



**Ministry of Higher Education and  
Scientific Research**

**University of Diyala  
College of Education for Humanities  
Department of English Language**



# **A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis of Humorous Headlines in Selected English Newspapers**

A Thesis

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By

**Maryam Khalil Ali**

Supervised by

**Prof. Ali Abdullah Mahmood (Ph.D.)**

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وزارة التعليم العالي و البحث العلمي



جامعة ديالى  
كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية  
قسم اللغة الانكليزية

## تحليل دلالي - تداولي لعناوين فكاھية في صحف انكليزية منتقاة

رسالة

مقدمة الى مجلس كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية في جامعة ديالى  
و هي جزء من متطلبات نيل درجة ماجستير آداب في اللغة  
الانكليزية و علم اللغة

قدمتها الطالبة

مريم خليل علي

بأشراف

أ.د. علي عبدالله محمود

## **Abstract**

The current study tackles 20 humorous headlines from 10 selected English newspapers. Most of the previous studies focus on humor in literature and linguistic functions of the headlines in media. Very few of these studies tries to analyze humorous headlines in the English newspapers from either semantic or syntactic point of view. However, this study examines these headlines from semantic and pragmatic perspectives. Thus, it attempts to bridge the gap in literature of the thesis topic between certain linguistic functions of these headlines and their pragmatic functions. This can be achieved by identifying the semantic and pragmatic strategies and their manifestations in the data under investigation. The study aims at: providing a comprehensive analysis of the nature of humor in the English newspapers headlines by using semantic, as well as, pragmatic scripts, and giving an explanation of how the contextual factors play an important role in the understanding of the intended meaning of the humorous headlines.

The study introduces six hypotheses: (1) On the semantic level of this topic, the General Theory of Verbal Humor is a useful instrument for recognizing the humorous headlines of the selected English newspapers in terms of its six Knowledge Resources (KRs). (2) On its pragmatic level, Grice's Conversational Implicature (CI) and Cooperative Principle (CP) Theory is a successful tool for the analysis of the selected humorous headlines. (3) The most frequent literary device used in the selected data is metaphor, whereas the least frequent one is joke. (4) The most frequent non-observant Grice's Maxim is Quality. (5) Violation of Grice's Maxims is more frequent than flouting these Maxims. (6) The writers of the humorous headlines sometimes observe Grice's Maxims.

To achieve the aims and verify the hypotheses of this thesis, the study presents an eclectic model of two aspects, namely semantic and

pragmatic. The first contains KRs that can serve as linguistic factors, manifesting the semantic functions of the humorous headlines. The second consists of certain maxims that are supposed to be flouted or violated by the writers, resulting in humorous headlines. A helpful statistical review for the frequency distribution of the literary devices and flouted/violated maxims is used to guarantee having scientific-based results of this analysis.

Based on the findings of this research, the study arrived at certain conclusions, among them are: (1) the semantic and pragmatic functions of the humorous headlines are liable to be verified due to the KRs of the GTVH and the Maxims of Grice's CI and CP Theory. (2) The current study detects only two types of non-observance of Grice's (1975) Maxims out of five: flouting and violation, which play an important role in creating the humorous effect on the target readers of the headlines in the English newspapers. (3) Violation occurs only in three headlines (4, 16 and 19) out of twenty. They are in *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Post*, respectively.

On the other hand, all the hypotheses of the study are verified and found true, except that the second part of Hypothesis (3) and Hypothesis (5) are rejected. The study also answers the two questions of the thesis, and it ends with some recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Problem

In such bulky information in the time of the internet, it is sometimes difficult for a reader to choose a necessary newspaper article. Here, a special role belongs to the newspaper headline. It is the first unit of the article which attracts the reader's attention. The language of headlines is different from the language of other literary texts. The editors (writers) <sup>1</sup> use a kind of language to formulate a headline in which it arouses the reader's attention. However, the headlines may record problems on two levels, namely, the semantic and the pragmatic. On the semantic level, "the newspaper headlines are unilateral (contain one semantic concept and do not have homogeneous members of the sentence) and complex (with several semantic elements)" (Andrew, 2007: 25). By the number of semantic scheme elements, headlines may form difficulty to be interpreted differently on the part of the reader.

On the pragmatic level, a newspaper headline is written with a certain purpose. Writing the headline, the writer/reporter deliberately selects certain linguistic devices to achieve his communicative intention. Far from addressing the issue of pragmatic inference in headline interpretation, ambiguity and implicit meaning have been viewed as 'confusing', 'problem' raising, 'misleading', or as too effortful processes overridden by syntactic parsing (Reah, 1998: 13).

Writing a suitable headline for a newspaper article is a complex task because the headline is neither a semantic summary of the text nor a pragmatic attracting device for the reader (Dor, 2003: 719). Also, the ambiguity (double meaning) is considered as a prominent feature of

humor. It is the reason behind considering humorous headlines as problematic. Humor by itself could be seen as a double-edged sword. People who read humorous headlines should put into consideration that humor maybe obscene, aggressive, and sexual. Moreover, the intended meaning of some humorous headlines cannot be interpreted on the level of the literal meaning. Instead, it can be determined inferentially depending on the shared knowledge between the writer and his readers, the context in which the humorous headline is used and the process through which the humor is displayed.

Therefore, this thesis is an attempt to address the previous semantic and pragmatic problems arising from the strict functions of the specific genre of the newspaper headlines. This analysis is made to see what semantic and pragmatic features they incorporate in order to reflect the intended meaning of their editors. It is also used to solve such problems by verifying the hypotheses put for this sake. However, this study is supposed to answer two questions: (1) How do the writers of the newspapers headlines create humor by the application of the KR's of the GTVH? And (2) how do they create humor by flouting and violating the Grice's Maxims (1975) ?

## **1.2 Aims of the Study**

The study has several purposes listed below, so it aims at

1. providing a comprehensive analysis and description about the nature and the composition of humor in the headlines of English newspapers by using semantic, as well as, pragmatic scripts.
2. giving an explanation of how the contextual factors including world knowledge and expectations play an important role in the understanding of the intended meaning of the humorous headlines.

3. testing how the GTVH and the CI Theory are valid to analyze the selected newspapers headlines, by identifying the semantic and pragmatic patterns which create humor.
4. specifying the most and the least exploited Grice's Maxims in the flouting and/or violation of these maxims.
5. identifying the KRs which take part in the creation of humorous headlines.

### **1.3 The Hypotheses**

It is hypothesized that

1. on the semantic level of this topic, the GTVH is a useful instrument for recognizing the humorous headlines of the selected English newspapers.
2. on its pragmatic level, Grice's CI and CP Theory is a successful tool for the analysis of the selected humorous headlines.
3. the most frequent literary device used in the selected data is metaphor, whereas the least frequent one is joke.
4. the most frequent non-observant Grice's Maxim is Quality, whereas the least frequent one is Relation.
5. violation of Grice's Maxims is more frequent than flouting these maxims.
6. the writers of the humorous headlines sometimes observe Grice's Maxims.

#### **1.4 Procedures of the Study**

To achieve the aims of the study and verify its hypotheses, the following procedures are followed to execute the analysis of this topic:

1. Reviewing the relevant literature through the theoretical background of the subject, focusing on definitions, types and functions of humor, in addition to classification and characteristics of newspaper headlines, and some other related topics in the field.
2. Selecting and figuring out the data from 10 newspapers for the semantic and pragmatic analysis of the humorous headlines.
3. Analyzing the collected data qualitatively in terms of the adopted semantic and pragmatic model.
4. Conducting a statistical analysis on the subject to achieve its aims and to quantitatively support its findings.
5. Discussing the results, drawing conclusions based on the findings of the analysis, and putting forward recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

#### **1.5 Limitation of the Study**

This study is limited to the semantic and pragmatic analysis of 20 selected humorous headlines from 10 English newspapers. Newspapers are chosen for this study for the purpose of specification, because they are directed to address people of a community in specific geographical area.



## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

1. The present thesis is expected to be of real significance to students of linguistics in general, and researchers in the fields of semantics and pragmatics, in particular. It is useful when they write argumentative essays.
2. It is hoped that this study is useful to those who work in educational institutions such as curricula designers, especially in selecting appropriate headlines for reading comprehension passages in English.
3. It is also beneficial for those who are specialized in mass media concerns, especially publishers, reporters and writers of newspapers, since it has close contact with their domain and how to criticize or mock upon others in a clever way .
4. It is supposed to be useful to postgraduate students, who work in educational programs.
5. It is also expected to help those who work on humor as an instrument for psychological therapy.