

Varieties of Wordplay¹

1 Conceptualizing Wordplay

1.1 Wordplay can be understood (1) as the action of playing with words (in a way to be specified) or (2) as the result thereof, i.e. a specific linguistic form produced with the intention to play. (1) is primary to (2) since for there to be a result there has to be an action. For the study of wordplay this means that linguistic forms should always be analyzed in relation to the respective action and thus to the context in which they are produced (usage-based approach; Barlow and Kemmer 2000; Bybee and Beckner 2015; see also Winter-Froemel, DF, 1.2).

1.2 Wordplay as an action is purposeful behavior. It can be argued that actions can also be unintentional, e.g. (unintentionally) wounding someone, but the action of playing implies that the playing person is aware of the action. Wordplay thus requires an acting subject, which can be (a) the speaker, (b) the addressee of the utterance, or (c) a third person. In example (1) (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.6.1) the action of playing is performed by the hearers. The pupils are consciously playing with the linguistic material produced by the teacher. Since playing in many cases is a social activity, typically more than one acting person is involved in the play. In the case of synchronous communication wordplay can also be co-constructed by several speakers (see example (2)).

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- (1) – Teacher (handling a technical device): Jetzt fehlt nur noch, daß das Gummi reißt! [All I need now is that the rubber tears.]
 – Pupils (pubescent): *Laughter*. [indicating sexual reinterpretation of *rubber* in the sense of ‘condom’]
 (Winter-Froemel 2013: 151; Winter-Froemel and Zirker 2015a: 318–319; see also Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.6.1, this volume, including the translation)
- (2) <BLUEGUY> si vs avez du boulot de correction, je suis preneur
 <luke> blueguy, kel drole de boulot, coraicteur
 <BLUEGUY> korèctheur
 [translation included in the discussion below, see section 2.2]
 (original spelling, personal data changed²; <http://www.chat-fr.org>)

Even if the action of producing a playful utterance (by a speaker or writer) is conceptually different from the action of recognizing an utterance as playful (by an addressee or a third person), both actions are performed in a playful way. Both interlocutors are playing on the given linguistic material.

1.3 Since wordplay is a purposeful activity, slips of the tongue or unintended combinations of linguistic items cannot be instances of wordplay unless the addressee or a third person takes them up with a playful intention. Examples from literary texts where the character is unaware of the playful character of what he is saying but the author is obviously playing on words (e.g. Bauer 2015: 285) perfectly fit the criterion of a purposeful activity.

1.4 Apart from the intention to play, the speaker usually has further intentions. One of the most common intentions of playing with words is to amuse others. Wordplay is thus often associated with verbal humor. It can, however, also have other functions like, for example, to attract attention, to express in-group solidarity or to show creativity in using language (for more details see 3; see also Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.2). Playing on linguistic forms is often used as a means to fulfill one or more of these purposes.

² For reasons of data protection, personal data in this example as well as in the examples (17), (30) and (32) have been changed.

2 Towards a Definition of Wordplay

2.1 In addition to the basic characteristics of wordplay (see paragraph 1 above) it has to be specified in which way the speaker and / or hearer are playing and what kinds of linguistic forms can be involved in the play. Most typically, wordplay involves linguistic units which are identical or very close in form but different in meaning (Winter-Froemel 2009: 1429).

Wordplay in the narrow sense can thus be defined as the action of playing with linguistic material (or the result thereof) that is based on the combination of linguistic units which are identical or very close in form and have different meanings (see, in a similar form, the first subtype of wordplay proposed by Winter-Froemel, DF, 5.2.1).

The formal identity or similarity can concern different levels of linguistic description, e.g. the phonetic level, the lexical level, the morphological level or the syntactic level (see paragraph 4). It can also simultaneously involve different levels. In example (1) the play involves the formal identity on the lexical level (ambiguity of *Gummi* ‘rubber’ / ‘preservative’).

2.2 Wordplay in a broader sense can be defined as the action of playing with linguistic material (or the result thereof) that is based on a combination of linguistic units which are similar in form but do not have different meanings.

As for the narrow definition, the formal similarity can concern different levels of linguistic description. The examples in (2) and (3) can be described as wordplay in a broader sense. In example (2) (see section 1.2 above) the speakers are playing on orthographic variations of the word *correcteur* (‘corrector’, ‘proof-reader’), thus on similarities on the orthographic level. The semantic allusion to the meaning of *correcteur* is part of the play.

- (3) Schittebön – Schankedön.
 [translation included in the discussion below]
 (Zirker and Winter-Froemel 2015: 3; Winter-Froemel and Zirker 2015b: 3)

The play in example (3) is based on the permutation of sounds (or letters), hence on similarities on the phonetic (or orthographic) level (Germ. *bitteschön* (‘you’re welcome’) and *dankeschön* (‘thank you’)). In the same way as in (2), (3) does not involve different lexical meanings and can thus not be described as wordplay in the narrow sense.

2.3 Wordplay in the broadest sense can be defined as the action of playing with words (or the result thereof), which is based on the variation of linguistic units without involving formal similarities. Wordplay in that sense can concern all kinds of linguistic material that is modified in a playful way.

- (4) sarkollandisation
(Sablayrolles 2015: 192)
- (5) The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

The portmanteau word in (4) is a ludic combination of the names of the French politicians Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, modified by the French suffix *-isation*. It refers to the similarities in the political programs of the two politicians in the French presidential election campaign 2012 and criticizes the dominance of the two candidates compared to the other candidates (Sablayrolles 2015: 192). Example (5) is a pangram or holoalphabetic sentence, i.e. a sentence that uses every letter of the alphabet at least once. Pangrams are playing on the specific combination of all letters of the alphabet in one single sentence. In both examples the play is not based on formal similarities as in (1)–(3). We would still describe them as wordplay in the widest sense if they are the result of a purposeful modification of linguistic material with the intention to play.

2.4 Wordplay in the narrow sense, wordplay in a wider sense and wordplay in the widest sense (2.1–2.3) are conceived as distinct categories with no fuzzy boundaries. However, the classification might depend on our way of describing the phenomenon. There might, for example, be instances of wordplay where it is not clear whether or not the play is based on formal similarity.

- (6) Doukipudonktan, se demanda Gabriel excédé.
[translation included in the discussion below]
(Raymond Queneau 1959, *Zazie dans le métro*)

Example (6) is the first sentence of Raymond Queneau's novel *Zazie dans le métro* in which the author plays on a creative orthographic representation of the phonetic realization of the utterance *Doukipudonktan* (*D'où (est-ce) qu'il pue donc tant ?* 'From where does it stink so much?'). One might argue that the play is orthographic and that no formally similar element appears in the utterance.

On a deeper level, however, one might see an implicit reference to formal similarities, namely the correspondence between the orthographic and phonetic forms. In some cases the presence or absence of formal similarity may thus depend on our way of describing the phenomenon.

3 Functions of Wordplay

Wordplay can be classified according to its functions in discourse. It appears in a broad range of discursive contexts, in spontaneous interaction, in comedy, jokes, literary texts, advertising slogans, newspaper headings and nursery rhymes, to give just a few examples. In all of these contexts the production of wordplay as defined in paragraphs 1 and 2 is based on the (speaker's and / or hearer's) intention to play with linguistic material. Apart from that basic function, the use of wordplay can have a number of more specific functions. It can, for example, be used

- to amuse people and achieve humorous effects (e.g. Hausmann 1974: 26; Chiaro 1992; Thaler 2012: 147–149; Renner 2015: 26)
- to give aesthetic pleasure (e.g. Sauer 1998: 175–176; Thaler 2012: 147)
- to show one's creative ability in using language (e.g. Kabatek 2015: 220)
- to attract and retain the addressee's attention (e.g. Tanaka 1994: 64; Sablayrolles 2015: 208)
- to gain approval of others (Giles et al. 1976: 141)
- as a mnemonic device to foster memorization (e.g. Janich 2013: 213; Sablayrolles 2015: 209)
- to provoke emotional involvement (e.g. Janich 2013: 212)
- to create or maintain in-group solidarity (e.g. Giles et al. 1976: 141; Goth 2015; Sablayrolles 2015: 208)
- as a politeness strategy / a means of saving the speaker's (writer's) or hearer's (reader's) face (Thaler 2012: 147–149; Bauer 2015: 282)
- to contribute to social stability (e.g. Kullmann 2015: 56)
- to exclude certain hearer groups (e.g. Sablayrolles 2015: 208)
- to ridicule or embarrass out-group members (e.g. Kullmann 2015: 56–57; Sablayrolles 2015: 208–209)
- to tease or provoke the hearer or reader (e.g. Kullmann 2015: 59, 67)
- as a tool of satirical comedy (e.g. Goth 2015)
- to insinuate things which are too indecent to say outright (e.g. Hausmann 1974; Tanaka 1994: 76–77)
- to discuss social taboos (e.g. Goth 2015: 90)

- to condense information (e.g. Hausmann 1974: 9)
- to support one's argumentation (e.g. Hausmann 1974: 21), or
- to increase the student's motivation and interest in language learning (e.g. Vittoz Canuto 1983: 131–138).

Most of these functions are social in nature. Wordplay is always part of social human behavior and has to be analyzed within its specific discursive context.

4 Linguistic Techniques of Wordplay

4.1 Wordplay can be classified according to the linguistic devices on which the play is based (e.g. Hausmann 1974; Guiraud 1980; Vittoz Canuto 1983; Chiaro 1992: 24–47; Forgács and Göndöcs 1997; Alexander 2007: 21–58; Janich 2013: 202–213). It seems difficult to propose such a classification for wordplay in the broadest sense (2.3) since there is a nearly unlimited range of possibilities to modify linguistic material in a creative and playful way. As to wordplay in a narrow (2.1) and a broader sense (2.2), the number of techniques is limited by the number of possibilities to create formal similarities. There are, however, a lot of creative variations which are difficult to capture in a taxonomy. Some of the most frequent techniques are listed in the following sections. Wordplay often combines two or more of these techniques.

4.2 Phonetic Techniques

4.2.1 Play on Homophones

Many instances of wordplay, especially of English puns, are based on homophony. Example (7) plays on the homophony of *whine* and *wine*. The French example in (8) is based on the homophony of *mots* ('words') and *maux* ('evils'). The play on homophones can also involve elements of different languages (see Knospe 2015 on bilingual puns). Example (9) plays on the homophony of Engl. *fun* and Germ. *fan[tastisch]* ('fantastic'). Since homophony involves two phonetically identical elements with different meanings, play on homophones is always wordplay in a narrow sense.

- (7) When you step on a grape it gives a little whine.
(Long and Graesser 1988: 44)
- (8) Entre deux mots, il faut choisir le moindre. [Among two words / evils
you must choose the lesser.]
(Paul Valéry 1941, *Tel quel*; translation into English VT)
- (9) Funtastisch.
(Advertising slogan of Swatch; Janich 2013: 206)

4.2.2 Play on Similarity of Pronunciation

- (10) Wasabi da nur bestellt?!
[translation included in the discussion below]
(Advertising slogan of the German food delivery service Lieferando,
2015)
- (11) Dreh bien!
[translation included in the discussion below]
(Advertising slogan for French cigarette paper, Forgács and Göndöcs
1997: 63)

In some cases the play is not based on phonetical identity, but on similarities in pronunciation (homoeophonic play) which give rise to different meanings. Again, the play can involve different languages as in (11), which plays on the similarity in the phonetic realization of Fr. *très* (*très bien*, ‘very good’) and the German imperative *dreh* (‘twist’), referring to cigarette paper. Example (10) plays on the phonetic similarity between *wasabi* (‘Japanese horseradish’, referring to the photo of sushi accompanying the slogan) and *Was hab i (da nur bestellt)* (‘What have I (ordered)?’). We are again dealing with wordplay in the narrow sense.

4.2.3 Play on Permutation of Sounds

Permutations of sounds can produce various forms of wordplay like spoonerisms, French *contrepèteries* (example (12)) or German *Schüttelreime* (example (13)). In many cases the permutation of sounds involves a play on different

meanings and is thus wordplay in the narrow sense. In (3) (see 2.2), the permutation of sounds can also be wordplay in a broad sense.

- (12) Ainsi le **duc** serait **peiné**.
 = / Ainsi l'eunuque serait pédé /; cf. Rabatel 2015: 35
 [So the duke will be sad.
 = / So the eunuch will be gay /]
 (translation into English VT)
- (13) Du bist
 Buddhist.
 [You are / a Buddhist.]
 (translation into English VT)

4.2.4 Play on Rhythm and Rhyme

Plays on rhythm and rhyme as well as plays on alliteration and assonance (4.2.5) usually do not involve ambiguity. Example (14), *Uschi das ist Sushi* ('Uschi it's sushi') is simply playing on rhyme. In contrast to the first line of the slogan (see example (10)), the rhyme does not involve different meanings.

- (14) Wasabi da nur bestellt?!
- Uschi das ist Sushi: Von Meisterhand gerollt bei 10.000 Lieferdiensten.
 [What have I ordered?! (see comment on example (10) above)
 Uschi, it's sushi: Rolled by our expert chefs at 10,000 delivery services]
 (Advertising slogan of the German food delivery service Lieferando, 2015; translation into English VT)

4.2.5 Play on Alliteration and Assonance

- (15) Betty Botter bought some butter. (English tongue twister)

4.3 Lexical Techniques

The use of homonymy, polysemy and paronymy are very common techniques of wordplay (cf. Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.6–3.8). They are wordplay in the narrow

sense. In oral communication they often overlap with homophonic and homoeophonic play (4.2.1, 4.2.2). Moreover, play on the lexical level can also involve phraseological elements (4.3.4) or references to lexical sets (4.3.5).

4.3.1 Play on Homonymy

The play in (16) relies on the homonymy of the English verb *to strike*. Homonymic forms can also be used in their different meanings in different parts of an utterance, as in (17). The play is thus not based on homonymy as such, but on the juxtaposition of different meanings of homonymic word forms. The example in (17) is an extract of a chat log taken from a German webchat. The co-constructed play is based on the juxtaposition of the different meanings of Germ. *arm* / *Arm* ('poor' / 'arm').

(16) The first thing that strikes you in Rome is traffic. (Blake 2007: 76)

(17) <moni> muah ich werd krank ^^
 [muah, I'm turning ill ^^]
 <gewinnerin02> arme moni^^
 [poor moni ^^]
 <moni> ja ne ich bin schon arm dran
 [I'm really badly off, right?]
 <marlon666> besser arm dran als arm ab @moni
 [Rather be badly off than have your arm off @ moni]
 (Chat conversation, original spelling, personal data changed;
<http://www.chatcity.de>; translation into English VT)

4.3.2 Play on Polysemy

(18) Zwei Jäger treffen sich.
 [Two hunters meet, 'come together' / 'hit each other'; cf. Winter-Froemel 2009: 1429]

4.3.3 Play on Paronymy

The examples in (19) and (20) involve expressions that are not identical but similar in form. Example (19) plays on the phonetic similarities of *contraceptive* and *contradictive* and of *pregnant* and *ignorant*. Example (20) plays on the permutation of syllables opposing a *full bottle in front of me* to a *full frontal lobotomy*.

- (19) Maggie goes to the doctor's and says: I've forgotten to take my contradictory pills.
 Doctor: You're ignorant.
 Maggie: That's right. Three months.
 (Alexander 1997: 64)
- (20) I'd rather have a full bottle in front of me than a full frontal lobotomy.
 (Chiaro 1992: 19)

4.3.4 Play on Phraseological Elements

Wordplay can be based on idioms or sayings, usually involving homonymy, polysemy or paronymy of one of its parts. In (21) the German adjective *rot* ('red') in the idiom *rot sehen* ('to see red, to lose one's head') is contrasted with the adjective *blau* ('blue') in its literal sense. The play thus opposes *rot* in its literal sense to *rot* as part of the idiom. The German slogan in (22) plays on the formal similarity to Latin *Habemus papam*. The slogan was actually published in 2013, the year of the papal election. The play also involves an allusion to syntactic patterns of child language, i.e. two-word sentences. *Habenmuss* is an orthographic variation of Germ. *haben muss* ('must have'), referring to beer in combination with *Papa*³ ('daddy'). The example also involves the orthographic technique of playing with word boundaries (see 4.5.2).

³ The form *papa* is also ambiguous in American English, as it may mean 'daddy' – a form obsolete in British English – or refer to the Pope (see the formula *Habemus papam*).

- (21) Renovierungspflicht? Wenn der Vermieter bei blauen Wänden rot sieht.
[Renovation required? When your landlord sees red / loses his head up-
on seeing your blue-painted wall.]
(Advertising slogan of a legal costs insurance; Janich 2013: 181; transla-
tion into English VT)
- (22) Habenmuss Papa [Must have it, papa. / Habemus Papa(m).]
(Advertising slogan for Karlsberg beer, 2013; translation into English VT)

4.3.5 Play on Lexical Sets

Wordplay can be based on lexical sets, i.e. on sets of related or opposite items of meaning which are part of a native speaker's linguistic knowledge (Alexander 1997: 54–55). Lecolle (2015: 238) characterizes such cases as *parallelisms with semantic opposition* (“parallélismes avec opposition sémantique”).

- (23) Le court en dit long.
[translation included in the discussion below]
(Name of an annual short film festival in Paris; Lecolle 2015: 238)

The French example in (23) opposes *court* (‘short’) and *long* (‘long’), involving the idiom *en dire long* (‘to speak volumes’). The example can thus also be classified as a play on phraseological elements.

4.4 Morphological Techniques

Ludic alternation of morphemes (4.4.1) and ludic word formation (4.4.2–4.4.6) can be considered morphological techniques of wordplay (see Tab. 1). Word formation in wordplay typically involves creative or irregular word formation processes (see, for example, the irregular French derivation *positiver* (verb derived from the adjective *positif* (‘positive’) in (29) or the imitated comparative form in (31)). Again, these techniques partly overlap with other techniques.

Tab. 1: Morphological techniques of wordplay

Technique	Examples
4.4.1 Play on Morphemes	(24) (Flirtation is) All attention But no intention (Alexander 1997: 35)
4.4.2 Compounding as Play	(25) nounoursothérapie (compound of Fr. <i>nounours</i> ('teddy bear') and <i>thérapie</i> ('therapy'); cf. Sablayrolles 2015: 205)
4.4.3 Portmanteau Words as Play	(26) Halte... aux provocasseurs (newspaper heading, blend of Fr. <i>provocateurs</i> ('agitators' / 'trouble makers') and <i>casseurs</i> ('rowdies'), cf. Hausmann 1974: 64) (27) Ostalgie ('nostalgia for East Germany' < German <i>Osten</i> ('East') + <i>Nostalgie</i> ('nostalgia'); cf. Renner 2015: 125) (28) Girafitti ('vandalism spray-painted very, very high'; cf. Blake 2007: 57)
4.4.4 Derivation as Play	(29) Avec Carrefour, je positive. [With Carrefour, I am positive.] (Advertising slogan of the French supermarket chain Carrefour, 2003; translation into English VT)
4.4.5 Play on Acronyms	(30) <sunny_girl> wie MG? [Like MG?] <Julie7508> MG? <Julie7508> Mönchengladbach [name of a German city] <malle> Maschinengewehr... [Machine gun.] <Julie7508> MaschenGrad zaun / rugen / [play on Germ. <i>Maschendrahtzaun</i> 'wire mesh fence', substituting the noun <i>Draht</i> 'wire' in the compound by <i>Grad</i> 'degree; rate'] <Julie7508> <Julie7508> MichelinGelo <Julie7508> Miroslav Glose (Chat conversation, original spelling, personal data changed; http://chat.rtl.de ; translation into English VT)
4.4.6 Play on Comparative Forms	(31) Gut, besser, Gösser. [Good, better, Gösser] (Advertising slogan for Gösser beer; Forgács and Gördöcs 1997: 54; translation into English VT)

4.5 Orthographic and Graphic Techniques

4.5.1 Play on Orthographic Variations

Wordplay can also be primarily based on the orthographic modification of lexical items without involving different meanings (example (32), see also example (2) (1.2)). Play of that kind is wordplay in a broad sense.

- (32) <BLUEGUY> mais au fait moi je suis pas correcteur [But in fact, I'm no proofreader]
 <BLUEGUY> j'ai juste été traumatisé à coup de dictées [I've just been traumatized by dictations]
 <luke> trop matisé donc :) [*this playful formation is discussed below*]
 (Chat conversation, original spelling, personal data changed;
<http://www.chat-fr.org>; translation into English VT)

In example (32) the verb form *traumatisé* ('traumatized') is modified to *trop* ('too') *matisé* (neologism attributed to the comic character Titeuf used in the expression *trop matisé*).

4.5.2 Shifting of Word Boundaries

The playful shifting of word boundaries can give rise to different meanings and thus to wordplay in a narrow sense. In example (33) the idiom *Have a nice day* is modified to *Have an Ice Day* referring to the cigarette brand West Ice. Like all orthographic techniques, this kind of play is restricted to written communication. It goes beyond a play on homophones (4.2.1) as can be found in oral communication.

- (33) Have an Ice Day.
 (Advertising slogan for West Ice cigarettes, 2005)

4.5.3 Palindromes

Palindromes are words or sentences that read the same backward and forward. They are a purely formal way of playing on words and do not involve different meanings (wordplay in a broad sense).

- (34) Madam, I'm Adam.
(Chiaro 1992: 31)

- (35) La mère Gide digère mal. [Mother Gide has a poor digestion.]
(Jaki 2015: 258)

4.5.4 Play on Typographic Elements

Apart from linguistic items in a narrow sense, wordplay can also involve typographic elements like font styles, the integration of pictures and symbols or the creative use of punctuation marks. This primarily concerns wordplay in the broadest sense. Sometimes typographic variation can also give rise to play on a formal linguistic level. In (36) the alternation of capital and lower case letters produces a ludic integration of *IBM* and the German word *Schreibmaschine* ('typewriter').

- (36) SchreIBMaschine
(Advertising slogan for an IBM typewriter; Forgács and Göndöcs 1997: 64)

4.6 As the examples show, there is no one-to-one correspondence between linguistic techniques and concrete occurrences of wordplay. Wordplay often combines two or more techniques and involves more than one level of linguistic description. We can roughly say that the more levels and the more techniques are involved, the more complex the wordplay is. Some of the techniques privilege wordplay in a narrow sense (e.g. play on homonymy, polysemy and paronymy), while others are usually restricted to wordplay in a broad sense (e.g. play on rhythm and rhyme, play on alliteration and assonance, palindromes).

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