LEXICAL LANGUAGE PLAY
IN "THE BIG BANG THEORY" SITCOM

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Василенко К., Книга А. Лексична мовна гра в ситкомі "Теорія великого вибуху"

У статті встановлено роль лексичної мовної гри в досягненні гумористичного ефекту в такому дискурсивному жанрі, як ситуаційна комедія. Матеріалом дослідження послужили шість сезонів популярного американського ситкому "Теорія великого вибуху". Акцентовано на тому, що найчастіше мовна гра актуалізується за допомогою лексичних мовних засобів і прийомів. Розглянуто такі прийоми лексичної мовної гри, як порівняння, перифраз, метафора, гіпербола, персоніфікація, звертання до неживого предмета, алюзія, цитацій, антономасія, омонімія, поєднання непоєднуваного, метонімія.

Ключові слова: гумористичний дискурс, ситком, мовна гра, прийоми мовної гри, лексична мовна гра.

Василенко Е., Книга А. Лексическая языковая игра в ситкоме "Теория большого взрыва"

В статье анализируется роль лексической языковой игры в достижении юмористического эффекта в таком жанре дискурса, как ситуационная комедия. Материалом исследования послужили шесть сезонов популярного американского ситкома "Теория большого взрыва". Акцентируется внимание на том, что наиболее часто языковая игра актуализируется при помощи лексических языковых средств и приемов. Рассматриваются такие приемы лексической языковой игры, как сравнение, перифраз, метафора, гипербола, олицетворение, обращение к неодушевленному предмету, аллюзия, цитация, антономасия, омонимия, соединение несоединимого, метонимия.

Ключевые слова: юмористический дискурс, ситком, языковая игра, приемы языковой игры, лексическая языковая игра

Vasilenko E., Kniga A. Lexical language play in "The big bang theory" sitcom

The article deals with the phenomenon of language play and its role in achieving humorous effect in humorous discourse.

The authors start with considering the notion of language play understood as creative, non-standard usage of any linguistic units and / or categories to create witty utterances. To the characteristics of language play belong those of secondary character, wit, conventionality, artificiality, associativity, substitutiveness, accentuality, relevance, individuality, aesthetics, the comic effect, etc. Language play is viewed as one of the main ways of achieving humorous effect in humorous discourse, including the genre of situational comedy.

The study is based on a popular American sitcom "The Big Bang Theory". The authors come to the conclusion that the characters of the sitcom use in their jokes language play techniques at all the levels of language structure: phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic, the most frequent being those of lexical level. Such means of lexical language play as (in decreasing order of frequency) simile, periphrasis, metaphor, hyperbole, personification and referring to an inanimate object, allusion and citation, antonomasia, homonymy, combination of incompatible words, and metonymy are considered.

Key words: humorous discourse, sitcom, language play, language play techniques, lexical language play

Problem statement and its connection with important scientific tasks. Language play (in some papers referred to as language game; the term introduced by L. Wittgenstein [Wittgenstein 1953]), which is defined as creative, non-standard (non-canonical, deviating from the linguistic / stylistic / speech / logical norm) usage of any linguistic units and / or categories to create witty utterances, including those bearing a comic content [Kultura / Культура 2007 : 802], is one of the main ways of achieving humorous effect in humorous discourse, including the genre of situational comedy.

Situational comedy (sitcom) is a series of weekly shows featuring regular characters having the capacity for creating humorous situations. The humour in a sitcom "arises from playing around with the comic possibilities of those particular character types interacting with each other in that situation, and may not involve lines or gags which are funny in isolation" [Ross 1998 : 89].

Analysis of recent research and publications. The theoretical basis of the research are the works by D. Crystal [Crystal 2001], O. Konovalova [Konovalova / Коновалова 2008], N. Kovilyaeva [Kovilyaeva / Ковыляева 2015], B. Norman [Norman / Норман 2006], A. Ross [Ross 1998], A. Skovorodnikov et al. [Kultura / Культура 2007], etc. In these works, such features of the

phenomenon under study as wit, conventionality, artificiality, secondary character, associativity, substitutiveness, accentuality, relevance, individuality, aesthetics (which consists in the beauty and grace of the utterance), the comic effect, and the internal ("natural") properties of the language itself are distinguished. It is also underlined that language play embraces all language levels: phonetics, word formation, lexis, syntax.

It should be taken into consideration that language play serves as only one of many means of creating a humorous effect and interacts with other techniques, such as deliberate parody, distortion, conglomeration, etc.

Goal and objectives of the study. The study is aimed at identifying and systematizing lexical language play techniques used by the characters of the sitcom "The Big Bang Theory".

Presentation of the main research material. The study is based on the six (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 9th) seasons of the popular American sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" (for the analysis of language play in other sitcoms see, e. g., [Vasilenko, Kniga / Василенко, Книга 2017]).
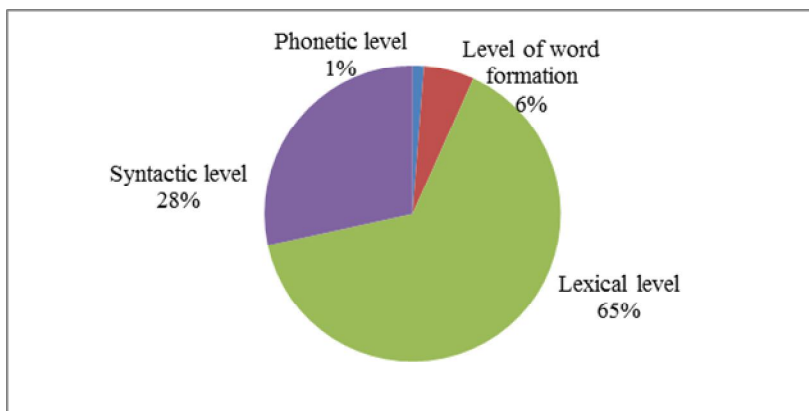

Figure 1 – Language play in «The Big Bang Theory» sitcom
(seasons 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9)

In the course of the study 965 cases of language play were selected by the continuous sampling method. Lexical language play,

being the most frequent, makes up 65% of the total number of the language play cases used by the protagonists of the show. At the syntactic level, the use of language play makes up 28%, at the level of word formation – 6%. Phonetic language play is the least common and makes up only 1% of the total number of language play cases used by the characters of the sitcom (see Fig. 1).

The means of creating lexical language play are those of indirect nominations (O. Konovalova includes here such figures of speech as metaphor, metonymy, simile, periphrasis [Konovalova / Коновалова 2008]), homonymy, combination of incompatible words, hyperbole, citation and allusion, antonomasia, personification and referring to an inanimate object.

In the material under analysis, 626 cases of lexical language play usage have been found. As there are four protagonists in the sitcom, it seems necessary to describe language play in the speech of each character separately (see Table 1).

Table 1

Lexical language play in the speech of the main characters
of "The Big Bang Theory" sitcom (seasons 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9)

Language play technique / Character	Sheldon	Leonard	Howard	Rajesh	Total
Simile	84	33	25	34	176
Periphrasis	83	15	29	19	146
Metaphor	77	20	24	7	128
Hyperbole	35	16	10	2	63
Personification and referring to an inanimate object	21	5	5	7	38
Allusion and citation	22	7	4	4	37
Antonomasia	11	4	7	5	27
Homonymy	5	-	1	1	7
Combination of incompatible words	1	-	1	1	3
Metonymy	-	-	1	-	1
Total	339	100	107	80	626

As the table above shows, lexical language play is most frequently used in the speech of the main character of the sitcom – Sheldon Cooper – and includes 339 cases, which makes up 64.69% of all the language play means used by the character. The protagonist uses simile (84 cases), periphrasis (83 cases), metaphor (77 cases), hyperbole (35 cases), allusion and citation (22 cases), personification and referring to an inanimate object (21 cases), antonomasia (11 cases), homonymy (5 cases), and combination of incompatible words (1 case). Sheldon does not use metonymy.

In the speech of Leonard Hofstadter, a smaller number of lexical language play means is observed – 100 cases, which makes up 61 % of all the language play techniques used by the character. The character uses simile (33 cases), metaphor (20 cases), hyperbole (16 cases), periphrasis (15 cases), allusion and citation (7 cases), personification and referring to an inanimate object (5 cases), antonomasia (4 cases). Leonard doesn't use homonymy, combination of incompatible words, and, as well as Sheldon, metonymy.

The speech of Howard Wolowitz includes 107 cases of lexical language play, which makes up 69.48% of all the language play means used by the character. Howard is the only one who uses all the lexical language play techniques: periphrasis (29 cases), simile (25 cases), metaphor (24 cases), hyperbole (10 cases), antonomasia (7 cases), personification and referring to an inanimate object (5 cases), allusion and citation (4 cases), homonymy (1 case), connection of units that cannot be connected (1 case), and metonymy (1 case).

In Rajesh Kutrappali's speech, lexical language play usage includes 80 cases, which makes up 68.97% of all the language play techniques used by the character. Rajesh uses simile (34 cases), periphrasis (19 cases), metaphor (7 cases), personification and referring to an inanimate object (7 cases), antonomasia (5 cases), allusion and citation (4 cases), hyperbole (2 cases), homonymy (1 case), and connection of units that cannot be connected (1 case). Rajesh, as well as Sheldon and Leonard, doesn't use metonymy.

The total number of cases of lexical language play usage is reflected in Table 2.

Table 2

Lexical language play in "The Big Bang Theory" sitcom
(seasons 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9)

Language play technique	Percentage	Number of cases
Simile	28.1%	176
Periphrasis	23.3%	146
Metaphor	20.4%	128
Hyperbole	10.1%	63
Personification and referring to an inanimate object	6.1%	38
Allusion and citation	5.9%	37
Antonomasia	4.3%	27
Homonymy	1.1%	7
Combination of incompatible words	0.5%	3
Metonymy	0.2%	1

The data presented in the table indicate that the most common means of lexical language play used in the sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" is simile, which makes up 28.1% of all the techniques used at this level. Periphrasis and metaphor are a little less common. The least frequently used techniques are those of homonymy, combination of incompatible words, and metonymy.

Let us consider the examples of lexical language play in the speech of the main characters of "The Big Bang Theory" sitcom (in decreasing order of frequency).

Simile. Making an opening statement at the court, Sheldon compares it with a milking stool that is also inappropriate at this situation.

Sheldon: Very well, a quick opening statement. Like a milking stool, my case rests on three legs (S03E16 10:55).

Periphrasis. Leonard describes his friends Rajesh and Howard as "a sexually ambivalent Indian astrophysicist with selective mutism and alcohol issues" and "a hundred-pound Jewish guy who lives with his mom":

Leonard: Do you think a sexually ambivalent Indian astrophysicist with selective mutism and alcohol issues is better than a hundred-pound Jewish guy who lives with his mom? (S04E2007:17)

Metaphor. Trying to get Sheldon's permission to date his sister, Raj hints at his nationality (Hindu). Thus, Raj speaks of the possibility of producing a stronger offspring in case he becomes part of Sheldon's family. The metaphor is based on the similarity of the colour of his skin and the colour of mocha:

Raj: Everybody knows genetic diversity produces the strongest offspring. Why not put a little mocha in the family latte (S01E1512.45).

Hyperbole. Sheldon follows his habits and does the same things over and over again. On discovering that his old hairdresser died, he panics and says that his hair grows very fast and in absolute silence one can hear the sound of hair growing. Obviously, the process of hair growing cannot be heard, so in this case the character clearly exaggerates:

Sheldon: I'm sorry. I'm looking for a barber and I'm running out of time. My hair is growing at the rate of 4.6 yoctometers per femtosecond. I mean, if you're quiet, you can hear it (S05E18 05:00).

Referring to inanimate objects. Raj says how much he will miss American food when he leaves the country after his visa expires:

Raj: Oh, beef, I'm going to miss you so much. Do you know, at the Mumbai McDonald's, you can't get a Big Mac? All you can get is a Chicken Maharaja Mac. And the special sauce, curry, which, in India, believe you me, is really not that special (S03E04 05:02).

Allusion. Sheldon has left for Texas, which means that one of the friends has to go there to bring him back. Trying to avoid this "fate", Howard refers to the Bible saying that his people (i. e. the Jews) have already once crossed the desert:

Howard: … My people already crossed a desert once, we're done (S03E01 15:04).

Citation. Having got attached to "Siri", Rajesh arranges a romantic evening with the phone. The character tries to choose a case for his device and refers to Coco Chanel who came up with the idea

of a small black dress which is a must in the wardrobe of any woman:

Raj:... Now, what should we put Siri in for dinner? Leopard, sparkles, or to paraphrase Coco Chanel, you can never go wrong with a little black case. Siri, play some smooth jazz (S05E14 16:10).

Antonomasia. Howard calls his ex-girlfriend Steph "Mrs. Dead to Me" as she started to date his best friend:

Howard: Oh, if it isn't Mrs. Dead to Me.
Steph: Hello, Howard (S02E08 18:07).

Homonymy. Joining the friends' conversation, Sheldon gets interested in the topic being discussed. On hearing the word «date» he tries to figure out what the talk is about:

Sheldon: I see. Now, are we talking, the social interaction, or the date, the dried fruit? (S03E09 03:05).

Combination of incompatible words. During the conversation with Leonard, Sheldon reminds him to hand Penny her mail which Leonard took both "on purpose and accidently":

Sheldon: Don't forget the mail you took accidentally on purpose so you'd have an excuse to talk to her (S01E03 02:25).

Metonymy. Howard's referring to his scooter as "13 horses" creates a humorous affect when combined with the phrase "You might want to stand back":

Howard: You might want to stand back. I'm sitting on top of 13 horses here (S03E20 07:55).

Conclusions and perspectives of further scientific research. Language play is one of the main means of achieving humorous effect in such genre of humorous discourse as situational comedies. The protagonists of a popular American sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" use these techniques at all language levels, the most frequent being lexical ones (64,69% of the total number of cases of language play usage). The most frequently used means are those of simile, periphrasis, and metaphor. Hyperbole, personification and referring to an inanimate object, allusion and citation, and antonomasia occur less often. The rarest techniques are those of homonymy, combination of incompatible words, and metonymy.

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