A Pragmatic Analysis of Onomastic Pun in The Holy Bible

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Abstract:

Naming puns or onomastic wordplay is an interesting variety of wordplay. It fulfils an important role in the Scriptures. This type of pun is called Biblical wordplay. Onomastics as a discipline is stemmed from the Greek word *onoma* meaning 'name'. The study at hand examines this linguistic phenomenon in The Holy Bible to uncover layers of meaning in this kind of pun in English religious texts. It is a qualitative study that pragmatically approach this phenomenon and adopts Sperber and Wilson's post-Gricean pragmatics which is called "Relevance Theory" (1995) to analyze five texts from The Holy Bible. The study concludes that meaning is encapsulated in pun words to a great extent and the core meaning of many texts will be lost if instances of onomastic pun are not understood in these English religious texts. The study shows that the most used structure to realize this kind of pun is the syntactic structure with the help of the lexical level. Furthermore, uncovering layers of meaning and comprehending religious texts in English language depend on onomastic pun to a great extent. It is proved by data analysis that instances of onomastic pun are content based in these texts.

Keywords: The Holy Bible, Onomastics, Biblical Pun, Relevance Theory, Pragmatics

Research Questions

1. To what extent can pun words be possible reason for misunderstanding the meanings of these texts?

2. What are the most used structures to realize onomastic pun in English language? At what linguistic level (Phonology/ morphology /syntax or semantics) it is realized and manifested in this language?

3. Being ideological tools of persuasion, to what extent pun words are tucked as a source of manipulation in religious texts?

1. Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to introduce onomastic pun in English language. It examines this linguistic phenomenon in The Holy Bible to uncover layers of meaning in this kind of pun in English religious texts.

2. Pragmatics

The historical discussion started from the classical definition of pragmatics by Morris (1938) as the study of the relationship between signs and their interpreters but the concerns that constituted the scope of pragmatics had a much longer history(Verschueren and Ostman, 2009, p. 2). Pragmatics is defined as the study of language use in human communication as determined by the conditions of society (Mey, 2001, p. 6). Actually, to define something means to impose a boundary or an end to it simply. Pragmatic basket can be loosely attached to the notion of waste basket of unresolved questions of linguistic thinking despite the negative connotations of the word (waste basket). Birner (2013, p.1) defines it in simple direct words as "the study of language use in context". However, Pragmatic competence is generally implicit and known at some level, but not usually available for explicit examination so pragmatics typically has to do with meaning that is:

• non literal,

• context dependent,

• inferential, and/or

• not truth conditional.

So, the intended meaning here is context sensitive that is why many interpretations can be suggested or decoded depending on the reading or readings provided by context as perceived by interlocutors (Ibid , p.4).

Pragmatics is the study of relations between language and context that are grammaticalized , or encoded in the structure of a language(Levinson, 1983,p.9). It deals with aspects of meaning "worked out" on particular occasions of use, not "looked up" one (Cruse, 2006.p.136).

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As a matter of fact, different definitions do exist because there are two main schools of thought in contemporary pragmatics:

1. **Anglo American School**: The component view of pragmatics.
2. **European Continental School:** It represents the perspective view of pragmatics.

3- Onomastics

Neethling (2021, p.244) reports that onomastics is a discipline stemmed from the Greek word *onoma* meaning 'name'. Names are written with capital letters in all languages. One can list many categories to be considered as onomastic entities appearing in various contexts in the world. But generally speaking, under the label of onomastics the major focus is mainly on one or two categories. These two categories are anthroponymy and toponymy. The first, anthroponymy, deals with names of homo sapiens, i.e. people. Even within anthroponymy various categories do exist, such as first names, last names (or surnames), bynames (or nicknames) and ethnic names. The second major focus is on the category called *toponyms*. It provides nearly endless study possibilities for place names. Any name specifying a place would qualify to be a toponym.

4- Pragmatics of Names

The pragmatic analysis of names is mainly indebted to the philosophy of language. To be more specific, it is attributed to the theories of reference emerging from logic. For many linguists, properhood is not a structural category but it should be considered pragmatic one. De Stefani (2016, p.4) presents some views of other scholars regarding this issue stating that John Stuart Mill's (1973 [1843]: 43) stresses this point as he believes proper names to have no signification by themselves. This view marks starting point for the different subsequent views by other philosophers to develop theories regarding proper names. In other words, to Mill, proper names merely refer to an object. But for others, like Frege (1892) and Russell (1973 [1905]), such names can have meaning or at least a connotation. They depict names as 'descriptions of single objects' (Frege,1892) or as abbreviated definite "descriptions" (Russell ,1973 ,1905).

The impact of philosophy of language exerted on linguistics in the 1960s and 1970s is truly visible in the work on proper names. In the light of language philosophical tradition, authors like Searle (1958) and Zabeeh (1968) reflect more on the 'classical' logical problems of name reference and meaning aiming at describing the different functions that a given name can have in the speakers' utterances.

5- Methodology

Qualitative research is an approach to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. It involves emerging questions and procedures. Data analysis is typically based on inductively collected data to build up general themes as the researcher make interpretations of the meaning of the data. The resultant written report has a flexible structure to render the complexity of a situation(Creswell,2014)

The study at hand adopts Sperber and Wilson's post-Gricean pragmatics which is called "Relevance Theory". The reason behind selecting this model is due to the fact that instances of pun words are implicitly linked to the title of the texts in The Holy Bible. According to this theory, achieving optimal relevance is certainly less demanding than obeying the Gricean maxims. This theory is simply based on a broad understanding of relevance and two Principles of Relevance:

1. **The Cognitive Principle**: Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance

2. **The Communicative Principle**: Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance(1995, P.260)

Sperber and Wilson states that "An input is relevant when its processing leads to cognitive gain". *Relevance* can be broadly understood as "an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context" (Sperber and Wilson ,1995,p.122).

Naming puns or onomastic wordplay is an interesting variety of wordplay. It fulfils an important role in the Scriptures. This type of pun is called "*Biblical wordplay"*. The model adopted in this study is provided by Delabastita (1997). The reason behind selecting the model of Delabastita (1997) is due to the fact that names are utilized to a great extent to play with the meaning of words in The Holy Bible. Naming is tucked as a source of manipulation in religious texts to a great extent. Names are used implicitly as ideological tools of persuasion. Many previous studies adopt Delabastita (1996) as this model presents an adequate taxonomy of pun words but one year later the same researcher asserts that many other possibilities are available. But in The Holy Bible comprehending instances of Onomastic Pun is essential to comprehend the texts. Delabastita (1997) agrees with Kaufmann (1997, p.95) in asserting that naming pun in the Scriptures is "a literary technique which explicitly documents the authors' deliberate use of wordplay to demonstrate the 'congruence' between the nature of an entity and the biblical Hebrew word that names it…

In fact, the biblical authors often insert substantial narrative episodes to justify a name given to a person or place".

Concerning the data, five texts are selected from The Holy Bible to analyze onomastic pun in English language.

6.1 Data Analysis

6.2 Hagar and Ishmael: Text (1)

6.2 .1 Pragmatic Analysis of Text 1

● **Cognitive Principle**: Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance according to this principle. In this text, the informative intention of the text is communicated at the very beginning by the title of the text to guide the audience to reach to the intended message of the text. The message is that God hears the ones who call him.

● **Communicative Principle**: According to this principle, Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. In this text, the overtness of communication is achieved by two onomastic words :(Ishmeal) which means (God hears) and Beer Lahai Roi which means (the well of the vision of life).

Here expectations of relevance are satisfied once the reader comprehends these two key words. Once such expectations are satisfied, no need for more processing effort as readers are expected to follow the path of least effort as stressed by Relevance-guided comprehension heuristic according to Sperber and Wilsons' theory.

Table 1 Pun word(s) and the intended meaning in Text 1:

Verse no.	Pun type	Pun word	Intended meaning
Genesis (16) 11	Onomastic pun	Ishmael	God hears
14	Onomastic pun	Beer Lahai Roi	"the well of him that liveth and see/ "the well of the vision of life

6.3 The Covenant of Circumcision: Text (2)

6.3.1 Pragmatic Analysis of Text (2)

● **Cognitive Principle:** The search for relevance here is triggered by the two linguistic cues presented in the title. Processing input will be geared to the maximisation of the relevance of (Covenant) and (Circumcision) in the title to guide the readers through their path of less processing effort in constructing the interpretation of utterances with more effect according to this principle

● **Communicative Principle**: The w's communicative intention is manifest by dynamically processing the two cues provided in the title as a sign for ostensive communication for optimal relevance. *Abram/*

Abraham and *Sarai/ Sara* raise expectations of new status the Lord promised to the couple to be *"The father of a multitude"* and the *"princess for all the race"*. As such. Re-naming them is relevant to readers and expectations of relevance are satisfied with the upcoming child (*Isaac - laughter*) and Abraham/ Sara new status. Onomastic pun here plays an essential role in guiding readers through out of least effort/ more effect path.

Table 2 Pun word(s) and the intended meaning in Text 2:

Verse no.	Pun type	Pun word	Intended meaning
Genesis (17)	Onomastic pun	Abram	(a high father), the earlier name of Abraham.
		Abraham	father of a multitude
6			
16	Onomastic pun	Sarai	(my princess) the original name of Sarah wife of Abraham
		Sarah	(princess), for all the race
20	Onomastic pun	Isaac	(laughter)

6. 4 The Birth of Isaac: Text (3)
6.4.1 Pragmatic Analysis of Text (3)
● **Cognitive Principle:** No need for much processing effort with this short direct text with overt linguistic cues. The path of interpreting this text is guided by the expected birth of Isaac as he will be the source of joy and laughter to his old father (Abraham) after long years of suffering.

● **Communicative Principle:** The constructed interpretation of the utterances here is directed to the overtness of the reason of celebrating the expected new born which is justified by the father's old age and Sara's suffering from infertility as she herself admits *"Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age"*.

Table 3 Pun word(s) and the intended meaning in Text 3:

Verse no.	Pun type	Pun word	Intended meaning
Genesis (21)	Onomastic pun	Isaac	Laughter
4			

6.5   The Treaty at Beersheba: Text (4)

6.5 .1 Pragmatic Analysis of Text (4)

● **Cognitive Principle**: To comprehend this text, readers will pick out the most relevant key words in the title, namely *Beersheba* and *treaty*, to construct the meaning intended by the text writer. Expectations of relevance are satisfied once readers arrive at the meaning of the onomastic pun word Beersheeba which means the well of oath or the well of seven with regard to the oath they make there and the seven ewe lambs from the flock which Abraham gives to Abimelek . He accepts them as a witness that he dugs this well.

● **Communicative Principle**: The overtness of communication is signaled by the utterance *"So that place was called Beersheba because the two men swore an oath there"* in verse no.32. The whole presents the problem of the fight over the well to finally present the solution to this problem.

Table 4 Pun word(s) and the intended meaning in Text 4:

Verse no.	Pun type	Pun word	Intended meaning
Genesis (21) **32**	Onomastic pun	Beersheba	well of the oath/ well of seven

6.6   Jacob and Esau: Text (5)

6.6 .1 Pragmatic Analysis of Text (5)

● **Cognitive Principle**: In the story of Jacob and Esau, the maximisation of relevance tends to be geared to the search of the intended meaning of these two names. The expectations of relevance are satisfied once readers arrive at the story of the two twin brothers, as well as the selling/buying of the birthright of the Esau to Jacob.

● **Communicative Principle:** Here one can talk of the story of the two twins with their names which reflect their destiny to be *"Two nations"* that *"will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger"* and *"The first to come out was red and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau. After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob."* All of these quoted verses function as a relevance guided path to help readers reach the intended meaning of the text.

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Table 5 Pun word(s) and the intended meaning in Text 5:

Verse no.	Pun type	Pun word	Intended meaning
Genesis (25) 26	onomastic Pun	Esau	Hairy
27		Jacob	one who follows on another's heels/ supplanter
30		Edom	Red

7. Conclusions

1. Concerning the first question which reads as: *"To what extent can pun words be possible reason for misunderstanding the meanings of these texts?"* the study at hand proves that meaning is encapsulated in pun words to a great extent and the core meaning of many texts will be lost if the texts' receivers do not understand instances of pun words in English language. In such a case, misunderstanding is inevitable result. Many names in The Holy Bible are residue of Hebrew and Greek. This is a sold proof that The Holy Bible is an ancient record of these languages. Hidden meanings of names is essential to understand the moral lesson and to understand stories in texts of The Holy Bible because the plot is related to the meaning of names of characters and places.

2. Concerning the second question which reads as: *"What are the most used structures to realize onomastic pun in English language? At what linguistic level (Phonology/ morphology /syntax or semantics) it is realized and manifested in this language?"* the study proves that the most used structure to realize this kind of pun is the syntactic structure with the help of the lexical level in English language. Data analysis proves the following linguistic features to be exploited:

● **Lexical structure**: By the use of onomastic pun, many lexical units (proper names to be specific) are exploited to play with words and to bring a communicatively significant confrontation of two meanings of the same word.

● **Syntactic structure**: Pun words are contained within larger units (utterances) to justify their usage. The process of meaning construction of any onym corresponds to extra-linguistic knowledge representations which is supported by the linguistics structure. As it is the case in Text no. 1 (Hagar and Ishmael):

❖ *She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi.*

Here, disambiguating the onomastic pun requires extra-linguistic knowledge representations and it is supported by the linguistic structure which is exploited to hint to this pun instance (*That is why the well was called*). This utterance triggers the search for meaning making process.

3. Concerning the thirds question which reads as *"Being ideological tools of persuasion, to what extent pun words are tucked as a source of manipulation in religious texts?"* the study at hand concludes that uncovering layers of meaning and comprehending religious texts in English language depend on onomastic pun to a great extent. It is proved by data analysis that instances of onomastic pun are content based. As such, wordplay is a very effective ideological tools of persuasion in religious texts and a rich source of language manipulation.

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تحليل تداولي للتلاعب اللفظي باستخدام علم الاسماء في الكتاب المقدس

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المستخلص:

إن التلاعب اللفظي بالتسمية او التلاعب اللفظي باستخدام علم الاسماء هو نوع مثير للاهتمام من اللعب بالألفاظ. هذا النوع يؤدي دورًا مهمًا في الكتاب المقدس. ويسمى هذا النوع من اللعب بالألفاظ في هذه النصوص تلاعب بالألفاظ الكتابية باستخدام علم التسمية. وينبع علم الأسماء كأحد فروع المعرفة من الكلمة اليونانية التي تعني "الاسم". وتبحث الدراسة الحالية هذه الظاهرة اللغوية في الكتاب المقدس لتحري المعاني في هذا النوع من اللعب بالألفاظ في النصوص الدينية الإنجليزية. إن هذهِ الدراسة هي تحليلٌ نوعي تداولي باعتماد "نظرية الصلة" للباحثين سبيربر وويلسون (١٩٩٥) المنسوبة الى نظريات ما بعد جريس لتحليل خمسة نصوص من الكتاب المقدس. خلصت الدراسة إلى أن المعنى مغلف ومضمن في الكلمات المستخدمة للتلاعب اللفظي إلى حد كبير وستفقد العديد من النصوص المعنى الأساسي والمحوري إذا لم يتم فهم أمثلة التلاعب اللفظي بالتسمية في هذه النصوص الدينية الإنجليزية. وتُثبت الدراسة أن البنية الأكثر استخدامًا لتحقيق هذا النوع من اللعب بالألفاظ هي البنية النحوية بمساعدة المستوى المعجمي. علاوة على ذلك، فإن فهم المعنى وفهم النصوص الدينية باللغة الإنجليزية يعتمدان إلى حد كبير على التلاعب بالألفاظ الكتابية باستخدام علم التسمية. وقد ثبت من خلال تحليل البيانات أن أمثلة التلاعب اللفظي باستخدام علم التسمية تستند إلى محتوى هذه النصوص.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الكتاب المقدس، علم الأسماء، التلاعب بالألفاظ الكتابية باستخدام علم التسمية، نظرية الصلة، التداولية