

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Humor has become an integral part of society (Siahaan, 2019). As explained by Siahaan (2019), the existence of humor is often a way for people to overcome or reduce boredom. Widjaja (1983) stated that humor applies to ordinary people for entertainment, because “entertainment” is an absolute necessity for humans to survive in the process of defending their lives. The development of the digital age makes it easier for people to find different forms of humor they like. One of the most common forms of humor that can be found easily spread in today’s digital or internet era is memes (Siahaan, 2019).

The definition of a meme was first written by Dawkins (1976) in his book entitled “*The Selfish Gene*,” stated that a meme is a unit of communication and cultural element that can be spread from one individual to another. Memes are images or photos modified with the addition of text or language to create new meanings (Nugraha et al., 2015 as cited in Listiyorini, 2017). On the other hand, Lestari (2018) emphasized that a meme is created to illustrate or comment on what is currently happening and it is typically based on factual events or situations. Therefore, memes can serve as a tool for social protest, a means of education, entertainment, or even as a medium for moral improvement (Siahaan, 2019).

Besides having funny images and texts, memes also contain certain messages or intentions that the creators want to convey. In this case, there is a connection between the use of language in memes in conveying the creator's message. However, social media platforms often use memes as a form of jokes or humor, in which memes are usually made by adding wordplay that has more than one meaning. In the study of language, the field that deals with meaning is referred to as semantics. Griffiths (2006) defined semantics involves the exploration of word and sentence meanings without being affected by particular contextual elements. In addition, the situation in which a word can be understood in various ways, causing unclear meanings is called lexical ambiguity. Ramadani (2015) explained lexical ambiguity arises when a word has several lexical interpretations based on the dictionary. For example, the word *kind* can have several definitions such as 'type' and 'considerate' (Murphy, 2010).

Lexical ambiguity is a common phenomenon in language. Rodd (2018) stated that in English, specifically, more than 80% of words have multiple definitions in the dictionary, and some words even have many different meanings. Therefore, lexical ambiguity is something that is very common in English. In addition, lexical ambiguity usually appears in sentences that are commonly used for humor (Siahaan, 2019). Seewoester (2009) mentioned that funny and humorous sentences often derive their appeal through ambiguity or unclear meanings embedded within them. This is supported by Danandjaja (2005) who argued that an utterance is considered

humorous if it can make people laugh and has several characteristics, such as surprising, tickling, breaking the rules, strange, absurd, contrary to reality, naughty, and can be interpreted in various definition. Hence, the presentation of humor in memes can be both entertaining and confusing at the same time depending on how each individual understands the meaning of lexical ambiguity contained in humor in memes.

There are many platforms where memes can be found, one of which is the social media platform Instagram. Instagram is a platform that almost everyone uses nowadays. In line with Destira et al. (2021), Instagram is one of this century's fastest-growing social media apps. One of the Instagram accounts that provides memes characterized by wordplay and light classic jokes (dad jokes) is the @punhubonline account. @punhubonline's Instagram account has 1.2 million followers and has become popular for its ability to reach many users by presenting memes that are fun and easy to understand. Thus, lexical ambiguity used in memes on @punhubonline Instagram account was the focus of the analysis in this study.

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## 1.2 Problems of the Study

Derived from the provided explanation that has been presented previously, this study established two research questions shown below.

1. What kinds of lexical ambiguity are used in memes on @punhubonline Instagram account?

2. How can memes be analysed from the theory of humor on @punhubonline Instagram account?

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

In light of the research questions previously, the research objectives were outlined below.

1. To identify types of lexical ambiguity used in memes on @punhubonline Instagram account.
2. To find out how memes can be analysed from the theory of humor on @punhubonline Instagram account.

### 1.4 Limitation of the Study

Due to the research background and problems, this research has established its limitations. This research is limited to identifying the types of lexical ambiguity used in memes on @punhubonline Instagram account utilizing Murphy's (2010) theory of lexical ambiguity and finding out how memes can be analysed from the theory of humor on @punhubonline Instagram account by using Shade's (1996) theory of humor.

### 1.5 Significance of the Study

This study provides contributions that benefit both theoretical and practical aspects. These contributions are delineated hereafter.

### **1.5.1 Theoretical Significance**

It is hoped that this research contributes to the field of linguistic studies, especially semantics, by providing insight into lexical ambiguity used in the development of language in humor and adapted in the context of digital communication, in this case, memes. This is expected to help linguists and researchers understand the type of lexical ambiguity and the type of humor created by lexical ambiguity as well as the meaning conveyed through memes on Instagram social media. In addition, this research is hoped to provide benefits for academics exploring the relationship between language, humor, and cultural development in social media.

### **1.5.2 Practical Significance**

By conducting this research, it is anticipated that students acquire a deeper understanding of linguistics, specifically focusing on semantics, particularly lexical ambiguity. Furthermore, students are expected to develop the ability to decipher the meanings of words that create lexical ambiguity within memes, enabling them to grasp the humor conveyed in memes effectively. Additionally, students comprehend the types of humor created by lexical ambiguity in memes. Moreover, this research is hoped to give more information about the novelty of the types of lexical ambiguity and the types of humor discovered in memes on Instagram in this current era and can be used as a reference by other researchers in examining similar topics using a variety of different data sources.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE, CONCEPTS, AND THEORIES

#### 2.1 Review of Related Literature

This study is not the first exploration into the semantic field, specifically concerning lexical ambiguity. Several studies related to the subject of this research were required to conduct this recent study. There were five prior studies on this subject were chosen for comparison, comprising two theses and three articles that were explained below.

The first previous study associated with this research is a study entitled “*Lexical and Syntactical Ambiguity in the Business News of BBC News*” by Jannah (2021). This study analysed the business news articles on BBC News by utilizing Kreidler’s (2017) theory as an analytical foundation. The findings revealed that lexical ambiguity was more common than syntactic ambiguity. In addition, in lexical ambiguity, the most common type was homonymy, and in other data, syntactic ambiguity was found in the type of surface structure. The previous research and this current research differ in that the previous one discussed two ambiguities from business news articles on BBC News and how BBC News used these ambiguities, while this research only focused on lexical ambiguity and how memes can be analysed using the theory of humor from in @punhubonline Instagram.

Moreover, the previous research applied the theory proposed by Kreidler (2017), while this study employed the theory by Murphy (2010) and

Shade (1996). In comparison, this current study showed that homonymy was the prevalent type of lexical ambiguity observed in memes on @punhubonline, as well as incongruity, was the most common theory of humor in this account. Further, the previous study objectives align with this research in examining the types of lexical ambiguity.

The second previous study was conducted by Huda (2021) entitled “*Ambiguity in Advertisement Slogan of Samsung Products*”. This study examined Samsung product advertisement slogans and applied the theory of lexical ambiguity proposed by Fromkin (2010) in analysing the data about the types of lexical ambiguity and their presence in Samsung advertisements. By contrast, this current study focused more on memes and employed the theory by Murphy (2010) and Shade (1996) to answer two research problems. Furthermore, the findings of the data analysed differ, with the previous study analysing 15 slogans and finding nouns have the most ambiguous indications. The results demonstrated that nouns were the most common type of homonymy as part of lexical ambiguity and as another finding, more than half of the Samsung product slogans contained lexical ambiguity.

Whereas the current found 61 data of memes containing lexical ambiguity. The similarity with the previous study appeared in this current study that the prevalent type of lexical ambiguity found in memes was homonymy rather than polysemy. On the other hand, this current study also determined how memes can be analysed from theory of humor and it showed

incongruity as the most prominent type. Both studies focus on the analysis of lexical ambiguity but employ different data and theories.

The third previous study is entitled “*Deconstructing Internet Memes through Semiotic Analysis: Unveiling Myths and Ideologies in Visual and Verbal Signs*” by Pratiwi et al. (2023). This study was a semiotic analysis of meanings conveyed in memes where the theory used was from Chandler (2007). The objective of this research was to investigate the myths and ideologies conveyed by the signs or symbols in memes, as well as to analyse the message being conveyed to the viewers. Moreover, the analysis results indicated that internet memes were a way of communicating that utilizes symbols to transmit a message, and the implicit meanings of the symbols can uncover the myths and ideologies contained in the message. As explained above, it could be seen the prior study and this study are similar in that both used Instagram memes as a data source for the analysis. Meanwhile, there are distinctions between the two research as the previous study analysed memes focusing on semiotic analysis, this study analysed the lexical ambiguity and theory of humor in memes. Furthermore, the theories of both studies are different since they have different purposes. Therefore, the findings between two studies were different.

The fourth previous study was done by Wiyanto (2022) entitled “*Semantic Perspective on Lexical Ambiguity in English Textbook*” which examined categories of lexical ambiguity and their use in student English textbooks. The study proposed Ullman Stephen’s (1997) theory of ambiguity



to fulfill the objectives of the study. The study's findings revealed that the textbook had two kinds of lexical ambiguity namely polysemy and homonymy, with polysemy found to be dominant. Based on the explanation, the discrepancies between the prior research and the current research are the prior research analysed English textbooks as the data source, while this research analysed memes on @punhubonline Instagram. Both studies also apply different theories as the previous one used the theory from Ullman (1997), and this study used the theory of lexical ambiguity from Murphy (2010) and the theory of humor by Shade (1996). In contrast to the previous study, this current study found that 61 findings of memes used lexical ambiguity, and homonymy was the prevailing type of lexical ambiguity. In addition, this current study also presented the most prevalent theory of humor was incongruity.

The last previous study was a study entitled "*Lexical Ambiguity in the Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry*" by Ardiani et al. (2022). The study investigated lexical ambiguity contained in an anthology poetry book using the theory of lexical ambiguity. Moreover, the findings of this research showed that homonymy was the dominant type of lexical ambiguity in the poetry book that impacted how the reader interpreted the text, creating lexical ambiguity. As a comparison, the distinctions between the prior research and this research are the previous one analysed lexical ambiguity in poems from a poetry book, while this study used memes on @punhubonline Instagram to analyse the types of lexical ambiguity and theory of humor. The similarity

between these studies, this current study revealed that homonymy also dominated in memes, with polysemy appearing less frequently. On the other hand, this current study also presented the most prevalent type of humor was incongruity rather than superiority. The previous study provided new insights into the use of lexical ambiguity in Latin American poetry contained in an anthology. The presence of prior research indicated that the analysis of lexical ambiguity can be conducted not only on literary texts or poetry but also on modern content such as memes on social media.

## 2.2 Concepts

In this part, several concepts from experts were utilized to analyse the data, namely lexical ambiguity, memes, and Instagram.

### 2.2.1 Lexical Ambiguity

Ambiguity comes in different forms, and one of those forms is known as lexical ambiguity. Rodd (2018) stated that the term “lexical ambiguity” refers to a circumstance in which one word can reference several distinct concepts. According to Makroum (2021), lexical ambiguity is the simplest and most common type of ambiguity, and this type of ambiguity occurs when a word has more than one definition. Moreover, Kreidler (2017) defined lexical ambiguity as an ambiguity that happens when one single word or phrase has more than one distinct meaning in a sentence or utterance.

Lexical ambiguity may cause confusion or misunderstanding as the word or phrase can be interpreted in several different ways. It is supported by Wahyuni (2014) that a word may be interpreted with several possible meanings and sometimes brings confusion in predicting the exact meaning that someone wants to convey in a particular context. This makes people get several related meanings or different meanings. In conclusion, lexical ambiguity refers to a condition in which a word or phrase has more than one sense that may lead to confusion by the reader or listener because it can be in the form of spoken or written.

### 2.2.2 Memes

A meme is identical to something funny. Merriam-Webster defines a meme as an entertaining or interesting element (such as a captioned picture or video) or category of elements that are widely spread on the internet, particularly through social media. A meme is a symbol that conveys concepts or ideas related to a cultural unit or a form of imitation that can be duplicated (Suswandari et al., 2021). Moreover, Holovatiuk (2020) discussed that the term “meme” refers to ideas, concepts, opinions, behavioral styles, phrases, sounds, images, and so on, which can be spread from one person to another through various ways (verbal, non-verbal, or virtual) and may become a topic of conversation or shared material. It can be concluded that memes are online content such as images, videos, or text

that are often used to convey messages or ideas that usually refer to popular culture and are easily imitated and spread quickly on the internet.

### 2.2.3 Instagram

Since its inception in 2010, Instagram has become the most widely used social media platform worldwide. According to the online Cambridge Dictionary, Instagram is a social networking platform in which users can capture, edit, and share photos and videos. It is supported by the online Oxford Dictionary that explained Instagram is a social media website where people can share photographs and short videos. In addition, Instagram also provides various other features so that users can interact with each other. It can be concluded that Instagram is a social networking platform that enables users to post pictures and videos, as well as engage with other users.

## 2.3 Theories

This section explored the theoretical framework used for analysing the data. The first theory came from Murphy (2010) to identify kinds of lexical ambiguity and the other theory by Shade (1996) to find out how memes can be analysed from theory of humor on @punhubonline Instagram accounts.

### 2.3.1 Lexical Ambiguity

In his book entitled “*Lexical Meaning*”, Murphy (2010) explained that lexical ambiguity occurs when one lexeme has more than one possible

meaning. Further, there are two kinds of lexical ambiguity according to Murphy (2010: 84) as follows.

### 1. Homonymy

Murphy (2010: 84) stated the following:

If two form–meaning pairings involve two different lexemes that just happen to have the same spoken and/or written form, then it is a case of **homonymy** – that is, there are two lexemes that are each other’s **homonym**. For instance, the noun *kind* meaning ‘type’ and the adjective *kind* meaning ‘considerate’ are two different words that just happen to have the same spelling and pronunciation. If we want to talk just about the spoken form of the language, we can refer to **homophones**, which have the same pronunciation but not necessarily the same spelling, such as *raze* and *raise*. If we’re just looking at the written language, there are **homographs**, which are spelt the same but may or may not be pronounced differently – like the musical instrument *bass* /beɪs/ and the fish *bass* /bæs/.

### 2. Polysemy

Polysemy or polyseme is a phenomenon in language in which one word has several meanings that have a close relationship or connection (Murphy, 2010: 84). For example, the meanings of *book* in terms of ‘bound pages’ and ‘information’ are interrelated words, so it is not appropriate to treat the word *book* in the sense of ‘text’ and ‘tome’ as two completely different words. Therefore, it can be concluded that the word *book* is a polyseme or polysemy that includes the meaning of ‘text’ and ‘tome’. To make it clear, this study provided the table below to show the comparison between homonymy and polysemy.

**Table 2.3.1 Comparison of Homonymy and Polysemy**

<b>Homonymy</b>	<b>Polysemy</b>
Refers to two or more words either sound the same, the same spelling, or both	Refers to a word that have many possible meanings
Has completely different meanings	Has different, but related meanings
Possibly different etymologies	Usually same etymology
Listed separately in dictionaries	Listed under one entry in dictionaries

(Source: Murphy, 2010: 91)

### 2.3.2 Theories of Humor

According to the book “*License to Laugh: Humor in the Classroom*” by Shade (1996), there are some main theories in the literature associated with different concepts and ideas about humor. These theories include incongruity theory, superiority theory, and relief/ release theory, most of which were developed by famous in their research on human nature and the human condition.

#### 1. Incongruity Theory

Incongruity theory is a theory that states that people find something funny when there is a discrepancy between what they expect or anticipate and what actually happens (Shade, 1996: 10). As stated by Shade (1996), incongruity in humor can include various forms such as contradiction, understatement, overstatement, surprise, reversal, absurdity, or unrealistic elements. Moreover, sudden changes when someone unexpectedly sees or

understands something in a different or unexpected way are often the important elements of successful humor. The following is an example of jokes that can be explained using the theory of incongruity.

**Boy** : Daddy, Mommy was backing the car out of the garage and ran over my bike.

**Daddy** : Serves you right. How many times have I told you not to leave your bike in the driveway?

(Shade, 1996: 10)

The situation above makes sense and is possible to happen; therefore, they are not considered funny in any way. However, by simply changing two words, the situation suddenly becomes a joke because it violates expectations, thus creating an incongruity element, as illustrated below.

**Boy** : Daddy. Mommy was backing the car out of the garage and ran over my bike.

**Daddy** : Serves you right. How many times have I told you not to leave your bike *on the porch*?

(Shade, 1996: 10)

Now, the situation above becomes funny when visualizing a car running over a bike on the porch of a house.

Immanuel Kant (1790) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1819) German philosophers are credited for developing this theory. The basis of this theory is that humor is created when people expect one thing and are suddenly

presented with another. Humor is the outcome of these unexpected verbal or visual connections (incongruity).

## 2. Superiority Theory

According to Shade (1996: 11), superiority theory in humor occurs when something becomes funny only if it happens to another individual, as stated by Mark Twain. In addition, Shade (1996) also played a role in developing this idea by saying that humor arises when someone is the object of ridicule, insult, or being underestimated for doing something wrong. For example, students may laugh at a classmate who makes a mistake in class, such as someone who mispronounces or misspells a word. As long as no one seems to be hurt, some people sometimes find this acceptable and funny. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Descartes, and Bacon all held the view that laughter occurs when there are flaws, imperfections, or weaknesses in others when people compare them to themselves.

## 3. Relief/ Release Theory

Shade (1996: 12) explained that the relief theory focuses the social and behavioral aspects of humor. This theory considers that humor arises when the emotional stress or tension present in a situation is relieved or released through humor. In this context, humor can be used to express criticism or protest against elements of society that are considered repressive or uncontrollable. An example of using humor in the context of



relief theory is when someone in a meeting uses humor to give a funny to a tense situation or conversation. This allows everyone to have a short laugh, get off the topic for a minute or two, and refocus and continue discussing the issue, perhaps with a fresh perspective.

