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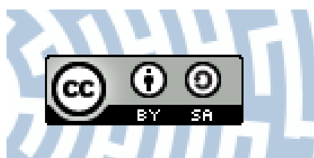

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Agnieszka Solska

Puns as tools for teaching English grammar in a university context

Abstract: This paper addresses the issue of teaching grammar to students who are learning English at the tertiary level, especially those who have taken up English as a university subject. It makes a case for incorporating yet another tool in the extensive toolkit already available to their teachers: puns, an ambiguity-based word-play whose effect springs from correlating two distinct meanings via one linguistic form. The paper outlines arguments for the pedagogical value of using puns in the classroom and presents examples of specific activities that can be employed in the classroom to raise L2 learners awareness of a whole range of grammar-related issues.

Keywords: Explicit and implicit grammar teaching, puns, ambiguity, wordplay, language play, consciousness raising activities

1. Introduction

In modern language teaching, grammatical competence is recognised as vital to mastering a second or foreign language, though it is a matter of debate what approaches teachers should take to instill it in their students and what kind of materials they should use. The issue at the heart of the debate, whether to "teach grammar, or […] simply create the conditions by which learners learn naturally" (Ellis 2006: 83), is of crucial importance to language teachers, except those for whom the choice of the methods and the means is dictated by the specific language-related subjects they teach. Among the subjects followed by university students of modern languages such as English, there are some whose objectives are best attained if grammar is taught implicitly through meaningful

communicative language, and there are some whose main focus is on the grammatical system on which the language is based and which call for teaching grammar in as explicit a way as possible.

The purpose of this paper is to recommend a teaching tool that the teachers of both kinds of students may find useful: the pun, a figure of speech which involves correlating two meanings via one linguistic form. As a type of wordplay which owes its effect to lexical ambiguity, it is usually seen as best suited for teaching vocabulary and for providing what might be called comic relief. I hope to show that some puns, namely, those which exploit the morphosyntactic features of the English language, can be employed in the classroom to bring the students' attention to diverse aspects of grammar, including the lexical multicategoriality of English words, the constituent structure of the English sentence, inflectional and derivational morphology, as well as a range of specific constructions.

The paper is organised in the following way. First, Section 2 presents the peculiarities of the context in which English grammar instruction takes place at the tertiary level. Section 3 reports on the pun-related research, especially in ELT studies. Sections 4 discusses the structure-based properties of punning utterances which could be exploited in grammar instruction. Section 5 is concerned with implications morphosyntactic features of puns have for ELT: it specifies the areas of grammar in which pun-based material can be particularly useful and stresses such merits of puns as their ubiquity and authenticity as well as their focus on the inner workings of languages and their ability to lower the learners' affective state. Finally, Appendix 1 contains reflective questions that can help grammar teachers consider their own classroom practice, and Appendix 2 provides a handful of specific pun-based tasks that could be employed in the classroom.

2. Grammar instruction in a university context

At the tertiary level of the educational systems in many countries, for instance in Poland, learners of English fall roughly into three categories. The first one consists of (mostly young) adults, some more, some less proficient in English, whose study programmes include a general EFL course with usually a minimal number of contact hours per week. For these students, learning grammar is merely a means to an end, which is improving their communicative competence. The second category

consists of again mixed-ability students whose study programmes offer an ESP course designed to help them use English in their chosen professions. Though these students are unlikely to consider time spent on learning grammar as time wasted (Nassaji and Fotos 2011), they probably have even less interest in grammar-centered instruction. For them too, communication is the goal and grammar a tool to achieve that goal.

The students taking courses supplied by English language departments, who make up the third category of learners, differ considerably from the other two groups in terms of their competence, goals, and needs. Their level of proficiency in English is not only more uniform but on average much higher than in the other two groups. Though they too do not perceive achieving grammatical competence as their ultimate goal, they wish to become not only effective communicators in English but also experts *in* the language. While it is impossible to predict what kind of careers they will pursue when they graduate, the assumption motivating the range of subjects which are offered to them is that their future work will capitalise in one way or another on their knowledge of English. As the backbone of language, in one form or another, grammar is present in all of these subjects, taught either implicitly or explicitly.

Grammar teaching looms big in the intensive course in Practical English, which all of these students follow. It comprises many subjects, among them one unequivocally called Practical Grammar, which spreads out over four or six semesters and which has a two-fold objective, both practical and theoretical. On the one hand, it is supposed to help students become proficient users of English grammatical structures; on the other hand, it is supposed to equip them with well-ordered general knowledge of the English grammatical system and well-grounded specific knowledge of particular English grammatical structures. Incorporated in their programmes of studies are also linguistic subjects such as Introduction to linguistics, Descriptive grammar, Contrastive grammar, and even Historical grammar. These are not part of their Practical English course but give them a solid basis in basic grammar-related concepts and equip them with the meta-language in which these can be discussed. In addition, students pursue various content subjects, such as literature and culture, and depending on the study programme they have chosen, a number of courses designed to help them acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to become teachers, translators, or interpreters.

In one way or another, grammar teaching cuts across all of these subjects. It obviously has pride of place in Practical Grammar, but it lurks even in literature and culture classes. After all, the mastery of the English grammatical system is crucial to understanding literary

texts, and success in practically all content subjects where English is the language of instruction depends on the students' ability to apply the structures they have learned in speech and writing.

Due to the time constraints and entrenched habits, teachers of Practical Grammar classes are not very likely to apply inductive methods or to expose students to authentic texts. Some might incorporate elements of the Grammar Consciousness-Raising approach, advocated by Rod Ellis (2002, 2005), but in general, they tend to favour the deductive approach and often rely on a modified version of the age-old Presentation-Practice-Production (PPP) model. The modification in question involves devoting much time and attention to the first two Ps and hardly any to the last one, which is relegated to other practical English as well as content subjects. The teachers of those other subjects are more likely to choose methods and materials (e.g., coursebooks, authentic texts, language games) which integrate grammar points into developing various skills a student has to master. Of the vast array of available materials at their disposal, teachers of Practical Grammar typically choose books of exercises.

3. Pun-related research

What I propose is adding puns as an instrument that could be of use in teaching grammar both in the subjects dedicated to this area of EFL/ESL and in other subjects. To the best of my knowledge, this idea has not yet been explored. Indeed in ELT studies, puns remain under-researched, usually meriting only passing mention in the works of scholars interested in language play and its effects on second language learning (Kral 1994; Woolard 1996; Davis 1997; Lantolf 1997; Lopez-Corria 1999; Cook 2000; Tarone 2000; Tocalli-Beller and Swain 2007).

So far puns have been extensively discussed by literature scholars (Redfern 1984; Culler 1988) and humor researchers (Raskin 1985; Attardo 1994; Yus 2003; Dynel 2010). Linguists and psycholinguists have pondered the way puns are processed (Yus 2003; Giora 2003; Solska 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2017a), and analysed their role in specific communicative settings, from advertising slogans (Tanaka 1992, 1994; Goddard 1998; van Mulken et al. 2005) and city promotional slogans (Solska and Rojczyk 2015) to conversational witticisms (Norrick 1984) and newspaper headlines (Goddard 1998; Dor 2003; Chovanec 2005). Those SLA researchers who have spared their attention for puns have

acknowledged their potential as instruments for instruction or offered proposals for how to exploit them for ELT purposes. Thus, Monnot and Kite (1974) demonstrated how pun-based advertising slogans can be used to clarify and teach vocabulary. Lucas (2005) argued that incorporating puns in language lessons can help enhance the general awareness of the language and language comprehension. Lems (2011) presented lesson plans incorporating puns in order to teach spelling, pronunciation, and meanings of English words in a light hearted way.

The view of the pedagogical value of puns that emerges from these proposals is that they are useful for the motivational purposes (because of their connection with humor) and appropriate for teaching vocabulary (due to relying on lexical ambiguity). While these merits of puns are most obvious, their educational potential seems much greater and, as I argued in Solska (2017b), embraces many more aspects of language, including not only lexis, orthography, and pronunciation, but also morphology and syntax, appropriacy and style, text types, as well as discourse and pragmatic competence. Here I would like to focus on grammar alone.

4. Puns: utterances that straddle the lexis-grammar divide

4.1 The lexis-grammar interface in puns

Puns may seem an odd tool to propose for helping students come to grips with grammar-related issues. Among the notions invoked by dictionary definitions of these figures of speech, such as the one below, which captures features of prototypical puns, we find references to meaning, sound, and humour, yet no mention is made of anything that could be construed as structure-related.

> The use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words. (*The Oxford English Dictionary*)

Yet, if we consider the three properties (discussed in Solska 2017a) which set puns off from non-punning utterances, we can see that only one of them is tied up with meaning alone, while the remaining two place

puns firmly at the intersection of lexis and grammar. The properties in question are that:

1. Puns contain a linguistic form (the connector) whose phonetic shape functions as a pivot that allows it to bring together two (or more) meanings.
2. The context against which the connector is processed contains at least two disjunctive elements, which induce the interpreter to derive more than one meaning of the connector.
3. The two meanings the interpreter is induced to derive are clearly distinct from each other.

Only the third feature is purely meaning-related and responsible for the oscillating effect observed in many puns: the interpreter ending up swinging back and forth between two interpretations, unable to entirely let go of either. A quick glance at the meanings conveyed by the connectors italicised in Examples (1)–(5) seems to confirm the view that puns belong in the domain of lexis, exploiting as they do lexical ambiguity couched in homonymy, polysemy, perfect as well as imperfect homophony, and homography.

(1) HOMONYMY: Being in politics is just like playing golf: you are trapped in one bad *lie* after another. ['untruth'or 'position of a ball']

(2) POLYSEMY: We must, indeed, all *hang* together or, most assuredly, we shall all *hang* separately. (Benjamin Franklin) ['be united,' 'be punished']

(3) PERFECT HOMOPHONY: Literacy Hour gives pupils the *right* to *write*.

(4) IMPERFECT HOMOPHONY: May I have the next *glance* please? (Wife to husband staring at another woman at a party) [*glance* evoking *dance*]

(5) HOMOGRAPHY: You can tune a guitar, but you can't tuna fish. Unless of course, you play *bass*. (Douglas Adams)

The most obvious structure-based characteristic of punning utterances is the fact that in the punning utterance, the connector may surface only once (in the so-called vertical puns), simultaneously yielding more than one meaning, or more than once (in horizontal puns), on each occasion bearing a different sense. More importantly, however, the potential of the punning connectors to bring together distinct meanings is not limited to the types of ambiguity listed above and, as indicated by Examples (6)–(10), includes categorial, sub-categorial, and syntactic ambiguity, as well as sub- and supra-lexical ambiguity, phe-

nomena made possible by the morphosyntactic features of the English language.

(6) CATEGORIAL AMBIGUITY: Let us give you some *sound* advice. (advertisment at a hearing aid centre) [adjective 'reliable' or noun 'auditory effect']
(7) SUB-CATEGORIAL AMBIGUITY: 'What did a Buddhist say when ordering a hotdog?'
'*Make me one with everything.*'
(a) *make* as a ditransitive verb: 'Sell me a hotdog with all available condiments'
(b) *make* as a complex transitive verb: 'Cause me to achieve unity with the universe'
(8) SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY: After he ate the duck the fox *got a little down in the mouth*.
(a) 'became depressed'
(a) 'ended up with duck feathers in the mouth'
(9) SUB-LEXICAL AMBIGUITY: *Mount Ever-Rest* (name of a funeral home)[evoking *Everest*]
(10) SUPRA-LEXICAL AMBIGUITY: Why did the cookie cry? Because its mother was *a wafer* too long. ['a wafer' or 'away for']

What induces the interpreter to derive more than one meaning of the connector is the context against which the connector is processed. Containing at least two disjunctive elements, each raising the salience of a different meaning of the connector, it prevents the hearer from homing in on just one meaning and one syntactic function/category of the connector. The disjunctors are often extra-linguistic or purely conceptual. For instance, the pun lurking in the promotional slogan for the Canadian city of Thunder Bay in (11) is only obvious to those who know that the city is located on the banks of Lake Superior, and the two meanings of *lie* in (1) are made salient by the mention of such spheres of life as politics and golf. In some puns, however disjunctive elements are to a large extent structure-based, and it is puns like these that are of interest to us. For instance, when presented in writing, the homophonic pun in (12a) leaves no doubt as to the lexical category of each of its two connectors. However, when it is presented orally, as in (12b), it is the structural frame they are a part of, indicated in (12c), that determines which of them is the noun *right* and which the verb *write*.

(11) *Superior* By Nature.
(12) (a) Literacy Hour gives pupils the *right* to *write*.

(b) Literacy Hour gives pupils the /raɪt/ to /raɪt/.
(c) Literacy Hour gives pupils the N to V.

Let us thus examine the structure-based properties of punning utterances which could be exploited in grammar instruction.

4.2 Puns and structure-induced lexical multicategorialities

In many puns, the homophonous and/or homonymous words which function as connectors represent more than one part of speech. We have already seen this in (6). In (13a), the key words *vote(s)* and *count(s)* function as both nouns and verbs. In the pun-based riddle in (14a), the word *fast* unexpectedly switches not only from one meaning to another but also from one grammatical category (adjective) to another (verb). What highlights the ambiguity of the key word is the context in which the connector is placed. Both parts of the chiastic pun in (13a) have the same structure, indicated in (13b), in which on its first appearance the connector has to be a noun, and on its second one a verb. In the riddle in (14a), the mention of horses, animals valued for their speed, makes the adjectival interpretation of *fast* more accessible. However, the question part supports both the adjectival and the verbal interpretation of its last constituent, as indicated in (14b), and this is what turns the riddle into a pun.

(13) (a) In capitalism it is your *votes* that *count*. In feudalism it is your *count* that *votes*.
(b) It is your N that V.
(14) (a) How do you make a horse *fast*? Don't feed him for a while. (Deneire 1995: 290)
(b) make NP X [X: either an AP or a VP]

4.3 Puns and the morphosyntactic structure of the connector

Though the connectors are prototypically words, they can be larger or smaller than a word. In (15), the connector is a phrase; in (16), the first fragment of (5), the first connector is a string of words; in the punning blend in (17), the connector is a word fragment; and in (18), on its second appearance, it is a morpheme. Connectors like these have an internal supra- or sub-lexical structure, which makes them amenable to a structural analysis at the level of a sentence, a phrase, or a word.

(15) How do you organise a party in space? You *plan it*. (*plan it* evoking *planet*)
(16) You can *tune a* guitar, but you can't *tuna* fish. (Douglas Adams)
(17) Ow*lcatraz* (name of a bird sanctuary)
(18) Some are *wise*, some are other*wise*.

4.4 Puns and structural ambiguity

Some puns rely on structural ambiguity. In (8), repeated below as (19), the phrasal connector *got a little down in the mouth* is both lexically and syntactically ambiguous. As indicated by bracketed structures (19b) and (19c), and by the tree diagrams in Figure 1, it can be parsed as a verb followed by a complex adjective phrase or as a verb followed by a noun phrase and a prepositional phrase. The former structure yields the meaning that the fox got depressed, and the latter, that it ended up with duck feathers in its mouth.

(19) After he ate the duck the fox *got a little down in the mouth*.
(a) $[\text{got}]_{\text{V-INTENSIVE}}$ $[\text{a little [down in the mouth]]}_{\text{AP}}$
(b) $[\text{got}]_{\text{V-TRANSITIVE}}$ $[\text{a little down}]_{\text{NP}}$ $[\text{in the mouth}]_{\text{PP}}$

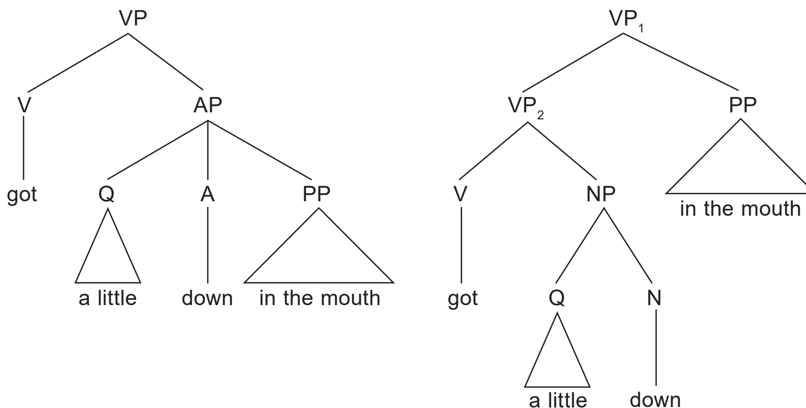


Figure 1. The two underlying structures of *got a little down in the mouth*

4.5 Puns and sub-lexemic ambiguity

In some puns, the ambiguity involves sub-lexemic elements, such as word fragments and individual morphemes, including lexical roots as well as inflectional and derivational affixes. This can be observed in

(20), one of the many versions of an anecdote whose key fragment is a string of four connectors pronounced /mɔ:nɪŋ/, /s nz/, /reɪz/, and / mi:t/. Each of them links two concepts, and together they make up two different complex ideas, indicated as (20a) and (20b), each connected with a different grammatical structure.

(20) Three brothers inherited pieces of land from their father and decided to combine them into one ranch. They asked their mother what to call it and she suggested that the appropriate name would be "Focus". Why? Because
(a) focus is where the[morning sun's rays]$_{NP}$ [meet]$_{VP}$
(b) the ranch would be the place where the[mourning sons]$_{NP}$ [[raise]$_{V}$ [meat]$_{NP}$]$_{VP}$

On the (a)-reading, the *-ing* syllable is merely a fragment of the monomorphemic lexeme *morning*, the *-s* ending on *sun* marks the genitive case, and on *rays*, the plural form of the noun. On the (b)-reading, the *-ing* in the first connector is an inflectional ending marking the present participle of the verb *to mourn*, the *-s* ending on *sons* indicates the plural number and, despite having the same phonetic realisation as the inflectional ending of *rays*, /z/, the final segment of *raise* has no independent meaning or function.

4.6 Puns and supra-lexemic ambiguity

Often more than one type of ambiguity is at play, which is part of the reason why puns are so extremely diverse both conceptually and structurally and, consequently, difficult to classify.[1] In (19) above, the two parses and corresponding meanings are made possible by the lexical multicategoriality of the word *down*, which can be understood both as an adjective ('dejected') and as a noun ('fine plumage'). Both sub- and supra-lexemic ambiguity, indicated in Figure 2, is exploited in (21). In its overt form, the answer to the riddle is made up of two clauses: the superordinate clause with *eat* as the main verb contains a noun phrase object whose head noun *sand* is postmodified by a relative clause *which is there*. On its other interpretation, the answer involves only one clause, whose verb *eat* is followed by the object noun phrase *sandwiches there*.

[1] Diverse and to some extent conflicting pun taxonomies have been proposed by Heller (1974), Tanaka (1994), Yus (2003), and Dynel (2010).

(21) Why can a man never starve in the Great Desert? Because he can eat *the sand which* is there. [‘sand which’ or ‘sandwiches’]

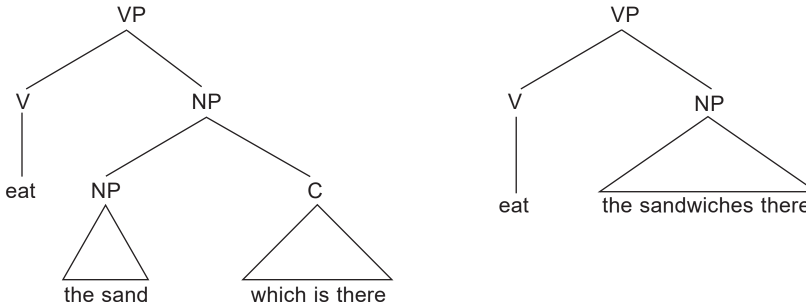


Figure 2. The two underlying structures of the verb phrase in the answer section of the riddle in (21)

4.7 Puns and sub-lexemic relexicalisations

In some puns, lexemes get decomposed and relexicalised, that is, reinterpreted in an unexpected way, always motivated by the morphosyntactic properties of the language. This can be seen in (22), where the mention of dry-erase boards used in classrooms causes the hearer to reanalyse the lexeme *remarkable* (meaning ‘noteworthy’) based on the meanings generated by its sub-lexemic elements as ‘capable of being written on again.’ In this tongue-in-cheek sense, the first syllable of the word gets reinterpreted as the *re-* prefix (carrying the meaning of ‘perform an action again’), the second, as the root morpheme *mark*, and only the final one retains the original meaning of the suffix *-able*.

(22) When asked his opinion about the new dry-erase board, the teacher said: ‘Simply *remarkable*.’

Puns like these are perfectly suited for alerting L2 learners to ways of forming new words, an important part of the grammatical competence of the language user. The specific word formation process underlying the context-specific relexicalisation in (22) is derivation (affixation), in (9) above, compounding, and in the place names in (23)–(25), blending (contamination).

(23) Cashino (name of a casino)
(24) Fishcoteque (name of a fish and chip shop)
(25) Maltitude (name of a brewery)

5. Implications for ELT

The fact that many puns owe their effect to morphosyntactic properties of their connectors and/or the context they are embedded in is a potent argument for incorporating them in grammatical instruction. The next section examines specific areas of grammar puns of this sort are particularly good at illuminating and thus sensitising students to.

5.1 Aspects of grammar to be taught via puns

Categorial ambiguities exploited in puns can be used to draw the learners' attention to the lexical multicategoriality of English words. Puns exhibiting structural ambiguity can serve as a springboard for teaching, systematising, or reviewing the structural composition of the English sentence as well as the functions of phrases and clauses used as sentential constituents. Puns with sub-lexical and supra-lexical connectors can be applied to demonstrate the workings of English inflectional and derivational morphology.

The list of aspects of grammar that can be taught via puns does not end here. Puns can be used to illustrate a whole host of specific structures. The so-called Tom Swifties, that is, puns that turn adverbs into punchlines, such as (26)–(29), can help learners extend their vocabulary while practicing the English adverbs of manner and their use in direct speech.

(26) 'It's freezing,' Tom complained *icily*.
(27) 'If you want me, I shall be in the attic,' Tom announced *loftily*.
(28) 'Your Honour, this is crazy!' exclaimed Tom *judgmentally*.
(29) 'I need a pencil sharpener,' explained Tom *bluntly*.

The numerous pun-based 'I-used-to-be' one-liner jokes, such as (30)–(32), can help learners understand not only when best to apply the modal verb *used to*, but also when it is appropriate to choose the verb *get* as a passive auxiliary. As in *get killed*, *get broken*, or *get damaged*, the situations described in the three examples below are all unpleasant to the agent.

(30) I used to be a carpenter, but then I got *bored*. ['disinterested' or 'drilled through']

(31) I used to be a train driver but I got *sidetracked*. [‘distracted’ or ‘placed on a sidetrack’]
(32) I used to work for Budweiser but I got *canned*. [‘drunk’ or ‘placed in a can’]

In (30)–(32), the verb *get* functions as a resulting copula, that is, an intensive verb. However, in (19) and in (33) below, its function swings between that of a monotransitive and an intensive verb. Puns like these, hinging on the radical sub-categoriality of the verb *get*, can serve as a point of departure for bringing the students’ attention to verb complementation and the distinct English sentence patterns in which this verb can appear.

(33) What makes a shy girl get *‘Intimate’*? (An advertising slogan for Intimate Perfume by Revlon)

Paraphonic puns such as (34)–(39), which are only apparent to those familiar with the similar sounding expressions (idioms, proverbs, set phrases, etc.) they are based on, sometimes employ non-standard grammar. Teachers wishing to familiarise their students with this aspect of English usage can rely on such puns to present this topic against a wider and humorous cultural context.

(34) Thistle Do Nicely. (name of a clothes outlet, evoking *This’ll do nicely*)
(35) Lettuce Eat (name of a sandwich shop, evoking *Let us eat*)
(36) Make It Sew (name of a clothes alterations place, evoking *Make it so*)
(37) Wish You Wash Here (name of a launderette, evoking *Wish you ?was here*)
(38) Sofa So Good (name of a furniture shop, evoking *So far so good*)
(39) Junk And Disorderly (name of a furniture shop, evoking *Drunk and disorderly*)

5.2 A widely available authentic resource

There are obviously other factors that make puns valuable instruments for teaching English, including English grammar. In contrast to the language used in books designed to teach grammar, puns are authentic in that they are fashioned by native speakers to interact mainly with other

native speakers and are often puzzling to non-native audiences. Both SL and FL learners of English are bound to be exposed to a barrage of pun-based advertising slogans, such as (40), and to encounter pun-based names of high street businesses: shops, restaurants, etc, such as the ones in (17), (23)–(25), and (34)–(39) above.

(40) Prices that will even make our competitors *cross with us*. (An advertising slogan for Stena Sealink ferries) [an adjective phrase 'angry with us' or a clause 'cross the seas in our liners']

Sooner or later learners of English will discover that some confusing newspaper headlines, such as (41), incorporate punning wordplay and, if they achieve an appropriately high level of sensitivity, they may spot puns lurking in the titles of books, as in (42), and even research papers, as in (43).

(41) *Czech*mate as Germany crash out (Headline reporting on a soccer match between Germany and the Czech republic, *Telegraph*, June 24, 2004)
(42) *Sound* Foundations (title of a book on learning and teaching pronunciation by Adrian Underhill) ['solid' or 'pertaining to pronunciation']
(43) The *case* for *case* (title of a research paper by Charles Fillmore) ['argument', 'grammatical category of case']

Among the pithy comments students of English are often called upon to discuss in their conversation or composition classes, there are quite a few, for instance (1) and (44), which owe their effect to punning.

(44) If you don't *do* politics, expect politics to *do* you. ['pursue', 'harm']

Finally, works of literature are replete with paronomasia, as punning is dubbed in the realm of rhetoric, some of it grammatically motivated, such as Mercucio's famous line from *Romeo and Juliet* in (45), where the extra meaning of the key word *grave* emerges from the unexpected use of the noun *grave* in the pre-modification of another noun.

(45) Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a *grave* man. (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3 Scene 1)

It would be a mistake not to tap these widely available resources, to deny advanced students of English the opportunity to find out how

widespread and important puns are in the English-speaking world, and to neglect providing them with skills necessary to spot punning word-play and to resolve it.

5.3 Mini-lectures in language-related issues

Unlike other types of figurative language, such as metaphor, to whose existence in mundane language many language users remain oblivious, puns draw attention to themselves. They stand out, and in doing so, they highlight something that normally takes place below the level of conscious thought: the inner workings of the language. In a way, they are like mini-lectures on the nature of language, lectures with a twist because all they do is provide examples for issues that do not get spelled out. That is precisely what makes them such a good tool for teaching grammar both implicitly and explicitly. We might simply focus the students' attention on the punning effect and let them enjoy it, or we might go one step further and help them identify and describe how that effect came about.

5.4 A test of learners' (grammatical) competence

Language learners can reasonably be expected only to learn how to resolve puns, not how to create them. Still, both abilities hinge on an extensive knowledge of language at its many levels and sensitivity to many factors, including those which are structure-related. That is why puns can be treated as a test of the learner's appropriately high command of language. Moreover, success in resolving puns may give students a sense of achievement, of reaching the point in their language development when they can appreciate the language games native speakers engage in. This can work wonders in boosting the learners' motivation to continue studying the language.

5.5 Reducers of learners' affective state

Puns are a form of wordplay, and though not all of them are humorous, many are. There is a growing body of evidence (Tarone 2000; Schmitz 2002; Forman 2011; Wagner and Urios-Aparisi 2011) that the use of humor and language play in the classroom may have positive impact on the learner, the best researched being facilitating the recall

of the second language and reducing Krashen's (1982) affective filter. This quality of puns cannot be overestimated when it comes to teaching grammar, the aspect of language which is typically perceived as boring, arduous, and demotivating (Jean and Simard 2011).

6. Concluding remarks

I hope to have shown that the merits of using puns in grammar instruction can be quite impressive. Appendix 1 below contains examples of classroom activities that can help English language teachers make the most of punning wordplay in their teaching, whether by sensitising language learners to specific aspects of English grammar, or by providing inspiration for how to transform puns into a grammar teaching material, or by creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment for learning grammar.

Reflective questions

Q1: Do you typically teach grammar implicitly and explicitly? Is it because of the nature of the subject(s) you teach? Is it connected with your personal preferences? Is it connected with the needs and expectations of your students as you perceive them?
Q2: In the light of what you have read in this article, do you think the students you teach could benefit from being exposed to punning utterances in the classroom?

Practical tasks

T1: Examine the grammar-based puns used as examples in this article as well as the ones in Appendix 1, and decide which level of competence they are appropriate for. Do you think you could use some of them in your teaching? If so, in which subject(s)?
T2: Prepare a lesson plan incorporating one or more pun-based classroom activities, either suggested in Appendix 1 or ones you have devised yourself.

Appendix 1

Classroom activities

The classroom activities that follow are all essentially consciousness raising tasks, that is, they can help direct learners' attention to grammar features they might not notice on their own. They all make use of authentic language material: puns which were produced by native speakers to interact will other native speakers. Each task consists of two parts, both involving a reflection on some grammatical issue. The first one relies upon the students' implicit knowledge of the language system and is thus suitable for use in any class at and beyond the intermediate level. The second part, ostensibly directed at 'grammar nerds,' is a follow-up task which can be used to help learners develop explicit, declarative knowledge or to allow them to make use of the knowledge they already have.

The initial, 'implicit' part of each task can serve as a stand-alone activity in the warm-up at the beginning of a lesson or a relief between different sections of a lesson, offering a needed change of pace. The 'explicit' follow-up part of the tasks can be integrated into a specific section of a grammar-centered lesson as way of rounding-off or a point of departure for presenting, reviewing, or practicing a chosen aspect of the English grammar.

Activity 1: Can you identify the titles of films or books, or the names of characters from literature that inspired the following names of businesses? Which name does not belong with the others?
1. Wizard of Odds (an antique shop)
2. Lord of the Fries (a fast food chain)
3. Molly's Blooms (a florist)
4. Planet of the Grapes (a wine merchant)
5. Breakfast at Timothy's (a café)
6. Merchant of Tennis (suppliers of sports equipment)

for grammar nerds: Why is the Saxon Genitive used in only one name while all others contain the of-phrase?

Activity 2: What are the two meanings of the words *fast*, *count(s)*, and *vote(s)* in the sentences below?
1. Question: How do you make a horse *fast*? Answer: Don't feed him for a while.[2]
2. In capitalism, it is your *votes* that *count*. In feudalism, it is your *count* that *votes*.

for grammar nerds: Identify the lexical category (part of speech) the three words have on each of their two meanings.

[2] Based on Deneire (1995: 290).

Activity 3: The panda bear on the cover of Lynne Truss's book blocks out one of the two places where a comma could be placed. Create as many versions of the title as you can by inserting or omitting a comma. Identify the meaning associated with each version.

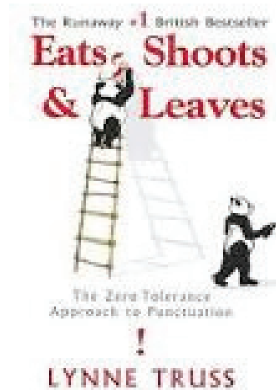


Figure 3. Lynne Truss's book

for grammar nerds: Use brackets to represent the three meanings. On which reading is the title (1) a simple sentence, (2) a compound sentence made up of two clauses, (3) a compound sentence made up of three clauses?

Activity 4: In the following letter from an electric company,[3] the word *delighted*, which normally means 'very happy,' has acquired an extra, context-specific meaning. Can you identify this meaning?

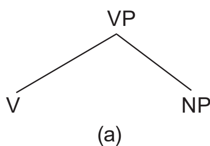
> We would be *delighted* if you sent in your bill. However, if you don't, you will be.

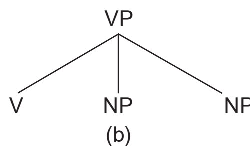
for grammar nerds: Do you know other words formed in the same way as the word *delighted* in its new sense? What is the word formation process by which such words have been coined?

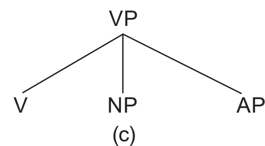
Activity 5: Depending on two letters which are missing in its final word, the statement below can be understood in two ways. Identify them.

> Seven days without a pizza makes one *w--k*.

for grammar nerds: Which tree diagram (a), (b) or (c) best represents each of the two meanings of the sentence above?







[3] Based on Aarons (2012: 107).

KEY

ACTIVITY 1

1. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,* a children's novel by L. Frank Baum, or The *Wizard of Oz,* a musical fantasy film
2. *Lord of the Flies*, a novel by William Golding
3. *Molly Bloom*, a female character in James Joyce's *Ulisses*
4. *Planet of the Apes*, a science fiction film
5. *Breakfast at Tiffany's,* a novel by Truman Capote; a romantic comedy film loosely based on the novel. The odd one out because it leaves out the reference to the establishment (the café).
6. *Merchant of Venice*, a play by William Shakespeare

The Saxon Genitive is typically used when the possessor is human, as is the case with *Molly* and *Timothy*, both of which are people's names. The genitive structure in *Timothy's* is elliptical (or autonomous): the head noun (e.g., *café*), modified by the genitive form *Timothy's*, is omitted.

ACTIVITY 2

SOUND: *adjective* 'valid, good'; *noun* 'meaningless noise';
VOTES: *noun* 'official choice made in an election'; *verb* 'to make an official choice in an election'
COUNT: *verb* 'to matter, deserve consideration'; *noun* 'a nobleman equivalent in rank to an English earl'

ACTIVITY 3

1. Eats Shoots and Leaves, that is, the panda bear consumes young stems as well as leaves of plants.
2. Eats Shoots, and Leaves, that is, the panda consumes young stems of a plant, then goes away.
3. Eats, Shoots, and Leaves, that is, the panda bear consumes food, then fires a gun, then goes away.

(1) {Eats [Shoots and Leaves]}: one simple sentence
(2) [Eats Shoots] [and Leaves]: two conjoined clauses
(3) [Eats] [Shoots] [and Leaves]: three conjoined clauses

ACTIVITY 4

'deprived of light,' that is, 'cut off from electricity supply'

E.g., *defrost, de-ice, deforest* (de-noun formations), and *decapitate, deactivate* or *denationalise* (de-verb formations), all formed by affixation (derivation)

ACTIVITY 5

w**ea**k: tree diagram (c); w**ee**k: tree diagram (a)

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