



Pragmatic Features Of Wordplay

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ABSTRACT

The article examines wordplay as a pragmatic phenomenon and focuses on phraseological neologisms of different degrees of connectedness that arise through play. It classifies the main mechanisms of wordplay, relates the cohesion of playful phraseological units to the traditional typology of phraseology, and describes the inferential mechanisms, the role of context and shared knowledge, and the communicative functions that underlie their interpretation.

KEYWORDS: Wordplay, phraseological neologisms, degrees of connectedness, pragmatics, implicature, relevance theory, presupposition, ambiguity, interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary discourse — media and advertising texts, literary works and everyday online communication — is increasingly saturated with creative, non-standard language use, among which wordplay occupies a special place. The need to interpret newly coined units that function in such texts makes their pragmatic study particularly relevant: the effect of these units depends not only on their form and dictionary meaning, but on the speaker's intention and on the inferential work performed by the addressee. Accordingly, wordplay cannot be described adequately within a purely formal or semantic framework; it calls for a pragmatic account that connects linguistic form with the conditions of its use and with the communicative situation in which it is deployed.

Wordplay is understood here as the deliberate exploitation of the formal and semantic properties of language in order to activate two or more competing readings within a single context. Depending on the linguistic level involved, several mechanisms can be distinguished: phonetic and paronymic play, based on the similarity of sound; play on polysemy and homonymy, based on the coexistence of several meanings in one form; and structural play, based on the reshaping of set expressions. It is the last type that is of primary interest here, since it gives rise to phraseological neologisms in which a familiar idiom is modified so that its conventional and its newly created senses remain simultaneously active.

The cohesion of such playful units varies considerably, and this variation can be described with reference to the traditional typology of phraseology. Following the classification into phraseological fusions, unities and combinations, playful phraseological neologisms range from loose, occasional transformations of an idiom, in which the original expression remains fully transparent, to more tightly bound, lexicalised combinations that acquire a relatively fixed form and an autonomous expressive value. The degree of connectedness directly affects interpretation: the looser the unit, the more the addressee relies on the recognisable source idiom, while more cohesive units are processed increasingly as independent signs.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, the force of wordplay rests on a controlled clash of interpretations. In Gricean terms, an addressee who encounters an apparent violation of the conversational maxims — most often of manner or quantity — does not treat it as a failure but searches for an implicature that restores cooperativeness; the simultaneous availability of two senses is thus a signalled invitation to infer additional meaning. In the terms of relevance theory, the extra processing effort imposed by the ambiguity is offset by additional cognitive effects — humour, evaluation, intimacy or persuasion — which the author intends the hearer to derive. The interpretation of a play on a set expression therefore requires the simultaneous retrieval of the conventional idiom and of its context-driven reshaping.

The success of this strategy depends heavily on context and on shared background knowledge. Wordplay built on phraseology presupposes that the addressee already commands the source idiom and can recognise its deviation; the presupposed knowledge functions as a filter that determines whether the double reading will be perceived at all. This is why such play is especially productive in texts addressed to a specific, culturally competent audience, and why it is so sensitive to the communicative setting: the same modified expression may yield a rich layered reading for one addressee and remain opaque for another.

This mechanism can be illustrated by the familiar technique of reworking an idiom so that both its established sense and a new, context-bound sense remain active at once: the reader recognises the original expression, perceives its modification, and infers the evaluative or humorous point that the author has encoded. The double reading is not an accidental ambiguity but a purposeful pragmatic strategy; its success depends on the shared knowledge described above, which is precisely why wordplay is so productive in headlines, slogans and titles addressed to a specific audience.

The pragmatic functions of wordplay-based phraseological neologisms are diverse. They attract and hold attention, compress an evaluation into a memorable form, establish an in-group bond between author and addressee, and modulate illocutionary force by softening or intensifying it. In advertising and journalistic headlines they serve persuasion and memorability; in literary and colloquial speech they signal irony, expressivity and the author's stance. These functions confirm that such units operate primarily at the level of communication rather than of the language system alone.

Finally, the pragmatic nature of wordplay has direct consequences for contrastive and translational research. Because the effect of a playful phraseological neologism arises from the interaction of form, meaning and presupposed knowledge, it can rarely be reproduced mechanically in another language; the translator must recover the intended pragmatic effect and recreate it with the resources of the target language. This makes the description of the underlying mechanisms not only a theoretical task but also a practical prerequisite for adequate cross-linguistic transfer.

Thus, the pragmatic analysis of wordplay-based phraseological neologisms demonstrates that their meaning is co-constructed in interaction: the author encodes a deliberate, layered ambiguity, and the addressee, guided by the search for relevance and by shared knowledge, recovers the intended interpretation. A systematic description of these mechanisms broadens our understanding of pragmatic interpretation in general and provides a reliable basis for the further contrastive and translational study of wordplay across languages.

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