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Play-on-Wor(l)ds: The Connection Between Language and Culture in Wordplay Use in Italy, Britain, the United States, Germany and Japan

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Introduction

All known living human languages – languages that are currently spoken by natives as primary form of communication – can be distributed into 142 language families. This means there are at least as many different language structures, derived from the proto-language of each family, clarifying why idioms from separate families are so divergent. However, despite the fundamental differences among languages, these all share features – some linked to human psychology; the capability to produce humour is one of them. Almost every human being can respond to humour (which Cambridge Dictionary defines as "the quality in [something] that makes it funny or amusing; the ability to laugh at things that are amusing") by recognising its traits: thus, we talk of *sense of humour*. Being language a versatile tool that speakers can model as they please, it is largely used as means to create humour (in this case known as *verbal* humour) in several different forms. Object of this paper will be the verbal humour subcategory of wordplay.

I have always been a language lover: as a child, because knowing foreign languages allowed me to potentially understand and communicate with a wider target of people; now, as a university student, I am also fascinated by how the deep knowledge of a foreign idiom allows to play with it almost flawlessly. As the punster I am, I found it would be interesting to translate my interest towards the creation of jokes and wordplays in different languages into a research on how the concept of humour varies according to the languages and cultures that are involved. For this reason, this paper will give attention to the strict connection of wordplay not only to language, but also and most importantly to culture and humour perception. However, wordplay use is not limited to humorous intents, as we will learn, and can permeate many other genres of social interaction; thus, we will also be finding wordplay uses that are not to be included in the sphere of humour.

The first section consists of an initial and more theorical overview of the definition, role and typologies of wordplay based on research conducted by scholars. It will be followed, in the second section, by a deeper reflection on the role culture plays in the creation of wordplay, being at the same

time influenced by it due to its ubiquity in everyday communication (Zirker and Winter-Froemel, 2015:1). For this purpose, we will find an insight of wordplay tradition in Italy, Britain, United States, Germany and Japan. Finally, geared with the information collected in the first two sections, we will proceed to analyse wordplay examples to demonstrate how differently – or similarly – countries conceive and produce wordplay according to the either common or divergent traits that characterise their languages and cultures. The sequence of the three sections will represent a sort of path that will be beneficial to gradually approach the intent of this paper – that is to shed light on the bond between wordplay and culture.

1. Wordplay and Research

This first section wants to provide all necessary information to comprehend the nature and functions of wordplay. Primarily, we will encounter a general definition of wordplay developed by Dirk Delabastita, one of the most renowned scholars who have done extensive research in the field. Research will play a central role in the second and central paragraph, which will cover part of the extensive studies experts have conducted on the macro-concept of 'wordplay' while keeping an eye on the areas of our interest: as it slowly leads to a transition towards the second section, focused on culture, the second paragraph will also introduce the concept of wordplay as perceived by its user. Finally, the last part of the section will provide a list of the principal categories the macro-concept of wordplay can be subdivided in. However, since the paragraph will be source of fundamental information, while trying to provide as general data as possible a selection will be made of the types of wordplay we will meet throughout the second section and thus we will most likely find useful during the analysis in the third one.

1.1. Definition of Wordplay

Being a subcategory of the much wider concept of humour does not make wordplay less challenging to describe. In fact, it is too versatile and ambiguous to be attributed only one standard definition. However, one of the major scholars in the field developed a description of the phenomenon that I find general and yet exhaustive enough to introduce us to the concept:

> Wordplay is the general name indicating the various textual phenomena (i.e. on the level of performance or *parole*) in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language used (level of competence or *langue*) are exploited in such a way as to establish a communicatively significant, (near)-simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings (signified) and more or less similar forms (signifiers). (Delabastita 1993:57, emphasis in the original)

The assertion will be easier to paraphrase once a few linguistical technicisms mentioned by Delabastita will be explained. The dichotomy *langue* and *parole* was distinguished by theoretical linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in his book *Course in General Linguistics* (1916; original: *Cours de*

linguistique générale). *Langue* is "both a social product of the faculty of speech and a collection of necessary conventions that have been adopted […] to permit individuals to exercise that faculty" (2011:9). It is the totality of sources and relative conventions speakers of a certain idiom have at their disposal to produce utterances or communicate in any other manner; *langue* is independent and pre-exists the individual. Instead, *parole* is "the executive side" (2011:13), that is the use individual speakers make of language to communicate. As opposed to *langue*, that is a universal and shared source, *parole* is mastered by individuals, each of whom utilises it differently.

Going back to Delabastita's definition of wordplay, now his words are more transparent: wordplays are those utterances (*parole*), both written and spoken, that make use of the sources the correspondent *langue* offers to evoke two or more linguistic structures that share more or less different meanings and more or less similar forms (e.g. their pronunciation or spelling). As the name already communicates, wordplay consists in the action of "playing with language": it pushes semantic boundaries to recall two or more alternative meanings linked to the same word or combination of words that otherwise would have had very little in common.

However, wordplay does not only have, as one may think, the function to play with linguistic material; on the contrary, the plethora of intentions one can have while using it is impressive. Here follows a part of the list created by Thaler (2016:51), where she provides every bullet point with the source[1]. Wordplay can be used

– to amuse people and achieve humorous effects (e.g. Hausmann 1974: 26; Chiaro 1992; Thaler 2012: 147–149; Renner 2015: 26)

[…]

– to show one's creative ability in using language (e.g. Kabatek 2015:220)
– to attract and retain the addressee's attention (e.g. Tanaka 1994:64; Sablayrolles 2015:208)

[…]

– as a mnemonic device to foster memorization (e.g. Janich 2013:213; Sablayrolles 2015:209)
– to provoke emotional involvement (e.g. Janich 2013:212)

[1] The complete list is in *Varieties of Wordplay* in Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko and Maik Goth (2016:51).

- to create or maintain in-group solidarity (e.g. Giles er al. 1976:141; Goth 2015; Sablayrolles 2015:208)

[…]

- to exclude certain hearer groups (e.g. Sablayrolles 2015:208)

[…]

- as a tool of satirical comedy (e.g. Goth 2015)

[…]

- to discuss social taboos (e.g. Goth 2015:90)

Even this small selection shows how wordplay can be involved in the most specific contexts, as it is fundamental part of social human behaviour. Since every distinct function has a different objective (e.g. to amuse, to mock, or even to criticise someone), one must make sure, as Thaler underlines, to always analyse wordplay within its specific discursive context (2016:52). We will discuss more in depth the functions of wordplay in social interactions in §2.1.

1.2. Research on Wordplay

Wordplay is a multifaceted concept that has been object of research of scholars under many points of view. This paragraph will deal with some of the aspects that are beneficial for an in-depth approach to wordplay: a comparison of the definitions Esme Winter-Froemel and Verena Thaler developed of three major subgroups will be followed by a reflection on hearer and speaker's point of view in the recognition and exploitation of a potential wordplay.

1.2.1. Wordplay subgroups

Three major subgroups have been recognised and described as single units under the umbrella concept of wordplay. Winter-Froemel and Thaler each listed their own individual distinction of the three major subgroups of wordplay. The following table shows a juxtaposition of the two versions.

Esme Winter-Froemel[2]	Verena Thaler[3]
A first major subtype of wordplay associates and / or juxtaposes linguistic units which are identical or very close in their form and have different meanings, basically in the form of homonymy, polysemy or paronymy.	Wordplay in the narrow sense can […] be defined as the action of playing with linguistic material (or the result thereof) that is based on the combination of linguistic units which are identical or very close in form and have different meanings.
A second major subtype of wordplay is based on the principle of combining elements selected according to a formal criterion which is defined on a sublexical level (i.e. on the phonic or graphic level) and identifies paradigmatically similar items.	Wordplay in a broader sense can be defined as the action of playing with linguistic material (or the result thereof) that is based on a combination of linguistic units which are similar in form but do not have different meanings.
A third major subtype of wordplay are ludic deformations, where specific elements of existing forms are substituted on a sublexical level. This subtype of wordplay is also mostly local […] and it implies a sublexical innovation.	Wordplay in the broadest sense can be defined as the action of playing with words (or the result thereof), which is based on the variation of linguistic units without involving formal similarities. Wordplay in that sense can concern all kinds of linguistic material that is modified in a playful way.

The first aspect to capture our attention is the linguistic level on which every wordplay subtype works. As Thaler highlights, we experience a transition from the narrowest to broadest sense: the wordplay actualisation widens its focus from a phonological to a morphological level, then reaching the broadest sense by involving not only sound and spelling, but words in their wholeness, often involving their modification. Each of the three subgroups obviously covers multiple ways to play with words that correspond to that wordplay definition: for example, Winter-Froemel already mentions homonimy, polysemy and paronymy as members of the first subtype. The third paragraph of this section will be completely dedicated to a more exhaustive list, provided with examples.

Another standing out aspect is the absence of the subject exploiting language in the definitions of both Winter-Froemel and Thaler; in fact, as we will examine in depth in §1.2.2., wordplay is not simply a one-way phenomenon.

1.2.2. Point of view

A necessary condition for wordplay to be considerable as successful – meaning it has triggered the desired effect – is that at least one person recognises its traits and the way semiotic material is being

[2] *Approaching Wordplay* in Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko and Maik Goth (2016:37-38).
[3] *Varieties of Wordplay* in Sebastian Knospe, Alexander Onysko and Maik Goth (2016:49-50).

played with (Lecolle, 2016:63). This does not necessarily mean only the speaker (we talk here of 'speaker' and 'hearer' referring to both oral and written conversation) is able to do it.

Let us go back a bit further: according to the theory of semantic frame coined by Charles Fillmore (1977; 1982), of great importance within the field of cognitive linguistics, our semantic knowledge is distributed in frames that "encapsulate the encyclopaedic, interconnected, and contextual nature of meaning" (Onysko, 2016:71). Consequently, the words forming an utterance evoke a certain frame according to the meaning the statement in question wants to convey. What happens when wordplay is involved is that the expectation created for its semantic complexion is unexpectedly substituted by verbal material that evokes a different, oftentimes completely opposite, meaning (Onysko, 2016:72). Coulson et al. call this phenomenon "frame-shifting": through a semantic and pragmatic reanalysis, elements of the message-level representation are recognised as part of a new frame that the individual retrieves from long-term-memory (2006: 229).

Is it always the same part of the conversation (i.e. the speaker) to voluntarily trigger a frame-shift to produce wordplay? The answer is no: wordplay has to be recognised to be successful, but this does not prevent the existence of wordplay to be identified also (if not only, at least initially) by the hearer. Knowledge is subjective, strictly related to personal experience, so we could say that according to the encyclopaedic knowledge one owns, some people may be more compatible to recognising wordplay. For example, as Winter-Froemel (2016:16) proposes, in some occasions the hearer could be more sensitive to humour or could be linguistically more competent than the speaker, thus pinpointing wordplay where even the producer of the utterance had not noticed its presence or had not intended to induce amusement (she calls these cases 'ludic reinterpretations'). In these situations, the normal social hierarchy is inverted by the hearer, who prevails on the speaker. Social hierarchy as part of wordplay involvement in social interactions, will be further discussed in §2.1.

1.3. Principal Categories of Wordplay

This section will represent a source for wordplay kinds during the analysis in the third section. The three lists include a sample of the most common types of wordplay – and thus the most likely to be used most in the countries we will be focusing on.

1.3.1. First major subtype

The first major subtype entails those wordplay varieties where the exploited linguistic material shares very similar, if not identical, form (signifier) and divergent meanings (signified). Another distinction can be made among these types according to the visibility of the play-on-words, which can be *in praesentia* or *in absentia* (Winter-Froemel, 2016:29), labelled by Hausmann (1974) respectively as 'horizontal' and 'vertical' wordplay. Both designations help understand where the difference lies: *in praesentia* wordplays juxtapose visible items, whereas wordplays *in absentia* invite to look for an alternative interpretation, since the seemingly most obvious one does not lead to a communicatively adequate interpretation (Winter-Froemel, 2016:18). The first major wordplay subtype comprises:

Type of wordplay	Function / description	Example
Homographs	Words that share the same written form but have different meanings. (definition: Wikipedia)	Cottleston, Cottleston, Cottleston Pie, A fly can't bird, but a bird can fly. (Hoff, B. (1982) *The Tao of Pooh*)
Homonyms	Words that sound the same or are spelled the same but have different meanings. (definition: Cambridge Dictionary)	Why did the teacher wear sunglasses? Because his students were so bright. (source: https://www.slideshare.net/DavidMainwood/puns-homophones-and-homonyms)
Homophones	Words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings or spellings, or both. (definition: Cambridge Dictionary)	Context: two violinists playfully complain about a bassist calling a classical piece "song". All we ever wanted was peace. But we can't have peace if people call it song. (source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygtqBkiGVCw)
Paronyms	Words that are pronounced or written in a similar way but have different lexical meanings. (definition: Wikipedia)	I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream. (source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1Nxup3hDm8)
Polysemic words	Words that have multiple meanings, usually related by contiguity of meaning within a semantic field. (definition: Wikipedia)	A baseball player is running off the field to a nearby house in the neighborhood. The fans told the runner to run HOME. (Garcia et al. (2007) *Polysemy: A Neglected Concept in Wordplay*)

1.3.2. Second major subtype

The second major subtype entails those wordplay types where the exploited linguistic material shares similar, but not identical, form (signifier) and the same meaning (signified) – also known as 'soundplay'. The second major wordplay subtype comprises:

Type of wordplay	Function / description	Example
Alliteration	The use, especially in poetry, of the same sound or sounds, especially consonants, at the beginning of several words that are close together. (source: Cambridge Dictionary)	The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew, The furrow followed free; We were the first that ever burst Into that silent sea. (Coleridge, S. T. (1798), *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*)
Anagrams	Words or phrases made by using the letters of other words or phrases in a different order. (source: Cambridge Dictionary)	He pulled Harry's wand from his pocket and began to trace it through the air, writing three shimmering words: TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE Then he waved the wand once, and the letters of his name rearranged themselves I AM LORD VOLDEMORT (Rowling, J. K. (2018), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*)
Lipograms	Word game consisting of writing a paragraph or longer works in which a particular letter or group of letters is avoided. (source: Wikipedia)	*Gadsby*, a novel by Ernest Vincent Wright, does not include any word that contains the letter E. (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gadsby_(novel))
Palindromes	Words, numbers, phrases, or other sequences of characters which read the same backward as forward. (source: Cambridge Dictionary)	A nut for a jar of tuna. (source: https://www.grammarly.com/blog/16-surprisingly-funny-palindromes/)
Spoonerism	An error in speech in which corresponding consonants, vowels, or morphemes are switched (see metathesis) between two words in a phrase. (source: Wikipedia)	You have hissed all my mystery lectures. You have tasted a whole worm. Please leave Oxford on the next town drain. ("You have missed all my history lectures. You have wasted a whole term. Please leave Oxford on the next down train."). (Lederer, R. (1988), *Get Thee to a Punnery*)
Tongue-twisters	A sentence or phrase that is intended to be difficult to say, especially when repeated quickly and often. (source: Cambridge Dictionary)	She sells sea-shells on the sea-shore. (Winter-Froemel, E (2016), *Approaching Wordplay*)

1.3.3. Third major subtype

The third major subtype entails those wordplay types where the exploited linguistic material undergoes a modification (or innovation) on a sublexical level – also known as 'ludic deformation' (Winter-Froemel, 2016:42). The third major wordplay subtype comprises:

Type of wordplay	Function / description	Example
Homophonic translation	It renders a text in one language into a near-homophonic text in another language, usually with no attempt to preserve the original meaning of the text. (source: Wikipedia)	The lyrics “Like a wheel, gonna spin it” in the song *Highway to Hell* by AC/DC can be misheard by Italian speakers as “le galline con le spine” (eng. spiny hens).
Language games	A system of manipulating spoken words to render them incomprehensible to the untrained ear. (source: Wikipedia)	Road → frog [and toad] (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhyming_slang)
Malapropism	The mistaken use of an incorrect word in place of a word with a similar sound, resulting in a nonsensical, sometimes humorous utterance. (source: Wikipedia)	Alice said she couldn’t eat crabs or any other crushed Asians. (crustaceans). (source: https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-malapropism.html)
Portmanteaus	Words formed by combining two other words. (source: Cambridge Dictionary)	Smog (smoke + fog) Spork (spoon + fork)

2. Wordplay and Culture

"Culture consists of shared elements that provide the standards for perceiving, believing, evaluating, communicating, and acting among those who share a language, a historical period, and a geographic location". The assertion Shavitt et al. (2008:1103) made is a sufficient clarification of the tight relationship culture and language share; not only are idioms an essential component of the respective culture, but they also contribute to shaping and expanding it. At the same time, culture is an intrinsic aspect of language: according to the place, time and condition a community lives in, language develops to give space to elements and concepts the respective community gives importance to. Let us take in consideration the example of Italian pasta: nowadays there are dozens of sorts of pasta and due to the difference in shape and size, each one of them has a specific name. However, we will hardly ever hear non-Italians name a sort of pasta other than "pasta" or "macaroni", or again "fettuccine". This, as Lotman et al. state, because "no language […] can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have, at its center, the structure of natural language" (1978:212).

Therefore, if language is as fundamental for culture as culture itself is for language, we can deduct that, in turn, wordplay plays as huge a role in culture as culture does in its production. This second section will focus precisely on that omnipresent feature of language that is wordplay – especially as a subcategory of verbal humour. We will first reflect on the importance of wordplay in social interactions among two or more individuals and how even within the same community (in this case a country) smaller groups can be established, outside of which certain references cannot be understood. This will help introduce the idea of wordplay both as product and expression of a culture that is accessible only to native individuals or to those who have learned enough about it to be able to understand references. We will then proceed, with the same intent, to examine how Italy, Britain, United States, Germany and Japan deal with wordplay, collecting information on the topic in propaedeutic view of the analysis that will be conducted in the third section.

2.1. Wordplay in Interactions Among (Groups of) People

Be it shared between two individuals or among a larger group, wordplay, as essential part of language, performs a role of communication instrument. In §1.1 we have already seen some of the functions carried out by wordplay in a social environment and eight out of nine happen to regard the social sphere. It seems wordplay can be involved in multiple aspects of social interactions – not only in the humorous ones, as one could expect – and the strongest awareness individuals have of wordplay, the greater role they play in the "wordplayfulness" of the moment. Some of the functions listed in §1.1 are taken in consideration by Kullmann (2015:63) as he reflects on the prominence of wordplay in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. He points out that in both literary works, wordplay is exploited as means to exclude – or to confuse, as in the case of Alice dealing with the creatures living in Wonderland – one or more hearers; Shakespeare's Beatrice, however, utilises it to make fun of the other unaware characters such as a messenger who cannot manage to go any further than understanding the literal meaning of her words.

> MESSENGER: "[Benedick] hath done good service, lady, in these wars."
> BEATRICE: "You had musty victual, and he hath holp to eat it: he is a very valiant trencherman; he hath an excellent stomach."
> MESSENGER: "And a good soldier too, lady."
> (Shakespeare, W. (1600), *Much Ado About Nothing*)

With this pun, which opens onto a series of humorous and somehow provocative play-with-words, Beatrice implies that "Benedick might be better at eating food served on trenchers or platters than at fighting courageously in trenches dug in a battle-field" (Kullmann, 2015:63). According to Kullmann, by playing with words Beatrice also wants to entertain the audience creating a pleasant and playful environment, thus demonstrating how pivotal a position wordplay holds in conversation. Not only does it capture the attention of the hearer(s), but it also stems their entertainment or exclusion – like in the case of the messenger.

Beatrice is taking advantage of her position in social hierarchy, as she is allowed to speak in such a caustic manner. However, the act of playing with words constitutes a suitable means to "invert

the otherwise prevailing social hierarchy between the speaker and the hearer" (Winter-Froemel, 2016:16). Such situations often occur during school lessons in case of ludic reinterpretations (§1.2), when students grasp a secondary meaning in the teacher's words, or when they openly respond playfully to a teacher's question:

> TEACHER: What is the square root of 56.9?
> STUDENT: Cottleston pie.
> (source: Urban Dictionary)

This sort of context shows an individual who is at a lower level in social hierarchy (the student) reply light-heartedly to the question made by a member of a higher level (the teacher). "Cottleston Pie" is an answer given at any kind of question by Winnie the Pooh in the book *The Tao of Pooh* which became largely used as a silly reply. This use of wordplay, or humour in general, is brought to another level when it represents the only way for people to express their own opinion against oppressive authorities. Tilley (2017:161) states that "satire, irony, wordplay, puns, and double entendre can communicate at multiple levels, subtly signalling an insult or joke to one audience but being difficult to pin down as offensive or illegal by those in power (and thus difficult to punish)". Hence, wordplay represents an almost "safe" weapon to use due to its double-reading feature, which can result understandable only by a specific group of people – the subversive one in this context. A not so extreme form of 'subversive' wordplay is signifyin', the language used by African Americans to establish and feel part of a community, which we will read of in §2.2.3.

A further example of wordplay function is presented by Crystal (1998:2) as he reports a conversation held by four friends – Janet, Jane, Peter and John – in which Janet is telling a story about an encounter of their respective cats on the street. She is suddenly talked over by Jane and then by Peter, each of whom makes a play-on-words revolving around the word "cat" (respectively 'catfrontation' and 'cat-astrophe', then followed by other similar humorous utterances), at which Janet responds positively by accepting the fun touch they gave to the conversation. As Crystal points out, even though Janet is interrupted while telling her story, the confidential situation the four friends

are in allows the other three to take the lead with a series of puns ("ping-pong punning"), which is also the main topic of the conversation. Each of the four interlocutors enjoys the chance to produce humour, thus strengthening the bond they are sharing in such social circumstance.

This limited number of examples already gives us an insight of how deeply wordplay is rooted in interactions among two or more individuals and how differently it can influence the conversation according to the (emotional) effect it wants to trigger.

2.2. Wordplay as Product and Expression of Culture: The Perception of Wordplay in Italy, Britain, the United States, Germany and Japan

Subject of this paragraph will be the use and role of wordplay in single countries, that are Italy, Britain, the United States, Germany and Japan. As already mentioned in §2, language and culture are intrinsically linked; consequently, every country has developed – and is constantly further developing – its own domain of language and its 'playability'. Examples of wordplay use from the past, as well as an overview on the modern one will be examined for each country.

2.2.1. Italy

Being a fusional language that uses inflection, Italian is rich in homophones and expands through derivation rather than fusion – even though nowadays portmanteaus are starting to become more frequent. Within the centuries-old Italian literary tradition, wordplay has been explored on multiple levels, sometimes finding common points with works from other foreign authors. For instance, Kullmann (2015) underlines how wordplay is practiced by the characters in *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600) by William Shakespeare (which we have talked about in §2.1.) follows perfectly the courtly practices that are recommended in Baldassarre Castiglione's *Il cortigiano* (1528). For instance, when Bernardo Bibbiena, one of Castiglione's characters, states that "[o]f those readie jeastes […] that consist in a short saying, such are most lively that arise out of doubtfulnesse", he is certainly referring to wordplays involving homophones.

Fast forward to early 20th century when Italy, an underdeveloped country, was experiencing a period of intense migration: millions of farmers left their country to seek fortune abroad, especially in North and South America. In 1904, Giovanni Pascoli wrote *Italy*, a poem in Dantesque *terza rima* (a hendecasyllabic stanza formed by tercets in cross rhyme), that describes the true story of two Italian immigrants who go back home from the United States to visit their mother. The whole work highlights the at this point divergent lives the old mother and her children live, since she is still immersed in tradition and old costumes, whereas the two siblings are now used to the more developed and modern New World. However, what strikes the most is the linguistic experiment Pascoli makes with homophonic translation: the two siblings mangle English words they hear every day in America in a phonetically correct and yet senseless Italian.

Venne, sapendo della lor venuta,
gente, e qualcosa rispondeva a tutti
12 *Ioe*, grave: *Oh yes*, è fiero... vi saluta...

molti bisini, *oh yes*... No, tiene un frutti-
stendo... *Oh yes*, vende checce, candi, scrima...
15 Conta moneta: può campar coi frutti...

Il baschetto non rende come prima...
Yes, un salone, che ci ha tanti bordi...
18 *Yes*, l'ho rivisto nel pigliar la stima...
(Pascoli, G. (1904), *Italy*, emphasis in original)

Joe (English version of 'Beppe', misspelled as *Ioe*) is the brother who, in the tercets above, welcomes in their house people who have come visit them. He answers all their questions about their life in America and their mutual friends who are living there as well, and through his words the author lets the reader witness the hardships of a generation that has been eradicated from its home and culture. Moreover, starting from verse 13, Joe says the words *bisini* (business), *fruttistendo* (fruit stand), *checche* (cakes), *candi* (candy), *scrima* (ice cream), *moneta* (money), *bachetto* (basket), *salone* (saloon), *bordi* (boards), *stima* (steamer): the author evidently also wants the reader to notice the struggle of people who have now partly lost use of their mother tongue while still not mastering the new idiom.

Worth naming is also writer, journalist and teacher Gianni Rodari, who revolutionised Italian children literature through his creative tales and nursery rhymes written within the ‘60s and the ‘80s. His most outstanding trait is the way he plays with lexicon and grammar, encouraging children to make errors by inventing stories around those same misspellings. For instance, the first nursery rhyme in his *Book of Errors* (1964), named *Per Colpa di un Accento* (lit. Due to an Accent), begins as follows (I will propose a rough literal translation, not following poetic standards, to provide an English version of the meaning):

Per colpa di un accento	Due to an accent
Un tale di Santhià	A person from Santhià
Credeva d’essere alla meta	Thought to have reached their destination
Ed era appena a metà.	But was only halfway through.
(Rodari, G. (1964), *Il libro degli Errori*)	

The wordplay revolves around the homographic words *meta* (destination), pronounced /'mɛta/, and *metà* (half, halfway through), pronounced /me'ta/. The only difference in spelling is given by the accent in *metà*: for this reason, the person from Santhià, who has apparently forgotten or not noticed the accent, misunderstands the word and wrongly thinks to have completed their journey. There are various other cases of words whose written form changes only for an accent and due to this subtlety, they are one of the greatest challenges for people (especially children) who learn Italian.

In the journalistic world, Italians use wordplay as a tool to write concise headlines: they are quick and easy to read and at the same time they are more likely to capture the attention. The following example was written on the 18 February 2016 edition of *L’Eco di Bergamo*, the city’s daily newspaper, in view of a football match between their team *Atalanta* and *Fiorentina* from Florence.

> […] la Fiorentina è un osso duro.
> (source: https://www.ecodibergamo.it/stories/Sport/atalanta-rosa-quasi-tutta-disponibilema-la-fiorentina-e-un-osso-duro_1167508_11/)

The sentence plays on the two levels of readability, the semantic and the pragmatic one. *Fiorentina*, the adjective that refers to someone or something that comes or stems from Florence, is the name of a football team, but is also a famous steak one can eat in Florence; “osso duro” means “hard bone”,

which is a reference to the culinary field and to the structure of the steak (which is also called 'T-steak' due to the T form of the bone). So, the semantic meaning of the sentence is "The fiorentina steak has a hard bone". On a pragmatic and more metaphorical level, "essere un osso duro" (lit. to be a hard bone) means that one does not give up easily and persists, or even that someone is hard to beat due to their ability. Hence, what the title really wants to say is that *Fiorentina* will not be easy for *Atalanta* to beat.

Finally, advertisements that involve wordplay are becoming more and more common in Italy, since, as Tanaka (1994:71) states, puns "attract attention because they frustrate initial expectations of relevance and create a sense of surprise" and consequently let those whom the message is addressed to focus on the product that is being advertised. An Italian retail store chain, *Esselunga*, is well-known for the witty and effective advertisements involving food and wordplay.

This picture, for instance, goes back to a 2001 campaign organised by *Esselunga*, which consisted in playing with names of famous personalities and foods. This character, recognisable by the typical hat he painted in the portrait of Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, is Piero della Francesca, an Italian painter of the early Renaissance. The humorous play-on-words is due to the change of consonant C in *Francesca* with a P: in fact, *pesca* is the Italian term for 'peach', the fruit that has been used for the advertisement.

2.2.2. Britain

Britain is well-known for its secular wordplay tradition: a huge amount of research has been done on Shakespeare's use of wordplay in his works and he surely was not the first, nor the last one to utilise it. The poem *London* (1794) by William Blake sees the author exploiting the polysemy of the word 'cry' (in italics) to let the reader perceive on how largely despair affected the population (the city of London in the context) during the Second Industrial Revolution.

5 In every *cry* of every Man,
In every Infant's *cry* of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the Chimney-sweeper's *cry*
10 **E**very blackning Church appals,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.
(Blake, W. (1794), *London,* emphasis added)

It must also be highlighted how the Leitmotiv of (sorrow) sounds is underlined by the acrostic (which Cambridge Dictionary defines as a text, usually a poem, in which particular letters, such as the first letters of each line, spell a word or phrase) formed by the initials of verses 9-12: H-E-A-R (in bold).

The critical and not at all humorous use of wordplay Blake makes in his poem is completely different from the one practiced by Lewis Carroll, less than a century later, in his *Alice's* books. Alice's character was allegedly inspired by Alice Liddell, daughter of the Dean of Christ Church, Henry Liddell, to whom Carroll was attached. At the time wordplay was used by adults to entertain children in the upper circles of society (Kullmann, 2015:64); Carroll displayed this type of playfulness in the Alice's books , but also in the letters he wrote to some child friends. For instance, here is an extract from a letter he wrote to eleven-year-old Mary MacDonald on 14 November 1864:

> My dear Mary,
> Once upon a time there was a little girl, and she had a cross old Uncle – his neighbours called him a Curmudgeon (whatever that may mean) – and this little girl had promised to copy out for him a sonnet Mr. Rossetti had written about Shakespeare. Well, and she didn't do it, you know: and the poor Uncle's nose kept getting longer and longer, and his temper getting shorter and shorter, and post after post went by, and no sonnet came. […]

Kullmann notices how the effective creation of counterparts of Carroll himself and little Mary, along with the witty use the author makes of the words 'long' and 'short', served Carroll as a means to subtly give a lesson to his young friend about not finishing to copy a sonnet, which she had really done.

The last example relating to British literature we want to focus on is George Orwell's *1984*, where the author makes large use of portmanteaus. The most eye-catching example is, of course, 'Newspeak' (formed by the two words 'new' and 'speak'), the language that is slowly being shaped

to become as simple and as unlikely to misinterpret as possible – just like the name itself. However, in a world where double meanings are strictly forbidden, Orwell cleverly hides one in the name of the exact bureau that should keep them under control. The Newspeak word for Ministry of Truth is, in fact, Minitrue, where one can recognise the words ‘mini’ and ‘true’, a subtle hint at the very scarce amount of truth there is in such a dystopic reality.

English is a malleable language, rich in synonyms, homophones and homograph, and most importantly “very dynamic in terms of new accessions involving a large variety of word-formation techniques, and of neologisms capable of covering changes in all sectors of society” (Mattiello, 2013:2). Thus, it is a fertile source of creative and eye (and year)-catching formulations, whether they are used for humorous purposes or with more serious intents. The former category brings us back to comedy, of massive importance in the British culture, for which we will cite an example from the song *Cheap Flights* by British comedic and satirical singing group Fascinating Aïda. The song is a protest and a mockery against airlines offering flights at very low prices that, however, come with extra charges on almost every service.

> Diddly-aiden-daidin-daidin-dai
> Diddly-aiden-daidin-daidin-dai
> Someone’s being diddled and it’s us, so it is.
> (Fascinating Aïda (2012), *Cheap Flights*)

Being the song allegedly directed at Ryanair, the Irish low-cost airline, the group cleverly plays with the assonance between lilting – a form of traditional singing common in the Gaelic-speaking areas of Ireland and Scotland – and the verb ‘diddle’, synonym for ‘cheat’. Even if the company is never named throughout the song, the use of regionalisms is a key factor in the creation of a humorous atmosphere where the audience can laugh at it; this shows once again the strong synergy of culture and language when producing wordplay.

Wordplay is hugely exploited by the advertising industry, too: in fact, the centuries-old punning tradition that characterises Britain, along with the high probability to find homophones in the English language (Díaz-Pérez 2012:11), led Britain to make a more consistent use of wordplay in advertisements compared to other countries (Redfern 1982, Tanaka 1994). For instance, the name ‘Surelock Holmes’ in the picture on the side[4] clearly recalls the famous fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. By changing the spelling from ‘Sherlock’ to ‘Surelock’, the word gains a new meaning, that is to count on this locksmith to install safe locks on his clients’ doors.

In the East End of London, the social class that is known as Cockney gave birth to a vernacular idiom that nowadays is still in use and, for speakers that are external to the community, almost indecipherable (and sometimes hilarious): Cockney Rhyming Slang. In the distinction developed by Winter-Froemel and Thaler, it is recognised as a language game, included in the third major wordplay subtype (§1.3.3.). As the name itself highlights, this wordplay variety works with rhymes: a concept or a common word is replaced by a couple of two more words, the latter of which rhymes with the original one; then, the second word of the pair is omitted (and is thereafter implied), rendering the conversation understandable only for Cockney speakers. Here is an example of a sentence uttered in Cockney Rhyming Slang:

> I’m ironing my Uncle.
> (source: http://www.fun-with-words.com/crs_example.html)

For a non-Rhyming Slang speaker, the sentence makes no sense; however, it does for those who know that ‘Uncle’ should be paired with ‘Bert’, which rhymes with ‘shirt’. So, a Cockney Rhyming Slang speaker who utters “I’m ironing my Uncle [Bert]”, in fact wants to say that they are ironing their shirt.

[4] Source: https://www.theguardian.com/small-business-network/gallery/2016/mar/22/business-pun-gallery-quirky-names

2.2.3. United States

Transitioning from British to American[5] English, we do not only shift between language varieties, but obviously also between cultures. If the British one is composed of the four countries forming the United Kingdom, the American one is an even more complex and multi-faceted. The United States we know today stem from the encounter and fusion of numerous cultures. If we consider all the migrations – voluntary or not – that occurred since the New World was discovered, we realise that a wide plethora of communities, some more, some less, shape today's American culture. For this reason, 'American' use of wordplay is an umbrella concept covering different developments of language use according to the concentration of certain ethnicities in every area of the United States. Since it would be difficult to list only wordplay uses that manage to involve this whole culture mix, we will "zoom in" on a few specific communities – the Latino and Hispanic and African American ones – to discover how differently from one another they produce wordplay.

Hispanic and Latin American citizens constitute about 18.5% of the American population[6], making Spanish the second most spoken language in the United States, and 60% of them have Mexican origins. The impact of two different languages that suddenly had to coexist gave shape to Spanglish, a blend of English and Spanish lexicon and grammar which differs according to the variety of Spanish. The word 'Spanglish' was coined in 1933 (Lambert, 2018:13) and Chicano theatre, typical of the Mexican tradition, was one of the first evidence of Spanglish use. Among others, Netty and Jesús Rodríguez wrote and played many theatrical works where the two languages meddle through borrowings (the adaptation of a word from one language into another), codeswitching (the use of two distinct idioms within the same phrase or discourse) and interferences (the influence of a language on another), such as *Una Mula de Tantas* (1932). Haney (2003:164), underlines that the jokes contained

[5] This section focuses only on the United States of America; however, I will also be using the term 'America' (which technically indicates the whole territory formed by North and South America) to avoid repetitions, always and only referring to the United States.
[6] Source: U.S. Census Bureu (2019) < https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219#qf-headnote-a >

in their dialogues "play with the boundaries between English and Spanish […], suggesting a move toward the celebration of cultural hybridity". Here is an example from *Una Mula de Tantas* (1935):

J:	Pues ¿que Ud. No conoce México?	Well, aren't you familiar with Mexico?
N:	Oh, no.	Oh, no.
	Me ser American girl.	*Me to be* American girl.
	(Rodríguez, J; N (1935), *Una Mula de Tantas*)	(Anonymous, 1935)

From Spanglish – and the incorrectness that the imperfect knowledge and simultaneous use of two idioms involve – derived fromlostiano, a type of artificial and humorous wordplay that translates Spanish idioms word-for-word into English and vice versa. The name originated from 'from lost to the river', a word-for-word translation of the Spanish idiom *de perdido al río*, which means in difficult times one should take risky decisions rather than doing nothing. In their book *From Lost to the River* (1995), Ochoa and Socasau describe various types of fromlostiano, which involve idioms, celebrities' names, street names, multinational corporations' names and minced oaths (the misspelling or mispronouncing of blasphemous, taboo or prophane words). Due to the tight relation between Spanglish and the Latin and Hispano American reality, this language has become a way to express one's identity and to enhance the feeling of belonging to a community. Thus, advertisements exploiting Spanglish and fromlostiano have become rather common. This picture[7] was taken in Miami, Florida, where a consistent Latin and Hispano American community resides. In this case, rather than using *gratis*, the Spanish word for 'free', whoever is offering free consultation from a mechanic wrote the English one.

The African American community is also significantly present in the United States; its origins date back to the Atlantic slave trade occurred between the 16th and 19th century. The African American community has developed a vernacular linguistic practice that exploits the gap between the denotative and connotative meanings of word: signifyin'. American literary critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. was the

[7] Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanglish

first to deeply analyse signifyin' in his books *Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (1987) and *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988), where he recognises signifyin' as essential part of the whole African American culture, comprising music, literature and rhetoric. Ruff (2009:66) states that signifyin' "is thus the primordial material upon which hip-hop music, the blues, jazz, spirituals, and African-American work songs are drawn.", correlated to technical devices such as rhyme, rhythm, incremental repetition, improvisation and phonetic manipulation. The famous *I Have a Dream* speech given by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963, for example, is composed by numerous uses of incremental repetition:

> We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. *Now is the time* to make real the promises of democracy. *Now is the time* to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. *Now is the time* to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. *Now is the time* to make justice a reality for all of God's children. (Martin Luther King Jr (1963), *I Have a Dream*, emphasis added)

Signifyin' is said to derive from the pet of the Yoruban spirit Esu-Elegbara, a monkey who masters rhetoric tools such as metaphor, metonymy, hyperbole and irony. Inspired by it, slaves created a way to exploit language which functions on exposing and exploiting the weaknesses of a system (§2.1.). Fundamentally, signifyin' is produced through witty insults, teasing and taunting, often accompanied by gestures that are relevant within the black community. This obviously applies differently to divergent kinds of interlocutors: when interacting with friends and equals, "aggression and directness are equally appropriate", whereas when addressing someone in a position of power, "indirection, innuendo, and implication become the appropriate strategy" (Ruff, 2009:66). Signifyin' permeates in every artistic field and music is surely the most prolific one: *Signifying Rapper* (1988) by Schoolly D is one of the most known rap songs, where two people of colour interact through signifyin' in a rather violent way. Nowadays, Twitter is the social medium where signifyin' is produced the most and since the tweeting app does not involve physical contact, African American users rely completely on language. Florini (2014) states that "[b]lack users often perform their identities through displays of cultural competence and knowledge" and, as Baratunde Thurston

asserted during his presentation "How to Be Black Online" at South by Southwest in 2010, such a rooted dissing call-and-response tradition in oral conversations was naturally transferred online. The following example was collected by researcher Thomas Kochman in his book *Rappin' and Stylin' Out: Communication in Urban Black America* (1972) and represents how a call-and-response conversation could be started, either orally or online.

> Yo momma sent her picture to the lonely hearts club, but they sent it back and say, "We ain't that lonely!"
> (source: https://www.straightdope.com/21341677/to-african-americans-what-does-signifying-mean)

2.2.4. Germany

German is a fusional language (i.e. it has the tendency to use the same inflectional morpheme to express the same grammatical, semantic or syntactic meaning) characterised by inflection – that is the use, among others, of affixes (prefixes, suffixes, and so on). Therefore, it is rich in derived words and polysemic lexicon on which German wordplays often rely, since homophony is also largely present.

Since early 20th century, Germany has developed the tradition of *Kabarett*, a name that refers to both comedy and political satire. The substantial difference between stand-up comedy and *Kabarett* is that the former revolves around personal stories of comedians, whereas *Kabarettisten* perform critique against politics and society while stimulating the audience. Nowadays there are multiple *Kabarett* branches, from the most classical ones (represented, among others, by Volker Pispers) to those that take inspiration from a more modern concept of comedy, where *Kabarettisten* such as Dieter Nuhr. The latter, for instance, often plays with his own surname, which sounds like *nür* (eng. only), to name his stage programs:

> Nuhr in Berlin (Nuhr / Only in Berlin)
> Nuhr die Wahrheit (Nuhr / Only the truth)
> (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dieter_Nuhr#CD_albums)

Other than in performing environments, the potentiality of playing with German is widely exploited in advertisements and signs. The following example is a message that was printed on bins

in the district of Ahrweiler, in the north of Rheinland-Palatinate, where new rules about waste sorting have been introduced in 2018:

> ABFALLSORTIERUNG
> FÜR ALLE (SELBST)VERSTÄNDLICH
> (Source: https://www.kreis-ahrweiler.de/presse.php?lfdnrp=8499)

The word in brackets literally means 'self', whereas *verständlich* means 'understandable'. However, the two words combined form the adverb *selbstverständlich*, translatable as 'obviously', 'naturally', but also 'to be a given'. So, the message can have to separate meanings: either "Waste sorting, easy for everyone to understand" or "Waste sorting, available to everyone". With the same, simple line the district managed to inform citizens of the new guidelines regarding waste sorting while eliminating any doubt about their clarity.

Shop and restaurant signs are also ideal chances to create the perfect play-on-words that captures people's attention and makes them most probably remember the place, this leading to a higher probability of them entering. Nowadays it is very likely to find bilingual puns where German and English are mixed to create an even wider range of wordplays (Knospe, 2016), especially in big cities like Berlin, but monolingual signs are also very successful and used for every kind of business. According to the shop or restaurant, wordplays will be most often produced using words that belong to the same semantic field; for example, hairdressers play with words referring to hair, cuts, heads

and also the feeling of satisfaction their customers enjoy after receiving a haircut. Here is an example of a perfumery photographed in Berlin[8], where the sign shows a portmanteau highlighted by the use of two different colours. The part in red, *spar*, refers to the verb *sparen* (eng. to save), which blends with the word

[8] Source: https://www.facebook.com/groups/338580632890855/permalink/1992821427466759/

Parfümerie. The clever addition of a single letter before *Parfümerie* has given the sign a further meaning, that is the affordability of the shop.

In 2009, cartoonist and blogger Bastian Melnyk, established Bad Pun Day (Ger. *Tag der schlechten Wortspiele*), celebrated, allegedly for no particular reason, on 12th November. Many people on the internet gladly join the celebration with their own bad puns and other types of play-on-words and even *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the Bavarian newspaper, usually publishes a humorous article full of wordplays. For example, in 2015 Carolin Gasteiger, jokingly unsure of what to write that year, asked herself "Was sollen wir nur Thunfisch?", where the word *Thunfisch* (eng. tuna fish) substitutes the verb *tun* (eng. to do) in the question "Was sollen wir nur tun?", that is literally translatable as "What should we do?".

2.2.5. Japan

Due to its extraordinary versatility, the Japanese language (both written and spoken) is one of the most prolific idioms for the production of wordplay. In essence, the Japanese writing system is formed by the combination of logographic *kanji* and syllabic *kana*. *Kanji* are the adopted Chinese characters, every one of which corresponds to one or more words, whereas the two *kana* are *hiragana* and *katakana*; the first is mostly used for conjugation, the latter to write words that have been adopted from foreign languages. Due to the multiple meanings linked to every *kanji*, homophones and homographs are the most used types of wordplay.

Goroawase (語呂合わせ) is one of the most used wordplay typologies, where homophonic words are associated with a sequence of numbers, letters or symbols, thus providing that sequence with a new meaning. Rather than for inducing amusement, this kind of wordplay is used as a mnemonic technique to help memorise, among others, telephone numbers. One thing we should know is that Japanese has not one, but three different ways to read numbers: *on'yomi* reading (derived from

Chinese), *kun'yomi* reading (originated in Japan) and the English reading. Here is a chart[9] with all three different readings: *hiragana* and *katakana* alphabets will be accompanied by the *romaji* version, that is the transcription in Latin alphabet. It will help us read the number sequences we will find in this paragraph as well as in §3.5.

#	On'yomi	Kun'yomi	English
0	れい (rei / ree)、れ (re)	まる (maru)、ま (ma)、わ (re)	オウ (owu)、ゼロ (zero)、ゼ (ze)
1	いち (ichi)、い (i)	ひとつ (hitotsu)、ひと (hito)、ひ (hi)	ワン (wan)
2	に (ni)、じ (ji)	ふたつ (futatsu)、ふた (futa)、ふ (fu)	ツ (tsu)、ツー (tsuu)、トゥー (tuu)
3	さん (san)、さ (sa)、ざ (za)	みつ (mitsu)、み (mi)	ス (su)、スリー (surii)
4	し (shi)	よん (yon)、よ (yo)、よつ (yotsu)	フォ (fo)、ホ (ho)
5	ご (go)、こ (ko)	いつつ (itsutsu)、いつ (itsu)、い (i)	ファイブ (faibu)、ファイヴ (faivu)
6	ろく (roku)、ろ (ro)	むつ (mutsu)、む (mu)	シックス (shikkusu)
7	しち (shichi)	ななつ (nanatsu)、なな (nana)、な (na)	セブン (sebun)、セヴン (sevun)
8	はち (hachi)、は (ha)、ば (ba)	やつ (yatsu)、や (ya)	エート (eeto)
9	きゅう (kyuu)、く (ku)	ここのつ (kokonotsu)、こ (ko)	ナイン (nain)
10	じゅう (juu)、じ (ji)	とお (tou / too)、と (to)	テン (ten)

An example of the commercial use Japanese make of *goroawase* is shown in below. The telephone number in question is that of a sushi restaurant and the wordplay is brought in action by the last four figures.

> […] 0 3 4 8
> (source: https://dailyportalz.jp/b/koneta05/07/15/02/)

To decipher the message, which at first impact is not fully clear, we will require not one, but all three types of reading. To read figures 0 and 3 we will make use of the English reading (respectively オ,'o', and ス, 'su'); for figure 4 we will need the *on'yomi* pronunciation (し, 'shi'), whereas for figure 8 we will use the *kun'yomi* typology (や, 'ya'). Thus, we obtain おすしや (お寿司屋), *osushiya* – where I have substituted *katakana* with *hiragana* because of the word's Japanese origin – which means

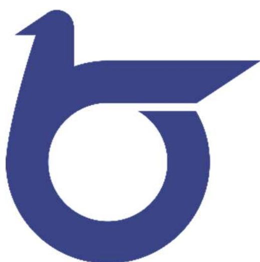
[9] Source: https://psychology.wikia.org/wiki/Japanese_wordplay

‘sushi restaurant’. A clever play with the way each figure is read renders the telephone number easier to remember.

Goroawase can be used also to remember dates (students at school find it particularly useful) or to produce playful utterances that exploit the double reading of a certain combination of sounds. A curious case of *goroawase* is tetraphobia, the notorious superstition surrounding the digit 4 which is widespread in most East Asian nations. Due to the similar (if not the same) pronunciation of the digit 4 and the word “death” – in Japanese they are both pronounced し, ‘shi’ – most East Asians cultures tend to avoid or dispose of that figure: many cases are known of hotels devoid of the fourth floor.

Another kind of wordplay that is typically Japanese is rebus monogram: names are spelled via a rebus as a form of visual pun. While the history of this type of wordplay dates back to the heraldic tradition of the 17th century, nowadays it is widely used by brands. Let us take as an example Kikkoman, a very well-known brand that produces soy sauce and among other traditional seasonings and products. The name Kikkoman is formed by the two Japanese words *kikkoo* (亀甲), ‘tortoise shell’, and *man* (萬), ‘10,000’. The rebus is composed by a hexagonal tortoise shell that encloses the *kanji* for *man*. The meaning lies in the belief that tortoises can live for 10,000 years.

A category of rebus monogram is what Japanese call *mon* (紋), decorative emblems used to identify a single individual, a family or, more recently, a company or a business. *Mon* that are used strictly as family emblems are also known as *mondokoro* (紋所) or *kamon* (家紋). An example is the clever emblem of the Tottori Prefecture, located in the Chūgoku region of Honshu. The image represents a blue bird (*tottori* in Japanese) whose form represents the hiragana と, ‘to’: thus, from the image we can read, *to-tori*, namely *Tottori*.



From what we have read so far about the use of wordplay in Japan, one thing catches the eye: rather than to induce amusement, wordplay has the more practical function to ease the memorisation of numbers or dates, or to help recognise the emblem of a family or a brand at first sight. In fact, apart from traditional comedy forms such as *manzai* (漫才), similar to double act comedy or stand-up comedy, those that we know as ‘jokes’ or ‘puns’ will most likely make people roll their eyes. They have the same reputation of what we call ‘dad jokes’ and share a similar name (*oyaji*, meaning ‘old man’): a typical response to this kind of wordplay, almost always based on homophony, would probably be *samui*, “that’s cold”.

3. How “Wordplayfulness” Varies from Country to Country: Analysis of Wordplays in Italian, British English, American English, German and Japanese

This third and final section will focus on the analysis of three wordplay examples for each country we have talked about in the second one. The intention will be to use the information and data that have been collected in the first two sections to reach two main goals: the first, to examine wordplay structure to discover what kinds of wordplay we will be encountering; the second, to establish if and on how deep a level culture is involved in every case.

3.1. Italian

The first wordplay example is part of an advertisement for Riso Gallo, an Italian joint-stock company specialised in the production of rice and quick recipes with rice as main ingredient. Since the early 2000s, the slogan of every Riso Gallo advertisement has been the following:

> Chicchiricchi... di fantasia!
> (source: https://www.risogallo.it/azienda/comunicazione/)

The wordplay lies in the word *chicchiricchi*, which is linked to the brand name *Gallo* (eng. rooster). In fact, the Italian onomatopoeia for a rooster’s call is *chicchirichì* and the symbol and mascot acting in advertisements is an animated version of the animal. The first part of the onomatopoetic word, *chicchi*, is coincidentally the exact same Italian term for ‘grains’: what the English language knows as ‘rice grains’, in Italian are called *chicchi di riso.* The slogan’s cleverness lies in the exploitation of the homophonic resemblance between the second part of the onomatopoeia, *richì*, and *ricchi* (eng. rich, full): the effect is that *chicchiricchi* can be perceived both as the rooster’s call and as *chicchi ricchi*, and the addition of *di fantasia* (lit. of fantasy) leads to a final meaning of ‘fanciful rice grains’. This wordplay relies on paronymy, since it exploits the similarity in written and spoken form but difference in meanings of *chicchirichì* and *chicchi ricchi*: hence, it belongs to the first major wordplay subtype recognised by Winter-Froemel and Thaler.

I photographed the second wordplay example near a beach volley court in a sports club in Reggio Emilia, Italy, whose name, *OndeChiare* (lit. clear waves), is significant for the analysis:

What interests us is the first line, *OnDe Beach*, which is a subtle and clever wordplay based on both homographic translation and homophony. The word *onde* (eng. waves) is part of the club's name, so 'OnDe Beach' can be seen as a light modification in the name to indicate the club's beach volley area. However, the capital D in *OnDe* is not a typographic error; on the contrary, it entails a second meaning. In fact, the pronunciation for the English definite article 'the' (/ði:/) with an Italian accent is /de/, just like the second syllable of *onde* (pronounced /onde/). Thus, the capital D triggers the double way of reading the line: 'Onde(Chiare) Beach' and 'On The (De) Beach'. Since this wordplay functions based on homophonic translation, it belongs to the third major wordplay subtype.

Lastly, we will examine a wordplay risen in a situation I recently witnessed in first person. My brother and I had gone to the cinema with some friends to see the new film directed by Christoper Nolan, *Tenet*, and once we exited the theatre we had to give back our tickets' money to the one friend that had paid for everyone. While handing the money to our friend, my brother uttered:

> Tenet... I soldi del biglietto.

The play-on-words revolves around the Latin word *tenet*, which is the third person singular of verb *tenere*, translatable as 'to last', 'to persist'. However, in modern Italian the verb *tenere* has various other meanings; the one that interest us is *tenere* literally translated as 'keep' or 'withold',

contextual to a situation where money is involved (e.g. 'keep the change'). In fact, in this case the speaker takes advantage of the similarity between *tenet* and *tenete*, third person plural of the Italian verb. In modern colloquial Italian, the imperative form of *tenere* is used in such a context when the speaker is giving something to the hearer, similarly to the 'here you are' form used by English speakers. Hence, the final English translation of the sentence would be 'here is the money for the ticket'. In this case, the wordplay taken in examination is based on homophony, due to the almost identical written form of *tenet* (Latin verb) and *tenete* (Italian verb), and for this reason it is part of the first major wordplay subtype.

3.2. British English

The first wordplay we will analyse for the British English section is a poster drawn by an anti-Brexiter for a protest in 2017[10]:

The message is a quotation of the famous song *You are my sunshine* by Johnny Cash, where 'you' is replaced by 'EU', the acronym for 'European Union'. The protester is clearly demonstrating (pun intended) their position on Britain's separation from the EU, which had still not happened at the time, by addressing the well-known love song to the Union. In this case, the wordplay relies on the homophony between 'you' /ju/ and 'EU', in English pronounced /iː-juː/. Thus, this wordplay belongs to the first major wordplay subtype.

[10] Source: https://de.reuters.com/article/grossbritannien-brexit-umfrage-idDEKBN1DY0FR

The second wordplay we will analyse is part of a 2014 advertisement campaign organised by the British supermarket chain Morrisons[11]:

The amusement is triggered once the reader realises that the visual part in the advertisement, a pack of minced beef, completes the name of London district Westminster. Once again, the wordplay relies on homophony for this: in fact, the word 'mince' (/mɪns/) shares the exact same pronunciation with the central section of the name Westminster /ˈwɛstmɪnstə/. The play-on-words suits the campaign of a supermarket chain (hence the meat) that, as is written on the advertisement, is now delivering to Central London, where Westminster district is. Due to the reliance on homophony, the wordplay is part of the first major wordplay subtype.

Finally, here is a recurrent pun about British singer and songwriter Elton John:

> I used to wonder if Elton John liked lettuce, then realised he's more of a rocket man.
> (source: https://punsandoneliners.com/randomness/rocket-jokes/)

The play-on-words involves the words 'lettuce', in the primary sentence, and 'rocket man' in the secondary one. In fact, lettuce and rocket are two kinds of edible plants, usually eaten in salads, whereas in colloquial English 'to be more of a something' means 'to prefer something over something else'. Thus, the literal meaning of the sentence is that the British singer prefers rocket over lettuce. However, *Rocketman* is also a well-known song by Elton John, hence the humorous twist taken by

[11] Source: https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/morrisons-pun-tastic-ads-show-off-new-london-delivery-service/1303298

the latter part of the utterance. Due to the difference in lexical meaning and the identical pronunciation of 'rocket man' and 'rocketman' (/ˈrɒkɪt mæn/), the wordplay is based on paronymy and is, consequently, part of the first major wordplay subtype.

3.3. American English

The first example of wordplay we will encounter as far as American English is concerned is a Spanglish beer advertisement[12]:

The word *beerveza* is a portmanteau composed by the English word 'beer' and its Spanish equivalent *cerveza*. It is a typical case in which an advertisement approaches a bilingual community by mixing the two languages they speak; moreover, English native speakers can also easily comprehend the message of the advertisements thanks to the image and description. Since portmanteaus involve a modification in the sublexical structure of the words involved, this wordplay example is part of the third major wordplay subtype.

The second example is a recurrent play-on-words shared among fans of the *Star Wars* franchise:

> May the Fourth be with you.

In 2011, *Star Wars* fans across the world decided to unofficially establish 4th May as Star Wars Day after the pun had been first seen in a 1979 *London Evening News* headline about the election

[12] Source: https://www.pinterest.it/pin/555420566517108791/

of the new British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher[13], saying “May the Fourth Be with You, Maggie. Congratulations”. The wordplay revolves around the catchphrase ‘May the Force be with you’ pronounced by various characters throughout the saga, and especially around the words ‘may’ and ‘Force’. As far as the former is concerned, the wordplay typology used is polysemy, since the auxiliary verb ‘may’ can express a wish, whereas ‘May’ with capital M is the fifth month of the year, when the celebration takes place. The wordplay typology regarding the words ‘Force’ and ‘Fourth’, (they day in the month of May when the recurrence occurs) is, instead, paronymy, since their spelling and pronunciations are only slightly different. Both wordplay variations belong to the first major wordplay subtype.

The last wordplay we will take in examination was inserted by YouTube animator TheOdd1sOut in one of his autobiographic videos, set in a scholastic environment. Subject of the video is his former poetry teacher during his freshmen year in a preparatory school, who made the class thoroughly analyse poems in order to grasp the real meaning and what the authors intended to communicate. The animator underlines in multiple occasions throughout the video how he found poetry, a compulsory subject, boring. During one lesson, the at the time student noticed that a sentence written in direct speech was missing quotation marks at the end and, believing it had an intentional meaning, he told the teacher, who, however, stated it was only a typing error. In the next frame, the Youtuber, who wants to humorously exaggerate the exasperation he felt in that situation, makes the character representing himself scream:

> Why am I perfectly nitpicking this piece when the poet put purposely poor punctuation in his poems! Pterodactyl!
> (Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDyxXGCVIuI&t=395s)

Since poetry is the topic of the video, TheOdd1sOut decided to structure the sentence playing with alliteration, a technique of sound repetition (in this case of the letter P) usually exploited by poets to induce sensations or emotions. However, the humorous effect is given by the fact that the intention

[13] Source: http://abcnewsradioonline.com/entertainment-news/happy-star-wars-day-may-the-fourth-be-with-you.html

of the Youtuber is not a poetic one, but he exploits the poetic knowledge he had been forcingly given during the course out of frustration. Moreover, at the end of the utterance he adds a term ('pterodactyl') which is out of context and whose pronunciation ironically does not involve the sound P: /ˈtɛrʌdæktɪl/. Since the wordplay variety used in this context is alliteration, the wordplay belongs to the first major wordplay subtype.

3.4. German

As we have already seen in §2.2.4., the German language is characterised by an abundancy in homophones, which are often used in advertisements to create catchy slogans, such as in the following 2019 EasyJet advertisement:

> Der Sommer kann Stadt finden.
> (source:
> https://www.facebook.com/easyJetDeutschland/videos/ezy_sommer_citymp4/2451525101534110/)

A literal translation of the slogan would be "the summer can find a city", meaning that relying on EasyJet, everyone will find a city to spend their summer holidays. However, *Stadt finden* (lit. find a city) sounds exactly like the German verb *stattfinden*, which means 'to take place', 'to occur'. Thus, the hidden message of the advertisement is "Summer can begin", which informs the audience that they will find whichever flight they need to reach their destination. Since *Stadt finden* and *stattfinden* share almost the same pronunciation but different spelling, this wordplay is an example of paronymy, which belongs to the first major wordplay subtype.

The second wordplay is a pun made by a German friend of mine:

> Was ist ein Keks unter einem Baum?
> Ein schattiges Plätzchen.

The joke – literally translatable as "What do you call a biscuit under a tree? A tiny, shady spot" – is based on the double meaning of the word *Plätzchen*, which is the diminutive form of the term *Platz* (eng. place, spot), but also the name of German cookies that are usually baked for Christmas. Thus,

the punchline raises amusement because of its double meaning: “What do you call a biscuit under a tree? A shady Christmas biscuit”. The wordplay relies on the polysemy of the word *Plätzchen*, since there is no difference in pronunciation or writing form, but only in the semantic field to which ‘place, spot’ and ‘Christmas biscuit’ belong; hence, the pun belongs to the first major wordplay subtype.

The third and last wordplay is included in a series of 2015 posters hung in by the union of train stations in Berlin, Hauptstadtbahnhöfe, as a protest against passengers throwing their waste on the ground[14]:

The message includes a German saying, *das ist völlig Banane*, which means “that’s a mess” or, as in this case, “that’s uncivil”. In fact, the message plays with the link between the German saying and with the picture of a banana peel, which is universally recognised as symbol of rubbish. The English translation of the message, in fact, would be “Waste on the ground is totally uncivil”. Like the previous wordplay, this one relies on the polysemy of the German word *Banana*, since its semantic meaning is the yellow fruit, whereas the saying *das ist völlig Bananas* is based on its pragmatic meaning. Hence, the wordplay is part of the first major wordplay subtype.

[14] Source: https://hauptstadtbahnhoefe.wordpress.com/2015/11/23/hausordnung-muss-sein/

3.5. Japanese

As illustrated in §2.2.5., *goroawase* is the most common and successful Japanese wordplay and due to the infinite possible combinations, the *goroawase* generator has been created. We will be analysing two case generated by this bot and, lastly, a *mon* example. The first *goroawase* is very symple:

> 1 9 4
> (source: https://dailyportalz.jp/b/koneta05/07/15/02/)

According to the possible ways to read each digit (see table in §2.2.5.), figure 1 is read as い, 'i', figure 9 as く, 'ku', and figure 4 as よ, 'yo', where the first two sounds belong to the *on'yomi* reading and the latter to the *kun'yomi* one. The combination of sounds leads the wordplay to be readable as 行くよ (only *hiragana*: いくよ), 'ikuyo', whose English equivalent is 'let's go', since the verb *iku* means 'to go' and the *yo* particle has an exhortatory function. This *goroawase* is comparable to the abbreviated language western teenagers use while texting (e.g. lol, brb), since it is easier and also quicker to write a short series of figures rather than an entire sentence. The wordplay revolves around homophony and for this reason it belongs to the first major wordplay subtype.

The second wordplay consists of a slightly more complicated combination of numbers:

> 8 7 2 1 2 3
> (source: https://dailyportalz.jp/b/koneta05/07/15/02/)

This time we will need all three reading systems to reach the meaning of the number combination: figure 8 is read as は, 'ha' (*on'yomi*) figure 7 as な, 'na' (*kun'yomi*); figure 2 as に, 'ni' (*on'yomi*): figure 1 as ひと, 'hito' (*kun'yomi*); figure two as つ, 'tsu' (English); finally, figure 3 as み, 'mi' (*kun'yomi*). The resulting sound combination is 花に一つ身 (only *hiragana*: はなにひとつみ), 'hana ni hitotsumi', where *hana* means 'flower' and *hitotsumi* is the Japanese correspondent of 'baby clothes', whereas the particle *ni* indicates that *hana* refers to *hitotsumi*. So, the literal translation is

‘baby clothes with a flowery pattern’. Since this example is also a *goroawase* that functions based on homophony, it is part of the first major wordplay subtype.

The last example is the logo of a successful Japanese fast-food chain, Yoshinoya, that is recognisable as a *mon*[15]:

Yoshinoda is famous for its *gyuudon* (牛丼), rice bowls topped with sliced beef, vegetables and sometimes eggs. For this reason, a bowl is visible in the logo of the chain; engraved on it there is a big Y, recalling a bull horn, which is also the initial letter of the company’s name written in Latin alphabet. Moreover, the bull horn is surrounded by a rope representing *yokozuna* (equivalent to ‘winner’), a ranking that *sumo* wrestlers can reach throughout their career. The message in its entirety means that Yoshinoya sells the best beef bowls on the market. Mon is a kind of visual wordplay that is external to the three major wordplay subtypes recognised by Winter-Froemel and Thaler.

3.6. Final Reflection

In this section we have analysed a plethora of selected wordplay use examples for the countries we have been discussing, with the aim to understand how each of them exploits this linguistic tool. Depending on the characteristics of the language and how it expands (e.g. through derivation, like Italian), every country exploits its own idiom in a different way to produce humorous utterances or, as advertisements do, to capture the attention. However, there is a major difference among the western countries we have taken in account and Japan, at least as far as the wordplay uses we have seen are

[15] Source: Google Images.

concerned: wordplay is mostly used either as a channel to enhance memorisation, as *goroawase* does, or to create images that symbolise a company, a family or a place, like *mon*. Instead, western countries tend to use it mostly as a humorous tool or to communicate in a powerful manner.

Conclusion

This paper has been dedicated to the study of wordplay, its variations according to the language change and how the respective countries make use of it, whether the intentions are humorous or not. In the first section, *Wordplay and Research*, we have given a definition of wordplay and discussed the research that has been made about this language tool. Moreover, we have also discussed some of the most common typologies of play-on-words. As its title already alludes to, the second section, *Wordplay and Culture*, has explored the connection existing among culture and this aspect of languages. After a brief overview, we have examined some of the ways in which Italy, Britain, the United States, Germany and Japan make use of wordplay. The first and second sections provided us with the knowledge we needed in order to effect a wordplay analysis in the third one, *How* "*Wordplayfulness*" *Varies from Country to Country: Analysis of Wordplays in Italian, British English, American English, German and Japanese*. Three wordplay examples have been examined for each country and sometimes similarities have been found among them, although we have noticed a consistent difference between the western countries and Japan. In conclusion, we have observed that what is known as 'sense of humour' is shared by every nationality we have been dealing with in this paper, which has given us an insight of how the language tool that wordplay is can be exploited for multiple, divergent purposes depending on the language and cultural background of a country.

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