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Polysemy, Reanalysis, and Comic Timing in English and Russian

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Annotation. his cursory article analyses how metaphorical polysemy – one lexical form carrying several metaphor-related senses – creates humour in English and Russian. The core claim is functional: polysemous words become humorous when discourse lets two interpretations remain briefly plausible, so the recipient must reanalyse the utterance and notice the speaker's "designed ambiguity." Linguistically, this mechanism fits script-based accounts of humour, where a text becomes funny when it supports an opposition between compatible interpretive scripts (Raskin, 1985; Attardo & Raskin, 1991). At the processing level, graded salience research predicts that familiar metaphorical meanings may be activated alongside literal meanings, which makes double-access effects cognitively available for joking (Giora, 1997). Evidence from Russian ERP studies further indicates that metaphor-related senses can induce competition and reinterpretation during comprehension – an interpretable cognitive correlate of punchline-like reprocessing (Yurchenko et al., 2020). Culturally, metaphor repertoires and humour norms shape which polysemies are "safe," recognizable, and translatable across English and Russian communities.
Keywords: metaphorical polysemy, humour, ambiguity, lexical access, figurative meaning, incongruity, cultural scripts, English, Russian, translation pragmatics, salience

A practical way to locate humour in language is to watch the listener's face at the moment of reinterpretation. If they first understand an utterance one way and then realize a second reading was also licensed, the reaction often includes a short delay, a correction, and then laughter. That sequence is not accidental. It is a miniature model of verbal humour as "controlled misunderstanding," where the text is engineered to invite one interpretation and then force a second. Script-based humour theory formalizes this intuition: a joke works when it activates two scripts that are in a specific relation (often opposition) and when the recipient can switch between them without the utterance collapsing into nonsense (Raskin, 1985).

Metaphorical polysemy is unusually efficient for this purpose because it stores two interpretive tracks inside a single word. Here I use *metaphorical polysemy* to mean a family of related senses created through metaphorical mapping and conventionalized enough to be part of normal usage. A speaker does not need to invent a new metaphor; they exploit a ready-made semantic network. English *cold* can denote temperature and emotional distance; *heavy* can denote weight and seriousness; *sharp* can denote a cutting edge and mental quickness. Russian shows parallel patterns: тёплый ('warm' / 'affectionate'), тяжёлый ('heavy' / 'difficult'), острый ('sharp' / 'witty' / 'piquant'). None of these words is automatically funny. Humour appears when context keeps the literal reading temporarily credible and then makes the figurative reading suddenly unavoidable (or vice versa), so that the listener experiences a brief "semantic wobble" followed by stabilization.

This wobble fits neatly with the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH), which extends Raskin's script framework and treats jokes as structured objects with multiple knowledge resources (including script opposition and the mechanism that licenses the switch) (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). The reason polysemy matters here is that it supplies an economical logical

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mechanism: ambiguity does not need extra wording; it is already latent. The speaker's work moves from lexical invention to pragmatic staging: selecting a polysemous trigger, choosing a context that initially biases one sense, and then adding a cue that reweights the alternative sense.

Two psycholinguistic points clarify why this staging often works in real time. First, salience-based models argue that familiar meanings – whether literal or conventional metaphorical – can be activated quickly and sometimes in parallel. Giora's graded salience hypothesis predicts that when both meanings are salient (frequent, conventional, familiar), comprehension may initially activate more than one candidate interpretation; context then helps decide which meaning becomes dominant (Giora, 1997). If this is correct, a joke does not always require the listener to "miss" the intended meaning completely. The listener can hold a weakly activated alternative in the background, then experience the pleasure of recognition when the punchline confirms that the alternative was relevant.

Second, evidence from Russian neurocognitive research suggests that metaphor-related senses can behave as competitors during processing, not as mere decorative add-ons. Yurchenko, Lopukhina, and Dragoy used ERPs in a priming paradigm and found that metaphorical senses of polysemous nouns show processing patterns that differ from metonymic senses and interact with literal sense activation, consistent with competition and reanalysis during comprehension (Yurchenko et al., 2020). The cautious inference is methodological, not romantic: if metaphorical polysemy can trigger measurable reinterpretation dynamics, then it provides a plausible cognitive "handle" for punchline-like effects in Russian, where the receiver's mind is already doing the kind of repair that humour exploits.

The cultural dimension enters because polysemy is never only semantic; it is also social. A polysemous mapping can be universally intelligible in principle (warmth → affection is widely grounded in embodied experience), yet still differ in how comfortably it can be used for joking. Conceptual metaphor research explicitly treats metaphor as both embodied and culturally patterned; cultures share many mappings, but differ in emphasis, conventional expressions, and context sensitivity (Kövecses, 2010). This becomes visible when humour depends on which metaphorical senses are most entrenched. If one language conventionalizes a metaphorical sense strongly, that sense becomes "fast," and the literal sense may feel remote; the joke then needs stronger situational support to revive literal plausibility. If the metaphorical sense is weaker, the same lexical trigger may feel ambiguous too early, and the punchline loses force because the switch is too predictable.

English and Russian also differ in what I would call *pragmatic tolerance for play* in different registers. Academic prose and official speech typically restrict overt wordplay in both languages, but media discourse, informal conversation, and online genres tolerate it more. The point is not that one language is inherently "more humorous." The point is that humour is regulated by norms: which domains allow ambiguity, how directly irony can be performed, and how much ambiguity a listener is expected to resolve without explicit cues. Scholarship that surveys humour and figurative language emphasizes that humorous effects arise from the interaction between figurative mechanisms and contextual constraints, not from figurativeness alone (Godioli & Chłopicki, 2024). Metaphorical polysemy is a high-potential mechanism precisely because it can look like ordinary description until the second reading "activates," allowing humour to be covert rather than announced.

A concrete illustration helps. Imagine an English line in a workplace scene: "We need a *bright* intern." In many contexts, *bright* defaults to 'intelligent'. If the next line mentions lighting a studio or fixing lamps, the literal 'luminous' reading becomes relevant, and the first line can be reinterpreted as a practical request. Russian offers яркий with a similar duality ('bright' / 'vivid'

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/ 'striking'). Yet the humour will not be identical, because яркий often leans toward evaluative aesthetic meaning in Russian ("яркая личность"), while English *bright* more readily functions as a straightforward intelligence adjective. The same two-plane structure exists, but the *default* plane can differ; that changes the amount of contextual engineering needed for the joke to land. This is exactly the type of micro-difference that matters in translation and intercultural humour: you may preserve polysemy formally and still lose comedic timing because the sense ranking changes.

Translation makes the cultural stakes explicit. When an English pun depends on a specific metaphorical polysemy, the Russian translator has three options, each with a cost. One can preserve meaning and drop humour (semantic fidelity), preserve humour and shift wording (functional equivalence), or attempt a compromise by introducing a different Russian polysemy that can carry a similar two-step reanalysis. Script-based humour theory helps diagnose why the third option is often the only one that truly "translates" the laugh: humour is not attached to a single lexical item; it is attached to the configuration of scripts and the switch mechanism (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). If the target language does not offer the same configuration, the translator must rebuild the configuration with different materials.

This is where metaphor–humour similarity becomes more than a slogan. Krikmann argues that humour and figurative speech share a deep cognitive similarity in that both involve two planes of meaning and a kind of alignment work performed by the recipient (Krikmann, 2009). Metaphorical polysemy compresses that alignment work into a lexical node. It is, in effect, a reusable switch. In English and Russian, this switch is often powered by embodied domains (temperature, weight, sharpness, cleanliness), but the cultural script decides whether the switch is read as playful, rude, pretentious, or simply confusing.

If one wanted to study this topic empirically – not merely by collecting nice examples – the design should respect that humour is interactional. A corpus of English and Russian humorous texts (stand-up transcripts, sitcom dialogue, meme captions, satirical headlines) could be annotated for (a) the polysemous trigger word, (b) the sense that the immediate context privileges, and (c) the cue that forces reinterpretation. The analysis would then ask a sober question: do jokes that rely on metaphorical polysemy cluster around certain source domains more in one language than the other? Kövecses's framework predicts both overlap and patterned divergence, so the hypothesis would not be "completely different," but "similar mappings with different salience profiles" (Kövecses, 2010). Psycholinguistic work like Giora's and Yurchenko et al.'s then gives a second layer: salience and competition dynamics can be treated as predictors of when such jokes should be easy or hard to process (Giora, 1997; Yurchenko et al., 2020).

A limitation is necessary. "English" and "Russian" are not single communities. Within Russian, humour conventions differ across regions, generations, and online subcultures; within English, varieties differ just as sharply. Another limitation is that metaphorical polysemy is only one humour engine among many. Script opposition can be built through irony, hyperbole, narrative structure, and social stereotype scripts without relying on polysemy at all (Raskin, 1985). So, I interpret "humorous potential" narrowly: not that polysemy is the main source of humour, but that it is a high-efficiency resource for creating local punchline effects with minimal linguistic material.

Even with these boundaries, the comparative conclusion is stable. Metaphorical polysemy in English and Russian becomes humorous when a speaker (or author) arranges conditions for double-access: one sense is made contextually likely, the other is kept plausible, and a later cue forces a switch that the recipient experiences as both correction and recognition. Linguistic theory explains the structure (scripts and their opposition), psycholinguistics explains why the

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switch is cognitively available (salience and competition), and cultural analysis explains why some switches are socially rewarded while others are sanctioned. When these three layers align, one word can indeed "set a trap," and the laugh is the sound of successful reanalysis.

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