Puns and Language Play in the L2 Classroom

Pragmatic Tests on Swedish High School Learners of English

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ABSTRACT: Puns are short humorous texts that play on structural ambiguity in order to create incongruous scripts. The perception of their humour requires considerable pragmatic manipulation, which may present problems for L2 learners, which is why many scholars agree that they are best reserved for more advanced students. Using a combination of Quantitative and Qualitative analysis of data yielded from a survey containing puns and referential jokes, this study confirms that humour through puns is largely inaccessible to Swedish High School learners of English, with ambiguity being the main obstacle across the test groups. However, since language play has been proven to be facilitative to language learning, and since students themselves express a wish to be able to participate in humorous interaction, learners may well benefit from working with puns and language play in the classroom in order to gain greater linguistic abilities and well-rounded communicative competence.

Key words; Humour, Puns, Ambiguity, Incongruity, Scripts, Language Play, Language Learning, Second Language Acquisition.
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1. Introduction

Puns combine two human universals; language and laughter. As far as speaking and laughing are concerned, people all over the world depend on their language as well as their sense of humour daily, in order to engage socially and create bonds with others around them. For a language learner wanting to connect with speakers of their target language, being able to participate in humorous exchanges can be important for the same reasons. The English language abounds with opportunities to make witty remarks that play with linguistic properties, and this paper looks into the possibilities of making such humour available to Swedish High School students of English.

1.1 The facilitative role of Language Play

The last couple of decades have seen a growing body of research supporting the idea that language play may have a facilitative role in Second Language (L2) development. The publications of Nancy D Bell (2007; 2009; 2011; 2017), and others (Chiaro, 1992: 101; Ross, 1998: 1; Servaité, 2005; Derakshan, 2016) offer a range of reasons for including humour in the L2 classroom, positing direct and indirect effects for learners. Among the direct effects, research has shown that learners’ language awareness is raised when they engage in activities that involve deciphering puns (Bell, 2017), allowing them to expand their abilities through playing with new forms and functions. Such activities also require learners to engage in metalinguistic discussions about L2 forms, which can increase their memorability.

Furthermore, many studies support the teachability of pragmatics through humour, and report on the benefits this provides for mastering speech acts, conversational implicatures, conversational management and pragmatic fluency (Fernandez-Fontecha, 2008; Bell, 2009). Indirect effects of humour are in the emotional realm. A relaxed, fun atmosphere in the classroom, where learners feel free to experiment with language, enhances the learning environment and helps remove affective filters such as boredom, stress and anxiety, that can otherwise negatively affect motivation (Bell, 2009). Studies also show learners using the most syntactically complex language, and display the broadest range of language functions, when in a relaxing and enjoyable context (Bell, 2017). This points towards a positive, circular relationship among humour, emotions and increasingly sophisticated L2 use. For these reasons, it is interesting to investigate how students respond to examples of puns and language play in order to ascertain the type of teaching opportunities they may provide.
1.2 The Problematic of Puns for L2 Learners

The processing of humour involves the perception of some sort of incongruity. Salvatore Attardo, who has published extensively on the linguistics of humour, describes incongruity as “a mismatch between two ideas” (1994: 47), where laughter arises when this incompatibility between two interpretations is perceived. A joke thus contains two frames of reference, two associative contexts, and the punch line contains a shift from one perceived context to another. In order for a joke to succeed, the perception of incongruity, and its deciphering, must be pitched at the right level; the process has to be relatively effortless or the humour is lost. For L2 learners, simply decoding the message might present considerable challenges, possibly resulting in the incongruity being overlooked (Bell, 2007). Furthermore, even if the incongruity is perceived, unravelling it may require substantial mental effort causing the joke to fall flat. This may cause added stress for learners, rather than the positive effects sought after. In terms of puns, learners will have to perceive some sort of linguistic ambiguity initially, before standing a chance of noticing any incongruity caused by that ambiguity. For these reasons, many scholars contend that puns are best reserved for the most advanced students, and that students of lesser proficiency will have more success with referential jokes. Since referential jokes lack the element of linguistic ambiguity they may very well be translated into students’ L1, whereas puns cannot.

2. Research Aims

The aim of this paper is to test the claim that puns are only accessible to advanced learners. Bell (2009) argues against it, stating that, although wordplay is indeed difficult for learners, it does not mean that they cannot understand and appreciate this type of humour. Through presenting a survey with a number of well categorised linguistic jokes to Swedish learners of English, at different levels of proficiency, this essay sets out to test this claim empirically. To do this, the following research questions were set:

1) Out of puns and referential jokes, which examples do students find funny?
2) What linguistic features, if any, prove difficult for students’ comprehension?
3) What differences, if any, can be found in the results of the two different groups?

A quantitative analysis of the results from the survey, as well as a qualitative analysis of students negotiating for meaning will provide the data needed for a discussion.
2.1 Section Overview

Incongruity Theories of Humour deal with contrived wit, rather than incidental humour, from a pragmatic perspective of using humour for a reason. Humour therefore highlights a central aspect of pragmatics, in that speaker intent and hearer interpretation are crucial to the success of a joke or pun. In fact, all humorous communication, whether instances of conversational humour, jokes, or puns, rely on pragmatic manipulation, in that context and intentions are important in understanding utterances, above and beyond literal meaning. There is cooperation in conversation, and this aspect of pragmatics is expanded on in Section 3, whereas Sections 3.1-3.3 look at pragmatic approaches to understanding how interpretation works in humorous exchanges.

A look into the mechanics of jokes and puns reveal their duality. Attardo’s work with linguist Victor Raskin, has resulted in the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), of which Raskin’s own Semantic Script-based Theory of Humour (SSTH) forms an integral part. Raskin explains that the SSTH sets out to “determine and formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions for a text to be funny” (1985: 54). This paper will make use of the notion of scripts in Section 6, which presents a structural analysis of puns; in this aid, SSTH is presented in Section 4. The GTVH is also of interest since it includes a language resource, needed in order to provide a full grammatical analysis of ambiguity in puns. Therefore, the theory is briefly introduced in Section 5.

Section 8 consists of an analysis of the data collected from the survey, combined with the qualitative data received from an audio recording of students negotiating to decipher the jokes and puns from the survey. The results are then used as the basis for a discussion with regards to puns and language play in the classroom which follows in Section 9. The conclusion in Section 10 seeks to summarise the research findings and provide suggestions for the role of language play in the L2 classroom.

3. Pragmatics

Pragmatics is, largely, the study of meaning in interaction (Thomas, 1995: 22), or how speakers make sense of what is meant even when it is not explicitly spoken. Philosopher H.P.Grice first described the cooperative nature of conversation in the 1940’s, although his work was not published until 1975 (Yule, 2015: 144; Thomas, 1995: 56). The Cooperative
Principle (CP) states that successful conversation depends on the assumption between interlocutors that cooperation is taking place i.e. that what is being conveyed is true, relevant and informative, according to four conversational maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and manner. The maxims are observed in direct speech acts, whereas indirect speech acts contain conversational implicatures. Implicature is the technical term for what is suggested in an utterance, although it is neither explicitly stated nor directly implied (Yule, 2015: 146; Thomas 1995: 58). Speakers who deliberately exploit, or flout, a maxim, intend for their listener to understand the underlying implication, as per the following example;

A: ‘Will Becky be at the meeting?’
B: ‘Her car broke down.’

The reply ‘Her car broke down’ seems to defy the maxim of relation, however, if A assumes that B is being cooperative, A can add the implicature ‘since her car broke down she is not going to make it to the meeting’. Cooperation, then, is still taking place although no longer at the literal level. Grice’s maxims thus serve a purpose both when they are followed and when they are flouted, as they explain how interpretation is successful even when utterances fail to make literal sense. Knowledge of pragmatic conventions in any given language form part of our communicative competence; speakers do not make conscious pragmatic decisions (Yule, 1995: 146). Pragmatic ability is considered to be a tacit skill developed during childhood.

Flouting is cooperative behaviour, in that it is an overt non-observance of maxim; the speaker intends for the hearer to be aware of it (Attardo, 2017). This allows the hearer to infer that one maxim is being flouted insofar that another is being observed (Attardo, 1994: 273). Conversely, violating a maxim, is the covert non-observance of maxim. A hearer that is unaware of the non-observance cannot infer any other meaning, which creates implicature failure: the intention to deceive (Attardo, 2017).

In the case of humorous language, the speaker invariably violates one or more of the conversational maxims (Attardo, 1994: 273). As a result of this violation, the hearer suspends all inferencing and the interpretation of the utterance then follows according to a different set of rules.

1 Appendix A contains a full wording of CP and its submaxims
3.1 Non-Bona-Fide Communication Mode

Victor Raskin observes that humorous discourse follows the cooperative rules of non-bona-fide (NBF) communication, rather than being a simple negation of serious communication (Attardo, 1994: 205). Raskin subsequently suggested the four maxims of NBF communication mode;

1. Maxim of Quantity: Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke.
2. Maxim of Quality: Say only what is compatible with the world of the joke.
3. Maxim of Relation: Say only what is relevant to the joke.
4. Maxim of Manner: Tell the joke efficiently. (Raskin, 1985: 103)

The consequence of the NBF maxims is that speakers are not committed to the truth of what they say in NBF mode. A speaker producing a humorous text uses the violation of a maxim to deliberately mislead the hearer into thinking that reliable information is being provided, while the utterance is in fact “rigged with the unexpected presence of a second sense” (Attardo, 1994: 272). At this stage the hearer cannot make sense of the sentence without backtracking and selecting a different sense. When backtracking the hearer will reinterpret the information on the basis of the NBF mode of humour and react accordingly, i.e. laughing or smiling. From this follows that the most crucial aspect of joke telling is the importance of the implicit.

3.2 The Importance of the Implicit

In any given NBF communication, part of the information must be left implicit; for the joke to function the speaker must break the Maxim of Quantity (Attardo, 1994: 289) and follow the NBF quantity maxim instead; ‘Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke’. Some information is left unsaid until the punchline, as seen below;

*My brother went to jail. He didn't take it very well. He was yelling insults and attacking everyone, he even threw his faeces on the wall. I don't think we will play Monopoly with him again.*

It is imperative for the success of the joke that the hearer does not realise that the narrator is describing the events of a board game during the narrative part of the text. At the introduction of *Monopoly* in the punch line, the hearer reaches an interpretative dead end. The second sense is that the brother never went to a real jail but was in fact so furious only because of missing his turn in the game. It is a well-known requirement of the punch line, that it must come unexpectedly, only at the very end of the joke (Attardo, 1994: 289). If the incongruity
is revealed too soon, the humour of the two interpretations will fail. (The above referential joke features in the joke survey as example number four, see Appendix B.)

Puns are generally quite short, but also rely on the mismatch between two ideas. In a pun, the senses are incongruous because of ambiguities in language; the duality in any given pun is a play on linguistic ambiguity and thus violates the maxim of manner and its submaxim avoid ambiguity.

3.3 Puns and Pragmatics

Ambiguity is a common property of natural languages, which occurs across every level of grammar. Any linguistic element can be ambiguous out of context; hearers select the correct sense of a word based on the context where it occurs (Attardo, 1994: 112). In her article Puns and Tacit Linguistic Knowledge (2017), Debra Aarons cites Boeckx (2010), who posits that “the recognition of ambiguity (pragmatic or otherwise) is likely to be an innate feature of human cognition”. Naturally, not all ambiguity is humorous. When ambiguity occurs unintentionally, the source of uncertainty is identified and then rectified so that normal communication continues unhindered, without conscious effort. If the maxim of manner is flouted deliberately, implicatures will be drawn and the ambiguity resolved (Aarons, 2017). This process is easily accounted for within the Gricean CP; no matter how flawed the message comes across, interlocutors incline towards an interpretation that makes sense in the context of the utterance. Larkin-Galianes (2017), states that the information-processing strategies used in the understanding of a pun are similar to those in non-humorous interaction, the chain of input is the same; prediction, confirmation/disconfirmation, readjustment to new input etc. The difference in terms of puns, is that the maxim of manner is violated and not flouted, which leads to the suspension of the usual rules of communication.

Puns are examples of defunctionalized use of language, or ludic language. Aarons (2017), explains that puns are metalinguistic devices, asking participants to pretend that language is other than it is. Doing so, requires metalinguistic understanding, which may prove difficult for L2 learners. Even native or competent speakers of a language are rarely able to fully analyse the structure of a language consciously, nor does successful communication depend on such skills. Users possess tacit structural knowledge about their language, knowledge that puns rely on for their humour. Puns tap into this linguistic knowledge, making aspects of it conscious. When hearers encounter new and different ways
to use language, they are forced to examine the language rules that the pun evoked and activated (Aarons, 2017). The disruption to normal processing is triggered by the incongruity, which alerts the hearer to the ambiguity. Similarly, failure to perceive the ambiguity may result in failure to perceive the incongruity. The theoretical claim that Aaron’s research on puns as tacit knowledge brings forth is that there are levels of linguistic representation that are largely subconscious unless users are made aware of them by a disruption to normal language processing.

Crucial to the mechanism of the pun is that the ambiguity creates an overlap of two scripts, and that these scripts are opposed. It is the recognition of script oppositeness that reveals the incongruity involved in the two or more interpretations of the linguistic ambiguity. Section 4 presents Victor Raskin’s linguistic theory of humour and the notion of the semantic script in more detail.

4. The Semantic Script-based Theory of Humour

Raskin describes a ‘script’ as a large chunk of semantic information surrounding a certain word, or evoked by it (Raskin, 1985: 81). It is the background knowledge that is needed in order to make inferences about a statement, and each word in our vocabulary has certain encyclopaedic knowledge about the world associated with it. Thus, the word ‘classroom’ will activate a conventional knowledge structure that exists in memory, relating to the sort of activities that might take place in a classroom (Yule, 2015: 147). Certain scripts are compatible with more than one situation, as in ‘get up, get dressed, grab a bag, leave the house’. Such a script could be describing [go to work] but could just as well be the script for [go to school], or [going camping]. Raskin’s theory of humour is based on the idea that a joke must be compatible with two possible scripts that overlap and are opposed to each other in a certain way. The SSTH Main Hypothesis reads:

(i) The text is compatible, by or in part, with two distinct scripts;
(ii) The two distinct scripts are opposite in a special predefined sense.
(Raskin, 1985: 99)

The first script, which is always the seemingly most obvious situation, is introduced in the narrative part of the joke. It is strongly suggested and enforced, and is accepted until an incongruity is introduced suddenly, and always in the final part of the joke, at which stage the hearer realises that another interpretation is possible (Raskin, 2017). Raskin introduces the
script-switch trigger as the element of the text that causes the passage from the first to the second script (Attardo, 1994: 203), and that which renders the first script defeated. A semantic script analysis of a joke will thus always yield two scripts. The second condition of the SSTH is that the two scripts are opposed. Raskin presents three basic, abstract oppositions; actual vs. non-actual, normal vs. abnormal, possible vs. impossible (Attardo, 1994: 204). These oppositions can then be further contextualised into text-specific, more concrete oppositions such as good/bad, life/death, sex/no sex, etc.

In order to further exemplify the SSTH the following example can be analysed;

“I asked my daughter if she had seen my newspaper. She told me that newspapers are old school. She said that people use tablets nowadays and handed me her Ipad. The fly didn’t stand a chance.”

In the narrative part of the text the hearer is led to believe that the father wants to catch up on the news in his printed newspaper. The script, therefore, is [reading the paper], which is reinforced throughout the text when the daughter calls newspapers old fashioned and suggests her father uses the Ipad, in her mind as a means to read the news. This is in line with the generational divide in terms of technology and seems a plausible situation. It is only when the incongruent ‘fly’ is introduced that an interpretative dead end is reached. Upon backtracking the [reading the newspaper] script is deemed incorrect; the father had no intention of catching up on the news, he was killing a fly. At this stage the second script is selected; [using a newspaper to swat a fly]. This comes as a complete surprise; the daughter has also misunderstood her father’s intentions. The image of the father swatting the fly with an Ipad is amusing in itself, but also because it is surprising. The scripts are opposed along the ‘normal’ vs. ‘abnormal’ lines, as in swatting a fly with a newspaper is normal but doing so with an Ipad is not. The text specific opposition could be ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’, depending on whether the hearer thinks it is more important to kill the fly or take care of an expensive device. (The above joke features in the joke survey as example number eight, see Appendix B.)

Script opposition is the key to understanding what makes a joke funny, but the scripts are also the most difficult for L2 learners to grasp (Bell, 2017). In order to understand the joke, the hearer must be in possession of both scripts and the more obscure the script opposition, the funnier the joke. This means that the jokes that evoke the biggest laughter among native speakers (NS) can leave non-native speakers (NNS) feeling perplexed because they do not have access to the appropriate script.
If the SSTH is a purely semantic theory, then the General Theory of Verbal Humour, (GTVH) first presented in 1991 by Attardo and Raskin, incorporates additional elements needed to make further generalisations about verbal humour. The GTVH was born out of the observation that the SSTH was not a complete theory (Attardo, 2017), motivations for which are further described in section 5.

5. The General Theory of Verbal Humour

The claim that the SSTH is not a complete theory is motivated by the fact that SSTH cannot differentiate between referential and verbal humour - puns (Attardo, 2017). If puns play with ambiguities in language to produce opposing scripts, then referential jokes create humour through incongruity in script opposition only. This distinction is important but since both categories of jokes involve script opposition the SSTH cannot separate the two. Furthermore, the GTVH allows for the exploration of similarity, or otherwise, through the hierarchy of six knowledge resources that are the parameters of the GTVH. The parameters are called knowledge resources, because they are the resources that one would have to draw upon if creating a joke from scratch.

- At the top of the hierarchy is Raskin’s script opposition. (Described in section 4).
- Logical mechanism refers to how the incongruity of the joke is resolved. The resolution is a partial, or playful one, if the incongruity is resolved; in absurd jokes there may not be a resolution at all (Attardo, 2017).
- The situation resource contains the setting, characters, and activity in the joke. It does not refer to the context in which the joke is being told, as Attardo (2017) explains; “the GTVH is a theory of competence, so it logically could not encompass contextual factors, which are by definition part of performance”.
- The target resource is also, like resolution, optional since there would only be a target if the joke is of an aggressive nature (Attardo, 2017). If there is no ‘butt’ of the joke this resource would be empty.
- The Narrative Strategy describes how the parts of the text are distributed and the position of the punchline. This can be described as the genre of the joke (Bell, 2017), and can describe the form that, for example, a riddle can take; is it a knock knock joke, or perhaps a question answer joke?
The Language knowledge resource will contain a full phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical description of the text, thus, the GTVH can be used to analyse puns.

GTVH explains the mechanisms through which humour is created. Although it is not necessary for L2 learners to learn all the details of the theory, Bell (2017) argues that “teachers who engage their classes in explorations of L2 humour should be aware of this theory”. For the students themselves, practice identifying scripts and their oppositions could be facilitative if their goal was to be able to participate in humorous interaction. This paper will take advantage of the concepts discussed in Sections 3-5, in order to present a structural analysis of puns, in Section 6.

6. Structural analysis of Puns

This section looks at the ambiguities present in the puns that will be used to collect the data for this research paper. Puns play on the duality of language, they are, whether phonetic, semantic, or syntactic, invariably two-faced. The first script will play on the more obvious sense of the sound, word or structure, whereas the second script will reveal a hidden, incongruent meaning (Chiaro, 1992: 39). Ambiguity occurs across the entire grammar of English;

- Phonology – the sounds that make up a language
- Morphology – the way the words themselves are structured
- Lexis – the individual words of a language
- Syntax – the way the words are structured into sentences

**Phonology**

The term *homophone* refers to words that sound the same but are spelt differently. The English language exhibits a lot of examples of homophones, because the spelling system is not based on representing each individual sound with a specific symbol (Ross, 1998: 9). Jokes that manipulate this feature of language are therefore best enjoyed in their spoken form, since the ambiguity would literally be spelled out in writing and remove the element of surprise in the punchline.

‘*She’s the kind of girl that climbed the ladder of success, wrong by wrong.*’
This pun plays on the similarity of sound between the word *rung* and *wrong*. *The ladder of success* is figurative language that makes us visualise one success being topped by others as the climb up the metaphorical ladder progresses. The first script selected is the [career] script, until the punchline suggests that there were no *rungs* on the career ladder, instead the climber seems to be making a number of mistakes, *wrongs*, perhaps descending the ladder instead of climbing up. The word *wrong* becomes the script-switch trigger, activating the second script which is the [blunders] script. The text-specific opposition between the two scripts is thus ‘success’ vs. ‘no success’, whereas the abstract opposition is between ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’.

*Morphology*

Morphology refers to the way words are formed. Many words are free and single morphemes that cannot be split into smaller parts, such as nouns, adjectives and verbs. These can exist with bound morphemes, prefixes and suffixes that add a different semantic or grammatical meaning to the word. The morpheme is thus the smallest meaning-carrying unit of language (Yule, 2015: 66). NS have instinctive knowledge about the way morphemes are used, which can be exploited to create ambiguity in puns (Ross, 1998: 14).

‘Tom is always running into cars and making dents’
‘Is he really? A reckless type, huh? What does he do?’
‘He’s a dentist!’

This joke plays on the suffix -*ist* which carries the meaning ‘one who…’ in this case makes dents, whereas a *dentist* is a familiar occupation. The first script is the [reckless] script, which is suggested and reinforced during the narrative part. The punchline introduces the incongruity between a reckless person and the overlapping script [profession], of someone who works in a high precision job as a dentist, as well as the ambiguity between the occupation *dentist* and a *dent-ist*, as one who makes dents. The logical mechanism for the resolution of incongruity requires knowledge of the way the morpheme -*ist* is used, without which the joke cannot be appreciated as humour.

‘One day a man went to see Mozart’s tomb. When he got there, the tomb was open, and Mozart was sitting there tearing up pieces of paper. The man asked: “What are you doing with all your great works of music?” Mozart replied: “I’m decomposing!”’

In this case the prefix -*de* is used to refer to Mozart undoing the music he once composed. Decomposing is also the process of a dead body decaying, and therein lies the incongruity. The hearer needs to know who Mozart is, as well as be in the possession of the lexical
knowledge that writing music is known as *composing*. When the script-switch trigger *decomposing* is introduced the hearer must also have the linguistic skill to link *decompose* to the decay of a dead body, as well as the use of the prefix *-de* as a way of undoing something. Without that knowledge the incongruity cannot be resolved, and the joke cannot be appreciated.

*Lexis*

The vocabulary of English is a common source of puns. The language is vast and has borrowed from several sources throughout its history; Germanic Languages, Latin, French and others (Ross, 1998: 17). This has resulted in a large number of words being semantically related, a feature frequently manipulated in puns.

*‘Mummy, can I lick the bowl?’  ‘No darling, please pull the chain like everyone else!’*

The above joke plays on the two meanings of the word *bowl* as in a round dish, or the second sense of the word, the toilet bowl. The first script is [baking] and the type of bowl which is suggested is one holding the batter for a cake, which children love to lick once the batter has been poured in the baking tray. The second script however, activated by the script switch trigger *pull the chain*, allows the hearer to see the hidden sense of *toilet bowl*. The hearer needs to be in possession of the script switch trigger object in order to perceive the ambiguity and resolve the incongruity, and this could possibly prove difficult for L2 learners if their toilet does not flush by chain. These two meanings of the word *bowl* constitute an example of polysemy, the phenomenon of words having various, but related, meanings.

Homophones and polysemes are notoriously difficult to tell apart. In order to be sure, one can consult a dictionary to see if the words in question have different entries. Polysemes are listed under one entry; they share etymology and are thus related. Homophones are listed separately and are two unrelated meanings of the same word. Consider the following notice in a butcher’s shop;

*‘Would mothers please not sit their babies on the bacon slicer, as we are getting a little behind with our orders.’*

The two competing senses of the word *behind* causes the humour in this joke. The most obvious sense of the word being that the butcher has a back log of orders, however, as it can be read as *behinds* in the sense of babies’ bottoms, an image is created of little babies’ bums
being caught up in the bacon slicer and the pieces mixing with authentic meat orders. Since these two senses of behind are separate parts of speech (preposition and noun) one might assume that they are unrelated and thus homonyms, however, a look into their etymology reveals that they both stem from Old English behindan, but that the first sense of behind as a preposition has acquired a euphemistic sense similar to running late. (Ross, 1998: 19)

**Syntax**

Syntax refers to the way meaning is created through the structure of words in a sentence. Phrases have headwords with optional modifiers added before or after it (Ross, 1998: 20). Two possible interpretations of phrase structure can cause ambiguities;

‘For sale: Mixing bowl set designed to please a cook with a round bottom for efficient beating’

The first script, [whisking batter] in this for sale notice has the modifier *round bottom for efficient beating* describing the mixing bowl set itself, however, it could be read as attributed to *cook* which creates the humour in this case. The second script [spanking the cook] is activated because of this ambiguous structure and generates an image of the round bottom of a cook being spanked. There is also lexical ambiguity displayed in the word *beating*, meaning that the logical mechanism required to resolve incongruity of this pun includes knowledge of the synonymous relationship of *beat* and *whisk*, which can present difficulties for L2 students, as well as syntactic knowledge in order to perceive what the note had actually intended to read.

Explaining the ambiguity in certain jokes can require a technical level of clause analysis, however, NS would perceive the ambiguity whether or not they can apply the correct labels to the words, (Ross, 1998: 21) for example, in a sentence such as this one;

‘Trimmet’s treacle puddings have caused several people to be taken to hospital with badly scalded feet. It seems the instructions read: Open tin and stand in boiling water for twenty minutes.’

The second script [put your feet in boiling water] is activated because of the lack of object in the second imperative *stand in boiling water*, and further strengthened by the absence of a specific subject. The ambiguity could easily be lifted with the presence of the pronoun *it* after the verb *stand*, but only at the expense of a potential joke.
7. Methodology

In order to ascertain the level of student (SS) comprehension and appreciation of puns and play in English, a survey consisting of ten jokes was compiled. These examples were analysed and categorised according to, firstly, whether they constituted referential jokes, or puns playing on linguistic ambiguity. Secondly, the puns were further categorised depending on the type of ambiguity they exhibited. The jokes were presented in a random order (see Appendix C).

7.1 The Data

The empirical evidence that founded the basis for the ensuing discussion consisted of the results from the above-mentioned survey. For each of the ten jokes SS had a multiple-choice section where they could mark their response to the joke. The five choices ranged from non-comprehension, through comprehension but with some uncertainty, to complete understanding with three levels of increasing appreciation. The data was received as numbers of students that had marked a certain choice for each joke, translated to percentages of comprehension and appreciation.

7.2 The Test Groups

The informants to whom the survey was presented consisted of two separate sets of Swedish students of English. Test Group One were students from the ninth grade of Högstadiet i Älmhult, representing the average Swedish learner at this age. Test Group Two came from the ninth grade of Engelska Skolan i Järfälla. At this school 50% of classes are taught in English and the working language between teachers and students in and out of the classroom is English. This group thus represented students with higher proficiency in English and greater pragmatic and linguistic competence. When the data had been compiled, the results from the two test groups were compared and analysed, the variable being proficiency.

7.3 Method of Analysis

The results from the survey were analysed quantitatively. It did not include spaces to collect any comments or thoughts with regards to the jokes. This was limiting, in that the results could not pinpoint exactly what SS had understood, or not. Consequently, in order to gain some extra insight into what the obstacles for comprehension could consist of, and what the
criteria for appreciation might be, the jokes from the survey were also presented to a volunteer group of students, whose negotiation was recorded and transcribed (see Appendix D). This group consisted of two boys from the Älmhult School who had not taken the survey at the time that their peers did. Their discussion took place in the company of their teacher, subsequent to the results from the survey having been collected. This qualitative part of the analysis served to clarify certain aspects and questions that had come to light when the survey data had been analysed. In that aid, the teacher was provided with prompting questions beforehand.

8. Analysis of results

This section sets out to answer the research questions (RQ) posed at the outset of this project. For a full disclosure of the totality of empirical results, both quantitative and qualitative, please see Appendix C and D respectively.

RQ 1 was set in order to ascertain whether students preferred puns or referential jokes. The data obtained clearly show that referential joke number four stands out as well received, with the majority of students understanding, and many appreciating it, across SS in both test groups.

4. My brother went to jail. He didn't take it very well. He was yelling insults and attacking everyone, he even threw his faeces on the wall. I don't think we will play Monopoly with him again.

![Diagram showing responses to joke 4 in Group One and Group Two]

Without any type of ambiguity present, the duality in this example is restricted to the script opposition. Accordingly, this joke shows the lowest percentage of students not understanding out of the whole survey, especially in test group two where only 5% of students marked that they did not get the joke and another 5% marked that they 'kind of' got
the joke. Those percentages are higher in test group one, however, considerably lower than their responses to puns.

Interestingly, example number eight in the list, also a referential joke, displayed a good spread of both comprehension and appreciation across the two test groups, however, not quite to the same extent:

8. ‘I asked my daughter if she had seen my newspaper. She told me that newspapers are old school. She said that people use tablets nowadays and handed me her Ipad. The fly didn’t stand a chance.’

The majority of SS enjoyed this joke, but some had comprehension issues. It is hard to discern what the particular obstacle was with this joke. The scripts [reading the news] and [swatting a fly] are not at all obscure, something that Bell (2017) warns may present problems for learners, moreover, the script switch trigger ‘fly’ is a common piece of vocabulary that should not present problems. The volunteer group did not offer any explanations here since they had heard the joke before and were able to explain it instantly. It is possible that some students, nearing the end of the survey and feeling frustrated at not understanding the majority of puns, had become disheartened at this point and stopped trying, perhaps marking that they did not get it without really reading through the examples. It is problematic that the data cannot confirm if this was the case. Still, despite some of SS not understanding this joke, there is some spread here, more so than in many other examples.

Referential joke number two was negatively affected by the lexical item BSE, representing mad cow disease without which the joke is incomprehensible. The vast majority of students were not in possession of this abbreviation, and in hindsight it can be argued that more interesting results could have been yielded had this item been spelled out in full. The volunteer group, accordingly, made the connection with the crazy cow only after they had
‘BSE’ explained by the teacher, and showed some appreciation at that stage. From this follows, that referential jokes were more accessible to students across the three groups.

In terms of the puns, the examples that were relatively well received in test groups one and two, were examples displaying morphological ambiguity, suggesting that SS are familiar with word formation with prefixes and suffixes across the morphological level of grammar. The data further show that syntactical jokes were appreciated also. This being relatively surprising, warranted a closer look at these examples. Upon review, suspicions grew that these puns could be appreciated simply through perceiving the second script in isolation. Therefore, the volunteer group was prompted to search for the first script, or another interpretation of events. The exercise does indeed seem to confirm the assumption, with SS having difficulties perceiving two scripts.

5. A friend of mine went to see Mozart's tomb last week. When he got there, the tomb was open and Mozart was sitting there tearing up pieces of paper. My friend asked: "What are you doing with all of your great works of music?" Mozart replied, "I'm decomposing!"

The volunteer group started out showing some appreciation for this joke, however, when prompted, they were not able to disentangle the morpheme that caused the ambiguity. They did understand the word *compose* but needed a lot of help to understand *decompose* in both senses of the word. For this example, the teacher had to explain the joke, at which point the students did not find it funny at all. This seems to suggest that SS in the other groups were perhaps also appreciating this joke without a full understanding of the two scripts, instead just perceiving one script and finding that funny in isolation. The high percentage of SS marking that they ‘kind of’ got the joke, 32% in both groups, strongly suggests that SS seem to be aware that there is more to the joke i.e. the two scripts, than they are able to comprehend.
Example ten, again, plays with ambiguity created by a morpheme, in this case the suffix -ist, meaning a person who... This example does not present a particularly obscure script; with the word dent in the narrative part of the joke, the punchline dentist is relatively easy to link to the first script. Furthermore, dentist as a profession is a piece of vocabulary that students will be well familiar with at this stage. Accordingly, there was a good spread in both groups, in fact the responses in test group one and test group two are again similarly distributed, with the majority of students able to comprehend the joke.

10. Lynn: Tom’s always running into cars at traffic lights making dents.
Max: Is he really? A reckless type, huh? What does he do for a living?
Lynn: He is a dentist.

Still, a number of students did not grasp the joke. A possible obstacle may have been the lexical item dent, as the volunteer group needed this word translated before continuing with the joke. Once in possession of that item they immediately made the connection to the situation introduced in the second script. Interestingly, the students in the volunteer group only perceived the second script of a person making dents and did not notice the duality of dentist until prompted by the teacher, indicating that the second script could be appreciated in isolation, without noticing the ambiguity created by adding -ist to the noun dent.

Similarly, the examples of syntactic ambiguity both contain a second script that can be found funny without perceiving an ambiguity at all.

6. Trimmet’s treacle puddings have caused several people to be taken to hospital with badly scalded feet. It seems the instructions read: ‘Open tin and stand in boiling water for twenty minutes.’

9. ‘For sale: Mixing bowl set designed to please a cook with round bottom for efficient beating.’
The volunteer group immediately perceived the two scripts for example six. In terms of example nine, SS clearly showed that, although showing initial appreciation, when prompted, they had great difficulty perceiving the two scripts present and seemed to appreciate the second script in isolation.

Example nine contains syntactic as well as lexical ambiguity. The obstacle in the volunteer group in terms of the first script was the synonymy of *beating* and *whisking* without perception of which the first script becomes undetectable. The reason, then, that SS appreciated this pun, was the image of the round bottom of the cook being spanked, without realising that the notice was advertising a bowl that allowed for efficient whisking.

In response to RQ2 (What linguistic features prove difficult?), the results show that the greatest obstacle to comprehension was lack of vocabulary. Example one displaying lexical ambiguity was probably unsuccessful because of *pull the chain* which is not the way these students would flush a toilet, resulting in the ambiguity of *bowl* being lost.

1. ‘Mummy, can I lick the bowl?’ ‘No darling, please pull the chain like other children!’

The volunteer group did show understanding of *pull the chain*, immediately translating it to ‘spola’. After making that connection SS ‘solved’ the pun quite quickly and showed some appreciation. The results in test group one, and to some extent test group two indicate, therefore, that SS were not in possession of ‘pull the chain’, without which the joke is incomprehensible.

The second example displaying lexical ambiguity, number three in the list, also presented some comprehension problems, although less in test group two.
3. Notice in a butcher's shop: ‘Would mothers please not sit their babies on the bacon slicer, as we are getting a little behind with our orders.’

What became clear in the volunteer group was that, for this example as well, the first script was difficult to perceive; in their discussion of the joke, SS mentioned the bottom definition of behind, but when prompted for a duality they got stuck on thinking of behind as a sense of stupid, and needed a lot of prompting before they were able to see what the notice had actually meant to display. This suggests that SS appreciating this joke, did so through script two in isolation, without ever perceiving the first script and structural ambiguity. From this follows, that although lack of vocabulary, quite naturally, creates difficulties, the feature that presented the most problems for SS was ambiguity in itself.

In response to RQ3 (i.e. differences between the two groups), the results did not show any great variances depending on proficiency. Test group two showed a little more understanding each time but not to the extent expected, indicating that wordplay was indeed very difficult for both groups.

Needless to say; if the recipient of a joke cannot perceive the incongruity, they will not be amused. From looking at the data provided by the survey, it can be argued that SS did not have as much fun with this exercise as expected. While administering the survey in test group one, it became quite clear that the puns and jokes were not what was referred to in the introduction at ‘the right pitch’. The students made comments that they found it very difficult, some became quite frustrated and voiced their exasperation as they were working through their survey. One student quite interestingly stated that although she could understand the words, she could not understand why the texts were funny. This seems to suggest that SS lacked the pragmatic ability to switch to NBF communication mode, and therefore were not
able to halt the disambiguation process, backtrack and to select a different sense, argued by Attardo, Raskin et al as a prerequisite for appreciation. Quite simply, the humour was lost because SS were unable to perceive the incongruities. One can assume that this was the result of too much mental effort being dispensed at simply understanding the language, as suggested by Bell (2007), or if the incongruity was perceived, it was its unravelling that proved too difficult. Accordingly, the positive results in the form of reduction of affective filters, creating a relaxed atmosphere, and reducing distance SS-T, were lost and the survey instead resulted in added stress for students. The results of the survey clearly show that wordplay of this kind is too difficult for L2 learners in Swedish High Schools, so in terms of testing the claim that puns are best reserved for the most advanced of students, this has been proven correct.

9. Discussion

Upon analysing the data received from the survey it is true that the results yielded were unexpected. Comprehension was decidedly lower than anticipated, and the realisation that the results from test group two failed to show marked improvement in this respect was initially disappointing. However, what was instead uncovered was arguably more interesting; the reasons behind the incomprehension. These reasons were not difficulties with the grammar in terms of morphology, syntax or otherwise, but difficulties perceiving ambiguity. The results seem to support the theoretical claim made by Debra Aarons (Section 2.3), that there are levels of linguistic representation that are largely subconscious unless users are made aware of them by a disruption to normal language processing. If the recognition of ambiguity depends on tacit linguistic knowledge, this skill will be largely reserved for NS, learners instead profiting from these structures in their L1. This has been proven through the qualitative data, showing that SS had difficulties perceiving both scripts in play in the puns. In their appreciation of the puns mentioned in the analysis of results in section 7, SS were in fact amused by script two in isolation.

All is not lost however. Although SS had difficulty with the survey, there were interesting qualitative results yielded from negotiating meaning. During the interview part of the negotiation, (see appendix D), the volunteer students agreed that it is important to understand humour in the target language and were absolutely sure that this is something that can be taught in school. SS agreed that through studying wordplay, it was possible to gain a
deeper understanding of the target language, playing with words allowing for viewing the language in a different way. As argued in Section 1.1 with regards to the facilitative role of language play, it appears SS in the volunteer group agree that there are possibilities here.

Going back to the SSTH and the notion of scripts, teachers could well benefit from being aware of the theory so that, in presenting a joke or pun to their classes, they could explicitly teach SS the mechanics of humour and wordplay. Bell (2011) suggests starting practice in recognising scripts in L1, subsequently progressing to simple examples in the target language. Furthermore, jokes can serve as valuable teaching tools showing SS ambiguity across the grammar of the target language and in that way teaching particular structural features of semantic relations, morphology and syntax.

10. Conclusion

This essay set out to test the claim that puns are best reserved for the most advanced of students, through data from a survey consisting of seven ambiguous puns, and three referential jokes. The claim was proven correct, in that students across the three test groups had great difficulties understanding the puns presented; comprehension levels were much lower than expected, and the results from the two groups were not markedly different.

An analysis of the results prompted a closer look at the examples that were appreciated by SS across the two groups. This review revealed puns that had amusing visuals being presented in script two, that could be humorous in their own right. The qualitative results confirmed this suspicion, proving that the most difficult feature of puns lay not in the levels of grammar as expected, but in the perception of ambiguity in and of itself. The claim made by Aarons (2017), positing puns as jokes that activate tacit linguistic knowledge therefore gained in importance. If puns activate NS structures that are otherwise unconscious, it follows that NNS do have access to such structures in their L2, which then explains the fact that SS that took this pragmatic test were not able to perceive the ambiguities present in the puns of this survey. This affected the logical mechanism resource of Attardo/Raskin’s GTVH, (Section 5) since SS were not able to resolve the incongruity in those puns, resulting in the humour being lost.

In terms of the facilitative role of language play, the data from this research project do not give any indication of improving memorability of L2 forms and structure since a follow
up of the volunteer group’s negotiation for meaning was not within the scope of the study. However, it stands to reason that further study of puns could improve recognition of ambiguity and thus build on linguistic representation so that SS can improve their pragmatic abilities in this respect.

As argued by Bell (2011), the goal of humour instruction is not to make comedians out of L2 users, nor for them to use humour in the same way that NS of the target language do. Research suggests that native-like pragmatic behaviour is not expected, or even desired. Instead, the goal should be to present learners with a set of choices in order to assist them in finding a ‘third place’ in which the norms of L1 and L2 intersect. Studying the mechanics of wordplay can allow learners to, at least, recognise, and to some extent even appreciate humour in interactions with NS, which can aid in strengthening social bonds. The knowledge of how humour, in general, and puns, in particular, operates, can help learners of English achieve a more rounded communicative competence, of which being able to laugh with others form an integral part. This study has proven that L2 learners can greatly benefit from experimenting with language play in the classroom, in order to achieve such competence.

References


APPENDIX A

The Cooperative Principle, H.P. Grice (1975)

“Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accented purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”

**Maxim of Quality:** Super maxim: Make your contribution one which is true

Submaxims: Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Maxim of Quantity:** Make your contribution as informative as required for the current purpose of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than required.

**Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant

**Maxim of Manner:** Super maxim: Be Perspicuous

Submaxims: Avoid obscurity of expression

Avoid ambiguity

Be brief and be orderly.

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2 With respect to this maxim, Grice writes, "Though the maxim itself is terse, its formulation conceals a number of problems that exercise me a good deal: questions about what different kinds and focuses of relevance there may be, how these shift in the course of a talk exchange, how to allow for the fact that subjects of conversations are legitimately changed, and so on.”
APPENDIX B

Corpus of puns and wordplay present in the L2 survey. Listed in order of appearance.

1. ‘Mummy, can I lick the bowl?’ ‘No darling, please pull the chain like other children!’

2. Two cows in a field. One says ‘Are you worried about this BSE scare?’ ‘Of course not, I’m a helicopter.

3. Notice in a butcher's shop: ‘Would mothers please not sit their babies on the bacon slicer, as we are getting a little behind with our orders.’

4. My brother went to jail. He didn't take it very well. He was yelling insults and attacking everyone, he even threw his faeces on the wall. I don't think we will play Monopoly with him again.

5. A friend of mine went to see Mozart's tomb last week. When he got there, the tomb was open and Mozart was sitting there tearing up pieces of paper. My friend asked: "What are you doing with all of your great works of music?" Mozart replied, "I'm decomposing!".

6. Trimmet’s treacle puddings have caused several people to be taken to hospital with badly scalded feet. It seems the instructions read: 'Open tin and stand in boiling water for twenty minutes.'

7. ‘She’s the kind of girl that climbed the ladder of success, wrong by wrong.’

8. 'I asked my daughter if she had seen my newspaper. She told me that newspapers are old school. She said that people use tablets nowadays and handed me her Ipad. The fly didn’t stand a chance.'

9. ‘For sale: Mixing bowl set designed to please a cook with round bottom for efficient beating.’

10. Lynn: Tom's always running into cars in front of him at traffic lights making dents. Max: Is he really? A reckless type, huh? What does he do for a living? Lynn: He is a dentist.
APPENDIX C – Full disclosure of results

Phonological ambiguity – Example Seven

7) ‘She’s the kind of girl that climbed the ladder of success, wrong by wrong.’

Example Seven plays on the sound similarity between ‘rung’ and ‘wrong’, creating an ambiguous pun which suggests an additional method by which to climb the metaphorical ladder of success. In order to understand this pun, learners need to be in possession of the idiomatic expression of the ladder of success, as well as the lexical knowledge that the steps on a ladder are called ‘rungs’. The second script is [blunders], making mistakes at work.

The majority of learners were not able to understand the pun, interestingly the percentage marking that they could not comprehend the joke was higher in test group two. The word ‘rung’ is quite an obscure lexical item, and indeed, not an item that the volunteer group of students were in possession of. Test group one shows a higher percentage of students that ‘kind of’ get the joke, indicating that they may be focussing on climbing the ladder ‘wrong by wrong’ without perceiving that there exists a phonological ambiguity at all.

Morphological ambiguity – Examples Five and Ten

5) A friend of mine went to see Mozart's tomb last week. When he got there, the tomb was open and Mozart was sitting there tearing up pieces of paper. My friend asked: "What are you doing with all of your great works of music?" Mozart replied, "I'm decomposing!".
Example five plays with the prefix -de as a way of undoing something, and the way it is used to describe the ‘undoing’, or decay, of a dead body. The students need to know who Mozart is, as well as be in possession of the lexical item ‘composing’ for writing music. This particular pun was relatively well received by students.

More spread can be noted in both comprehension and understanding in test group one, with the majority of students marking that they could indeed understand this joke, and many also finding it funny; 14% even laughing out loud. The results in test group two look very similar with an even spread of comprehension and appreciation, a relatively low percentage marking that they could not get the joke; 10%, and 16% of students laughing out loud.

The volunteer group started out showing some appreciation for this joke as well, however, when prompted were not able to detangle the morpheme that caused the ambiguity. They did understand the word ‘compose’ but needed a lot of help to understand ‘decompose’ in both senses of the word. For this example, the teacher more or less explained the whole joke, at which point the students did not find it funny at all. This seems to suggest that students in the other groups were perhaps also appreciating this joke without a full understanding of the two scripts, instead just perceiving one script and finding that funny in isolation. The high percentage of students marking that they ‘kind of’ got the joke strongly suggests that students seem to be aware that there is more to the joke i.e. the two scripts, than they are able to comprehend.

10) Lynn: Tom's always running into cars in front of him at traffic lights making dents.
Max: Is he really? A reckless type, huh? What does he do for a living?
Lynn: He is a dentist.
Example ten, again, plays with ambiguity created by a morpheme, in this case the suffix -ist, meaning a person who. This example does not present a particularly obscure script; with the word ‘dent’ in the narrative part of the joke, the punchline ‘dentist’ is relatively easy to link to the first script. Furthermore, ‘dentist’ as a profession is a piece of vocabulary that students will be well familiar with at this stage. Accordingly, there was a good spread in both groups, in fact the responses in test group one and test group two are similarly distributed, with the majority of students able to comprehend the joke.

Still, a number of students were not. A possible obstacle could have been the lexical item ‘dent’, as the volunteer group needed this word translated before continuing on with the joke, however, once in possession of that item they immediately made the connection to the situation introduced in the second script. Still, the students in the volunteer group only perceived the second script of a person making dents, and did not notice the duality of ‘dentist’ until prompted by the teacher, indicating that the second script could be appreciated in isolation, without noticing the ambiguity created by adding -ist to the noun ‘dent’.

Lexical Ambiguity – Examples One and Three

1) ‘Mummy, can I lick the bowl?’ ‘No darling, please pull the chain like other children!’

Example one presents lexical ambiguity of the word ‘bowl’ as well as a cultural difference in the way toilets flush, accordingly test group one showed little understanding, all of 64% of the students marking that they could not get the joke. Test group two showed a different pattern with as many students marking that they did not get the joke as there were students that ‘kind of’ got the joke.
The volunteer group did show understanding of ‘pull the chain’ immediately translating it to ‘spola’. After making that connection the volunteer group ‘solved’ the pun quite quickly and showed some appreciation. The results in test group one, and to some extent test group two, seem to suggest, therefore, that students were not in possession of ‘pull the chain’, without which the joke is incomprehensible.

3) **Notice in a butcher's shop:** ‘Would mothers please not sit their babies on the bacon slicer, as we are getting a little behind with our orders.’

Example three plays on a duality of senses in the word ‘behind’, the second script creating a visual of little babies’ bums being sliced by the bacon slicer.

Test group one showed some appreciation, with 19% of the students marking the joke as pretty funny, however, the majority of students showed relatively low comprehension rates with 43% marking that they were not able to understand the humour, and 23% that they kind
of got the joke. Test group two had a more even distribution of results with more students marking that they ‘kind of’ got it, than students marking that they didn’t.

What became clear in the volunteer group was that the first script was difficult to perceive; in their discussion of the joke they mentioned the ‘bottom’ definition of behind, but when prompted for a duality they got stuck on thinking of behind as a sense of ‘stupid’, and needed a lot of prompting before they were able to see what the notice had actually meant to display. This appears to suggest that students appreciating this joke, did so through script two in isolation, without ever perceiving the first script and the ambiguity in structure.

Syntactic Ambiguity – Examples six and nine

6) Trimmet’s treacle puddings have caused several people to be taken to hospital with badly scalded feet. It seems the instructions read: ‘Open tin and stand in boiling water for twenty minutes.’

Example six plays on different ways to perceive the structure of final phrase. The lack of subject for the second verb phrase leads to an ambiguity which apparently had some customers standing themselves instead of the tin in scalding water.

![Pie charts showing responses to joke 6 for groups one and two](image)

This pun had 7% of the students in test group one laughing out loud, and 19% finding it pretty funny, indicating that some of the students were able to perceive the humour and appreciate it. Many students in test group one still had comprehension issues with 43% marking that they didn’t get it, but there is decidedly more spread for this joke.
Test group two showed similar distribution to test group one of both comprehension and appreciation. Interestingly, the volunteer group, understood the duality of this pun without any issues at all.

9) ‘For sale: Mixing bowl set designed to please a cook with round bottom for efficient beating.’

Example nine, similarly, plays on two ways of viewing the ‘beating’ whether it is the cook’s bottom receiving the blows, or a batter in the mixing bowl. ‘Beating’ is also ambiguous in itself, with the duality between ‘spanking’ and ‘whisking’ in this case. Test group one showed a similar distribution of comprehension and appreciation to the previous syntactic example (six, above), with over half the group marking that they could not get the joke. 25% did ‘kind of’ get the joke, relatively close to the 17% for the previous syntactic joke.

Test group two had as many students marking that they could not understand, as students marking that they ‘kind of’ got the joke, 32% respectively. However, this group had 21% of students laughing out loud, indicating that this pun was fully understood and appreciated. In the volunteer group, however, it became quite clear that their appreciation was for the second script only, it took teacher prompting in order for the students to look beyond the spanking of the cook and perceive that the notice was actually saying that the mixing bowl allowed for efficient whisking.

Referential jokes – Examples Two, Four and Eight

2) Two cows in a field. One says ’Are you worried about this BSE scare?’ ‘Of course not, I’m a helicopter.'
This example proved very difficult for both groups of students, it would possibly be as difficult for learners that are very advanced since the abbreviation ‘BSE’ is virtually unheard of for most speakers not native to the UK. One could argue that, had this item been translated to ‘mad cow disease’ the joke would have yielded more interesting results. As things stand, it is clear that hardly any of the students could understand the joke. In the volunteer group the students made the connection between the disease and the crazy helicopter cow only when they had been made aware of the translation.

It is worrying that test group one show more understanding than test group two. The results in test group one could be due to some students marking that they ‘kind of’ get the joke although they actually do not. This affects the validity of the test in terms of the other examples as well. However, as with above examples, the prudent thing is to look at the bigger pieces of the pie chart and focus on those results, rather than the abnormalities. Moreover, in terms of this particular joke, it can also be argued that some group one students may think the get the joke because the image of a cow as a helicopter is amusing in its own right.

The 11% of students in test group two that found the joke pretty funny, could well be students who do understand ‘BSE’ in the context of crazy cows, however, the results fail to provide exact knowledge with regards to what they find funny.

4) My brother went to jail. He didn't take it very well. He was yelling insults and attacking everyone, he even threw his faeces on the wall. I don't think we will play Monopoly with him again.

The script switch trigger in this referential joke is ‘Monopoly’ in the punchline, at which point the receivers of this joke will realise that the brother was furious, not because he was going to a real jail, but simply because he would have to miss a go at a board game. It is his
strong reaction that presents the incongruity here, and that which creates humour. Without any type of ambiguity present, the duality here is restricted to the script opposition. Accordingly, this joke shows the lowest percentage of students not understanding out of the whole survey, especially in test group two where only 5% of students marking that they didn’t get the joke and another 5% marking that they ’kind of’ got the joke. Those percentages are higher in test group one, however, lower than the responses to puns.

The volunteer group grasped the joke immediately after reading it, confirming that a referential joke presents much less difficulty than puns.

8) 'I asked my daughter if she had seen my newspaper. She told me that newspapers are old school. She said that people use tablets nowadays and handed me her Ipad. The fly didn’t stand a chance.'

Neither of the two scripts in this referential joke are particularly obscure. The narrative part of the joke presents a familiar situation, catching up on the news, which, these days, takes place on an electronic device more often than not. Most people will also have swatted a fly with a newspaper at one stage or another. Although the results from both test groups show that many students did understand the joke, and appreciate it, there are still many that did not, 31% in test group one and 16% in test group two.
The script switch trigger ‘fly’ is a very common word, unlikely to present much difficulty. It is hard to discern what the obstacle was in this example. Considering the response for example four showing quite overwhelming comprehension in both groups, the results from this example are surprising seeing as it is a referential joke, i.e. without ambiguity, and without difficult vocabulary.

The volunteer group offered no explanation for what might be the obstacle, with one students having heard the joke before and the other grasping the two scripts immediately upon reading the joke. That being said, the vast majority of students did indeed comprehend this joke.

Answers to Interview Questions; Volunteer Group

**Do you think it is important to be able to understand and make jokes in English?**

SS agreed that it is important to be able to make and understand jokes in English, simultaneously expressing that jokes can help in creating a deeper knowledge of the language. S1 made the remark that you can learn from playing with words in the way that puns do, giving as an example, learning words that mean different things means learning the language in a different way. When asked by the teacher if the Swedish language makes similar types of wordplay jokes, the students enjoyed relaying an example. When teacher and SS were laughing together at this Swedish example, it created a pleasant atmosphere between the three, an example of the indirect effects humour can have on the classroom, in particular the way humour reduces social distance between teacher and students.

**Can you make jokes or make people laugh in English?**
Both students seemed to be of the opinion that they would be able to make jokes and make people laugh in the target language, stating ‘I guess so’ which indicates that they have not been in a position to test themselves in that respect. They did concede, however, that they would not be able to create humour through the use of puns.

**Do you think you can learn about jokes and humour in class?**

When asked if they thought it was possible to learn about jokes in school, the answer was short and certain; absolutely.

**Do you like it when teachers make jokes in the classroom?**

Depending on the teacher, they answered that they enjoy when a teacher makes jokes in class, and agreed that an element of being able to laugh at oneself is crucial to humour.

**Did you find these jokes funny?**

When asked if they found the jokes in the survey funny they both answered ‘no’ unanimously! However, they specified that since they had to have the duality explained to them, this removed the humour for them. This ties in, of course, with the theory that a punchline must be sudden, at which point the two scripts, and the script opposition must be perceived simultaneously. The incongruity presented by the joke then takes the hearer by complete surprise. If the joke has to be explained that element of surprise is removed and the joke ceases to be funny.
APPENDIX D - Transcription of volunteer students’ audio

S1 Du kan börja med första

S2 Ja, jag antar ju att the bowl är ju toan, och sen kedjan är ju att spola

S1 Jaha. Så mamman tror att hon frågar om hon kan slicka toan?! Huh huh

S2 Ja huh huh

____________________________________

S1 Tvåan då. Ja jag har ingen aning

S2 Jag tror jag vet

S1 Läser skämtet högt

S2 Det är ju bara för kossor, inte för helikoptrar; BSE scare

S1 Men det, va? Det är ju helt ologiskt

S2 Men skämt är ju inte logiska direkt

S1 Men det står ju två kossor... nej

S2 Men den tror att den är en helikopter antagligen

T Could it have something to do with mad cows disesae?

S2 Jaha, nu fattar jag. Den är redan galen

S1 Jahaaa, ok

____________________________________

T Läser skömtet högt

S2 Vänta... sätter dom ungen på bacon skivaren?

T Mmm, what’s the joke?

S1 Jag fattar inte heller, att dom kanske har bråttom och råkar.slice bebisen

T Mmmmm

S1 Vet inte

S2 Jag fattar inte

T No.. How about, to be a little behind, what does that mean?
S2 Jaha, efterbliven eller?

S1 Nej, men att dom ligger lite bakom med orders, lite bakom

T Ligger lite efter med sina orders. Mmm, can you tell me something else that is a behind?

S1 Korkad

S2 Bakom flötet

T How about this, is this a little behind as well? *Points to bum I suppose?*

SS Read the joke again

SS Jahaaaa, huh huh huh

T Hahahaha

________________________________________________________________________

S1 Fyran

S2 Jamen den här fattar jag

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T goes back to previous joke. What do you think the shop owner is really saying?

S1 Att de får med lite rumpa med sina orders

T Är det vad han säger? Eller är det vad du hör?

S1 Det är vad jag hör

T Det är vad du hör. Men vad är det han säger egentligen?

S1 Att dom inte ska sätta sina bebisar på bacon slicaren

T För då kan dom inte använda den. Dom är i vägen ja! Det är ju vad han egentligen säger.

________________________________________________________________________

S1 Jaha nu fattar jag fyran. Han har åkt i fängelse på Monopol! Åsså, bara... ja, ja

S2 Så han blev jätte arg bara för att han åkte i fängelse på monopol.

S1 Så han kastade skit på väggen. Så säger dom att dom inte skulle spela monopol med honom igen. Det gick sådär liksom..

S2 Om han attackerade all, kanske han hamnade i riktigt fängelse istället

T Fast det var ju hans bror, tror du att han polisanmälde honom? Skulle du göra det om din bror kastade bajs på väggen?
S1 Hahaha
S2 Ja fast han attackerade ju alla

T Nästa då. Läser skämtet
S2 Hmmm... Decomposing det är väl något med musik, composing
T Composing är ju när man komponerar musik ja
S1 Han bara gör om det typ
T Decomposing vad kan det vara då?
S1 Omkomponera
T Ja, vad betyder -de egentligen i många sammanhang?
S1 Åter igen
S2 Åter
S1 Återvinner, nej jag fattar inte.
T Difficult isn’t it, with proper English puns?
S1 Ja. Det här är jätte konstigt. Jag vet inte vad ’tomb’ är
T Tomb! It’s a grave
S2 Tomb. Tomb raider du vet, har du inte spelat det?
T It’s a grave, you know what a grave is?
S1 Mmm
T But decomposing is something else as well. -de means retract, take it back undo, so with compose…
S2 Han hade komponerat
T Och nu rev han sönder så han tog bort allting. But decomposing means something else as well when it comes to dead people
S1 Ja, för dom gick ju till hans grav, jag antar att han var död
T Mozart levde på 1700 talet, ja jag tror att han var rätt död huh huh
S1 Men det står ju att Mozart satt där och slet upp papper det är ju ganska...
T Mmm men
S2 Jahaa! Att han förruttnar..

T Han förruttnar ja! Precis. Så inte nog med att han tog tillbaka alla sina kompositioner, han förruttnar också

(The students did NOT find that funny one little bit!!)

____________________________________

T Ok next one. Trimmet’s Treacle Puddings

(Looong pause)

S1 Scalded

T Scalded feet

S1 Dom var såhära… brända

S2 Dom stod i kokande vatten

S1 Open tin and stand in boiling water huh huh då staller dom sig själva i kokande vatten i 20 minuter, så korkade som dom är

T För vad skulle dom ha gjort?

S1 Jamen, dom skulle ju lägga puddingen där i

T Ja burken ja

S1 Burken

T Några är ju lite korkade

S1 Bakom flötet

____________________________________

T reads joke. Another play on words

S1 (Gäspar och sträcker sig)

S2 Fel efter fel

T Och vad skulle det kunna tänkas betyda?

S1 Vet inte

S2 Jaha, hon bytte stege det var fel stege eller?

T Jaaaa, eller kanske... hon gjorde nånting fel? Men på vad sätt kan det här vara en lek med ord?
S1 Vet inte

T Rung by rung. She climbed the ladder of success rung by rung. Vad heter dom här som finns på en stege? Som man klättrar på?

S2 Stege, steps

T Or rung. By rung

S2 Jaha. Ok jag har aldrig hört talas om det ordet förut.

____________________________________________

S1 OK. 8

S2 Den där har jag hört förut

S1 (Fnissar mycket). Ja då skulle han använda tidningen för att slå flugan och då så, ah, slog han ju med Ipaden istället

T But the fly didn’t stand a chance

S1 Det är det som är viktigast

T The tablet might have broken, we don’t know

_________________________________________________

S2 For efficient beating

S1 The what!??

T Hmmmm hmm hm!

(Long pause)

T Ja, hur förstår ni den där?

S2 Den fattar inte jag

S1 Hon har en rund rumpa!

T Kocken har en rund rumpa, för att .. for efficient beating

S2 Hon ska slå rumpan

S1 För att man effektivt ska kunna slå på den

T Kan det finnas nån annan betydelse på den där?

S1 Ja, att... den mixing grejen är rund

T Rund bottom ja. Botten, mm. For efficient beating
För effektiv slagning

På Engelska kan man ju säga att man vispar, whisk, men också beat the batter, det är inte vispning men en ordentlig blandning

Ok

Lynn: Tom’s always running into things… läser skämtet

(Lång paus)

Dents. Vad är det?

Buckla

Jaaa, amen dents, dentist, jobbar med att göra dents

Precis, man kan ju lägga till ändelsen -ist för att beskriva någon som gör någonting. Men det finns en dubbel mening va? För vad kan dentist betyda mer?

Tandläkare.

Jamen visst! Så kan det ju vara.

Så han får betalt för att göra bucklor på bilen?

Ja.. eller också är det en pun with words, bara att man leker med ord. Men dom säger ju, en reckless type, what does he do for a living?

Och sen är han en dentist

Do you think it’s important to understand and make jokes in English?

Ja, varför inte?

Kan ju vara ganska viktigt

S2 together För man lär sig språket bättre / För att man ska lära sig

Man leker ju såhär med orden eller nåt sånt

T Ja det är ju väldigt mycket lek med ord speciellt i dom här skämten

Man lär sig ju ord som kan betyda olika saker, och då lär man ju sig språket på ett annat sätt

Ord kan ju uttalas lika och skrivas olika, de kan skrivas lika men betyda väldigt olika saker. Är det en typ av skämt som vi har på svenska också? Kan ni ge något exempel?
S2 Vad finns mellan Fittja och Trosa?
(S1 Hahaha hihi skrattar gott)
T Okej... två platser, det vet jag inte..
S2 Handen
T SS skrattar gott tillsammans och ler. God stämning
T Den har jag faktiskt inte hört
_____________________________________________

Can you make jokes, or be funny and make people laugh in English?
S2 Ja, jag antar det
S1 Guess so
T You think so?
S1 Maybe not in puns but some other way
T Ok
_____________________________________________

Do you think you can learn about making jokes in school?
S1 Absolutely
_____________________________________________

Do you enjoy when a teacher makes jokes in class?
S1 (nods)
S2 Det beror på vem som drar dom
T Do you have teachers that make jokes in class?
S2 Ibland
S1 Bengan!
T Vilken typ av skämt brukar han använda?
S1 Inte direkt ordvitsar men han driver ju med oss
T Ok är han rolig?
S1 Ja han driver med sig själv också
T Mmm jag tror man måste kunna dra med sig själv om man ska vara rolig.

T Nåt mer?

T Var det här roliga skämt?

S1 Nej!

T Varför var dom inte roliga?

S1 Jag tycker dom är ganska lame

T Om du hade förstått all den här dubbeltydigheten..

S1 Då hade dom ju varit roliga, men nu skulle vi ju försöka lista ut vad det betyder då blev det inte lika liksom.. det förlorade det roliga liksom.

T Ok.

T Men om vi tittar på en igen.. ska vi ta butchern..

T Den tyckte jag var väldigt rolig. Men jag förstod ju behind, dels att vi kommer efter därför att det sitter barn i vägen, men dels därför att jag vet att behind också kan vara rumpa. Så jag hörde dubbeltydigheten. Så jag tyckte den var rolig. När ni hade fått den förklarat, blev den rolig då?

SS Nej