

The Language of Humour in Stoppard's *On the Razzle*

Rohit S. Kawale, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Tom Stoppard

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Abstract

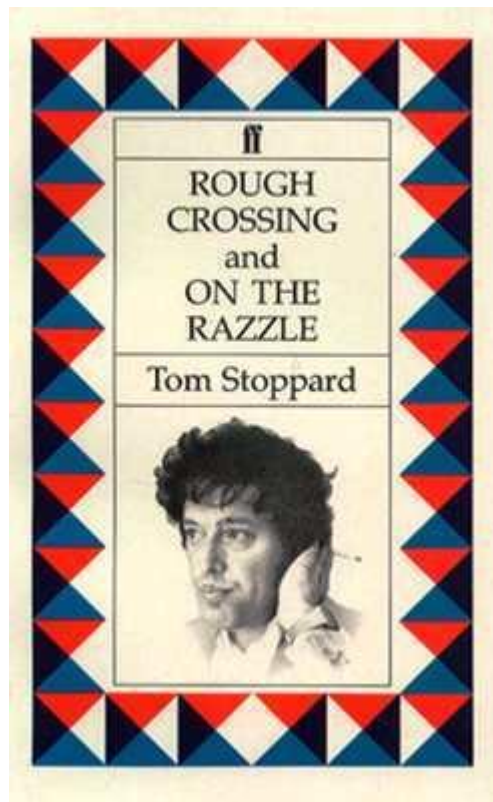
Humour is a field much neglected in literary criticism, and also in recently developed fields like stylistics and pragmatics, perhaps because humorous writing is never regarded as a classic. Likewise, language of humour has also not been studied much. Stoppard's language of humour needs some attention. In this paper, the author tries to analyse the language of humour in Stoppard's play *On the Razzle* by using the classification of puns given by Nash (1985) and also the concept of Malapropism. The author points out that a combination of a Malapropism and a pun, which the author calls a Malapropist pun, is a unique feature of Stoppard's humour.

Keywords: Humour, language of humour, Stoppard, Malapropism, malapropist pun

Introduction

Humour, in general, whether in any kind of writing or in purely humorous writing, has been neglected by critics and scholars. In that way, humour is never taken seriously! Particularly, very little has been written specifically about the language of humour. Being an

area neglected by critics, it is also an area neglected by research scholars. With so much support from modern linguistics in general and from pragmatics and stylistics in particular, one would have expected much more attention to the language of humour. With pragmatics, we are now not just interested in the language of literature, but also in the language of advertisements, conversations and so on. But we are not much interested in the language of humour yet. This article aims at showing how the language of humour needs more attention.



Tom Stoppard has a unique style of his own, in which the language of humour plays an important role. For the present analysis, we shall go into the language of humour in his play *On the Razzle*. The play is a farcical comedy. The humour created by the farcical situations is supported by the humour created with the help of language.

Language of Humour

We can classify the comic use of language in the play into three categories – i) puns, ii) Malapropisms and iii) a combination of a pun and a Malapropism. To begin with, let us try to understand what a pun is. In order to do that, it will be of some help to refer to Nash (1985). He classifies puns into the following types:

1) Homophones: Homophones are pairs of words which have the same sound but different meanings. For example, rain /reign, mail / male, etc.

2) Homophonic phrases: All the syllables are equal, the phrases sound alike, but the meaning is different.

3) Mimes: Instead of having variant meanings, mimes have variant forms. For example, the question 'What do cats read?' is answered by saying 'The Mews of the world.'

4) Mimetic phrases: These are mimes expressed in phrases.

5) Homonyms: Homonyms have the same spelling, but different meanings. 'School' means an educational establishment and it also means a collection of fish. So, the question 'Where do fish learn to swim?' is answered by saying 'In a school.'

6) Homonymic phrases: If a whole phrase has two different meanings, it is a homonymic phrase.

7) Contacts and blends: Some phrases echo other idioms and create a different meaning. 'A proposition of a different colour' is a combination of 'a proposition of a different kind and 'a horse of a different colour '.

8) Pseudomorphs: A pseudomorph is a false form, which does not exist in the language, but is invented to make a homonymic pun. For example, 'What do you do with a wombat?' The answer is 'Play wom.'

9) Portmanteaux: It is a coinage that packs two meanings into one word. For example, Lewis Carroll uses the word 'mimsy', which is the portmanteau of 'flimsy', which is the portmanteau of 'flimsy' and 'miserable'.

10) Etymological puns: This pun is based on the etymology of a word. For example, 'Nero made Rome the focus of his artistic attention' has two meanings, because in Latin 'focus' means 'fireplace.'

11) Bilingual pun: A foreign word is made to have the meaning of an English word, whether by homophonic accident, by homonymic contrivance or by literal translation.

12) Pun-metaphors: A metaphor is converted into a pun. For example, 'Murky consequences of washing our hands of Europe.'

Of these, we find homophones, homonyms and homonymic phrases in a considerable number in this play; and we also come across one or two examples of mimes and bilingual puns. They will be analysed here one by one.

Homophones

As mentioned above, homophones are words that are pronounced alike but have different meanings. There are a number of examples of these in this play. For example, Sonders says to Zangler, "I love your **niece!**" (p. 10) (emphasis mine), to which Zangler replies, "My **knees**, sir?" (p.10) (emphasis mine). This is not a perfect homophone, as there is a slight difference between the pronunciations of 'niece' and 'knees'. But, nevertheless, it is an instance of homophone. This is used again later in the following conversation –

"Zangler: No, I can't be in a hurry, I'm having trouble with my **niece**.

Melchior: It's the trousers" (p. 18) (emphasis mine).

Another instance is in the following extract –

"Melchior: That's classic. I like to be clean.

Zangler: And board, of course.

Melchior: Clean and bored.

Zangler: And lodging.

Melchior: Clean and bored and lodging – "(p. 14).

In another example, the homophone is completed by attaching one sentence to another.

"Christopher: Meanwhile we'll be **off**.

Weinberl: **-ally** grateful if you would take care of this" (p. 39) (emphasis mine).

Weinberl picks up the word 'off' from Christopher's sentence and adds '-ally' to it to complete the word 'awfully' and to complete his sentence using that word.

In another conversation, Weinberl says, "Not hungry", to which Christopher replies, "Not even Herzegovina" (p. 53). This is connected to another instance that appears a little later –

"Weinberl: I will give you half my kingdom, too!

Mrs Fischer: Hungary?

Weinberl: Starving!" (p. 56)

In the earlier example, 'hungry' is heard as 'Hungary', and in this example, 'Hungary' is understood as 'hungry'.

In another instance, Melchior says, "My master wishes to have a clear view of that **hansom** cabman while he's eating" (p. 57) (emphasis mine), to which Weinberl replies, "Your master's taste in cabmen is something we prefer not to discuss" (p. 57). The word 'hansom' is understood as 'handsome', and therefore Weinberl gives this reaction.

Homonyms

As explained above, homonyms are words with the same spelling but different meanings. The following is an example.

"Zangler: (Spluttering) You old – you stupid –

Gertrud: Should I let Marie have –

Zangler: - old baggage!

Gertrud: *Not* the new travelling case..." (pp. 12-13).

Here, Zangler calls Gertrud old baggage, whereas Gertrud thinks that Zangler completes her sentence by adding 'old baggage'; and she contrasts it with 'the new travelling case'.

In the same conversation, Gertrud tells Zangler that his new servant has arrived. Sonders says to her, "Your servant, ma'am!" to which she replies, "His" (p. 13.) Sonders expresses politeness by saying "Your servant, ma'am!" But Gertrud takes it literally, and points out that Sonders is *Zangler's* servant, not hers. This feature can also be described as taking figurative language literally. Later, we shall go into an example of this. In another conversation, Melchior, Zangler's servant, calls out to him at another place, when Zangler is in a confused state. Here is the conversation –

"Zangler: (*emerging confused*) Eh, what? What? Who's this?

Melchior: Herr Zangler!

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Zangler: Your servant, sir – no, by God it's mine. What are you doing here?" (p. 37)

The following is another example of using two meanings of the same word.

"Melchior: I thought that was shop talk. Please disregard it as the inexperience of youth, as the poet said.

Zangler: Do you have a reference?

Melchior: I'm afraid not, I just read it somewhere.

Zangler: Have you got a testimonial?" (p. 14)

Stoppard plays a pun on the two meanings of 'reference'. In another instance, Stoppard plays a pun on 'mistress', using two meanings of the word –

"Zangler: Well, what would you say to having a mistress?

Christopher: One each or sharing?

Weinberl: Congratulations, Chief! We wish you and your bride every happiness"

(p. 24).

Zangler is the 'master', being the owner of the shop, so his wife would be the 'mistress' for his servants. But, Christopher understands the other, derogatory meaning of the word. In another example, Stoppard uses a word not only with two different meanings but also in two different grammatical categories, noun and verb –

"Christopher: All the same, after three hours in a farm cart and probably six hours' trek to get home, to end up **flingless**...

Weinberl: Dishonoured and **unflung**..." (p. 34) (emphasis mine).

In the first occurrence, Stoppard uses 'fling' as a noun with the meaning 'self-indulgent enjoyment' and adds '-less' to it. In the second occurrence, he adds '-un' to the past participle of the verb 'fling'. Another case of using a word in two different grammatical categories is found in the following piece of conversation –

"Christopher: Chink glasses.

Weinberl: (*Squeakily*) Are they? They must go with the screen" (p. 59).

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Christopher uses 'chink' as a verb and suggests that they should chink their glasses. Weinberl understands the word as a noun, and thinks that according to Christopher the type of glass is 'chink glass'.

Homonymic Phrases

When not just a word, but a whole phrase has two different meanings, it is a homonymic phrase, as mentioned above. There are just a few examples of this in the play. The following is an example –

"Zangler: My niece and ward is preying on my mind. There's something not quite right there.

Christopher: My niece and ward *are* preying on my mind - ?" (p. 23)

Zangler's niece and ward are one and the same person. So, the ungrammaticality of Zangler's sentence is not what is worrying him. He is worrying the situation in his house. But Christopher misunderstands "There is something not quite right there" as a comment on the possible ungrammaticality of Zangler's own sentence. It is not a simple case just a homonymic phrase, but Stoppard is also playing with grammar.

In another example, Marie says to Sonders, "Oh, August, you're a terrible man, kiss me again. You made me **feel all funny down there**" (p. 31) (emphasis mine). When Sonders embraces her, more inside her cape than out, she explains 'down there' by adding "I mean in the cellar" (p. 31). Here, the phrase 'down there' has two meanings – one refers to the cellar downstairs and the other has sexual connotation. Stoppard plays with the ambiguity of an adverb phrase.

Another example of a similar kind is found in the following conversation –

"Mme Knorr: I'd like some chicken. And some more champagne. I can feel it working already.

Christopher: (*Quietly*) Breast or leg?

Mme Knorr: All over" (p. 60).

Christopher's question "Breast or leg?" refers to the chicken, but Mme Knorr misunderstands it as a question about her observation "I can feel it working already," which is the effect of champagne on her.

Mime

There is an instance of pun, which might be put into the category of mime. As mentioned above Nash (1985) defines mime by observing that instead of having variant meanings, mimes have variant forms. The following is the example.

"Zangler: ...That fortune-hunter Sonders is after my ward.

Gertrud: My word.

Zangler: My ward!" (p. 9)

Gertrud's sentence 'My word' is an exclamation in response to Zangler. But he corrects it by saying "My ward!"

Taking Figurative Language Literally

This is a feature for which, I have not found any term. Kawale (1991) analyses this feature from P.G. Wodehouse's novels. Figurative meaning is, basically, an extension of literal meaning. But Wodehouse makes a character take figurative meaning literally, which becomes funny. Kawale (1991) quotes the following example. Bertie Wooster says, "I did tell him I was guiltless of the charge, and a fat lot he believed me. He continued to hot up, finally reaching a condition of so much Fahrenheit that I was surprised he didn't run me in on the spot" (Wodehouse, p. 78). Here, 'hot up' is used figuratively, but Wodehouse brings the figurative meaning back to literal meaning by using the word 'Fahrenheit'.

The example from Stoppard's play is as follows. Melchior says that fashion is Madame Knorr's middle name, which is figurative way of equating her with fashion. But Zangler takes it literally by saying, "More or less. Knorr Fashion House" (p. 19). In the name 'Knorr Fashion House', the word 'Fashion' is in the middle.

Bilingual Pun

A bilingual pun makes use of meanings of words from two languages. In the following conversation, there are four instances of such puns, in which the languages involved are English and German.

"Melchior: Is it cold out?

German man: Bitte?

Melchior: Is it, is it? Last night was definitely dank. (*He opens the door for them.*)
Would you say tonight was as dank or not as dank?

German woman: (*Leaving*) Danke.

Melchior: (*Amazed*) Danker?

German man: Bitte.

Melchior: (*Closing the door after them.*) Please yourselves" (p. 51).

It is necessary to explain the pun. The German man says, "Bitte?" in the sense of "Pardon?", as he did not understand what Melchior said in English. Melchior understands 'Bitte' as the English word 'bitter'. This is the first pun. When Melchior opens the door for the German couple, the German woman says 'Danke' in German, which means 'Thank you' in English. But, Melchior understands it as 'danker', the comparative degree of the adjective 'dank' that Melchior has already used. This is the second pun. So, rather surprised, Melchior asks her, "Danker?" which the German man understands as the German word 'Danke'. Therefore, just as in English, one would respond to "Thank you" by saying "Welcome", the German man says, "Bitte". This is the third pun. But, Melchior understands it as the English word 'bitter', which is the fourth pun. This is how, in a brief, but rather complicatedly interesting exchange, Stoppard has made four bilingual puns.

Malapropism

A Malapropism is the wrong use of a word in place of a word with a similar sound. There are some instances of this in this play. In almost all these, one character, mostly Zangler, gropes for the correct phrase that he has in mind. He uses a wrong phrase, which is a Malapropism. Then, another character tries to suggest the correct phrase to him. Except one of them, all the other are also Malapropisms. Here is an example –

"Zangler: ... I feel like the cake of the week.

Weinberl: That's very well put, Chief.

Zangler: I don't mean the cake of the week –

Weinberl: Not the cake of the week – the Sheikh of Kuwait – no –

Zangler: No –

Christopher: The clerk of the works –

Zangler: No!

Weinberl: The cock of the walk?" (p. 23)

Another example is given below.

"Zangler: I'm sending Marie away for a few days. You'll have to manage the while the till... No –

Weinberl: To while the time...

Zangler: No!

Weinberl: The till the while?

Zangler: That's the boy" (pp. 23-24).

In another instance, it is Weinberl who gropes for the right phrase.

"Weinberl: We'll stop the clocks!

Christopher: Yes! What?

(Weinberl *mimics* Zangler and Christopher *mimics* Weinberl.)

Weinberl: No – I mean –

Christopher: Box the stock –

Weinberl: No –

Christopher: No – bake the cake – no –

Weinberl: No!

Christopher: Cook the books –

Weinberl: That's the boy – "(p. 28).

In another instance, Gertrud corrects Zangler's Malapropism –

"Zangler: I'll teach you to get up to your coquetry you meretrix!

Gertrud: Up to your merry tricks, you coquette..." (p. 33).

All these are, actually, 'Malapropist phrases', and should be described so.

'Malapropist' Puns

A unique feature of the language of humour in this play is many instances of combination of a Malapropism and a pun, which we shall call "Malapropist puns'. It is a complicated use of language in which there is not only a Malapropism but also a pun played on one of the words in the phrase. Here is an example – "...as I'm surrounded by village idiots and nincompetent poops of every stripe" (p. 13). It is a Malapropism of 'incompetent', 'nincompoop' and 'poop'. But it is not exactly a wrong use of a word, as it creates its own meaning, in a deviant manner. The following is another example –

"Zangler: Don't tell me what I told you – search her room, perhaps he's got my ward's behind between his knees and raped her backwards – no –

Gertrud: - got back behind your niece and ward's drapes –

Zangler: No!

Gertrud: Got behind your back and your niece's wardrobe.

Zangler: That's the boy" (p. 30).

In such instances, too, a character gropes for the right phrase and another character goes on trying to provide him the right phrase. There is not only a Malapropism, but also a homophonic pun on 'knees' and 'niece', homophonic phrases 'my ward's behind' and 'behind your back' and a homophonic pun on 'raped' and 'drapes'. But basically, all this is in the form of a Malapropism – the tendency of using wrong words or phrases because of the similarity in their sounds. This is a unique feature of Stoppard's language of humour, his own creation.

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Here is another example of the same feature –

Melchior: ..."The Classinova person – the whosit incarnate – the Don Juan is at the Imperial Gardens Cafe with a nice young lady like a ladylike young niece!" (p. 37)

Firstly, 'Classinova' is a Malapropism of Casanova. There is a sort of homonymic pun on 'nice' and 'niece', and on 'lady like' and 'ladylike'.

In the same conversation, after a few lines, Melchior says, "I did but the Cassata incarnate has arrived and the tart!" (p. 37) To this, Zangler replies by saying that those are just desserts. Here, Melchior commits a Malapropism by saying 'Cassata' instead of 'Casanova'. Secondly, the word 'tart' refers to a woman in a derogatory sense. But Zangler understands 'tart' as a pie, and Cassata is also the name of a dessert. So, there are homonymic puns on these two words. In the same conversation, there is another Malapropist pun –

"Melchior: The dinner is all arranged, but I'm on the trail of the Casserola and you must come immediately before it gets cold" (p. 37).

There is another Malapropism on 'Casanova', that is 'Casserola'. Further, the reference to the dinner getting cold also fits in the meaning of Casserola.

In another example, Zangler says –

"Quick, fetch me a half-witted cab you hansom fool!" (p. 38)

There is confusion between 'hansom' and 'handsome', which is a Malapropism and also a homophonic pun. A little later, Weinberl says, "...she's probably busy hemming and hawing" (p. 39). It is obviously a Malapropism on 'humming and hawing'. But, there is also a homophonic pun, as the person is busy doing some stitching, which includes 'hemming'.

The following is another example –

"Melchior: ...he will pudding you before the dessert – no – he'll desert you before –" (p. 67). There is a Malapropism on 'desert', and also a pun on 'desert' and 'dessert'.

Conclusion

There is a lot to analyse in Stoppard's language of humour. In this paper, the author has tried to point this out by analysing the language of humour in one of his plays. Using the terminology and the classification of puns given by Nash (1985), the author has tried to

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analyse the humour in the play. The most important feature of the language of humour in this play is a combination of a Malapropism and a pun, which the author has described as a Malapropist pun, for convenience. Such Malapropist puns are Stoppard's own creation, perhaps, and a unique feature of the humour in this play.

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Rohit S. Kawale, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Sangamner College
Sangamner 422 605
Maharashtra
India
rohit.kawale@gmail.com