

A STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF WORDPLAY IN *THE SIMPSONS* SERIES

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Abstract

The objectives of this study are to identify and describe the forms and functions of wordplay in *The Simpsons* series. The source of the data was the twenty fourth season of the famous series of *The Simpsons*. The data were selected only from the first episode to the sixth episode of the season. The form of the data was some verbal expressions spoken by the characters or written anywhere on the screen. There are dialogues, monologues, advertisements, titles, and shop signs. The validity and credibility were ensured by using triangulation to achieve data trustworthiness. The result of this research shows that all types of wordplay appeared in the series. They are punning repetition, play on antonym, asyntactic, etymological, syllepsis, and similarity on pronunciation. Based on the findings, the play on similarity of pronunciation is the most dominant type that occurred in the series. The domination of this type shows that the play on similarity of pronunciation is an effective technique and successful in amusing its audience and delivering the wordplay phenomena to them. In addition, all functions of wordplay like telling jokes, breaking taboos, and raising serious effect were found in every episode. This proves *The Simpsons* as a genuine adult animated sitcom which can tell jokes and break taboos at the same time.

Keywords: *The Simpsons*, wordplay, animated sitcom

INTRODUCTION

Humans develop language for their basic needs in communication. After fulfilling the needs for communication, people start to put their creativity in language and see language not only as the media to communicate but also as a source of entertainment and beauty. The application of language into many forms of entertainment and beauty is the base of language creativity. One of the techniques in language creativity is foregrounding. Wordplay as a foregrounding technique is useful for any author to put their creativity in language. It can be assumed that smart and effective wordplay shows the wits of the language user.

Wordplay shows the style of the author. Stylistics is the study of style (Missikova, 2003:

18). Hence, this study uses stylistics as the main field to analyze the wordplay used in the series. Stylistics concern with language creativity as Paul Simpson (2004: 3) says that to do stylistics is to explore language, and, more specifically, to explore creativity in language use. Therefore, this study tries to explore how the author uses his creativity in language, mainly the utilization of wordplay.

Wordplay, also known as pun, is a foregrounded lexical ambiguity, which may have its origin either in homonymy or polysemy (Leech, 1968: 209). *The Simpsons* is an adult animated sitcom created by Matt Groening. Since the first season show in 1987, he has used many figurative language, deviation technique, and also wordplay. However, this advantage

may become obstacle to other people. Political and cultural differences are the common problem faced by the author to deliver the message conveyed in the wordplay.

What the Simpsons and other characters say in the series will be hardly understood if the viewers are incapable of interpreting the wordplay used in the series. Hence the study tries to explain what form and what function of wordplay delivered by the characters.

This study is limited to the wordplay used in *The Simpsons* series of the twenty fourth season from episode one to six. This study focuses on the analysis of the types and functions of puns related to the context and the plot of the episode.

Theoretically, it is expected that the result of the study is useful as enrichment to the study in linguistic field, especially in the stylistic branch.

Practically, this study is expected to give a deeper understanding for the readers in analyzing series based on the linguistic aspects and inspire other researchers to develop and conduct other research in the same scope with different subjects.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative approach was more frequently used than the quantitative one because this research described the phenomena inside a series. As Seliger and Shohamy (1995: 124) suggest, descriptive research involves a collection of techniques

used to specify or describe naturally occurring phenomenon without experimental manipulation.

The object of this study was an animated sitcom entitled *The Simpsons*. The data were collected from the first episode until the sixth episode of the twenty fourth season. The data were in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. The contexts of the data were the dialogues used by the character and any written texts appeared on the screen in *The Simpsons*.

The main instrument of this research was the researcher himself. The researcher designed the research including observation, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Other instruments were the DVD rip video and subtitles of *The Simpsons* season 24.

The analysis of this research used data sheets. To analyze the data, this research conducted content analysis. The procedures of analyzing the data begin by coding and classifying them. Each of the data was put into the data sheet. The data sheet contained text number, forms, functions, meaning and explanation, and total number. The next procedure was interpreting the data from the data sheet by conducting reference analysis. The final step was making conclusions based on the interpreted data.

This research conducted trustworthiness to establish the validity, truthfulness of the data, credibility, and the consistency of the data used. In achieving those four aspects, triangulation was applied in this study. The triangulation was conducted by comparing the data found to the

related theories. To gain more validity of the data, the data found was checked by those who interested on the same field of the study. The triangulators were two students of English Language and Literature; they were Arista Ferdiansyah and Dhoni Setiawan.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There are six types of wordplay found in *The Simpsons*. The types of wordplay are punning repetition, play on antonym, the asyntactic pun, etymological pun, syllepsis, and play on similarity of pronunciation. The three functions of wordplay are also found in the series. The functions of wordplay are telling jokes, breaking taboo, and raising serious effect. This fact implies that the wordplay technique is mastered excellently by the author, Matt Groningen.

Table 1. Types of Wordplay Used in *The Simpsons*

No.	Types of Wordplay	Frequency
1.	Punning Repetition	12
2.	Play on Antonym	12
3.	The Asyntactic Pun	16
4.	The Etymological Pun	17
5.	Syllepsis	1
6.	Play on Similarity of Pronunciation	34
Total		92

Table 2. Functions of Wordplay Used in *The Simpsons*

No.	Functions of Wordplay	Frequency
1.	Telling Jokes	53
2.	Breaking Taboo	7
3.	Raising Serious Effect	32
Total		92

Based on the findings, the most dominant type of wordplay appeared in *The Simpsons* is play on similarity of pronunciation. In addition, the function of wordplay found in *The Simpsons* with the highest occurrence is *telling jokes*. This fact implies that the wordplay technique is mastered excellently by the author, Matt Groningen.

Further explanation about the types and the functions of wordplay can be seen in the following examples.

The following example is punning repetition taken from the early minutes of the Moonshine River episode.

BART: I hear **tapping** from inside
 MAYOR QUIMBY: Well, uh, let's, uh, all start **tapping** our toes to the sounds of Scab Calloway and his non-union band. (05-M/RP/ TJ)

As seen in the utterance above, Quimby quickly gives response as he says to the guests to enjoy the party by diverting the meaning of **tapping** from 'knock' to 'dance' and continuing his utterance with 'our toes'. The mayor

intention of doing this is possibly to cover the race setup because there were no winners at Springfield Grand Prix and Tour de Springfield as they were messed up.

An example on how play on antonym works may be seen in the next datum which is taken from the first episode of season 24.

(sign) BART'S **PRECIOUS JUNK**, keep out! (10-M/AT/TJ)

ditulis *Junk* generally used to refer to useless rubbish which people usually disposed of even before it is used. However, when placed after *precious*, the reader is made aware it has a non-antonymous sense. Audience understands that Bart will not dispose the things inside the box because the *junk* is *precious* to him. This is also known as a paradoxical play since the opposite words *precious* and *junk* are used together and mixed successfully.

The next datum is asyntactic pun and is taken from the first episode of season 24.

CLETUS: We **knows not** where. (13-M/AS/ TJ)

In asyntactic pun, one of the meanings of the word does not actually fit into the context. In the above utterance, Cletus should say 'we don't know where she is' instead of 'we knows not where'. The latter utterance is not following the syntactic rules and therefore, it is categorized as asyntactic pun.

An example of the etymological pun is quite visible in the third episode of the twenty-fourth season.

KENT BROCKMAN: Springfielders are getting that **sinking feeling**... ..as the dangerous sinkhole continues to expand. (35-A/ET/ RS)

In the above utterance, *sinking* is a part of the meaning of idiom "getting that sinking feeling" which means a bad feeling that something bad is going to happen. However, as the background of the story is telling about the sinkhole happened in Springfield, the word *sinking* can be interpreted literally and etymologically as 'falling' or 'dropping' to a lower level.

An example of syllepsis was found in the first episode.

BART: So I won't, even if you **torture me** like you do the **English language**. (28-M/SL/RS)

Bart's 'torture' is referring to Cletus' torture, a physical torture to Bart and the abstract sense of torture of English language spoken by Cletus. The torture of both Bart and the English language are placed equally by using the wordplay technique of syllepsis. Since Cletus' English is terribly spoken and not syntactically correct, Bart calls Cletus' usage of English is a torture to the language itself.

An example to introduce a play on similarity of pronunciation was found in the first episode of the season 24.

(sign) **Racers Ball – Racist Ball** is down the street. (03-M/PR/RS)

The similarity of the pronunciation of 'racers' and 'racist' used in the sign is effective to raise a quick laugh. The word 'racist' is somehow used to satirize the historical condition where some black American was not permitted to enter any party. The prohibition of black American to attend wedding ball,

graduation ball, is the motivation to create this serious yet funny wordplay.

An example of telling jokes function can be seen in the sixth episode of season 24.

STEVE MOBBS: Greetings, I am Steve **Mobbs**, welcoming you from beyond the grave. (89-T/PR/TJ)

The name 'Steve Mobbs' is a play on Steve Jobs, which is famous as the creator of Apple product, one of them is iPad. The play of the surname of Jobs become Mobbs may have created an ambiguous reference to a group of criminal since most applications for Apple are purchased. This ambiguity created from the wordplay leads to a quick laugh for the audience.

The example of breaking taboo can be seen in the fourth episode of season 24; The Simpsons family forgot to visit their only grandfather, Abe Simpsons.

RITA: After we were fired from Spiro's, we **teamed up...** for more than music. (69-G/ET/BT)

Rita Lafleur is Abe Simpsons' ex-wife. As Rita told her story, she uttered the expression above. Her statement above implies that she was Abe teammate in working and also implicitly means that she was in an affair with him. The use of this technique of wordplay shows that wordplay can be used as a euphemism and to break taboo.

A good example of a pun raising serious effect is found in "The Greatest Story Ever Holed" inside the second episode of the season.

MAYOR: Thanks a lot, **Liser!** (32-H/PR/RS)

The use of above utterance is an irony because the mayor is implicitly blaming her instead of thanking her. It is also obviously emphasized with the use of the play on similarity of pronunciation as the mayor calls her *Liser* which has a very close pronunciation to *Loser*.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion in chapter IV, some conclusions can be pulled out related to the objectives of the study mentioned in the first chapter. The conclusions are arranged in the list below:

1. The whole types of wordplay categorized by Leech are found in *The Simpsons*. Based on the findings, the play on similarity of pronunciation is the most dominant type occurred in the series. The domination of this type shows that the play on similarity of pronunciation is still an effective technique and proved success in delivering the wordplay phenomena to the audience.

2. From all three wordplay functions proposed by Bloomfield (2007), three of them are found in *The Simpsons*. As seen in the findings, telling jokes is the most dominant function of wordplay found in *The Simpsons*. With more than half of the data, this function works as a core of each episode of *The Simpsons* because almost all wordplay found in the series is aimed at entertaining the audience.

Suggestions

For the readers, this research is a challenge to find the linguistic phenomenon, especially wordplay, in other literary works such as novels or movies. It is expected that the readers are able to notice any wordplay used in literary works as well as to classify and explain them. Furthermore, the readers should understand the purpose of wordplay because wordplay is not bound to one function; it is variable. There are still many interesting topics under stylistics umbrella which have not been analyzed. Furthermore, the object of this research is limited to a few episodes which were also aired three years ago. Therefore, it is suggested to have another research in the same field using a newer and broader source that will make a better understanding of wordplay in modern days.

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