Punning Exploiting External and Internal Metaphors
A Study of Groucho Marx’s Use of Metaphor Reversal

Kalle Larsen
D-essay
Linguistics
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Supervisor: Christina Alm-Arvius
Abstract

The aim of this study has been to analyse metaphorical strings which have been interpreted literally, a process referred to as metaphor reversal. This was first described by Löflund (1999:18) and the specific term was later coined by Alm-Arvius (2006:6). Metaphor reversal is basically a subcategory of the broader term polysemic punning.

When a metaphor unexpectedly is interpreted literally, a humorous effect takes place and a pun is created. Especially if the metaphorisation in question has an entrenched figurative meaning, the unexpectedness of the literal interpretation is greater and the pun more obvious. The examples of these puns exploiting metaphor reversal have been taken from films featuring the verbal comedian Groucho Marx (GM), who frequently used this type and other kinds of puns in his films.

The terms internal and external metaphor, coined by Alm-Arvius (2003:78), have been used in order to distinguish between two different types of metaphorisations. Internal metaphor refers to metaphors with obvious internal collocational clashes and external metaphor refers to metaphors without such clashes, which can thus be given a literal as well as a figurative reading. However, this is not a clear-cut distinction and occasional overlapping between the two categories is common. Therefore, a continuum has been given which shows the overlapping category ‘more figurative external metaphors’. These are metaphors without collocational clashes, but with entrenched figurative meanings which make them metaphorical and not literal.

GM does not only revert external metaphors; he also reverts internal metaphors although this category contains collocational clashes which should make a literal interpretation impossible. Internal metaphor puns tend to be more absurd than external metaphor puns due to the collocational clashes which make the literal interpretation less probable. Reverted external metaphors are referred to as REM and reverted internal metaphors as RIM.

Most examples analysed are metaphorisations with idiom status with clearly preferred figurative meanings. Consequently, their figurative meanings are deeply entrenched and should not be altered. However, these figurative meanings are altered by GM in his punning; they are reverted and interpreted literally. This indicates that one of the few occasions when it is accepted or even possible to interpret a metaphorical idiom literally is in punning.

Key words: polysemy, punning, metaphor reversal, figurative meaning, literal meaning, internal metaphor, external metaphor, idiom, continuum, universe of discourse.
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1. Introduction, Methodology and Material

1.1 Introduction

“A pun is a kind of word play that is made possible by the ambiguity of a lexical unit or a longer compositional string” (Alm-Arvius 2003:141).

It is important to remember the latter part of this definition of a pun, since puns playing with the different meanings of a polyseme are often referred to as single occurrences of a lexical unit with different, but related meanings. For instance the definition of “pun” (see below) in OALD seems to neglect the fact that a string of words can also work as a pun: “the clever or humorous use of a word that has more than one meaning, or of words that have different meanings but sound the same” (OALD 2000:1027). According to the definitions in this essay, the former category is labelled punning exploiting polysemy and the latter is labelled punning exploiting homonymy. Alm-Arvius’s description of a pun above is to be preferred since she emphasises that also strings of words can be played with in punning.

The main aim of this study will be to analyse puns exploiting metaphorical compositional strings; more specifically, metaphorical strings that switch from a figurative interpretation to a literal one. The term for the type of metaphorisations that can be read figuratively as well as literally is external metaphor, e.g. He is so short-sighted taken from Alm-Arvius (2003:115). It was coined and described by Alm-Arvius (2003:78), and I further analysed metaphors from this category in my C-essay (Larsen 2006:4–20). Metaphorical strings with collocational clashes and, in many cases – but not always – a lexicalised and entrenched figurative meaning constitute the category of internal metaphor, e.g. Girls are roses. Internal metaphor is another term introduced by Alm-Arvius (2003:78). Some such strings will be analysed as well, since these are also used in puns in the empirical material. A traditional view of metaphor, as opposed to cognitive linguistics, is used in this study. Consequently, metaphors are seen as occasional figurative instances in language and not as conceptual structures which make language metaphorically structured (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980:3-9ff).

The analysis of internal and external metaphors is a quite recent area of analysis in metaphor research, and the use of such metaphors in punning is an even less investigated area. Alm-Arvius does not discuss this aspect in the chapter on puns in Figures of Speech (2003:141–151), the book where the terms are first presented. Accordingly, this study will make use of a new way of analysing puns and it intends to throw some light on a previously
neglected area in metaphor research. For an overview of similar previous research, see section 2.

The kind of pun that results from playing with metaphors by drawing attention to both their literal and figurative interpretations can be called punning exploiting polysemy, henceforth referred to as *polysemy punning* or *polysemous pun*. It is, more specifically, a play with a word’s or a construction’s different but related meanings. A specific term for this type of pun has, until recently, been missing. *Metaphor reversal* is the specific term for this kind of punning that has recently been coined and will be described in greater detail in section 2.1.

In puns that exploit external metaphors, henceforth referred to as *external metaphor puns*, the figurative meanings and the literal meanings are played with. An example would be: *Speaker 1*: “I get cold feet”. *Speaker 2*: “Then put on a pair of slippers”. The entrenched figurative meaning of the metaphorical idiom *get/have cold feet* makes the figurative interpretation the preferred or expected one. The literal interpretation is unexpected and used as a pun. This is the case for the basic character of the kinds of constructions analysed in this study: a literal unexpected interpretation of a metaphorical expression creates a pun. Most of these have obvious idiom status with entrenched figurative meanings. The expressions with doubtful idiom status still have entrenched figurative meanings that cannot be disregarded. Internal metaphors with obvious figurative meanings will also be analysed. A more thorough analysis and explanation of *external* and *internal metaphor puns* will be examined in section 4 below.

Certain comparisons with other kinds of puns, such as punning exploiting homonymy, found in the empirical material will also be made in order to separate and categorise the different kinds of puns. This will be further analysed in section 5.

### 1.2 Material

The empirical material for this study comes from lines said by Groucho Marx in the four films *The Cocoanuts, Animal Crackers, Duck Soup* and *A Day at the Races*. He frequently uses puns in his conversations and speeches, and many of these puns are built on the interplay between the literal and the figurative understandings of external metaphors, but also puns based on internal metaphors are used by him. We will see examples of both types of polysemy punning in this study.

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1 The empirical material from this film has been taken from the manuscript and not from the film itself. Hence, all the examples analysed in this study may not be found in the film and reference will be made to the manuscript.
Julius Henry Marx, better known as Groucho Marx, henceforth called GM, produced about 15 films in the 1920s to the 1930s together with his brothers, the Marx Brothers, in which they also play the main characters. GM almost always plays the role of the eloquent but impudent speaker who constantly tries to fool other people by using very witty language in order to get out of difficult situations. Very quickly, he can make any interlocutor(s) confused due to his skilful use of, most of all, figures of speech. By using a vast amount of tropes, GM not only manages to confuse his interlocutors in a conversation, he also entertains the audience watching the film. This is of course the primary goal to achieve, to entertain, since the films are labelled as comedies. However, to watch a film by the Marx Brothers and concentrate on GM’s speeches is not only entertaining, it also provides special and rich empirical material for any researcher interested in semantics, in particular one interested in figures of speech.

One kind of word play which GM often produces is the pun. He produces puns in many conversations, and in different ways, both polysemous puns and puns exploiting homonymy, henceforth referred to as homonymy punning or homonymous puns. Often the polysemous puns are based on internal or external metaphors.

GM almost always pokes fun at the upper classes in his films, for instance by using different kinds of puns. With this in mind, it is worth noting Redfern’s claim “that it is authoritarian personalities who most dislike and reject ambiguity [in language]” (1984:10). Redfern refers to experiments carried out by experimental psychologists which have revealed certain people’s attitude towards puns. Hence a combined political and psychological aim for effect seems to be involved as well in many cases when GM exploits potential ambiguities in language by using puns.

This study is not an exhaustive piece of research based on all the puns GM produces in the four films listed above; it is instead a study of a selected number of internal and external metaphor puns. Most puns analysed in this study are created from expressions with idiom status, i.e. “conventional multi-word expression[s] with a recurrent form as well as [their] own meaning or usage conventions in a language” (Alm-Arvius 2006:14). All expressions, however, have entrenched figurative meanings, usually found in dictionaries, which are not altered if the expressions are mentioned out of any specifying context. In other words, their

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3 Although the Marx Brothers did not write their own manuscripts, many puns were probably improvised and invented by GM while shooting a scene. GM’s ad-libbing is confirmed by Kanfer (2000:13) and Bego (2001:44).
4 The pages of this manuscript are not numbered; therefore, I have counted the pages and added the page numbers.
internal or external metaphor status is then opaque or at least not regularly obvious. The analysis of this distinction is given in section 3 below.

GM was an American comedian from the 1930s; hence, some examples given in this study may belong to American English only and some may seem rather dated.

1.3 Categorisation and Terminology

As stated in the Introduction, the study of internal and external metaphor puns is a new area of analysis in metaphor research, and this makes it difficult to directly compare the present study to other studies. In numerous other studies of puns there is no way of distinguishing internal and external metaphor puns from other types of polysemy punning. More specifically, the term polysemy punning can be seen as a hypernym of the terminological labels for the more specific kinds of punning called internal and external metaphor puns which are analysed in section 4.

Polysemy punning can contrast a literal and a figurative meaning of a word or a construction in a playful or surprising way, and we have an example of an external metaphor pun or maybe an internal metaphor pun. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that polysemy punning plays on the figurative and the literal meanings: The following example from the empirical material illustrates this (italics mine):

General: Our men are being badly beaten. I suggest we dig trenches.
GM: Dig trenches? There isn’t time to dig trenches, we’ll buy them ready made.
(Duck Soup 1933)

Here two different, but related meanings of trench are used and neither of them is given a figurative interpretation (ditch in the ground vs long, loose coat). Thus, if the punster plays with the figurative and literal meaning of a word or construction we are dealing with a more specific type of polysemy punning called external or internal metaphor pun. We will return to the example above and other similar examples in section 5.2.

In the next section, some previous research on puns with polysemous ambiguities is briefly presented. Moreover, the two researchers who seem to have come up with an adequate term for the use of internal and external metaphor puns are presented along with their studies.
2. Previous Research

2.1 Previous Research on Puns with Polysemous Ambiguities

Hammond & Hughes (1978:1-2f) make a distinction between “verbal pun” and “play on words”. According to them, “a verbal pun” is only homonymous in character, because the two different meanings are not related in any way. A polysemous pun is instead labelled as “play on words”, and is said to have “a rational erudite quality”, whereas a pun has “a capricious and irrational quality” (Hammond & Hughes 1978:2). The distinction between puns and play on words seems quite superfluous, however, since word play according to, for instance, Crystal (2002:112f) and Alm-Arvius (2003:141f) should be seen as a superordinate term of all sorts of puns and not as a specific sort of ambiguity category. Consequently, Hammond & Hughes’s distinction between play on words and puns will not be used in this study. Instead, pun(s) will be treated as the superordinate term of both homonymy punning and polysemy punning.

Nash (1985:146f) presents an interesting term: “pun-metaphors”. His example is a headline: Murky consequences of washing our hands of Europe and he argues that “[the headline writer’s] casual use of the hand-washing idiom, however, enables him to work the pun on murky, using a figurative meaning, ‘disreputable’, side by side with its primary meaning, ‘dark’, here stretched to include the nuance ‘dirty’”(1985:146). In this headline the literal and figurative meanings of murky function together and thus a kind of pun is created; we wash our hands to get rid of dirt. However, there is not an unexpected switch from a figurative interpretation to a literal interpretation in the pun on murky here: The meanings simultaneously complement each other. The label “pun-metaphor” seems suitable for headlines such as this example when the meanings work side by side like many puns do, but it does not really cover the switching between ambiguous and clearly different interpretations that takes place in the sort of punning analysed in this study.

Neither do studies of GM’s life and films provide any help in the analysis of the puns that GM produced. The acclaimed study of the Marx Brothers, The Marx Brothers Encyclopedia, treats the notion of puns in one short entry with some examples and a brief description without any further classification or analysis (Mitchell 1996:197). Nor is any specific information on GM’s puns found in Kanfer (2001:9–438) or in Adamson (1973:43-404), two recognised biographies of the Marx Brothers.
Tiersma (1985:1–33) describes, in his interesting but short study *Language-Based Humor in the Marx Brothers Films*, how GM exploits different kinds of puns. Although Tiersma analyses metaphorical constructions that switch from a figurative interpretation to a literal interpretation and labels them “decomposition” (1985:13–19), he also includes homonymy punning in this category. Moreover, Tiersma later refers to the same kind of switch from the figurative meaning to the literal meaning but now he labels it “structural ambiguity” (1985:32f). Tiersma does not distinguish between internal and external metaphors and, more notably, he does not distinguish between polysemy and homonymy (1985:3). Due to confusing classification and labelling, Tiersma does not provide us with an adequate term for the kind of punning that will be analysed in this study.

An analysis that adequately describes the kind of pun we are dealing with in this study is found in Löflund (1999:18) and in Alm-Arvius (2006:6), who coins the term metaphor reversal for a usually humorous switching back to a literal meaning in the use of an idiomatic metaphor. Both argue that a metaphor is reverted when a sudden switch from the figurative meaning to the literal meaning takes place. Löflund’s example is the following: “Marge [from *The Simpsons*] /…/ sees a man on television who skis down a hill and who falls and breaks his neck. Marge: That’s what I call breakneck speed” (Löflund 1999:17). *Breakneck* literally means to ‘break the neck’, but the only lexicalised meaning is “[only before noun] very fast and dangerous” (*OALD* 2000:143), which indicates how uncommon the literal interpretation of *breakneck* actually is. Löflund further argues:

> The literal meaning is never used on its own really, without a connection to the metaphorical sense, other than in these kinds of puns. The literal source of the metaphor is pushed into focus when Marge talks about the man who actually and literally broke his neck by skiing at too fast a speed. It can be said that Marge in a way reverts the metaphor when she places the literal sense in focus. (1999:18)

This is exactly the kind of pun in which a witty or surprising shift from the entrenched figurative meaning to the unexpected literal meaning of a metaphorisation takes place. A description seems so far to have been missing, but Löflund’s description of a metaphor as being reverted works well.

Alm-Arvius (2006:6) further develops Löflund’s description and argues that a metaphor is reverted when the “return to the source meaning is a contextually induced reversal of the
metaphorical process” (2006:6). Moreover, Alm-Arviu introduces the term \textit{metaphor reversal} for the switch back to the literal source of a metaphorisation, which works as a pun. What we are dealing with is a kind of “backgrounding” versus “foregrounding” of the literal and figurative meanings, depending on which meaning the communicative situation demands (Cacciari 1993:38). In the puns of this study, a very sudden and unexpected foregrounding of the literal meaning takes place and the figurative, entrenched meaning gets temporarily backgrounded. This process, here called metaphor reversal, can be used with success in punning as proven by GM, who exploits this kind of potential ambiguity to a great extent in his characters’ utterances in the Marx Brothers’ films. We will return to the analysis of this kind of punning in section 4.

Since this study is dealing with both external and internal metaphor puns where a switch from the figurative meaning to the literal meaning takes place, two terms will be used: \textit{reverted external metaphors} and \textit{reverted internal metaphors}. For the sake of convenience, the acronyms REM and RIM will be used henceforth.

3. Internal vs External Metaphors

3.1 Internal or External Metaphors in Idioms
At first glance, the distinction between internal and external metaphors may appear obvious. Alm-Arvius states that the figurative status of an internal metaphor “is directly evident from the combination of words within a syntactic string” (2003:115) due to the collocational clashes it involves, whereas an external metaphor “could in principle also be given a literal reading” (2003:115f). The distinction seems fairly clear-cut so far: certain strings can only be interpreted figuratively (internal metaphors), whereas certain other strings can in principle be understood figuratively as well as literally (external metaphors). However, we must keep in mind that idiom status plays a very important role when analysing internal and, in particular, external metaphors. Whether an external metaphor can also be interpreted literally depends on how deeply rooted its figurative meaning is. An idiom has an entrenched meaning which is not altered even if it is written or said in isolation, i.e. it has a firmly established and, usually, figurative meaning. Most examples of internal and external metaphor puns in the empirical material of this study are based on idioms, and as a result the entrenched and expected interpretation is the figurative one and the literal interpretation is unexpected.
The dominating and entrenched figurative meaning of an idiom seems not to be recognised by Glucksberg (2001:17f), who argues that a literal interpretation of a string of words is just as common and probable as a figurative one. He also writes that it is the context that decides which interpretation should be the preferred one, which is certainly true in general. However, Glucksberg does not discuss metaphorical idioms which keep the figurative entrenched meaning if taken in isolation, i.e. out of context. That an idiom has an entrenched figurative meaning made up by the composition of a special set of words is, however, noted by Colombo, who argues that “[o]ne of the main characteristics of idioms/…/is that the figurative meaning cannot be derived from a compositional interpretation of the literal meanings of the single words that compose the idiom” (1993:166). The words in an idiom can be separated if they are each considered away from the idiom, i.e. in isolation. These words then have a literal meaning, but we cannot figure out the entrenched meaning of the idiom by looking at the literal meaning of each word it is composed of. This is also noted by Gibbs (1994:424), who argues that this is “because idioms are noncompositional, since their meanings are not a function of the meanings of their individual parts”. The entrenched meaning of an idiom as a whole is, however, evident also when it is taken out of context and mentioned in isolation. This is important to keep in mind, and we will return to this aspect of idioms below.

All idioms are of course idiomatic or show idiomaticity, but there are also other instances of idiomatic language use. Accordingly, all instances of idiomaticity are not idioms (cf. Cacciari 1993:27f; Fernando 1996:30–33). Incidental syntactic combinations can be described as idiomatic if they just adhere to the general formation or constructional principles of the language. The term idiom refers to recurrent, entrenched lexico-syntactic constructions, which are often “frozen”, and it is a term which is more specific than idiomatic and idiomaticity. Thus, the term idiom will be used in this study to refer to the examples analysed in section 4.

Idioms are often seen as “frozen” expressions, i.e. unchanging elements. However, idioms can in fact undergo some changes and still be recognised as idioms. This is noted by Alm-Arvius: “There are many examples of formal or semantic variation of idioms. In other words, non-canonical uses of such prefabs can still be recognised as instances of a particular idiom” (2006:1). One example given in her article is the idiom have/get butterflies in one’s stomach, which can also be used in the following way: Those butterflies were storming her stomach again (taken from the BNC) in which the core words butterflies and stomach are intact but the rest of the idiom is altered.

Let us now turn to a couple of other examples in order to, hopefully, make the discussion about metaphorical idioms clearer. This label is intended to refer to idioms that are
expressions with an entrenched figurative meaning, such as *have/get butterflies in one’s stomach*. Idioms that are non-figurative are “semantically more straightforward set phrases” (Alm-Arvius 1998:23), and some examples of this category would be *ladies and gentlemen, fish and chips* and *give way*.

If we examine the metaphorical string *That is not my cup of tea*, taken from Larsen (2006:4), we will more clearly see the difficulties that occur when deciding whether such a string contains an external or internal metaphor. The expression *not my cup of tea* is an idiom which has a figurative entrenched meaning, namely that someone does not like or has no interest in something, i.e. the referent of the deictic demonstrative pronoun *that* in the string *That is not my cup of tea* or another referring expression used in this slot. The first thing to look for is if there are any collocational clashes, as for instance in *Girls are roses*, where there is a literal incompatibility between *girls* and *roses*. If a collocational clash is present, then we can be fairly certain that we are dealing with an internal metaphor, since our encyclopaedic knowledge tells us that this would be an impossible sentence if we gave it a literal interpretation. Now, there are clearly no such collocational clashes in the expression *not my cup of tea*. Therefore, this is not an obvious internal metaphor. If we then ask ourselves whether it can be given a literal interpretation, we might be able to decide if it could be seen as an external metaphor. It appears as if, at first glance, *not my cup of tea* can be given a literal interpretation since it might be used “for instance at a tea-party where there are many guests with many cups of tea” (Larsen 2006:4). This ought to be a good example of a straightforward external metaphor since both a literal as well as a figurative interpretation seem possible. However, *not my cup of tea* is an idiom, and therefore stored in the English language with its figurative meaning; that is, its entrenched and expected meaning. This means that it triggers the figurative interpretation for anyone who knows idiomatic English, e.g. native speakers or other proficient users of the language. When we have a metaphorical idiom, the metaphorical interpretation would be the preferred and salient one even if the idiom was written or said in isolation.

*Not my cup of tea* is a lexicalised idiom (*OALD* 2000:307), and that the metaphorical interpretation is the preferred one in the example used here becomes even more evident when looking up the string in the *BNC*. Seven results were found and all represent the figurative interpretation. Five of these examples did not have a subject phrase and two examples had *it* and *they* respectively. So a specific subject phrase, for instance the deictic element *that*, is not part of the idiom *not my cup of tea*. 

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Strings that are conventionally recognised as metaphorical idioms seem more unlikely to be given literal interpretations since these deviate from their figurative entrenched meanings. So even if a metaphorical idiom does not contain any collocational clashes, the figurative interpretation can still be the dominating one. Thus, straightforward or balanced (see section 4.1) external metaphors seem uncommon, and difficult to find since they must not be part of any idioms and must not contain any collocational clashes. Let us thus consider two strings which are not lexicalised idioms or contain any collocational clashes: *The old rock has become brittle with age* taken from Cacciari & Glucksberg (1994:449) and *Smoke gets in your eyes* taken from Larsen (2006:18).

The former example can be interpreted metaphorically if it is used about a person who has certain characteristics that can be described by means of the metaphor *old rock*. The person referred to is then old and cannot manage things as s/he once could. On the other hand, this example can just as well be taken literally, i.e. be intended to describe a real rock that after centuries has become brittle. Since this example is not an idiom with an entrenched or lexicalised figurative meaning, it can be interpreted figuratively as well as literally. Consequently, idioms can never be straightforward external metaphors, since idioms always have an entrenched figurative meaning that is apparent also when the expression is said in isolation. What finally decides the interpretation “is the universe of discourse, as it is manifested in the language context and/or the extralinguistic situation” (Alm-Arvius 2003:95). The different interpretations are triggered by the communicative situation in which the speaker finds himself or herself in or by the textual context. If this expression is said in isolation, we cannot decide if the figurative or the literal interpretation is the preferred one. This makes it a straightforward external metaphor.

If we now turn to the latter example, *Smoke gets in your eyes*, it was claimed in Larsen (2006:18) that this string is also a straightforward external metaphor because both the figurative and literal interpretations are possible. However, since this example is taken from a very famous pop song the string has almost obtained an entrenched figurative meaning. According to Glucksberg (1993:23), citing a pop song is an example of an “explicit allusion”, which refers to a specific meaning of a certain string of words, i.e. to an entrenched meaning that is not altered even in isolation. Consequently, “[s]ince the song obviously is very well known, we can suspect that it is uncommon to say *Smoke gets in your eyes* in everyday speech without referring to the song at all” (Larsen 2006:18). Still, Google⁵ provides 606,000 hits of

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⁵ [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22smoke+gets+in+your+eyes%22, 15/9-06.](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22smoke+gets+in+your+eyes%22, 15/9-06.)
Smoke gets in your eyes, many of which refer to the literal use of the expression, even if the overwhelming majority appears to refer to the song, i.e. have the figurative interpretation. Similarly, only four out of fourteen examples of Smoke gets in your eyes have literal interpretations in the BNC. Thus, this example seems to be somewhat problematic when it comes to deciding when and according to what criteria we can label a string a straightforward or balanced external metaphor.

As was shown in Larsen (2006:15), the two categories internal and external metaphors are not so easily distinguished and should, therefore, be seen as connecting along a continuum:

‘Internal metaphors’——‘More likely to be metaphors’——‘External metaphors’

We can place the idiom not my cup of tea in the category ‘more likely to be metaphors’, because even if this example does not contain any collocational clashes, the metaphorical interpretation is still the normal and preferred one. By comparison, That old rock has become brittle with age can be placed in the category ‘external metaphors’, since it cannot be decided whether it is a literal or a figurative string when it is decontextualised, i.e. said in isolation. The more problematic example Smoke gets in your eyes cannot just be labelled as an external metaphor, since the metaphorical interpretation, to be hopelessly in love and weep over it, is so common. However, Google and the BNC indicate that this example does exist with a literal meaning as well. Thus, Smoke gets in your eyes belongs in the category ‘more likely to be metaphors’.

We can now say that a key feature for what can be considered a potential external metaphor seems to be how likely the two interpretations are. If the metaphorical interpretation and the literal one seem as likely out of any specifying context we have a straightforward external metaphor.

The idea of using a continuum in order to express the literal or figurative status of a string of words is mentioned in Cacciari (1993:31), who points out that “different types of expressions, according to their level of literality, idiomaticity, or metaphoricity” can be connected along a continuum whose endpoints represent metaphoricity and literality respectively. This suggests that using a continuum for describing the relations between internal and external metaphors is useful and adequate.
3.2 Metaphor Reversal in Punning

If a metaphorical string with an entrenched figurative meaning is interpreted literally, we get a pun meaning. Even if a certain metaphorical string does not contain any collocational clashes, from the point of view of the literal meanings of the words in it, the figurative meaning of the string is entrenched and also the preferred interpretation. This means that if anyone gives a metaphorical idiom a literal interpretation, a pun or at least a pun-like situation will be created.

Let us here consider an example from the empirical material of this study where a pun is created by giving a metaphorical expression a literal interpretation (italics mine):

A suitor to a young woman: Gloria, I love you! Can’t you see I’m *at your feet*  
GM: *When you’re through with her feet you can start on mine.*  
 (*Duck Soup* 1933)

Here a suitor utters an expression addressed to Gloria, *at your feet,* an expression whose established meaning is that someone is prepared to do anything for someone else. This figurative meaning is the entrenched meaning in English (see the results from the *BNC* below). The whole context also provokes the figurative meaning. Therefore, the figurative reading of this string is the preferred one. However, the lack of literal collocational clashes in this string opens up for a literal interpretation as well, and this is what GM exploits here. He disregards the conventional situation and the language connected with it. Consequently, his literal interpretation of the metaphorical string becomes ridiculous and humorous. The figurative status of *at your feet* gives the string a metaphorical reading under any circumstances. If we decontextualised *at your feet,* the figurative interpretation of the string would be the preferred one. Significantly enough, the *BNC* provides 36 citations for *at your feet,* and 16 of these have the intended figurative meaning said by the suitor in this example, for instance “I throw myself at your feet, oh Lord Malamute” (*BNC, AD9 564*). None of the remaining examples refer to the sort of situation that GM conjures up in the example, namely to stay close to someone else’s feet, literally, and give them some kind of treatment. This is an obvious intended pun-interpretation of *at your feet,* where GM takes a figurative expression with no collocational clashes and turns it into a literal expression. This reversion of the metaphorical expression *at your feet* is unexpected due to its entrenched figurative meaning and the particular context in which we find it. Hence, the pun creates a humorous situation.
This pun exploits a particular kind of potential polysemy through the type of metaphor reversal termed REM.

4. Groucho Marx’s Internal and External Metaphor Puns

4.1 Examination of External Metaphors

Even if only a few examples were analysed, the discussion in section 3.1 above made it relevant to ask whether straightforward external metaphors are fairly uncommon and whether many metaphors without collocational clashes should rather be placed in the category ‘more likely to be metaphors’ than in the category ‘external metaphors’? The analyses in this section can, hopefully, provide some indications. In order to refer to the different terminological categories on a continuum, they will henceforth be referred to as:

‘Undeniably ——— ‘More figurative ———— ‘Balanced
internal metaphors’ external metaphors’ external metaphors’

The category labelled ‘balanced external metaphors’ means that we do not know out of a specifying context whether a string should be understood as a metaphor or as a literal description. There is a “balance” between a potential literal and figurative meaning. The category labelled ‘more figurative external metaphors’ seems to be most likely in punning resulting from metaphor reversal, and some examples from this category will be examined in this section. However, we will see in section 4.2 below that also metaphorisations from the category labelled ‘undeniably internal metaphors’, metaphorisations with obvious collocational clashes, can be used to create puns.

Let us now examine the following examples taken from the empirical material, i.e. films featuring GM, in which he uses external metaphor puns (italics mine):

(1) Lady: You are the most able statesman in all of Freedonia.
GM: Well, that covers a lot of ground. Say, you cover a lot of ground yourself. You’d better beat it or they’ll tear you down and put up an office where you’re standing. (Duck Soup 1933)
(2) Lady: Captain Spaulding [GM’s character in the film], you stand before me as one of the bravest men of all time.

GM: All right, I’ll do that! (GM steps forward and stands in front of her). (Animal Crackers 1930)

(3) GM: Just think of it. One year ago, I came to Florida without a nickel in my pocket. And now, I’ve got a nickel in my pocket. (Cocoanuts 1929)

In examples (1) to (3) the same kind of punning is exemplified. GM turns a more figurative external metaphor into a literal expression by exploiting the possible polysemous shifts in these examples and thus uses metaphor reversal.

Examples (1), (2) and (3) provide the following characteristics shown with binary features listed below:

Pun intended: switch from an entrenched figurative meaning to an unexpected literal meaning.
+ Metaphorical
+ More figurative external metaphor
- Undeniably internal metaphor
- Balanced external metaphor
+ Polysemous
- Homonymous

(1)
Let us start by looking at example (1). Here GM replies with the figurative expression that covers a lot of ground in order to clarify to the lady that what she said to him includes many things and that a lot is expected from him. Then, quite unexpectedly, GM turns this figurative expression into a literal string of words when he actually describes the lady as covering a lot of ground, i.e. taking up a lot of space and being fat. GM also extends this metaphorisation by adding information about what other people will do with the huge amount of space that is occupied by her at the moment.

Now, does example (1) exhibit the set of binary features presented above? That covers a lot of ground is a metaphorical expression since its entrenched meaning is figurative. This is
exemplified in the BNC, where all four examples have the figurative meaning, and Google\(^6\) where all the first 100 hits of totally 190,000 refer to the figurative meaning. *Cover ground* is also a lexicalised idiom with a salient figurative meaning (TFD\(^7\)). Thus, it should be seen as a more figurative external metaphor due to the lack of collocational clashes which makes it possible but unlikely or even incongruous to interpret the string literally. External metaphors, both more figurative and balanced ones, tend to have a polysemous relation to a backgrounded source sense complex, i.e. a relation between the different but related figurative and literal meanings. Polysemy “refers to the phenomenon of words having various, related meanings” (Ross 1998:17), which is what characterises the two types of external metaphors as well. The figurative and the literal meanings of *cover (a lot of) ground* are different but still related to each other. When creating a pun in such cases by using metaphor reversal, the different meanings are used in the same context, which surprises the listener and creates a humorous situation. GM reverts the metaphor *cover (a lot of) ground* by returning to the literal source meaning of the expression and we have an example of REM.

*Cover (a lot of) ground* is a metaphorical idiom with an entrenched figurative meaning. GM, however, neglects its idiom status and the universe of discourse in which it is said. He interprets the words literally and an unexpected and humorous interpretation of the idiom is created, i.e. a pun.

(2)

In example (2) the expression *stand before somebody as something* is played with. In order to understand the pun GM uses in this example, we must see the scene where he is having a conversation with a lady who says: *Captain Spaulding, you stand before me as one of the bravest men of all time*. GM answers: *All right, I’ll do that!* After his reply he quickly takes a step forward and stands in front of her. This expression is ordinarily used by a person who wants to say something significant about somebody else, using the simile marker *as*. GM exploits this more figurative external metaphor by actually standing in front of the lady uttering the expression. In this way GM performs what the lady claims that he does if the interpretation of the expression is literal. Thus, GM has reverted the metaphorical expression *stand before somebody as something* by interpreting it literally.

\(^6\) [http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22cover+a+lot+of+ground%22](http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22cover+a+lot+of+ground%22), 15/9-06.

\(^7\) [http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/cover+ground](http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/cover+ground), 20/11-06.
This expression does not seem to be very common in English since there are no examples in the BNC and only 177 hits are found in Google\textsuperscript{8}. All of these, however, exemplify the metaphorical interpretation of the expression, for instance: *yet here you stand before me as Cupid*\textsuperscript{9}, and none the kind of situation which GM creates by standing in front of the speaker. This expression may not be felt to have an obvious idiom status since it is not lexicalised, and it is not a very common expression. However, the figurative interpretation is clearly the preferred and normal one, even if it is certainly possible to interpret this metaphorisation literally since no collocational clashes are present. Still, such an interpretation does not seem to occur in actual conversation, and a pun is created when the literal interpretation is suddenly foregrounded. Along our continuum, this expression ends up in the category ‘more figurative external metaphors’ and the pun should be referred to as an example of REM since we return to the literal source meaning from the figurative entrenched meaning.

The polysemous potential of *stand before somebody* is thus exploited in order to create the pun, even if *stand before somebody* does not normally correspond to *stand in front of somebody*, which is the interpretation GM makes. The former expression, with the meaning of physically standing in front of somebody, is only used in formal situations, e.g. “He shall stand before kings” (BNC, AOP 1081). Therefore, GM’s act of standing in front of the speaker is unexpected in the film situation, which can be regarded as an informal one. It is also an unexpected interpretation due to the entrenched figurative meaning of the expression *stand before somebody else as something*.

The expression in (3) *without a nickel* does not seem very common, at least in British English, since there are no instances of it in the BNC. However, Google\textsuperscript{10} exemplifies 805 uses of the expression *without a nickel*, and all of these seem to be examples of the metaphorical use, such as: “[she] arrives at her destination without a nickel in her pocket”\textsuperscript{11}. A nickel is an American and Canadian coin and, consequently, this expression is mostly used in American and Canadian English. Although the expression certainly is quite common it is not an obvious example of an idiom. The expression *without a nickel* cannot be found in OALD (2005:858) or TFD\textsuperscript{12}. Neither does the American dictionary Merriam-Webster\textsuperscript{13} include this expression.

\textsuperscript{8} http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22you+stand+before+me+as+%22, 15/9-06.
\textsuperscript{9} http://www.newpara.com/Cosmic%20Eggs%20Quantum%20Bacon%20.htm, 15/9-06.
\textsuperscript{10} http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=%22without+a+nickel%22, 15/9-06.
\textsuperscript{11} http://www.talkinbroadway.com/regional/sanfran/s750.html, 15/9-06.
\textsuperscript{12} http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/nickel, 20/11-06.
The expression is not a lexicalised idiom; however, it might still be seen as an idiom due to the entrenched figurative meaning and that it is a fairly common expression.

Apart from the metaphor status, *without a nickel* can be seen as a synecdochical and hyperbolic expression as well. Synecdochical since it describes a part-whole relation where the nickel stands for a larger sum of money: “synecdoche is a meaning shift in the use of a lexeme—or a longer expression—within a **part-whole** [author’s bold] relationship” (Alm-Arvius 2003:163–164). The expression is also hyperbolic since it must be a clear exaggeration that GM’s character came to Florida without even one nickel in his pocket. Surely, he must have had at least some money with him in order to get there and survive. This hyperbole might not be so easy to recognise at first glance, because it is part of an idiomatic string which “members of a speech community have heard/…/repeatedly and do not act with surprise or pay them any particular attention when they hear them, in spite of their really drastic meaning” (Alm-Arvius 2003:135).

It is the figurative versus the literal meaning of *without a nickel (in my pocket)* that GM contrasts in this pun. The two meanings are different but related; i.e. we are dealing with the polysemous ambiguity of the phrase *without a nickel*. Just after he has said the expression, he says to himself: *And now, I’ve got a nickel in my pocket*, and in this second utterance he expresses the literal meaning of owning one nickel, as he is actually keeping a nickel in his pocket. This statement shows that his first line was also intended to be understood literally and not as a figure of speech, as it was about how very little money he had at the time, literally not even one nickel. However, the figurative interpretation is the preferred and normal one of this expression, which was also indicated by *Google*.

We can place this expression in the category ‘more figurative external metaphors’ since there are no collocational clashes in it, although its figurative meaning remains intact even in isolation. The pun is an instance of REM, since the entrenched figurative meaning of *without a nickel* is reverted and made literal.

### 4.2 Examination of Internal Metaphors

GM’s usage of this pun category seems more problematic since he now reverts undeniably internal metaphors with collocational clashes. As we saw in the preceding section, examples (1) to (3) are all more figurative external metaphors and they are possible, although not likely, to be interpreted literally since there are no collocational clashes in them. We can return to the

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13 [http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/nickel](http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/nickel), 9/1-07.
example presented in section 3.1, *Girls are roses*, in order to explain the difficulties we are now facing. In this example a clear collocational clash is present since a real girl can never be a real flower and we should not interpret this string literally. Alm-Arvius also argues that “it does not appear possible to reject the metaphorical character of internal metaphors” (2003:78), i.e. they seem impossible to interpret literally. Nevertheless, this is exactly what GM does in some puns that we will examine in more detail below. GM ignores that a collocational clash makes the string incongruous if interpreted literally.

It seems as if GM can create reverted metaphor puns out of any kind of situation regardless of whether or not there are collocational clashes in the metaphorical string. It will not be discussed here whether puns built on more figurative external metaphors are more or less humorous than puns built on undeniably internal metaphors. However, we can notice that a pun from the former category is much more unexpected, and more absurd, since the literal interpretation is impossible. This might create a more humorous pun (cf. Ross 1998:1–8). Still, such a pun seems more far-fetched and thus perhaps less humorous (cf. Ross 1998:1–8; Nash 1985:124–137).

We will examine three examples which all contain the same binary features as examples (1) to (3) in section 4.1 except that we are now dealing with undeniably internal metaphors. Thus, the puns intended in these examples are more absurd since an undeniably internal metaphor cannot be given a literal interpretation due to the collocational clashes present.

Examples (4), (5), and (6) exemplify the following characteristics shown with binary features in the list below:

Pun intended: switch from the entrenched figurative meaning to the unexpected (seemingly impossible) literal meaning.
+ Metaphorical
  - More figurative external metaphor
+ Undeniably internal metaphor
  - Balanced external metaphor
+ Polysemous
  - Homonymous
(4) (GM in a conversation with a man and both have just been pickpocketed by Harpo who stands next to them)
Man: I…
GM: Don’t talk, he’ll take the word out of your mouth. (Animal Crackers)

(5) Lady: The ambassador is here and he’s had a change of heart.
GM: A lot of good that’ll do, he’s still got the same face. (Duck Soup)

(6) Girl: What are you, a man or a mouse?
GM: You put a piece of cheese down there and you’ll find out. (Pirosh et.al 1964:81)

(4) In example (4) GM plays with the lexicalised idiom to take the word right out of somebody’s mouth, which means “to say what sb else was going to say” (OALD 2000:1491). We need to see the scene in order to appreciate the pun, since it is Harpo, GM’s brother, who pickpockets GM and the other participant of the conversation when GM utters the expression. Thus GM interprets the metaphorical idiom literally although the entrenched meaning is figurative and, more noticeably, there is an obvious collocational clash present. It is literally impossible to take a word out of somebody’s mouth. Nevertheless, GM creates a pun by using a hyperbolic expression in order to refer to Harpo’s pickpocketing, thus warning his interlocutor that Harpo is a very skilful pickpocket.

This idiom should be placed in the category ‘undeniably internal metaphors’ due to the collocational clash that is obvious in this expression. Although this pun is different from puns exploiting REM in which the literal source meaning is foregrounded, we are still dealing with the process referred to as metaphor reversal. While referring to a pickpocket close to him, GM uses the entire scenario and interprets the metaphorical idiom to take the word right out of somebody’s mouth literally. This pun is more absurd than puns exploiting REM; we know that it is impossible for somebody to take a word out of somebody else’s mouth. The literal interpretation is more absurd when internal metaphors are reverted. The foregrounding of the literal source meaning does take place, but this literal meaning becomes absurd since it is actually impossible. In REM we have a foregrounded or highlighted literal meaning that is physically possible, e.g. example (1) in which it is possible for a human to cover a lot of ground literally. No matter how improbable this particular interpretation is, in REM this interpretation is still physically possible. In reverted internal metaphors (RIM) the literal
interpretation is not physically possible, but the metaphor can still be reverted and used as a
pun. What GM shows is that it is still possible to play with the metaphoricity and literality of
a metaphorical string although there are obvious collocational clashes present. It seems as if
the only time we can interpret a metaphorical idiom with obvious collocational clashes
literally is in punning.

We are dealing with polysemy punning even in RIM. There is still a switch between a
figurative meaning to a literal meaning. This switch may seem impossible at first, but GM
shows that even an idiom like this with a clear collocational clash can be given a literal
interpretation as well. Thus, there are different but related meanings that are being played
with in this idiom, a kind of polysemy punning.

Undeniably internal metaphors that are interpreted literally are probably only intended for
punning, as GM shows. Google and the BNC do not provide any examples of a literal use of
the idiom to take the word right out of somebody’s mouth.

(5)
In example (5) there is an overt collocational clash which should make a literal interpreta-
tion impossible. Nevertheless, GM reverts the metaphorical idiom a change of heart and gives it a
literal reading. GM uses this metaphor reversal as an insult directed at the ambassador: He
pretends that the ambassador has transplanted the organ called the heart (a change of heart),
but that does not matter to GM, who would instead like to see some kind of facial changes
since the ambassador is so ugly.

The metaphorical idiom played around with here can be placed in the category ‘undeniably
internal metaphors’ due to the overt collocational clash. Of course, with today’s medical
surgery we can actually perform heart transplantations, and it is possible to change the face of
a human being which technically would make a literal interpretation possible. Still, the
collocational clash is obvious, because we usually speak in more medical terms if we have
undergone advanced surgery such as heart transplantation and facial surgery. The literal
interpretation is perhaps not impossible but it is still an unexpected and even incongruous
interpretation; therefore, we place this idiom in the category ‘undeniably internal metaphors’.

The polysemy punning in this example is the two different but related meanings of a
change of heart. The entrenched figurative meaning of this idiom is change of mind, i.e.
“[people] change their opinion or the way they feel about something” (TFD14). In order to

create the metaphor reversal, GM refers to a literal meaning of the string: to actually change the organ called the heart in one way or another. This is a highly unexpected interpretation and seems absurd, like most examples of RIM do.

No literal uses of *a change of heart* are exemplified in the *BNC* and out of the 980,000 examples in *Google*\textsuperscript{15}, at least the first 400 examples seem to refer to the figurative interpretation.

\(6\)

In the idiom *are you a man or a mouse*, from example (6), there is also a metaphorisation with a collocational clash. This idiom is used when we ask someone (in most cases a male person) if he is brave or not, since the conspicuous features of a prototypical man, at least according to some kind of masculine ideal, and a prototypical mouse are courage and cowardice respectively. *Man* and *mouse* are used metaphorically in order to ask if the person is brave or a coward. However, GM interprets this idiom literally and creates an example of RIM. By responding with a feature that is clearly connected to literal mice, namely eating cheese, GM suggests that he may be a real mouse and not just the metaphorical mouse referred to in the idiom. The strong desire for cheese that real mice are usually supposed to have, although this has not been scientifically proven, has nothing to do with the metaphorical use of *mouse* in the idiom *are you a man or a mouse*. Therefore, GM here signals that he has interpreted the string literally and reverted the metaphorical idiom.

By playing with the different but related literal and figurative meanings of the noun *mouse*, GM reverts the whole idiom. The entrenched meaning of *mouse* when used in this idiom denotes a coward. The meaning of the idiom according to *TFD*\textsuperscript{16} is: “something that you say in order to encourage someone to be brave when they are frightened to do something”. Only some features of a literal mouse are highlighted in the metaphorical use of *mouse*, such as anxiety and weakness. The unexpected literal interpretation of *mouse* in the idiom involves a lot more features than just anxiety and weakness, for instance being a rodent, having fur, a tail and a desire for cheese. The collocational clash in this idiom makes this pun an example of RIM, because no man can literally be a mouse. This is, however, GM’s interpretation; an impossible and quite absurd interpretation which only works in punning or perhaps some fictional scenario.

\textsuperscript{15} \url{http://www.google.se/search?hl=sv&q=%22a+change+of+heart%22&meta=}, 15/9-06.

\textsuperscript{16} \url{http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/Are+you+a+man+or+a+mouse}, 20/11-06.
Google exemplifies some literal interpretations of *are you a man or a mouse* similar to GM’s pun. The idiom is used as a headline in an article about chimeric experimentation which produces human-animal hybrids. Headlines often use puns (cf. Alm-Arvius 2003:149), and therefore it is no surprise that this idiom is given a literal reading in a headline in order to work as a pun. Once again we see that the only suitable situation for a metaphorical idiom, with or without collocational clashes, to be read literally is in punning.

5. Other Categories of Puns

5.1 Homonymy Punning

Two other types of puns much used by GM will here be briefly examined. The first type is homonymy punning. This form of ambiguity in language is different from polysemy because “it is only the expression sides of homonymic language elements that are the same, while their senses are unrelated” (Alm-Arvius 2003:144). The meanings of a polysemous word are different but related, whereas in a homonymous word they are completely unrelated. This is why we sometimes may feel that homonymy punning is not very erudite or even funny; it may even invoke anger and irritation because it is seen as a cheap way of joking (cf. Crystal 1998:12–18; Hammond & Hughes 1978:1f; Lanham 1991:127; Redfern 1984:11–32). In homonymy we distinguish between homographs and homophones. The former category contains words that are spelled in the same way but pronounced differently, and the latter category contains words that are pronounced in the same way but spelled differently (Alm-Arvius 1998:61). Homophones are, obviously, much more common in puns occurring in speech. Consequently, GM exploits only homophones when using homonymy punning.

Here, two examples are given with the binary features assigned to both of them:

(7) Lady: This is *a gala day* for you.
   GM: Well, a *gal-a-day* is enough for me, I don’t think I can handle anymore.
   (*Duck Soup* 1933)

17 [http://www.google.com/search?q=%22are+you+a+man+or+a+mouse%22](http://www.google.com/search?q=%22are+you+a+man+or+a+mouse%22), 15/9-06.
18 [http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,1437701,00.html](http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,1437701,00.html), 15/9-06.
(8) Minister: How about taking up the tax.
GM: How about taking up the carpet?
Minister: I still insist we must take up the tax.
GM: He’s right! You’ve gotta take up the tacks before you can take up the carpet. (Duck Soup 1933)

- Metaphorical
- Polysemy
+ Homonymy
+ Homophone
- Homograph

In these examples, (7) and (8), GM exploits the similar pronunciations of words, tax vs. tacks, and strings of words, gala day vs. gal-a-day respectively. We can see that none of these words are related; their phonological similarity is just a coincidence in the English language, and they are used in punning due to the unexpectancy of suddenly transforming the meaning of a word or a string of words into something that is phonologically the same, but semantically something completely different. The transformation has a surprising effect because we are still within the same universe of discourse when saying the homonymous words.

In homonymy punning we are not dealing with idioms or expressions with entrenched figurative meanings that suddenly are altered. Homonymy punning has nothing to do with the meanings of the words or the expressions played with; it only concerns the expression side.

The coincidences in language referred to as homonymy may not be very easy to spot although they have been present in the language for a long time. Redfern notices that the punster "cannot invent puns which are not already potential in language. He merely unearths, sometimes dusts off, this treasure trove” (1984:9). Homonymy punning is not a process of inventing coincidental similarities; it is a process of uncovering the potentials in language, to see where there are similarities that can be exploited in order to create a joke that may appeal to some people.

Of course, according to cognitive linguists such as Lakoff & Johnson and their co-workers example (8) ought to be seen as metaphorical due to their theories of conceptual (1980:3–21ff) and primary metaphor (1999:45–73). However, this view is not regarded in this study where a more traditional view of metaphor is applied.
5.2 Non-Figurative Polysemy Punning

Although polysemy punning has been analysed in section 4, there is one important difference between the puns in this section and the puns in section 4: the type of meaning variation. In section 4 the punning exploitation of potential ambiguity in metaphorical idioms and expressions was analysed, and it was always clear which meaning was the figurative and entrenched one. However, there are examples of polysemy punning that do not deal with metaphorical idioms and where different but related meanings are not figurative and literal respectively. In these two examples we have two different but related literal meanings of the polysemous words *trench* and *gas*:

(9) General: Our men are being badly beaten. I suggest we *dig trenches*.

GM: *Dig trenches*? There isn’t time *to dig trenches, we’ll buy them ready made.* (*Duck Soup* 1933)

(10) Soldier: General Smith reports a *gas attack*. He wants to know what to do.

GM: *Take a spoon of bicarbonate soda and water.* (*Duck Soup* 1933)

- Metaphorical
+ Polysemy
- Homonymy

(9)

In (9) GM is in a war situation in which a normal discussion topic is whether the soldiers should dig trenches or not. However, since *trench* is a polysemous word, GM sees his chance of producing a pun20 and answers the soldier using an unexpected meaning of *trench*, namely the meaning of a long, loose coat21. The two meanings of *trench* are different but related, and we are dealing with an example of polysemy punning. When there is polysemous meaning variation of this kind, the relation between the interpretations can also be referred to as domain specification: “[T]his is because they describe different cognitive domains” (Alm-

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20 In fact, it is possible that GM in this example is talking about actually buying *trenches*, i.e. ditches in the ground and not trenchcoats. In that case, we are not dealing with polysemy punning anymore since no different but related meanings of *trench* are played with. However, my personal interpretation of this example is that the pun is exploiting the polysemous word *trench*.

21 Trenchcoats were first used in the trenches during the First World War.
The pun becomes effective due to the unexpectedness of using the meaning of a coat in a war situation in which everyone refers to the, in this situation, entrenched meaning of *trench*, i.e. a deep ditch in the ground. In this case, the sudden switch of meanings surprises the reader, since *trench* is given with the collocate *dig*.

(10)

In (10) we are still in the war situation and this context tells us that *gas attack* ought to mean a military attack using nerve gas or some other dangerous gas. GM exploits the polysemous character of *gas attack* and refers instead to gases in the stomach which may appear very suddenly. His answer is a recipe which, supposedly, should make the gases in the stomach go away. Once again, this polysemy pun becomes effective due to the unexpectedness of the “stomach meaning” of *gas attack*. Clearly, this interpretation does not fit very well in this particular universe of discourse.

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that metaphors which are suddenly changed to represent the unexpected literal meaning have a humorous effect and can be used in punning. *Metaphor reversal* is basically a subcategory of the more general notion referred to as *polysemy punning*.

The term used to describe a metaphor that can be interpreted literally as well as figuratively, due to the lack of collocational clashes, is *external metaphor*. This category of metaphors works well in punning just because it allows literal interpretations as well as figurative ones. The other category which consists of metaphors with obvious internal collocational clashes is called *internal metaphor*, and it is a category that should not be as suitable for punning since no literal interpretation appears possible. However, as we have seen in the analyses in section 4.2, it is certainly possible to create puns which exploit internal metaphors as well, although these puns might be more absurd. Due to the entrenched figurative meaning of many metaphorisations, the distinction between the two categories is not clear-cut. Consequently, there is some occasional overlapping between the categories of internal and external metaphors. It is important to note that when dealing with metaphorisations, the internal or external status of some metaphors is somewhat complex.

In order for a metaphorical construction to have both an expected entrenched figurative meaning and an also potential but unexpected literal meaning, the construction must have an
external metaphorical meaning whose form is identical with that of a literal string. However, the entrenched figurative meaning of such an expression will be the one we recognise if the construction occurs in isolation, out of context, especially when we are dealing with idioms as in this study. The punning effect of an instance of metaphor reversal depends on the close connection of such an idiom with a given form.

Section 4.1 shows how external metaphors can undergo metaphor reversal in order to create a humorous effect. In other words, a pun is created. The empirical material analysed in this section contains examples of reverted external metaphors (REM) because none of them exhibit any collocational clashes, which means that these expressions, from the point of view of the literal meanings of the words in them, can also be interpreted literally.

Section 4.2 shows instead how undeniably internal metaphors, which contain apparent collocational clashes, can also be exploited in punning by playing with the absurd literal meaning. These are termed reverted internal metaphors (RIM). These puns tend to be more absurd than puns created from REM. Whether this absurdity results in more or less humorous puns is of course a subjective reaction and may vary from listener to listener.

It has been highlighted in this study that we cannot just look for collocational clashes in metaphorisations in order to ascribe them the status of either external or internal metaphors. We must always investigate how common the figurative and the literal meanings are respectively. This is the reason why we ought to connect the metaphorisations investigated along a continuum like the one suggested in section 4.1. Expressions that cannot be assigned a figurative meaning or a literal meaning if taken out of context are here called ‘balanced external metaphors’, and they may be rare in the English language. Metaphors with obvious collocational clashes and idioms can never be part of this category due to their obvious or entrenched figurative meanings. Proficient speakers of English do not have to hesitate when facing idioms like *a change of heart*. They select the metaphorical meaning as the salient one, under any circumstances.

Another goal of this study was to show how metaphor reversal can be used in punning. This is a type of punning that seems to have been neglected in most studies of puns, which is a reason why it is important to highlight its occurrence in the kind of word play called punning. It is only in punning that it is possible for a metaphorical construction with an entrenched figurative meaning, such as an idiom, to be interpreted literally. In order to show this in a convincing and, hopefully, humorous way, the empirical material was taken from four films featuring the verbal comedian Groucho Marx (GM), who quite frequently uses
metaphor reversal as puns in his films. Also researchers of GM’s life and films seem to have overlooked his use of the kind of punning analysed in this study.

Finally, when meeting with a pun of any kind, in a film, in a book, in a conversation or in a study, it may sometimes seem like an awkward linguistic equivocation which need neither seem erudite nor more subtly humorous. GM’s puns must, in many cases, be experienced while watching the films in order to be fully appreciated. However, even in the films many of his puns can appear very cheap to some people which may provoke anger instead of laughter. Nevertheless, the questions of what is humorous and why it is humorous are not treated here. This study concentrates on the linguistic phenomenon called punning and, more specifically, metaphor reversal used as punning.


References

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Appendix

Examples of REM
1. Lady: As chairwoman of the committee I welcome you with open arms. GM: Is that so, how long do you stay open? (*Duck Soup* 1933)

2. Chico: What will you give us to keep our mouths shut? GM: I’ll give you a lockjaw. (Pirosh et al. 1964:45)

3. Chico: Hey Doc., you’re playing with fire. GM: I noticed you didn’t mind being scorched. (Pirosh et al. 1964:70)

4. GM: I’m gonna take you down and show you our cemetery. I’ve got a waiting list, there are fifty people dying to get there on that list, but I like you so I’m gonna shove you in ahead of all. (*The Cocoanuts* 1929)

5. Lady: Promise me you will follow in the footsteps of my husband? GM: How do you like that? I haven’t been on the job for five minutes and already she is making advances to me. (*Duck Soup* 1933)

7. (Groucho standing on a chair and telling a story but gets lost) Groucho: Now where was I? Oh, on this chair! (*The Cocoanuts* 1929)

Examples of RIM

8. Man: Sir, you try my patience. Groucho: I don’t mind if I do, you must get over and try mine sometime. (*Duck Soup* 1933)

Examples of Non-Figurative Polysemy Punning
9. GM: I danced before Napoleon. No, Napoleon danced before me. In fact, he danced 200 years before me. (*Duck Soup* 1933)

10. GM: Here’s one I picked up in a dancehall (he dances). Here’s another one I picked up in a dancehall (points with his thumb to the lady). (*Duck Soup* 1933)
Groucho: Well, this is a treat. Your treat! (Animal Crackers 1930)

Examples of Homonymy Punning

12. Girl: Am I intruding?
GM: Are you intruding? Just when I had her on the 5-yard line. I should say you were intruding. I should say you are intruding. Pardon me, I was using the subjunctive instead of the past tense. Yes, we’re way past tents, we’re living in bungalows now. (Animal Crackers 1930)

13. GM to two girls: What do you say girls, should we get married?
Girl: But that’s bigamy!
Groucho:Yeah, that’s big o’me too, it’s big of all of us, let’s be big for a change. (Animal Crackers 1930)

14. GM: Where are you going?
Man: Uruguay.
GM: Well, you go your-go-away, and I’ll go mine. (Animal Crackers 1930)

15. GM: I was sitting in front of the cabin when I bagged six tigers.
Lady: Captain, did you catch six tigers?
GM: I bagged them, I begged them to go away, but they hung around all afternoon. (Animal Crackers 1930)

16. Lady: I don’t want to interfere with your weekend.
GM: Nothing interferes with my week end, and don’t be so personal! (Animal Crackers 1930)

17. Police: Inspector!
GM: Inspect her yourself! (Animal Crackers 1930)

18. GM: The beasts are not looking for a waterhole, what they’re looking for is an alcohole. (Animal Crackers 1930)