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## ‘Extended’ Wordplay in Fictional Narrative Texts: Cross-Disciplinary Perspective

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**Abstract.** The article considers instances of complex use of wordplay as a narrative-building tool in fictional narrative texts. The term ‘extended wordplay’ is introduced specifically to refer to the cases where repetitive use of (or reference to) a specific wordplay or a specific wordplay-building model in a fictional context can be seen as a means to convey an effect or a message that are important for the construction of the fictional narrative. Assuming the linguistics, literary studies and pragmatics perspectives, the study carries out a comprehensive multidisciplinary analysis of wordplay in both English literary and cinematic fictional texts and reveals that extended wordplay can fulfil plot-building, world-building and character portrayal functions. The findings also show that specific elements of extended wordplay such as its formal type, or word-building model, the semantics or formal peculiarities of its constituent parts, its overall semantics and effect can originate in a very restrictive context and prove crucial for the construction or perception of the fictional narrative. The collected data and findings can be helpful for further research of complex cases of wordplay in multimodal texts or the perception of wordplay and English-Russian wordplay translation by the audiences.

**Keywords:** wordplay, ambiguity, fictional narrative, fictional world, narrative functions of wordplay, multidisciplinary approach to wordplay, pragmatics of wordplay.

Research area: Social Structure, Social Institutions and Processes; Languages of the Peoples of the Foreign Countries (English).

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## Комплексное использование игры слов в художественном нарративе: мультидисциплинарный подход

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**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются особенности комплексного использования игры слов как инструмента построения художественного нарратива. Вводится термин «развернутая игра слов» для обозначения случаев, когда одна и та же игра слов или модель построения игры слов повторно, в том числе многократно, используется в рамках одного художественного текста с целью передачи эффекта или сообщения высокой релевантности. В качестве материала исследования используются тексты англоязычных литературных произведений и сериалов без учета полимодальности последних. Случаи комплексного использования игры слов анализируются с точки зрения их лингвистической составляющей, с перспективы прагматики и литературоведения. Выявлено, что комплексная игра слов может служить важным компонентом построения сюжета, художественного мира, а также характеристики персонажей. Формальные и семантические составляющие конкретного случая игры слов, такие как образовательная модель, форма и семантика составляющих элементов, общая семантика, – в комплексе или по отдельности – могут обуславливаться жесткими контекстуальными рамками и формируют особенности перцепции художественного мира, персонажей и событий. Результаты проведенного исследования могут быть использованы в изучении игры слов в полимодальных текстах, а также в изучении особенностей перцепции аудиторией англо-русских переводов игры слов в художественных текстах.

**Ключевые слова:** игра слов, двусмысленность, художественный нарратив, художественный мир, функции игры слов, мультидисциплинарный подход к изучению игры слов, прагматический аспект игры слов.

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### Introduction

Back in 1992 Keiro Tanaka introduced an article about puns in advertising saying (numerous quotes from scholars provided) that for a long time pun had been considered low and unliterary; nothing more than a witty retort, a punchline (Tanaka 1992: 92). But the

discourse seems to have evolved in the recent decades and the usage of wordplay has also become more elaborate. This is not, of course, to say that sophisticated play-on-words was invented in the ninetieth, after all, the English language has a long wordplay tradition, but rather that nowadays wordplay has become

markedly omnipresent and is taken seriously. Unsurprisingly, it is currently the focus of many scholars working within diverse scientific fields, such as linguistics (Lecolle, 2016; Renner, 2015), translation (Delabastita, 2004) and literary studies (Bross, 2015; Anastasaki, 2019), cognitive studies and psycholinguistics (Gibbs Jr., 2018; Onysko, 2016; Knospe, 2015), pragmatics (Tanaka, 1992; Wilson & Sperber 2004), social semiotics (Zenner & Geeraerts, 2018; Baranova & Pavlina, 2024), etc.

Fiction-wise, wordplay has become some kind of a hallmark feature of many books, movies and series. No wonder, researchers' interest has switched at least in part from the classical tomes (Bauer, 2016; Díaz-Pérez 2013) to the problems of modern narrative, starting with the use of wordplay in high-concept novels (Anastasaki, 2019) to translating subtitles in sitcoms (Schauffler, 2015; Jaki 2016) or using multilingual wordplay as a character portrayal method in contemporary novel (Delabastita, 2018). Modern storytellers want audience's full attention. Fictional truth has become questioned and unsteady. Assumptions are debased. Narrators are unreliable and memories are false. Nothing is to be taken for granted. The addressee, reader or viewer, is invited to follow, analyze and overanalyze every tiny detail – during and after reading or watching, in between sequels or seasons. Wordplay is a valuable tool to make people think and pay attention and the authors make good use of it.

Analyzing fictional narrative texts, a term applied to both literary and cinematic fiction (Bellardi, 2018: 24), requires certain degree of interdisciplinarity due to the mere nature of the source. Fictional reality is always twofold. On the one hand, the author creates a fictional world that, however nonsense or magical, imitates the real world and its laws. In real world wordplay can be found everywhere: in everyday life conversations, public discourse, names of places, internet memes and so on. Its existence is simply natural. A fictional advertisement or a newspaper title may well contain a pun because that is what real PR people or journalists would use. Fictional slogans or titles will follow the discourse rules: headlines must catch the eye of the reader, taglines must

entice people in. On the other hand, wordplay is the way for the author to communicate with the reader, pass a message unseen by the characters. A simple one, perhaps, like 'Cheer up!' or 'Do you think the press can get any more un-serious with click-baiting?'. But also complex ones that would be a redline piercing through the narrative akin to extended metaphor, get its metalinguistic value pushed forward. A more detailed consideration of what we call 'extended wordplay' (by analogy with extended metaphor) can be of interest for all those creating or researching fictional worlds and translating fiction in written or audiovisual formats.

### Theoretical Framework

A more or less universal definition of wordplay is as follows: 'the general name for 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). The key components of the definition (italicized) require a few explanatory remarks.

Wordplay is generally based on homonymy, homophony, homography, and paronymy (Delabastita, 2004: 603) and can take on a form of a single lexeme, a group of words or a bigger syntactic structure through various language mechanisms (Delabastita, 2004: 602–603). Wordplay is also popularly categorized based on the postulates of 'Relevance Theory' (Wilson & Sperber, 2004) with cognitive mechanisms of pun activation and interpreting being foregrounded (Dynel, 2010; Attardo, 1994).

Wordplay being *textual phenomenon* means it normally exists inside a text as the said phonetic, lexical or semantic similarities can hardly produce a required effect without proper context e.g. *deadly bored* may only become considered a pun – and not just a metaphor – when referring to somebody or something closely related to death, for example, a mythological creature that is not technically alive such as a vampire or a zombie. In some cases, the *play-on-words* can be seen without any context but the meaning and motiva-

tion behind it will not be clear, or will seem strictly formal without context e.g. *New whine in old bottles* (from *Do not put new wine into old bottles*) in an article about problems in beer and wine industry (Leppihalme, 2014: 210). Exceptions in the form of zero-meaning puns, or groaners, that are not tied to any specific context (e.g. *My friend drowned in a bowl of muesli. A strong currant pulled him in*) are 'to blame for the stigmatisation of all types of puns as simple and puerile' (Dyrel, 2010: 10).

Finally, as regards the *communicative role* of wordplay, two matters should be addressed: a) Are there instances where wordplay is not communicatively significant?; b) What exactly are the functions of wordplay?

Speaking about the communicative relevance of wordplay, D. Delabastita suggests that the distinction between wordplay – being intrinsically deliberate – and unintended ambiguity, slips of a tongue, malapropisms, etc. is vital (Delabastita, 1996: 131). The latter do not have any conscious motivation, hence do not convey a special message. Delabastita's point is fair and clear when talking about wordplay in general. However, since we are not going to discuss *any* wordplay but rather wordplay in fiction, a contribution from literary studies and pragmatics and, thus, a cross-disciplinary approach, would be helpful in order to clarify to what degree Delabastita's statement is instrumental for narrative in literature and cinematography.

From the pragmatics perspective, wordplay should be seen as a part of a speaker-hearer interaction (Zirker & Winter-Froemel, 2015: 6–7). In a face-to-face conversation, which happens in real life, there is usually one speaker and one hearer. Even if a person addresses a thousand people, there is nothing but the speaker's conscious or subconscious choice behind the uttered words. In literary texts two speaker-hearer interactions can happen at the same time: the one between the characters (completely orchestrated) and the one between the author and the audience. The author's design may be that the character produces a pun-like phrase without intention but for the audience it might be meaningful anyway. At the author-audience level, undeliberate ambiguity

or a mistake such as confusing similar sounding words can also be considered wordplay as they are deliberate from the standpoint of the author, are based on the similarity of form and difference of meaning of several language units and bear a message or an effect, being a funny (maybe Freudian) slip or something more substantial like a character's lack of linguistic expertise.

The dual speaker-hearer configuration in a fictional narrative text suggests a distinction between the two dimensions of the story, as in why a character uses certain wordplay in a certain situation and what the author wants the reader / viewer to get from it apart from its immediate conversational or situational value. The in-world puns motivation generally mimics that of the real world puns. One of the most recognized functions of wordplay is humor (Kabatek, 2015; Attardo, 2018). It can also be used to show one's wit and highlight competence; to engage the interlocutor in a conversation, to make the addressee pleased or complacent by letting them decipher the hidden meaning (Díaz-Pérez, 2013: 286). The conative or appellative function of wordplay may be foregrounded in advertisements (Zirker & Winter-Froemel, 2015: 9–10). The ludic and naming functions of wordplay are singled out when dealing with lexical blends in various discourses (Renner, 2015).

The author-audience motivation can partially coincide with the in-world one (after all, some puns exist to amuse both the characters and the reader / viewer). But it also reveals a certain connection with the metalinguistic value of wordplay. It can have poetic function (Poier-Bernhard, 2018); serve as 'a means of characterization'; as well as direct the reader's attention to a certain part of the text, a message, or involve the reader in a 'metalinguistic reflection' (Zirker & Winter-Froemel, 2015: 6–8); can add 'persuasive force to the statement' or 'deceive our socially conditioned reflex against sexual and other taboo themes' (Delabastita, 1996: 129–130). The list goes on.

Without a concrete context, this division is, of course, rather relative due to the simple fact that those functions do not exclusively belong to either of the two dimensions. The dis-

inction is crucial, however, when dealing with a specific example of wordplay.

The perception of meaning and functions of wordplay is a subject matter of pragmatics and, at that, of translation studies since translation is impossible without pragmatic analysis (on pragmatic analysis in translation see Sdobnikov 2018; Petrova 2018). We are not here to discuss the translation of puns, however, the contribution of translation studies, the way it adjusts and sharpens the pragmatics perspective, is enormous for the study of wordplay functions (Dyner, 2010; Jing, 2010; Díaz-Pérez, 2013). The translation decisions, although disloyal or at times even harmful to the source text, made in face of the non-pragmatic limitations such as the wordplay (un)translatability<sup>1</sup> and extralinguistic factors such as lack of time, reveal the ultimate contextual relevance and *unavoidability* of some of the components and functions of specific instances of wordplay. A translator working on a text with a pun does not only have to conduct a comprehensive pragmatic analysis and determine the functions of a concrete wordplay but also *prioritize* the relevance of the disclosed functions to decide how strictly they should be transferred to the target text.

The relevance-priority approach agrees with our vision of extended wordplay discussed later as the expanse of its presence in a text or the extensive web of causative-consecutive ties it creates can make it as a whole or its formal or semantic elements deeply essential for both the in-world and author-audience dimensions.

<sup>1</sup> The discussion of translatability and equivalence has been frowned upon lately as, on the one hand, it is didactically inaccurate since a translator is supposed to transfer the meaning of a text as a semantic whole and not look for equivalent words (Sdobnikov 2019: 297); and, on the other, mostly counterproductive (if there is a text that has to be translated and it contains wordplay, then the question must arise as of 'how – not if – it is possible to achieve a successful transfer of wordplay into a target language' (Schauffler 2015: 230)). Not to call wordplay untranslatable, it is rarely subject to 'straight' transfer. There are, of course, a variety of methods one can use to convey a pun into the target language (Delabastita 2004: 604). What we are more interested in, however, are the cases where translators do not choose a technique that would ensure that the target text look as natural as possible because that often means that some of the formal or semantic components of the wordplay are too relevant to be omitted, substituted or compensated.

### Statement of the problem

Considering wordplay in fictional narrative texts through the linguistics', literary studies' and pragmatics' perspective, the present paper addresses the following research questions (RQ):

- What functional types of wordplay can be considered essential for the building of a fictional narrative text? (RQ1)
- How is such wordplay integrated into a fictional narrative text? (RQ2)
- What formal and / or semantic components of a specific wordplay can be crucial for the story narrative? (RQ3)

We hypothesize that fictional narrative texts contain wordplay that is deeply imbedded in the narrative structure to the point of being unalienable and crucial for the recipients' understanding of the plot and/or characters. We also believe that such wordplay tends to be 'extended' – the same way as a metaphor can be – and either forms part of a larger causative-consecutive chain that strictly predetermines its form and / or the semantics of its constituent elements and / or its overall semantics; or exists within a repetitive pattern of similar wordplays. Finally, both formal and semantic elements of a specific wordplay can be integral to build a fictional world or its events.

### Methods and material

To carry out this research several fictional texts rich in wordplay were selected. Both fictional literary texts and fictional filmic texts, viewed as fictional narrative texts (Bellardi, 2018), are subject to analysis, the semi-otic differences between the two groups being irrelevant for the present study. The sources include J. Fforde's *Shades of Grey*, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, HBO's *Succession* (2018), FOX' *House* (2004), MAX' *Gordita Chronicles* (2022). The overview of the parts of plot relevant for the analysis will be given in the Results and discussion section.

Several instances of what we may consider extended wordplay were extracted as per the theoretical provisions discussed and the hypothesis proposed in the previous sections. The criteria for the material collection can be exposed briefly as follows:

1) Wordplay can acquire a form of a word, a combination of words or a larger structure that are built based on the similarity of form and difference of meaning of several language units (Delabastita, 2004: 603);

2) Play-on-words can be seen as such only when it is intentional. In view of the duality of the speaker-hearer regimes in a fictional narrative text (Zirker & Winter-Froemel, 2015: 6–7), only the author's intention is to be taken into account for the purpose of this research. That means all of the provided examples of wordplay are intentional from the standpoint of the author but some are not intentional from the standpoint of the character.

3) Wordplay can be seen as extended when it (a) is used and / or referred to more than once in the same fictional text; (b) fits into a repetitive pattern of similar wordplays united by the form, the meaning / peculiarities of the constituent elements, the overall semantics. In both cases the repetitive use is implied to be deliberate.

The obtained examples were analyzed (1) from the linguistics' perspective (the formal type, the semantics of the constituent elements and the effect produced by the merging of meanings); (2) from the point of view of literary studies (the narrative-relevant functions of the wordplay); and, finally, (3) through the pragmatics / translation studies perception (the relevance of the wordplay and its functions for the plot and its connections with other plot elements).

Crossing the three approaches, we aspire to uncover how the various linguistic and semantic elements (see (1)) of extended wordplay can be determined by the fictional context and how relevant those elements – individually and combined – are for building the narrative. We are also interested in the metalinguistic functions of wordplay in a fictional narrative text in both the author-audience and the in-world dimensions.

## Results and discussion

A fictional story usually features *fictional world, characters and events*: fictional world is static and represents a setting for the characters to exist and make events happen. In our

opinion, extended wordplay exists within all of these three narrative realms and can be key to their formation. The three types (or functions) of extended wordplay will be named in accordance with the storytelling realm to which they bear importance: 'plot-building', 'world-building', and 'character portrayal'.

### I. Plot-building function

The simple existence or discovery of a certain wordplay can itself be an event relevant for plot-building which means it exists within a causative-consecutive paradigm linking it to a number of preceding or proceeding minor or major events. Such puns cannot be seen as a simple one-liner or mere witticism but as a more expansive multi-component construct in which both the formal component and the meaning of the constituent parts are important. In this case the metalinguistic function of wordplay is foregrounded for both the characters of the fictional narrative texts and the audience.

Let us consider two examples from season 2 of HBO's series *Succession* (2018) that focuses on the life of media mogul Logan Roy and his four heirs and the operation of their family company WaystarRoyCo<sup>2</sup>. In example (1) the pun is known almost from the start but triggers a series of events later on, in example (2) the pun is the conclusion of a scene revolving around language play.

(1) A high-ranking employee in a multinational media and entertainment company who is first referred to at the beginning of season 2 as 'Mo' is then revealed to be actually called 'Lester', 'Mo' being a pejorative nickname invented by his co-workers. As the season progresses various characters are surprised to connect the dots as why one would be called Mo-Lester (as in 'molester', *a person who attacks somebody, especially a child, sexually* (OALD)). Formally speaking, the nickname was built first through the addition of 'mo' to the character's name 'Lester' and the resulting word 'molester' represented what the character is and does. Then it was shortened to 'Mo'

<sup>2</sup> For convenience, the *Succession* quotes were taken from the Full Scripts of Season 2. They may differ slightly from the show's final cut but the differences are insignificant for the problem discussed.

which made the pun undistinguishable for the characters outside the inner circle.

The pun is activated for the audience when Willa, a new-comer to the main characters' circle being unaware of the meaning behind the nickname, calls this character Mo at his funeral in front of his wife. The latter is confused as her husband's name is Lester. Willa's boyfriend Connor has to steer her away to explain what happened.

(1a) *WILLA: So sorry for your loss, Maria. I never met Mo but I hear he was a great guy.*

*MARIA: Mo?*

*WILLA: Your husband?*

*[Maria smiles, confused. They move on.]*

*CONNOR: His name's not Mo.*

*WILLA: What? You call him Mo.*

*CONNOR: His name's Lester. <...> Mo-Lester.*

Willa is immediately cautioned by the revelation ('*And was he one?*') and advises Connor, who is about to start his presidential campaign, against pronouncing the speech at the funeral as it poses a potential reputational risk should anything of Lester's doings ever come out.

A whistleblower indeed reveals the truth in the second half of the season so that several characters have to testify at a congressional hearing to address the allegations of sexual harassment in the company. Senator Gil Eaves questions one of the company's top managers pointing out that the extended use of the nickname in correspondence – but never in messages directed to Lester himself or his family – shows that the company's executives were well-aware of Lester's crimes and the true meaning of the nickname.

(1b) *[Gil motions and Nate gets an internal email up on a big screen. 'Mo' is highlighted in a brief internal email.]*

*<...>*

*GIL: You called him 'Mo' in emails over thirty times to family and colleagues, but you never used it in the items of correspondence sent to him during his illness. Why not?*

*<...>*

*GIL: He was offering jobs in return for sex? And your private nickname for him was Mo Lester? That's quite a coincidence.*

The expanse of the described wordplay is enormous. When the character is first mentioned as 'Mo' we don't see the pun at all, the wordplay becoming 'activated' only in the next episode when Willa stumbles upon it at the funeral. From then on it causes a long action-reaction chain, dialogues and plot-twists revolving around it, and finally serves as evidence to prove the company's involvement.

The sheer banality of the pun for anybody who knew Lester's real name and the decades of collective gaslighting of the issue do also draw out the main characters' detachment from the real world and lack of compassion for the outsiders. They do not see Lester's victims as real people but rather as a nuisance ('no real people involved' becomes an eerie catchphrase throughout season 2).

**Summary:** The overall meaning (transparent association with sexual abuse) is relevant because various scenes, including the highly important Congress session, are anchored in it. The form is relevant as it must be a wordplay and both of the constituent elements of the wordplay are neutral and not at all derogatory-sounding, otherwise the 'outsiders' would have suspected something earlier.

(2) A wordplay can be pivotal for a shorter sequence of events, like a scene, for example, which surely is more compact and less imposing than the pun in example (1), and yet it remains a very specific type of context as it is of significant size and is revolving around a purely linguistic phenomenon.

Here is an example from the same series' season 2 episode 6. The ATN news agency is to present its new user-centered strategy at a media conference. Two characters are discussing speech details. The current motto reads: '*ATN: We Are Listening*', the choice of words is not arbitrary as it reflects the company's intention to give their users a say in what they would like to have on the platform. As the scene unfolds we learn that the *We Are Listening* motto has been approved by the focus group but in the end the legal and PR teams have advised they should change it as the company is going through a data collection controversy (their voice assistant records and stores what people are saying). So, initially *We Are Listening* was supposed to

show that they tend to their customers' needs but in the current situation it may also refer to them literally spying on people. There is a significant swathe of dialogue where the characters just come to terms with how wrong the motto may sound. They keep repeating the offending piece, sometimes changing nothing, sometimes stressing some of the words, and each time it seems new meanings are adding up:

(2a) TOM: *Um, okay. I mean I really do like 'We're Listening'. It sounds like – I mean it sounds like we're listening?*

GREG: *<...> There's a gray area in terms of our data collection, so that we are kind of, like, we actually are – listening?*

TOM: *We're listening?*

GREG: *It's complicated – but yeah it seems we are sometimes, listening, quite aggressively.*

The intense brainstorm does not steer them too far from the initial choice as first they opt for *We hear you* which sounds pretty much the same but 'less active' and then *We're hearing* which does not solve the ambiguity problem either. Finally, they manage to transform the ambiguity into yet more ambiguous wordplay where they merge the verb *hear* and a support expressing cliché 'we are *here* for you'. The idea is to spell 'here' as 'hear' based on the homophony of the two words and to slightly distort the syntax:

(2b) GREG: *Maybe it's ATN: We're hear for you. Like 'here' spelled 'H-E-A-R'.*

TOM: *'We're hear for you.' That's gibberish.*

GREG: *'We hear for you.'*

The wordplay setup begins when the new strategy is explained and then the slogan is given. Then the ambiguity in *listening* is noticed. The verb is changed into a semantically similar *hear* that does not suit them either but ends up in the final slogan *We hear for you* which is based on an intended pun. The linguistic and extra-linguistic framework in which this final pun originates is rather restrictive. And the fact that the characters did not opt for discarding the problematic slogan altogether but rather masked it using an even more vague tagline ('*It's good because it's not clear exactly what the hell it means? So. Lots of wiggle room.*') is another reminder that although they are usually

aware of their wrong, they are more inclined to hide it, rather than make it right<sup>3</sup>. This may also be an ironic mirror of the bigger trouble described in example (1) where the situation reached the point of no return. The measures they took helped make the situation somewhat less compromising but could not, of course, make the problem disappear.

**Summary:** The overall meaning of the pun is strictly determined by the situation and specific circumstances. The form shows various degrees of ambiguity both intended and unintended.

The above is not to claim that the puns that are different from the ones just described are arbitrary in form and meaning. Wordplay cannot, of course, emerge from the linguistic and semantic void. But the ties connecting them to the previous and posterior events are not necessarily so strong and the conditions determining their form and semantics that restrictive. Many puns intend to produce short-lived humorous effect, show one's rude / playful, etc. attitude, add minor details to the situation or the characters such as the loud noise not allowing to hear clearly, one's speech defects distorting the sounds and others.

## II. World-building function

Fictional worlds – especially fantasy ones – are difficult to design. Every place, every person, every object and every phenomenon should have a name, a unique one, but not *too* unique. On the one hand, a new world is a new concept, and the reader or viewer should know that this world is different from the one where they live. On the other hand, the audience is supposed to see some basic parallels between reality and fiction to be able to remember the lore and relate to the characters. Last but not least, knowing the new world should

<sup>3</sup> Online cinema Amediateka adapts Greg's first *here / hear* suggestion for the Russian subtitles dropping the wordplay but preserving the meanings of both *hear* and *here*: "А может, 'ATN: Мы всегда рядом с вами'? И в скобках написать 'Мы вас слышим'?" / "Maybe it's 'ATN: We are here for you'. And put 'We hear you' in brackets." It seems peculiar that the translator chose to sacrifice the character's advertising skills and highlight that he is so stuck with the compromising wording, he wants to insert it, however clumsily, into this new tagline.



not be tedious. That is why authors try to keep the readers' 'little grey cells' busy and entertained by making allusions, hiding Easter eggs, choosing funny wording or resorting to editorial techniques. And wordplay is a perfect tool.

Since wordplay is used to build the *concept* of a new fictional world, it seems only logical that puns should be considered collectively, as a complex multi-component whole, and not separately. Although some world-building puns can prove quite relevant for the narrative and action, in general, their individual conceptual and semantic value appears rather diluted. The wordplay-based names of lore elements must be interesting to pick at and preferably not be utterly confusing, i.e. possess senses alluding to the notion they refer to. In some cases, those names may be also united by a common idea, the most extreme version being when the naming process happens within a very strict conceptual framework.

This latter approach is, for example, practiced by British author Jasper Fforde famous for his high-concept novels such as *The Big Over Easy* and *Shades of Grey*. The former is set in a world where people's lives revolve around reading and writing: publishing, editing, criticizing, etc. No wonder the text is swarming with wordplay alluding to various linguistic and literature matters: the name of the town is Reading, writers are legally prosecuted for using clichés, a character feels 'a strange impulse to climb' a beanstalk and they solve crimes by looking for clues in cross-language puns (see analysis in (Anastasaki, 2019)).

His *Shades of Grey* is similarly conceptual. It takes place in an alternative version of the United Kingdom where one's status in society depends on their perception of color. This book is rich in wordplay and the new notions are conceptualized through their connection to color or color-related paraphernalia and facts. The current regime is called *Colortocracy* ('color' + Greek 'kratos' / 'rule') implying that the perception of color is the determining factor in their society. People do research in *Chromaticology* ('chromatics' + 'ology'). A high-ranking official from a government agency is addressed as *His Colorfulness* (mimicking 'his Highness'), the agency being *National Color* (~

'National Security'). The famous *Ochrlahoma* musical (alluding to the musical 'Oklahoma!' and the 'ochre' color) is being advertised.

Some puns are built around the universe terminology, taking on metalinguistic value for both the in-world and author-audience dimensions:

(3) *We had attended Morning Chant and were now seated for breakfast, disheartened but not surprised that **the early Greys** had already taken the bacon, and it remained only in exquisite odor. [Fforde]*

(4) *"Are you **bright**?"*

*It was an ambiguous question. Bright could mean either "intelligent" or "highly color perceptive." The former question was allowable; the latter was not. [Fforde]*

In (3) the lower class citizens (they see the world in grey only) who woke up early and ate up all the bacon are jokingly called *the early Greys* which is a mixture of the *early bird catches the worm* saying and the name of a tea blend *Earl Grey*. In (4) the narrator points out the ambiguity of the word *bright* which is both a key concept in their 'colorcratic' world and a common adjective.

High-concept literature aside, wordplay creation is rarely that restrictive. Nonetheless, fictional worlds tend to have certain wordplay patterns, although to a lesser extent. For example, a magical joke shop 'Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes' in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* would often name products with a string of words starting with the same letter: *Creepy Crawlies*, *Mysterious Midnight Moon Madness*, *Headless Hats*; the acronyms resemble real world notions and sometimes sound funny: OWL and NEWT for exams, SPEW for the organization defending house elves' rights; but, all in all, there is no single model to follow for the whole series.

**Summary:** World-building puns within a story can all be created through one specific mechanism such as being conceptualized within the same semantic field or all having a common form.

### III. Character portrayal function

Wordplay can be character specific. We do not here refer to cases described in section

I where puns do indeed contribute to the portrayal of the characters like many other linguistic or extra linguistic components of the story but neither the form nor the semantics of the puns are a habit or a pattern. Let us consider cases where the form or both the form and the meaning of the constituent parts of the pun is a behavioral model resulting from the character's physical state or personality.

The form may be key when a character tends to talk in an unusual or even enigmatic way for some reason. There can be some supernatural explanation or a perfectly normal one.

Characters may begin to speak in a bizarre way due to a health condition. This was the case of an aphasia patient on Fox's medical drama series *House* (2004). Aphasia affects the parts of the brain responsible for speaking and comprehension. The patient could not express himself coherently but the words he used instead of the intended ones were similar sounding. The doctors even began to understand some of his messages when they had known him a bit better. In the following example the doctors realize that the patient doesn't want them to share the results of the medical tests with his wife (the patient uses 'knife' instead).

(5) *Patient: The stained **knife** can't force.*

*Dr. Chase: We are not gonna tell your wife. We are not cops. (House)*

In the end, deciphering his nonsense speech helped find the cause of his illness. The patient kept saying:

(6) *'Couldn't tackle the **bear**. They took my **stain**.'* (House)

Dr. House realized that *bear* was the patient's association with *bipolar disorder* which he kept secret (*polar bear* / *bipolar disorder*), and *stain* was a substitute for *brain*. He had undergone an unprofessional brain surgery to cure his mental disorder but the operation ended up affecting his brain functions.

Although the repetitive pattern in general represents a symptom, in the end, the meaning became key to resolve the case.

All kinds of unintended wordplay are also typical of characters less expert in the language, like foreigners, children, uneducated people. These kind of speakers, who are only beginning to learn new vocabulary, tend to

see hidden puns and dead metaphors unavailable for the perception of a native speaker 'as the language became a habitual cognitive and communicative tool for them.' (Delabastita, 2018: 54–55). Consider MAX' comedy series *Gordita Chronicles* (2022) that tells the story of a Dominican family that have just moved to Miami. Cucu, the show's 12-year-old protagonist, is already quite fluent but keeps coming across new words and meanings. She also often compares English to Spanish, the latter being her mother tongue. One of the first discoveries leaves her somewhat crestfallen as she learns that the meaning of 'Gordita', a Spanish endearment her parents call her, is not that flattering in English. 'Gordita' in Spanish means 'chubby' and is used affectionately towards someone, especially children, who are not even necessarily chubby. Boys from her American school mockingly 'translated' her nickname into 'fatso', an offensive word to say someone is overweight.

(7) *Boy1: Hey! Watch where you're going, **fatso**.*

*Cucu: Oh, my name's not fatso. It's Cucu.*

*Boy2: **Fatso means gordita, gordita** (Gordita Chronicles).*

As the story goes, Cucu notices more differences between how the two languages work and that many words are based on metaphors and puns that are not the same in English and Spanish. At the same time, she realizes that learning to speak English does not require throwing away Spanish as she can love and master both. She wants to prove this point to her English teacher that insists she must avoid Spanish at all cost when in class. The teacher asks her to help with English-Spanish translation as she accidentally locks her keys inside the car. Cucu is to ask the Spanish-speaking worker to break into her car to get the keys:

(8) *Now, translate exactly. "I locked my keys in the car. **Break in** and get them."*

To spite her, Cucu translates the phrasal verb 'break in' which must be understood metaphorically as 'enter with force' with the Spanish 'romper' which has the non-metaphoric meaning of 'break' that implies damaging something. So, the worker shatters the car window.

In some cases, however, Cucu cannot recognize the dead metaphor herself and comes up with a wrong idea:

(9) *Yoshi*: “Define these weird English words: <...> **Party pooper**.”

*Cucu*: [giggles] “Okay, I don’t know this one, but I hope it never happens to me.” (*Gordita Chronicles*)

When asked about the meaning of the informal expression ‘party pooper’ (OALD: ‘a person who does not want to take part in a pleasant activity and stops other people from having fun’), she offers a literal reading: a person who could not make it to the toilet at a party.

Cucu’s mother Adela who is the least proficient in the family is shown to constantly mix up and mispronounce words and create unintended puns as the result. While the puns Cucu creates are often rather complex and aim at showing her inquisitive mind and the genuine desire to improve her English, Adela’s are generally primitive and a product of her reluctance to put too much thought in how she speaks. When her family members try to correct her, she tends to dismiss their comments. She confesses to want ‘a big house with a central **hair conditioner**’ (instead of *air conditioner*) or imagines typical suburbs with ‘**green lions**’ (instead of *lawns*) and ‘**white pickled fences**’ (instead of *picket*).

While for Cucu English is an interesting subject she wants to study, for her mother it is, firstly, a simple necessity and, secondly, a part of the American Dream concept she took on when living outside the US. ‘Picket fences’ and ‘green lawns’ are clichés typically used to describe the ideal middle-class life she dreams of and she doesn’t remember the wording quite well because for her the wording is mere symbolic in the Saussurean sense. It is not the fences or the lawns she wants but rather the prosperity they represent.

**Summary:** Depending on the specific characterization function form and / or meaning can be strictly specific and indicative, e.g. symptoms of a medical condition can be represented through wordplay based on paronymy; lack of expertise in a language can result in puns based on formal confusion or literal understanding of common metaphors.

## Conclusion

This research is a contribution into the study of wordplay and its functions in fictional narrative texts and aims to investigate instances of complex wordplay in fiction from the cross-disciplinary perspective. The term ‘extended wordplay’ was introduced for the purpose of the present research alluding to the cases where a specific wordplay or wordplay model is used repetitively within the same fictional text to produce certain effect.

The findings speak in favor of the hypotheses formulated as regards the posed research questions. The research revealed that extended wordplay can indeed be found in modern fictional narrative texts, its role going far beyond short-lived humorous effect. Looking into the specific formal and semantic elements of extended wordplay, the research shows that the wordplay-building model, the form and semantics of the constituent parts as well as the overall semantics of wordplay, individually or combined, can be strictly determined by the context and serve a particular purpose for the construction of the fictional narrative. As a matter of fact, extended wordplay can be crucial for the representation of all the fundamental elements of a story: the fictional world, the characters and the plot. It can often be used in a metalinguistic way when characters deconstruct and decompose its form and meaning. In this case the way the characters discover or come up with a pun can be seen as an event, as a significant part of a scene or the overall plot. A particular wordplay-building model can be used throughout the fictional narrative text to create a comprehensible and entertaining concept of a fictional universe. Extended wordplay is also especially effective in character portrayal, representing permanent habits, obsessions and mental states.

This study has implications for the investigation of extended wordplay in multimodal fictional narrative where parts of wordplay can feature semantic ties with the visual elements. The findings could also prove useful in the study of some aspects of wordplay translation in literature and, potentially, cinematic texts, such as the audience’s perception of various English-Russian translations of the same instances of wordplay.

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