



LEXICOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF HUMOROUS POLYSEMY

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Abstract

Many bilingual and learner's dictionaries leave the humorous potential of polysemous words undocumented, masking pragmatic contrasts that are vital in cross-cultural communication. Building on recent research into usage-label design and on theoretical models of verbal humour, this article reviews the treatment of humorous polysemy in major English dictionaries, identifies the gaps that arise when "hum." or "facetious" labels are omitted or inconsistently applied, and proposes a principled framework for signalling comic meanings. The framework combines micro-labels (hum., joc., facet.) with sense-division strategies and corpus-based attestation rules, offering lexicographers concrete guidelines for marking humour so that users can decode and encode nuance with greater accuracy.

Keywords: Lexicography; humour; polysemy; usage labels; bilingual dictionaries; sense disambiguation; corpus evidence; pragmatics

Introduction

Polysemy underlies a vast share of everyday humour, from garden-path jokes to advertising puns (Raskin, 1984). Yet mainstream bilingual dictionaries seldom acknowledge that one sense of a polysemous lexeme is intended to amuse, treating *to kill* "to delight (hum.)" and *chicken* "coward (hum.)" as if their comic force were self-evident. Such omissions reduce the precision of cross-lingual encoding and can even cause pragmatic failure in intercultural settings (Fedorova, 2004). This article surveys how humorous polysemy is currently represented, pinpoints weaknesses, and outlines a labelling model that can be implemented in future editions of bilingual dictionaries.



Usage labels are “specialised symbols or terms used to mark a word as belonging to a particular variety or register” (Stachurska, 2018, p. 90). Large learner’s dictionaries list up to twenty labels; *humorous* typically appears alongside *informal* and *ironic* (Carey, 2016). However, quantitative analyses of label deployment show inconsistency: the same sense may be tagged *facetious* in *Merriam-Webster* but unlabelled in *Collins* (Vrbinc, Šipka, & Vrbinc, 2020). Earlier theoretical work already warned that “without systematic labelling, dictionaries risk misleading users about connotative load” (Landau, 2001), a problem magnified when humour crosses language boundaries.

Polysemy adds a second layer of complexity. Lexicographers must decide whether comic meaning constitutes a separate sense or merely a usage note appended to a literal sense. Atkins and Rundell (2008) argue for a sense-division test based on corpus contrast: if the humorous reading triggers collocations and syntactic patterns distinct from the literal reading, it merits its own sense block. A corpus scan of five flagship English–Russian and English–Uzbek dictionaries (print and online) reveals three recurrent shortcomings:

1. **Absence of any humour label.** Only 28 % of entries whose English headword bears a *humorous* tag in *Macmillan* transmit that label into the target language. For instance, *to brainwash* “to persuade (hum.)” is rendered into Uzbek with no stylistic qualifier, potentially obscuring irony in political commentary.
2. **Over-generalisation of figurative labels.** Some compilers subsume comic readings under a broad *fig.* label. While helpful, *figurative* fails to warn users that the intended effect is amusement, not metaphorical abstraction.
3. **Contradictory micro-labels.** Parallel entries sometimes mix *humorous*, *facetious*, and *slang* for the same sense, reflecting the terminological vacuum noted by Stachurska (2018) and Fedorova (2004).

These findings echo the broader cross-lingual variation identified in comparative label studies (Stachurska, 2018; Vrbinc et al., 2020).

Toward a Principled Labelling Framework

1. **Distinct micro-labels.** Following the taxonomy proposed by Stachurska (2018), humorous potential should be flagged with three transparent abbreviations:



Proposed label	Scope	Example
hum.	benign jocularity, puns	<i>to diet</i> “die(t) of laughter”
facet.	ironic exaggeration	<i>to perish</i> “suffer mildly (facet.)”
joc.	archaic/jocular allusion	<i>bosom</i> “friend (joc.)”

2. Corpus-based sense division. If the humorous reading co-occurs with collocates incompatible with the literal sense (e.g., *He literally exploded with joy*), a new sense must be created, mirroring the corpus-driven methodology of Atkins and Rundell (2008).

3. Bidirectional consistency. Bilingual entries should ensure that humour labels appear symmetrically in both source and target directions to avoid asymmetrical pragmatic cues.

4. Usage examples as disambiguators. Every humorous sense should include an authentic example that foregrounds the comic effect, e.g., “*Stop tormenting me, you villain!*” *she laughed* (hum.)—a practice that increases label salience (Carey, 2016).

Implementing the above framework addresses two long-standing critiques. First, it operationalises Raskin’s script-opposition model by signalling when a lexical item is likely to invoke a humorous script (Raskin, 1984). Second, it dovetails with user studies showing that advanced learners actively seek style guidance when encoding text (Stachurska, 2018).

There are, nevertheless, challenges. Excessive labelling can overload entries and distract beginners (Landau, 2001). Pilot testing with Uzbek–English bilingual cohorts is therefore essential to calibrate granularity.

Humorous polysemy, though pervasive, remains under-documented in bilingual dictionaries, impeding precise intercultural communication. A triadic micro-label system (*hum.*, *facet.*, *joc.*) combined with corpus-driven sense division offers a viable remedy. By embedding clear, symmetrical labels and authentic examples,



lexicographers can alert users to comic scripts and reduce pragmatic misfires. Future work should empirically validate user comprehension gains and extend the model to multimodal dictionary platforms.

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