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Wordplay and Discourse Traditions

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show that wordplay phenomena are not only determined by the universal ability of humans to play with words and the linguistic possibilities and constraints of particular languages, but also by traditional, culture-specific patterns. The importance of a clear distinction between the different levels of analysis involved in wordplay phenomena (the universal level, the level of the individual language, the level of the concrete utterance and, finally, the level of “discourse tradition”) is discussed with reference to different communicative functions and illustrated by means of an example from the comic series *Astérix* and its translation into different languages.

Keywords: *Astérix*, comics, discourse tradition, Eugenio Coseriu, language and humour, metalinguistic function, poetic function, Roman Jakobson, Romance, translation

1 Introduction*

Linguists have an enormous privilege: they are allowed to work on the whole range of aspects associated with human language and languages. They may find pleasure in logical argumentation and the formulae of compositional semantics, enjoy explanations in syntactic theory, work on language contact on Caribbean beaches, or even find themselves analysing wordplay. Human beings have invented science because knowledge is a human necessity; it derives from the two fundamental human characteristics defined by Hegel, the *logos* and the *work*.¹ But we can identify further human necessities that seem to be universal, like metaphysical or religious thought, love, of course, and probably also a ludic side, and thus the need for humour. We assume, like Bergson ([1900] 2012), that laughter is common to all human beings, and by combining humour and language, we soon arrive at wordplay or punning. No doubt, punning is fun, but its obvious attraction for a linguist is also dangerous, since the scientific treatment of the comic frequently involves the danger of neglecting abstrac-

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1 Cf. Trabant (1996: 20).

tion, clarity and the systematic treatment of the subject matter in the face of a tempting example. What is wordplay? It appears that, in telling a few anecdotes, the mystery might simply disclose itself.

This, however, will not be the purpose of this short paper. It is tempting to stay focussed on the data and to simply keep looking for amusing examples in order to illustrate the many different phenomena at play when we engage in punning. The other extreme would be to construct a purely theoretical model of wordplay, in other words: to establish the categories relevant to an adequate location of the phenomenon in a theory of language. But theory without empirical evidence is void, and it will, as always, be difficult to match both sides, to bring together theory and empirical evidence. A negative delimitation of the phenomenon proves to be even more difficult. Moreover, what we are talking about and what a positive definition of wordplay should look like (cf. Winter-Froemel 2009) seems obvious, and we all have a clear intuition about how some prototypical cases of wordplay work. It is rather difficult, however, if not even impossible to state clearly – and in terms of a semiotic theory – where the limits of wordplay are and what wordplay is *not*. Hence, the aim of this paper will not be to go further into these general theoretical issues but rather to discuss one aspect not typically considered in standard definitions or in specific explanations of wordplay phenomena: The most important notion in what follows will be that of *tradition*, and the starting hypothesis – deriving from a language theory that distinguishes between linguistic, pragmatic, and *traditional* features (adopting the notion of *discourse traditions* from Koch 1987, 1988, 1997) – will claim that here, as in any study of linguistic phenomena, *traditional* phenomena play a crucial role.

It might be important to define more clearly what I mean by tradition, since a particular language itself could be regarded as a tradition.² A simple example may serve to explain this: the fact that in Spain, people say *Buenos días* to each other in the morning might be explained by the universal pragmatic need for greeting, or by facts of the Spanish language (which contains the two words, their morphology and syntax). But neither universality nor the Spanish gram-

² In the sense of Hockett (1963: 11-12), who claims tradition to be one of the universals of human language: “The conventions of a language are passed down by teaching and learning, not through the germ plasm. Genes supply potentiality and a generalized drive since nonhuman animals cannot learn a (human) language and humans can hardly be prevented from acquiring one. Bee-dancing is probably genetic. [...] Every human language has tradition [...]. If we design and build a collection of machines that communicate among themselves with a language, this property will be lacking.”

mar explain why they greet each other exactly like that rather than in a different way. One could even point out that it is almost illogical to use the plural form when, generally, the reference is to a particular day only, or discuss why the adjective *buenos* is preposed in a language where the unmarked adjective should find itself in postposition.

The notion of “discourse tradition” refers to these kinds of traditional repetitions, and the greeting formula is just a simple example that allows for the explanation of the more general phenomenon: according to Koch (1997), the creation of utterances is always based on both the knowledge of a particular language (its grammar and lexicon), and the knowledge of discourse traditions; the latter including formulae like *Buenos días* and textual forms like letters, sonnets, newspaper articles or even forms of so-called “informal” everyday communication. Discourse traditions are – as can be seen from the example of the sonnet – not limited to a particular language, and they can be distinguished from universal pragmatic factors and from the grammar of a language, although they interact with both. This interaction is both a direct and an indirect one: on the one hand, discourse traditions are *loci* of preservation and innovation of linguistic features (e.g. preservation of archaic forms in legal formulae or in religious texts; innovation in new textual environments, see Koch 2008); on the other, given their inter-linguistic mobility, the adoption of discourse traditions is a source of interference with other languages (such as the Italian influence in Spain when the sonnet as a form was adopted from Italy).

The basic effect of wordplay derives from an element of surprise: playing on words achieves its expressive effect only when new and unexpected elements are introduced. However, as we will see in what follows, wordplay phenomena can be strongly linked to discourse traditions, and they can spread across languages by translation. The example I will take as my starting point is drawn from the well-known French comic strip series *Astérix* and its translation into several languages, a particular case that will allow me to discuss some general issues and get back to the theoretical discussion about the role of discourse traditions and its relationship to wordplay.

2 The Corsican Map

Obviously, there are textual genres and kinds of linguistic interaction where wordplay is a staple of expression, such as jokes, advertising, humoristic plays, comedy shows etc., and comics. In the French comic series *Astérix* (see also Blancher, in *The Dynamics of Wordplay 2*), wordplay has been one of the chief

features from the beginning, and maybe also one of the reasons for the worldwide success of the little Gaul hero who makes the whole Roman empire look ridiculous. A particularly fruitful area of wordplay in *Astérix* are proper names, and one might even argue that, in some way, the proper names are keys to entire stories: Names characterise places, persons and peoples, and the fundamental opposition between Romans and Gauls is underlined by different kinds of names and different suffixes. The Romans have comical names ending in *-us*, the Gauls humorous names ending in *-ix* (derived from the historical Gaul's leader Vercingetorix, defeated by Caesar), and Roman place names mostly end in *-um*. The humoristic effect is produced by a few techniques that are repeated systematically: In some cases, an amusing, transparent word characterizing a person or place is combined with the respective ending. More often, however, a transparent word or a group of words is created that does not bear any semblance to either Latin or any of the other languages (or caricatures of languages) that appear in the stories, by making use of the final sequence of sounds that resemble a familiar ending: as in the case of the toponym *Petitbonum*, which sounds like a French-Latin hybrid easily imaginable as a place name (Fr. *Petit* [small], Lat. *bonum* [good]) but is in fact an allusion to *petit bonhomme* [toddlér], and thus simultaneously evokes a completely different meaning. This kind of artificial and arbitrary “folk etymology” is a common technique in punning, and in the case of *Astérix*, the concrete comical imitation of Latin and other locally connoted names has been one of the most frequent procedures for the creation of a humorous effect, as we can see in the names of the protagonists themselves, such as Astérix (<*asterisk*), Obélix (<*obelisk*), Idéfix (<*idée fixe*) etc.

Astérix has been translated into many languages, and the translations have generally tried to adopt the technique employed in the original French text, sometimes not very successfully, as in the case of German *Kleinbonum*, a relatively opaque form that tries to render *Petitbonum* but only achieves the first effect (German-Latin hybrid evoking a Latin toponym) while failing to create the second level of meaning, i.e. the truly humoristic one. In other cases, such as *Babaorum* (an allusion to the French dessert *Baba-au-Rhum*), possibly some francophile German intellectual might have captured the original effect, but surely not the general public. In the English translation, *Babaorum* is rendered as *Totorum*, an allusion to colloquial English *Tot'o rum*, a shot of rum; so, here the technique was recognised and re-created with a local equivalent that achieves the same effect.

The Corsican map at the beginning of one of the most successful *Astérix*-stories, *Astérix en Corse*, is an example that illustrates the name-based wordplay

technique of the comic series particularly well. The map shows the island as a completely Roman-dominated place, with Roman settlements and castles all around the coast (there are 46 invented names and four historic place names). In the French original version, we find authentic Latin words and word groups that are known in the French community without having anything to do with place names (like *Geranium*, *Tedeum*, *Postscriptum*, *Vacuum*, *Desideratum*, and *Natrium*). Supposedly, not all the names are recognized to the same degree in the community of readers: the map offers easily identifiable cases like *Geranium* but also other, more sophisticated ones, like *Sivispacemparabellum*, a whole sentence that appears as a single word and that requires at least a partial knowledge of Latin.³

The translators of *Astérix* have looked for various solutions, with some sticking to the ideal of a close-to-the-source translation, and others giving priority to the technique and the effect produced rather than to fidelity to the original version. The following table shows some examples where the source language is compared to three translations⁴:

Tab. 1: Examples of names of the Corsican map in four versions

French	German	Spanish	Portuguese
Geranium	Geranium	Geranium	Geranium
Postscriptum	Postscriptum	Postscriptum	Postscriptum
Sivispacemparabellum	Hintenrum	Sivispacemparabellum	Sivispacemparabellum
Tedeum	Seisdrum	Tideum	Seraficum

It is interesting to observe that the German translation is the one where the least importance is given to the fidelity criterion. There is even a certain priority to look for names that rather follow the *petit bonhomme* model: German expressions ending in *-um* but without any relationship with Latin, like *Hintenrum* (a

³ This Latin proverb (*Si vis pacem para bellum* [If you want peace, prepare war]) was replaced, in the German translation of *Le grand fossé* [Der grosse Graben], by *Si vis pacem evita bellum* [If you want peace, avoid war]. Adolf Kabatek, the German text editor, was then ironically accused of being “subversive” on account of this change.

⁴ René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo: *Astérix en Corse* (1973a); German version *Asterix auf Korsika* (1975), translated by Gudrun Penndorf, German text edition by Adolf Kabatek; Spanish version *Astérix en Córcega* (1973b), translated by Víctor Mora; Portuguese version: *Astérix na Córsega* (1973c), translated by Cláudio Varga.

colloquial short form of *hinten herum* [from behind] or [round the back]); *Seisdrum* [be it as it were]; *Saudum* – i.e. *saudumm* [very stupid]; *Hauteuchdrum* [fight for it]; or *Toblerorum*, where in the French original we find *Factotum*. The latter form would have had the same effect in a German context, but the translator somehow “exaggerates” the case and prefers to choose a completely different form: The name *Toblerorum* plays with the chocolate flavour and brand name *Tobler-O-Rum*, a combination of the Swiss brand name Tobler, the French contraction of preposition and article *au* pronounced *o* and the word *Rum*. (*Tobler-O-Rum* is milk chocolate with raisins and rum flavour). Thus, the wordplay is based on the imitation of Latin-sounding endings in *-um* in combination with any word or even short phrase with this ending but with no real relationship with Latin (or at least not with toponyms). The comical effect is being created by the dislocation of the word and the aforementioned “pseudo-folk etymology.”⁵

Hence, when comparing the different versions, we see that there are two main tendencies: *continuity* (the translation follows the original model, sometimes with partial graphic adaption), or *substitution*, the latter corresponding to a technique derived from other cases and probably due to the necessity in the translation process of introducing additional wordplay in order to counterbalance the obvious loss of humour produced by local allusions in the original version. We could now go into a detailed analysis of all the forms and comment on them, but the examples so far shall suffice to serve as a starting point for a more general discussion of the nature and theoretical classification of wordplay.

3 Different Levels of Analysis

The arbitrarily chosen examples of the previous section allow me to observe some general characteristics of wordplay:

- We can identify a general property of wordplay: not only the content of the message, but the message itself is the focus of attention. Playing on words is

⁵ Here again, as in *Sivispacemparabellum*, a further effect is added for a really Latinate readership by the fact that *-orum* could be interpreted as a genitive plural ending, as in *Babaorum*. The quality of the wordplay in *Astérix* is characterised by this multi-level interpretation: there is a first level easily recognised by all readers, and there are further, more sophisticated levels which are more challenging. The various levels of understanding make the stories more appealing for multiple and heterogeneous audiences. The technique of audience stratification invites readers to comment metalinguistically on the stories and it creates a difference between “experts” and “laymen.”

not simply saying something by means of words but at the same time playing with something, using words to do something ludic with them.

- We can identify a certain technique or principle underlying the Corsican map; this technique or principle is not linked to one particular language (even if, in this case, it is linked to the common reference to Latin; but we could also formulate the principle in a more abstract way, as loanword imitation or, more precisely, imitation of another language within a language). The concrete means that fulfil the function of language imitation are phonological similarities to well-known morphological endings of the imitated language, morphological *shibboleths*, so to speak. The comical effect is produced through the moment of surprise when the reader becomes aware of the play: a combination of two originally unrelated elements (cf. Bauer, this volume).

Once this technique is established, it serves as a pattern for repetition. Each repetition, even if it also has its own and independent semiotic value, evokes previous instances of the same pattern, and in this way the technique becomes a historical, traditional one. It is not part of the grammar of either language involved in the play: no rule of German grammar says that, by choosing words or phrases ending with *-um*, speakers ironically evoke Latin and provoke a comical effect. In other words, we seem to be dealing with a cross-linguistic technique that is located outside the grammar of the languages involved (cf. Knospe, this volume). The universal basis is the possibility of imitation of a language within a language, but the concrete way of evocating Latin by *-um* and *-orum* endings, through repetition, becomes an established (local) tradition.⁶

Even if punning draws on general techniques, the knowledge required for the concrete interpretation of each of the examples is complex. If we look at the examples of the map, we can identify a considerable amount of different kinds of knowledge that must be activated in order to catch the comical effect: knowledge of words, expressions, of at least a little bit of Latin, etc. If we extend this to the almost endless amount of other wordplay examples, we will see that there is not a restricted set of rules to be activated, but rather evocation of unlimited knowledge: there is an interpretative process necessary for the understanding of each of the individual examples. However, individual diversity left

⁶ When McDonald's in Germany introduced the Mexican weeks by calling them "Los Wochos," a similar comic effect was achieved by adding the Spanish plural morpheme *-os* to the German word *Woche* [week] – with the difference that *Wochos* was a new form in German with a common noun meaning, not a parody of a pre-existing form used as a proper name.

aside, there are also some more general underlying principles that can be subsumed under various categories: we can play with form (rhyme, syllable changes, sound play, etc.), with content (comparison, hyperbolic expressions, taxonomic or other semantic relations, etc.), or with combinations of both.⁷

The *Astérix* example and the more general observations allow us to now move on to a discussion of different levels of analysis. It seems to make sense to relate wordplay phenomena to the fundamental distinction established by Eugenio Coseriu (1985) of three levels in the analysis of any linguistic phenomenon: the *universal level* (what is common to human speech in general), the *historical level* (the level of particular languages), and the *individual level* (the level of concrete utterances). Wordplay is a universal phenomenon, but it depends strongly on the possibilities and techniques of a particular language. Moreover, each instance of wordplay has an individual side, and to capture its concrete function in a particular situation is an issue of interpretation. To these three levels we will have to add a further dimension, more or less independent of the grammatical and technical side of the historical language and not limited to the individual utterance: the dimension of *discourse tradition* (cf., e.g., Kullmann, this volume). In the remainder of this paper, I will go through these four different dimensions and comment on some aspects of their relevance for wordplay.

3.1 Wordplay and Communicative Functions

If we begin with the first of Coseriu's levels, the universal one, we have already taken for granted that playing with words, like playing in general, is a universal human activity not limited to any cultural or linguistic space (an assumption valid at least until some anthropologist discovers an Amazonian tribe that does not play with words; cf. Huizinga [1938] 1987). But what is the universal character of wordplay? If we look at Karl Bühler's classic semiotic model, we can state that wordplay highlights the expressive and the conative function: it showcases the expressive creativity and ingenuity of the speaker and attracts the hearer's attention or has a concrete effect on him. The less important function is the referential one.

⁷ It seems to be contradictory to claim the importance of "unlimited knowledge" on the one hand and to postulate categorisation, on the other hand. Of course, there are useful attempts for classifying the *types* of knowledge involved in the process of understanding of utterances, such as Coseriu's *Umfelder* (1955–1956; see also Aschenberg 1999; Winter-Froemel 2013: 156). But the possibility of grouping together different domains of knowledge into types does not contradict the principal lack of limitation of knowledge itself.

But this does not yet suffice for a localization of wordplay on a universal level. A simple shout such as *stop it!* also highlights both functions without having anything to do with wordplay. Some authors have discussed the relationship between wordplay and metalinguistic reflection, so a consideration of Jakobson's additional communication functions (see 1960) might bring us closer to a fuller understanding of the process involved in wordplay.

Of the three functions Jakobson added to Bühler's model, we may leave aside the phatic function, the assurance of the communication channel, but we should have a closer look at the *metalinguistic* and the *poetic* function. The metalinguistic function in Jakobson's theory (1960) refers to those speech acts where the message itself becomes the centre of attention of the message. The poetic function refers to the essential characteristics of poetry and literature. Several authors – and also several of the contributors to this volume – have claimed that wordplay is in its essence metalinguistic.⁸

But is this really true? In order to find an answer, we will first have to ask how we can define metalanguage. As we know, there are broad and narrow definitions of the concept 'metalanguage.' The narrow definition holds that a metalinguistic statement is just one that says something about language, such as "blue is an adjective" or "house is the subject in *the house is red*." In a broader definition of the concept, also those speech events that suppose a certain level of reflection on utterances are considered metalinguistic, for instance when I say "he said that sadly."⁹ Yet others claim that discourse markers and pragmatic particles like "you know," too, are actually metalinguistic. An extreme position is held by Harald Weinrich (1976), who even includes prepositions and conjunctions among the class of metalinguistic elements, on the basis that they do not have any referential value. In such an approach, the whole of grammar and all the synsemantic units (as opposed to autosemantic units)

8 One proponent of this view is Yaguello (1998: 3): "There is one significant area where all that metalinguistic activity is brought into full view: wordplay, playing *on* words, playing *with* words, verbal play in all its forms – punning, the rebus, charades, spoonerisms, eye rhymes, nursery rhymes, riddles, portmanteau words, crosswords, anagrams, and so on: everything in our speech which reveals an innate, intuitive linguistics in speakers. Playing, after all, presupposes that one knows the rules and how to bend them, how to exploit the ambiguity which characterises natural languages, as well as the creativity which they allow. For children, language-learning is inseparable from word games, which thereby take on educational value (mainly self-educational as it runs out). Indeed, all wordplay presupposes correct acquisition of the code."

9 For an overview of several traditional – both broad and narrow – definitions, see Ulrich (1997).

would be considered metalinguistic. For the sake of terminological precision, I, personally, would prefer a more restricted definition of what metalanguage is; and I would also adopt Coseriu's criticism of Jakobson's model (2007: 76-92), claiming that there is no need to distinguish a separate "metalinguistic function," since saying something like "blue is an adjective" is a purely referential statement exactly as "Tübingen is a big university with a small town," with the only difference that what we refer to are elements that are part of a language (even if we might accept that these referents are quite special ones). In an approach that restricts metalanguage to the self-referential function (and thus subsumes it under Bühler's referential function), wordplay is not metalinguistic, but something else.¹⁰ But if it is not metalinguistic, what else could it be? Poetic? Jakobson's definition of the poetic function reveals that he uses wordplay to illustrate what is meant by 'poetic': his famous example of the Eisenhower electoral propaganda slogan *I like Ike* plays with a kind of a linguistic Russian doll where *I* is part of *like* and *Ike* and *Ike* is part of *like* (see 1960). Is this wordplay or simply sound play? I would propose that all the elements included in the classical rhetoric notion of *numerus*, the Latin translation for the Greek *rhythmus*, are traditional forms of wordplay. We may no longer consider them to be wordplay in the narrow sense, but this is more due to the commonness of such techniques than to their objective shape. In other words, what Jakobson subsumes under his "poetic function" has at least something to do with wordplay. But, again, I would follow Coseriu in his criticism and suggest that the poetic function is neither poetic nor a communicative function. The mistake of associating formal techniques with poetry is very old, and it was already criticised by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, as Coseriu points out, when he argued that a treatise on natural science does not become a poem only through metre and rhyme:

people attach the word poet (maker) to the name of the metre and speak of elegiac poets and of others as epic poets. Thus they do not call them poets in virtue of their representation but apply the name indiscriminately in virtue of the metre. For if people publish medical or scientific treatises in metre the custom is to call them poets. But Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the metre, so that it would be proper to call the one a poet and the other not a poet but a scientist.

([1927] 1965: 1447b)

¹⁰ Cf. also Culioli (1990: 41) who talks about the "jouissance du métalinguistique" and further comments: "on pourrait soutenir qu'il y a du métalinguistique, mais pas de métalangage, au sens d'un langage extérieur à la langue objet."

Obviously, formal definitions are bound to fail in capturing the difference between poetry and other forms of language. The essence of poetry is not form; it is the literary expressivity of the poet, and a simple piece of prose can easily be a poem.¹¹ Poetry is not a communicative function but another way of speaking, its main aim being the expression of the individual's self rather than communication.

But we started out wanting to define wordplay, not poetry. In the process, we have come to see that there seems to be a formal overlap between some forms of poetry and wordplay. Curiously enough, however, the example Jakobson gives for the poetic function of language is one involving wordplay, not a poem: *I like Ike* is a propaganda slogan, and even if wordplay might be an important element of many instances of poetry, there are also many examples of everyday wordplay without any aim at being poetry. Is wordplay aesthetic? This is another question: apparently, wordplay is aesthetic, but it is not necessarily literary. A kind of common, everyday aesthetic exists, and this is what wordplay frequently is.¹²

Language can be used to simply communicate, but language can also be used to look at the form of the message itself, in the same way we can put on our clothes just to protect our bodies from the weather or, as an added value, a side-effect, we can put on clothes that look nice; as long as clothes fulfil their primary function, their capacity for being ornamental – an *ornatus* – appears to be almost limitless, just as there are no limits to the ornamental element in language, as long as it fulfils its primary function of communication. However, with wordplay we are not on the level of an individual language nor on the universal level: what is universal is the possibility of playing, but the wordplay itself is a matter of the individual level of the concrete text. This means that wordplay is produced through linguistic means, but it is not language in the structural sense, in the sense of *langue* or in the sense of *competence*: wordplay is not part of the grammar of a particular language, as I have pointed out – even in the case of phenomena like the French *verlan* (see Oster, in *The Dynamics of Wordplay 2*) or the Argentine *vesre*, as we will see in the following section. But what exactly are the techniques of wordplay on the individual level? Can we establish rules and norms for wordplay? I do not think that this is feasible; we can only establish an open list of possibilities. Since wordplay is a phenomenon on the level of the concrete utterance, it can involve absolutely everything that is present in

¹¹ Cf. also the special issue 23.2 of *Connotations* on “Poetry in Fiction” (Bauer, Leimberg, Niederhoff and Zirker 2013 / 2014).

¹² Cf. Stempel's (1983) notion of *Alltagsrhetorik* [everyday rhetoric].

the concrete utterance: we can play with the repetition of syllables, we can omit letters, we can play with the sounds of language, with the shape of letters, with rhythm and with time, with space and with voices, with content and form, with nature and culture, with all the elements that might be in one or another way evoked by a text. One might object that such “techniques” of playing are abstract ones and that they go beyond the individual level. This holds for the technical and possibly traditional aspect of wordplay phenomena, but the concrete function of a concrete instance of wordplay in a concrete text is purely individual.

Since there is almost no limitation to wordplay, we can also play with elements of other languages and – as in Dada poetry, or in Asenso Ferreiras *Trem de Alagoas* – with any kind of sound. What we do might be limited by certain elements of the language we are playing with, or, put differently: we might perceive, in a certain language, specific elements (like compounds, morphology, etc.) that afford us with opportunities to play.¹³ But any attempt at providing a closed and limited classification of wordplay is doomed to failure; we can only roughly classify the areas where wordplay is possible: phonic, content-oriented, play with homonyms, play with spelling, etc. And we can analyse the concrete technique that works in one case or another.

However, the question remains whether this kind of analysis is a task for the linguist? Or should we leave it to the field of literary studies? It is not linguistic in a formal linguistic sense, but I would not accept an exclusive language theory that eliminates a large number of phenomena related to language from linguistics, particularly those that are likely to attract the interest of common speakers. Linguistics is not an arrogant discipline that does not care about the layman’s opinion: linguistics should consider all possible aspects of language. And the analysis of wordplay is a concrete task of text linguistics, not in the sense of a textual grammar but in the sense of a science of interpreting what happens in a text, in the sense of discovering the phonetic, morphematic, graphemic, semantic etc. techniques that make a text work, and, as a whole, imbue it with its special sense, which – in the case of wordplay – is intellectual exercise. At the same time, wordplay is an aesthetic technique that gives beauty to a text. It always has an aesthetic effect, but there can also be an expressive effect, showing the creativity of a speaker or an artist, or a conative effect on the

¹³ See also the contributions by Knospe and Renner, this volume; as well as Sablayrolles, in *The Dynamics of Wordplay 2*.

hearer who is impressed by a slogan or by the wit and creative abilities of a wordplayer, be it a rapper, a comic author or a comedian.¹⁴

3.2 Wordplay and Discourse Tradition

Even if the interpretation of a concrete wordplay phenomenon is an individual task, it would be completely wrong to delimit wordplay to the individual level. If this were the case, wordplay could only be analysed as one or the other concrete phenomenon in this or that concrete text, contributing to some concrete sense of that individual text.

There is of course more to wordplay. If we look at the tradition of *numerus*, if we look at odes, at hexameters, at sonnets, at blank verse and at a rapper's techniques of composition, we will obviously identify something else: wordplay is not only actual and individual, but it can build on *tradition*, and to some extent, typically does so. There is a continuum between uniqueness (for instance the omission of the letter *e* in a whole postmodern novel, *La Disparition* by Georges Perec; see Di Blasio in *The Dynamics of Wordplay 2*), and commonness like rhyme; and sometimes more general traditions provide the frame for more 'local' – at times individual – traditions, such as the Petrarchan sonnet and its Shakespearean variant, certain joke patterns and their individual variation, and any other tradition of established wordplay frames with individual variance. The comedian Christian Hirdes mentions an individual tradition when defining what he calls the *Hirdes reduction*, in the sense of a *re-ducere ad sensum*, going back to the original sense, or 'speaking literally.' He claims he has invented this technique of (folk-)etymologizing, but it is of course a well-known and old one, and we might think of Erich Kästner, of Karl Valentin, Franz Hohler, and of Otto Waalkes as exponents of that technique in the German speaking context, and we will surely find others in French, English and elsewhere. The re-motivation of opaque words is a widespread traditional technique, as there are other traditions of wordplay: discourse traditions, as I would call them, traditions that might be local, individual, typical of a certain place or culture like the *limerick* or the *Schüttelreim* (see Rabatel, in *The Dynamics of Wordplay 2*), or even traditional, to a certain degree, within a whole language community. One example would be the technique of syllable inversion in Argentinian Spanish – the so-

¹⁴ As the German comedian Christian Hirdes (for biographical information, see <http://www.christianhirdes.de/seiten/ueber-christian-hirdes.php>) somewhat cheekily puts it: the main purpose of his comedy is to make the women in the audience fall in love with him.

called *vesre* – a technique impossible in languages like Chinese, where we do not have real polysyllabic words. While in Spanish, *vesre* is only a local phenomenon, in French, some of the words created by *verlan* like *moeuf* or *beur* have almost become generalised words of the French language (at least in France). Does this mean that *verlan* is part of French grammar? Not at all. It is simply what in other places might be a phenomenon restricted to schoolyard games; in the case of *verlan*, for historical reasons, this game has become a widely accepted element in the French community: a commonly known discourse tradition.

4 Conclusion

To sum up: wordplay is a universal phenomenon that derives from the universal ability of human beings to distinguish between the strictly necessary and what could be considered superfluous. Wordplay is, in some way, a superfluous ornament not necessary for the basic needs of transmitting a message. However, it may serve, as any “superfluous” element, to enhance the effect of the necessary; it may have a purely aesthetic effect or help to give expressivity to the speaker or the message. Moreover, since any aesthetic activity is essential for human beings, wordplay might be superfluous for the message but it can help to fulfil our aesthetic needs, and it can play an important pragmatic role: Wordplay modulates the message, it adds or subtracts communicative weight, it alters the relationship between the interlocutors, or it allows a contentless message to be uttered simply for the virtue of its comic effect.

On a historical level, wordplay is (partly) determined by the techniques that a particular language affords, and this is why not all wordplay traditions can be translated into other languages. Sometimes they must be replaced. In our example, the original French *Astérix* is full of wordplay phenomena, but many of them could not be reproduced literally in the German version. So, facing the fact that many of the original allusions cannot be rendered in the translation and thus get lost, what the team of the German translator and the text editor did was to adopt the general technique of playing with words, sometimes by adop-

tion of the same technique but with different examples, sometimes by creating even new techniques (see Schauffler, this volume).¹⁵

We also saw that, apart from the universal aspect of wordplay and the historical possibilities and limitations inherent in a particular language, wordplay has traditions. These can be the traditions of an individual (like the particular manner of a comedian or author¹⁶), they can be traditions of a group or groups (like children's wordplay games or French *verlan*), they can be part of long term or short term literary traditions (like the classical forms of poetry or like rap), and they are common to communities, not necessarily identical with *language* communities. Some of them become traditional in literature, others in popular discourse, yet others in the context of advertising, while some remain individual. They emerge, they are modified, combined, abandoned, but they will always exist, because what is common to all human beings is that they can play with words, and they generally enjoy it.

5 References

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15 The most famous example is the translation *ils sont fous, ces romains* [they are crazy, these Romans] by Germ. “die spinnen, die Römer,” with a rhythmic repetition of the article / pronoun *die*, possible due to a focalising syntactic dislocation. This German pattern became proverbial.

16 A prime example would be Douglas Adams and John Lloyd's *The (Deeper) Meaning of Liff* ([1983] 1992). This is an interesting case of wordplay, tradition and translation: the idea of remotivating proper names of places as common names with meanings the language supposedly lacks was adopted in a German version (*Der tiefere Sinn des Labenz* (1992)), by the translators Sven Böttcher and with completely different toponyms and completely different meanings – a particularly startling example of quite literally relocating an individual case of wordplay.

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