EduVision: Journal of Innovations in Pedagogy and Educational Advancements
Volume 2, Issue 2, February 2026
brightmindpublishing.com
ISSN (E): 3061-6972

METAPHORICAL POLYSEMY AS A HUMOUR ENGINE IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

Kendjaeva Zemfira
Independent Researcher
Uzbekistan State World Languages University

Abstract
Humour often appears at the exact moment when a reader or listener realizes that the same word can be understood in two compatible, yet competing ways. This article examines that "double-access" effect through metaphorical polysemy – cases where a lexical item keeps a literal sense while also developing metaphor-based senses (e.g., physical sharp → intellectual sharp). I focus on English and Russian because both languages routinely conventionalize metaphor, but they do not always conventionalize the same source domains or the same pragmatic "safe zones" for joking. Building on semantic accounts of deliberate ambiguity in verbal humour and on research that links humour to two-plane meaning construction, I argue that metaphorical polysemy becomes humorous when context makes the literal frame briefly plausible, then forces reanalysis. Evidence from psycholinguistic ERP work on Russian ambiguity processing supports the claim that metaphorical senses can trigger measurable competition and reinterpretation – precisely the cognitive rhythm that jokes exploit.

Keywords: Metaphorical polysemy, humour, ambiguity, figurative meaning, incongruity, English, Russian, pragmatics, cultural scripts, lexical access.

Introduction

A pun is the simplest classroom proof that meaning is not a single track. A speaker plants a word, the listener hears the "expected" sense, and then a later cue makes another sense suddenly relevant. The laugh is not produced by the second meaning alone; it is produced by the *switch*, and by the listener's recognition that the switch was engineered. In semantic terms, verbal humour has long been tied to deliberate ambiguity and to conditions under which a text supports competing interpretations

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(Raskin, 1985). What I want to isolate here is a particular substrate of that ambiguity: metaphorical polysemy.

Metaphorical polysemy is easy to describe but tricky to delimit. I treat it as a set of *related* senses created via metaphorical mapping, where the lexical form stays stable while its sense inventory expands. This differs from homonymy, where meanings are unrelated, and it differs from purely contextual metaphor, where the figurative meaning is a one-off inference rather than a conventional sense. In practice, English sharp (knife edge → intellect), cold (temperature → emotional distance), or virus (biology → computer threat) sit on a spectrum from fresh metaphor to entrenched sense. Russian provides comparable cases: острый (sharp/spicy/witty), тёплый (warm/affectionate), тормоз (brake → "slow person"), and каша (porridge → mental confusion), among many others. These items are not humorous by default. They become humorous when discourse invites the listener to keep both the literal and figurative frames "half-open."

That half-open state matters. Krikmann's account of humour and figurative speech emphasizes their shared architecture: both operate with two planes of meaning and pressure the recipient to resolve a perceived inconsistency by constructing an intersection between planes (Krikmann, 2009). A metaphor may resolve into insight; a joke resolves into amusement. Metaphorical polysemy is positioned to do both because it supplies a ready-made pair of planes inside one lexical shell. The speaker does not need to invent an entirely novel figurative link; the lexicon already stores it. The speaker's task shifts from creating meaning to *timing* meaning.

Timing is where humour starts behaving like a small psycholinguistic experiment. Consider an English exchange such as: "I need a *sharp* assistant." The default reading is figurative (smart). Now add a physical prop in the scene – say, a box cutter on the desk – and a follow-up line: "Because these packages are winning." The second line retroactively legitimizes the literal sense (sharp tool), and the hearer must decide whether the first line was an evaluation of intelligence or a request for a blade. The humour is not located in either sense in isolation. It is located in the recognition that the speaker arranged conditions for temporary misalignment. Russian can produce a parallel effect with острый: "Нам нужен *острый* редактор." If the next sentence mentions "колкие правки" (biting edits), the figurative reading dominates; if it mentions cutting cardboard for a layout

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mock-up, the literal resurfaces. The two languages share the same embodied base (physical sharpness), but they may differ in how naturally a workplace context supports the literal frame. That is already a cultural-pragmatic variable, not a dictionary variable.

At this point, it is tempting to claim that English humour is "more X" and Russian humour is "more Y." I will not do that, because such claims often collapse into stereotypes. A safer move is to talk about *norms of appropriateness* and *translation constraints*. Marușceac's overview of humour as a sociocultural phenomenon explicitly notes that cultures differ in what topics are acceptable for laughter and in which situations laughter is appropriate, and that these norms create practical difficulties in translating humorous material across English and Russian (Marușceac, 2022). Metaphorical polysemy sits inside that difficulty: even when the source word and target word are both polysemous, the *distribution* of senses and the pragmatic labels attached to them (formal, ironic, rude, playful) may not match.

Cultural variation in metaphor is relevant for the same reason. Kövecses argues that conceptual metaphors show both near-universal patterns grounded in embodiment and meaningful variation along cultural and contextual dimensions (Kövecses, 2010). For humour, this means the speaker may rely on a source domain that is "available" in one speech community but not salient in another. Animal metaphors illustrate the point cleanly without requiring controversial content. English shark (animal → aggressive businessperson) and Russian акула (same mapping) align well; humour can be preserved if the joke's mechanics rely on predation imagery. But other conventional animals do not line up so conveniently: an English coward-as-chicken mapping does not transparently convert into Russian without changing the lexical choice and, therefore, the internal polysemy structure. When the mapping changes, the joke's hinge changes too.

There is also a cognitive cost dimension that literary and translation scholars sometimes describe impressionistically ("it feels harder to process"). Psycholinguistic work gives that intuition a sharper edge. Yurchenko, Lopukhina, and Dragoy used ERPs in Russian to compare how readers process literal senses primed by metonymic versus metaphorical senses of polysemous nouns. Their results indicate that metaphor-related priming can trigger competition and

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reanalysis effects (N400/P600 patterns), suggesting that metaphorical senses may behave as partially distinct representations that interfere with literal access more than metonymic senses do (Yurchenko et al., 2020). I do not claim that "P600 equals laughter." The evidence does not say that. What it does support is a cognitively plausible bridge: humour that exploits metaphorical polysemy often depends on a moment of reanalysis, and reanalysis leaves measurable traces in language processing.

This bridge also helps explain why some literary jokes feel "slow-burn." A writer may deliberately delay a disambiguating cue to keep the reader's interpretation unstable. In fiction, that instability can build character voice: a narrator chooses a word that flatters itself under one reading and undercuts itself under another. Russian literature has a long tradition of lexical play; English literature does too; the difference is rarely the *presence* of polysemy, but the stylistic conventions around how explicitly the author signals playfulness. A subtle narrator may rely on the reader's tolerance for uncertainty; a comic narrator may overfeed cues and invite a faster switch.

Recent computational work, interestingly, ends up rediscovering a similar link between creative language types. Simpson and colleagues model humorousness and metaphor novelty as gradable properties and show that linguistic features and embeddings can predict rankings of short texts by humour and metaphor novelty (Simpson et al., 2019). For my purpose, their contribution is not an algorithm; it is a reminder that humour and metaphor are empirically "neighboring" phenomena in how they manifest in text. If models can learn shared signals, human readers likely do something analogous – using expectation, deviation, and recovery as a general-purpose mechanism.

A practical implication follows for comparative studies of English and Russian: counting loanwords or cataloguing metaphors is not enough if the target is humorous potential. The analysis has to include (a) the lexical sense network (which senses are conventional, which are marginal), (b) the pragmatic conditions that license play (where joking is acceptable), and (c) the discourse timing that makes both senses briefly viable. Kendjaeva's recent discussion of metaphorical polysemy as a catalyst for humour in multilingual settings points in the same direction by emphasizing negotiated meanings and the way overlapping literal/figurative dimensions can yield laughter or confusion depending on context

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(Kendjaeva, 2025). Even if one debates particular examples, the methodological intuition is sound: humour is not stored in the word; it is assembled in interaction. I should mark two limitations, because otherwise the argument becomes too smooth to trust. First, "English vs Russian" is not a single comparison; genre, register, and region matter. A stand-up routine, a Telegram meme, and a classic short story each uses polysemy differently. Second, the article has used constructed examples to expose mechanisms. They are realistic, but they are not a corpus. A next step would be to build a small parallel dataset of polysemy-driven jokes (or ironic turns) and annotate where the hinge sits: literal-to-figurative, figurative-to-literal, or a third option where both remain active.

Even with those limits, the main claim holds up: metaphorical polysemy is not just a property of lexical semantics; it is a reusable humour technology. It offers a compact way to stage incongruity while remaining "licensed" by ordinary language. The speaker does not break the code; the speaker exploits the code's multiple exits. When the timing is right, one word really does laugh twice.

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