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# THE RELEVANCE-BASED MODEL OF CONTEXT IN PROCESSING PUNS

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## 1. Introduction

While the essential role context plays in the understanding of expressions and utterances has never been questioned, the way it is perceived has evolved from a static factor established prior to the process of utterance interpretation, indeed a prerequisite for processing information, to a dynamic entity which emerges in this process. The latter view is espoused by relevance theorists, who define context as “the set of premises used in interpreting an utterance” (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95: 15) and treat it as a mental construct undergoing diverse modifications as the comprehender of an utterance processes and interprets incoming verbal information and other communicative signals supplied by the communicator.

The aim of this paper is to consider the usefulness of this model of context for analyzing the derivation of meaning in puns, i.e. utterances in which, instead of its usual function of allowing the comprehender to resolve ambiguities ubiquitous in language and communication, the context plays a different role of leading him to entertain, and often to accept two diverse readings.

The paper will start with a brief characterization of the most striking features of puns (in section 2), followed by the discussion (in section 3) of the limitations of the most widely accepted approach to pun comprehension, namely Attardo’s (1994) connector-disjunctive model. In section 4 the notion of context as it is understood in relevance theory will be examined, and its potential for accounting for the key properties of puns (the oscillating effect and the ‘connecting’ role of the pivotal expression) will be put to the test in sections 5 and 6. The paper will close with a handful of concluding remarks.

## 2. Key features of puns

Punning can be characterized as relying for its effect on correlating distinct meanings in one linguistic form. This unique property of puns is achieved by diverse structural and lexical means, the systematic study of which has yielded equally diverse pun classifications (e.g. Heller 1994; Attardo 1994 and references therein, Tanaka 1994; Yus 2003), and is grounded in the ambiguity of the pun’s pivotal section, variously described as the punning element or the connector. The long list of multiple meanings it engenders includes cases of homonymy, as in (1), polysemy, as in (2), metaphor, as in (3), perfect

homophony, as in (4), imperfect homophony, as in (5), paronymy, as in (6), and homography, as in (7).

- (1) Being in politics is just like playing golf: you are trapped in one bad *lie* after another.
- (2) There was a sign on the lawn at a drug re-hab centre that said “Keep Off The *Grass*.”
- (3) Never invest in funerals, it’s a *dying* industry.
- (4) Everybody *kneads* it. (An advertising slogan for Pillsbury flour) [*kneads/needs*]
- (5) *Mud, Sweat and Gears*. (The name of a bicycle repair shop) [*mud/blood, gears/tears*]
- (6) The Crime of *Pun-ishment*. (Title of an essay on puns)
- (7) Poland *Polishes* Off U.S. Volleyball Team. (*The Daily Herald* June 17, 2011)

Combinations of these are not uncommon, as could be seen in (8), which combines homophony with metaphor, as are cases where lexical ambiguity is mixed with structural ambiguity, such as (9):

- (8) When it pours it *reigns*. (Advertising slogan for Michelin tyres)
- (9) After he ate the duck, the alligator *got a little down* in the mouth.

Deriving and juxtaposing the pun’s two meanings is effected in a rather straightforward way in the so-called horizontal, or syntagmatic puns, such as (10), in which the connector appears more than once, on each occasion in a different syntactic role and carrying a different sense. Since the repeated occurrence of the punning element openly points to the punning intention of the communicator, puns of this sort are sometimes described as explicit.

- (10) Some men are *wise* and some are *otherwise*.

A more ingenious way of deriving and juxtaposing meanings takes place in vertical, or paradigmatic puns, such as (1) – (9) above, in which a single ostensive signal is supposed to communicate more than one meaning. Puns of this sort are sometimes called implicit as there is no guarantee that the interpreter will in fact become aware of the intended duality of meaning. If he does, the potential ambiguities of the pun’s pivotal part will remain unresolved and the comprehender will end up swinging back and forth between two interpretations.

This oscillating effect is the key feature of puns regardless of whether the two interpretations involved are equally valid (as is the case with the so-called double retention puns) or not (as is the case with the so-called single retention puns). For instance, the comprehender of (1) is forced to oscillate between two perfectly legitimate senses of the noun *lie*, i.e. ‘deliberate untruth’ and ‘a position of a golf ball.’ In (3), the only viable meaning of the word *dying* is metaphorical, but the special appeal of the utterance lies in the fact that the word is used to describe an industry which specializes in burying or cremating people who are dead in the literal sense of the word. Thus even in

single retention puns the extraneous meaning does not completely evaporate but lingers in the interpreter's mind as the pun-creating counterpoise to the valid meaning.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. The limitations of the conjuctor-disjunctor model of pun comprehension

Researchers studying puns (Redfern 1982, 1984, 1996; Norrick 1984; Zwicky and Zwicky 1986; Sobkowiak 1991; Tanaka 1992, 1994; Attardo 1994; Giora 1997, 2003; Yus, 2003; van Mulken, et al. 2005; Partington 2009) have always emphasized the role of context in leading the addressee to derive and contrast the pun's two meanings. Indeed, puns have been described as "the product(s) of a context deliberately constructed to enforce an ambiguity" (Attridge 1988: 141). An interesting attempt to systematize this role can be found in Attardo (1994), who outlined what could be called a connector-disjunctor model of humorous texts and who applied it to humorous puns. Identifying the disjunction of meaning and the conjunction of form as the two main properties of ambiguity-based humorous texts including puns, Attardo argued (1994: 134) that "[t]he presence of humorous ambiguity is brought about and resolved (i.e. revealed, or made explicit) by two functional elements in the text": the conjunction of form is made possible thanks to the connector, i.e. "the ambiguous element of the utterance which makes the presence of two senses possible" (1994: 134), while the disjunction of meaning is achieved thanks to the disjunctor, i.e. the element which forces the passage from one interpretation to another. The presence of these two, according to Attardo, constitutes the necessary and the sufficient conditions for the punning effect to arise.

Attardo's main focus was on puns used as humorous texts, such as (11), so he did not try to extend his observations to all kinds of puns, not all of which are humorous. It can be argued, however, that his conjuctor-disjunctor model can be applied to other texts that exploit ambiguity regardless of whether they are humorous or not, as long as they depend for their effect on correlating two diverse meanings in one linguistic form. Indeed, Bucaria (2004) put the model to use in her discussion of punning newspaper headlines, such as (12):

- (11) Why did the cookie cry? Because her mother has been away for so long. [a wafer]  
(Attardo 1994: 128, after Pepicello and Green 1983: 59)
- (12) DRUNK GETS NINE MONTHS IN VIOLIN CASE (Bucaria 2004: 291)

Both in Attardo's discussion of humorous puns and in Bucaria's analysis of ambiguous headlines (both punning and not) context is understood in a mechanistic way mainly as discourse that surrounds a language unit, though sporadically they also mention non-linguistic factors which enforce the ambiguity of the pun's connector, such as the situation in which the speech event is taking place. For instance, discussing the pun in (13) Attardo feels it necessary to specify the circumstances in which it appeared and Bucaria (2004: 282) bemoans the fact that the "analysis of headlines collected on web

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<sup>1</sup> For the discussion of the continued availability of the extraneous meaning in single retention puns see Solska (forthcoming a).

sites is complicated by the absence of the context in which the headlines originally appeared, which could have provided useful information for their semantic disambiguation.”

- (13) Context: on a birthday card there is a picture of a beautiful woman holding a birthday cake. The legend reads:  
 “You can’t have your cake and *Edith* [eat it] too.” (Attardo 1994: 149)

Interestingly, neither Attardo nor Bucaria mentions the knowledge possessed by the comprehender as a factor which might be crucial in allowing him to establish the second, less obvious, interpretation of the connector despite the fact that punning jokes and newspaper headlines whose comprehension depends on the addressee’s encyclopedic knowledge are not unusual. For instance, the joke in (14) can only be understood by those who know that American one cent coins bear the image of Abraham Lincoln’s profile and full appreciation of the punning headline in (15) depends on the addressee’s familiarity with the title of Shakespeare’s comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*. In puns like these, the connector’s double meaning can only be recognised by those who have access to information that can be obtained neither from the speech situation nor from whatever linguistic material precedes or follows the connector.

- (14) Which president was least guilty? Lincoln. He is *in a cent*. [*in a cent/innocent*]  
 (15) Much Ado About *Muffin* at BA. (Headline of an article in *The Sun* about a British Airways flight attendant suspended for stealing a muffin that a passenger left uneaten on his tray)

Attardo and Bucaria never describe extra-linguistic factors as possible disjunctors, which makes the connector-disjunctors vision of context in pun comprehension somewhat incomplete. If we look further afield, we can easily notice that in many communicative settings extra-linguistic disjunctors, making a reader or hearer aware of another, less salient, sense of a key expression, are quite common. For instance, the punning character of (5) above is apparent only to those who have heard of Winston Churchill’s famous “Blood, sweat and tears” speech or at least to those who have heard of the American music group by the same name. The message in (16) would be incomprehensible and its similarity to the common expression “Come what may” would pass unnoticed if it did not appear in a sign over a restaurant. In much the same way, in (17), the less salient meaning of the word *cover*, i.e. ‘*cover-as-wrap*,’ is brought to the reader’s attention by a picture showing various objects (among them a chair, a lobster, a bottle and a watering can) wrapped in newspaper sheets.

- (16) *Cumquat May*. (Name of a vegetarian restaurant)  
 (17) And you thought we only *covered* business. (Advertisement for *Financial Times Weekend*)

However, the limited view of context is not the most serious problem of the connector-disjunctors model of understanding puns. What seems puzzling is that it acknowledges and identifies by name only two key ingredients underlying the punning effect and shows no appreciation for the fact that if *two* meanings are correlated in the pun’s

connector, *each* of them must be linked to some element in the pun or outside it. This indicates that apart from the connector and the element causing passage from one meaning to another, there has to be another element, namely one that has caused the first meaning to emerge. In other words, the problem with the conjunctive-disjunctive model is that it focuses on establishing the pun's second, less accessible meaning, and takes the first, more accessible meaning, for granted.

Both Attardo and Bucaria seem to assume that the more accessible meaning is simply conveyed by the connector. Among the different possible connector-disjunctive configurations to be found in punning jokes and punning headlines, they mention a 'non-distinct connector-disjunctive configuration,' in which the connector and the disjunctive coincide in one portion of the text. Bucaria (2004: 299) points to the headline in (12) as an example of an utterance exhibiting such a configuration. Undoubtedly, in utterance (12), the switch from one meaning of the word *case* to another cannot take place until the world is actually encountered. However, the 'container' meaning of this word is clearly motivated by presence of the concept VIOLIN, while the other meaning of *case*, i.e. 'case-as-lawsuit,' by whatever information can be gleaned from the phrase 'gets nine months.' Attardo quotes utterance (13) as an example of a pun in which the connector doubles up as the conjunctive. However, there can be no doubt that one of the meanings to be juxtaposed here is explicitly conveyed by the utterance itself, while the other one has to be retrieved from memory and will only be supplied by those who are familiar with the proverb "You can't have your cake and eat it." Thanks to its phonetic similarity to the predicate *eat it*, the pivotal word *Edith* does act as a switch between meanings since it allows the hearer to identify *eat it* as the 'target' expression with which the explicitly conveyed concept is to be contrasted, but the identification can only be made if the comprehender has heard of the pertinent proverb.

The conclusion one might draw from such examples is that when describing the role of the contextual factors triggering the punning effect it would make more sense to identify not two but three essential elements in puns: the connector and two pun-creating, or 'disjunctive,' elements, which can but do not have to be linguistic in nature and which are like two forces pulling the comprehender in two opposite directions.

Another drawback of the model is that while it emphasizes the 'connecting role' of the pun's ambiguity carrying fragment, it offers no tools for specifying which aspects of its meaning are in fact responsible for its 'connecting' role. Attardo invokes sound symbolism and the human tendency to believe that identically (or similar) sounding expressions are supposed to carry identical (or similar) meanings. The problem is that in puns identical (or similar) sounding expressions, instead of conveying identical (or similar) meanings, somehow end up conveying meanings that are anything but similar.

In what follows I hope to demonstrate that the relevance-theoretic model of context provides better tools for explaining the source of the oscillating effect in puns and for how it is possible for one fragment of a punning utterance to serve as a pivot linking diverse meanings.

#### 4. Sperber and Wilson's dynamic view of context

Sperber and Wilson, the founders of Relevance Theory, forcefully argue (1986/1995: 132-142) for what might be called a cognitive view of context. In their inferential model of human communication, set within a broader cognitive framework, context is understood as the information available for processing an utterance, information that can be gleaned from diverse sources including but not limited to the discourse preceding the linguistic material being processed or the physical setting in which communication is taking place. The extra- and intra-linguistic sources of contextual information would also include "expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker" (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995:15-16). Yet another source of contextual information is the assumptions stored under the encyclopedic entries of the concepts made accessible to the comprehender by the words he will decode while processing the utterance. This sort of information is always used in fleshing out utterance meaning and is of particular importance in the case of puns, many of which tend to be autonomous, self-contained texts. Its vital role underlying the 'connecting' function of the connector will be discussed in section 6.

In the process of working out utterance meaning the comprehender starts off from what Sperber and Wilson call the initial context, which is available to the comprehender before an utterance is produced and which consists of the assumptions remaining in the comprehender's memory from whatever deductive process has just taken place. In other words, it is made up of propositions that are linked to whatever provided cognitive effects prior to the hearing of this utterance. As soon as the first lexical item of a new utterance is produced, the comprehender's first step is to select from the initial context the propositions that he finds relevant to the concept communicated by the item just uttered, i.e. whatever propositions will allow him to modify some element(s) in his current cognitive environment. As the utterance unfolds, newly communicated assumptions, i.e. background assumptions which the utterance has made accessible, will move to the foreground, while others will drop into the background.

The ever-changing context is thus whatever set of assumptions is active at a given time. The assumptions it consists of, often referred to as background or contextual assumptions, are thus assumptions manifest to the hearer, i.e. assumptions which the hearer is able to mentally represent to himself, which may but do not have to represent the actual state of the world and which constitute input to the inferential, i.e. deductive processes of utterance interpretation.

What governs the choice of the contextual subset of assumptions at any given moment is relevance, the key notion in the theory, understood as a trade-off between the cognitive gain achieved by processing the incoming input and the processing effort needed to achieve that gain. In keeping with the communicative principle of relevance,<sup>2</sup> an assumption is judged as relevant if it brings in cognitive effects which the hearer perceives as adequate in the view of the effort he has expended to derive them.

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<sup>2</sup> "Every act of ostensive communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance" (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 260).

## 5. The comprehender's cognitive environment as the ambiguity enforcing factor in puns

To see how this dynamic model of context outlined above might account for the way meanings in puns are derived, interpreted and processed, let us consider utterance (1),<sup>3</sup> consisting of a lead-up clause 'Being in politics is just like playing golf' followed by the punning clause 'you are trapped in one bad *lie* after another.' By the time the comprehender encounters the subject pronoun *you* in its second clause, he will have at his disposal an initial context consisting of assumptions which have been made available by the first utterance and which are connected with whatever he believes is involved in 'being in politics' and whatever he knows about 'playing golf.' These assumptions may include those listed in (18):

- (18) a. Being in politics involves ...  
    running for office,  
    trying to get support of the voters,  
    delivering speeches,  
    making promises,  
    winning or losing elections.  
    b. Playing golf involves ...  
    using a club to hit a small ball into holes in the ground,  
    being a member of a golf club,  
    spending time outdoors,  
    going to the golf links,  
    winning or losing games.

In additions to these, the initial context will also include the idea (made available by the concept LIKE) that the producer of (1) perceives a similarity between the two spheres of life mentioned in the lead-up clause, and the expectation that this similarity will be explained in the utterance that follows. As the second part of the utterance progresses, some of these assumptions will become more prominent, some less, and totally new assumptions will emerge based on whatever information the second clause will reveal, i.e. based on the information explicitly and implicitly conveyed by the utterance. The process of identifying these two kinds of meanings will require decoding the verbal input into a structured set of concepts, i.e. recognizing mentally represented concepts associated with the words and expressions used in the utterance as well as identifying its logical form, resolving any undeterminacies its component concepts exhibit, and finally, establishing whatever meanings the utterance may imply.

Engaged in this process the comprehender will form and test hypotheses against the information making up the initial context described above. Specifically, he will perform the task of identifying the possible referent(s) of the indexical *you*, he will carry out the contextually appropriate modifications of meaning of the metaphorically used verb *trapped* and the vague adjective *bad*, and he will attempt to select or construct the appropriate sense of the noun *lie*. The fact that the initial context includes both the

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<sup>3</sup> A discussion of the explicit and implicit meanings of utterance (1) can be found in Solska (forthcoming b).

concept POLITICS and the concept GOLF, each making available different assumptions, will prevent him from selecting or constructing only one meaning for some of these items. Instead, the initial context will make it manifest to him that *you*, instead of referring to the addressee, is used non-deictically and identifies not one but two sets of people, namely those who ‘are in politics’ and those who ‘play golf.’ It will also make it evident that the noun *lie* encodes not one but two equally prominent and equally relevant concepts:  $LIE_1$ , pertaining to saying intentional untruths and  $LIE_2$ , indicating a position in which something lies.

As predicted by the so-called relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure,<sup>4</sup> the two senses of *lie*, linked to the two concepts the word encodes, will not be derived simultaneously but one by one, with the more accessible meaning emerging first. Since the assumptions making up the comprehender’s cognitive environment by this point will make it manifest that the first sense to emerge, though valid, is not relevant enough, i.e. it does not give him the full range of benefits he can expect (in other words, it is not optimally relevant), the comprehender will be compelled to reapply the procedure and search for another meaning, which together with (or contrasted with) the first meaning will finally satisfy his expectations of relevance. As for the meanings communicated by the vague words *trapped* and *bad*, they will only be established after the key expression *lie* has been interpreted, and since the word will yield two equally valid interpretations, each of these items will be taken to convey two slightly different occasion-specific concepts:  $BAD^*$  and  $TRAPPED^*$ , applicable to  $LIE_1$  on the one hand, and  $BAD^{**}$  and  $TRAPPED^{**}$ , applicable to  $LIE_2$  on the other hand. What the comprehender will end up constructing is an explicature consisting not of one but of two equally valid propositions, given in (19), which means that his new current context will now contain the two assumptions given in (20):

- (19) a.  $YOU_x$  GET\* TRAPPED\* IN ONE BAD\*  $LIE_1$  AFTER ANOTHER (BAD\*  $LIE_1$ ).  
 b.  $YOU_y$  GET\* TRAPPED\*\* IN ONE BAD\*\*  $LIE_2$  AFTER ANOTHER (BAD\*\*  $LIE_2$ ).
- (20) a. The speaker believes that politicians get repeatedly hampered because of the falsehoods they cannot get away with.  
 b. The speaker believes that golf players get repeatedly hampered because of the positions of the golf ball they find it hard to cope with.

The comprehension process is unlikely to stop at this point since most comprehenders will combine the newly constructed assumptions in (20) with other highly accessible assumptions, such as (21), which are grounded in the hearer’s life experience:

- (21) People who get repeatedly hampered may find it hard to succeed.  
 Getting away with a lie can be difficult.  
 People who lie cannot be trusted.  
 Some people are better at lying than others.

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<sup>4</sup> “Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, enrichments, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility. [...] Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned)” (Wilson & Sperber 2004, 613).

Tackling a bad lie of a golf ball requires skill.  
Some golfers are better at tackling bad lies than others.

These assumptions can be used as implicated premises allowing the addressee to derive a whole range of (weakly) implied meanings, such as those listed in (22a) and (22b), which will form yet another context the hearer may use in further processing:

- (22) a. Being repeatedly caught lying can damage a politician's career.  
To achieve success in politics depends on the ability to tell lies.  
Politicians cannot be trusted.
- b. Difficult positions of a golf ball can be a challenge to the golfer.  
Being good at golf depends on learning how to tackle bad lies.  
Not everyone can be good at golf.

At this point some comprehenders might stop but some might go even further and start deriving totally emergent meanings, such as the ones in (23), which are neither directly stated by utterance (1) nor directly inferable from it, meanings which the speaker may but does not have to endorse yet which are perfectly possible in the light of the assumptions that have by this stage been derived, and which can be used in the processing of whatever utterances the comprehender may encounter next.

- (23) A successful politician must be good at lying.  
Politicians enjoy lying.  
For politicians lying is a game.  
Politics is a game.

As can be seen, any assumption that is in some way salient can become a contextual assumption and can interact with the ongoing material to yield another assumption that will modify the hearer's cognitive environment by producing a cognitive effect, which is by necessity a contextual effect, since it too can be used in the interpretation process to follow.

Arguably, the analysis presented above cannot be applied to all puns considering the structural diversity they exhibit and the different communicative settings in which they appear. Obviously, a different initial context will be available to a person who has just read the name on the box containing a board game, such as (24), to someone who will spot the sign (25) over a launderette, to someone exposed to the advertising slogan in (4), repeated here as (26), or to someone who will read the title of a book in (27) or a newspaper headline in (28):

- (24) Merchant of *Venus*. (The name of a board game)  
(25) Wish You *Wash* Here. (The name of a launderette)  
(26) Everybody *kneads* it. (An advertising slogan for Pillsbury flour)  
(27) *Barry Trotter* and the Shameless Parody. (A parody of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series)  
(28) Science *Friction*. (A headline of an article about an argument between scientists and the British government on the topic of mad cow disease)

Nonetheless, in these cases too the general mechanism will be the same. The context that will be available to the comprehender from the start will include an expectation that the utterance he has encountered will achieve relevance by conveying information about the nature of whatever it accompanies: in (24), about what might be involved in the game, in (25), about the kind of activity that is conducted on the premises, in (26), about the product being advertised, and finally in (27) and (28), about the subject matter (or context-content) of respectively the book or the article. In these cases too the hearer will process the utterance against the background information made available by the concepts associated with the words and expressions used in the utterance and whatever information it will allow the addressee to retrieve from memory. Unlike in (1), the linguistic material surrounding the connectors in (24) – (28) does not render the utterances ambiguous. Still there is a good reason why they have been chosen instead of other expressions, for instance such as the ones in (29) – (33) below. The phonetic information made available by the concepts they encode together with the information conveyed by the co-text in which they appear allows the comprehender to retrieve from memory the words and expressions (*Venice, wash, needs, Harry Potter and fiction*) which may or may not have direct bearing on ‘what the utterance is about’ but which will trigger contextual effects of their own making the comprehender unable to ignore them.

- (29) ? Merchant of *Mars*.
- (30) ? Wish You *Launder* Here.
- (31) ? Everybody *makes dough* with it.
- (32) ? *Barnabas Trott* and the Shameless Parody.
- (33) ? Science *Dissension*.

As has been seen, though it is the comprehender who constructs the constantly evolving contexts in an attempt to derive an optimally relevant interpretation, he does so on the basis of the speaker’s ostensive behaviour. After all, he cannot help treating all ostensive, i.e. deliberately produced, linguistic signals, whether spoken or written, as evidence that the communicator intends to convey a certain meaning. Thus, even though the communicator cannot present the hearer with the best possible context he can cue that context by providing him with linguistic and non-linguistic stimuli that will make it possible to identify whatever he intends to communicate.

## 6. The comprehender’s cognitive environment and the ‘connecting’ qualities of the connector

Having discussed the ‘disjuncting’ role of the hearer’s cognitive environment, i.e. its role in deriving and retaining the pun’s two meanings, let us move on to identify the roots of the ‘connecting’ role of the pun’s connector, i.e. to establish the linguistic basis for the correlation of two meanings in one form. To do so we need to take a closer look at the conceptual information which is conveyed by the pivotal expression and since puns can be based on different types of ambiguity, we need to establish what makes the pivots’s conceptual content different in each case.

Relevance theorists take the view (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995: 92) that concepts encoded by words and expressions give the comprehender access to three types of information, stored in the three entries of each concept: (i) the information about the phonetic and grammatical properties of the word or expression realizing the concept (which is accessed via the concept's *lexical entry*), (ii) the information about the concept's logical properties amounting to its proper definition (which is accessed via the concept's *logical entry*), and (iii) the encyclopedic knowledge about the extension and/or denotation of the concept (accessed via its *encyclopedic entry*), which also includes folk and specialist assumptions, cultural beliefs and personal experiences.

As I argued elsewhere (Solska forthcoming a), depending on the type of ambiguity exhibited by the connector in a specific pun, at least five different pairings of concepts communicated by a pun's connector can be identified. These pairings are shown in the diagrams below, each of them specifying what kind of ostensive signal can be used as a punning element and which parts of the conceptual content of the two concepts communicated by that element are common to both of them.

The diagrams focus on two major details: the nature of the ostensive signal used and the conceptual information made manifest by that signal. In each case a few words of comment are offered about the kind of contextual cueing which makes a specific outcome possible. In the diagrams, both channels: written and spoken, have been taken into account. Obviously, speech is the primary medium through which language is expressed and the orthographic form of a word is not part of the lexical entry of a concept. However there are utterances whose punning qualities become apparent only in writing, since in many cases it is the graphic shape of the ostensive signal that makes one realize that the utterance is a pun, especially when non-standard spellings are involved, as in (34) and (35):

(34) Bingo Hall Worker *B-10* And Robbed. [*B-10*/beaten]

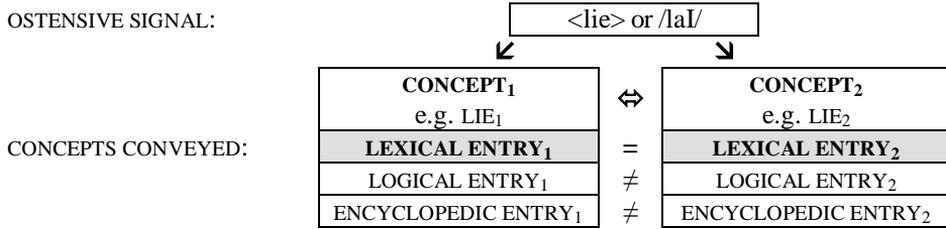
(35) *Skolars* need glasses. (Advertising slogan for Skol beer) (Bielski 1999: 39)

As for the symbols used in the diagrams, a single headed arrow identifies the concept or concepts which are made available by the ostensive signal used. A double-headed arrow represents the comprehender's oscillation between the two concepts. The shaded sections in each diagram and the equation mark (=) placed between the corresponding entries of the two concepts indicate which aspects of the conceptual information are the ones the two concepts have in common. The 'almost equal to' symbol ( $\approx$ ) indicates that the corresponding entries of the two concepts have some but not all aspects of their content in common. Finally, the lack of identity between corresponding concept entries is marked by the inequality symbol ( $\neq$ ).

## 5.1 Puns based on homonymy

As shown in diagram 1, in puns based on homonymy, such as (1), or on polysemy, such as (2), the distinct concepts the addressee will be led to juxtapose share the lexical entry, i.e. the entry specifying the phonetic structure and grammatical properties of the lexical item encoding a concept. However, their logical addresses are different and they provide

access to different sets of encyclopedic data.<sup>5</sup> In the case of such puns the oscillating effect will arise regardless of whether the utterance is produced in speech or in writing.



**Diagram 1: The pairings of concepts conveyed by the connector in homonymy- and polysemy-based puns.**

Whether a homonymy- or polysemy-based pun will be detected or not depends on the trivial factor of the addresser’s familiarity with the particular meanings of the linguistic expressions used. For instance, a person unfamiliar with the slang meaning of *canned*, say, someone who is not a totally proficient speaker of English, may fail to see the pun in (36).

(36) I used to work for Budweiser but I got *canned*.

However, it would seem that punsters tend to provide enough cueing for the comprehenders so that if one of the meanings conveyed by the connector is not known, or unlikely to be accessed, or at least not readily available, the assumptions made available by the linguistic or non-linguistic material surrounding the key word will make it easy to infer the other meaning. For instance, though most people may lack the encyclopedic knowledge of what a Mobius strip is,<sup>6</sup> the presence of the concept MATHEMATICIAN in utterance (37) would allow even a complete layman to guess that the unknown word *Mobius* should be understood as ‘having something to do with mathematics.’ In (38), the less obvious meaning of the key word *drive*, i.e. ‘driveway,’ is brought to the attention of the interpreter by the accompanying photograph, showing a Mazda car parked on a driveway leading to a mansion house.

(37) “Where do mathematicians go on weekends?” “To a Mobius *strip* club!”

(38) The perfect car for a long *drive* – Mazda car. (Tanaka 1992: 77)

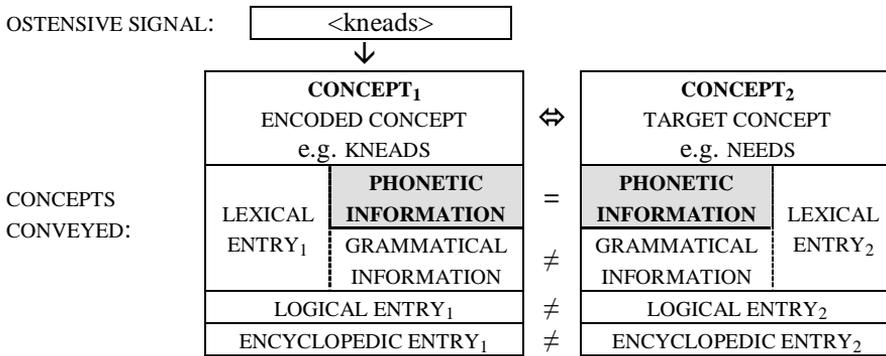
<sup>5</sup> The distinction between the two is drawn based on the etymological relatedness between the senses of a word in the case of polysemy and the lack thereof in the case of homonymy, and is thus of little value in a synchronic study, such as this one.

<sup>6</sup> The term *Mobius strip* refers to a surface which has only one side and only one boundary and has been named after a German mathematician who was the first to describe its mathematical properties.

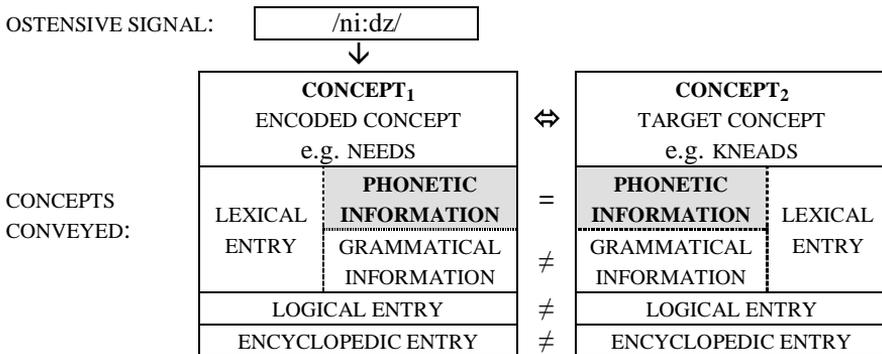


### 5.3 Puns based on perfect homophony

In puns based on perfect homophony the punning element acting as the ostensive signal will yield a punning effect regardless of whether the utterance is presented in speech or in writing. However, which of the two concepts will be accessed first will depend on whether the addressee will first read or hear the pun, which is why diagram 3, showing the conceptual content of such puns, appears in two versions. It may be observed that in puns of this sort the punning element does in fact encode only one concept which, if the pun is to be detected, will have to be contrasted with the concept encoded by another identically or similar sounding yet unexpressed ‘target’ expression, which the hearer first has to identify. For instance, the reader of (4) and (8) above will only see the pun if he identifies the identically sounding word *needs* and *rains* respectively. Similarly, the hearer of (4) and (8) will only see the pun if he identifies the identically sounding word *kneads* and *reigns* respectively. As shown in Diagrams 3a and 3b, in puns based on perfect homonymy the distinct concepts the addressee is supposed to identify share only a fragment of their lexical entries, namely the part specifying the phonetic form of their linguistic counterparts, yet their logical and encyclopedic entries are different.



**Diagram 3a: The pairings of concepts conveyed by the connector in puns based on perfect homophony, when presented in writing.**

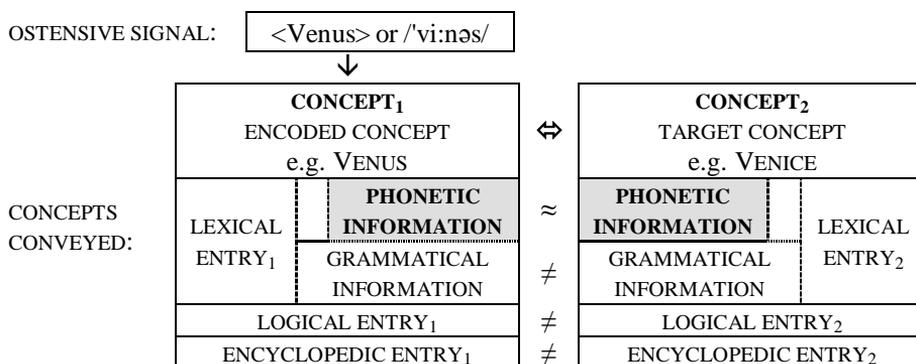


**Diagram 3b: The pairings of concepts conveyed by the connector in puns based on perfect homophony, when presented in speech.**

### 5.4 Puns based on imperfect homophony and on paronymy

As shown in Diagram 4, in puns based on imperfect homonymy and on paronymy, the distinct concepts involved have even less in common than in the case of perfect homonyms: they share only a fragment of the phonetic form of their linguistic counterparts. Puns like this resemble puns based on perfect homophony in that their connectors too encode only one concept. However, unlike in puns based on perfect homophony, in which the two meanings emerge in the order determined by whether the ostensive signal is graphic or acoustic, the concept encoded by the connector will be accessed first regardless of the medium of transmission. The target concept will only be identified and the pun detected if the hearer's cognitive environment contains the pertinent information allowing him to identify the virtual member of the brace of concepts. Characteristically, the linguistic material surrounding the connector in such puns contains fragments of idioms or set phraseologies, or makes references to proverbs, titles of books and films. Most members of a given speech community will have in their memory the titles of many books, movies, TV shows, etc. as well as a long list of proverbs and sayings, which is why so many of them get repeatedly reused. The title of Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice* has inspired both the name of the shop in (45) and the name of a board game in (24), repeated here as (46). The title of the movie *Planet of the Apes* is involved in both the name of a wine shop in (47) and a video rental place in (48), and the echo of the proverb *It never rains but pours* can be found in advertising slogans (49), (50) and (51):

- (45) Merchant of *Tennis*. (The name of a shop selling sports equipment)
- (46) Merchant of *Venus*. (The name of a board game)
- (47) Planet of the *Grapes*. (Name of a wine store)
- (48) Planet of the *Tapes*. (Name of a video rental place)
- (49) When it rains it *pours*. (The advertising slogan for Morton salt)
- (50) When it pours it *reigns*. (The advertising slogan for Michelin tyres)
- (51) We've *poured* throughout her *reign*. (The advertising slogan for Guinness beer, which appeared in the year of Queen Elisabeth II's Silver Jubilee) (Redfern 1984: 134)



**Diagram 4: The pairings of concepts conveyed by the connector in puns based on imperfect homophony and on paronymy.**

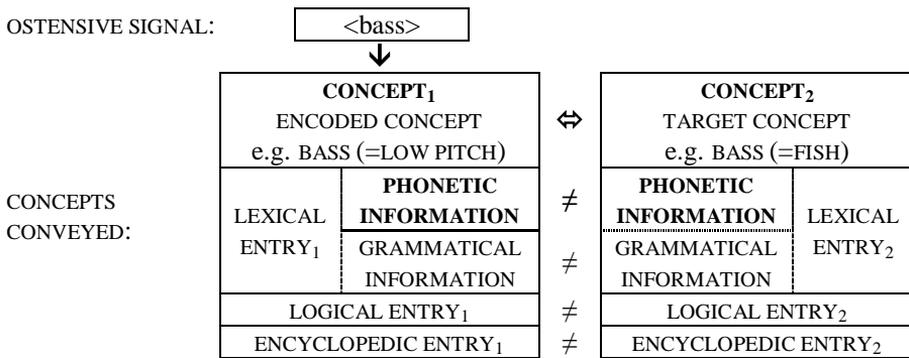
### 5.5 Puns based on homography

Puns based on homography only work in texts conveyed in the written form (such as advertising slogans used in pictorial ads, names of shops and businesses, titles of books, newspaper headlines etc), as in their case the ostensive signal is the orthographic form of the word. Horizontal homography-based puns, such as (52), do not survive in speech: the two occurrences of the connector item are then perceived as imperfect homophones.

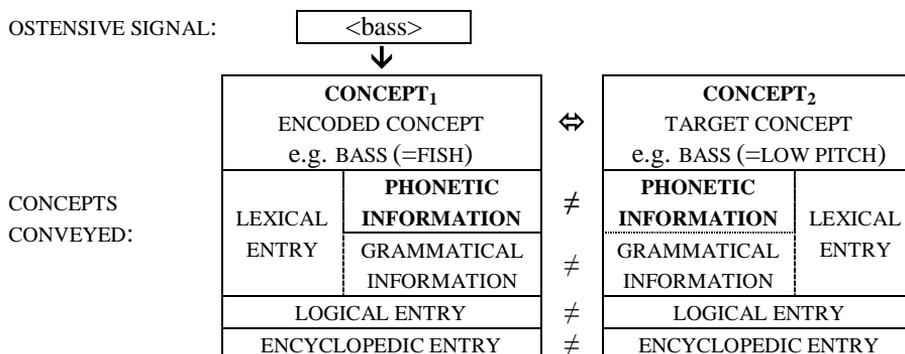
(52) I enjoy *bass* fishing and playing the *bass* guitar.

Given the generally accepted belief in the primacy of speech over writing, it is not surprising that homographic puns are often not seen as puns proper. This is the view taken by Sobkowiak (1991: 13), who contrasts such “‘printed’ puns” with “true puns,” which for him are “in their mass, a decidedly spoken phenomenon.” Koestler (1978: 144), who observes that “in the pun, two strings of thought are tangled into one acoustic knot,” does not even acknowledge the existence of homographic puns.

However, given their widespread use and the fact that the mechanism which is at work is the same as in the case of other puns, homographic puns too seem to merit consideration. As shown in Diagrams 5a and 5b, what sets them off from other puns is the fact that the concepts which are brought into contrast are in fact encoded by different words, which by definition have different lexical, logical and encyclopedic entries, but which merely happen to be associated with the same graphic form. Which of the two concepts is accessed first (and is thus represented as CONCEPT<sub>1</sub>) depends of which word is actually encountered at a given point in the utterance



**Diagram 5a: One possible pairing of (words and) concepts conveyed by the connector in homography-based puns, when presented in writing.**



**Diagram 5b: The other possible pairing of (words and) concepts conveyed by the connector in homography-based puns, when presented in writing.**

## 7. Concluding remarks

Considering the fundamental role context plays in utterance comprehension in general, it is not surprising that it also acts as a key factor in interpreting puns. The role of contextual factors in pun comprehension has always been acknowledged by researchers investigating puns and has been reflected in Attardo's (1994) not entirely successful attempt to account for what he saw as the defining properties of punning utterances, namely the 'disjunction of meaning' and the 'conjunction of form.' I hope that the analysis presented above has demonstrated that in contrast to approaches grounded in a limited mechanistic vision of context, such as Attardo's, the cognitive model of context proposed within the relevance-theoretic framework is better equipped to explain how the ostensive signals chosen by communicator and the assumptions that gradually become manifest to the comprehender affect the way the comprehender of a pun constructs a context that will allow him to recognize the punning intention of the communicator, to establish and juxtapose the pun's two meanings as well as derive whatever cognitive effects these meanings may trigger.

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