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DOI: 10.15290/CR.2025.48.1.04

Imperfect homophony as a source of wordplay in the sitcom *Modern Family*: A relevance-theoretic lexical pragmatic approach

Abstract. The paper analyses imperfect homophony as a source of wordplay, with a view to delineating the way two concepts or only one concept is valid for the discourse. Second, it investigates the source of the contextual information required for the identification of the target expression. The analysis is performed in the light of Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. It will be demonstrated that the target concept is accessed via activating a search for relevance triggered by the phonetic similarity between two concepts as well as the linguistic context. The findings of a study will demonstrate that puns stemming from imperfect homophony can be divided into those in which two concepts are facilitated and juxtaposed in linguistic context and thus their encyclopaedic entries are fully valid for the overall humorous interpretation and those in which only one novel concept is valid for the ongoing conversation. In addition, the puns under analysis can be categorised according to the criterion of the source of contextual information required for the identification of the target expression. In the paper, the key role of context will be discussed and specified, with the emphasis on the viewer's perspective. The theoretical proposals are illustrated with imperfect homophony-based puns derived from the sitcom *Modern Family*.

Keywords: relevance theory, imperfect homophony, sitcom, humour, ad hoc concept, lexical pragmatics, puns

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of imperfect homophony, also known as paronymy, involves words whose linguistic forms share a phonetic segment (Attardo, 1994). This linguistic device is not inherently humorous, nevertheless there are publications that bring its humorous potential to the fore, especially those devoted to puns whose comic effects reside in different forms of phonetic ambiguity (e.g. Attardo, 1994; Solska, 2012a, 2012b). Ruiz-Gurillo (2016) contends that paronymy functions as a metapragmatic clue, i.e. as "a humor indicator of humor" (Ruiz-Gurillo, 2016,

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p. 90). In the relevant literature, puns based on paronymy are also referred to as paronymic, non-homonymic, heteronymic, paronomasic (Sobkowiak, 1991), imperfect (Zwicky & Zwicky, 1984; Hempelmann & Miller, 2017), near puns (Partington, 2006), puns based on imperfect homophony (Solska, 2012b), or paraphonic puns (Dienhart, 1999).

The explanation concerning terminological nomenclature used throughout the paper is in need here. Many authors use the term “paronymy” with reference to a group of words whose spelling and pronunciation are similar. As a result, paronymy is tantamount to other notions such as imperfect homophony. A case in point can be Dienhart’s (1999, p. 109) conceptualisation of near homophony (or, paraphony) as “two words...similar but not identical in phonological form”². It needs to be emphasised that I endorse Solska’s (2012a) differentiation between paronymy and imperfect homophony as she approaches puns based on paronymy and imperfect homophony in slightly different terms. The former can be exemplified with the one-line joke: I used to be a doctor, but then I lost *patience* (patience vs. patients), while the latter with The Merchant of *Venice/Venus*. The *patience/patients* pair is an instance of cognates (paronymy), while the *Venice/Venus* pair is an example of “soundalikes” (imperfect homophony). The focus of this paper is on the latter case, i.e. similar-sounding words that are not derived from the same root. It should be underlined that since many scientists treat paronymy as an umbrella term for words that share a phonetic segment, irrespective of whether they are cognate forms or soundalikes, whenever I refer to the studies of others I comply with the labels used by those authors.

The studies of humorous paronymy and imperfect homophony are mainly concentrated on possible classifications of paronyms (especially early attempts at research into paronymy), for instance Hausmann’s (1974, in Attardo, 1994) typology of puns encompasses syntagmatic, paradigmatic, partial syntagmatic and partial paradigmatic paronyms.

Zwicky and Zwicky (1986) examine a corpus of 2140 English puns to report on phonological relationships in imperfect puns. They reckon that in this type of puns, “one phonological entity (the pun) stands for a phonologically distinct (but similar) entity (the target) the two representing two distinct lexical items as before” (Zwicky & Zwicky, 1986, p. 494). Notably, they observe that there are two types of relationships in imperfect puns: 1) segment/ zero, in which marked segments appear in place of unmarked targets, exemplified by *The lobe was the original **earring** aid* [target: hearing, pun: earring]; and 2) featural which encompasses vowels (e.g. *Engraving gives one the satisfaction of scratching the **etch*** [target: etch, pun: itch) and consonants. As regards phonological similarity, they conclude that imperfect puns share phonological segments, specifically consonants differ in voicing and position, while vowels differ in height and tenseness, which corroborates earlier studies.

Focusing on the similarity between paired forms of linguistic signs in puns, Dienhart (1999, p. 115) identifies paraphonic puns and observes that two near-homophones “are mentally linked by

2 Dienhart (1999) acknowledges the fact that a related term to “paraphonic” is “paronymic”, nonetheless the latter term refers to words that are etymologically related.

using a word in the sequent whose semantic content ties in with an item in the precedent, while at the same time being phonetically similar to the word or phrase it ‘replaces.’” The following riddle serves as an example: *Q: What do cannibals have for lunch? A: Baked **beings***, where the answer is tied in the context of cannibalism, and the phonetically-similar word *beans* would be relevant in the normal activity of eating.

As posited by Sobkowiak (1991, p. 113), the understandability of a paronomasic pun is maximised when it keeps “the consonantal skeleton relatively intact”, which means that a single consonant should be substituted for a different consonant. Vowels, on the other hand, are more easily substituted since “their information load is less (redundancy is higher)” (ibid.) important.

Partington (2006) argues that in near puns two sequences resemble each other not only on the phonological level but also the visual one (especially when a pun is written), nevertheless it is a phonetic dimension that is more important. He also contends that the correlation between two meanings that a near pun gives rise to is the point of the pun and it is, in part, responsible for its quality as well as judging whether it is successful and humorous.

Vásquez and Aslan (2021) reckon that wordplay based upon paronymy is cognitively demanding as it calls for the recipient’s accessing not only background knowledge but also more inferencing than wordplay whose humour depends upon literal meanings, which is always the case in implicitly communicated humour.

The present paper discusses puns based on imperfect homophony in an American sitcom *Modern Family* and analyses those forms of wordplay with respect to two criteria: 1) the number of valid concepts, resulting in the classification in which two concepts are valid or only one is valid, and 2) the source of the contextual information required for the identification of the target expression, yielding a distinction between an expression retrievable from memory and an expression present in the discourse. More specifically, granted that the purpose of watching a sitcom is the audience’s eagerness and readiness to be entertained³, it is important to describe the path of comprehension followed by viewers while analysing puns stemming from imperfect homophony, underlining the key role of context. The paper is structured as follows. First, section 2 presents a relevance-theoretic account of the construction of ad hoc concepts as well as an account of the comprehension heuristic procedure. In section 3, a synthetic overview of the relevance-theoretic studies into puns based on imperfect homophony as well as of the relevance-oriented view on context and its selection is offered. Section 4 describes data collection, research questions and tools of analysis. Section 5 presents the results from the analysis. Granted that humorous effects in puns based on imperfect homophony reside

3 Notwithstanding the primary purpose of entertainment, there is an interesting strand of research in which humour is conceptualised as a means of communicating propositional meanings that cannot be expressed when the speaker chooses other linguistic stimuli (e.g. Piskorska, 2021; Wieczorek, 2021 and references therein). As for puns fulfilling functions other than amusement, it has been demonstrated that they fulfil secondary functions, such as starting and stopping conversation, or filling awkward pauses (Norrick, 1993) as well as different poetic, metalinguistic, emotive, conative, phatic, and referential functions (Solska, 2021).

in the recipient's accessing two diverse concepts, it is my intention to detect whether the two expressions are always fully valid for the ongoing conversation as well as whether the target concept is always provided or it must be retrieved from the recipient's memory. Given the dearth of relevance-theoretic studies into humorous imperfect homophony, my article will hopefully "provide further data for a theory of lexical pragmatics and shed some light on the nature of the mental mechanisms involved" (Wilson & Carston, 2007, p. 237).

In the interest of clarity, I follow the convention of referring to two concepts, being dubbed a novel and target concept. The former is an ad hoc concept derived from the punning element used, whereas the latter modifies the concept underlying the punning expression. The target concept is activated via phonetic similarity to the novel concept. When processing of the target expression is not valid for the discourse context, the recipient does not inferentially develop the target concept into an ad hoc concept.

2. RT and ad hoc concept construction and comprehension

The growing interest in lexical pragmatics in the light of Relevance Theory (henceforth RT) is credited to Wilson and her insightful 2003 contribution, where she used the term 'lexical pragmatics' explicitly⁴. Nevertheless, the idea that lexical items require modifications of meaning in context was expressed by Sperber and Wilson in 1995 and further developed in several papers (Sperber & Wilson, 1997; Carston, 1997, 2002, 2019). The recipient's pragmatic-lexical processes involve deriving a relevant interpretation by means of adjusting an encoded concept in the light of contextual information and relevance.

RT proposes a radical version of a unitary approach to lexical pragmatics (Wilson, 2003; Wilson & Carston, 2007; Wilson & Kolaiti, 2017; Hall, 2017). It is maintained that adjusting a linguistically encoded concept in a given context is a part of free enrichment process in which a logical form becomes a contextually enriched proposition (Carston, 2010)⁵. Relevance theoreticians show how "the meanings of words are frequently pragmatically adjusted and fine-tuned in context, so that their contribution to the proposition expressed is different from their lexically encoded sense" (Wilson & Carston, 2007, pre-printed article). One of the consequences of this view is that a number of various linguistic phenomena such as approximation, hyperbole and metaphor all require the process of ad hoc concept construction and thus are treated as "a continuum of

4 In fact, Wałaszewska (2015) points out that Carston's (1997) contribution is an early attempt to look at how the meaning of words is modified in context. In addition, as noted by Wałaszewska (2015), outside an RT account, the term "lexical pragmatics" was coined by Mercer (1991).

5 The supporters of RT's lexical pragmatics differentiate between two types of enrichments, viz. saturation (linguistically mandated completion) and free enrichment (Carston, 2000; Padilla Cruz, 2022). While the former is the process triggered by linguistic constituents, the latter is "mandated entirely by pragmatic requirements rather than by any linguistic constituent present in the logical form" (Carston, 2000, p. 23). Both the recovery of unarticulated constituents and ad hoc concept construction are examples of free enrichment (cf. Jodłowiec, 2015 on a contextual cognitive fix).

cases...with no clear-cut points between them” (Wilson & Carston, 2007, p. 231). The comprehension of those figures of speech involves the process of narrowing or broadening or both, viz. the denotation may be more specific or general (Carston, 1997).

Focusing on the continuum of cases of lexical-pragmatic processes, the sentence *That film made me sick* is a case in point, demonstrating how the very same utterance can lead to different interpretations as soon as the concept gets a linguistically narrower or broader denotation. In the literal sense, the communicator can convey the meaning that s/he truly vomited because of the film (Wilson & Carston, 2007, p. 236). Apart from that, the concept SICK can be expanded in different directions (the cases of approximation, hyperbole and metaphor), which means that a communicated concept can be more general than the encoded concept. On the approximate interpretation, one can communicate that the communicator was about to vomit after having watched the film. As an instance of hyperbole, the speaker may imply that the film made him rather uneasy. Metaphor, in turn, requires the most radical treatment since its understanding involves the greatest departure from the encoded meaning of a given concept and as a result its denotation is broadest. Consequently, the interactant can metaphorically communicate that s/he experienced mental discomfort (Wilson & Carston, 2007). What needs underlining is that an RT approach to lexical pragmatics is unitary and hence literal and figurative uses of language are put along the continuum of cases, where only one inferential interpretative process of creating an ad hoc concept is required.

RT holds that utterance interpretation is an inferential endeavour through and through, which is guided by the interpreter’s expectations of relevance (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Any input is relevant to an individual if its processing yields the maximum cognitive benefit gained at the lowest mental effort. Relevance is therefore a comparative concept as the higher level of cognitive effects that satisfies the expectations of relevance gained at the smallest effort, the more relevant an input is. This understanding of relevance entails the fact that individuals have an innate capacity to maximise the relevance of an input (the cognitive principle of relevance) to attain a high degree of effects in return for the smallest processing effort (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). It is held in RT that any ostensive stimulus (anything that attracts one’s attention and directs it to the intended meaning) conveys the presumption of an input’s being optimally relevant to the recipient (the communicative principle of relevance) (Wilson & Sperber, 2004).

In addition, it is stated that the communicator’s ostensive stimulus is a clear indication/evidence of his/ her intentions, which is then inferred by the audience (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Consequently, the hearer is supposed to derive warranted conclusions about what the communicator intends to inform the audience. Those conclusions are a result of the recipient’s following the comprehension heuristic:

Relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure

- a) Follow a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects: Test interpretive hypotheses (disambiguations, reference resolutions, implicatures, etc.) in order of accessibility.

- b) Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (or abandoned) (Wilson & Sperber, 2004, p. 613)

While interpreting an utterance, there can be a number of different interpretations, yielding different cognitive gains, nevertheless the hearer accepts the interpretation that satisfies one's expectations of relevance, i.e. provides a balance of effects and effort.

3. An RT view on humorous imperfect homophony and the relevance of the context

The research into humorous imperfect homophony along RT lines is not extensive. Its studies concentrate on describing puns based on imperfect homophony as one of the various forms of wordplay in which context plays a central role (Solska, 2012a, 2012b, 2023). The aim of this section is, therefore, a summary of the proposals relevant solely to puns based on imperfect homophony. Moreover, an RT account of the context is delineated since it is essential for the recovery of the meanings in puns.

As regards the idea of how context is viewed in the RT framework, the construction of context is an active process. In a nutshell, the context is constructed (not given in advance) in order to process any new assumption. It is defined as “a subset of the individual's old assumptions, with which the new assumptions combine to yield a variety of contextual effects” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986 [1995], p. 132). The originators of RT further explain that “[a] context in this sense is not limited to information about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances: expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker, may all play a role in interpretation” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986 [1995], pp. 15–16). The selection of the context is conditioned by relevance so that a balance between cognitive effects (gain to cognitive processes) and the processing effort spent to compute any incoming stimulus that seems relevant enough is achieved.

There are various sources of contextual assumptions that can be valid for comprehension. Not only do new assumptions tie with old assumptions that can become the context for any new incoming stimuli, but also “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], pp. 15–16) can be used in the process of interpretation. Second, any new experience can appear to be relevant at some time. Third, encyclopaedic entries attached to concepts can be activated: “the encyclopaedic entry of a concept becomes accessible only when that concept appears in an assumption that has already been accessed” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986 [1995], p. 138). Those are highly idiosyncratic assumptions.

The comprehension process begins with the construction of the initial context, which comprises “the set of assumptions which make up his interpretation of the previous utterance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986 [1995], p. 139) and which can eventually be extended in different directions to

achieve relevance. When the recipient encounters a new discourse, s/he immediately accesses those propositions from the initial context that would lead to attaining a relevant interpretation (for a detailed account of how context is selected in joke processing, see Jodłowiec & Piskorska, 2024).

As for RT writings on imperfect puns, Solska (2012b) draws a parallel between puns based on perfect homophony on the one hand and imperfect homophony on the other, underlining the fact that connectors (punning elements) in both types encode only one concept. What distinguishes those two groups is that in puns based on imperfect homophony the concept encoded by a punning element will be formulated first, irrespective of the fact whether the very pun is spoken or written (Solska, 2012a). The second, target, concept will be identified and hence the humorous intention will be recovered as long as there is specific information in the recipient's cognitive environment. In many cases, the linguistic material in which the punning element is used incorporates parts of idioms or alludes to well-known books or films. As an illustration of the point concerning the encoded/target concept, consider the pun based on the Shakespeare's comedy *The Merchant of Venice*, which was slightly changed by the producers of a board game into *The Merchant of Venus*⁶.

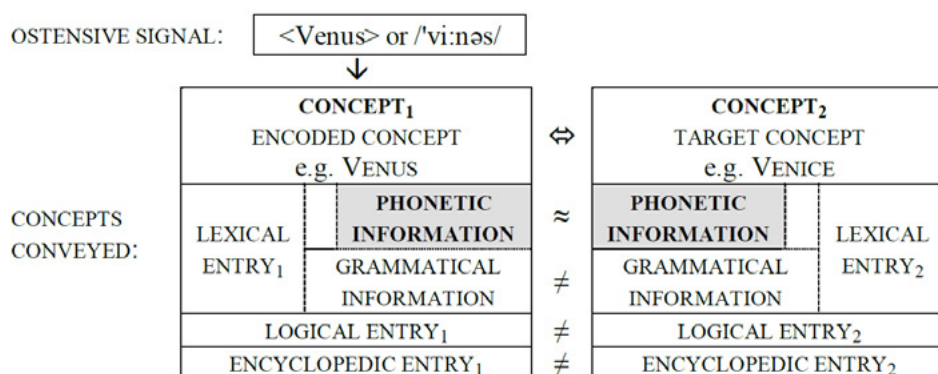


Figure 1. The pairings of concepts conveyed by the connector in puns based on imperfect homophony (Solska, 2012b, p. 401).

Figure 1 shows the analysis of the pun *The Merchant of Venice/Venus* in accordance to the three types of information that relevance theoreticians believe are stored under concepts (Sperber & Wilson, 1986 [1995], p. 86): 1) lexical entry: the information about grammatical and phonetic properties associated with a word/phrase, 2) logical entry: the information about defining properties of concepts, and 3) encyclopaedic entry: the “information about the extension and/

⁶ Solska (2012a, 2012b) explains the pleasurable feeling that the hearer experiences when analysing different forms of wordplay and thus accessing two meanings on the basis of the ambiguity carrier in terms of the oscillating effect. The interpreter is supposed to oscillate (move back and forth) between two legitimate, either inferred or retrieved, meanings.

or denotation of the concept” (ibid.). On the basis of Figure 1, it can be noticed that while logical and encyclopaedic entries of the concepts in puns based on imperfect homophony are dissimilar, one component of each lexical entry, namely the phonetic property, is similar.

To see how the two concepts *Venice* and *Venus* are activated and modified in the context of conversation, I would like to set the name of the board game in context to devote attention to processes involved in accessing the encoded concept and target one:

(1) **Peter:** Did you like the board game we played last night?

Mary: I adore playing the Merchant of Venus.

Mary provides an explicit answer that she liked the board game they played yesterday. Peter may construct the initial context that consists of the set of background assumptions concerning *The Merchant of Venus*: a player needs to buy and sell goods to other players, the game is set in the universe, players are obliged to buy permission to do business in a new galaxy, a player will earn money and then discover other galaxies, and if you are a successful player, you may ship goods to different galaxies. It is important to note that the role of metalinguistic context is of paramount importance since the reason why the addressee realises the word *Venus* is phonetically similar to the word *Venice* is the use of the phrase *The Merchant of...* This part of the title of the Shakespearean play functions as a starting point for the hearer’s identification of the similar-sounding target expression. As regards the first encoded concept that appears in the surface structure *The Merchant of Venus*, it may contain the encyclopaedic information specified above, for instance that it is a board game in which players live in different galaxies. The target concept is accessed as soon as the interpreter is able to identify a similar-sounding expression *The Merchant of Venice*, as it is present in his/ her cognitive environment. The encyclopaedic information attached to this lexical entry may encompass the following: it is one of the famous Shakespearean plays, it is about Antonio who is a prominent anti-Semitic merchant in Venice, the play is about loan and people who cannot afford to pay it back, etc. It may happen that one, some or none of those pieces of encyclopaedic information will be relevant in what the board game titled *the Merchant of Venus* is about. It can be stipulated that the recipient constructs the concept MERCHANT OF VENICE, meaning that it is a play where characters buy/ sell goods, which leads to the construction of the novel concept MERCHANT OF VENUS*⁷ denoting that Mary enjoyed playing the game in which players can buy/ sell goods in the universe.

7 Following an RT convention, the presence of an asterisk differentiates ad hoc concepts (e.g. MERCHANT OF VENUS*) from context-independent lexical concepts (e.g. Merchant of Venus).

4. Research questions and methodology

4.1. Research questions

The main area of the present considerations is puns based on imperfect homophony, notably the role of (meta)linguistic and visual context in facilitating the process of fine-tuning the meaning of nonce formations, employing RT's process of ad hoc concept construction.

The first question is: What is the role of linguistic and metalinguistic context in guiding the recipient to grasp the intended meaning? Since a novel concept is built upon the similar-sounding target concept, it will be of considerable significance to tease out how the context guides the recipient to grasp the humorous meaning.

The second research question is: Are two concepts fully valid for the topic of the ongoing conversation? Since the ad hoc concept is obtained from the modification of the punning phrase in the context of encyclopaedic information connected with the target expression, it is interesting to study whether the encyclopaedic entry of the target concept is always valid for the conversation. What I would like to zoom in on is whether one or two expressions are tied thematically to the conversation at hand.

The third research question is: What is the role of visual context in the recovery or facilitation of the humorous meaning? While visual context can, in fact, navigate the viewer towards the selection of the intended humorous context in which the recipient follows the path of comprehension envisaged by the production crew, I would like to explicate the way in which it aids the recovery of humorous effects.

4.2. Data collection

The study, conducted for the sake of the present paper, the results of which are reported here, is based on a manually collected corpus of conversational humorous exchanges taken from the American situation comedy ("sitcom" for short) television series *Modern Family* (2009-2020), which offers its viewers an honest and hilarious perspective on positive and negative sides of family life.

The corpus for the present research consists of 25 cases of puns based on imperfect homophony from seasons 8 and 9. The total number of all humorous units, including puns and other manifestations of conversational humour, from each season is 116 and 87, respectively. The transcribed data does not "feature linguistic transcription conventions, for example, systematic signalling of emphatic stress, paralinguistic features, lengths of pauses, intonation, overlap" (Bednarek, 2010, p. 70). Nonetheless, relevant features of speech and other contextual information, which influence the reception of humour are included in square brackets. The main reason for limiting my corpus to two seasons is that all of the fictional characters that were children in initial seasons, are now teenagers and thus they are all engaged in more humorous episodes.

4.3. Analytic procedure

The results are presented in the form of two classifications. The first taxonomy of puns predicated on imperfect homophony is based on the number of valid concepts: a) those in which both interpretations are valid, i.e. novel and target concepts are thematically pertinent to the topic of the ongoing conversation (sometimes dubbed double retention puns) or b) only one concept is valid, i.e. a novel one, (sometimes referred to as single retention puns, cf. Dynel, 2010). In other words, the demarcation line is drawn between the cases in which the encyclopaedic assumptions from one or both concepts are thematically valid (section 5.1). The second taxonomy is based on the source of the contextual information required for the identification of the target expression, yielding a distinction between 1) an expression retrievable from memory, and 2) an expression present in the discourse explicitly (section 5.2). At this point it should be underlined that the classifications are not mutually exclusive, thus it is possible for any of the pun to be grouped to two taxonomies at once.

As has already been explicated, Solska (2012b) makes a case for the importance of contextual information in processing puns, it is imperative to describe the tools of analysis since her claim forms the basis for my processing of puns. More specifically, the first classification is premised on the assumption that only one or two concepts are valid for the context. Hence, there is always at least one concept tied to the context. The second classification is based on the source of contextual information necessary for accessing of the target expression. Some concepts are consequently explicitly provided in a co-text. In general, context is an analytical tool as well as the leading factor that drives the recovery of the target expression in the analysed puns. It needs be highlighted that for the successful processing of any humour, the recipient accesses initial, (meta)linguistic, visual as well as cultural context. In particular, the viewer first formulates the initial context on the basis of the activation of relevant assumptions from his/her memory concerning any fictional character. Then, the initial context is expanded to include any contextual assumption from the present conversation, which is salient for the recovery of the intended meaning of a pun. Also, the metalinguistic context is a valid source of information, being the word(s) that surround the word(s) which enables the recipient to realise that a word in a novel expression is phonetically similar to another word in the target expression (as shown in the analysis of *The Merchant of Venice/Venus*). Last but not least, granted that the puns under analysis heavily draw upon culture-based knowledge, as they contain references to famous people, songs or TV series, it is essential for the interpreter to access cultural context which is individual-specific. As a result, for the sake of understanding, cultural artefacts, which are usually unspoken elements in dialogues, are provided and explained.

The puns based on imperfect homophony in the sitcom evoke famous titles of TV series such as *Downton Abbey*, names of people such as *Britney Spears*, *Farrah Fawcett* or *Martin Luther King* or song titles such as *Sweet Home Alabama*, which should be easily understood by the viewers who are familiar with them. The reason why I believe that target concepts can easily be accessed is the phonetic similarity between the two concepts, the (meta)linguistic context and their ubiquity

in countries where American culture is wide-spread. As for the metalinguistic context, since the punning elements are built upon multi-word proper names (Marmaridou, 1989; Wałaszewska, 2023), the part of the proper name that is the same in a novel concept and target expression provides a hint for identifying the target expression. In addition, as already mentioned, granted that the bulk of target expressions in the collected puns derive their humorous effects from famous songs, films, or names, the production crew, in this way, preserves comedic success of the sitcom.

In the analysis that is undertaken in two subsections below, I would like to concentrate on the relation between the target concept, novel concept and contextual information, paying attention to their interrelations.

5. The analysis of imperfect puns in *Modern Family*

The objective for this section is to present the findings from the study. The purpose of the study is two-fold. First, it aims to tease out the way the ad hoc concept and/ or target concept is related to a discourse context (section 5.1). Second, it addresses the issue connected with the source of the contextual information required for the identification of the target expression (section 5.2). These findings are presented in the form of two independent, yet not mutually exclusive, classifications of those forms of wordplay, which is a result of a bottom-up methodological perspective.

5.1. The number of valid concepts

The bedrock for the first classification is the number of concepts that are valid in a discourse context. It gives rise to two main groups of the puns stemming from imperfect homophony, which squarely converges with the recognised division into double-retention and single-retention puns (Dynel, 2010).

5.1.1. Both novel and target concepts are valid

The first group encompasses the cases in which the concept encoded by the words/phrases used or inferred as well as novel concept are both valid for the fictional humorous conversation (van Mulken et al., 2004; Dynel, 2010). In other words, it will be demonstrated that irrespective of the fact that different lexical information is attached to those concepts, the totality of their encyclopaedic information is thematically valid for the topic of exchange. The target concept used (or inferred from the recipient's memory) together with the novel concept provide access to a number of assumptions.

I would like first to consider dialogue (2) below. Cameron and Mitchell are partners. In Mitchell's turn, the concept encoded by a punning element is offered bluntly, being *Kung Sue*. The second unexpressed target expression is determined as long as the viewer has some knowledge concerning the film *Karate Kid*, which is about *kung fu*, understood as martial arts.

- (2) **Context:** Throughout the whole episode, Jay, Mitchell's father, praises all the members of his clan that they are all winners since they have done something special this year. For instance,

Mitchell made the intruder flee after a quick fight. Cameron, Mitchell's partner, presumes that it is not true so he decides to make Mitchell confess that he made up the story about the break-in.

Cameron: Why didn't you just tell me?

Mitchell: I don't know. You... You walked in, and you asked if there was a break-in, and I...I was embarrassed and possibly concussed, so I just I went with it. Besides, my dad and Claire cannot know, okay? That whole "Karate Kid" summer, they called me "*Kung Sue*."

The initial context consists of Jay's eagerness to suggest a reason why his family members can be praised, which is then extended by Mitchell's explanation that he was forced to lie about his bravery to make an intruder flee. The recipient's background assumptions that should be accessed include Jay's personality trait that he disregards many people such as those of different sexual orientation or race and Mitchell's feature that he would like his father to accept his sexual orientation. In the context of referring to the film *Karate Kid* (1984), in which a karate expert teaches a young boy skills of martial art, Mitchell openly admits that his father called him *Kung Sue*. The metalinguistic context is valid here since the recipient's recovery of the target unspoken expression *kung fu* is conditioned by the word *kung* as well as similarity in sounds between *Sue* and *fu*. Processing of both *Kung Sue* and *kung fu* is valid in a given context. The nickname for Mitchell, *Kung Sue*, has been inspired by the name of Chinese martial arts *kung fu*. As regards the expression *kung fu*, there may be a range of assumptions stored under the concept *kung fu*⁸ such as it requires a lot of patience and hard work, it is mostly practiced by men, the Chinese are the best in training, the movements resemble dancing, or you are not likely to be physically attacked if you are a kung fu master. Second, the understanding of the novel expression *Kung Sue* should involve the construction of an ad hoc concept KUNG SUE*, meaning that Mitchell is a homosexual and his father eagerly underlines Mitchell's effeminate nature, and who is contrary to being a savvy master of martial arts. Moreover, some further implications are warranted, for example Mitchell's father despises his son's sexual orientation, or because of behaving effeminately, Mitchell is the opposite of being a master of martial arts⁹.

Excerpt 2 exemplifies the category of imperfect puns in which two concepts are highly valid for the overall interpretation. On the one hand, it can be stated that Mitchell trains martial

8 It must be highlighted that encyclopaedic information, encompassing personal experiences and cultural beliefs, is idiosyncratic, thus different viewers may have quite different representations about kung fu.

9 A similar path of comprehension will be followed by a recipient in a different imperfect pun in which Mitchell is referred to as *Martin Luther Queen*, being inspired by the target concept *Martin Luther King*, to emphasise his effeminate character while behaving like a passionate human rights advocate. On the basis of such instances, we can see how the two concepts are intertwined in the same discourse context in that the encyclopaedic information about Martin Luther King, being a human rights supporter, and about Martin Luther Queen, being a female version of Martin Luther, are merged.

arts and this is why he made an intruder escape. On the other, Mitchell's sexual orientation is underlined by referring to him in terms of a female name *Sue*, which 'forces' the telecinematic recipient to construct an explicit interpretation that Mitchell is a master of martial arts but also an individual with effeminate traits.

A similar example from this category of puns, in which both concepts need to be acknowledged and entertained is (3). The difference between the previous instance and this one is the significance of visual context, which facilitates and makes the understanding of the novel concept more explicit. Merv, a marketing guru, is eager to help Phil, an estate agent, to sell the property where a person was murdered. He suggests advertising the house as *Charles Mansion*, the name of which alludes to an American criminal and cult leader convicted of murder *Charles Manson*.

- (3) **Context:** Phil visited Merv to collect some materials. He starts talking about the house Phil has problems selling.

Merv: Oh! I had a brainstorm on that property of yours that you're trying to unload. You know, where the people [showing throat-cutting] Ckkk!

(...)

Merv: You...You call it "Massacre Manor," "Downton Stabby"¹⁰, "Charles Mansion." I mean, like, I...I got a million of them.

The initial context is that Phil is concerned about selling the property where a person was murdered. His friend Merv advises Phil to make the fact of murder become an asset, which should be underlined on real estate brochure. The background assumption about Phil being keen on making humorous remarks and highly valuing any attempt at humour should be activated. In this extract, Merv tries to help Phil sell this house by making up a few catchy phrases, all of which refer to the murder. The metalinguistic context should be highlighted since the use of the name *Charles* triggers the recipient's realisation that the novel expression *Charles Mansion* is phonetically similar to the unspoken expression *Charles Manson*. Furthermore, it needs to be underlined that both the novel expression and target one are lexicalised: the former as *Mansion*, whereas the latter as *Manson*. First, the target expression is highly valid for the present conversation and there may be some assumptions associated with *Charles Manson* include: he is a murderer, he had bad influence upon the weak, or he ordered others to kill. As a result, the target concept (CHARLES) MANSON* includes the chunk about him being a murderer, as the most highly salient in the context of talking about the house where a person was murdered. Second, the novel proper name *Charles Mansion* should be understood in the context of the property where a person was murdered, which gives rise to the construction of the novel concept (CHARLES) MANSION*: the house where the massacre similar to the ones carried out by Manson happened. Moreover,

10 The Downton Abbey/ Stabby pun is discussed in section 5.1.2.

Merv makes a throat-cutting gesture, which visually facilitates this path of comprehension. This example lends credence to the proposal that visual context facilitates and boosts the recipient's enjoyment, which, without the use of words, will not generate humorous effects. However, an acoustic or written medium is the main carrier of humorous intention in this example.

The last example to be presented in this section is dialogue (4), where two expressions are placed in a co-text and interwoven into the fabric of fictional communication. Conversation (4) is a case in point given the fact that Mitchell mentions the band called *Miami Sound Machine*, which is erroneously understood by Cameron as *Miami's Hound Machine*. It can be stipulated that if the recipient were to access the expression *Miami Sound Machine* on his/ her own, it would require high processing cost. However, it needs to be underlined at the very beginning of the discussion that follows that the pair of words *sound-hound* provides an oscillation effect, being the key feature for puns (Solska, 2012b).

- (4) **Context:** Jay asks Mitchell to help him buy tickets for Gloria Estefan's concert, which he was supposed to buy, but missed the moment when it was his turn to get them online.

[Mitchell talks into the camera]

Mitchell: Cam briefly dated a member of Gloria Estefan's band, TheMiami Sound Machine. He doesn't talk about it much. Just whenever someone mentions her or Miami. Or humidity.

(...)

[Cameron talks into the camera]

Cameron: He [his former lover] owns a mobile dog grooming business called *Miami's Hound Machine*. In retrospect, I didn't need to be as alarmed with his collection of leashes and collars.

The context in which Mitchell and Cameron's conversation is set is about Cameron's eagerness to brag about dating a man from Gloria Estefan's band, The Miami Sound Machine, which Cameron brings up constantly. The first expression *Miami Sound Machine* is explicitly provided and explained by Mitchell, being Gloria Estefan's group of musicians. Cameron mentions the novel expression *Miami's Hound Machine*. It is interesting to note that the phrase *Miami...Machine* makes the viewer become aware that the word *hound* is similar in sounds to the word *sound*. In addition, Mitchell's prior mention of *Miami Sound Machine* facilitates the recipient's acknowledging that the two interpretations are equally valid for their conversation and hence s/he is led to oscillate between the phrases *Miami Sound Machine* and *Miami's Hound Machine*. Consequently, the recipient constructs the novel ad hoc concept MIAMI'S HOUND MACHINE*, which is the place where dogs are groomed, which is further validated in the given context. Apart from the explicit content of Cameron's turn, the recipient may derive the implicature that he was blinded by the

possibility of dating a celebrity so hard he did not ponder about the alleged musician having a collection of dog's accessories.

5.1.2. Only a novel concept is valid

Another subtype of puns based on imperfect homophony encompasses the instances in which only one concept is fully valid for the conversation (van Mulken et al., 2004; Dynel, 2010; Solska, 2012b) and as such its modulation suffices for satisfying a televisual recipient's expectations of relevance. In other words, an encyclopaedic entry attached to one novel concept will be involved in the adjustment process, even though the target expression also needs to be identified but only for the sake of phonetic similarity. It is important to note that, according to RT, even the extraneous meaning of the pun contributes to the relevance of the utterance in the sense that it generates additional meanings which affect the overall import of the utterances. Alongside the fully valid meaning, the extraneous meaning provides the basis for the oscillating effect that characterises punning utterances and the foundation for incongruity, which is often perceived as a necessary condition for humour.

The first exemplifying humorous episode is (5), in which the song performed by a rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd titled *Sweet Home Alabama* has inspired the title of the song, viz. *Sweet Home Ala-gramma*, which Cameron and his sister used to sing to their grandmother.

- (5) **Context:** Cameron tries to convince Mitchell to visit his grandmother, who is on her deathbed, and spend some time with her.

Cameron: Well, Mama's reading her poetry. Lily's reciting scripture. Pam and I are gonna sing a song we wrote when we were younger, "*Sweet Home Ala-gramma*."

The comprehension starts off with the initial context in which Cameron shows an inclination to make Mitchell show affection towards Cameron's family. Hence, the viewer's piece of background knowledge is strengthened by turn (5). The most important contextual assumption is the fact that Cameron and his sister wrote the lyrics to the score of a well-known song to honour their grandmother. The metalinguistic context surrounding part of the novel expression *Sweet Home Ala-gramma* is highly valid since the words *Sweet Home* that are the same in both target and novel expressions make the recipient acknowledge that *Ala-gramma* and *Alabama* are phonetically similar. The target, yet not present, phrase in a co-text is *Sweet Home Alabama*, which is the name of the song. It should be highlighted that this expression, besides bearing phonetic similarity to the novel expression, is not thematically valid for the interpretation. I would like to turn to the novel expression *Sweet Home Ala-gramma*, which, given the context of the grandmother's being on her deathbed and the grandchildren singing a childhood song, the recipient should inferentially develop the expression into an ad hoc concept SWEET HOME ALA-GRAMMA*, which denotes a song sung to grandmothers to show their care and longing for the

time together. This concept is based upon the recipient's storage of encyclopaedic information concerning the relationship between grandchildren and grandmothers: grandchildren are fond of their grandmothers, they want to lift the grandmother's spirit, grandchildren are ingenious while making own lyrics, or grandchildren spend a lot of pleasurable time at grandmother's. There are some implicatures warranted in this context such as Cameron feels sorrowful because of his grandmother dying, he values time spent with his grandmother and it is difficult for him to lose a loved one.

In a similar vein, humorous unit in (6) serves as an illustration of imperfect homophony-based puns in which encyclopaedic assumptions from the construction of one concept are fully valid for the conversation. An interesting feature of this dialogue is the presence of two similar-sounding novel expressions. More specifically, Martin's turn contains an imperfect pun based on the expression *Britney Queers* and Cameron's turn contains a novel phrase *Britney Spares*, both of which echo the name of a famous American singer *Britney Spears*.

(6) **Context:** Mitchell and Cameron meet their opponent, Martin, in a bowling contest.

Martin: Hello, Cameron. Hello, Mitchell. Where's the rest of *Britney Queers*?

Cameron: It's the *Britney Spares*, Martin.

The initial context consists of the assumptions that were manifest to viewers in previous episodes that Cameron and Martin are very competitive and attempt to discourage an opponent right before the bowling contest. In addition, the linguistic context is that Martin purposefully distorts the name of Cameron's bowling team as *Britney Queers*, with the aim of offending and underlining that they are a group of homosexuals. The nickname *Britney Queers* is phonetically similar to the name of the famous singer *Britney Spears*. The recipient's realisation that the word *queers* is similar in sounds to the surname *Spears* is the presence of the name *Britney*. Martin's turn in which the metalinguistic context is salient formulates the context for Cameron's turn, in which he corrects the name of the bowling team as *Britney Spares*. Martin's use of *Britney Queers* facilitates the *queers-Spears* oscillating effect as well as Cameron's mention of *Britney Spares* leads to the *spares-Spears* oscillation. The ad hoc novel concept BRITNEY SPARES* can be inferentially enriched to denote the group of bowlers being able to spare, i.e. knock down all the pins. Moreover, Cameron may wish Martin to formulate the implicature that his bowling team is superb.

The next instance of the pun to be discussed in this subsection is (7) below. In (7), Jay mentions the target concept STARKY AND HUTCH, which prompts the emergence of the novel concept STORESKI END HUTCH*. An interesting fact about the *Starsky and Hutch/ Storeski End Hutch* punning element is that creating a neologism or a nonce formation which evokes another well-known expression, i.e. *Storeski End Hutch*, which evokes *Starsky and Hutch*, amounts to lexicalising a novel concept, e.g. the concept STORESKI END HUTCH.

- (7) **Context:** Manny secretly sneaks into Jay's villain's bedroom and sees the photo of David Soul which belonged to Jay.

Jay: David Soul played Hutch in "Starsky and Hutch." Now, one of my groovier closet ideas was a hutch for your skis that latched onto the end of your closet. I called it the "*Storeski End Hutch*."

The initial context contains the information about Jay's fixation with celebrities and with being the best in the closet business. In addition, the recipient should notice the phonetic similarity between the phrase *Starsky and* and *storeski end* given the word *Hutch*. The target concept STARKY AND HUTCH is the name for the TV series *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979) about police officers. The novel concept STORESKI END HUTCH* is constructed, denoting a hutch designed for storing ski slopes, being fixed to the end of a wardrobe.

The last punning element present in dialogue (3) that has not been discussed at greater length so far is based on the *Downton Abbey*/*Downton Stabby* pair. The initial context is provided above. In addition to the initial context, the viewer's contextual information is expanded with Merv's mention of the horror film *Massacre Manor* (2020), which is about teenagers spending time in a haunted house. The viewer's identification of the target expression *Downton Abbey* is conditioned upon the metalinguistic context so that the target expression is phonetically similar to the novel one *Downton Stabby*, the common denominator of which is the epithet *Downton*. At the beginning, I would like to focus on the name of the British historical drama series *Downton Abbey*, which can encompass the recipient's associations about this series such as it is about the aristocratic family, their members live a residence, they treat their servants well, they experience pleasurable life, etc. Second, the telecinematic recipient should construct a novel concept DOWNTON STABBY*, denoting an enormous property where a person/ family was stabbed. The explicature of Merv's suggestion of the name for the property is to make positive associations between the property and the fact somebody was murdered.

5.2. The source of the contextual information required for the identification of the target expression

Another way of categorising the above-discussed puns is with respect to the criterion of the source of the contextual information required for the identification of the target expression. This classification of the puns based on imperfect homophony bifurcates into 1) the exchanges where the target expression needs to be retrieved from the hearer's memory, 2) and the units in which the target expression is explicitly provided in a co-text. In this section, I will use the puns from section 5.1., drawing attention to the source of contextual information as well as the reason for the production crew's providing target expressions in a co-text or forcing the recipient to retrieve them from memory.

5.2.1. An expression retrievable from memory

The section encompasses the puns where a novel expression is provided in the discourse, whereas the target one needs to be accessed on the basis of the context and the expression already present. Hence, the following puns are grouped here: *Kung Fu/Sue* (2), *Charles Manson/Mansion* (3), *Sweet Home Alabama/Ala-gramma* (5), *Britney Queers/Spears/Spares* (6) and *Downton Abbey/Stabby* (3). In this section, instead of analysing the viewer's possible path of comprehension while understanding those punning elements, which is already conducted in sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2, I would like to comment upon the reason for the recipient's probable need to retrieve the target expression from memory.

The main reason for the production crew's deploying only novel expression in a co-text is the belief that the humorous outcome, which is invariably connected to the recipient's retrieval of the target expression from memory, is not endangered. That is to say, there is a strong presupposition that the necessary target concept, being similar in sounds to a novel concept, is already in the hearer's cognitive environment, though very frequently dependent upon culture-based knowledge. As Solska (2012b, p.401) contends, "[m]ost 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". In addition, the metalinguistic context navigates and facilitates the recovery of the target expression.

5.2.2. An expression explicitly present in the discourse

The second subtype of the puns includes those in which both novel and target expressions are simultaneously present in fictional conversations. Hence, the following puns are grouped here: *Miami Sound Machine/Miami's Hound Machine* (4) as well as *Starsky and Hutch/Storeski End Hutch* (7).

The production crew may have decided to explicitly provide the target expression in a co-text to make sure that each and every viewer will not have troubles with juxtaposing the novel with the target expression and hence make sure that a pun is detected and understood. To be more specific, in the analysed puns it is assumed that the Gloria Estefan band *Miami Sound Machine* and the American television series *Starsky and Hutch* are candidates that the recipient can lack in his/her cognitive environment. In addition, the target expressions *Miami Sound Machine* and *Starsky and Hutch* are not contextually linked to the conversation at hand, this is why their presence is necessary to be juxtaposed as similar-sounding elements.

6. Conclusion

The strand of research pursued in this paper employs the RT workings of lexical pragmatics whose main objective is to determine how word/phrase meanings are pragmatically modulated in the context. The principal benefit of such an approach is to capture the flexibility of the meaning communicated by the interactant. In general, this analysis accounts for how a recipient sitting in front of a TV screen can follow the path of least effort in deriving humorous effects.

My focus in this paper was on puns stemming from imperfect homophony, analysed from the perspective of the viewer, employing a cognitive pragmatic framework of RT to expound on how the novel and target concepts are related to the context of conversation as well as what is the possible source of the contextual information needed to access the target concept. A characteristic feature of the analysed puns is that their humour relies on multi-word proper names. More specifically, the proper names employed in the puns rely on the phonetic similarity between a real-life name (the target concept) and an invented one (the novel concept), for instance *Sweet Home Alabama* and *Sweet Home Ala-gramma*, respectively. A special role of the metalinguistic context is discussed in the analytic part as the very presence of at least part of the proper name makes the viewer realise that the proper name in the novel concept is phonetically similar to the proper name in the target expression. On the basis of example (5) analysed above, the viewer is presented with the beginning of the title of the song *Sweet Home*, however the word *Alabama* does not meet his initial expectations about how the utterance may proceed. As a result, the novel concept requires to be inferentially developed. My findings reveal that the puns based on imperfect homophony can be categorised according to two criteria: the number of valid concepts in the context as well as the source of the contextual information needed to identify the target expression. As regards the first criterion, there are two types of puns: those whose encyclopaedic information stored under two concepts are contextually valid and those whose encyclopaedic information stored under a novel concept is valid. This classification corresponds to the recognised division into double- and single-retention puns, respectively (Dynel, 2010). As for the second criterion, it gives rise to the classification of imperfect puns into those in which the target expression is unspoken and hence must be retrieved from memory and those in which the target element is explicitly present in the discourse.

I would like now to return to the research questions. The first was related to the role of (meta)linguistic context in steering the recipient's recovery of the humorous interpretation. The answer is two-fold, depending on which classification is taken into consideration. Overall, the construction of context against which every incoming stimulus is processed is of paramount importance in the comprehension process, as described in RT. In addition, the presence of other elements that are part of the target expression helps the recipient realise that a unit in a novel expression is phonetically similar to a unit in the target expression. In the first taxonomy in which the defining criterion is the number of contextually valid concepts, it is evident that the linguistic context plays a central role in the comprehension process since the recipient needs to construct a novel concept, which is in clash to the similar-sounding target expression, the encyclopaedic information of which is contextually valid. Above all, as noted by van Mulken et al. (2005), those puns have the chance of being appreciated more than puns in which one meaning is valid. In the second group of puns, i.e. those premised on the assumption that only a novel concept is inferentially developed, it seems that the only function of the retrieval of the target expression is to bear phonetic resemblance to the phrase coined in a fictional dialogue. As regards the salience of linguistic context for the second taxonomy, it needs to be stated that the

context is a dynamic construct, which gears the process of interpretation. While accessing the target expression from memory requires more mental effort and inferencing, the very presence of the target expression in a co-text preserves the recipient's following path of comprehension envisaged by the production crew and hence it is more effort-saving.

The second question in this study sought to determine whether two concepts are always valid for the context of ongoing conversation. It is evident from the above analysis that the puns based on imperfect homophony in the sitcom *Modern Family* bifurcates into those in which two concepts are valid and those in which the encyclopaedic information from one concept is valid. Approaching this issue from a quantitative perspective, it must be stated that in the collected data puns in which two concepts are valid vastly outnumber those in which one concept is valid in the context of the conversation at hand. This finding is in agreement with the previous research, among others by van Mulken et al. (2005) and Yus (2003), which showed that processing of puns in which two meanings are contextually valid yields higher degree of cognitive rewards for the mental effort than processing of puns with only one valid meaning. In RT terms, it can be explained by that fact that the recipient is not led to discard the first highly relevant but eventually incorrect interpretation, but he is rather forced to move back and forth between two valid meanings.

The last research question concerned the issue of whether visual context facilitates the recovery of the humorous meaning. While only one example discussed above relied partially on the visual context, the analysis of all 25 puns revealed that the fictional characters made use of visual context in six cases. It corroborates the claim that visual context aids the viewer's entertaining of a punning effect. This study thus adds to the growing body of research into the interplay between textual and visual elements in multimodal humour, as exemplified by Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2018) and Vásquez and Aslan (2021). Vásquez and Aslan (2021, p. 115) note that "both textual and visual elements showed great variation – and interacted with one another in diverse ways". Similarly, Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2018) argue that visual elements are as much important as linguistic structure. Future studies might take a closer look at this interplay.

The findings of the study demonstrate that (meta)linguistic and visual contexts as well as the recipient's search for relevance play a pivotal role in the recovery of the humorous interpretation in the puns based upon imperfect homophony. The role of the (meta)linguistic context is to make it possible for the viewer to access novel concepts and, to a certain degree, the target concept, which is either explicitly provided in a humorous episode or needs to be inferred on the basis of the phenomenon of imperfect homophony itself. The role of visual context, being the props and gestures enhancing the viewer's experience of humour, on the other hand, is to facilitate the process of the derivation of humorous effects as well as to boost the viewer's amusement.

Overall, the very fact of basing imperfect puns on a distorted version of cultural artefacts, such as well-known writers, singers or actors provide a fertile ground for lexical-pragmatic processes identified in an RT framework.

Acknowledgements

I owe my profound gratitude to the anonymous reviewers who have helped me shape my paper significantly.

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