

Michelle Lecolle

Some Specific Insights into Wordplay Form: Sublexical vs. Lexical Level

This short contribution focuses on wordplay from a formal point of view. It is based on the statement “form matters” that has been put forward by Winter-Froemel (DF, 3.1) as well as in discussions in the scientific network¹, and it especially addresses the issue of wordplay levels.

1 Getting Started: A Definition of Wordplay

1.1 As proposed by Winter-Froemel (DF, 5.1.1), I assume a definition of wordplay as “a historically determined phenomenon in which a speaker produces an utterance – and is aware of doing so – that juxtaposes or manipulates linguistic items from one or more languages” (see also Thaler, DF, 2.3 “Wordplay in the broadest sense”).

Wordplay can be funny or serious; hence it can fulfill many different functions (see Thaler, DF, 3; Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.2.2).

1.2 Depending on the addressee, the result of wordplay can be different from the originally intended effect (see Knospe, DF, 3 for examples of fuzzy boundaries between actual wordplay and misunderstanding, or other cases).

Therefore, wordplay is often a matter of interpretation on part of the addressee, and the interpretation issue has to be taken into account in the description. In other words: wordplay is not just a fact; it has to be recognized.

2 What Kind of Linguistic Items Are Manipulated?

Wordplay can be based on a manipulation of different linguistic features. Hence, a structural analysis of the linguistic levels involved, e.g. in the lan-

¹ Scientific Network WI 3826/1-1 “Dynamik des Wortspiels: Sprachkontakt, sprachliche Innovation, Sprecher-Hörer-Interaktion” (funded by the DFG / German Research Foundation from Dec. 2013 to Nov. 2016).

guage of the press, may be fruitful in its own right. In the following, I will differentiate between wordplay on the sublexical and lexical level without elaborating much on the intentions connected to the use of the items concerned.

2.1 Sublexical Level

On the sublexical level, one may distinguish the phonetic, orthographical and the syllabic levels on the one hand and the morphemic level on the other hand.

2.1.1 Phonetic, Orthographical and Syllabic Level

The phonetic level includes techniques such as alliterations and assonances, permutations of sounds as well as sound-based misunderstandings: see, for instance, Knospe (DF) on playful uses of phonetic contrasts, blends and confusions of sound as in the example of *that's terrible*. On this level, we can also observe creations of new forms building on existing ones, as the French example *guidenappeur* shows (coined by Queneau based on the word *kidnappeur*; see Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.9). Of course, the lexical level is affected as well in this case.

Turning to the syllabic level, we may state that it is relevant for describing spoonerisms (Rabatel 2015) and cases of ludic or serious reanalysis (cf. examples (32) *trop matisé / traumatisé* and (33) *Have an Ice Day* in Thaler, DF, 4.5.2; cf. also Rittaud-Hutinet 2014). Besides, rhyme as a serious form of play often involves more than one sound, at least in French poetry; if this condition is met, it can be described on the syllabic level.

Moreover, syllables as syntagmatic but not meaning-bearing units can be reinterpreted and remotivated as morphemes, as example (1) *co-* ('with', 'together') (taken from Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.3) illustrates.

- (1) Nous ne naissons pas seuls. Naître, pour tout, c'est connaître. Toute naissance est une connaissance. [We are not born alone. To be born is, for all things, to know / to be born with. Every birth is knowledge / a co-birth.]
(Paul Claudel: *Traité de la co-naissance au monde et de soi-même*, *Œuvre poétique*)

Since Claudel in (1) creates innovative lexical combinations – *naître* (‘to be born’) / *connaître* (‘to know’; (made-up) ‘to be born with’) –, this example also involves the word level (see DF, 2.2 below).

2.1.2 Morphemes: Lexical Morphemes and Affixes

Unlike syllables, morphemes are meaningful although they are also situated on the sublexical level (cf. Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.4.3). Accordingly, the repetition of morphemes tends to have a higher meaning potential than a mere repetition of sounds. To make the description more precise, one may contrast manipulations of affixes with those of morphological stems: as affixes are generally shorter (in terms of syllable size), the effects of repetition, contrast or echoing are stronger. Except for the case of bound morphemes, stems are, in turn, autonomous lexical devices, which may enter into syntactic and semantic relations with other lexemes (cf. DF, 3).

Consider example (2) below more closely: after riots had taken place in the Parisian suburbs of Villiers-le Bel (2007), Nicolas Sarkozy, French President at that time, expressed his discontent with the situation to journalists. Directed against persons such as social scientists and journalists who usually try to explain what happened in social terms, Sarkozy said that the attempt of explaining (*expliquer*) something that could not be explained (*l’inexplicable*) was a first step towards excusing (*excuser*) acts that could not be excused, because they should not be forgiven (*l’inexcusable*).

- (2) Quand on veut expliquer l’inexplicable, c’est qu’on s’apprête à excuser l’inexcusable [If you want to explain the inexplicable, you are about to excuse the inexcusable.]
(Nicolas Sarkozy, 29 novembre 2007)

In this “serious” wordplay, the speaker repeats the same word-formation pattern by employing two adjectives (*inexplicable*, *inexcusable*) that contain the negative morpheme *in-* and the morpheme *-able*, which, in a derived adjective, means “having the ability to.”

On the other hand, the two lexemes *inexplicable* and *inexcusable*, which are derived from the verbs *expliquer* and *excuser* respectively, constitute a gradation thanks to, both, their meaning and their place in the sentence. As a result, the utterance produces a successful emotional effect.

2.2 Lexical Level

As we have seen in the previous section, plays on the phonetic or graphemic level may affect the identity of a lexeme (see Thaler, DF, 2), and could not be recognized by the addressee/s. This phenomenon corresponds, in Benvenistes' terms, to the so-called "mode de signification sémiotique" (1974: 63–66), that is, what constitutes the sign as a unit. There may be considerable effects on the lexical level that can produce funny or at least stylistically remarkable lexical results (cf. example (1)).

Let us now briefly consider the characteristics most specific to play on the lexical level. Generally speaking, the lexical level is most adequate for describing lexemes, whose defining features are for morphologists form, meaning, part of speech (cf. Kerleroux 2003). Additionally, this level is helpful for describing the relations between lexemes. Besides, this level is relevant because it concerns the competence, recognition and memory, which are ideally shared among speakers in a linguistic community. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the associative values of lexemes. Lastly, lexemes are often polysemous and, sometimes, homonymous (see Thaler, DF, 4.3.1 and 4.3.2). These features may help us to delimit some specific kinds of wordplay based on particular formal and / or semantic relations between words (DF, 3) or due to their status as neologisms resulting from a shift of the syntactic category or word class (DF, 4).

3 Lexical Level: Semantic and Syntactic Relations

Lexemes can be involved in horizontal as well as vertical wordplay – two dimensions which can also be labelled wordplay *in praesentia* or *in absentia* (also cf. Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.5). Let us discuss some examples of both phenomena, with no claim to exhaustiveness.

3.1 Repetition and Polysemy / Homonymy

Even though repetition may be used at all levels, it produces different effects according to the levels affected. On the lexical level, repetition may involve a paradox which is based both on the similarity or identity of form and the difference in meaning. This is illustrated in (3), where *affaires* is repeated in two different meanings (*affaires*₁ 'court cases' / *affaires*₂ 'business').

- (3) Pendant les « affaires₁ », les affaires₂ continuent [During the court cases business goes on.]
(title of a book by the journalist Denis Robert, 1996)

3.2 Formal Relations

In example (4), cited from Thaler (DF, 4.2.1), and in (5), we find another type of formal relation between lexemes. These two examples are based on the phonemically identical words: *mots* ('words') and *maux* (pl. 'evils', 'wrongs', 'damages') – sg. *mal*.

- (4) Entre deux mots, il faut choisir le moindre. [Among two words / evils you must choose the lesser.]
(Paul Valéry 1941, *Tel quel*)
- (5) Un mal, des mots
[*un mal* 'an evil'; the second element [demo] can be interpreted in two ways: (1) *des mots* 'words'; (2) *des maux* 'evils' (irregular plural of *un mal*; homophonous with *des mots*)]
(Advertising slogan for SOS-Amitié, an association whose aim is to help people by listening on the phone)

In example (4), the wordplay can be said to be *in absentia*, because the word form *maux* does not occur on the surface but is just evoked by its homophone *mots*. (5), by contrast, illustrates both wordplay *in praesentia* (relying on homophony relations) and *in absentia* because of the different orthographic form (*maux* vs. *mots*). However, *maux* is evoked again: indeed, this irregular plural form is learnt at school by French pupils together with the singular form (*un mal, des maux*; also: *un cheval, des chevaux; un canal, des canaux* etc.). As the singular and plural forms constitute a nominal pair, this example could also be described as a form of phraseological wordplay.

3.3 Semantic Opposition and Polysemy

On the semantic level, different lexemes are paradigmatically related to other units (e.g. via antonymy and synonymy). These relations *in absentia* may constitute means for puns and wordplays *in praesentia*. In (6), two items are juxtaposed in the utterance being syntactically related to each other; the point is that

présent has two meanings, one being antonymic to *passé* ('past'), the other one matching the English nouns *present* or *gift*.

- (6) Les présents du passé [Gifts of the past]
(poster in an antiquary shop): *présent*

3.4 Syntactic Wordplay

Apart from these examples, the lexical level can also be involved in syntactic wordplay because of the syntagmatic links between lexemes.

3.4.1 Ambiguity Based on Syntactic Structure

Example (7) represents an instance of syntactic ambiguity as there are two ways of interpreting the antecedent of the relative clause (which may either refer to *l'affaire* or *la vache folle*), in combination with the verb form *rebondit* 'bounces'. Of course, one reading is more plausible (assuming: *l'affaire* as the subject of the relative clause), and the comic is due to the fact that the other meaning could be conceived – and imagined.

- (7) C'est l'affaire de la vache folle qui rebondit (newspaper heading)
[The mad cow disease affair is bouncing / The mad cow is bouncing (and it is a big issue)]

3.4.2 Chiasms

Chiasm is another case of syntactic wordplay based on the lexical level. For that, words and even more so the repetition of words in reversed order are crucial. The repeated words can have or cannot have the same meaning in the two instances. However, they are not interpreted in the same way due to the syntactic structure. Consider examples (8) and (9).

- (8) *Analyse de contenu et contenus d'analyses* [analysis of content and content analysis] (book title, Ghiglione et Blanchet 1991)
- (9) *Sémiotique de l'espace, espace de la sémiotique* [semiotics of space, area of semiotics] (symposium name)

4 Neologisms as a Result of a Change of Word Class

As lexemes are defined by a bundle of features, one being their part of speech (cf. DF, 2.2), there can also be neologisms based on category shifts (word class changes via conversion), i.e. new lexemes, based on the same form and a similar meaning as an existing lexeme (see Lecolle 2012). Sablayrolles describes this category of neologism as “syntactic neologism” (2000: 176–177).

Example (10) contains a remarkable instance of a syntactic neologism. It is taken from an extract of a love song by Richard Desjardins, which is written to address the beloved person Lisa.

- (10) Je me terre
 et toi tu soleilles. (Richard Desjardins, *L'effet Lisa*)
 [translation included in the discussion below]

First of all, one may notice the syntactic neologism *tu soleilles* (verb 2nd person), which is coined based on the noun *soleil*. The wordplay builds on the opposite semantic relation between *terre* (‘earth’) and *soleil* (‘sun’). But *terre* as a noun is just evoked via its homonymic form *terre* as a verb (*je me terre*: Fr. *se terrer* ‘to hide’).

So, the play combines similarity (homonymy), difference in word class (verb / noun), semantic relations, and syntactic devices. Here again, several techniques interact, all involving the lexical level but viewed from different perspectives of linguistic description. This shows that a structurally oriented description may indeed be useful for identifying different types of playful language use.

5 References

- Benveniste, Émile. 1974. *Problèmes de linguistique générale II*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Kerleroux, Françoise. 2003. Morphologie: la forme et l’intelligible, *Langages* 152. 12–32.
- Lecolle, Michelle. 2012. Néologie sémantique et néologie catégorielle: quelques propositions. *Cahiers de Lexicologie* 100. 81–104.
- Rabatel, Alain. 2015. Points de vue en confrontation substitutifs ou cumulatifs dans les contre-pèteries (*in absentia*). In Esme Winter-Froemel & Angelika Zirker (eds.), *Enjeux du jeu de mots. Perspectives linguistiques et littéraires* (The Dynamics of Wordplay 2), 31–64. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter.

Rittaud-Hutinet, Chantal. 2014. Équivoque homophonique en français: polyvalence fortuite et ambiguïté volontaire. *Études romanes de Brno*, 35(1). 141–161.

Sablayrolles, Jean-François. 2000. *La Néologie en français contemporain: examen du concept et analyse de productions néologiques récentes*. Paris: Champion.