

UDC 811.11

## PUNS IN PUBLIC SPEAKING

TERESA HRAZHEUSKAYA,  
EKATERINA CHEBOTAREVA

Polotsk State University, Belarus

*The article defines the concept of pun and reveals its main functions on the example of TED lectures. The influence of puns on the effectiveness of public speech is also investigated.*

Nowadays public speech is the most common way to express your thoughts and beliefs. In a society where we are bombarded with negatives at every turn, the use of humor can be very beneficial, both for the audience and the presenter. Therefore, every person should know how the jokes are formed and what functions they possess.

Public speaking is the process of designing and delivering a message to an audience. Effective public speaking involves understanding the audience and speaking goals, choosing elements for the speech that will engage people with the topic, and delivering presenter's message skillfully. Good public speakers understand that they must plan, organize, and revise their material in order to develop an effective speech [9].

There are many ways to win the listeners' attention. They include facial expressions, voice volume, gestures, and others. But according to the book by Anthony Audrieth, «a speaker who can effectively use humour to engage and entertain their audience possesses a valuable gift. You will be appreciated for providing heartfelt laughter; laughter that has therapeutic effects on listeners. And you will be remembered, talked about; your reputation as a truly great speaker will be enhanced and spread about» [1]. So, using humor is the most powerful weapon for a speaker.

Of all the humour types, the pun is most often used in public speeches. It is a joke or type of wordplay in which similar senses or sounds of two words or phrases, or different senses of the same word, are deliberately confused [5]. Puns are so popular because they are so easy to come up with. There are various methods of how to create them which are based on:

- homonymy;
- polysemy;
- replacement of words in idioms;
- usage of numbers to replace words and parts of words;
- merger or splitting words into parts in phrases.

The use of each type of pun depends on the situation, but studies of TED lectures have shown that, regardless of the type of public speech, the use of puns helps not only to make the audience laugh, but also to convey important thoughts to the public and draw attention to a particular topic. Some examples of puns and the description of their functions are given below.

Let's consider some puns taken from Maz Jobrani's TED talk, filmed at the TEDxSummit in Doha, Qatar. Jobrani's comedy pulls from his background as an Iran-born kid raised in Northern California: he pokes fun at cultural stereotypes of all kinds: «Now, being Iranian-American presents its own set of problems, you know. Those two countries aren't getting along these days. So, it causes a lot of inner conflict, you know. Like part of me likes me, part of me hates me. Part of me thinks I should have a nuclear program, and the other part thinks I can't be trusted with one. These are dilemmas I have every day» [2]. Here Jobrani pokes fun at his dual identity as well as at the strained relations between the West and the Middle East. Ambiguity is based on the polysemy of the word "conflict": 1) conflict as fighting between countries (the USA and the Middle East); 2) internal conflict as a military conflict within a nation because of political, economic or religious causes (since the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, Arab Americans have been looked on as a threat to security); and 3) inner conflict as the result of two opposing motivations inside one person which can bring on confusion, indecision, despair, anger, and fear.

Maz Jobrani also draws attention to the problems of xenophobia and has some advice for anyone who happens to be Middle Eastern and getting on a plane in the United States: "As a Middle Eastern male, I know there are certain things I'm not supposed to say on an airplane in the U.S. I'm not supposed to be walking down the aisle and be like, "Hi, Jack". Even if I'm there with my friend named Jack, I say, "Greetings, Jack, salutations Jack". Never, "Hi, Jack" [2]. This homophonic pun uses homonyms, or words of similar sounds, with different meanings and

## Linguistics, Literature, Philology

plays on those different meanings: if someone hijacks a plane, they illegally take control of it by force while it is travelling from one place to another. Thus, the comedian emphasises that even an innocent salutation is perceived as a threat by Americans if it comes from an Arab American. This obvious over-exaggeration is what causes people to laugh. However, this pun makes people wake up to an inconvenient truth: similar to other U.S. immigrant groups in the past, Arab Americans are viewed as suspects simply because of their origin.

Maz Jobrani explains that there are many more prejudices faced by Arabs in America, for example, the stereotype that Middle Eastern actors can only play roles of violent fanatics and terrorists in Hollywood. Hollywood has portrayed Arabs as villains and schemers for generations, from "The Sheik" in 1921 to Steven Spielberg's "Raiders of the Lost Ark" to Disney's "Aladdin." The actor asks, "Who knows? Maybe one day we'll even have our own James Bond. Right? "My name is Bond. Jamal Bond" [2]. That humor cuts many ways but at its core is the typecasting that Middle Eastern actors encounter in an age of Islamic radicalism and anti-immigrant fervor. The emotional appeal to Middle Eastern actors is inferred here: forget playing Terrorist No. 3 and seek roles beyond Hollywood stereotypes.

In these quotes, we can see that Maz Jobrani uses puns to make his speech more effective and to convey his message to the audience in a joking way. Jobrani's burning desire is to stop problems of misunderstanding and stereotyping. He says that when it comes to laughter, the Middle East and the West are actually very similar. So perhaps that spiritual aspect, combined with a more enlightened political approach, set within a context of greater cultural awareness is really the path that the two nations are trying to carve out for themselves at the moment.

In her motivational speech, Maysoon Zayid, a young woman with cerebral palsy, or CP, uses self-deprecating humor and puns when disclosing information about her disease. It makes her more likeable as a speaker because we all like people who take themselves lightly. At the same time, we understand that for Maysoon Zayid humour has always served as a coping mechanism, as a powerful tool that helped her and her parents cope with CP, in even the toughest of circumstances. While introducing herself she says: "People with disabilities are the largest minority in the world"[10]. This kind of a joke based on antonymy helps the speaker to draw attention to the problems of the disabled. "It is a play about a girl with CP. I was a girl with CP... I didn't get the part. They gave it to another girl. This was a part I was literary born to play" [10]. The idiom "to be born to do smth" means "possessing an innate talent or ability in a particular area". But here it is combined with its literary meaning "be brought into life by birth". The humour arises from the absurdity that although she was born with palsy, she was refused the part of the girl with palsy.

Some more puns are used in the performance of Sarah Jones who played the roles of completely different characters. In the introduction she says: «*Although, many of you already know that I do speak the Queen's English, because I'm from Queens, New-York*» [3]. This homophonic pun raises everyone's spirits as it is obvious that a girl from this New-York's borough can't be an RP speaker. Mention should be made that Queens is the most linguistically diverse place on Earth, according to the Endangered Language Alliance. And in total, about 60% of Queens's population spoke a language at home other than English. One of Sarah's characters focused on this phrase: «*She's a very nice, young black girl. Well, you know, she calls herself black. She's really more like a caramel color if you look at her*» [3]. As we see, in her speech Sarah doesn't only make people laugh but also talks about attitudes to certain races, about wars and terrorist attacks, which are the most widespread problems of the modern society.

One more example of the effective introduction is found in the talk by Emily Levine, who just said: «*I prefer to talk about things I know nothing about*» [6]. And this instantly affected the people who were preparing to hear a long and boring lecture, since the topic of the speech sounds like «A theory of everything».

In his public speech, Michael Jr. tells the story about his friend: «*He got hit in the eye with a flag, he lost his vision in one eye. And he's suing the league for 400 million dollars. He's not gonna see half of it*» [4]. In this case, the pun does not appear by chance, as it has both an entertainment function and helps a participant prove his idea that ordinary things can be funny.

Thus, TED talks analysis shows that a pun plays a significant role in public speaking since it performs various functions, combines with completely different types of speeches and increases their effectiveness. A public speech devoid of humor is not only less joyful – it's also less productive and less creative.

## REFERENCES

1. Audrieth, A. L. The Art of Using Humor in Public Speaking/ A. L. Audrieth. – Copyright, 1998. –127 p.
2. Jobrani, M. A Saudi, an Indian and an Iranian Walk into a Qatari Bar [Electronic resource] / M. Jobrani. – Mode of access : [https://www.ted.com/talks/maz\\_jobrani\\_a\\_saudi\\_an\\_indian\\_and\\_an\\_iranian\\_walk\\_into\\_a\\_qatari\\_bar/transcript?embed=true&language=ru](https://www.ted.com/talks/maz_jobrani_a_saudi_an_indian_and_an_iranian_walk_into_a_qatari_bar/transcript?embed=true&language=ru). – Date of access : 15.03.2021.

3. Jones, S.A One-woman Global Village [Electronic resource] / S.Jones. – Mode of access : [https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah\\_jones\\_a\\_one\\_woman\\_global\\_village?language=ru](https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_jones_a_one_woman_global_village?language=ru). – Date of access : 18.03.2021.
4. Jr, M. More than Funny [Electronic resource] / M.Jr. – Mode of access : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twSvd5bQLDw>. – Date of access : 15.03.2021.
5. Lee, I. Pun and Funny English//A Research Guide for Students [Electronic resource] / I. Lee. – Mode of access : <https://www.bydewey.com/pun.html/>. – Date of access : 10.02.2021.
6. Levine, E.A Theory of Everything [Electronic resource] / E. Levine. – Mode of access : [https://www.ted.com/talks/emily\\_levine\\_a\\_theory\\_of\\_everything](https://www.ted.com/talks/emily_levine_a_theory_of_everything). – Date of access : 16.03.2021.
7. Siddons, S. Presentation Skills / S. Siddons. – Trowbridge : The Cromwell Press, 2003. – 64 p.
8. Smith, R. G. An experimental study of effects of speech organization upon attitudes of college students/ R. G. Smith // Speech Monographs, 1951. –P. 191.
9. Stand Up, Speak Out: The Practice and Ethics of Public Speaking [Electronic resource] / University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing Edition, 2011. – Mode of access : <http://uilis.unsyiah.ac.id/oer/files/original/e338b347a4696d3376bf5377224e228d.pdf>. – Date of access : 17.03.2021.
10. Zayid, M. I got 99 problems. Palsy is just one [Electronic resource] / M. Zayid. – Mode of access : [https://www.ted.com/talks/maysoon\\_zayid\\_i\\_got\\_99\\_problems\\_palsy\\_is\\_just\\_one#t-99439](https://www.ted.com/talks/maysoon_zayid_i_got_99_problems_palsy_is_just_one#t-99439). – Date of access : 15.03.2021.