

The oddity of homonyms

Age: 6 to 9

Unit Length: 1 to 2 weeks

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Description

There's something a bit odd about the way language works. All languages have homonyms - words that are the same but have different meanings, usually determined by the context in which they appear. Homonyms are also the source of many jokes: Mona: "Whenever I'm down in the dumps I buy new clothes." Lisa: "So that's where you get them!" One of the values of becoming familiar with homonyms is that they help that process of making language "visible" making it into an object that students can reflect on. It is a part of that "metalinguistic awareness" that seems important in helping students to become flexible and effective users of language. (And having written a unit on homophones it seemed only fair to write one for their cousin homonyms.)

Unit Outline

PLO's

write a variety of imaginative writing for a range of purposes and audiences
Use the features and conventions of language to express meaning in writing and representing including, spelling unfamiliar words by applying strategies

Cognitive tools used:

Story, Binary Opposition, Mental Imagery, Jokes and Humour

Instead of beginning with objectives, this framework guides us to think of the importance of the topic, in particular to "perfork" (perceive, feel, think together) what is emotionally important about it. The main structuring device then follows.

We are asked to reflect on what binary opposites catch that importance. This method works just like any story form; in the beginning, the author sets up opposite forces whose interplay provides the organizing structure to the work. The binary oppositions also will determine for us what is relevant and what irrelevant to include in our lesson. We are then given some guidance in how to think of our lesson or unit as a story-form. We are to think of our lesson not so much as a matter of attaining objectives but as a good story that we are to tell our students.

The way our language works is a great story: the sheer cleverness of its invention and developments in the ancient world, what it has made possible for human beings, how it has transformed our lives, both the internal life of our minds and the external lives we lead among the products of our sciences and technologies. To think of

oneself as the teller of this fascinating story is a step up on thinking of oneself as the facilitator of students' acquisition of sets of utilitarian sub-skills.

1. Locating Meaning:

What is emotionally engaging about homonyms? How can it evoke wonder? Why should homonyms matter to us?

So what is the wonderful story about homonyms? What might we want to teach in a single lesson? Homonyms tell us something about the slap-dash manner in which our language has grown. Our language isn't some neatly designed logical device, but has all kinds of oddities that have served complex purposes, or were simply convenient, here and there; and there are only a limited set of sounds we can easily make. So we will want to show homonyms as exposing some of the messiness of language, but also, incidentally, showing the ingenuity with which we turn such messiness to wonderful results. To take one of the lighter cognitive tools discussed elsewhere on this site, let us assume that the teacher wants to have students recognize how homonyms can be confusing but also how that confusion can lead to wonderful results, and decides to use the joke as the medium for conveying the message. The joke remains, despite books of written jokes, primarily an oral form. Certain jokes pass from generation to generation, surviving sometimes with only superficial changes through decades and even centuries.

Jokes work by making what is usually a metaphoric connection between things otherwise not connected. The more the connection is weird or unexpected or asserts a logic that is thinkable but absurd, the more likely we are to respond with an explosive laugh. The laugh seems a result of our holding, for a moment, categories or images that suggest a world working quite differently from the way reality works. This applies at least to certain kinds of jokes, those that create deliberate confusion usually by insisting on the wrong interpretation of a homonym. In their simplest form they can appear as those question and answer jokes: "When is a door not a door?" "When it's ajar." Playing with such jokes encourages flexibility in the use of metaphor, and introduces us to logic, and can give us practice with the composition of narratives, and helps students understand what homonyms are and what problems and benefits they can have for our language uses.

Sources of meaning: the strangeness of the language we use without thinking

Sources of emotional engagement: the cleverness whereby we can turn this logical weakness of language into an endless possibility for delight

2. Thinking about the content in story form:

2.1 Finding binary opposites:

What binary concepts best capture the wonder and emotion of the topic?

A useful structuring pair might be normal/weird. At the heart of many jokes is the contrast between what things go together in our expectations and what things don't,

and the sudden intrusion of something that does not fit, but yet makes a kind of sense. It is a kind of sense that threatens the categories of our expectations. The incongruity often serves to reassert the normal course of events by its craziness, but in the moment of the joke it creates a wild, new, different world.

Main opposition: normal / crazy

Possible alternatives: logical / incongruous

3. Finding images and drama:

What parts of the topic most dramatically embody the binary concepts? What image best captures the dramatic contrast?

Take any homonym and think of using it deliberately wrongly so that a crazy image is generated.

Image or metaphor that captures the binary oppositions:

An elephant, leaving home, packing his trunk (“nose”) full of clothes.

Content that reflects binary oppositions:

Nearly all homonyms can be twisted from normal use to something crazy.

4. Structuring the body of the lesson or unit:

How do we teach the content in story form?

The first part of this section invites us to think of a dramatic embodiment of the binary opposites that catch the importance of the topic. One way of getting at this might be to begin with a set of simple jokes. I will randomly put in a set of a recently popular form in North America, such as:

He: "Do you like my company?"

She: "I don't know. What company do you work for?"

* *

Mona: "Whenever I'm down in the dumps I buy new clothes."

Lisa: "So that's where you get them!"

* *

Joe: "How do you stop a herd of gooseberries from charging?"

Shmoe: "Take away their credit cards."

* *

Mary: "How did elephant feel about packing its trunk?"

Ellen: "It sucks."

* *

The teacher might begin with a brief analysis of these. The first two are cases of deliberate misunderstanding of a homonym. The third and fourth, also get some of

their humor from being parodies of joke forms as well as using the form they parody. The fourth is based on a double incongruity; the normal act the elephant makes to fill its trunk is by sucking, that can also be a comment on the elephant's feelings about the act.

This analysis should be quite brief. The teacher might then take the jokes further by asking the students, perhaps in groups, to take their favorite joke and continue the narrative further. The teacher might prepare a few examples. Perhaps, if the teacher feels ready to be a little daring that day, he or she might, in an assumed voice, elaborate a crazy world from the confused homonym. In a TV commentator-style of high-seriousness the teacher could continue the story of the last example above with something like: "After the elephant had packed its trunk, I offered to take it to the station. It proved extremely difficult getting the trunk downstairs, not to mention the problem of maneuvering the elephant around the bend in the stairs. My sister kindly pushed from one end, and I pulled the trunk from the other. We just made it, but all the furniture in the hall was knocked over and squeezing the elephant through the door broke it off its hinges. Fortunately my dad has a convertible car, and the elephant sat on the back seat holding its trunk between its front legs. A cop pulled us over, though, and when he asked my father what he thought he was doing, my dad said: "... " (The teacher might invite the students to supply the father's response, and that can lead to some further zany episode in the developing narrative.)

The lesson might continue by getting the students, possibly in groups, to write or make notes about their favorite homonym-based jokes. Each group might choose one for telling to the class.

Such a class would involve some reflection on language, a study of how certain forms of homonyms can be used deliberately to cause the kind of incongruity that results in laughter, and some practice making notes and working towards a coherent narrative. The exploration of impossible worlds created by taking a homonym crazily rather than normally can also help to underscore differences between written and spoken language.

Sketch of overall story structure of the lesson:

Begin with some examples of homonym-based jokes, getting the students to add their own. Show how the homonyms can be a door to crazy worlds if they are read wrongly. Use the humor element to encourage development of narrative skills. Expose how language works in peculiar ways; what we might think of as a weakness of language, which can lead to confusion, is at the same time one of its great gifts.

5. Conclusion

How does the story end? How do we resolve the conflict set up between the binary opposites? How much do we explain to the students about the binary oppositions?

A concluding activity might take a homonym at random and get students to invent a joke, based on deliberate confusion of it. Take, for example, 'channel', as in both a narrow passages of water and TV. The task is to invent a question whose answer is wildly incongruous, but coherent in the metaphoric slippage between meanings of the homonym. Immediately, students will suggest confusions between "crossing the channel" in a boat or on TV. Or questions such as "What channel is the wettest?" or "What channel shows the most boats?" will emerge. After some examples, and, one hopes, some laughter and thought about language, then the teacher can again extend the mad world that is created by deliberately taking the incongruous meaning literally, and invite the students to elaborate it further. (People who have had exposure to the British Monty Python shows will perhaps better understand how this form of humor works.)

Concluding activity:

We will conclude by bringing home to students the way our oppositions between the literal and the incongruous provides us with an important outlet for the wonder of humor. The students, having become conscious of one way language works will be given the opportunity to explore it, recognizing the difficulty in playing with homonyms and the great rewards of laughter that come from cleverly doing so.

6. Evaluation

How can one know whether the topic has been understood, its importance grasped, and the content learned?

The amount of laughter might form a unique evaluation instrument to such a lesson! The degree of engagement should also provide an index of emotional success. But one also will want to evaluate how adequately students have grasped the role and uses of homonyms and the metaphoric slippage that can frequently occur among these features of language. Students' comprehension can be assessed by the adequacy of their explanations of how certain of these jokes work. One could also give them exercises that would require them to display how adequately they understand which words in a joke are the homonyms, and how adequately they can explain how the homonym works.

Forms of evaluation to be used:

Observation of students' engagement and understanding of the topic as the lesson goes forward. Assessment of how adequately they can identify what a homonym is, and how adequately they can use the potential homonyms provide for humor.