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# Discursive Dimensions of Wordplay

## 1 Introduction

The following contribution to the discussion forum on wordplay foregrounds two questions:

1. Why is it difficult to fix a boundary between wordplay and non-wordplay, and what are “problematic” or borderline cases? (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 5)
2. Which factors determine whether an instance of wordplay or verbal humor – as defined by Winter-Froemel in paragraph 5 – is successful or miscarried? Under which circumstances may initial failure in getting across a ludic message be overcome in discourse? (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.4)

The ensuing observations do not claim to be exhaustive by any means. Rather, they seek to give exemplary insights into the multifaceted and dynamic character of the phenomenon under analysis by looking at its effects and its various forms of discursive embedding.

## 2 Prototypical Cases of Wordplay

Probably every speaker has got a relatively clear intuition of what wordplay is (Kabatek 2015: 214), as examples abound in literature (poems, theatrical plays or other textual genres) and specific media formats such as comedy shows, but also in advertising and everyday-life communication. These contexts are heterogeneous in that they either involve a mass audience, i.e. book readers, theater audience and television viewers, and smaller social groups with different cohesive ties, i.e. friends, colleagues and maybe even business partners. Moreover, wordplay is not only limited to adults, but also part and parcel of the ludic practices many children engage in, as can be shown by large collections of nursery rhymes, songs and jokes typical of this age group (McGhee 1979; Socha and Kelly 1994). These contexts provide discursive spaces in which different kinds of playful interactions may unfold. They influence our own use of and reflection on language and, in the long run, may bring about specific discourse traditions (Kabatek 2015).

In light of these traditions, the phenomena listed in Fig. 1 may be considered prototypical types of wordplay, and the four English examples assembled here could easily be complemented by German, French, Italian or Spanish ones etc. Structurally, they all share one feature: the fact that the speakers play with sounds. More specifically, the configuration in (3) exploits rhyme effects, whereas (4) is a tongue twister. The difficulty in articulating (4) in a rapid way, often competing with other speakers, resides in that it contains a linear sequence of similar-sounding words. Their onsets alternate between /k/ and the consonant clusters /kr/ and /kl/ while the nucleus either contains the vowel /æ/ or /i:/. The rapid change between words with these phonemes and the need to articulate the phrase in question as quickly as possible may provoke amusing mispronunciations. Similarly, examples (1) and (2) play with pairs of same- or similar sounding words. However, in these two examples, known as punning and paronomasia respectively, only one of the words concerned is realized on the linguistic surface. This hints at a common differentiation between *wordplay in praesentia* ((3) and (4)) and *wordplay in absentia* ((1) and (2)) (Hausmann 1974; see also Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.5).

Analyzing such and other examples, it is necessary to bear in mind the intricately interwoven complex of linguistic, social and cognitive factors in which instances of wordplay occur (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.2). These points are also relevant for the discussion below, which embarks on a variety of examples:

- First, wordplay may come about in the oral or written medium. Some forms, e.g. rhymes as in (4), may work well in both constellations although oral performance generally creates a more immediate effect. By contrast, other techniques, e.g. lexical puns, tend to be more effective in the oral medium while losing part of their effect in written realization, depending on whether the two elements are polysemous units, full or partial homonyms (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.7–3.8).
- Second, the linguistic components played with may have different linguistic status (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 3.4–3.10). Furthermore, wordplay may entail the use of one or several languages (see, e.g., Knospe 2015 on bilingual puns).
- Third, on a social and cognitive level, wordplay can involve a varying number of participants connected by different modes of interaction, which can be characterized by spatial and temporal proximity or distance relations. That is why the opening paragraph of section 2 referred to contexts such as everyday speech as opposed to TV, literature or theater contexts.
- Finally, the interactants in situations involving wordplay may have specific linguistic profiles and metalinguistic skills. They can be on a par with each

other in this respect or not (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.2). Minimally, one of the agents must be conscious of the wordplay.

**Puns**

(1) Santa's helpers are subordinate clauses.  
(Honig 2008: 32)

[Abstracting from capitalization, *Santa* can be taken as short for *Santa Clause* here; if so, his assistants can be named "subordinate Clauses." However, Santa may also be the name of a woman, who knows how useful subordinate clauses (in a grammatical sense) are to express more complex ideas.]

**Paronomasia (imperfect pun)**

(2) A man wanted to buy his wife some anemones, her favorite flower. Unfortunately, all the florist had left were a few stems of the feathery ferns he used for decoration. The husband presented these rather shamefacedly to his wife. "Never mind, darling", she said, "with fronds like these, who needs anemones?"  
(Zwicky and Zwicky 1986: 493)

[This joke plays with the similar-sounding elements *fronds / friends* and *anemones / enemies*]

**Soundplay**

(3) pooper scooper 'a tool for picking up doggy doings'  
(Blake 2007: 158)

[playful rhyming compound]

(4) How can a clam cram in a clean cream can?  
(Burridge and Stebbis 2016: 428)

[tongue twister]

Fig. 1: Prototypical types of wordplay

### 3 Separating Wordplay and Non-Wordplay

While the classification of the phenomena in section 2 as prototypical types of wordplay seems to be rather straightforward (although traditional research only

treats (1) and (2) as instances of wordplay in a narrow sense; for more details see Winter-Froemel, DF, 5.1), the question of where wordplay begins or ends is a thorny issue. In view of many grey areas and potential overlaps of different phenomena, this contribution, instead of assuming a clear borderline between wordplay and non-wordplay, thus postulates a continuum of playfulness or ludicity (see also Winter-Froemel, DF, 5). This approach matches with the cognitive linguistic insight that virtually all categories have fuzzy boundaries – a thought which is supported by Partington (2006: 131), who talks of inner and “outer reaches” of wordplay. Similarly, Delabastita (1993: 58) argues that sharp category distinctions do not exist, as wordplay is “a complex field of phenomena, which is defined by the *simultaneous* interaction of various problematic axes such as *langue-parole*, diachrony-synchrony, difference-identity, and communication device-disorder” (emphases in the original text).

It would be interesting to show how these axes interact in different types of wordplay, but this would clearly go beyond the scope of this paper. For instance, the aspect of synchrony vs. diachrony in wordplay is very complex in itself. Amongst other things, the playful character of a word may fade diachronically. This can be shown by meanwhile established rhyming lexemes such as (5) and (6) as opposed to witty ad hoc creations like (3) in Fig. 1:

- (5) *snail mail* ‘ordinary mail as opposed to e-mail’  
(Blake 2007: 158; see also Germ. *Schneckenpost*)
  
- (6) *brain drain* ‘a situation in which many educated or professional people leave a particular place or profession and move to another one that gives them better pay or living conditions’  
(*Merriam-Webster*, s.v. *brain drain*)

Another dimension of the problem of synchrony vs. diachrony is captured in paragraph 3.7 of Winter-Froemel’s contribution to the discussion forum and thus not deepened in this article.

For reasons of space, the focus of this section lies on another aspect, namely the divide between wordplay as a communication device and cases where speech disorders are manifest. In fact, one and the same linguistic output may be judged differently depending on who says what to whom and with what degree of control over what is uttered and with what reaction from the hearer. If not intended as such by the speaker him- / herself, the *condition sine qua non* for assuming wordplay is that the addressee(s) reinterpret(s) the unit concerned and recognize(s) a ludic message behind it, which was not seen or intended by

the originator (see Winter-Froemel, DF, 2.6; see also Alexander 1997: 23–24). The situations in which this may happen can be quite complex. After all, the media, contriving scripted forms of wordplay, may resort to what Partington (2006: 118) describes as deliberate word confusions for entertaining ends. Admittedly, this is not excluded for everyday communication. However, a mispronunciation is usually not faked here, but mostly happens randomly. Irrespective of this, the result may be similar on one level: a deviant form produced by someone, be it the speaker him- / herself or a third person, may bring about a new message which, having been discovered, might cause amusement, at least in one of the communication partners. For instance, the author of this contribution vividly remembers a situation in a seminar on psycholinguistics, taught at the Institute of British and North American Studies in Greifswald, Germany in 2012. The respective session focused on speech errors. Looking at a hand-out which systematized sound errors, one of the students in class stumbled upon the example *cupcake*, which was rendered as [kʌk'keɪp] by the speaker cited, based on data from Shattuck-Hufnagel's (1983) corpus. At the beginning, the student somewhat vaguely expressed his doubt as to the legitimacy of the classification as a slip of the tongue without knowing more about the speaker. As the comment that the examples were not produced by language users suffering from inborn or acquired speech disorders did not satisfy him, the student made his point by switching into German, arousing laughter among his fellow students:

- (7) Also, ich weiß ja nicht, ob die Sprecherin sich hier nicht über ihren letzten Klamottenkauf aufregt – so nach dem Motto ‚So ein Kack Cape aber auch – verdammt miese Qualität!‘.  
 [Well, I'm not sure, but the speaker might be complaining about the clothes she bought on her last shopping tour, following the motto 'What a crappy cape – damn low quality!']  
 (Personal communication, translation into English SK)

Example (7) shows that one and the same linguistic unit may evoke different interpretations. The more habitual one is based on the assumption that the intended English word was *cupcake*, which was just rendered in a phonetically defective form, while the second reading goes across language boundaries and leads to a funny reinterpretation.<sup>1</sup> For Delabastita (1993: 155), such instances

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of speech errors against the backdrop of a model of speech production, see, e.g., Levelt (1989: 246–256, 346–359).

illustrate the “indefinable border area between rhetorical skill and linguistic pathology” as there may be shifts from one side to the other side of the scale. If a speech error is the starting point, this may result in what he labels a case of “significant wordplay” (Delabastita 1993: 155). The ludic moment initiated in (7) is conditioned by a clash between two perspectives: On the one hand, I, as the course instructor, had taken for granted a monolingual context when preparing the hand-out, which seemed to make the interpretation as an error in terms of a sound transposition imperative. On the other hand, the student had obviously (also) looked at the example from the angle of a German learner of English so that he arrived at a deviating bilingual interpretation. Structurally, this is licensed through near-homophony of the phonetically realized form [kʌk] and the German expletive *Kack* [kʌk] ‘crap(py), shit’, which fills the modifier position. In the example at hand, this cross-linguistic association was facilitated by the use of phonetic transcription on the hand-out, since the output in question might also have been represented orthographically as *cuck cape*. Due to the different spelling in the two languages, this would probably have blocked the link to German. Another aspect that needs to be acknowledged here is that the head of the compound – *cape* – is shared between the two codes: it represents a regular lexeme in English and an anglicism in German. As a result, an interpretation as a hybrid compound with an alliterating head and modifier is legitimate.<sup>2</sup>

On a social-communicative level, this short example also illustrates that communicative cooperation and, with it, a common ground between producer and recipient(s) are necessary for the language game to take effect (see section 4 of this contribution). In this case, the student did not succeed in constructing a shared discursive space at the beginning when he unspecifically referred to the unknown background of the speaker producing the form [kʌk'keɪp]. However, adding a metalinguistic comment, he managed to bring about an attention shift, activating German in the minds of his fellow students. As this initiates a funny reframing, the group burst into joint laughter.

While the setting in (7) is certainly special in that it involves a linguistically trained, bilingual audience, there are other examples which illustrate the com-

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<sup>2</sup> What is also worth mentioning here is the fluid boundary between speech error and (natural) phonological assimilation in rapid speech, which is often regressive in English. See, for instance, cases like *ten mice* pronounced as [tem'maɪs] or the rendition of *spaceship* as ['speɪʃɪp] (examples and transcription based on Kortmann 2005: 78). Generally, this does not lead to misunderstandings, but this is not fully impossible, as the assimilated form ['hæmbæg] might, e.g., be taken for *ham bag* (an *ad hoc* creation which could make sense in a particular context, e.g. a visit at a burger restaurant) instead of the habitual word *handbag*.

plexities which may be connected to the delimitation of speech errors and deliberate / significant wordplay or verbal humor. For instance, in lack of further information on the context, it is not possible to adequately assess the status of the adjective in the following utterance:

- (8) That's terrible.  
(Meyer 2005: 255)

As in the previous example, (8) may be seen as a *lapsus linguae* that might be based on the speaker's wavering between the adjectives *terrible* and *horrible*, which phonemically partly overlap. Alternatively, the output could also have been intended as a blend of *terrible* and *horrible*, leading to semantic intensification.

Another problem area may be linked to the use of *malapropisms*. The latter result from a confusion of similar-sounding (learned) words, often borrowings in origin, as illustrated by Mrs Malaprop's attack on Lydia in the following extract from Sheridan's play *The Rivals*:

- (9) Oh, there's nothing to be hoped for from her! she's as headstrong as an allegory on the banks of Nile.  
(Richard Sheridan, *The Rivals*, 1775, Act III, Scene 3)

Here, Mrs Malaprop, who wants to sound educated, but actually lacks linguistic knowledge, confounds the term *alligator* with the learned word *allegory*, which creates a comic effect noticed by other characters and the educated audience. For one part, the wordplay is therefore situated on the level of interaction between author and reader; for the other part, some protagonists in the play are presented as superior to Malaprop as well.<sup>3</sup> Moving to everyday communication, Chiaro (1992: 20) shows that malapropisms may also result from a problem on the receptive level, more specifically from mishearing (see Blake 2007: 142–144), resulting in a phenomenon which has become known under the term *Mondegreen* (see Dubinsky and Holcomb 2011: 38–39). Such incidences can, e.g., be encountered in the speech of children who, for obvious reasons, are not always able to come to grips with 'difficult' words and may thus wrongly reproduce

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<sup>3</sup> An oft-quoted theory in the field of humor research is the so-called *superiority theory*. Moreover, there is the *incongruity theory* that posits that humor and wordplay in a narrow sense (e.g. puns) are based on a clash of ideas which is later on resolved in discourse. For an overview of these theories see Attardo (1994).

them or mix them up, causing amusement in others. Chiaro (1992: 20) describes a situation which she observed in a public park in London. When facing a squirrel, a young child uttered:

- (10) Nice one, Squirrel!  
(Chiaro 1992: 20)

Probably, this was meant to echo a popular song named *Nice one, Cyril!* As Chiaro reports, the girl grew perplex as the grown-ups started laughing, not knowing herself that she had confused a personal and an animal name. (In adult speech, though, this might have been considered a pun, which shows that the knowledge and consciousness assumed shape our view on what is said.) Similarly, the German author and journalist Axel Hacke writes about occasions where mishearing played a role and uses this as a motif for many of his narrations. Amongst others, he is known for a book with the absurd, contradictory title shown in (11).

- (11) Der weiße Neger Wumbaba [The white negro Wumbaba]  
(Hacke and Sowa 2004: 12)

It is inspired by what the author, during his childhood, when *Neger* was not yet considered a derogatory term, wrongly heard in a line of the famous German poem *Abendlied* ‘Evening Song’ (1779) by the Romantic poet Matthias Claudius. The original verse runs like this: *Und aus den Wiesen steigt / Der weiße Nebel wunderbar*. This literally translates as ‘And from the meadows / rise magic white mists’) and is thus not linked at all to a man named Wumbaba. Another instance Hacke reflects on is the song title *I believe in miracles* of the group Hot Chocolate, which is said to have been misheard by many Germans, e.g. as

- (12) I believe in (k)nuckles  
(Hacke and Sowa 2004: 9)

In writing and doing public readings of texts centered on situations with such misunderstandings, Hacke exploits a mixture of recognition / identification and malicious joy on part of his audience.

Returning to the productive level, we may also come across *spoonerisms*, i.e. transpositions of sounds of two or more words (see Thaler, DF, 4.2.3 and Rabatel 2015). They may emerge involuntarily and can be turned into a laughing



stock for the hearer(s), but they can also be created on purpose.<sup>4</sup> That is why Lipka (2009: 85) speaks of the possibility of “fake spoonerisms”, thinking of creations such as

- (13) standing ovulations  
(Lipka 2009: 85)

instead of *standing ovations*. Yet, the distinction implied by Lipka (2009) is sometimes hard to make. Illustrating this, Blake (2007) mentions the example

- (14) flutterby  
(Blake 2007: 132)

(14) can be depicted as a spoonerism affecting the habitual English noun *butterfly*. This deformation might be due to a speech error or could have been consciously coined in an act of (synchronic) reanalysis. For the author, the form *flutterby* is creative as it “make[s] more sense than the original [term]: Butterflies do flutter by, but it is hard to see any connection between the ‘butter’ of ‘butterfly’ and ‘butter’. One theory is that the word originally referred to butter-coloured varieties” (Blake 2007: 132).

By contrast, the situation is not ambiguous in obvious misprints which can lead to new, unintended meanings, too. Although it is not always clear whether such examples often spreading via the Internet are authentic or not, they can be funny, for instance when they evoke sexual connotations. For this, see the following typographical error in the name of an institution, documented in an announcement for a commencement program at an American university on the website *Collegecandy*:

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the former BBC comedy series *The Two Ronnies* (1971–1987) and the program of the American parodists *The Capitol Steps*, who perform shows full of political humor, naming one of their programs *Lirty Dies. Just whip your flurds*. The audience of such TV formats is invited to follow the meaning twists created. These can be double-edged, as the motto of *The Capitol Steps* illustrates. The latter transforms the phrase *Dirty Lies. Just flip your words*. It also makes sense, however, if we assume *Lirty* to be a nickname and take the form *flurds* as spelling pronunciation for the American pronunciation of *flirts*, which shows the feature of *t* tapping.

- (15) London B. Johnson School of Pubic Affairs  
 [mistyping of the adjective public]  
 (<http://collegetcandy.com/2012/05/24/15-unfortunate-misprints-photos/>,  
 accessed 30.04.2016)

In view of such and other challenges, it is difficult to fix a boundary between wordplay and ‘non-wordplay’.

## 4 Wordplay and Ludic Language Use as Cooperative Activity

As was partly shown in section 3 already, wordplay harbors the potential to create social bonds and to cause amusement (possibly at the expense of others), but it may also fail, at least initially. Even though success and failure are possible outcomes of virtually all communicative acts, the conditions in situations of wordplay which are necessary for arriving at a shared understanding are special, not least due to the high degree of context-dependence involved. Hence, the following section aims at discussing in more detail which contextual factors can make the pendulum swing from confusion / lack of understanding to shared entertainment or delight – sometimes rapidly, in other situations only after considerable effort on part of the interlocutors. As was the case with the data in sections 2 and 3, both instances of written and oral communication are used for illustration.

As a first example, let us study the dynamics of the dialogue in (16), which, according to Winter-Froemel’s criteria (DF, 5), would be an example of folk-etymological motivation:

- (16) A domestic sitting-room. Evening. Janet and John are in the middle of a conversation with Peter and Jane. Jane is telling a story about what happened when their respective cats met in the street.

JANET: ... And so there was sort of a confrontation between Crumble and Splash –

JANE: Catfrontation you mean. (*Laughs.*)

JANET: Well, all right, catfrontation, if you insist – and they stood by the –

PETER: Near cat-astrophe, if you ask me. (*Groans.*)

JANET: I wasn't asking you, Peter.

PETER: Sorry, I didn't mean to be categorical. (*More groans all round.*)

JANE: This sounds like if it's becoming a catalogue of disasters. (*Peals of laughter.*)

PETER: I don't think John approves of all this jocularity, when Janet's trying to tell us a perfectly serious story.

JANE: You don't know what John's being, though, don't you.

PETER: What?

JANE: A catalyst. (*More laughter all round.*)

PETER: I thought that was what happened to moggies when they'd drunk too much. (*Further groans.*)

JANET: Oh, that's Christmas-cracker standard.

PETER: Of course, you know what Splash would get if he stayed outside for too long?

JANE: What?

PETER: Catarrh. (*More laughter all round.*)

JANET: Anyway, to get back to the point ...

JOHN: Yes, get on with your catechism, Janet. (*Mock cheers.*)

(Crystal 1998: 2–3)

Crystal (1998: 3) depicts episode (16) as an act of verbal acrobatics or “ping-pong punning”<sup>5</sup> between close friends who, over a glass of wine, start engaging in a little verbal combat. It is engaged by Jane, who creatively speaks of a “cat-frontation” when thinking of what the fighting cats did. Although her remark interrupts the normal flow of the conversation – a thing which also happens in later parts of the dialogue –, her clever move triggers a whole sequence of wordplay. Gradually, the others, including John who only takes an active role at the end of the dialogue, join in. As the accompanying paralinguistic signals emphasize, the friends are enjoying each other's company. In the lexical twists the free morpheme *cat* is read into words like *catastrophe*, *catalyst* and *catechism*. Getting reinterpreted in a ludic way, the codified meaning of these lexemes, as found in dictionaries of English, is thus broken through. Simultaneously, the speakers dismiss questions of etymology, and the fact that these items, as borrowed learned words, are morphological wholes. Through their synchronic reinterpretation, the respective terms are related to the discourse

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<sup>5</sup> Different from the understanding in examples (1) and (2) of this contribution, Crystal (1998) uses the term *pun* in rather a loose or non-technical sense here, referring to any humorous or clever use of a word.

topic, the cat fight. The dialogue can be said to be an example of shared light-hearted, humorous play which is set in a relaxed atmosphere at the dinner table and emerging from the intimate relation between the participants. Under other circumstances, the situation could have taken a different turn and resulted in angry reactions, as Peter and Jane, to keep the game going, consciously suspend communicative principles such as the rule not to go far off topic (see Grice's (1975) maxims of quantity and relevance) and the polite habit not to cut off other people's words. However, it is only through this act of bending certain communicative principles and linguistic rules that the conversation develops this way. At the same time, Crystal (1998: 4) stresses that not all rules are annulled in this example, as the speakers, to share their amusement, must pave the floor for the others to enter the game, i.e. provide contextual cues to mark their twists as discursively relevant (on this matter see also Yus 2016: 139–150). In this respect, Crystal (1998: 4) mentions the use of special facial expressions accompanying wordplay in the oral medium, e.g. by raising one's eyebrows, blinking one's eye etc. Also, a more careful or prominent stress of the important element *cat-* was audible in the recording of the scene he analyzed. Moreover, cooperative listeners tend to give short answers only while one and the same pun is not repeated. Last but not least, the fact that Peter and Jane come up with *what*-questions as well as the teasing part where John, so far absolutely silent, is explicitly addressed, can be interpreted as invitations for the others to join in.

Similarly, the student in (7), through the use of a metalinguistic comment, makes the listeners backtrack and look back at the example on the hand-out from a bilingual perspective. In (1), (2) and (9), there are no explicit signals of this kind since this would go against the conventions of jokes and literary texts. Yet, a joke found in a book may also be retold and explained to the audience if the listeners do not get it. Clearly, this is one of the last resorts.

In principle, we have a broad cline between success and failure. For instance, a speaker may say something and then notice the ambiguity of his / her statement as is the case with Felix in (17). He does not intend a face-threatening act and thus tries to resolve the situation in the end, albeit with some amusement:

- (17) Setting: a school-practical exercise in a French class of a German *Gymnasium*. During the demonstration lesson of a fellow student, Felix and Stephan sit next to each other. The overhead projector used in class causes problems as the adjustable deflection mirror does not stay in position.

Felix (*enervated*): Halt doch bitte mal die Klappe! [ambiguous in German: '(1) Please hold up the deflection mirror!'; (2) 'Shut up!']

Stephan: Uhh?

Felix (*hesitates*): Ehmm, sorry, also nicht Du, sondern die Klappe da.

[Ehmm, sorry, not you, but this thing there. (*smiles and points at the deflection mirror.*)]

(Personal communication; translation into English SK)

Complexity may even further increase in situations where wordplay is intertextual. Here, different dimensions may need to be disentangled, as is demonstrated by example (18):

- (18) J. feels ill and considers cancelling his flight to the Cacausus where he wants to attend a workshop with colleagues who are engaged in ecological projects the following week. S. tries to convince him that he should not panic, but wait and see whether he will feel a little better the day after.

S.: Du schaffst das, J. [You will manage, J.]

J.: Irgendwie, irgendwo, irgendwann. [Anyhow, anywhere, anytime.]

S.: Hmmh? (*Pause / break in between*)

J.: Oops, jetzt darf ich nicht mehr durch die Türkei in den Kaukasus. [Oops, now I will not be allowed any more to travel from Turkey to the Caucasus.]

S.: Erdowie, Erdowo, Erdowann? [Erdo-how, Erdo-where, Erdo-when?]

J.: Nein, Nena. [No, Nena.]

S.: Wie jetzt? [What?]

J.: Ich bin politisch korrekt. Und ich bin mit Nena aufgewachsen. ☺ [I'm politically correct. And I grew up with Nena songs. ☺]

S.: LOL

J.: Siehste mal ... \*grins\* [You see!' \*grin\*]

[...]

(Private chat communication, April 2016, translation into English SK)

From a discursive perspective, extract (18) is multidimensional:

- First of all, there is the literal level: J. is not sure whether he should postpone his trip to the Cacausus, where he would travel to by plane via Istanbul. To underline his message, he uses the formula *Irgendwie, Irgendwo, Irgendwann* 'anyhow, anywhere, anytime', whereby the adverb *irgendwo*

‘anywhere’ signals that his itinerary might be different if he should decide not to go to this meeting with colleagues.

- S., acknowledging the connection to Turkey and being aware of Jonathan’s political positions, links the use of this line to a satirical song about the Turkish President Erdogan which was recently broadcast by the German TV magazine *ExtraDrei*. Its title *Erdowie, Erdowo, Erdogan* ‘Erdo-how, Erdo-where, Erdogan’ modified the title of a song of the German pop singer Nena, which dates back to the 1980’s and was later on newly recorded and released as an album.<sup>6</sup>
- J., in turn, claims that he, being politically correct, was referring to Nena’s title, which, as he explains, was often played when he was a child. S., not seeing any connection to the Nena song first, is puzzled for a moment, but gets his point in the end. Both chat users are amused, as the connection to the satirical song, the title of which is phonemically close to the original, is not really wiped out, as can be inferred from the emoji and the comment J. makes.

## 5 Conclusion

The above reflections reveal the manifold facets which may be at stake in wordplay and verbal humor. All in all, they underline the need to use a differentiated descriptive framework for depicting the phenomena at hand. As this contribution tried to make clear, a formalist approach, which would be interested in the structural dimensions only, would soon run into problems, since such a narrow focus would not sufficiently acknowledge the central role of the larger context. This way, the analysis would fall short of the dynamics of wordplay. To illustrate this, section 3 delved into the fuzzy boundaries between wordplay and non-wordplay. Section 4 then focused on the efforts producers and receivers may need to use to arrive at a shared understanding. Additionally, it was point-

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<sup>6</sup> In the public discussions initiated by the satirical song, there are also other orthographic representations of the title: Among these, there are the versions (1) *Erdowie, Erdowo, Erdowann* ‘Erdo-how, Erdo-where, Erdo-when’, which comes closest to the original Nena song (see <http://www.mainpost.de/ueberregional/meinung/leitartikel/Leitartikel-Das-Schoene-an-Satire;art9517,9186780>, accessed 01.05.2016), and (2) *Erdowie, Erdowo, Erdowahn*. The second representation (see <http://www.rolandtichy.de/kolumnen/aus-aller-welt/erdowie-erdowo-erdowahn/>, accessed 30.04.2016) is based on the paronymic relation between the German words *wann* ‘where’ and *Wahn* ‘mania’ and ties in with the critical message of the satirical song.

ed out that the analysis needs to account for the concrete discursive constellations, which may be very complex as we may be confronted with situations of multi-level communication.

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