

# A linguistic account of wordplay: The lexical grammar of punning

Alan Scott Partington \*

*Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Bologna, via Cartoleria 5, 40124 BO, Italy*

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## Abstract

This paper is an attempt to describe both the structure and function of punning wordplay (perhaps a more accurate term would be *phraseplay*) in English using a number of notions commonly employed in modern lexis-driven descriptions of the language, deriving from the theoretical work, principally, of Sinclair and Hoey. Sinclair demonstrates how the organisation of language at the phrase level relies on two basic underlying principles, the *open-choice* (or *terminological*) and the *idiom* (or *phraseological*) principles. Hearers/readers have certain predictions or expectations about how speakers/writers employ these principles. The contention put forward in this paper is that it is these organisational expectations which wordplay upsets and exploits. This is undertaken in two principal ways, by *relexicalisation* and *reworking*.

Hoey's work on *lexical priming*, instead, provides a lexical–grammatical framework which sheds light on precisely what the linguistic expectations of hearers are and how they come about in the first place.

I analyse a considerable number of naturally occurring instances of wordplay collected from a corpus of newspaper texts to examine how these theoretical frameworks apply in practice.

In the meantime, having defined punning as the bisociative play between two sound sequences, we consider, again from the perspective of modern linguistics, the vexed question of wordplay *motivation*, that is, the relationship between the different meanings of the two sound sequences which will affect its quality, its success or failure.

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## 1. Introduction: linguistic research into wordplay

Of all the various forms of humour, plays on words and puns have received the bulk of attention in linguistic – as opposed to psychological, medical, literary or aesthetic – studies. They are the most obviously dependent on a form of wording, and therefore many authors have felt them to be the only kind of humour to constitute a proper object of linguistic study. In terms of Cicero's celebrated distinction between jokes “about the thing” (*re*) and “about what is said” (*dicto*), that is, between playing with an idea or a situation and playing on words, puns are felt to fall squarely into the second category (Attardo, 1994: 27). Even the slightest change in the wording of a pun, of course, can render it meaningless or at least humourless. It will be seen in this paper, however, that many puns play with ideas as well as words. We will see too how puns in natural discourse make conceptual points: “there is a continuous stretch from the pun through the play on words (*jeu de mots*) to the play of ideas (*jeu d'esprit*)” (Koestler, 1964: 66).

\* Tel.: +39 532 249931.

E-mail address: [alanscott.partington@unibo.it](mailto:alanscott.partington@unibo.it).

Attardo, however, is more than a little critical of the results of past linguistic research in this area. “Large parts of the territory of punning phenomena still remain uncharted” he notes. “This is not to say that the efforts of linguists have been wasted” but their “prevalently taxonomic approach” has dictated “‘low intensity’ explanatory patterns” (1994: 108). In other words, linguistics has tended to provide lists of different kinds of puns but has done comparatively little to explain how they function in real-life discourse. Ritchie is equally critical of past research in this area and suggests practical or circumstantial problems in the study of naturally occurring wordplay:

Puns which occur spontaneously in everyday life are not often very funny and are rarely recorded for later use; hence there is no obvious source of collected spontaneous puns.

(Ritchie, 2004: 114)

It is now possible to collect considerable quantities of authentic discourse in context in the form of language corpora (Section 5) which may well help to remedy problems of data availability. And, given that wordplay involves creative and unusual use of language, in this study we will also find it useful to refer to authentic language data as contained in corpora – principally *Papers*, a 100-million word corpus of UK quality newspaper texts – as a contrastive indication of the normal or background usage of the lexis and grammar being exploited.

## 2. Defining the pun

### 2.1. Identity and resemblance

In this section we attempt a definition of the kind of puns of interest to the current work. Punning is probably the most obviously bisociative of all forms of humour. As Koestler explains:

The pun is the bisociation of a single phonetic form with two meanings - two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot.

(1964: 65)

Attardo also notes that “though couched in different theoretical frameworks, all linguistic (and non-linguistic) analyses agree on the fact that puns involve two senses” (1994: 127–128). But all verbal puns are based upon the same fundamental mechanism: they are plays on *sounds*, or rather, on the resemblance between two sets of sequences of sounds (Koestler calls this the “acoustic knot”). It must be stressed that puns generally do not play with single words but phrases, larger units of discourse.

There is a certain tradition that distinguishes between homonymic puns and homophonic puns (see, for example, Reah, 1998: 17–18). Examples of these two different kinds can be found in Section 2.3. However, it will be argued here that a more fundamental distinction is between “exact” puns and “near” puns. In an exact pun, two sound sequences which are *identical* are called into play, whereas in the near pun, two sequences are involved which *resemble* each other phonologically (sometimes visually). Each of the sound sequences is designed to be associated in the context of the particular joke text with a distinct meaning. We might represent this notationally as  $SS_1(M_1)$  and  $SS_2(M_2)$ , where  $SS_1(M_1) = SS_2(M_2)$  (exact pun) or  $SS_1(M_1) \approx SS_2(M_2)$  (near pun) ( $SS$  = sound sequence and  $M$  = meaning). It is of course the relationship between  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  which is the *point* of the pun and which will partly determine its quality, whether or not and to what degree it is judged effective or humorous (Section 4).

Both Attardo (1994: 133–134) and Ritchie (2004: 112–116) point out, however, that ambiguity in itself is not a sufficient condition for punning, that is, the potential existence of two meanings of a single sound sequence does not automatically make it a pun. Indeed, as Attardo reminds us, “all words are ambiguous, vague, or unspecified if they are not taken in context” (1994: 133). “Mere ambiguity is not enough to create a pun”, he adds, “otherwise how could one differentiate between a pun and an ambiguous utterance such as ‘Flying planes can be dangerous’” (1994: 133). In similar vein, Ritchie argues that the ambiguity of *shell* (“discarded marine carapace”/“artillery round”) does not make a pun out of “John found a shell on the beach”.

What else is needed then to transform ambiguity into a pun? Attardo suggests two elements. Firstly, that the meanings be “opposed”. This however, is too general a criterion. In any two element universe like that of the pun, the elements are essentially in opposition. The second is that puns are, as Attardo puts it “concocted”, though I would prefer “authored” (Attardo, 1994: 133–134). In other words, someone has to deliberately manufacture, or at least point out, the ambiguity. It

is not hard to conceive of both Attardo and Ritchie's examples of non-punning ambiguity being transformed into puns by, as it were, "wilful intervention":

- (1) A: John found a shell on the beach. (Where *shell* means "discarded marine carapace")  
 B: That's a coincidence. Yesterday, I found a hand grenade. (Forcing *shell* to mean "artillery round")

The punster has to somehow alter features of the context of an utterance to force a second reading – in the above example by introducing vocabulary pertaining to explosive devices and thus overriding *beach*'s normal priming to cooccur with *sea-shell*. In fact most punning jokes can be understood in terms of *lexical priming* (Section 3). The punster relies on the hearers recognising or activating a conventional set of primings leading to a perception of  $SS_1(M_1)$ , before springing an unexpected  $SS_2(M_2)$  on them.

All puns are deliberate, then, in the sense of knowingly constructed, but some puns are pre-pondered – here we shall adopt the term *scripted* – and generally have a single author, whilst others are unscripted and arise spontaneously in the flow of discourse. The latter are born when one of the interactants perceives the possibility of a second interpretation, that is  $SS_2(M_2)$ , of some part of some previous utterance and produces the pun by bringing it to the attention of the other participant(s), as in example (1). On occasion, it is the hearer who creates or "authors" the pun by producing some kind of back-channel behaviour (laughing, groaning, saying "That's a good one", and so on) which draws attention to another possible meaning of the first speaker's utterance.

## 2.2. Near puns

The way puns work is probably best illustrated by considering near puns first. In one type, the so-called syntagmatic pun, both  $SS_1$  and  $SS_2$  are physically present. Two famous examples are:

- (2) non Angli sed angeli (not Angles but angels) (attributed Pope Gregory I or "the Great")
- (3) It is better to be looked over than overlooked (attributed to the actress Mae West)

However, in the majority of jokes based on near puns, the hearer is presented with just one of the sound strings (from Redfern, 1984: 18–19):

- (4) A man forgets to buy his wife her favourite anemones for her birthday. The shop has only some greenery left, which he purchases. But the forgiving wife exclaims on his return: "With fronds like these, who needs anemones?"

and is required to recover the other ("with friends like these, who needs enemies?"). The humour lies in an intellectual delight in the sheer unexpectedness of the juxtaposition and the ingenuity in the reworking of the story. In terms of the relationship between  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  in (4) there is also a sort of evaluation reversal (a common ingredient in joke humour [Partington, 2006]): "a formula normally used in a hostile context is here twisted for reuse in a conciliatory one" (Redfern, 1984: 19).

## 2.3. Exact puns

Turning to exact puns, the simplest of these may exploit either homonymy (words alike in sound and spelling) or homophony (words alike in sound only): in either case the working and effect is generally identical and in both homonym and homophone puns only one sound sequence is present. An oft-quoted example of a homonym joke is the following:

- (5) “Do you believe in clubs for young people?”  
 “Only when kindness fails.”

(attributed to W.C. Fields)

The sound sequence *club* can express at least two homonyms (or  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  in the notation adopted above), which are “association of people” and “heavy weapon”. The initially favoured, or rather *encouraged*, narrative reading, elicited by  $M_1$ , then, is: “do you think young people should be encouraged to join associations?”, whilst the second narrative reading, exploiting  $M_2$ , reinterprets the question as “do you think it may sometimes be necessary to discipline young people with heavy weapons?”, clearly a highly improper proposition and therein lies much of the humour. As Giora – who discusses this same pun – puts it: “Most jokes” (and certainly puns) “make up a discourse that best exposes our tendency to opt for the salient interpretation first” (2003: 168).

The following, instead is a homophone joke:

- (6) “Why is a defective condom called a Welsh letter?”  
 “Because it has a leak in it.”

A *French* letter is a colloquial term for a condom, whilst the *leek* (exact homophone of *leak*) is a national symbol of Wales.

### 3. A linguistic account of wordplay

We saw in Section 1 how Attardo and others felt that linguistics had largely failed to offer a fully coherent explanation of wordplay. However, theoretical developments in the fields of grammar and lexicology over the last 20 or so years, largely assisted by corpus linguistics research, may be providing us with new insights. In the following sections, I will offer an account of wordplay in English making reference to a variety of concepts which derive from the area of lexical grammar, namely, lexical priming, collocation, semantic preference, relexicalisation and delexicalisation.

#### 3.1. Lexical priming, collocation and semantic preference

Collocation is one of the most important technical concepts in lexical grammar and corpus linguistics (Sinclair, 1991: 170, 2004; Stubbs, 2001: 29–30; Hoey, 2005: 2–15), but it is defined in various ways. It is frequently used to indicate the actual, observed cooccurrence (either noted by a human analyst or fished out of the ocean of a corpus by software) of one lexical item with others within a short span of text, usually by convention limited to circa five words to the left or right of the searchword, that is, the lexical item under investigation. A number of authors, however, including Leech (1974), Partington (1998: 15–17) and Hoey (2005), also describe collocation as a psychological phenomenon.

The most extensive modern description of collocation as a psychological phenomenon is to be found in Hoey’s theory of lexical priming. The theory holds that, by repeated acquaintance with a lexical item along with processes of analogy with other similar items, normal language users learn – are primed to recognise and then reproduce in their own discourse – the typical behaviour of that item in interaction with other items.

In particular, we are primed to know which other lexical items it cooccurs with regularly (*collocation*), which semantic sets it occurs with (*semantic association*; other authors would favour the term *semantic preference*; see Sinclair, 2004: 33–34; Partington, 2004), which grammatical categories it cooccurs with or avoids and which grammatical positions it favours or disfavors (*colligation*), and which positions in an utterance or sentence or paragraph or entire text it tends to prefer or avoid occurring in (*textual collocation*). The user then, of course, reproduces this behaviour in his/her own linguistic performance. It is part of a native speaker’s communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) to know what is preferred and what is unusual combinatorial behaviour of items (and of speakers) in given conditions, that is, in a given discourse type they are familiar with. Through lifelong exposure to a language, native speakers acquire what Firth calls “expectancies” (1957: 195) of which items commonly cooccur with which others in texts.

By metaphorical extension (a process common to all descriptions of grammar),<sup>1</sup> the lexical item itself is said to be primed to behave in these particular ways, and so lexical priming is also regarded as a textual as well as a mental phenomenon. Thus, for example, the item *winter* is said to be primed to collocate with *in*, *that*, *during the*, and so on. As regards colligational behaviour, the expression *in winter* is primed to occur with the present tense in clauses expressing relational processes, and it displays a semantic preference to occur with expressions of “timeless truths”, for example: “In winter, Hammerfest is a thirty-hour ride by bus from Oslo [. . .]”. In terms of textual collocation, in some kinds of discourse (e.g. travel writing) *in winter* is probably weakly primed to appear at the beginning of a sentence, as in the example above (2005: 165–168). The complete array of an item’s combinatorial behaviours is known as its priming prosody.

Of particular interest to the study of wordplay are Hoey’s constant reminders that normal priming prosodies can always be overridden by users, as in the examples from poetry he provides: “a grief ago” (D. Thomas), “Theirs is not to reason why/Theirs is but to do and die” (Tennyson) (Hoey, 2005: 176–177). Creativity with language, he argues, is largely achieved by the deliberate overriding or exploiting of normal primings, to generate what elsewhere has been termed *unusuality* (Partington, 1998: 121–143). As Hoey puts it “when a choice of one priming is overwhelmed by another, more dominant priming [the result] is either ambiguity or humour” (2005: 170), both of which are strongly associated, of course, with wordplay.

Here, then, we are concerned with scripted wordplay, where primings are *deliberately* “confused” by the punster. One common mechanism is to play with normal collocational combination, as in example (24) below, where the collocational phrase *party animal* is substituted – but also evoked – by *poddy animal* or in (23) where the culturally bound collocation *home rule* is replaced and recalled by *home roulade*. We find many more examples of this sort in the corpus episodes described in Section 5.

In examples (5) and (6), on the other hand, we find plays on priming prosody at the level of semantic preference. As regards the first, we noted how the initial favoured reading of “Do you believe in clubs for young people?” was likely to be “do you think young people should be encouraged to join clubs?”. But how can the joke teller be sure this will be the hearer’s favoured first reading? The answer, of course, is that the colligational combination *clubs for* has a semantic preference for the semantic set of expressions indicating particular groups of human beings, in fact, in the *Papers* corpus, *clubs for* is followed by, among others, *businesswomen*, *children*, *collectors*, *pupils* and, indeed, *young people*.

In (6) the collocational expression *French letter* is substituted by *Welsh letter*; *letter* now being made to combine with a different item from the semantic set of {NATIONAL ADJECTIVES}. There is also, of course, reference to the collocational combination *Welsh leek* (four occurrences in *Papers*).

### 3.2. Relexicalisation of preconstructed phrases

Sinclair (1987) describes two basic principles of language organisation. The first is the *idiom* or *collocational* (here in the sense of words which regularly occur together in very many texts) principle, which sees normal discourse as largely composed of preconstituted or semi-preconstituted blocks of language (also known as prefabs [Bolinger, 1972], multi-word units [Zgusta, 1967], schemas/schemata [Barlow and Kemmer, 1994; Moon, 1998; Stubbs, 2000] and extended lexical units [Sinclair, 2004]; I myself find the metaphorical concept of the lexical *template* is useful). The other, the *open-choice* principle of language, describes discourse production as a series of open-ended choices – largely word by word – each an individual unit of meaning – “a series of slots which have to be filled from a lexicon” (1987: 320), the only restraints being grammatical, that is, that only items from certain word classes may appear in a given slot. In Sinclair (2004) these two principles are also referred to as the *phraseological tendency* (equivalent to the *idiom*), “the tendency of a speaker/writer to choose several words at a time” and the *terminological tendency* (equivalent to the *open-choice*), “the tendency of language users to protect the meaning of a word or phrase so that every time it is used it guarantees delivery of a known meaning” (2004: 170).

Sinclair also argues that the idiom or phraseological principle of language is the dominant, default mode of interpreting discourse because it requires less time and effort on the part of hearers. However, should this process

<sup>1</sup> For instance, when we declare that “x is a noun”, this is a metaphorical statement whose literal meaning is that “x is generally employed by speakers to fulfil a set of functions conventional associated with the set of items we denominate nouns”.

fail (in the sense of failing to explain the text), hearers retain the option of applying the open-choice principle. It is always possible to treat even tightly idiomatic phrases as if they were capable of analysis into smaller units. Here it will be further contended that it is the interplay, the enforced switching from one mode of interpretation to another, from the idiom to the open-choice, which is at the heart of a great part of wordplay. A few simple illustrations:

- (7) Is the tomb of Karl Marx just another communist plot?
- (8) A: What happens if the parachute doesn't open?  
B: That's known as "jumping to a conclusion".

Hearers are primed by previous acquaintance to interpret *communist plot* and [JUMP] *to a conclusion* as preconstituted blocks. Giora shows, with examples from psycholinguistic studies, that listeners normally access idiomatic interpretations of phrases in preference to literal ones; as Sinclair she argues that idiomaticity is more *salient* than literalness (Giora, 2003: 18–21). However, the context (the item *tomb* and the parachute which fails to open) constrains the hearer to reinterpret them as *communist + plot* ("grave space") and *jumping + to + a conclusion* ("leaping to one's death"), which are not recognizable preconstructed phrases and whose meaning must be grasped by using the open choice analytical mechanism. We will call this process *relexicalisation*, that is, the "freeing up" of the parts of a normally fixed or semi-fixed, preconstructed lexical unit. In the terms adopted above, some aspect of the context forces a sound sequence to be reinterpreted grammatically (syntactically or morphologically), revealing an  $M_2$  very different from the more salient or more expected  $M_1$ . In terms of lexical priming theory, the normal priming prosody that the sound sequences be interpreted as a unit is overridden. The effect achieved is a general revitalisation of the language at that point of the text. Novelty breathes life into the discourse. Relexicalisation is thus one of the fundamental linguistic processes underlying many forms of phraseplay. The kinds of (semi)-preconstructed phrases which appear in such plays are of practically any sort, from proverbs and sayings to quotations, idioms, even simple common collocations (as *communist plot*). A rich source in some discourse types, as we shall see, are film, book, TV programme titles and the like.

The  $M_2$  is, of course, unearthed through a process of enforced backtracking similar to that frequently employed to interpret joke humour (Raskin, 1985; Attardo, 1994). Hoey (2005: 82) discusses a verbal–visual pun, from film, where the backtrack trigger is visual:

- (9) In the film *Airplane*, we are told of a pilot who is no longer permitted to fly because he has a "drinking problem". The next shot shows him spilling a non-alcoholic drink all over himself; his problem is in fact that he misses his mouth when he tries to drink.

In Hoey's terms, in the absence of context, the audience is primed to associate the common collocation *drinking problem* with the salient  $M_1$  of alcoholism. The follow-up shot of the drink being spilled relexicalises *drinking problem* into the less salient *problem (with) drinking*. This process of relexicalising a common collocation is, as we shall see in Section 5, particularly frequent in newspaper headlines.

The following, the first a Jewish joke from Redfern, the second a shaggy-dog pun, reveal another aspect to the interpretative mechanism (the *mokel* is the person who performs circumcision):

- (10) After the [ceremony], the rabbi collects the fees, but it's the mokel who collects all the tips.
- (11) RACING NEWS: Riding the favourite at Cheltenham, a jockey was well ahead of the field. Suddenly he was hit on the head by a turkey and a string of sausages. He managed to keep control of his mount and pulled back into the lead, only to be struck by a box of Christmas crackers and a dozen mince pies as he went over the last fence. With great skill he managed to steer the horse to the front of the field once more when, on the run in, he was struck on the head by a bottle of sherry and a Christmas pudding. Thus distracted, he succeeded in coming only second. He immediately went to the stewards to complain that he had been seriously hampered.

The first of course relexicalises the set phrase *collect [al]the tip* and the second the colligational template *be* [intensifier] *hampered*. The evidence from the *Papers* corpus suggests that the priming for this colligation is very strong: *seriously* cooccurs with *hampered* 10 times, *severely hampered* is slightly more common (12 occurrences) with *badly hampered* slightly less (6). The joke's effect depends partly on knowing that *hampered* is a semi-technical term in horse-racing referring to any occasion when a rider's progress is impeded. It is also necessary to be in possession of the cultural knowledge that a *Christmas hamper* is a basket containing the foodstuffs incorporated in the joke – the essential ingredients of a traditional British Christmas. Hoey stresses that different people will have different lexical primings due to different real-world experiences, which explains in part how jokes and wordplay can have varying effects on individuals. The punning above will fail for people with no experience of horse-racing or the British Christmas.

I wrote in the definition of relexicalisation above that the hearer resorts to the open choice mode to reinterpret the (semi)-preconstructed phrase when their first reading fails to interpret the text satisfactorily. But in these two cases, the primary collocational readings make perfect sense – the mokol could well receive tips from grateful relatives and the rider was, in anyone's book, well and truly impeded. However, of course, neither of the "straight" primings, the default collocational readings is funny. The hearer knows these texts are meant as jokes and so begins a backtrack to find a humorous reading. We need therefore to refine our definition of what it means to interpret a joke text satisfactorily – it must not only make sense but also "make humour".

### 3.3. Delexicalisation

There is a type of relexicalisation pun which is of especial interest both to lexical grammarians and to logicians of language. Freud cites a couple of puns exploiting zeugma based on the verb *take* (the effect depending on the different status of the verb complement):

- (12) 1st man: "Have you taken a bath?"  
2nd man: "Why, is there one missing?"
- (13) Two men going past a café.  
1st man: "Let's go inside and take something"  
2nd man: "But the place is full of people!"

Freud explains that the effect of these texts depends on the reinterpretation of the verb *take*; in his terms, both jokes at first imply the more salient "empty" use and then enforce a rereading with the "full" use. Using the terminology of modern lexical grammar, the verb in phrases such as *take a bath*, *take a sandwich*, *have a meal*, *do a read-through* is said to be *delexicalised*, that is, it adds no separate meaning but is a kind of syntactic support for the phrase which functions as a single preconstructed unit. In other words, a speaker who uses the phrase *take a bath* to mean "bathe" is making a single lexical choice, a single "dip" into their mental lexicon. The delexicalised use of these phrases is far more frequent than any "full" use, at least in normal conversation, and conversationalists are therefore primed to adopt a first reading of (12) and (13), respectively, "did you bathe?" and "let's eat something", the humour, of course, lying in the enforced relexicalisation in the M<sub>2</sub>. The second character's reply in each case reinstates the "distinctive contribution" that *take* makes to the phrase, treating *take a bath* and *take something* as two combined units (or two choices from the mental lexicon), i.e. "remove/abscond with" + "a bath" and "remove" + "unspecified object".

Sinclair defines the process of the delexicalisation of an item as the "reduction of the distinctive contribution" it makes to the meaning of the piece of utterance in which it occurs. "There is" he claims, "a broad tendency for frequent words, or frequent senses of words, to have less of a clear and independent meaning" (1991: 113) and he cites as examples *take* in *take a look at this*, *make* in *make up your mind* and *of* in *of course*. With very frequent words we should talk about their general *uses* rather than their specific *meanings*. He emphasises just how common the phenomenon is. Since most "normal text" consists of the frequent senses of frequent words, most of discourse is to some degree delexicalised.

Finally here, the following children's joke, recorded by Wells (1982: audiotape), is also based around *take* but is an elegant variation on the mechanism:

- (14) There's this man. He come off his holidays from India. He brought this crocodile with him, you see. And he's going round the corner, taking it for walks and this policeman bumps into him. He says:  
 "Eh, what are you doing with that crocodile? You should take it to the zoo."  
 "All right, I'll take it."  
 Next day he sees him walking round the corner with the crocodile again. So the policeman says:  
 "I thought I told you to take that crocodile to the zoo."  
 "I did. Now I'm taking it to the pictures."

The context forces a first or salient reading along the lines of "take the crocodile to the zoo for public safety". The crocodile owner's interpretation, and our backtrack rereading, is based on the more common – but in this context more unexpected – narrative whereby someone is accompanied to the zoo for their entertainment or education. On this occasion, it is the first reading which is more fully lexicalised and less frequent than the second – a very marked occurrence (on salience in creative language, see Giora, 2003). What probably happens is that the item *crocodile* is *salient* in a textual sense, that is, it springs out (Latin *salire*: to spring) of the text, any listener is going to pay more attention to the item *crocodile* than anything else around. And *crocodile* has an overwhelmingly salient lexical priming for "dangerous", "they eat people", which trumps the idiomaticity of "take x to the zoo for pleasure", until the punchline restores it. As Hoey emphasises, primings compete all the time in discourse.<sup>2</sup>

We have already noted the association between logic and delexicalisation. Much of the wordplay in the Alice books by Lewis Carroll (by profession, of course, a mathematician) examines the concept:

- (15) "[...]and even Stigand, the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable –"  
 "Found what?" said the Duck.  
 "Found it," the Mouse replied rather crossly: "of course you know what 'it' means."  
 "I know what "it" means well enough, when I find a thing," said the Duck: "it's generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?"

*It*, of course, is frequently used in this totally delexicalised fashion. Phrases like *find it advisable*, *find it inconceivable*, *find it convenient* are perfect examples of indivisible preconstructed phrases whose meaning is spread throughout the unit. The Duck attempts to discover a real-world exophoric referent for the term and isolate some meaning for it; the humour actually lies in her perverse refusal to delexicalise.

Another example of delexicalisation for comic effect comes when Alice meets the Cheshire Cat:

- (16) Alice: "[...] and I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make me quite giddy!"  
 "All right," said the Cat; and this time it vanished quite slowly, beginning with the end of the tail, and ending with the grin, which remained some time after the rest of it had gone.

The Cat responds to Alice's objection to its vanishing "so suddenly" by disappearing slowly, because it treats the individual items as being fully lexicalised, the item *suddenly*, in particular, being treated as an adverb of manner. Alice however, uttered the phrase "so suddenly" as a unitary intensifier. The problem for Alice is that, given the – it must be admitted – rather unusual scenario of a disappearing cat, there is no suitable preconstructed intensifier she can use in the context. A great number of verbs collocate with particular intensifiers, for example, *work*. . . *hard*, *hurt*. . . *bad(ly)*, *insist*. . . *doggedly*, *guard*. . . *jealously*, *endure*. . . *patiently* (Bolinger, 1972: 246–250). *Vanish* is primed to collocate with *completely*, *entirely* and *altogether* (in *Papers* at least) but this is not what Alice wishes to say in this context and the best intensifier she can find is *suddenly*. The Cat treats the intensifier as not at all redundant, relexicalises the phrase and obeys to the letter.

### 3.4. Reworking and reconstruction of an original version

Relexicalisation – including delexicalisation – however, is not the only way in which punning plays with set phraseologies. There is another kind which occurs in those puns we have so far classified as "near" puns, those in

<sup>2</sup> We find the pivot phrase in two forms: "take that crocodile to the zoo" and "taking it to the pictures". This would make it a syntagmatic pun (Section 2.2), the kind where both SS<sub>1</sub> and SS<sub>2</sub> are physically present.



which a (semi)-preconstructed phrase is presented in some modified form. The altered phrase is the one which appears in the text. The new version  $SS_2$ , with a new  $M_2$ , is the one relevant to the current discourse situation; the degree to which  $SS_1(M_1)$  is also pertinent will vary (Section 4.1). A couple of simple examples:

- (17) It would appear that I am dying beyond my means.  
(attributed to Oscar Wilde)
- (18) Once the parents were out of the way  
It was every child for itself.  
(Roger McGough: *Hearts and Flowers*)

Here, of course, there is no particular intellectual challenge in reconstructing the originals (*living beyond one's means, every man for himself*); one item in the preconstructed expression has been replaced by its opposite. An effect of novelty and surprise is sought. Occasionally, however, especially in the “shaggy-dog” or *story* pun (see Ritchie, 2004: 120–124), the humorous effect lies in the ingenuity devoted to the reworking of a phrase. Consider the following political example:

- (19) *CNN/Reuters*: News reports have filtered out early this morning that US forces have swooped on an Iraqi Primary School and detained 6th Grade teacher Mohammed Al-Hazar. Sources indicate that, when arrested, Al-Hazar was in possession of a ruler, a protractor, a set square and a calculator. US President George W Bush immediately stated that this was clear and overwhelming evidence that Iraq did indeed possess weapons of maths instruction.

where, of course, there is a clear phonological resemblance to or echo of the sadly topical expression [possess] *weapons of mass destruction*; only three out around 21 sounds (phonemes if we prefer; the exact number will depend on the kind and level of transcription one adopts) are different between  $SS_1$  and  $SS_2$ .

Wordplay treats all expressions in a similar way, be they proverbs, book or film titles or current political jargon; we will witness a wide variety of source expressions in the analysis of authentic examples in Section 5. Spoonerism jokes require a similar sort of reconstruction (from Redfern):

- (20) What's the difference between a conjuror and a psychologist?  
A conjuror gets rabbits out of hats.

and therefore, of course, a psychologist *gets habits out of rats*. The question might be posed of how the listener is supposed to reconstruct this phrase, itself rather unusual, but the intended audience is aware of the rules of spoonerism and knows to look for a transposition of sounds that will produce a version that makes sense in the context of what a psychologist (supposedly) does.

It should be noted moreover that the kind of wordplay examined here is by no means exclusive to humour, as shown by the following examples, one from a novel, the other from poetry (my italics):

- (21) That night in Southern Australia brought its first snuffle of *tidings of great horror*.  
(A. Burgess: *The End of the World News*)
- (22) And God still sits aloft in the array  
That we have wrought him, stone deaf and *stone blind*.  
(E. Thomas: *February Afternoon*)

The first exploits the preconstructed *tidings of great joy*, the new version being its opposite. The second contains both the original collocation *stone deaf* and the new one *stone blind*. The effect here is more complex. By applying *stone* in an unusual collocational context, the poet not only extracts a particularly strong intensification of *blind* (the novelty of an intensifier-adjective collocation makes the intensification particularly forceful), but also of *deaf*, in effect, relexicalising the preceding set expression. God becomes both *deaf as stone* and *blind as stone*.

### 3.5. Summary of the two types of wordplay

To summarise the reflections so far. We have uncovered two separate linguistic mechanisms for the production of wordplay, both of which nevertheless depend upon the basic mutual recognition by speaker and hearer that the idiom or phraseological mode is the usual, default principle in interpreting normal communication, as Sinclair contends.

In the first of these mechanisms, enforced relexicalisation, which subsumes the sub-mechanism of delexicalisation, the hearer is presented with a sequence which s/he would normally be primed to interpret as a (semi)-preconstructed, (semi)-fixed expression – *jump[ing] to a conclusion, collect [the] tips, take a bath* and so on – and to recognise its associated  $SS_1(M_1)$ . Something in the discourse narrative, however, forces us to free up the parts of the expression and reinterpret the sound sequence using the open-choice principle, thus generating an entirely new  $M_2$ . The humour lies in the nature of the link between  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  but also in the considerable surprise the unexpected relexicalisation unleashes.

In the second mechanism, the reworked/reconstruction pun, we are, instead, presented with the  $SS_2(M_2)$  in the text which is a reworking and rewording of some preconstructed  $SS_1(M_1)$ . The effect in this case depends in part on surprise at the unexpected but also upon the challenge to recognise the allusion.

In some ways the mechanisms are specular. In the relexicalisation pun, the block is broken up. In the reconstruction pun, some of the pieces are displayed and the hearer is challenged to rebuild the block.

Many authors have remarked on the deliberately deceptive aspects of both jokes and puns, how, in the terms employed here, they play with primings, raising expectations to upset them and how, siren-like, they entice their hearers onto the rocks. However, as Attardo pointed out, there has never been an entirely satisfactory account of the actual linguistic mechanisms wordplay depends upon. The lexical grammar description outlined here seems to provide the beginnings of a unified and elegant explanatory hypothesis. It describes how puns depend on the interplay of the phraseological (set-piece) and the open-choice (analytical) language principles, the sudden shift from the first to the second, which explains precisely which expectations are raised and how they are frustrated and exploited.

## 4. The relationship between the sound sequences

### 4.1. Good puns and bad: motivation

One of the burning questions of linguistic research into humour is whether linguistic tools can help us define the *quality* of humour, in particular, whether it can enable us to distinguish a good pun from a bad one.

The optimists appeal to the traditional distinction between the justified or motivated and the non-motivated or hollow pun (other terminological variations exist). Taking the latter first, both Freud and Norrick recount episodes where they encountered hollow puns personally. Freud (1960: 112) recounts how:

- (23) at the end of a meal to which I had been invited as a guest, a pudding of the kind known as a “*Roulade*” was served. It requires some skill on the part of the cook to make it; so one of the guests asked. “Made in the house?” To which the host replied: “Yes, indeed. A home *roulade*.”

The effect of this reconstruction pun relies on the hearer knowing that an important political issue of the time was Irish *home rule*. Freud uses the episode as an occasion to “throw light on the condition which seems to determine whether a joke is to be called a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ one” (he actually talks throughout about puns rather than jokes in general). We derive enjoyment, according to Freudian joke theory, from “being transported by the use of the same or a similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one”. But “if there is not at the same time a link between those circles of ideas which has a significant sense, then I shall have made a ‘bad’ joke”. There is little connection of sense between Irish independence and a home-baked dessert and so, in the terms adopted here, the home *roulade* pun would be classified as non-motivated. To call it an example of “bad” humour, however, may be going too far. Freud himself admits that “when those of us present heard this improvised joke it gave us pleasure [...] and made us laugh” (1960: 12) (his way of saying “you had to be there”). It had the advantage of topicality and bathos – a juxtaposition of the momentous and the trivial.

A really “good” pun, on the other hand, Freud continues, is occasioned when “the similarity between the words” – we might prefer “sound sequences” – “is shown to be really accompanied by another, important similarity in their sense” (1960: 147). He provides an example from Italian “the well known cry *Traduttore – Traditore!*” (1960: 36)

(*translator – traitor*, which almost works in English, but not quite). To summarise and recapitulate, then, in the terms adopted here, a motivated pun occurs when, in conditions of  $SS_1(M_1) = SS_2(M_2)$  (exact pun) or  $SS_1(M_1) \approx SS_2(M_2)$  (near pun), there is some natural or contextual connection between  $M_1$  and  $M_2$ .

Norrick (2003: 1335–1336) provides an interesting example (two friends are discussing dolphin behaviour):

- (24) Roger: And it seems to be a completely egalitarian bond. There isn't a leader in a dolphin – do they have pods?  
 Jason: I don't know what they're called.  
 Roger: Whales are pods. I don't know what dolphins are. I guess they're *pods* too. *Poddies*. Anyway (laughing).  
 Yeah but I mean -  
 Jason: They're poddy animals. (laughs)

The pun, of course, depends upon the phonemic similarity (in a North American pronunciation) between *poddy* and *party*, which in turn depends upon an acquaintance with the collocational expression *party animal*. Note how the pun is constructed collaboratively. The question, however, remains: is this an instance of motivated or non-motivated wordplay? At first sight there would seem to be little connection between dolphins and human party-goers. However, on closer inspection, since it is the group behaviour of the animals which is being discussed, a certain link between dolphin gregariousness and partying becomes apparent. We can conclude that motivation and non-motivation in wordplay is not a polar matter but there exists a cline of motivation along which we can place any individual pun.

#### 4.2. Derivation

It should also be noted how one of the meanings of the sound sequence involved in a relexicalisation pun can be considered as primary and the other derivative. In Freud's joke, *home rule* is the primary SS(M) and *home roulade*, a nonce creation, is derived from it for the purpose of joking. Similarly, in Norrick's example, *party animal* is a pre-existing sound sequence from which *poddy animal*, another nonce, is derived. We will see how, in very many cases, the "original" SS(M) will be more abstract or figurative than the derived version, which will often involve a concrete, tangible entity (as, for instance, *home rule* is a concept whilst *home roulade* is a physical object). This is yet another aspect of the bathos which is so often a component of humour. This move from or contrast between the abstract and the concrete is also typical of another bisociative phenomenon, namely, metaphor. Love is a rose for Burns whilst inspiration is a wind for Shelley and daffodils for Wordsworth. It very probably reflects a basic human way of construing the world.

### 5. Corpus data: puns in newspaper headlines

This section is devoted to an analysis of authentic wordplay as found in headlines from a corpus of British newspapers (a five-million word corpus of articles from *The Independent*, a UK broadsheet), in order to discover whether the theoretical framework outlined here can account for real-life discourse examples. It was found to be most frequent in the arts section, followed by sports, then business, whereas the news sections were the poorest, presumably owing to the stricter time constraints which apply to them. It often takes time to play with language.

Redfern devotes a chapter to punning in various "sub-literary" discourse types such as advertising and newspaper headlines. In these areas, economy is paramount, and so puns – "two meanings for the price of one" (1984: 130) – are very popular.

#### 5.1. Exact puns in headlines

The following list contains a selection of more or less exact puns found in the corpus. The original expression on which the wordplay depends is given below each headline:

- (25) Bunhill: Russian sailors left *all at sea* for America's Cup  
 [*BE all at sea* = To be in a state of confusion]
- (26) Golf: *Faldo makes many a slip 'twixt cup and lip*  
 [*There's many a slip twixt cup and lip*]

- (27) Hoping to enter a Euro lottery? *Don't bet on it*: Maria Scott describes how German lotteries are being promoted here in defiance of the law  
[*Don't bet on it* = don't be too sure about something]
- (28) DESIGN/Some day you might be *sitting on a small fortune*: Fashionable young furniture makers of recent years have proved to be worth investing in  
[*sitting on a fortune* = to be in possession (especially unawares) of a source of wealth]
- (29) City: Closing a deal is *not his Forte*  
[*not* (someone's) *forte* = not their strong point]

In every case, the authors of these headlines have relexicalised a set phrase –  $SS_1(M_1)$ , the expression reported under each headline – and have implied a second meaning to the phrase, an  $SS_2(M_2)$  which is relevant to the topic of the article in question. In all of these, the wordplay is motivated, both meanings coexisting to some degree. This is the most common variety of exact puns found in the material.

Sometimes, if the rereading is felt to be a little obscure, we are given a gloss, as in (27) and (28). Otherwise we must read on to discover the new sense, that is, to understand why a trite phrase has been employed to introduce this particular story.

The simplest of these is (25). The expression *BE all at sea* has a metaphorical sense of “to be thoroughly confused”, which the Russian sailors no doubt are. But they are also quite literally *at sea*. We have already noted how second readings are very often concrete versions of more figurative originals. The proverb in (26), *There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip*, expresses the popular wisdom that making a plan and carrying it out successfully are not always the same thing. And so, one of the meanings is that Faldo may not find winning the tournament as easy as expected. But the items *cup* and *lip* have literal meanings too – the *cup* is the tournament trophy and also the golf-hole, and the *lip* is the edge of the golf-hole which the player was having difficulty in getting beyond. *Don't bet on it* in (27) has the double sense of “don't rely on” and “don't wager your money on”, whilst the *sitting* in (28) may be done (figuratively) on a source of wealth or (literally) on a piece of furniture. Deciphering the second sense of (29) depends on knowing that *Forte* is also the name of a businessman (Sir Charles Forte), who, evidently, is having difficulty *closing a deal*. Plays on proper names (both empty and motivated) are fairly common in headlines.

As we noted, all these are typical examples of relexicalisation, of the freeing up of the components of a set figurative phrase in  $SS_1(M_1)$  to give a new, more concrete  $SS_2(M_2)$ . The degree of motivation, of connection between  $M_1$  and  $M_2$  varies. In the next section we will uncover other related mechanisms in pun retrieval which depend upon the collocation principle and thereby provide evidence for its psychological existence.

## 5.2. The relexicalisation of idiom templates

A word is needed on the kinds of phraseology being exploited. Many of the original  $SS_1(M_1)$  are proverbs or sayings, still more are film, book, TV programme titles, and such like. All of these have a recognisably fixed single canonical form. The same is true, in general, of the collocational expressions being cited, for example: “Women athletes *gaining ground* on men”. However, we might usefully also consider the headline which commences “Brushes with fiction”. Prefacing an article on a fashion for novels based on the lives of famous artists, it exploits what we might call an idiom *template* of the form *a brush with [x]*, where *x* can be a wide variety of entities, most of which are unfavourable; *Papers* lists, among others, *authority*, *controversy*, *death*, *notoriety* and *the law*. The template can thus be said to display an unfavourable semantic prosody (Sinclair, 1987, 2004; Partington, 2004; Hoey, 2005: 22–23), that is, in our terminology the  $M_1$  of the expression *a brush with [x]* normally implies a “close encounter with something bad”. The expression is completely relexicalised in our headline and the *brushes*, as so often in these cases, become tangible, physical entities – paintbrushes. Interestingly, the unfavourable prosody is also no longer active or relevant; we do not generally expect anything bad to come of reading novels. Roughly similar is “Driven by passion”, a headline on motoring matters which exploits the template *driven by [x]*, where *x* can usually, according to *Papers*, be anything from *greed*, *ambition* and *instinct* to *economics*, *ideology* and *necessity*; there is no obviously favourable prosody. The relexicalised version, however, gives a highly approving sense to the expression.

Whether, then, the original SS<sub>1</sub> is fully fixed or a template, defined as a mixture of fixed and variable components, the mechanism of relexicalisation is much the same. Nevertheless all this does provide evidence that, alongside individual words, the brain also assembles and stores composite language templates.

### 5.3. Non-exact puns in headlines

Whereas, as we saw in the last section, the mechanism exploited by exact puns is that of *enforced relexicalisation*, here we will find that near punning, instead, depends upon various processes of *reconstruction* (Section 3.4).

Newspaper texts are, of course, meant principally to be read rather than spoken. This gives rise to the possibility of playing with the visual shape of words, for example (my glosses):

- (30) Beaten by the belle  
(The boxer, Mike Tyson, is sent to prison on the testimony of a young woman.)
- (31) First class male  
(Review of “Rogue Male”: the protagonist-narrator is both upper class and a tough guy.)

which, are reworkings, respectively, of the set expression *beaten by the bell* and the three-word collocation *first class mail*. These are sometimes classified as *homophone* puns since *belle* and *bell*, *male* and *mail* are different words pronounced the same way. More importantly, however, they are *heterographs*. They present a word string which is different in some way from the (semi)-preconstructed item they are recalling (in the letters on the page rather than in the sound waves in the air) and they function in exactly the same way as the near puns we have discussed above.

In Partington (1998) it was argued that the preconstructed phrase underlying near puns in writing can undergo one of four different sorts of changes in their surface realisation:

- (a) *substitution*: see below;
- (b) *abbreviation*: as in “Once a Catholic” (where . . . *always a Catholic* does not appear in the text);
- (c) *insertion*: as in “Iain Gale gives three artists the chance to put the palette knife in”, which inserts *palette* in the idiom *put the knife in* (“criticise”);
- (d) *rephrasing*, i.e. *reordering of parts*: as in “Another catch for the early birds”, which rephrases the proverb *it’s the early bird that catches the worm*.

These are, in effect, the four basic classes of change possible on any kind of information string.

The mechanism of *substitution* can be minimal, even of a single letter or phoneme, as in “Bonfire of the Sanities” (for *Vanities*), or of a single grammatical item, as in “Murder of the Cathedral” (*of* for *in*), or of a single lexical word, as in “The naked and the well-read” (*well-read* for *dead*). On occasion, however, the substitution process can be drastic, as in “Elway does it his way”, an extreme case of grammatical and lexical substitution. Of the five lexical items which make up the original quotation (the Sinatra song – *I did it my way*), as many as three have been replaced, the only ones which remain unaltered are *it* and *way*. This raises the question of how the text receiver is expected to recognise the original. We might hazard the following explanation. Each of the words in the new version is related to the one in the corresponding position in the original – thus *I* and *Elway* are both personal phrase subjects, *does* and *did* are parts of the same verb and *his* stands in the same relation to *Elway* as *my* to *I*. Clearly what is being recognised is the phrase pattern, the lexical template of the form [Personal subject (i.e. proper name/pronoun)] *do it* [possessive] *way*. Thus punning provides, once again, very strong psychological evidence for the existence of priming prosody and that the brain stores not just single lexical items but patterns of collocation and colligation.

In, for example, “Murder of the Cathedral”, the story being about the neglect of historical monuments, the pun is highly motivated. As for the headline “Art of stone”, however, the old SS<sub>1</sub>(M<sub>1</sub>), *heart of stone*, is semantically and prosodically dissonant with the new theme – an article on Renaissance sculpture, universally thought of as anything but unfeeling. And what do we make of headlines like “Beaten by the belle”? The literal, relexicalised sense, that the boxer Mike Tyson has been jailed on the evidence of a young woman who claimed she was sexually assaulted by him, fits the text. But the original idiomatic expression *beaten by the bell*, meaning “to run out of time”, is sometimes conventionally applied to a situation where a boxer is cheated of imminent victory by his opponent’s surviving the count because the bell ends the round. This has no possible application to the context of the story, it is simply used

because it is reminiscent of the world of boxing to give a certain flavour to the story, and possibly remind a distracted reader who Mr. Tyson is (see also Morley, 1998: 30–31). We might include this among semi-motivated forms of wordplay, and call it “reminiscent flavour” punning. Its use is common in British newspapers.

The following is an example of the second mechanism of change, *abbreviation*:

- (32) Accountancy & Management: *For what we are about to receive*. Simon Pincombe finds that company administrators and receivers are among those destined to do well this year  
[*For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful*]

Here, the gloss tells us that *receivers* are *about to receive* some financial reward (i.e. *do well*). What is interesting is that only half the original preconstructed phrase is given and the most relevant information – that receivers should be thankful – is contained in the missing part, the one that the hearer must supply from their mental lexicon. This is a fairly typical procedure, especially if the preconstructed phrase is long.

In the following:

- (33) DANCE/*From little acorns*: Judith Mackrell reviews Mikhail Baryshnikov and the White Oak Dance Project at Sadler’s Wells  
[*From little acorns, great oak trees grow*]

we are again given only half the preconstructed expression, this time a proverb, and again the most relevant information – that the author expects great things from the modest beginnings of the ballet group – must be recovered by the reader.

The third mechanism of phrase change is *insertion or expansion*, where items are added to the original preconstructed expression. The simplest example is “Play up and play the word game” where *word* is inserted into the famous line from Henry Newbolt’s poem. Of course, *word game* is itself a recognisable collocation. In “Iain Gale gave three artists the chance to put the palette knife in”, where the popular metaphor *put the knife in*, meaning “criticise viciously” is expanded by the insertion of *palette knife*, that is, an artist’s knife. It is a particularly effective comic introduction to a light-hearted article in which artists get the opportunity to criticise the work of art critics who fancy themselves as promising artists.

The fourth and final mechanism of headline alteration is *rephrasing or reformulation*, which, along with substitution, is the most common, but from which it differs radically in the mental processes it entails.

When discussing the heavily substituted “Elway does it his way”, it was argued that the phraseology was what the reader recognised, but when the rephrasing of a quotation or saying is particularly drastic, this can no longer be the case. What is it in “Are the first cuts the deepest?” (the *cuts* in question being sections of a motion picture) which enables the reader to recognise the song title *The first cut is the deepest*, or in “to conquer at the Stoop” (a rugby stadium) which recalls the set expression *She stoops to conquer*? This second is, of course, originally the title of a play by Goldsmith but the hearer does not necessarily need to know this, just to have acquired the expression in his/her mental collocational–phraseological lexicon. The answer must be that the reader simply recognises the cooccurrence of two or three items in the new version: *first, cut(s)* and *deepest* in the first, and *stoop(s)* and *conquer* in the second. In the *Elway* example, we hypothesised that the mental recognition works at the level of the lemma, since the reader was expected to pick up the grammatical relationship between *does* and *did*. However, here, the new *Stoop* has not changed morphologically but has undergone a drastic grammatical and semantic transformation. It is no longer even of the same word class; from being a verb (“to lower/debase oneself”) it has become a noun. The clue to recognising the original verb form would seem to be entirely collocational, and an unusual form of collocation at that. In fact, readers get no semantic clues to help them identify the original, since items in the new version tend to be used in entirely novel senses. Which is largely the point of the pun, it is a kind of play on linguistic register, conflating two highly contrasting *fields*.

These two instances – “first cut . . .” and “conquer at the Stoop” – would seem, then, to constitute further evidence of the psychological existence of the idiom principle; that the brain’s ability to store and recall lexical items which have been primed to cooccur is extremely powerful. Even the mildest of hints is enough to raise some preconstituted allusion to the surface of consciousness.

In sum, all the episodes discussed here are instances of the sort of wordplay we have termed the *reworking* pun. From a study of the corpus evidence, we have discovered that there seem, however, to be two distinct cognitive mechanisms of which hearers avail themselves to link the new, given version – SS<sub>2</sub> in our notation – to the original SS<sub>1</sub>, namely the *identification of a phrase structure* (the *Elway* example) and *cooccurring-item or collocational recognition*

(the *Stoop* example). By providing psychological evidence of how both phrase templates and also (semi)-fixed collocational expressions (the two being closely related) are stored in memory, they add weight to Sinclair's contention of the prominence of the idiom principle in language recall and processing and to Giora's assertion of the salience of idiomatic over literal readings.

The relationship between  $M_2$  and  $M_1$ , in this discourse type can, of course, be tenuous to the point of non-existence, as in the "Stoop" instance. The point of this kind of wordplay is to generate a kind of "smugness effect" in the reader when s/he recognises the allusion, with the ulterior motive of creating a bonding sense of collusion between reader and newspaper, always good for sales. As Norrick has argued, the challenge tends to be slight and unthreatening, and that when the hearer passes the test by "getting" the joke, solidarity or rapport is reinforced (2003: 1342, 1348).

## 6. Lexical cascading

Finally, a good number of headlines seem to employ a form of wordplay which is not quite the same as either relexicalisation or reworking, and would perhaps not be considered by many to fall into the category of classic puns. Nevertheless, they are a form of play which can still be usefully explicated using notions from lexical grammar.

These depend for their effect, not on the exploitation of any specific expression, but on the accumulation in the headline of words and phrases which belong to some particular lexico-semantic class. We might call this technique *lexical cascading*. A lexico-semantic class may be defined as a set of lexical items which have a high probability of being found together in a text or collection of texts of the same discourse type. The simplest example is:

(34) *Food features large on summit menu*

This is, of course, a statistical definition of lexical class, but the cooccurrence of items felt to belong together in many of the headlines above is evidence that the concept of lexico-semantic class also has a psychological reality for language users, because these classes are a reflection of the way our brains organise our experience of the world.

The sporting headlines are particularly rich in the use of this technique:

(35) *Midfield engine fuels Anfield drive*

(36) *Guscott's magic ruins Gloucester's fairy-tale and Quins maul sleeping Tigers*

(37) *Wasps draw Steeler's sting*

In the last two examples, the headlines are also reworking collocational phrases, respectively *tiger mauls ... (man/ tourist, etc.)* and *draw a (wasp) sting*. The phenomena of collocation and lexical class membership are closely related. Common collocates are items frequently found very close together in a text (usually within the space of very few words), whereas lexical class members are items often found in the same texts. The two phenomena shade into each other.

On occasion, journalists create highly complex semantic networks, as in the following, the first of which exploits the lexical class members relating to "gambling", the second to "elections":

(38) *When a gamble is fair game for the EC: The bureaucrats are looking at the future of gambling. Are they set to turn the tables on the industry?*

(39) *Novel voting system: Literature at the polls: New and retiring candidates choose their favourite.*

These function rather like extended metaphors and it is the techniques of collocation and selection from lexico-semantic classes which do the extending.

## 7. Conclusions

This linguistic account of wordplay has leant heavily on notions from current thinking in the field of lexical grammar, in particular, the contention that language users are primed to expect a text to consist largely of semi-fixed

preconstructed blocks or instantiated multi-word templates rather than a simple, very long string of individual lexical items, each chosen independently from its neighbours. Thus, the default reading of texts relies heavily on the idiom or phraseological principle, but that, if this should fail to make sense of or – if joking is expected, *make humour* of – a discourse, hearers retain the ability to interpret the text at any point using the open-choice or terminological principle. Punning wordplay exploits this default expectation in one of two ways. One form of pun functions (like other kinds of bisociative jokes) by placing the sound sequence in question in a novel context, thus forcing the hearer to switch from idiom reading to open choice and to *relexicalise* or reinterpret the sequence in a new way (for instance, *Communist plot* becoming a “grave plot” for a “communist”, *sitting on a small fortune* becoming literally “sitting on” + “a valuable seat”). We noted too that the derived sound sequence is very frequently a literal relexicalisation of a more figurative original. In the other form, a preconstructed block is altered in some way to draw explicit attention to the language for the sake of novelty and surprise and also to “challenge” the hearer/reader to reconstruct the “original” sound sequence (*Art of stone*, *Industrial resolution*).

We used this theoretical outline to examine how punning functions in one particular discourse type, newspaper headlines. We also made a number of observations on the structure of punning wordplay and how language users employ it and, perhaps most importantly, we considered how these observations provide evidence for how language storage is organised in the brain. Along the way, the difference between motivated and non-motivated wordplays was also considered and how this might relate to their “quality”, their “goodness” or “badness”.

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**Alan Scott Partington** is Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bologna, Italy. His current research interests range from corpus linguistics proper – the study of lexical grammar using corpus techniques – to Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies – the use of corpora to study features of interactive discourse. He is the author of *Patterns and Meanings: Using corpora for English language research and teaching* (Benjamins), *The Linguistics of Political Argument: The Spin-doctor and the Wolf-pack at the White House* (Routledge), *The Linguistics of Laughter: A Corpus-Assisted Study of Laughtertalk* (Routledge), *Persuasion in Politics* (LED) and is co-editor of *Corpora and Discourse* (Lang).