiguity have appeared in the fields of psycholinguistics and computational linguistics (e.g., Hirst 1987; Franz 1996; Clifton et al. 1994; van Gompel et al. 2000; Ravin and Leacock 2000; Gorfein 2001), the focus of the research was not so much on the phenomena generating ambiguity but rather on the ambiguity resolution mechanisms and processes. Most studies differentiate between lexical and syntactic ambiguity, with the former referring to ambiguity conveyed through polysemous

words/homophonous strings and the latter to phenomena of ambiguous word order, referential ambiguity, prepositional phrase attachment (e.g. Hirst 1987: 131–162; Gibson and Pearlmutter 1994), etc. However, while most studies stress the distinct nature of lexical and syntactic ambiguity and the completely different nature of the resolution mechanisms applied by the listener/reader in the two cases, MacDonald et al. (1994) posit a close interaction between the resolution of ambiguity of lexical and syntactic nature, based on the assumption that syntactic ambiguity resolution can be interpreted as a form of lexical ambiguity resolution.

Despite the significance of studies of ambiguity processing in the field of psycholinguistics, studies on the linguistic causes of ambiguity are perhaps even more pertinent to the field of humor research. Among the first attempts at offering a complete taxonomy of the types of syntactic ambiguity in English are the works of Stageberg (e.g. Stageberg 1998 [1970], 1971, and references therein). Stageberg distinguishes between lexical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity (i.e., attachment ambiguity), class ambiguity (to be better defined below), and script ambiguity (i.e., ambiguities that are resolved by intonation, and hence exist only in writing). Taha (1983) follows Stageberg and claims that “structural or syntactic ambiguity results from using carelessly constructed sentences [that] lack formal signals to clarify their sentence structure” (251) and proposes a twelve-category classification that attempts to account for types of syntactic ambiguity in both written and oral contexts. However, the taxonomy does not attempt to be comprehensive and Taha signals the existence of types of ambiguity that cannot be explained by the twelve categories.

Although the connection between ambiguity and humor is widely recognized in the literature, specific studies that examine the linguistic mechanisms of ambiguity as a source of humor are less numerous and are reviewed in Attardo (1994). These include, for example, Pepicello and Green’s (1984) study on the language of riddles, in which linguistic ambiguity and the grammatical strategies used to create it are looked at as one of the peculiarities of this genre. The strategies used to create ambiguity-based humor have been analyzed by Attardo et al. (1994) in their study of a corpus of 2000 jokes. The results of the study stressed the predominance of referential jokes over other types of jokes (mainly verbal and alliterative). Among verbal jokes, only 5.2 percent were found to be based on syntactic ambiguity, while lexical ambiguity was found in 92.5 percent of the cases. The interest of this datum for the present study has already been anticipated and will be stressed again below.

An interesting study on the analysis of structural ambiguity in jokes is offered by Oaks (1994), who approaches ambiguity not in terms of ways to avoid it, but, rather, as an important device in fields such as humor and advertising, thus completely reversing the perspective offered by previous research. After restricting the scope of the article to the particular type of syntactic ambiguity defined by Stageberg as “class ambiguities,” i.e., caused by part-of-speech ambiguity (e.g., *bite*, which may be a verb or a noun), Oaks first identifies a few obstacles in the creation of class ambiguity that are built into the language, such as the agreement rules among the different parts of speech, then, using examples from jokes, he goes on to identify a series of ambiguity enablers involving the use of articles, verbs, conjunctions, and others expressions that contribute to the creation of humor based on ambiguity.

In a broader perspective, Giora (2003) reviews the psycholinguistic literature on the processing of jokes, irony, and numerous related phenomena. Considering processing issues would take us too far afield, but I will address them briefly after the general discussion. Before proceeding with the classification of headlines, a brief review of the characteristics of newspaper headline writing can be found in the following section.

Studies on newspaper headline writing

Despite the existence of numerous studies on the language of newspaper headlines (e.g., Bell 1991; Fowler 1991; Reah 1998; Dor 2003), humor in this particular register has not been the focus of much research. In order to understand the way ambiguity, and possibly humor, is created in headlines, it will be appropriate to look at some of the characteristics of headline writing. As Bell (1991) and Reah (1998) both notice, the language of headlines makes use of linguistic and stylistic devices that are specific of this genre and that are imposed by the constraints and functions of newspaper writing in general. In particular, the main causes for the linguistic characteristics of headlines are the need to attract the readers’ attention and the space constraints of a newspaper. A predominant feature of headline writing is the use of loaded words or expressions, which carry particularly strong connotations, and hence attract attention. As a consequence, headlines are very “rich” on a lexical level, including, for example, slang or colloquial terms instead of their unmarked equivalents. The headlines’ space constraints cause syntax to be reduced and

contracted, with lexical words conveying the meaning and most grammatical words, such as determiners, conjunctions, and verbs (especially copulas, auxiliaries, and other modals) omitted. Indeed, ellipsis is one of the most common phenomena in headline writing (Jenkins 1987; Bell 1991; Reah 1998). This characteristic in turn leads to the massive use of “stacked nouns” (Jenkins 1987: 349), such as “train sex man fined,” and of left modification. It is easy to see how these phenomena, and especially the lack of what Stageberg calls “grammatical signals” and Taha’s “formal signals” (1983: 251), such as determiners that would disambiguate the meaning, can cause confusion between grammatical classes, or, in other words, can result in structural ambiguity. It is worth noting that structural ambiguity in English is also favored by the morphologic characteristics of the language, where a noun often has the same form of a verb, or vice versa, or the past tense and the past participle of a verb often coincide. Examples of this kind of ambiguity will be given in the section dedicated to structural ambiguity.

Classification of headlines

As already pointed out, the headlines were subdivided into two main categories on the basis of Attardo’s and Oaks’s classifications: lexical and syntactic ambiguity.² The latter was further divided into class ambiguity and a miscellaneous of other ambiguities, including attachment ambiguity, referential ambiguity, and ellipsis ambiguity (see below, the section on syntactic ambiguity). On a total of 135 headlines, the majority was found to be ambiguous on a lexical level (52.59 percent), while the rest (46.66 percent) presented some sort of syntactic ambiguity, of which 25.18 percent caused by class ambiguity and 21.48 percent by other types of syntactic ambiguity.

Table 1. *Classification of headlines*

Lexical ambiguity	<i>Syntactic ambiguity</i>		Phonological ambiguity
	Structural	Other types	
71 52.59%	34 25.18%	30 21.48%	1 0.7%

Table 2. *Types of ambiguity in Attardo et al.'s (1994) corpus of jokes and in the present corpus of headlines*

Genre	Lexical	Syntactic
Jokes	96%	5%
Headlines	56%	44%

As already mentioned, these results appear significant if compared with a previous study by Attardo et al. (1994) focusing on an analysis of types of ambiguity in a corpus of 2000 jokes. The study focused on a corpus of written jokes from four different collections, which were categorized as presenting some kind of referential or verbal ambiguity. Verbally ambiguous jokes were then subdivided according to the three different categories of lexical, syntactic, and alliterative jokes. The study found a preponderance of lexical jokes (92.5 percent) over syntactic (5.2 percent) and alliterative jokes (2.2 percent). The considerable difference between the syntactic ambiguity found in the corpus of jokes and in the present study on headlines will immediately be clear from Table 2, which compares only the categories of lexical and syntactic ambiguity (since the third category of alliterative jokes does not apply to this corpus).

The difference between the two results regarding syntactic ambiguity is probably to be attributed to differences in the genre between jokes and newspaper headlines. Attardo et al.'s (1994) observation on the fact that syntactic ambiguity is rarer because it seems to be more difficult to process appears then to be applicable primarily to voluntary humor, that is those genres of humor that are specifically designed to be funny, such as jokes.³ Since presumably most headlines in this corpus are examples of involuntary humor, the frequency of syntactic ambiguity seems to be higher in this latter case than in voluntary humor.

The following sections will explain the classification of the headlines in further detail, providing examples from the corpus that will illustrate the findings.

Lexical ambiguity

Oaks defines lexical ambiguity as conveyed by “a word with more than one possible meaning in a context” (1994: 378). In particular, the lexical ambiguity that Oaks illustrates without focusing on it in his article is a

same-class ambiguity in which, unlike in structural ambiguity, the lexical item does not change part of speech.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, although lexical ambiguity obviously plays a part in syntactic ambiguity as well, “lexical ambiguity” should be taken to mean same-class lexical ambiguity.

As already pointed out, the lexical ambiguity category includes 71 headlines, which is more than half of the examples in the corpus. Same-class lexical ambiguity in the corpus was found in different parts of speech, namely nouns, verbs, and prepositions. Each of the three sub-categories will be discussed below.

Nouns. Lexical ambiguity relying on nouns can be found in 38 headlines in the corpus; in most of them humor is created by homonymy.

(1) MEN RECOMMEND MORE CLUBS FOR WIVES

In (1), for example, the noun can be interpreted in more than one way. The polysemy of the noun *club*, meaning both “an association of persons for some common object” (Merriam-Webster OnLine), and “a heavy staff especially of wood [...] wielded with the hand as a striking weapon,” triggers the humorous response to a male recommendation that wives should be beaten (for another joke based on the ambiguity of the noun “club” cf. Attardo 1994: 97). In (2) below we can see an example of the contextual ambiguity of the word “suit,” where the piece of information reporting a trial, possibly involving controversies over a horse, can be interpreted as a piece of news about a doctor unusually dressed as a horse.

(2) DOCTOR TESTIFIES IN HORSE SUIT

Note how the lack of contextual signals, dictated by the elliptical nature of the register, enables the ambiguity. Had the headline been phrased differently (e.g., “suit concerning a horse”) no ambiguity would occur.

The importance of context in underlying the amusing content of some of the headlines is exemplified in (3) and (4) below, where the humorous interpretations of the nouns *sentence* and *fan* are primed by the presence of the words *actor* (actors usually pronounce sentences, i.e. their lines) and *air conditioning*, which belongs to the same semantic field as *fan*, or “an instrument for producing a current of air” (Merriam-Webster OnLine).

(3) ACTOR SENT TO JAIL FOR NOT FINISHING SENTENCE

(4) STADIUM AIR CONDITIONING FAILS—FANS PROTEST

(5) IRAQI HEAD SEEKS ARMS(6) MAN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING FACES BATTERY CHARGE

In (5) and (6), both nouns change meaning depending on their different interpretation. In (5) the presence of two nouns both having a body part as one of their meanings triggers the humorous effect. In (6) the two nouns *battery* and *charge* are both homonyms, and their humorous meaning is selected in this case by the presence of the word *lightning* in the first part of the sentence. As a result, in the funny version of the headline, the man struck by the lightning is not accused of having physically attacked someone, but he is to undergo some kind of electrical charge.

The corpus also includes headlines in which the funny meaning is brought about by the presence of ambiguous proper nouns and nouns that alternate between a proper and common meaning.

(7) QUEEN MARY HAVING BOTTOM SCRAPED(8) CLINTON PLACES DICKEY IN GORE'S HANDS

In (7), the news about a ship called Queen Mary whose bottom half has to undergo some kind of repair can be interpreted as the image of a monarch preparing to have her rear end scraped. Humor is here created by the referential ambiguity of the proper name "Queen Mary." In (8), on the other hand, what is intended as the proper name of a former White House intern can be interpreted as the English common noun indicating (depending on the different dictionaries and on the difference between American and British English) any of various articles of clothing, a fake shirt, a small bird, or a small donkey. The headline then assumes the meaning of former president Bill Clinton physically handing any of the above-mentioned concrete objects to Al Gore, instead of conveying the figurative meaning of the president recommending Dickey to Gore present in the expression "to put somebody in somebody's hands" (see also the idioms "to be in somebody's hands" and "to be in good hands"). It is also possible that the word "dickey," in this case, carries a sexual connotation, as a childlike version of the word "dick." Although this diminutive meaning is not listed in the dictionaries for "dickey," a sexual innuendo might be perceived by the readers, especially given the former president's notorious involvement in sexual scandals. Despite its ambiguity, though, it is to be noticed that (8) would be easily disambiguated by the use of smaller case, where, as a consequence, the word "Dickey" would clearly stand out as a proper name. This is another

example in which the lack of “signals” typical of the headline register enables the ambiguity. Note that Stageberg (1998 [1970]: 510) includes capitalization as a potential strategy to avoid ambiguity.

Verbs. Among the 25 headlines in which the ambiguous element is a verb, in some cases the ambiguity of the verb results in the sentence being “reversed” in meaning, or, in other cases, as having a meaning that conflicts with the readers’ expectations and knowledge of the world. This can be clearly seen in examples (9 and 10) below:

(9) 20-YEAR FRIENDSHIP ENDS AT ALTAR

(10) NEVER WITHHOLD HERPES FROM LOVED ONE

Headline (9) is made ambiguous by the two opposite meanings of the verb “to end”: a) “to have its natural conclusion in” and b) “to cease completely.” If the first meaning is applied, the headline is interpreted as news about a couple that decided to get married after having been friends for twenty years. However, if the second meaning is introduced, the text sounds like an example of a good friendship being ruined by a wedding.

(10) contradicts common expectations because the advice to fill in your partner on the sexual disease in order to avoid its transmission could be interpreted in the humorous meaning as “do whatever you can to pass herpes on to the person you love,” that is as a message that contradicts common sense. The ambiguity is here of course due to the double meaning of the verb “to withhold,” which can signify either “to keep information from someone” (serious meaning) or “to hold something back” (humorous meaning). Therefore, given the features of headline writing, one could then hypothesize that (10) in its intended meaning is actually a reduced form of “never withhold [the fact that you have] herpes from your loved one,” and that the ellipsis of words (see section 3 above) is ultimately responsible for the ambiguity.

Sometimes phrasal verbs, too, can be responsible for the humorous meaning of a headline, such as in (11) below.

(11) RED TAPE HOLDS UP BRIDGE

Example (11) illustrates the polysemy of the phrasal verb “to hold up.” In particular, ambiguity is created between the two meanings of the phrasal verb “to hold up,” which are “to detain” for the serious meaning and “to prop up” for the humorous one, where, like in other headlines, the funny interpretation is triggered by the presence of another ambiguous word or

expression, in this case *red tape*. Depending on the interpretation of *red tape* in the literal sense or in the metaphorical one, the headline signifies either “a red tape is preventing the bridge from falling down,” or “bureaucracy is slowing down the construction of the bridge,” where, presumably, only the latter was intended by the author/s.

Prepositions. Although these examples of lexical ambiguity are less numerous than the ones involving nouns and verbs, prepositions can be found in a few cases (five, in this corpus) as sources of humor. An example of this phenomenon is (12) below.

(12) WOMAN OFF TO JAIL FOR SEX WITH BOYS

In (12) humor is created by confusion between two of the main meanings of the preposition “for,” the causal and the final ones. The serious version of the headline is about a woman being sentenced to spend time in prison because she had sexual relationships with minors, thus exploiting the causal meaning of the preposition. On the other hand, the humorous interpretation relies on the final meaning of “for,” according to which the woman was sent to prison in order to have sex with young male convicts.

The following are examples presenting an ambiguous use of the preposition “by”:

(13) OLD SCHOOL PILLARS ARE REPLACED BY ALUMNI

(14) STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BY TREE

In (13) ambiguity is noticed between the meaning of “by” as expressing the agent of the passive sentence and “by means of,” indicating the instrument of the action. In other words, if the sentence is seen as the passive form of the active “Alumni replaced old school pillars,” i.e. the intended meaning of the headline, then the preposition expresses agency. On the other hand, if the active sentence is the more improbable “Someone replaced old school pillars by alumni,” “by” assumes the contextually humorous meaning of instrument. Example (14), too, presents the agency meaning of “by,” which this time is found in the humorous version of the headline, as opposed to the intended spatial meaning. In this case, the agency meaning of the preposition is of course made unlikely by the inanimate nature of the noun “tree,” according to which a tree is able to perform the action of finding a stolen painting.

It might also be interesting to notice that in (15) below the meaning of the preposition “in” changes depending on the meaning assigned to that

particular noun. If “case” is interpreted in the legal sense, then “in” has the meaning of “during” or “in the context of,” while if the noun is seen as indicating the container of a violin, then the preposition assumes the meaning of “within, into.” In this case, though, ambiguity is not caused by the preposition itself alone, but its semantic shift is a consequence of the lexical ambiguity of the noun.⁵

- (15) DRUNK GETS NINE MONTHS IN VIOLIN CASE

Syntactic ambiguity

Under this heading we will analyze cases in which humor is provided as a consequence of ambiguity in the syntactic structure of the headlines. Of the 63 headlines that present syntactic ambiguity, 34 were found to be ambiguous from a structural point of view, while ten presented an ambiguous PP attachment, and nineteen offered examples of other kinds of syntactic ambiguity. Examples from these different categories will be discussed below in separate sections.

Class ambiguity. Structural ambiguity is a kind of syntactic ambiguity that is created by confusion between different classes of parts of speech, so that the two interpretations require a restructuring of the sentence. This kind of ambiguity, analyzed by Oaks (1994: 378), is well represented by the example he gives:

- (16) Man in Restaurant: I’ll have two lamb chops, and make them lean, please.
Waiter: To which side, sir?
(Clark 1968: 191)

where “the change in meaning of *lean* [. . .] actually results in a change in our perception regarding the structure of the sentence, creating a structural ambiguity” (379).

This kind of ambiguity is found in many examples from the corpus, and some of them will be analyzed according to the kind of change that they involve in terms of different parts of speech, a process that is quite common in English, unlike in other languages, given the capacity of the same word to function as a noun, a verb or something else depending on the context. In most of the headlines carrying structural ambiguity, confusion is created between the class of nouns and that of verbs. In other

words, a word works as a noun in the serious meaning of the headline but as a verb in the humorous one, or vice versa. In the examples below the source of humor is the underlined word, namely a noun in the serious interpretation, or a verb in the humorous one:

(17) SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE VICTIM

(18) EYE DROPS OFF SHELF

(19) DEALERS WILL HEAR CAR TALK AT NOON

In (17) news about a police squad helping the victim of a dog bite turns into a report on the police squad assisting a dog in biting a person. In the intended meaning “bite” is the noun modified by another noun (dog), while in the second case it is the bare infinitive following the verb “helps.” Note how the lack of grammatical signals enables the ambiguity: had the headline been phrased as “squad helps the victim of a dog bite” the interpretation of “victim” as the object of “bite” would have been excluded. To exclude the ambiguity of “bite” as the verb of the NP “the victim of a dog,” one would need to denominalize the clause and write “the victim of biting by a dog” or “the victim was bitten by a dog”; all these options were clearly not available to the headline’s writer/s.

In (18) humor is conveyed by the ambiguity between the plural noun “drops” and the third person singular of the verb “to drop.” As a consequence, news about the sale of eye drops being discontinued has as an alternative interpretation as the bizarre idea of an eyeball dropping off a shelf. Note how the humorous version of the headline is brought about by the ellipsis of a verb, typical of headlines, (for example, “eye drops are off shelf”) which would immediately disambiguate the meaning of the headline. Similarly, in (19), the humorous reading revolves around the possibility of interpreting “talk” as a noun or a verb.

In other headlines structural ambiguity is to be found where what is intended as a noun in the serious meaning actually becomes a verb in the humorous version.

(20) RESEARCH FANS HOPE FOR SPINAL INJURIES

In example (20) humor is created by ambiguity between the morpheme expressing third person singular and the one indicating the pluralization of nouns, which in English happen to be homonyms (“/-s/”). Here structural ambiguity involves not only one but two elements in the headline. In the first interpretation “research” is the subject, and “fans” is the verb in the third person singular (meaning “to stir up, to increase”) followed by

its direct object “hope.” The humorous interpretation, on the other hand, has “research fans” (meaning “supporters of research”) as the subject and “hope” as the verb in the third person plural. In other words, if “hope” is interpreted as the direct object of the verb “to fan,” the headline is perceived as news on medical progress in the area of spinal injuries, while if “research” is read as a modifier of the plural noun “fans,” then humor arises caused by the incongruous message about research supporters hoping for spinal injuries. The same model of double ambiguity with a noun and a verb can be seen in (21) below, which is present in the corpus and is also quoted by Oaks as an example of structural ambiguity (382).

(21) BRITISH LEFT WAFFLES ON FAULKLAND ISLANDS

The corpus also presents examples of structural ambiguity between a verb and a past participle.

(22) DRUNKEN DRIVERS PAID \$1000 IN '84

As can be seen above, the headline is about drivers who were fined for \$1000 for drunk driving. In other words, the word “paid” should be interpreted as the past tense of the verb “to pay” and “drunk drivers” as the agent in the sentence. However, the fact that “paid” is also the form of the past participle of the same verb triggers the humorous meaning of drunken drivers being rewarded with \$1000. In this case, humor relies on the assumption that the verb “to be” (“Drunken Drivers [were] paid \$1000 in '84”) is omitted, which is a perfectly legitimate inference given the reduction phenomena typical of headline writing (see example 27, below). Some headlines also present ambiguity between verbs and modifiers.

(23) WILLIAM KELLY WAS FED SECRETARY

(24) NIGERIAN REVOLTING OFFICERS EXECUTED

In (23) the abbreviation of the adjective “federal” functions as a modifier of the noun “secretary,” with the message being that William Kelly used to work as a secretary for the Federal Government. However, the word “fed” could also be interpreted as the past participle of the verb “to feed,” with the headline becoming the passive form of the active sentence “someone fed a secretary to William Kelly.” The structural ambiguity is made possible by the fact that the verb “to feed” is a ditransitive verb, i.e. it has two objects. Also, the absence of the indefinite article “a” before the adjective “fed,” a phenomenon that is often present in newspaper headlines, contributes to enable the ambiguity.

In (24), the opposite phenomenon occurs, since what was originally intended as a verb can be interpreted as a modifier of the noun “officers.” In particular, the present participle of the verb “to revolt” can be perceived as a synonym for “abhorrent,” with the result that the Nigerian officers seem to have been executed for their lack of good looks rather than for their involvement in rebellious activities.

Attachment ambiguities. Among the other types of syntactic ambiguity found in the corpus, examples can be found of prepositional phrase attachment ambiguity (cf. Oaks 1994: 379; Attardo et al. 1994: 35), which is created by the possibility for a PP (or another type of phrase or clause) to modify one or another component of the sentence/phrase. Headline (25) below, for example, concerns prepositional phrase attachment.

(25) HOW TO COMBAT THE FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS WITH ILLEGAL DRUGS

In (25) the PP “with illegal drugs” is attached, in the serious interpretation, to the NP “the feeling of helplessness,” thus conveying the meaning that could be paraphrased as “how to combat the feeling of helplessness caused by illegal drugs.” The humorous meaning of the headline is created by interpreting the same PP as attached to the verb “to combat,” as a result of which the headline seems to suggest the use of illegal drugs as a remedy to the feeling of helplessness. In (26) ambiguity is created by the attachment of the reduced relative clause “not yet dead,” which in the serious meaning of the headline extends back to “new housing” while in the humorous interpretation it is attached to the PP “for elderly.”

(26) NEW HOUSING FOR ELDERLY NOT YET DEAD

Therefore, the serious interpretation suggests that a proposal for new housing for elderly people has not yet been turned down, as opposed to the humorous version of the headline, in which new housing is suggested for elderly people who are, obviously, not dead yet. In this last case, the ultimate cause for ambiguity could once again be seen in the ellipsis of the copula (New housing for elderly [is] not yet dead), the presence of which would have disambiguated the headline (see below). It is also to be noted how the humorous interpretation is also made possible by the polysemy of the verb “to die,” which, especially in newspaper register, is also used with the meaning of “to stop” (as in another example: “FARMER BILL DIES IN HOUSE”).

Other types of syntactic ambiguity. Some of the examples in the corpus derive their ambiguous and humorous meaning from phenomena of syntactic reduction or contraction typical of newspaper headline writing. For instance, in examples (27), (28), and (29) below, ambiguity is created by the absence of elements that would normally have to be added in most registers of written speech.

(27) LAWYERS FROM MEXICO BARBECUE GUESTS

(28) COUNTY OFFICIALS TO TALK RUBBISH

(29) THREATENED BY GUN, EMPLOYEES TESTIFY

(27) is another case of ellipsis of the verb “to be” (“Lawyers From Mexico [are] Barbecue Guests”). The absence of the copula here triggers the interpretation of the word “barbecue” as a verb instead of a noun, so that the Mexican lawyers appear as cannibals grilling their guests instead of as guests invited to a barbecue party. In (28) the cause of ambiguity is the omission of the preposition “about” (“County officials to talk [about] rubbish”), as a consequence of which the verb “to talk” becomes transitive as a synonym for “to discuss,” with the headline approximately meaning “county officials are scheduled to talk about issues concerning garbage disposal.” The clear consequence is that the expression “to talk rubbish” is formed, where the noun “rubbish” loses the literal meaning of “litter” and acquires that of “nonsense.” In (29), the simple juxtaposition of the two clauses “threatened by gun” and “employees testify” creates the possibility for a double interpretation. In the first, serious one, the employees who have been threatened by a gun, possibly during a holdup, testify about what happened. In the second meaning of the headline, the employees testify while being threatened by a gun. It could then be argued that the difference between the serious and the humorous interpretations relies on ambiguity between the temporal succession of events. While in the first case employees testify after being threatened by a gun, in the second case employees are threatened by a gun while they are testifying. In other words, ambiguity and humor are created by the use of a past participle in the headline, which could be paraphrased either as “employees were threatened,” that is with a passive past form, or as “employees are being threatened,” that is with a passive progressive one.

Referential ambiguity. Another kind of ambiguity that relies on syntactic phenomena is referential ambiguity (cf. Attardo et al. 2002: 16). In the

examples below, ambiguity and, consequently, humor, are caused by confusion between two possible referents in the sentence.

(30) TWO SOVIET SHIPS COLLIDE — ONE DIES

(31) AUTOS KILLING 110 A DAY, LET'S RESOLVE TO DO BETTER

In example (30), the news is given about the death of one person in the collision of two Soviet ships, with the pronoun “one” not having a specific antecedent in the headline, but just a generic referent to a person. However, another interpretation is possible, where “one” refers to a direct antecedent in the headline, that is “Soviet ships,” and which presupposes the readers’ association in square brackets: “one [of the two Soviet ships] dies.” In this case, humor is created by the fact that the verb “to die” is normally associated with animate subjects, and it is not used for objects like ships.

In (31) the pro-verb “do” and the comparative form of the adjective “good” (“better”) are the elements triggering referential ambiguity (do what? better than what?). In its presumably intended meaning, the headline is about the intention to further reduce the number of deaths in car crashes, therefore by “doing better” the reader is supposed to understand a number smaller than 110 a day. On the other hand, the headline turns out to be humorous if, contrary to what common sense would suggest, the referent of “doing better” is a number greater than 110 a day.

Phonological ambiguity

As Reah points out (1998: 18), newspaper headlines often rely on “the reader’s awareness of sound”—for example through alliteration and rhyme—even though they are not meant to be read aloud. This can be seen in the corpus in just one case, where phonological ambiguity is present, although most likely not originally intended by the authors.

(32) IS THERE A RING OF DEBRIS AROUND URANUS?

(32) above is a classic case of ambiguity based on the phonological string /iuren’s/, which corresponds to the noun “Uranus” or to the phrase “your anus,” the scatological denotation of which hardly requires any

explanation. Needless to say, this kind of ambiguity can only be appreciated if the headline is read aloud or sounded out.

Disjunctor/connector models in the corpus

As already noted above, in many headlines in the corpus, lexical ambiguity is created by the presence of two semantically compatible words, which select one of the possible meanings of the polysemous element as a source of humor. It is interesting to notice that only headlines containing lexical ambiguity can be analyzed on the basis of this mechanism, since the syntactic structure of a sentence is not linear or one-dimensional. Lexical ambiguity, on the other hand, can be explained applying the theory on the linearity of the joke and the Isotopy-Disjunction Model (IDM), first introduced by Greimas (1966) and critiqued by Attardo (1994). The model presupposes two moments in the disambiguation of a joke, where the passage from a first sense (S_1) to a second sense (S_2) opposed to S_1 is introduced by the presence and interaction within the joke of a disjunctor and a connector, i.e. “any segment of text that can be given two distinct readings” (Attardo et al. 1994: 28). For a detailed discussion see (Attardo 1994: 92–97). From the IDM it can also be derived that the position of disjunctor and connector are not random but occur in a specific order in the joke. In particular, the disjunctor occurs “after or on the same linguistic element in which the connector occurs” (Attardo 1994: 105). In the first case we have a distinct disjunctor (Figure 1), while in the second case a non-distinct one (Figure 2). However, a close analysis of the corpus of headlines reveals the existence of two other processing schemata, which were not included in Attardo’s review. In the first processing schema, which I will here call priming (Figure 3), the connector, or ambiguous element, actually follows the disjunctor, while in the second one, that could be identified as double ambiguity (Figure 4), ambiguity is carried not by one but by two elements in the headline. The non-distinct disjunctor schema was by far the most common among the 71 lexically ambiguous headlines, with 47 headlines (66.19 percent), while only 10 examples (14 percent) were found of distinct disjunctor, 5 for priming (7.04 percent), and 9 for double ambiguity (12.6 percent). A few examples from the corpus will help clarify the differences between the four processing schemata.

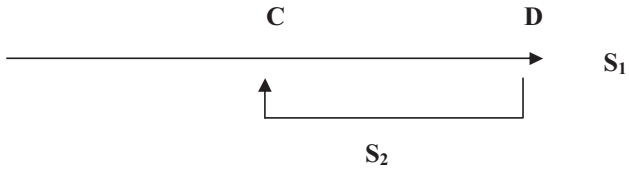


Figure 1. *Distinct disjunctive*



Figure 2. *Non-distinct disjunctive*



Figure 3. *Priming*

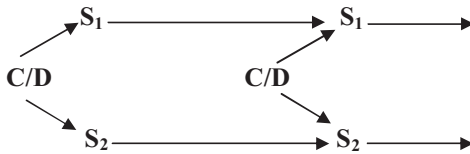
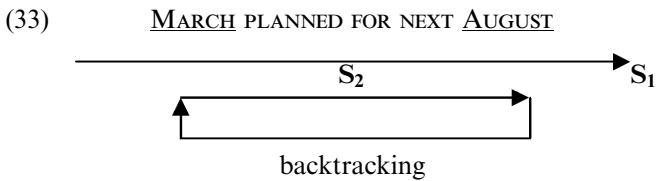


Figure 4. *Double ambiguity*

An example of distinct disjunctive can be seen in (33).



The disjunctive “August” is in final position and causes a reinterpretation (backtracking) of the ambiguous lexical element (connector) “March” occurring earlier in the headline. As a consequence of this semantic shift, S_1 , implying that “an organized procession of demonstrators who are supporting or protesting something” (Merriam-Webster OnLine) was planned for the following August, is transformed into S_2 , where the meaning of the noun “march” shifts to that of “the 3rd month of the Gregorian calendar” (Merriam-Webster OnLine). The non-distinct disjunctive model is also found in the corpus of headlines, with (15) being a typical example.



As can be seen above, the disjunctive “case” is also the connector, since no other ambiguous element appears in the headline and this particular lexical item is the only carrier of ambiguity. The two schemata discussed so far conform to the hypothesis that the disjunctive always occurs after the connector, which was postulated for the genre of jokes by Attardo et al. (1994). However, the third and fourth processing configurations illustrated in Figures 3 and 4 add other possibilities for the position of the disjunctive. In the third processing schemata the disjunctive occurs before the connector. Examples of this new processing schema can be found in (34)–(36) below.

- (34) LINGERIE SHIPMENT HIJACKED — THIEF GIVES POLICE THE SLIP
- (35) BLIND WOMAN GETS NEW KIDNEY FROM DAD SHE HASN'T SEEN IN YEARS
- (36) NEW STUDY ON OBESITY LOOKS FOR LARGER TEST GROUP

It can be noted that the lexical items “slip,” “seen,” and “larger” function as ambiguous elements that cause the meaning of the headline to shift from S_1 to S_2 . In other words, we have an overlapping of the two senses in which the connector retains its two meanings that were activated by the disjunctive earlier in the headline. It is important to notice that disjunctive and connector are identified on the basis of their ambiguity, or lack thereof; i.e. the disjunctive appearing in the first part of the headline

(“lingerie,” “blind,” and “obesity” in the examples above) is not a carrier of ambiguity, for the purposes of the joke, an element that is instead conveyed by the connector in the second part of the headline.

In (34), for example, the noun “slip” in the idiom “to give someone the slip,” meaning “to escape from someone,” functions as the ambiguous element because it can be interpreted in the sense of “an item of underwear.” This meaning is selected by the presence in the first part of the sentence of the word “lingerie,” which functions as the disjunctive. Similarly, in (35) and (36) the verb “to see” and the adjective “large” function as connectors. In other words, in example (35) the adjective “blind” selects the meaning of the verb “to see” that indicates not the action of meeting someone, as was intended in the serious meaning, but that of “to perceive by the eye” (Merriam-Webster). By the same token, the adjective “large” in (36) is ambiguous in its double meaning of “exceeding most other things of like kind especially in quantity or size” (Merriam-Webster). This semantic shift in this case is created by the noun “obesity” in the first part of the headline.

It should be noted that the disjunctive/connector interaction in the third configuration parallels the connector/disjunctive interaction in the IDM. This can be seen by noting that if we substitute the disjunctive in the first part of the sentence with another word, the second meaning of the connector is not activated, so that there is no shift or overlap between S_1 and S_2 , and eventually the headline is not perceived as funny. This is exactly the translation test proposed for verbal humor in Attardo (1994).

(33) MARCH PLANNED FOR NEXT AUGUST

The fourth processing schemata, double ambiguity, could be better exemplified by (5) and (37) below.

(5) IRAQI HEAD SEEKS ARMS

(37) FARMER BILL DIES IN HOUSE

As can be seen above, both headlines contain two potentially ambiguous lexical elements. In particular, in (5) the nouns *head* and *arms* take the meaning of, respectively, “leader” and “weapons” in the serious meaning, but they come to signify body parts in the humorous one. Similarly, in (37) the noun *bill* and the verb *dies* both acquire a humorous meaning if they are interpreted, respectively, as a proper noun and in the literal sense of “to cease living.” In other words both elements are both the connector and the disjunctive (Figure 4).

The presence of these new processing schemata in the corpus could have interesting applications in the field of both humor research and psycholinguistics. The discovery of new configurations of disjunctive/connector heretofore unrecorded in a corpus of jokes (Attardo et al. 1994) and in fact explicitly denied, on the one hand, points to the fact that differences in genre exist and that they are worth investigating, and, on the other, calls for a more thorough definition of the concepts of disjunctive and connector and of their order of appearance. In particular, in the field of psycholinguistics, on the other hand, the value of the model here called priming could be seen in a new perspective on the issue of priming and of the processes underlying the activation of meaning (cf. Giora 2003). For example, in the disjunctive/connector configuration, it appears that contextual pressure fails to disambiguate a clearly parasitical reading, thus leading to interesting issues about priming and the relative strength of activation of contextually primed readings and idiomatic ones. Certainly the disjunctive/connector configuration is strong evidence that the meaning not selected by context is nonetheless available to the speakers and is not discarded (or at least not completely, or not immediately). Furthermore, since backtracking requires more effort, we can predict that humorous texts with a disjunctive/connector configuration should be as difficult to process as overlapping disjunctive/connector configurations, but less so than connector/disjunctive configurations, which do require backtracking.

Concluding remarks

The present paper has analyzed linguistic ambiguity as a source of humor in a corpus of newspaper headlines made available online. The main categories of lexical, syntactic, and phonological ambiguity were further subdivided into subcategories, for each of which examples were provided. The headlines presenting syntactic ambiguity were found in greater number than headlines based on lexical or phonological ambiguity. However, the percentage of syntactic jokes was greater than that found by Attardo et al. (1994) in their analysis of a corpus of jokes, thus showing that there exist differences in types of humorous ambiguity in different humorous genres. In the case of lexical ambiguity, humor depends mainly on nouns, verbs, and prepositions, and the main cause of ambiguity was found in the homonymy of the lexical item in question. Syntactic ambiguity was

analyzed in terms of class ambiguity and other types of ambiguity relying, for example, on prepositional phrase attachment and ellipsis. Class ambiguity was found to involve mainly shifts between the classes of noun and verbs and vice versa, and examples of referential ambiguity were limited in the corpus. Phonologically ambiguous headlines were the least numerous with only one example in the corpus. This datum is not really surprising given the written nature of the medium.

Finally, an analysis of the headlines in terms of the disjunctor/connector theory revealed the presence in the corpus of two processing configurations, which differ from the distinct and non-distinct schemata already known and, to the best of my knowledge, had never been discussed in the literature on the processing of jokes. In the first of these cases, the disjunctor appears before the ambiguous element, or connector, so that both meanings of the ambiguous elements are activated and overlap, while in the second case two elements in the headline function both as connector and disjunctor, thus creating a double ambiguity. It was also suggested that the existence of these new processing schemata could have interesting consequences on the study of priming mechanisms and the activation of meaning.

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Appendix

Lexical ambiguity

Nouns

1. ACTOR SENT TO JAIL FOR NOT FINISHING SENTENCE
2. AIR HEAD FIRED
3. ASBESTOS SUIT PRESSED
4. ASTRONAUT TAKES BLAME FOR GAS IN SPACECRAFT
5. BANK DRIVE-IN WINDOW BLOCKED BY BOARD
6. CARIBBEAN ISLANDS DRIFT TO LEFT
7. CHEF THROWS HIS HEART INTO HELPING FEED NEEDY
8. CHILD'S STOOL GREAT FOR USE IN GARDEN
9. CLINTON PLACES DICKEY IN GORE'S HANDS
10. CLINTON'S FIRMNESS GOT RESULTS
11. CLINTON STIFF ON WITHDRAWAL
12. CROUPIERS ON STRIKE — MANAGEMENT: “NO BIG DEAL”
13. DEAF COLLEGE OPENS DOORS TO HEARING

14. DEAF MUTE GETS NEW HEARING IN KILLING
15. DEFENDANT'S SPEECH ENDS IN LONG SENTENCE
16. DOCTOR TESTIFIES IN HORSE SUIT
17. DRUNK GETS NINE MONTHS IN VIOLIN CASE
18. FARMER BILL DIES IN HOUSE
19. FLAMING TOILET SEATS CAUSE EVACUATION AT HIGH SCHOOL
20. GATORS TO FACE SEMINOLES WITH PETERS OUT
21. GRANDMOTHER OF EIGHT MAKES HOLE IN ONE
22. IRAQI HEAD SEEKS ARMS
23. JANE FONDA TO TEENS: USE HEAD TO AVOID PREGNANCY
24. MAN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING FACES BATTERY CHARGE
25. MARCH PLANNED FOR NEXT AUGUST
26. MEN RECOMMEND MORE CLUBS FOR WIVES
27. POLICE DISCOVER CRACK IN AUSTRALIA
28. PROSECUTOR RELEASES PROBE INTO UNDERSHERIFF
29. QUEEN MARY HAVING BOTTOM SCRAPED
30. SOME PIECES OF ROCK HUDSON SOLD AT AN AUCTION
31. STEALS CLOCK, FACES TIME
32. STARR AGHAST AT FIRST LADY SEX POSITION
33. TIGER WOODS PLAYS WITH OWN BALLS, NIKE SAYS
34. LINGERIE SHIPMENT HIJACKED — THIEF GIVES POLICE THE SLIP
35. MANY ANTIQUES SEEN AT D.A.R. MEETING
36. MAN MINUS EAR WAIVES HEARING
37. SCIENTISTS TO HAVE FORD'S EAR
38. ORGAN FESTIVAL ENDS IN SMASHING CLIMAX

Verbs

39. 20-YEAR FRIENDSHIP ENDS AT ALTAR
40. AIR FORCE CONSIDERS DROPPING SOME NEW WEAPONS
41. BONNIE BLOWS CLINTON
42. COLLEGIANS ARE TURNING TO VEGETABLES
43. COUNTY OFFICIALS TO TALK RUBBISH
44. EXPERTS SAY SCHOOL BUS PASSENGERS SHOULD BE BELTED
45. HERE'S HOW YOU CAN LICK DOBERMAN'S LEG SORES
46. INCLUDE YOUR CHILDREN WHEN BAKING COOKIES
47. KIDS MAKE NUTRITIOUS SNACKS
48. LATIN AMERICAN PROSTITUTES SLAM CATHOLICS DURING SUMMIT
49. LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS CUT IN HALF
50. MILK DRINKERS ARE TURNING TO POWDER
51. NEVER WITHHOLD HERPES FROM LOVED ONE
52. PANDA MATING FAILS — VETERINARIAN TAKES OVER
53. PATIENT AT DEATH'S DOOR — DOCTORS PULL HIM THROUGH
54. POLICE BEGIN CAMPAIGN TO RUN DOWN JAYWALKERS
55. PROSTITUTES APPEAL TO POPE
56. RED TAPE HOLDS UP BRIDGE
57. ROBBER HOLDS UP ALBERT'S HOSEY

58. SKELETON TIED TO MISSING DIPLOMAT
59. SURVIVOR OF SIAMESE TWIN JOINS PARENTS
60. TWO CONVICTS EVADE NOOSE; JURY HUNG
61. QUARTER OF A MILLION CHINESE LIVE ON WATER
62. INFERTILITY UNLIKELY TO BE PASSED ON
63. BLIND WOMAN GETS NEW KIDNEY FROM DAD SHE HASN'T SEEN IN YEARS

Mod

64. NEW STUDY ON OBESITY LOOKS FOR LARGER TEST GROUP
65. WOMEN'S MOVEMENT CALLED MORE BROAD-BASED
66. STIFF OPPOSITION EXPECTED TO CASKETLESS FUNERAL PLAN

Prepositions

67. WOMAN OFF TO JAIL FOR SEX WITH BOYS
68. STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BY TREE
69. MAN HELD OVER NEW FOREST FIRE
70. OLD SCHOOL PILLARS ARE REPLACED BY ALUMNI
71. NJ JUDGE TO RULE ON NUDE BEACH

Syntactic ambiguity

Class ambiguity:

Noun to verb

1. 12 ON THEIR WAY TO CRUISE AMONG DEAD IN PLANE CRASH
2. BASEBALL TALKS IN 9TH INNING
3. BUSH, DUKAKIS BUTT HEADS
4. BLIND BISHOP APPOINTED TO SEE
5. CHOU REMAINS CREMATED
6. DEALERS WILL HEAR CAR TALK AT NOON
7. DEER KILL 17,000
8. EYE DROPS OFF SHELF
9. LARGE CHURCH PLANS COLLAPSE
10. SOVIET VIRGIN LANDS SHORT OF GOAL AGAIN
11. SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE VICTIM
12. STUD TIRES OUT
13. TEACHER STRIKES IDLE KIDS
14. CARTER PLANS SWELL DEFICIT
15. HENSHAW OFFERS RARE OPPORTUNITY TO GOOSE HUNTERS
16. HERSHEY BARS PROTEST
17. TEXTRON INC. MAKES OFFER TO SCREW COMPANY STOCKHOLDERS
18. SHOT OFF WOMAN'S LEG HELPS NICKLAUS TO 66
19. LAWYERS FROM MEXICO BARBECUE GUESTS
20. STADIUM AIR CONDITIONING FAILS — FANS PROTEST

Mod to noun

21. MARIJUANA ISSUE SENT TO A JOINT COMMITTEE

Noun to mod

22. ANTIQUE STRIPPER TO DISPLAY WARES AT STORE

Verb to noun

23. BAN ON SOLICITING DEAD IN TROTWOOD
24. BRITISH LEFT WAFFLES ON FAULKLAND ISLANDS
25. JUDGE ACTS TO REOPEN THEATER
26. LUNG CANCER IN WOMEN MUSHROOMS
27. REAGAN WINS ON BUDGET BUT MORE LIES AHEAD
28. RESEARCH FANS HOPE FOR SPINAL INJURIES

Verb to verb

29. DRUNKEN DRIVERS PAID \$1000 IN '84

Mod to verb

30. JUVENILE COURT TO TRY SHOOTING DEFENDANT
31. KICKING BABY CONSIDERED TO BE HEALTHY
32. WILLIAM KELLY WAS FED SECRETARY

Verb to mod

33. NIGERIAN REVOLTING OFFICERS EXECUTED
34. CHINESE APEMAN DATED

PP attachment:

35. 2 SISTERS UNITED AFTER 18 YEARS AT CHECKOUT COUNTER
36. ARSON SUSPECT HELD IN MASSACHUSETTS FIRE
37. DR RUTH TO TALK ABOUT SEX WITH NEWSPAPER EDITORS
38. ENRAGED COW INJURES FARMER WITH AX
39. HOW TO COMBAT THE FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS WITH ILLEGAL DRUGS
40. YOUTH STEALS FUNDS FOR CHARITY
41. L.A. VOTERS APPROVE URBAN RENEWAL BY LANDSLIDE
42. MAN SHOOTS NEIGHBOR WITH MACHETE
43. WOMAN GIVING BIRTH TO CHILD IN AUTOMOBILE
44. KILLER SENTENCED TO DIE FOR SECOND TIME IN 10 YEARS

Other types of syntactic ambiguity:

45. COMPLAINTS ABOUT NBA REFEREES GROWING UGLY
46. CROWDS RUSH TO SEE POPE TRAMPLE MAN TO DEATH
47. FRENCH OFFER TERRORIST REWARD
48. FUNDS SET UP FOR BEATING VICTIM'S KIN
49. HALF-MILLION ITALIAN WOMEN SEEN ON PILL

50. HILLARY CLINTON ON WELFARE
51. HOSPITAL SUED BY SEVEN FOOT DOCTORS
52. KAMPALA: A HAND GRENADE EXPLODED ON BOARD A PASSENGER TRAIN KILLING A UGANDA ARMY SOLDIER WHO WAS TOYING WITH IT AND TWO CIVILIAN PASSENGERS
53. LAWYERS GIVE POOR FREE LEGAL ADVICE
54. MAN EATING PIRANHA MISTAKENLY SOLD AS PET FISH
55. MINERS REFUSE TO WORK AFTER DEATH
56. NEW HOUSING FOR ELDERLY NOT YET DEAD
57. THREATENED BY GUN, EMPLOYEES TESTIFY
58. THUGS EAT THEN ROB PROPRIETOR
59. VIRGIN HOLDS OFF 10,000 IN PEACHTREE
60. WORKERS ACCUSED OF SELLING STAMPS TO BE BURNED
61. BABIES ARE WHAT THE MOTHER EATS

Referential ambiguity:

62. TWO SOVIET SHIPS COLLIDE—ONE DIES
63. AUTOS KILLING 110 A DAY, LET'S RESOLVE TO DO BETTER

Phonological ambiguity:

64. IS THERE A RING OF DEBRIS AROUND URANUS?

Notes

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I would like to thank Dallin Oaks and Salvatore Attardo for their help and suggestions, as well as two anonymous reviewers. All errors and omissions remain my responsibility.

1. The connector is the ambiguous element, which can be interpreted in more than one way (i.e., is compatible with more than one sense); the disjunctive is the element of the text that forces the passage from the first sense (S_1) to the second one (S_2). For discussion and references, see Attardo (1994: 92–101).
2. It should be noted, in passing, that Stageberg (1998 [1970]) noted that the classification is not “watertight.” This issue is addressed below.
3. The argument in the text obviously applies only to the production of humor based on syntactic ambiguity, which, if indeed involuntary, would require no processing whatsoever; be that as it may, the recognition side of structural ambiguities remains harder than the recognition of other types of ambiguity. Needless to say, it is assumed that these examples are really involuntary humorous headlines. If this assumption is not granted, then the argument in the text loses all its force.
4. Cf. the following example, quoted by Oaks (1994):

Why was Cinderella thrown off the baseball team?

Because she ran away from the ball. (Rosenbloom 1976: 191)

where ambiguity is created by the homonymy of the word *ball*. However, the two interpretations of *ball* belong to the same class of parts of speech, that of nouns, and thus do not involve a restructuring of the syntax of the sentence.

5. In general, Stageberg's (1998 [1970]) warning that these classifications are not watertight should always be kept in mind; witness the following example:

NJ JUDGE TO RULE ON NUDE BEACH

which combines preposition ambiguity (rule while located *on* a nude beach or *about* a nude beach) but also nominal ambiguity: "rule" as in "issue a ruling or as in "govern." This example was arbitrarily classified as prepositional.

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Web sites

BAG

<http://graceland.gentle.org/bag2/headl.html>

<http://funnies.paco.to/Headlines.htm>

Funny Headlines

<http://freespace.virgin.net/mark.fryer/headlines4.html>

Funny Headlines

<http://freespace.virgin.net/mark.fryer/headlines3.html>

Funny Headlines

<http://freespace.virgin.net/mark.fryer/headlines.html>

Funny Headlines

<http://www.rightwords.co.uk/anechdl.html>

Funny Headlines

<http://www.geocities.com/Pentagon/Barracks/8889/jokes/news.htm>

Funny Headlines

<http://home.capecod.net/~tpanitz/ejoke/j49.html>

Headlinehumor.com

<http://www.headlinehumor.com/headlines5.htm?Submit=Next+Page>

<http://www.headlinehumor.com/headlines7.htm?Submit=Next+Page>

Humorous Headlines

<http://www.velocity.net/~acekc/headlines.htm>

Language Humor

<http://www.english-usa.net/humor-jokes>

<http://www.english-usa.net/humor-jokes/page2.html>

<http://www.english-usa.net/humor-jokes/page5.html>

<http://www.english-usa.net/humor-jokes/page4.html>

Merriam-Webster OnLine — The Language Center

<http://www.m-w.com/home.htm>

Omega13a's web page

<http://omega13a.ultimate-results.net/index.php?pg=headlines-crime&>

<http://omega13a.ultimate-results.net/index.php?pg=headlines-trials&>

<http://omega13a.ultimate-results.net/index.php?pg=headlines-sports&>

<http://omega13a.ultimate-results.net/index.php?pg=headlines-goverment&>

<http://omega13a.ultimate-results.net/index.php?pg=headlines-misc&>

<http://www.tjohnsonmedia.com/funn.htm>

<http://ousd.k12.ca.us/~codypren/headlines.html>

Sober VSU

<http://www.sobervsu.org.uk/viewContent.php?itemID=23>

<http://www.thewritecourse.com/Resources/headlines.htm>

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