

## International Conversation Café

Lifestyle Topic: Puns

If you spend much time studying a language, you will come across various literary devices. Puns are a literary device. A pun is often described as “a play on words”, but this definition isn’t very helpful. In many languages, there are words or groups of words that can have several different meanings. Using the different meanings of those words together, in an unexpected way is what creates a pun. Puns often use homophones, which are words that are pronounced the same even though they have different meanings, like dual and duel. Because puns require knowledge of multiple meanings and spellings of a word or phrase in that language, Alfred Hitchcock, a film director said that “Puns are the highest form of literature.” If you can make a pun in a language, it means that you have a very thorough understanding of that language. They can often be told as jokes, although not everyone finds them humorous. Here are a few examples. The word in question is in italics. As you read through them discuss the dual meanings of the word.

Some people fight over puns because they have a *dual (duel)* meaning.

Scientists say that the coral reefs are dying from stress. What are they stressed about? *Current* events!

I’ve heard that prison guards have started using Proactiv skin care products to prevent *breakouts*.

How can a room full of married people be empty? Because there isn’t a *single* person in the room!

Why did the skeleton stay home instead of going to the party? Because he had *nobody* to go with.

*Are there words or phrases in your own language that have multiple meanings? Does it ever cause confusion?*

*Do you have puns or a similar literary device in your own language? Are they used for humor, or for another purpose? Give some examples.*

*Do you personally find puns to be funny? (Please be respectful of others’ opinions! Many people just groan and smile when recognizing a pun)*

There are puns that are not designed for humor, however. Sometimes they are made to add drama or suspense, or to inspire a sort of awe. For example, the famous playwright, William Shakespeare, used puns in some of his work. In one scene from Romeo and Juliet, Romeo’s friend Mercutio invited Romeo to a party. The dialogue goes as follows:

Mercutio: “Nay, gentle Romeo, we must have you dance.”

Romeo: “Not I, believe me. You have dancing shoes with nimble *soles*; I have a *soul* of lead so stakes me to the ground I cannot move.”

Romeo has a broken heart, and thus states that he feels as though his soul is heavy. He references Mercutio’s dancing shoes that have soles on them which allow for quick, graceful movement. Romeo’s emotional distress causes him to feel like he is wearing shoes made of a heavy metal, which would certainly make dancing difficult!

Using puns is also used in music, often in rap or hip-hop songs. The ability to make this “play on words” is often respected by listeners of the song. Here are some examples:

“Make a beat so *sick*, you see their hands *throw up*.”

“Life’ll never make *cents* (*sense*) because you never made *change*.” -Sho Baraka, Man Up Anthem

*Are there any puns that you have seen in famous literature?*

*Have you heard wordplay (puns) in music before? If so, do you have a favorite line?*

Just some more puns for you to enjoy:

You know why it was called the Dark Ages? Because there were so many *knights*!

I lost my wife’s audiobook the other day, and now I’ll never *hear the end of it*.

I saw a man propose to a woman in the gym the other day, but she said no. I guess it didn’t *work out*.

I used to sell computer parts in a retail store, but I lost my *drive*.

Did you hear about the two *antennas* that got married? The wedding wasn’t anything special, but the *reception* was great!

I asked the librarian for a couple of books, one about Pavlov’s dog and the other about Schroedinger’s cat. She said they *rang a bell* but wasn’t sure if they were there or not.

The gingerbread hurt his knee the other day; the doctor recommended *icing* it.

What did the grape say when it was stepped on? Nothing, it just let out a little *wine* (*whine*).

*Now it is your turn. See if your group can make up a pun. Write a sentence with one word from the pairs below. Then see if you can arrange a pun out of it. Here are a few words to try.*

cell/sell, cheep/cheap, eight/ate, days/daze, flour/flower, meat/meet, missed/mist, sail/sale, seller/cellar, shoe/shoo, wait/weight, wood/would, teas/tease, poll/pole, moose/mousse

For example...

*It was an ate day feast that began on Sunday and did not end until the Monday of the next week.*

