

# A Cognitive Linguistics Account of Wordplay



# A Cognitive Linguistics Account of Wordplay

By

Konrad Żyśko

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



A Cognitive Linguistics Account of Wordplay

By Konrad Żyśko

Reviewed by:

Anna Malicka-Kleparska

(The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland)

Przemysław Łozowski

(Kazimierz Pułaski University of Technology

and Humanities in Radom, Poland)

This book first published 2017

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2017 by Konrad Żyśko

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-1669-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-1669-4

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	vii
Preface.....	xi
Acknowledgments.....	xiii
Chapter One.....	1
Wordplay: Preliminary Remarks	
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Towards a Definition of Wordplay.....	3
1.2.1 Similarity of Forms.....	5
1.2.2 Ambiguity.....	7
1.2.3 Novelty and Humour.....	10
1.2.4 Taxonomy of Wordplay.....	17
1.3 Summary and Conclusions.....	24
Chapter Two.....	27
Cognitive linguistics: Theoretical Background	
2.1 Introduction.....	27
2.2 Perception and Categorisation.....	31
2.3 The Role of Context.....	39
2.4 Conceptual Metaphor.....	45
2.5 Conceptual Blending.....	48
2.6 Summary and Conclusions.....	59
Chapter Three.....	63
Wordplay Revisited: Cognitive Mechanisms behind Wordplay	
3.1 Introduction.....	63
3.2 Wordplay and Meaning Variation.....	64
3.2.1 Wordplay and Image Schemas.....	66
3.2.2 Polysemy, Homonymy and Vagueness.....	84
3.2.3 Wordplay and Hidden Sense Relations.....	96

3.2.4 Concluding Remarks .....	105
3.3 Wordplay and Conceptual Integration Theory .....	106
3.3.1 Conceptual Blending and Meaning Construction .....	107
3.3.2 Wordplay and Current Discourse Space .....	117
3.3.3 Concluding Remarks .....	125
3.4 Analysability/Compositionality Parameter of Wordplay .....	126
3.4.1 Wordplay as (Non)Compositional Items .....	128
3.4.2 A/C and Idiomatic Language .....	131
3.4.3 A/C Cline: from Prototypes to Peripheral Cases .....	135
3.4.4 Concluding Remarks .....	138
3.5 Summary and Conclusions .....	138
Conclusions .....	141
Bibliography .....	145
Index .....	163

## LIST OF FIGURES

- Fig. 1-1. Continuum of meaning variation (after Murphy 2010: 93).
- Fig. 2-1. Graphical representation of the symbolic unit as a result of the connection between S = Semantic unit/pole, and p = phonological unit/pole
- Fig. 2-2. A continuum of linguistic units (After Dirvén and Verspoor 2004: 70, and Kardela 2012: 304).
- Fig. 2-3. Gestalt principle of closure (after Radden, Köpcke, Berg, Siemund 2007: 1).
- Fig. 2-4. An exemplary structure of the BIRD category (adapted from Aitchison 2003: 55).
- Fig. 2-5. Fuzzy category boundaries: CUP and BOWL (adapted from Labov 1973).
- Fig. 2-6. Profiling of the concepts of CIRCLE and ARC (adapted from Ungerer and Schmid 2006: 192).
- Fig. 2-7. A matrix of domains (adapted from Langacker 2008: 48).
- Fig. 2-8. Conceptual arrangement (adapted from Langacker 1999: 205).
- Fig. 2-9. Radial network for the category MOTHER (Evans and Green 2006: 276).
- Fig. 2-10. A schematic conceptual blend network as proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (2002).
- Fig. 2-11. Conceptual integration network for CHIMERICA.
- Fig. 2-12. Conceptual integration network for CHIMERICA.
- Fig. 2-13. Caused headache network (after Turner 2010: 388).
- Fig. 2-14. Context-dependent blending, adapted from Brandt and Brandt (2002)
- Fig. 2-15. Conceptual integration network for WINDSCREEN VIPERS.
- Fig. 3-1. Schemas and elaborations for the cases of a) polysemy, b) homonymy, c) vagueness (after Tuggy 1993: 173).
- Fig. 3-2. Variation of the schema-elaboration in polysemy (adopted from Tuggy 1993: 174).
- Fig. 3-3. CONTAINER image schema (after Johnson 1987).
- Fig. 3-4. *Out* image schema as used in *John went out of the room*.
- Fig. 3-5. *Out* image schema as used in *The honey spread out*.
- Fig. 3-6. *Out* image schema as used in *The train started out for Chicago*.

- Fig. 3-7. Schematic representation of the transformation of the image schema *out* as used in *Out of my mind. Back in five minutes.*
- Fig. 3-8. VIRTUAL and ACTUAL PLANES (after Langacker 1999: 79).
- Fig. 3-9. Virtual reality as characteristic of the conceptual metaphor (adapted from Langacker 1999: 81).
- Fig. 3-10. Profile shifting in *Out of my mind. Back in five minutes.*
- Fig. 3-11. Virtual reality as characteristic of the conceptual metaphor as used in *No one knew she had a dental implant until it came out in a conversation* (adapted from Langacker 1999: 81).
- Fig. 3-12. Central image schema for *over* (adapted from Lakoff 1987a: 419).
- Fig. 3-13. Image schema for *I got over a fear of hurdles* (adapted from Lakoff 1987a: 419).
- Fig. 3-14. Profile shifting in *I used to have a fear of hurdles, but I got over it.*
- Fig. 3-15. OFF spatial image schema.
- Fig. 3-16. Profile shifting in *I can't believe I got fired from the calendar factory. All I did was take a day off.*
- Fig. 3-17. Spatial image schema for *beneath*.
- Fig. 3-18. Virtual-to-Actual plane shift as performed by the conceptualiser in the mental processing of *I've never taken an elevator to the basement floor, that's just beneath me.*
- Fig. 3-19. Spatial image schema for *through*.
- Fig. 3-20. Virtual-to-Actual plane shift as performed by the conceptualiser in the mental processing of *Never lie to an x-ray technician. They can see right through you.*
- Fig. 3-21. Spatial image schema for *into*.
- Fig. 3-22. Profile shifting in *A hole has been found in the nudist camp wall. The police are looking into it.*
- Fig. 3-23. Spatial image schema for *up*.
- Fig. 3-24. Graphical representation of the central image schema with its possible transformations (adapted from Lakoff 1987a: 423).
- Fig. 3-25a) Image schema ON profiling vertical contiguity.
- Fig. 3-25b) Image schema ON profiling horizontal contiguity.
- Fig. 3-26. Schematic representation of the transformation of the image schema *on* as used in *What's on TV? Dust.*
- Fig. 3-27. The subsuming schema (C) for BED together with its elaborations: a piece of furniture (A) and the bottom of the river (B).
- Fig. 3-38. A metaphorical extension of *hot* in *What is always hot in the refrigerator? Chili.*

- Fig. 3-29. The subsuming schema (C) for sense extensions (A and B) of POSSESSIVE.
- Fig. 3-30. Graphical representation of the thing-to-process conversion (after Langacker 1987: 247).
- Fig. 3-31. A profile shift from the metaphorical extension to the spatial one as used in *What does it mean when the barometer falls? The nail has come out of the wall.*
- Fig. 3-32. A typology of English homonyms in accordance with morphological complexity (adopted from Szymanek 2013: 311).
- Fig. 3-33. Homophony of /'bəʊldə(r)/.
- Fig. 3-34. Image schema for JUMP, (adapted from Langacker 1987: 311).
- Fig. 3-35. A profile shift between the image schema OBJECT and AGENT as used in *What do you get when you cross a sheep with a kangaroo? A woolly jumper.*
- Fig. 3-36. Schematic representation of vagueness of the concept AUNT (adopted from Tuggy 1993: 177).
- Fig. 3-37. Vagueness of the concepts SURGEON and ACCOUNTANT.
- Fig. 3-38. Vagueness of TAKE as used in example 3.
- Fig. 3-39. Radial network with the central case (prototype) and subcategories.
- Fig. 3-40. Radial network for LITTLE MOUSE category.
- Fig. 3-41. Family resemblance relations between senses A, B, C, D.
- Fig. 3-42. Schematic representation of family resemblance of sense relations for CARDINAL.
- Fig. 3-43. Schematic representation of family resemblance of sense relations for LITTER.
- Fig. 3-44. Conceptual integration network for NIGHTMARAMARATHON.
- Fig. 3-45. Conceptual integration network for ELFIE.
- Fig. 3-46. Integration network for A BIRD IN THE HAND GATHERS NO MOSS.
- Fig. 3-47. Integration network for NO NEWS IS WORTH TWO IN THE BUSH.
- Fig. 3-48. Integration network for PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GRASS HOUSES SHOULDN'T STOW THRONES.
- Fig. 3-49. Standard model of *Current Discourse Space* (Langacker 2008: 466).
- Fig. 3-50. Current Discourse Space model for the selective mappings in examples 1-10 (adapted from Kardela 2010).
- Fig. 3-51. Re-conceptualisation of the compositional schema for examples 1-8.

Fig. 3-52. Current Discourse Space for *Why can you not starve in the desert? – Because of the sandwiches there.*

Fig. 3-53. Current Discourse Space as related to analysability of wordplay.

Fig. 3-54. Compositionality scale (after Kardela 2012: 312).

Fig. 3-55. Wordplay compositionality scale.

## PREFACE

Even though the ability to create witty puns seems to be an inherent skill of the human kind, a suitable explanation of their linguistic nature has evaded academic description.

The aim of this book is to break with the traditional view of presenting wordplay in terms of the exploitation of various phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic or pragmatic features of language, and to offer a holistic, conceptual outlook on the problem. It seems that wordplay encompasses many more phenomena than the sheer phonetic similarity (of a “more-or-less” character) between linguistic forms as has been commonly claimed. It is assumed that language, and hence wordplay, is a cognitive phenomenon which involves some complex mental processes, e.g. thinking in terms of metaphor, metonymy, blending, schemas, etc. Therefore, a cognitive account must acknowledge the role of the conceptualiser in the process of meaning construction. What also appears to be of the essence for the understanding of wordplay is the context of language use, together with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the world on the part of the speaker and hearer. Cognitive Grammar offers an account of such rich cognitive models e.g. by means of the Current Discourse Space.

It must be remembered that wordplay is a malleable substance as it forms a relatively wide continuum of instances, from those relying on pure homonymy, commonly viewed as prototypical, through some polysemous examples, blends, to some further peripheral examples in the form of modifications of well-entrenched formulaic expressions. Furthermore, it may involve a range of meaning variation, such as polysemy, homonymy, or vague concepts. Our claim is that meaning construction pertaining to wordplay frequently involves a profile shift from one conceptualisation to another, or a shift from an actual to a virtual plane, activating e.g. well-entrenched spatial image schemas, together with their metaphorical extensions stemming from one subsuming schema (polysemy). Furthermore, mental operations may also involve unrelated yet well-entrenched schemas (homonymy), or semantic structures which are not well-entrenched and are not expressed linguistically, even though a general schema could be provided for them (vagueness). Finally, we claim that some instances of wordplay typically regarded as homonyms may

have the potential to point towards some historically-motivated sense relations between the linguistic units involved.

The study presented here is illustrated by selected examples of wordplay encountered, *inter alia*, in the available literature related to wordplay and humour, as well as on Internet websites (mostly /<http://www.punoftheday.com>; <http://www.funology.com>; [www.lawrenceball.org/page/jokes.htm](http://www.lawrenceball.org/page/jokes.htm)).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for the help, encouragement and professional assistance that was offered to me while I was writing this book. My sincere thanks therefore go, first and foremost, to Professor Henryk Kardela for his infinite support and encouragement which I received in the course of writing this book. I am deeply grateful for all the comments and suggestions without which the present study would not have been completed. Warm thanks are also due to my colleagues at UMCS.

On a more personal note, I owe a special debt of gratitude to those who are dear to me. I cannot miss the opportunity to express my gratitude to my wife Angelina, whose support, joy, and optimism were of invaluable importance. Last but not least, I wish to thank my parents for their support.

All shortcomings in this work are, of course, my own responsibility.



# CHAPTER ONE

## WORDPLAY: PRELIMINARY REMARKS

### 1.1 Introduction

Playing on words, traditionally understood as a literary technique and a form of wit, has a long history of use and is probably almost as old as language itself. Although the earliest traces of wordplay are impossible to find due to the oral tradition of language, some early written forms have been well preserved. One of the first instances of such a use of language was found in ancient Egypt, where wordplay was richly involved in the creation of myths and interpretation of dreams (Pinch 1995: 68). The first evidence of rhyming can be found in the Chinese *Book of Songs* (*Shi Jing*)<sup>1</sup> (10<sup>th</sup> century BC). Wordplay was also found in ancient Iraq, about 2500 BC, in cuneiform, one of the earliest known forms of written expression (Robson 2008: 31), as well as in the Mayan settlements, where it took the form of hieroglyphic writings (Danien, Sharer 1992: 99). It was also the domain of the philosophers and writers of antiquity. For example, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, in Macrobius's *The Saturnalia* (Kaster 2011), Caesar Augustus used a playful comment after noticing a man ploughing up the field where his father was buried: "This is truly cultivating your father's memory" (*monumentum* – memory; *monumentum* – grave). According to the King James Version of the Bible (1769), Jesus Christ also played on words, saying to Peter "That thou art Peter [Petros], and upon this rock [petra] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Other early traces of wordplay direct us towards the Chinese Shen Tao (300 BC), who used *shih* (power), and *shih* (position) to highlight the fact that a king wields power in his position (Waley 1982: 61). Whether the two lexical units should be viewed as wordplay is a matter of dispute which could be re-analysed after reading this work.

<sup>2</sup> It should be observed, though, that the instances of wordplay were not only limited to homonymy or phonetic similarity. Another instance of wordplay, i.e.

The art of using wordplay, at least in English literature, began to gather momentum in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Geoffrey Chaucer), and thrived in the 15<sup>th</sup> (e.g. John Donne) and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries when “direct and formal combats of wit were a favourite pastime of the courtly and accomplished” (Coleridge 1969: 250). The heyday of wordplay probably occurred at the time of William Shakespeare, who is said to have used an average of 78 instances of wordplay per play (Manhood 1957: 164). One example of such proliferation is *The Comedy of Errors*, where Egeon, the Syracuse merchant, plays on the word *male* (“the sex of a baby” versus *mail* understood as “baggage”) when he refers to the birth of the twins: “That very hour, and in the self-same inn, a mean woman was delivered of such a burden male, twin both alike” (I, 1, 53–55).<sup>3</sup>

The following centuries witnessed the influence of the sciences and mathematical-logical thinking. This led to the spread of an often grudging attitude towards wordplay, which was characterised by fuzzy and overlapping meanings. As a result, its use started to fall in popularity in British literature in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a revival of wordplaying, mostly thanks to authors such as George Gordon Byron, Lewis Carroll, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edward Lear, and James Joyce. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought forth other names such as P.G. Wodehouse, George Bernard Shaw, Brain P. Cleary, or those representing the so-called mass culture,<sup>4</sup> such as Groucho Marx, Bob Dylan, Big Daddy Kane, Eminem, Jay-Z, to mention just a few contemporary names. This all suggests that wordplay, although changing throughout the ages, is still very popular.

Furthermore, there seems to be a general agreement among scholars that creating wordplay is universal for all languages (Veisbergs 1997: 162), and in some languages it is extensively encouraged and practiced (Nida 1993: 87). The truth is that, nowadays, examples of wordplay can be found in both alphabetically and non-alphabetically written literature (e.g. Chinese *hanzi*), and the rich tradition of playing on words has a big impact on today’s global phenomena, such as rhyming slang, rap, hip-hop, and the language used in the world of media, politics, advertising, or technology.

---

alliteration, based on the repetition of a sound in the first syllables of a series of words (or phrases) was quite commonly used around the 8th-10th centuries AD, which can be seen in the Old English epic *Beowulf*, the Old High German *Muspilli*, the Old Saxon *Heliand*, and the Old Norse *Edda*.

<sup>3</sup> For more on Shakespeare and wordplay, see Ermida (1998, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Although Gans admits that popular and high culture have converged to some extent over time (1974, 1999).

Despite wordplay's popularity, its territory still seems to be uncharted due to "low intensity explanatory patterns" (Attardo 1994: 108; Partington 2009). In other words, even though the available linguistic studies tried to somehow delineate wordplay, they failed to provide a unified account of the underlying processes which could explain how such non-conventional use of language is created and understood.

The aim of this chapter is to examine wordplay in order to present some attempts at its definition, to offer suggestions for taxonomy, and to provide its attributed functions. The theoretical constructs presented do not aim to fill the theoretical void concerning wordplay, but to serve as a point of reference or theoretical background against which some cognitive phenomena will be presented in the chapters to follow.

## 1.2 Towards a Definition of Wordplay

As has been previously shown, wordplay has a relatively long tradition of use, and its theoretical descriptions can be traced back to antiquity, with the studies carried out by Cicero and Quintilian (Kjerkegaard 2011: 1). With time, wordplay started to be linked with the rhetorical terms of *traductio* and *adnominatio*. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, written in the period 86-82 BC and ascribed to Cicero (1954: 279), states that "[t]ransplacement (*traductio*) makes it possible for the same word to be frequently reintroduced, not only without offence to good taste, but even so as to render the style more elegant". *Traductio* in this context should be understood as a figure of repetition. According to Kjerkegaard (2011: 2), wordplay understood as *traductio*, however, may not fully correspond to the understanding of wordplay today. Nowadays, wordplay could be characterised rather as *adnominatio*, which would be tantamount to paranomasia.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the available literature contributes to some kind of logical and conceptual confusion when it comes to wordplay terminology. For instance, whereas some of the authors, or dictionaries, distinguish between wordplay and puns (Freud

---

<sup>5</sup> *Paranomasia* should be understood as a pun (Baldick: 185). According to this line of argument, wordplay seems suitable for entertainment speeches yet its excessive use may, *inter alia*, lessen the speaker's credibility, seriousness, and impressiveness. Moreover, not only does it destroy the speaker's authority, but it may also be offensive because it may have "grace and elegance, but not impressiveness and beauty" (1954: 309). That is why wordplay was advised to be used cautiously, with an appropriate frequency. It appears, then, that the early approaches towards wordplay were of a functional and cautionary character.

1905, Fischer<sup>6</sup> 1905, Leppihalme 1997: 142; Baldick: 209), some others treat the two as identical (Redfern 1985; Delabastita 1996, Ritchie 2004). There also exists no consensus on the nature of wordplay. For some researchers any example of wordplay should be easily identifiable to any reader (Delabastita, 1997; 6) whereas for others, usually in line with post-structuralist views, a text is a maze where anything can be considered to be wordplay.<sup>7</sup> In general, however, authors have tried to define wordplay in relation to standard language. Stenius (1967), in line with the generative theories, views language as being subject to certain rules which guarantee successful communication:

(...) fixed rules must be obeyed – otherwise the player will be guilty of either making an incorrect move or else willfully cheating and may even be punished for deception. In the case of language a violation of rules is not obviously punishable, but it can end in a number of unwanted situations: misunderstandings of various sorts, ambiguity, falsehoods and lies [...] implicatures, and even in the most severe case, a total breakdown of communication. (Chrzanowska-Kluczevska, 2004, 31)

In this sense, language is subject to a fixed set of rules or maxims of conversation (Grice 1975), maxims of politeness (Lakoff 1972, 1973; Brown and Levinson 1978, 1987; Leech 1983), or a hypermaxim of linguistic conversation (Keller 1994), which must be obeyed lest the effective communication should be somehow flouted. Thus, for instance, the riddle:

A: *Where did King John sign the Magna Carta?*

B: *At the bottom!*

(Chiaro 1996: 44)

---

<sup>6</sup> Fischer and Freud seem to treat puns as games dealing purely with the linguistic form: “The pun is a bad play on words for it plays with the word as if it were only a sound”; whereas wordplay “goes deep into the very soul of the word” (Fischer 1905: 73). This seems to be in line with Freud’s thought: “The truth is that puns make the least demand on the technique of expression, just as wordplay proper makes the highest” (1905: 71). The view that punning may involve only the form and not the meaning, hence the distinction between puns and wordplay, was undermined by e.g. Todorov (1981), who claims that “[o]ne can observe only a greater or lesser richness in the semantic relationship, a greater or lesser motivation of the relationship between signifiers”.

<sup>7</sup> The idea that any language use involves playing with language is espoused by Wittgenstein (1953), who was au fait with wordplay within the broad category of games.

violates the Maxim of Relevance, as the answer provides information that is supposedly not expected or not relevant to the conversation. However, if the concept of maxims of conversations is applied to the description of wordplay, one could get the impression that the latter, here exemplified by a diversity of jokes, violates all of them:<sup>8</sup>

As jokes convey fictitious events, dialogues, utterances, they already thereby violate the Maxim of Quality. Each punchlined joke would violate the Maxim of Quantity as it fails to convey a part of necessary information. Each nonsense joke (or, in fact, any incongruity) ignores the rule of text's thematic coherence and thus also the Maxim of Relation; each pun (or, in fact, the "bisociativity" of jokes itself) violates its submaxim "Avoid ambiguity". Consequently, it seems reasonable simply to radically enlarge the extent of the concept of communication, calmly to admit plurality of different levels and types of human communication and predictably numerous contradictions between them. (Krikmann 2006: 48)

Therefore, Krikmann seems to espouse the view that there is some contrast between wordplay and standard language, as the former is more flexible and thus variable and open for experiment. Moreover, wordplay is commonly attributed with three particular features, i.e. similarity of forms, ambiguity, and humour.

### 1.2.1 Similarity of Forms

One attempt to bridge the gap between the above-mentioned approaches (i.e. treating wordplay as paronomasia, or treating the whole concept of language as a kind of wordplay) seems to be the notion of wordplay as proposed by Delabastita (1996), who refers to it as:

the various textual phenomena in which structural features of the language(s) used are exploited in order to bring about a communicatively significant confrontation of two (or more) linguistic structures with more or less similar forms and more or less different meanings (Delabastita 1996: 128).

In this definition proposed by Delabastita, wordplay can exploit all sorts of features, be they phonological, graphological, orthographic, morphological,

---

<sup>8</sup> This view seems to be supported by Kita (1998), and Karwatowska and Szpyra-Kozłowska (2004a)

syntactic or semantic.<sup>9</sup> Delabastita provides a list of universal ways through which linguistic phenomena can be similar, i.e. can share a similar form: identical spelling and pronunciation (homonymy), identical pronunciation but different spelling (homophony), identical spelling but different pronunciation (homography), or slightly different spelling and pronunciation (paronymy).<sup>10</sup> It seems, however, that similarity of any kind may be a necessary yet insufficient condition for wordplay to emerge. Consider the following slogan used by a computer company in an advertising campaign: *I think, therefore IBM*, which is based on Descartes's maxim *I think, therefore I am*. It appears that the relation between the form "IBM" and "I am" could be described in terms of paronymy. Nonetheless, even if the allusion is grasped along the principle of syntactic, phonological or whatever similarity between the expressions there may be, it cannot fully account for why sentences such as *I think, therefore I clam*, or *I think therefore I dam*, or *I think therefore I ram* etc. do not seem to meet the expectation of a wordplay-based slogan in this particular context. To quote Richie (2004: 117): "the mere presence in the language of a potentially similar (and contextually unrelated) phrase is a widespread phenomenon, and does not make an utterance amusing".

Thus, it seems that the missing link for wordplay to emerge is an appropriate context:

A necessary condition for pun perception is a context in which multiple and disparate meanings for the pun word are acceptable; the context must concern itself with certain matters if a pun is to be made on a certain word (Delabastita 1993:70)

According to Delabastita, the appropriate context should be related to human knowledge and the expectations of grammatical texts (verbal context) and/or should go in line with the world spoken of in the utterance itself (situational context) (Delabastita 1993: 72-73). That is why *What do sea monsters eat? Fish and **ships*** seems to be contextually valid, as ships are objects expected to be seen at sea, whereas *fish and fibs* or *wish and chips* do not meet such a condition. In other words, *fibs* and *chips* are not

---

<sup>9</sup> Such a structuralist taxonomy seems to be embraced, *inter alia*, by e.g. Chiaro 1996, Ritchie 2003, Ermida 2008. Some other scholars, e.g. Dienhart (1998), characterise wordplay merely with the phonological similarity used to compare two distinct ideas.

<sup>10</sup> Dienhart (1998:109) extends the list and categorises wordplay as being based on polysemes, homonyms, homophones, paraphones, or hahaphones defined as "an artificial type of near homophony whereby similarity of sound is produced by a kind of pseudo-morphemic analysis".

physical entities that conform to the encyclopaedic knowledge of what may appear in the sea, even though their linguistic form appears to be salient enough to evoke the *fish and chips* binominal. It is worth pointing out that the answer *fish and chips* could hardly be viewed as wordplay in the context of *What do sea monsters eat?* since it offers a somewhat too direct, although incongruous, reply to the question. Finally, consider some examples of wordplay based both on a linguistic and a non-linguistic, i.e. situational, context, e.g. *Cardiology* (the name of a shop selling greetings cards) or *Curl Up and Dye* (on a hairdressing parlour) (Ritchie 2004: 118) that clearly point to context as being wider than just a linguistic phenomenon.

Therefore, it is our claim that wordplay is based on the similarity of linguistic forms which is realised in an appropriate linguistic or non-linguistic context. We are also aware that such an assumption can be compared to just seeing the tip of an iceberg, as it does not really explain what is found under the surface, or how the surface was created in the first place (this issue will be addressed in Chapters 2 and 3).

### 1.2.2 Ambiguity

Traditionally, ambiguity occurs when a linguistic item has only one representation at one level (e.g. phonetically) but more than one representation at another level (e.g. semantically). Chomsky (1957:11; 1965) offers a list of such levels, e.g. *phonemic*, *morphemic* and *structural*. For example, the sentence *Let's meet at the bank* can be viewed as ambiguous as it offers two divergent, unrelated readings of the phonetic/morphemic string BANK ('a financial institution' and 'an edge of a river'). The joke: *What is black, white and red all over? A newspaper!* seems to be dependent on the phonemic ambiguity behind *red* and the past simple form *read*. Hence, traditionally, such a type of ambiguity is fostered by the unrelatedness of senses, which is typical of homonymy (Sweetser 1990, Sue 1994). One of structural ambiguity is the *garden path phenomenon*. A garden path sentence is a grammatically correct sentence that starts in such a way (i.e. an ambiguous way) that the reader's interpretation is incorrect, i.e. the reader is led down a garden path. Consequently, the reader needs to reinterpret the sentence to understand it correctly (Reisberg 2010). An example of such a sentence is: *Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana*. While the first phrase hinges upon the use of "time" as the subject noun, "flies" as the verb and "like" as a preposition, the second phrase uses "fruit flies" as a noun phrase, and "like" as a verb. However, it could be argued that garden path phenomena

“do not allow more than one structural interpretation when taken in their entirety, even though the initial parts of their sentences do” (Oaks 2010: 19). Regardless of the perspective adopted here, it is a common claim (e.g. Attardo 1994, Richie 2003) that wordplay hinges on ambiguity. According to some scholars (Attardo 1994: 96), ambiguity covers everything which is unspecified, and can be broken down into:

a) Phonic ambiguity:

*Q[uestion]: Do you believe in clubs for young men?*

*A[nswer]: Only when kindness fails.*

(Attardo 1994: 97)

b) Syntactic ambiguity:

*The big game hunter was telling about his adventures to a group of school children during their show-and-tell period. In describing some of his exciting experiences in Africa he said, “One night I remember being wakened by a great roaring noise. I jumped up and grabbed my gun, which was always kept loaded at the foot of my cot. I rushed out and killed a huge lion in my pajamas.” At the close of his presentation he asked if there were any questions. “Yes,” said a little girl sitting on the front row, “how did the lion get into your pajamas?”*

(ibid. 97).

c) Alliterative ambiguity:

*Today’s tabloid biography: High chair, high school, high stool, high finance, high hat – hi, warden!*

(ibid. 139)

What can be observed on the basis of the taxonomy is a kind of methodological tautology, as the clearly distinct alliterative ambiguity can also be placed under the category of phonic ambiguity.<sup>11</sup> The stance on wordplay that Attardo adopts also seems to be too broad, as wordplay turns out to be somewhat circumscribed to, and equated with, ambiguity. It seems obvious that not every instance of ambiguity should be tantamount to wordplay. Let us consider *I didn’t go to the lecture because Mary was there*. Even though the utterance offers two possible meanings (1. there is some conflict between the subject and Mary which prevented the subject from attending the lecture, 2. Mary went to the lecture so there was no

---

<sup>11</sup> Quite frequently, scholars seem to disagree on the types of ambiguity. While Ben-Amos (1976) views *red* and *read* (the past tense form) as phonetic ambiguity, Pepicello and Green (1984) refer to it as “morphological ambiguity”.

need for the subject to go) it can hardly be classified as wordplay. Furthermore, for Attardo ambiguity is mostly based on homonymy, which neglects the concept of polysemy and vagueness. In order to distinguish between ambiguity and vagueness, it may prove enlightening to investigate Tuggy's (1993) continuum of concept relations, which ranges from maximal distinctness (homonymy), through partial similarity (polysemy), to maximal similarity (vagueness).

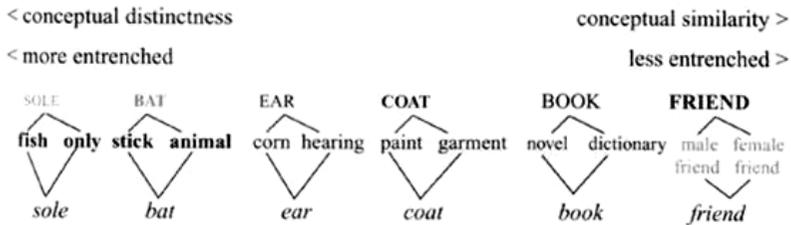


Fig. 1-1. Continuum of meaning variation (after Murphy 2010: 93).

It would seem that the difference between ambiguity and vagueness is a question of whether two or more meanings associated with a certain phonological form are distinct (ambiguous), or linked as non-distinguished, non-conventionalised subtypes of a single, more general meaning (vagueness)<sup>12</sup> (Tuggy 2006: 167). Hence, while *bank* "financial institution" vs *bank* "land at river edge" could be viewed as ambiguous, *aunt* "father's sister" vs *aunt* "mother's sister" should be regarded as vague. However, the borderline between ambiguity and vagueness is fuzzy (not absolute), with polysemy as a halfway point between the two (consider the verb *paint*, or the category *bird* as discussed by Tuggy 2006: 169-170).

Therefore, it seems that wordplay may, in fact, involve all the abovementioned cases of meaning variation (homonymy, polysemy, vagueness). However, according to Łozowski (2000: 85), once we give up the typically structural notion of lexical categories as being clearly delimited, and instead adopt a semantic evaluation based on the prototypical and peripheral instantiations of words, we may find some motivated affinities between alleged homonyms. In other words, as long as we want to find such affinities, we need to give up viewing homonymy in terms of denotational unrelatedness, but rather move to cognitive

<sup>12</sup> A series of tests have been proposed to separate ambiguous lexemes from vague ones, e.g. the logical test (Quine 1960), and the zeugma test (Lakoff 1970).

connectedness and the view of language as a matter of degree. Such a perspective leads to the conclusion that we cannot talk about ambiguity based on homonymy (unrelatedness of senses) but rather on polysemy, or, to go a bit further, on “vaguely-structured polysemous categories structured by varying degrees of perceived resemblance between their members” (Łozowski 2000: 122). This conclusion has some particular consequences for our perspective on wordplay, as it breaks with Kempson’s or Attardo’s view of wordplay as being based on ambiguity (homonymy), yet broadens the spectrum for wordplay creation as driven by polysemy.

On the basis of the above mentioned constructs regarding wordplay, it can thus be inferred that it is quite a complex phenomenon. Contrary to some common claims, wordplay seems to be limited neither to sheer similarity of forms, nor to ambiguity understood as being based on homonymy. It may also make use of polysemous relations and the vagueness as its underlying mechanisms. However, it can still prove enlightening to scrutinise such creative instances of language through the prism of its functions, one of them being the humorous effect.

### 1.2.3 Novelty and Humour

One common claim concerning wordplay is that it is a linguistic device used for entertainment. This is in line with a more general description of playing with language as presented by Crystal:

We play with language when we manipulate it as a source of enjoyment, either for ourselves or for the benefit of others. I mean ‘manipulate’ literally: we take some linguistic feature – such as a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters – and make it do things it does not normally do. We are, in effect, bending and breaking the rules of the language. And if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun. (Crystal 1998: 1)

Crystal (2006: 176) claims that wordplay, by means of “bending and breaking the rules of the language”, involves some non-conventional or novel manipulation of linguistic forms, and its function is merely to be enjoyed. This approach seems to be shared by Toury (1997: 271), who claims that the goal of wordplay is

(...) to achieve certain specific communicative aims, among which the following rank very high: drawing attention to the utterance as a piece of organized language, bringing about functional syncretism (i.e. the

combination of several functions intersecting in one and the same carrier), and producing humorous effects.

It can be thus claimed that wordplay involves some creativity on the part of the speaker, where creativity should be understood as producing some novel output (Nęcka 2011) which has not been thought of or encountered before. Such creativity or innovation tries to break with some well-entrenched semantic convention, and attempts to offer a new, non-standard outlook on the linguistic and extra-linguistic reality. This goal, as has been stated before, is achieved by means of the re-organisation of some well-known linguistic elements in such a way as to attribute them with some extra semantic value(s).<sup>13</sup> Quite frequently this is performed by the contextual juxtaposition of the innovative meaning against the conventional one, which leads to some semantic polyphony. One of the goals of such a juxtaposition is to draw attention to itself, but also to the resulting non-standard way of viewing the reality (Tokarski 2013).

The element of novelty inherent in wordplay may, in turn, lead to some humorous effects evoked in the reader. It should be remembered, though, that humour is an extensive phenomenon explained by a number of theories, such as Exaggeration, Incongruity, Surprise, Absurd, Contrast, Inappropriateness, Ridicule, Defiance, Violence, etc. (Gruner 1978). That is why there are many classifications thereof, e.g. into relief or release theories, superiority or aggression theories, incongruity theories (Morreall 1983, Raskin 1985, Ritchie 2004), or, furthermore, into cognitive (Incongruity and Contrast), social (Hostility, Aggression, Superiority, Triumph, Derision, Disparagement) and psychoanalytical (Release, Sublimation, Liberation, Economy) theories (Attardo 1994: 47).

The early theories of humour (and therefore, partially, wordplay) are based on Greimas's (1970) notion of *isotopy*. Isotopies, understood as the semantic components of a text, are characterised as being polysemous and hence ambiguous. That is why in order to determine the sense of a text, a process of disambiguation must take place (Attardo 1994: 94). One of the examples used by Greimas to illustrate his theory is the two meanings of the French word *toilettes* ("lavatories" and "women's attires"). According to Greimas, in order to understand the joke on *toilettes*, a transition from one alternative meaning (*isotopy*) to another must occur.<sup>14</sup> This theory proves to be quite limited in its scope, as it circumscribes humour (and

---

<sup>13</sup> The role of context in such a re-organisation is presented in Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>14</sup> The switch between isotopies seems to be synonymous with other theories, for instance, Koestler's bisociative matrices, Raskin's opposed scripts, or Coulson's frames.

hence, by extension, wordplay) to polysemy, which (as was proven in the first section) is not necessarily true.

Another important theoretical construct which can shed some light on wordplay mechanisms is Koestler's (1964) cognitive *bisociation model*. Bisociation is defined by Koestler as "the perceiving of a situation or idea (...) in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (1964:35), as cited by Attardo (1994:175). In his work, Koestler "inquires into the common cognitive grounds of highly disparate phenomena like humor, artistic creativity and scientific discovery" (Brône and Feyaer 2003: 1). It seems that Koestler's idea that "creativity involves bringing together elements from different domains" was later on appreciated by Fauconnier and Turner (2002:37), cognitive theorists of conceptual blending. This may indeed prove to be an important concept in understanding wordplay, yet not devoid of some limitations. Nash (1985) expands on Koestler's bisociation model, stressing the view that wordplay (or, in his nomenclature, pun) may join not only two concepts, but also two distinct texts. According to Nash, wordplay may be viewed as "a center of energy, a word or phrase in which the whole matter of the joke is fused, and from which its powers radiate" (Nash 1985: 7). Hence, it can be extrapolated that wordplay involves units ("phonetic consonance") which are springboards for multiple meanings ("semantic dissonance").

Nonetheless, the most prominent among humour theories is the Semantic Script Theory of Humour, as proposed by Raskin (1985). This theory of humour emerged as a reaction to formal semantics and is said to mark the onset of cognitive research into humour. Instead of the formal semantic theories, Raskin tried to take into account various aspects of pragmatics in the theory of language: contextual information as well as encyclopaedic knowledge; the concepts of script, schema, and frame; rules of scripts-relation, along with the criteria and procedures needed to justify and evaluate a semantic theory (Krikmann 2006: 31).

The main hypothesis of the Semantic Script Theory of Humor is that

a text can be characterized as a single-joke-carrying text if both of the (following) conditions [--] are satisfied[:] i) The text is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts [and] ii) The two scripts with which the text is compatible are opposite [...] (Raskin 1985:99).

A script should be defined as "a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it"<sup>15</sup> (Raskin 1985: 81), i.e. together

---

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Raskin makes a distinction between three types of scripts: a) encyclopaedic or cultural scripts; b) restricted scripts, shared with a certain group

with all the information, both linguistic and encyclopaedic, included in a lexical unit. Scripts can be linked with other scripts, forming semantic networks (Attardo 1994: 201). Raskin's contribution to the linguistic theories of humour is acknowledged as being the one that breaks off with

the cornerstone concept of grammaticality in Noam Chomsky's theory of language; ungrounded faith in capabilities of statistical methods in early mathematical linguistics; notions of presupposition, implicature, possible worlds, speech acts; attempts to create formalized semantic theories by Jerold Katz and Jerry A. Fodor, and criticism of these theories by Uriel Weinreich, James McCawley, George Lakoff, Raskin himself and others [...]. (Krikmann 2006: 31)

However, there are some authors (Krikmann 2006) who would claim that no matter what perspective we adopt towards humour, the underlying mechanisms behind humour and jokes boil down to theories of incongruity<sup>16</sup> (also known as inconsistency, contradiction, or bisociation) (Chiaro 1995). It is assumed that such an act involves two different planes of content, or lines of thought, called frames of reference (isotopies, schemas, scripts, etc). These two are mutually incompatible, but also include a certain common part which makes the shift from one to another

---

of people (e.g. friends, neighbours, family); c) individual scripts, which are characterised by the subjective experiences and the personal background of each speaker.

<sup>16</sup> The early traces of the Incongruity Theory can be found in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1959): "Novelty expressions" arise when there is an element of surprise, and (...) the thing turns out contrary to what we are expecting, like the jokes found in comic writers, produced by alterations in words, and by unexpected words in verse, where the listener anticipates one thing and hears another". The same idea is later on kept by Beattie (1776) who attributes a humorous effect to "two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage", or by Kant (1970: 238), who finds the prerequisite of a joke in "something that may deceive". In the various contemporary theories of humour, incongruity seems to be related to the concept of "the discrepancy between two mental representations, one of which is an expectation (...) and the other is some idea or percept" (Suls 1983: 41), or "a conceptual shift, a jolt to our picture of the way things are supposed to be" (Morreall 1983: 60). Some other authors (Forabosco 1992, 2008; Martin 2007; Morreall 1983, 2008; Dynel 2009a, 2009b, 2011b) claim that incongruity should be characterised in terms of surprise and novelty, rather than in terms of violated expectations. In line with this view, incongruity is seen as a diversion (or conceptual shift, as proposed by Morreall 1983) from the cognitive model of reference (scripts, schemata, frames etc.) (Forabosco 1992, 2008; Dynel 2013).

possible. With respect to verbal humour, Morreal (1983) distinguishes incongruities at various levels of language: sounds (e.g. alliteration, rhyming, or spoonerisms), semantics (juxtapositions of ideas), and pragmatics (violation of language norms and rules). In these cases, the reader begins to process the textual or other information, reducing it to the most accessible (salient) script, and proceeds until the interpretation comes across a semantic obstacle and fails. Then, due to some cognitive effort, the contradiction is overcome, and another interpretation resurfaces (incongruity is followed by resolution). Raskin (1985) also tries to explain the incongruity theory in terms of the non-*bona-fide* (humorous) and *bona-fide* (earnest, serious, information-conveying) mode of communication. When the reader analyses a joke, he/she would try to understand what was said in a default *bona-fide* way and, after failing to do so, he/she would seek some other, *non-bona-fide* mode of interpretation (irony, nonsense, etc.). According to Raskin, non-*bona-fide* communication differs from *bona-fide* (Raskin 1985: 100) communication in the way that the former violates one or more of the four conversational maxims proposed by Grice (1975).<sup>17</sup> He points out that the violation of the maxims can be either intentional or unintentional on the part of the speaker; in the former case, he/she is aware, and in the latter case unaware, of the created semantic ambiguity. Therefore, even if in the latter case the speaker is, in fact, earnest and serious, the hearer will interpret the utterance as a non-*bona-fide* one (Jaskanen 1999: 28). Raskin uses the following joke to illustrate his perspective (1985: 100):

*“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.  
“No”, the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. “Come right in.”*

According to Raskin, the joke above is (at least partly) compatible with the scripts DOCTOR and LOVER (1985: 85) and the opposition between the two scripts could be expressed in the following way: “The patient comes to the doctor’s house to see the doctor vs. The patient comes to the doctor’s house not to see the doctor” (1985:110). In other words, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Grice distinguishes between four general Maxims of Conversation: a) Maxims of Quantity: 1. Make your contribution to the conversation as informative as necessary. 2. Do not make your contribution to the conversation more informative than necessary. b) Maxims of Quality: 1. Do not say what you believe to be false. 2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. c) Maxims of Relevance: Be relevant (i.e. say things related to the current topic of the conversation). d) Maxims of Manner: 1. Avoid obscurity of expression. 2. Avoid ambiguity. 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary wordiness). 4. Be orderly.

wife's invitation to come in violates the Maxim of Quantity and acts as a trigger for moving from the first script to the second. Ergo, the interpreter is led to the vital question: "Why does the doctor's wife want the patient to come in? To answer this question, the interpreter needs to rely on his/her encyclopaedic knowledge or world information that some people may have love affairs while their spouses are away, a particular instance of which is triggered by the phrase "young and pretty wife".

While Raskin (1985), by means of his Semantic Script Theory of Humour, which was further developed into the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Raskin, Attardo 1991), tries to explain that a final humorous effect is achieved by means of two scripts that oppose or overlap each other at some point in the text (and thus can be foregrounded or backgrounded), leading to some form of ambiguity, I would claim that it is the characteristic of some instances of wordplay in the first place, i.e. wordplay may lead to the emergence of two opposing scripts, which consequently may, but does not necessarily have to, lead to a humorous effect. For instance, the idea of two opposing scripts could also be applied in science fiction, detective stories, thrillers, etc. However, the usage of wordplay, which appears in contexts ranging from poetry and literary works through everyday conversation, riddles and jokes, to advertisements and news reports, seems to have a wider set of functions. This is in line with the claim that "wordplay is not a subcategory of humour" (Henry 2003: 36), as some puns are meant seriously, e.g. *chimerica* which refers to China's enormous stake in America's economy and to the word *chimera* (Vandaele 2011: 180), or the opening line of Shakespeare's play, *Richard III*, "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this son of York". The homophonic usage of the word "son" seems to evoke family relations, hence alluding to Edward IV, or it creates a reference to the celestial body, i.e. "the sun". It seems justified, then, to claim that, generally, wordplay can be regarded as "every conceivable way in which language is used with the intent to amuse" (Chiaro 1992: 2), where amuse should be comprehended as the ability to surprise, or to create novel effects. Such a propensity behind wordplay, as Veisbergs (1997: 159) claims, could be potentially used as an attention-catching mechanism in order to make words or ideas more convincing or persuasive (e.g. in advertising or politics). This has some parallel consequences for readers of texts, who may get more involved in the reading by deciphering the wordplay cleverly used by the author. That is why advertising companies, politicians and organisations rely so much on catchy phrases, most of which make use of rhyming (e.g. the electric appliances company Zanussi – *The appliance of science*) or socially well-entrenched proverbs (e.g. *A*

*Mars a day helps you work, rest, and play*). Delabastita (1996: 130) puts forward the hypothesis that wordplay also enables us to address some potential taboo issues that would be difficult to be touched upon in some other ways (e.g. by means of euphemisms, “vomit” = “launch the lunch”).

Furthermore, Attardo (1994: 322-330) claims that wordplay offers a set of social functions, such as interaction within a group and the exclusion of outsiders. In some situations, wordplay may be a source of pleasure for both parties (i.e. the author and the addressee of the wordplay). What is more, the fact that the audience is able to understand the intended meaning of the wordplay helps to create a feeling of solidarity or exclusion (e.g. Cockney rhyming slang) between the speaker and the audience. Similarly, Lipka views wordplay as a kind of phatic communion between the sender and the recipient (2009: 84-91). In some other contexts,<sup>18</sup> it may be a source of pleasure just for the author, thus resulting in a feeling of superiority over the second party (Alexieva 1997: 139). This is in line with the ideas proposed by Leppihalme (1997: 141), who points out that wordplay may be a channel for ridicule (e.g. the Polish football supporters’ campaign directed against the Prime Minister *Tola ma Donalda, Donald ma Tole*), parody or pastiche (e.g. the parody of the political campaign: *Czyny nie cuda* – Jarosław Kaczyński, *Łydy nie uda* – Mariusz Pudzianowski), irony (e.g. the phrase describing one of the companies producing vacuum cleaners: *Nothing sucks like Electrolux*), or as a channel of secrecy (e.g. acrostics,<sup>19</sup> rhyming slang). Delabastita (1996: 129), in turn, highlights the cultural aspects of wordplay, stating that it may reflect particular values, tastes, traditions, identities and lifestyles of a given society. This is especially true in the case of slang, hip-hop and rap circles that build up their identities upon certain types of wordplay (e.g. noun-derived or verb-derived rhymes). This is also in line with the study *Homo Ludens* by Huizinga (1938), who claimed that, generally, there is no culture without games, or plays of any type. This idea can be further traced back to Nietzsche’s philosophical work “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense” (1949), where he appears to imply that untruth and falseness are inherent in language itself. He transfers the idea of the play between the world and the gods to human language:

---

<sup>18</sup> For instance, when the addressee does not understand the wordplay, or is ridiculed.

<sup>19</sup> An acrostic is a form of writing in which the first letter, syllable, or word in each line spells out a message. For example, a message sent by the CEO of Sun Microsystems to his employees was an acrostic in which the initial letters of the first seven paragraphs spelt “Beat IBM” (Paczkowski 2010).