

LANGUAGES AND CULTURE

USING WORDPLAY THROUGH VOCABULARY TO TEACH SHAKESPEARE'S SELECTED WORKS WITH AN EMPHASIS ON HUMOR

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ABSTRACT: "This article discusses one of the methods that helps instructors improve student engagement: integrating humor into teaching some of Shakespeare's works. Through humor, students not only master the language but also gain a deeper understanding of literature. The use of wordplay through vocabulary in language teaching not only creates a fun and dynamic learning environment but also attracts students through wit, sarcasm, and irony, helping to convey difficult or otherwise hard-to-express ideas directly. At the same time, humor helps create a comfortable learning space, reduce stress, and foster positive relationships between instructors and students. This aids students in gaining a better understanding of social and ethical issues in the works, thereby developing critical thinking and expanding cultural knowledge. To illustrate this, the article provides examples of wordplay using vocabulary tools (homophones, synonyms, antonyms, and polysemy) in three works: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*."

KEY WORDS: Humor; wordplay; homophones; synonyms; antonyms; and polysemy.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

The interaction between instructors and students in each lecture plays a vital role in language acquisition, particularly in foreign language learning, such as for students majoring in English. Instructors are not only required to employ appropriate teaching strategies, but must also maintain a professional and respectful attitude throughout the teaching process, notably avoiding an arrogant or overly rigid demeanor that may induce stress in students. Such an approach is ineffective, as it can lead to negative attitudes, apprehension, and ultimately a lack of confidence and motivation among students.

In contrast, effective instructors consistently adopt a friendly, democratic, open, and approachable attitude. They teach in a manner that is both clear and engaging, while also possessing the ability to inspire interest and capture students' attention. Simultaneously, they manage the classroom efficiently, fostering a productive learning environment that motivates students. The instructor's role is further exemplified in their ability to guide students and cultivate a positive and effective learning atmosphere.

One effective strategy that enhances student-instructor interaction is the incorporation of humor in lectures. Humor creates a lively, open, and comfortable learning environment, which promotes communication between the instructor and students. The use of humor in language teaching may be direct or indirect, but the most effective approach is to utilize humor directly in conveying linguistic knowledge. Specifically, instructors can incorporate materials containing humorous elements to help students absorb language content in an engaging, accessible, and memorable manner.

In addition to jokes, literary works that employ wordplay also serve as a valuable tool. Wordplay

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not only elicits laughter but also stimulates students' creativity, encouraging them to explore indirect, ironic, or critical ways to express difficult concepts. Wordplay can be applied in teaching various linguistic topics, such as phonology, writing, homophones, synonyms, antonyms, and polysemy. This is one of the central objectives that this article seeks to address.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Concept of "Wordplay"

Raskin (1985) suggests that wordplay is a form of semantic humor, where a word or phrase can have multiple meanings, and these meanings may be contrasting. According to this theory, wordplay occurs when a sentence or situation uses a word in two different semantic 'scripts' that the listener can recognize, eliciting a humorous response.

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) argue that communication and the understanding of humor depend on the level of 'relevance' of the message to the listener. Wordplay in language creates a level of ambiguity or polysemy that forces the listener to use inference to select the meaning most appropriate to the context.

Attardo (2001) and Holmes (2013) expand on Raskin's theory and propose a theory of humor based on speech acts (pragmatics). According to these scholars, wordplay is a type of semantic deviation in communication, where the listener must recognize different semantic relationships to perceive the humor. Chiaro (2006) argues that wordplay is an essential component of humorous language. Chiaro explores various types of jokes and the role of semantics in creating a humorous effect.

2.2. Humor

The term 'humor' originates from the Latin word 'umor,' which refers to one of the four bodily fluids (yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood). In Ancient Greek, the word 'humor' comes from 'humors,' referring to the balance of these fluids within the body.

Raskin (1985) suggests that humor arises when words or grammatical structures can belong to multiple semantic scripts, creating a sense of surprise or semantic contradiction. Meanwhile, Mulkey and Ziv (1988) study humor as a social and cultural tool, exploring how it is used to create social interaction, while Attardo (1994) focuses on semantic theories and speech acts, examining how they explain the emergence of humor. Provine (2000), Chandler (2002), and Holmes (2013) argue that humor results from the unexpected combination of two or more incompatible ideas.

In relation to teaching, humor is considered any message conveyed by the instructor aimed at making students feel happy. Although humor is a complex, multi-dimensional concept, Martin (2007) and Morreall (2009) believe that there is general consensus among scholars that humor can encompass various meanings in a way that evokes laughter. They agree that humor involves perception, concepts, and emotional responses, including enjoyment.

3. Methods of the study

This paper employs several primary research methods: semantic analysis, the organization of language, and the cultural and social factors involved in the creation of humor. The application of these research methods in analyzing wordplay through vocabulary via humor helps researchers gain a deeper understanding of the linguistic and social mechanisms that contribute to humor. These methods not only support the analysis of the semantic and syntactic structures of wordplay but also clarify the cultural, psychological, and contextual factors that influence humor in communication. The research data is drawn from several works by William Shakespeare, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Results

4.2.1. Homophones

William Shakespeare was a master of wordplay, including the use of homophones, to create humorous, sharp situations that reflect the depth of his works. Homophones are words that sound the same but have different meanings, and Shakespeare skillfully exploited this feature to create layers of meaning, contradictions, or irony. Below are some examples of homophone-based wordplay in his famous works:

1) In the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare uses homophones to create humor and irony:

Bottom: *"I'll roar you as gently as any sucking dove. I will roar you as 'twere any nightingale."* (Screen 2, act 1)

Shakespeare uses 'roar' to contrast with the imagery of the dove and the nightingale. Bottom's statement can be viewed as a form of wordplay, emphasizing the contrast between the strength of a roar and the delicacy of these

Puck: *"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"* (Screen 5, act 1)

Although it is not a typical example of a homophone, this sentence can be understood as a metaphorical wordplay with 'fools' and 'mortals,' as Puck comments on the foolish actions of the characters in the story, while also reflecting a perspective on human nature. This wordplay makes the line both ironic and humorous."

2) In the play *Twelfth Night*, the character Feste, the fool, frequently uses homophones to create humorous and profound situations.

Feste: *"Better a witty fool than a foolish wit."* (Screen 5, act 1)

This statement can be understood as an example of wordplay through the contrast between the homophones 'fool' and 'wit.' 'Witty fool' and 'foolish wit' are inherently opposing concepts, making the statement both humorous and reflective of Feste's ironic attitude toward intellect and foolishness.

Viola: *"And with what wing the staniel checks at it!"* (Screen 5, act 1)

In this sentence, 'wing' can be understood as an example of a homophone, as Viola not only refers to her agility but also evokes the image of a hawk soaring through the air. The use of this homophone helps convey the character's finesse and quickness.

3) In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses homophones to convey the psychological contradictions of the characters and to create sharp, and at times humorous, dialogue

Hamlet: *"Not so, my lord; I am too much i' the sun."* (Screen 2, act 1)

In this sentence, Hamlet uses a homophone between 'sun' and 'son' when responding to Claudius. This can be understood as a pun, referring both to the 'sun' (a metaphor for the heat of the environment) and reflecting the relationship between Hamlet and his stepfather Claudius. Hamlet intends to imply that he is 'too prominent' in the current situation, as if he is being illuminated by light.

Hamlet: *"A little more than kin, and less than kind."* (Screen 2, act 1)

This is a typical example of wordplay through homophones. Hamlet uses 'kin' (family) and 'kind' (affection) to refer to his uncle, Claudius. While 'kin' and 'kind' are not perfect homophones, the similarity in their sounds creates a pun in the way Hamlet criticizes Claudius

Hamlet: *"To be, or not to be, that is the question."* (Screen 1, act 3)

Although this line is famous and not a typical homophone pun, the use of 'be' (to live) and 'not to be' (not to live) creates a philosophical contrast, enabling Hamlet to question the nature of life and death. This represents an indirect form of wordplay through the repetition of a word that carries significant meaning in the play.

The examples above illustrate how Shakespeare employs homophones to create humor, reflect the complexity of characters' psychology, and highlight the contradictions in social and personal relationships. These homophonic wordplays not only enhance the appeal of Shakespeare's works but also underscore profound themes concerning human nature, love, betrayal, and death.

4.2.2. Polysemy

William Shakespeare skillfully uses polysemy (the use of words with multiple meanings) in his works to create humor, irony, or even to express deep contradictions between characters. Polysemous words are those that have different meanings, and Shakespeare capitalized on this feature to add depth to situations and characters. Below are some notable examples of polysemic wordplay in his works."

1) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Puck: *"I am that merry wanderer of the night. I jest to Oberon, and make him smile, When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile, Neighing in likeness of a filly foal: And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl, In very likeness of a roasted crab; And when she drinks, against her lips I bob, And on her wither'd dew-lap pour the ale."* (Screen 2, act 1)

In this passage, the word 'crab' refers to both an unripe apple (sour apple) and a crab (the marine creature). This is an example of wordplay through polysemy, where Puck disguises himself as a burning apple in a woman's bowl, making the situation humorous. The combination of 'crab' (sour apple) and 'roasted crab' creates a surprising and amusing blend.

2) *Twelfth Night*

Feste: *"No man must know. No man must know. What man must know?"* (Screen 5, act 1)

Here, 'man' can be understood in two different ways: one as a human being (in the common context), and the other as a specific individual. Feste is using wordplay to satirize the contradictions between the characters' words and actions, emphasizing the instability and implication in what they want to know or choose not to know.

Viola: *"For that is your trouble, let the great man talk, or let the noble lady smile."* (Screen 5, act 1)

In this sentence, 'great' can be understood as 'powerful' in a social sense (a person of high rank or status) and also as 'grand' or 'wonderful' in terms of character or qualities. Shakespeare plays with the word 'great' to highlight the complexity of the relationships between characters in *Twelfth Night*.

3) *Hamlet*

Hamlet: *"Frailty, thy name is woman!"* (Screen 2, act 1)

In this sentence, 'frailty' not only refers to physical weakness but can also be understood as emotional or mental weakness. Hamlet is criticizing his mother, Gertrude, but the word 'frailty' can be extended to imply all women in general, reflecting Hamlet's disappointment with his mother's betrayal and his broader disillusionment with women in a society full of deceit.

Hamlet: *"What a piece of work is man!"* (Screen 2, act 2)

The word 'work' has two meanings: one is 'masterpiece,' referring to the refined and noble nature of mankind, and the other is 'labor' or 'effort,' implying struggle and futility. Hamlet's statement can

be understood as irony, where he both admires and criticizes humanity - as a 'wonderful work' but full of flaws.

*Hamlet: *"To be, or not to be, that is the question."* (Screen 1, act 3)

The word "be" in this sentence can be understood in two ways: one is "existence" (to exist), and the other is "becoming" (to become). Hamlet is questioning life and death, using the ambiguity of the word "be" to broaden the meaning of whether to "exist" in life or to "become" something new, something different. This is a classic example of how Shakespeare uses polysemy to enrich philosophical questions.

Shakespeare frequently uses polysemous words to create wordplay that is humorous, critical, or satirical in his works. Words like "frailty," "work," and "be" have different meanings in different contexts, and their use not only enhances the humor but also reflects the complexity of the themes he aims to convey, such as love, power, life, and death.

4.2.3. Synonyms

Shakespeare was a master in using synonym-based wordplay to create humorous, sharp, and profound situations in his works. Synonyms are words with similar or nearly identical meanings but with different nuances depending on the context. Shakespeare used them to portray relationships, highlight character traits, and even to satirize or create conflict within situations. Here are some examples of synonym-based wordplay in his works:

1) "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

Puck: *"And I serve the fairy queen, to dew her orbs upon the green, the cowslips tall her pensioners be: In their gold coats spots you see; Those be rubies, fairy favours, nn those freckles live their savours: I must go seek some dew-drops here, And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear."* (Screen1, act2).

Shakespeare uses "dew" and "pearl" as synonyms, yet they carry different meanings in context. "Dew" refers to natural droplets of moisture, while "pearl" represents a valuable object hung up, creating a contrast between simplicity and preciousness, reflecting how Puck describes his work.

2) "Twelfth Night"

Feste: *"Better a witty fool than a foolish wit."* (Screen 5, act 1)

In this sentence, Shakespeare uses "witty" and "foolish" as opposing synonyms, but they carry contrasting meanings when placed together. Feste, the fool in the play, is expressing a profound view on intelligence and folly. This sentence not only serves as a wordplay but also reflects irony, highlighting the wisdom of the fool and the lack of intelligence in

3) "Hamlet"

Hamlet: *"Give me that man That is not passion's slave and I will wear him. In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart, As I do thee."* (Screen 2, act 3)

Shakespeare sử dụng "heart's core" và "heart of heart" như những từ đồng nghĩa với nhau để diễn đạt mức độ sâu sắc của tình cảm. Dù cả hai cụm từ đều nói về trái tim, nhưng cách sử dụng từ này tạo ra sự lặp lại và nhấn mạnh vào tình cảm sâu sắc của Hamlet đối với Horatio

Polonius: *"Give thy thoughts no tongue, Nor any unproportion'd thought his act."* (Screen 3, act 1)

The words "thought" and "act" are synonyms with a close connection, as Polonius advises Laertes not to let useless thoughts lead to unreasonable actions. The word "thought" can be understood as ideas or emotions, while "act" refers to a specific action taken based on those thoughts.

Hamlet: *"To be, or not to be, that is the question."* (Screen 1, act 3)

In this sentence, "be" can be understood as "to exist" or "to become." The repetition of this word not only creates a seemingly ambiguous statement but also evokes the freedom in Hamlet's decision

to live or die. This line can also be seen as a wordplay with the different nuances of the word "be," which Shakespeare uses to pose a question about existence and the meaning of life.

The use of synonyms in Shakespeare's works not only enhances the humor and creates layers of complex meanings but also helps him portray the relationships between characters in a profound way. Examples like "witty" and "foolish," "heart's core" and "heart of heart," or "be" and "work" not only add intrigue to the dialogues but also demonstrate Shakespeare's linguistic mastery

4.2.4. Antonyms

Shakespeare was a master at using antonyms for wordplay to create depth in situations, highlight contradictions between characters, and even to evoke humor. The antonyms in his works not only enrich the context but also enhance the depth of themes such as love, power, life, and death. Below are some examples of wordplay using antonyms in Shakespeare's works

1) *"A Midsummer Night's Dream"*

Puck: *"Lord, what fools these mortals be!"* (Screen 2, act 3)

In this sentence, the word "fools" contrasts with "mortals" to emphasize the contradiction between human naivety and ignorance and the eternal, divine nature of mystical beings like Puck. The use of these two antonyms highlights the irony and the helplessness of humans in the mystical world

Lysander: *"The course of true love never did run smooth."* (Screen 1, act 1)

"Smooth" and "rough" are two antonyms used to describe the difficulties and challenges of love. Lysander says that true love is never easy, and the contrast between these two words clearly illustrates the hardships the characters face in love.

2) *"Twelfth Night"*

Feste: *"Better a witty fool than a foolish wit."* (Screen 5, act 1)

Feste's statement uses "witty" and "foolish" as antonyms to emphasize a humorous yet profound philosophy about intelligence. Feste is commenting on the contrast between a clever fool and a person with intellect who acts foolishly. This opposition also reflects the irony of how intelligence and foolishness can coexist within the same individual

3) *"Hamlet"*

Hamlet: *"Frailty, thy name is woman!"* (Screen 2, act 1)

In this sentence, "frailty" and "strength" are antonyms. Although Hamlet criticizes the frailty of women, it subtly reflects society's views on gender differences. This contrast highlights Hamlet's frustration with his mother, Gertrude, and with women in general within the context of the play

Hamlet: *"To be, or not to be, that is the question."* (Screen 1, act 3)

"Be" (to exist) and "not to be" (not to exist) are antonyms, creating a famous and philosophical question. Hamlet raises the issue of life and death, the contrast between existence and non-existence, highlighting the threat of death and the reflections on being

Shakespeare effectively uses antonyms in his works to express the internal conflicts and contradictions of his characters, as well as to enrich the messages he wishes to convey. Examples such as "foolish" and "witty" or "frailty" and "strength" not only create humorous situations but also highlight themes of love, life and death, power, and wisdom in Shakespeare's works.

4.2. Discussion

Wordplay through vocabulary in teaching English (TE) plays a significant role, as it not only helps students develop their language skills but also motivates and engages them in the learning process. The use of wordplay and vocabulary games in the English classroom can help students

absorb lessons more naturally and easily. Here are some important reasons for the significance of this method:

The first reason is Enhancing vocabulary retention. Wordplay is an effective learning method that helps students retain vocabulary in the long term. When students engage in games like word puzzles, word matching, or creating sentences with new words, they not only learn vocabulary mechanically but also apply it in real-life contexts. This connection between words and images, sounds, or real-life situations helps students remember vocabulary for longer periods.

The second reason is Encouraging creativity and flexible thinking. Wordplay helps students develop creative and flexible thinking when using language. For example, in word puzzle games or word-matching activities, students need to figure out how to apply vocabulary in different situations, which allows them to come up with various ways to use words in different contexts. This also helps students use language more flexibly in real-life communication.

Also, it can create interest and motivation for learning. Using wordplay in English language teaching can help reduce monotony in learning. Learning vocabulary through games makes the process more interesting and engaging, preventing students from feeling pressured when learning a foreign language. Students will feel more joyful and confident in their learning, which also encourages active participation in lessons.

Certainly, it can help students gain a deeper understanding of word meanings. Wordplay games help students better understand the meanings of words and how to use them in various contexts. For instance, in synonym-antonym games, students can gain a clearer understanding of the nuances of words and how to use them appropriately in communication. This is crucial in language learning as it helps students avoid using words incorrectly or imprecisely.

Learning vocabulary through games helps students feel more comfortable using the language. They don't feel anxious about making mistakes when participating in games because the primary goal of the game is fun and learning, not perfection. This helps students feel more confident when using English in everyday communication.

Finally, it can develop critical thinking skills. Some wordplay games require students to think carefully to find the right word or answer, thus developing their critical thinking and logical reasoning abilities. For example, in word-matching games or synonym-finding exercises, students need to analyze, reason, and make decisions based on their knowledge, helping to enhance their logical thinking skills.

5. Conclusion

Shakespeare is a master of wordplay, often employing various methods such as puns, polysemy, inversion, and unexpected word combinations to create deep meanings. Using wordplay in teaching helps students recognize the incredible creativity in Shakespeare's language while improving their ability to analyze and decode metaphorical expressions in his works. It also helps develop language skills and critical thinking. Wordplay creates an engaging learning environment, stimulates a love for and exploration of classic literature, and aids students in effectively memorizing and applying vocabulary. Applying this method in teaching not only enriches the learning experience but also opens the door for students to gain a deeper understanding of the messages and values within Shakespeare's works.

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**Sử dụng hiện tượng chơi chữ bằng phương tiện từ vựng trong việc giảng dạy
một số tác phẩm văn học tiếng Anh của Shakespeare thông qua yếu tố hài hước**

Tóm tắt: Bài viết này đề cập đến một trong những phương pháp giúp giảng viên cải thiện sự tương tác với sinh viên: tích hợp hài hước vào giảng dạy một số tác phẩm của Shakespeare. Thông qua yếu tố hài hước, sinh viên không chỉ nắm vững ngôn ngữ mà còn cảm nhận được chiều sâu của văn học. Việc sử dụng chơi chữ bằng phương tiện từ vựng trong giảng dạy ngôn ngữ không chỉ tạo ra một môi trường học tập vui vẻ, sinh động mà còn thu hút sinh viên nhờ sự thông minh, châm biếm và châm chọc, giúp truyền đạt những ý tưởng khó hoặc không dễ dàng bày tỏ trực tiếp. Đồng thời, hài hước giúp tạo ra không gian học tập thoải mái, giảm căng thẳng và xây dựng mối quan hệ tích cực giữa giảng viên và sinh viên. Điều này giúp sinh viên hiểu rõ hơn các vấn đề xã hội và đạo đức trong các tác phẩm, từ đó phát triển tư duy phản biện và mở rộng kiến thức văn hóa. Để minh họa điều này, bài viết đưa ra các ví dụ về chơi chữ sử dụng công cụ từ vựng (từ đồng âm, từ đồng nghĩa, từ trái nghĩa, từ đa nghĩa) trong ba tác phẩm "Giấc mộng đêm hè", "Đêm thứ mười hai" và "Hamlet".

Từ khóa: Hài hước; chơi chữ; từ đồng âm; từ đồng nghĩa; từ trái nghĩa; từ đa nghĩa.