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## *Linguistic humour in Polish media: A study into wordplay mechanisms in TV news headlines*

The present paper is a data-driven study targeted at investigating the peculiarities of wordplay found in the headlines in a popular TV news program, *Fakty*, screened live on a daily basis at 7 p.m. on TVN, one of Polish commercial broadcasters. The principal reason for bringing this linguistic phenomenon into focus is not only its liberal use in the program, the headlines being larded with plays on words, but also its rich diversity. For the purposes of the present study wordplay has been defined broadly as a blanket term covering phenomena as discrete as genuine *puns*, *typographical play*, *portmanteau words*, *oxymoronic play* and other forms of verbal acrobatics. As such, it is here considered roughly synonymous with what is elsewhere labelled *verbal play*, *verbal/linguistic humour* or *play on words/language*. The entire body of data culled from the above-mentioned news programme is comprised of c. 150 examples of miscellaneous playful forms. Primarily, the study seeks to categorize them into separate groups, depending on the type of linguistic mechanisms they rest on. On top of that, some remarks are passed on wordplay quantity-quality relationship in the examined corpus as well as on its function in TV news headlines in general.

### *1. Preliminary remarks*

There is no denying that wordplay is a significant part of human day-to-day linguistic experience; babies make frequent playful use of word sounds, young children indulge in rhyming, ten-year old ones can already successfully disambiguate certain types of verbal play and, to repeat after Augarde (1986), any writing, poetic included, “is a kind of wordplay: slotting words into appropriate (or inappropriate) places, shifting words around like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and choosing those that make up a particular pattern” (Augarde 1986: ix).

One possible explanation for the ubiquity of wordplay is to be sought in the properties of language itself; another, of non-linguistic character, relates to human in-born propensity for tinkering with words.

It is argued that inasmuch as humans are pre-programmed to acquire the underlying organizational structure of language, they can equally successfully master all practices that upset it. Along slightly different lines, Redfern (1984) manifests human proclivity for double dealing, the cornerstone of a host of wordplay types, as follows:

All wit, and (some would maintain) all mental creativity, entail the ability to think on at least two planes at once, by a kind of semantic diphthong. We are always on the look-out for doubles [...] Think of the long list of double-barrelled terms we use: double-talk, double meaning, double-cross, double-decker, double-edged [...] (Redfern 1984: 132).

Universal as human inclination for wordplay might be, it should be pinpointed that some groups of people, depending on the type of language they speak, are better equipped for playing with words than others. Speakers of English, for instance, seem to be privileged in this respect, given that English, lexically well-provided and morphologically pretty unconstrained, invites free word associations, thus lending itself readily to verbal experimentation of all sorts (Empson 1953). Ullmann (1963) groups English together with French as examples of ‘pun-friendly’ languages, differentiating them subsequently from more conservative German, Spanish and Italian, all comparatively less conducive to play upon words. Polish, with its elaborate morphological system and phonology relatively resistant to identically/similarly sounding words (which, by contrast, lay the groundwork for a true wealth of homophonic puns in English), seems to fit into the latter category. This, alongside a strong backlash against linguistic humour in some academic circles, where the study of wordplay is regarded hardly promising, go a long way towards explaining scant attention that the phenomenon in Polish has thus far received from scholars.

As regards the issue of verbal humour in Polish media specifically, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the amount of wordplay is inversely proportional to academic interest it has stimulated. A systemic change in Poland after 1989 had a direct bearing on the language of the media which, having thrown off the yoke of communist nomenclature, has become more spontaneous, colloquial and, therefore, open to all sorts of jocular toying with words. Understandably, this ‘wordplay-friendly’ ambience has made ample room for extensive, if not altogether

excessive, use of humorous language, the present study being tangible evidence thereof. In contrast to this abundance, in-depth research into linguistic humour in Polish media is sorely lacking, a notable exception being a handful of brief mentions in Miodek (2000) and Lubaś (2000). Miodek observes that a standard convention of using wordplay in news headlines is of fairly recent date and, contrasting starkly with a dismal, militaristic phraseology of a bygone communist era, draws favourable response from the audience, even though it is sometimes too far-fetched, showing an appalling lack of taste (Miodek 2000: 78). Lubaś (2000: 84), discussing colloquialisms in Polish media, mentions in passing that they are frequently used in various rhetorical figures to produce wordplay, which is designed to make information more attractive to its potential recipients. The wordplay-inducing mechanism neatly illustrated by the author is a widespread practice of humorous etymological reinterpretation of individual components of idiomatic expressions.

In view of the apparent scarcity of scientific endeavours to investigate the playful use of language in Polish mass media, the ultimate aim of, and hopefully not over-optimistic expectation about, the present paper, which is a data-driven study of wordplay in TV news headlines, is to help plug, obviously to a restricted extent, this gap in academic research.

## *2. The phenomenon under investigation*

Whereas on the surface the definition of wordplay seems easy to provide, upon closer look the phenomenon proves to be a fairly foggy concept and research into its structure fraught with acute terminological and typological problems. Of multiple contributory factors to this state of affairs Delabastita (1993: 56) lists the following as the key ones: (1) the fact that wordplay has been approached from distinct vantage points in numerous academic disciplines (e.g. semantics, sociolinguistics, philosophy, rhetoric, stylistics, automatic language processing), each submitting its own terminological apparatus, (2) a growing tendency (following the publication of Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1953; first edition 1930)) towards defining ambiguity, the building

block of a substantial amount of playful forms, vaguely as a generic term covering any uncertainty that permits alternative meanings/interpretations of a single piece of language, (3) imprecision in the use of and differentiation between certain relevant linguistic terms (such as polysemy and homonymy). What adds to this general disorderliness is the fact that the modern nomenclature draws heavily on that of the ancient and Renaissance rhetoric, both manifestly lacking terminological rigour (*q.v.* section 4, *infra*).

For the purposes of the present study *wordplay* has been defined broadly as an umbrella term covering the phenomena which involve humorous experimenting with forms and meanings of words, such as genuine *puns*, *typographical play*, *portmanteau words*, *oxymoronic play* and other forms of verbal manipulation. As such, it is here considered roughly synonymous with what is elsewhere labelled *verbal play*, *verbal/linguistic humour* or *play on words/language* (cf. Chiaro 1992; Alexander 1997). At the same time, it contrasts markedly with the term *word game*, the two being often equivalent in common (semi-scholarly) usage. Accordingly, instances of *wordplay* are regarded as impromptu, unique inventions, whereas *word games* are artificially created formations, such as palindromes, pangrams or word squares (Cazden 1976: 607).<sup>1</sup>

The final remark to be made at this point pertains to the relationship between the terms *wordplay* and *pun*. While in critical literature the two are often used indiscriminately, under the adopted definition of *wordplay*, as given above, the phenomenon subsumes puns as a lower-order category. Nonetheless, it should be heavily stressed right at the outset that puns play a unique and prominent role in the present classification in that they lay the groundwork for linguistic humour in many other types of *wordplay* identified there, in which they operate alongside other trigger mechanisms, such as a playful use of typography or phraseology. To finally clear the terminological chaos it should be added that a pun will be defined after Delabastita (1993) as a phenomenon which depends for its existence on the juxtaposition of (at least two) (near-)identical/ similar forms (*signifiers*) and (at least two) dissimilar meanings (*signifieds*). Formally, existing at pronunciation/

<sup>1</sup> See also Dressler's (1985: 99) rigid distinction between 'isolated jocular forms' and 'established language games'.

orthography interface, it will rest on either of the following linguistic mechanisms: homonymy (identity in sound and spelling), homophony ((near-)identity in pronunciation), homography (identity in spelling) and paronymy (similarity in both pronunciation and orthography). The semantic composition of a pun, in turn, will represent a heterogeneous structure, being a union of the (surface-level and underlying) meanings of its component parts which, to permit a play, need to be sufficiently distinct.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. *The corpus and the method of the current study*

The present paper is a data-driven study which sets out to explore the peculiarities of wordplay found in the headlines in one of Polish TV news program, *Fakty*, broadcast live on a daily basis at 7 p.m. on TVN, a commercial station. The rationale behind zooming in on this linguistic device is both its all-pervasive character, the headlines virtually seething with plays on words, and its immense diversity in the program. Indeed, even a fleeting glance at the randomly sampled headlines from *Fakty* suffices to see how prominent and structurally sophisticated the phenomenon employed there really is. The collection of richly assorted playful forms compiled from the above-mentioned news program incorporates *c.* 150 examples. Primarily, the study seeks to categorize them into separate groups, depending on the type of linguistic

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, a discussion of the intricacies which go with the degree of the required semantic contrast is outside the ambit of the present study. Nonetheless, it should be strongly stressed that it is only the homonymic type of a pun that emerges semantically problematic; a pun which rests on homophony, homography or paronymy presents no difficulties as it is the product of (at least two) separate words (or word strings, where non-lexical varieties are concerned) working towards the punning effect that carry singly an autonomous meaning. In the case of the homonymic pun the upper limit of the desired semantic distance is demarcated by words which, having individually distinct semantic identities, happen to be identical in both pronunciation and spelling. To borrow terminology from lexical semantics, this phenomenon is customarily referred to as *homonymy* and covers cases, where (etymologically) unrelated lexical units or, properly speaking, lexical senses of the units, are singly assigned to individual lexemes which happen to be indistinguishable formally in terms of spelling and sound. In turn, the lower admissible threshold of the semantic distance prerequisite for the emergence of puns belongs with *polysemy*, where discrete but (etymologically) related senses of lexical units represent the component parts of a single lexeme. Importantly, due care should be taken not to confuse the present understanding of homonymy as a semantic criterion (standing in sharp contrast to polysemy) with what was labelled homonymy above, where it referred to formal identity of the pun components in sound and spelling.

mechanisms they rest on. This, in turn, lays a sound foundation for a number of reflections about the internal composition of the verbal play in the examined corpus as well as for observations of a more general nature, principally on wordplay quantity-quality relationship, and on its function and status in TV news headlines.

#### 4. *Classificatory attempts at wordplay: A word of caution*

First attempts at a comprehensive account of wordplay can be traced back to the ancient times and found in various rhetorical handbooks of that period. While the ancient rhetoric offered manifold classifications of the device which proved immensely influential in advancing its understanding over the centuries, none proved satisfactory enough to be usefully employed in the present-day academic research. Sadly, the Renaissance study into figures of speech and compositional styles, which showed a renewed interest in cataloguing wordplay, also failed to present a fuller picture of its structure. In short, both the ancient and Renaissance rhetoric where, interestingly, the notion of wordplay as such was totally non-existent, made a disorderly use of some formal devices (chiefly *paronomasia*, *antanaclasis*, *syllipsis* and *asteismus* corresponding roughly to individual types of play on words) that were indiscriminately lumped together under a common name *figura elocutionis*, which resulted in considerable typological inaccuracies (Freidhof 1984: 12; Kohl 1966: 55, 94; Redfern 1984: 82).

In view of the above, as Delabastita (1997) has it, it seems wiser to refer to post-rhetorical classificatory approaches of much more recent date based on a broader knowledge of the phenomenon. Essentially, these seem to represent two extremes following from two conflicting beliefs: (1) that it is perfectly possible to develop an all-inclusive typology of wordplay, i.e. delineate precisely the borderlines between its possible classes and subclasses (positivistic and structuralist perspective), and (2) that any attempt at investigating the structure of wordplay must be flexible enough to permit overlap and fuzziness, which for the most part precludes a satisfactory classification of the phenomenon (post-structuralist perspective). The exponents of the former, taxonomy-oriented, approaches have two viable options to select from:

The linguistic and textual complexity of wordplay is such that a very wide range of descriptive categories offer themselves as potentially relevant [...] Faced with this situation, the taxonomist of the pun has to choose between two evils: either ignore some of these categories to keep the typology down to a manageable size (at the price of reducing its descriptive force), or allow new categories to multiply the number of possible subdivisions (at the risk of at once rendering the classification unwieldy and blurring what the categories have in common) (Delabastita 1997: 3-4).

As already mentioned, the post-structuralist approaches to the classification of wordplay regard it as a complex and elusive phenomenon that escapes rigid pigeon-holing. Any classificatory attempt is claimed to bring about the opposite effect in that, focused on drawing over-subtle distinctions between categories, it inadvertently blurs the overall picture of wordplay structure. That is why scholars like Esar (1954), Mahood (1957) or Redfern (1984) decide to give up the idea of classifying wordplay altogether.<sup>3</sup>

While it is the two polar extremes that tend to prevail in the academic research wordplay, the approach favoured in the present study is one which recommends the middle-ground (such as Delabastita's (1993, 1997)), where only such classification is possible which is broad enough to permit a fair amount of overlap between individual categories.

## 5. *The study: Classification of wordplay types in the examined corpus of headlines*

### (I) Puns

#### (1) Homonymic puns<sup>4</sup>

- *Recepta* na protest<sup>5</sup>

(R: Protests in Polish health service)

<sup>3</sup> Speaking of puns exclusively, Esar justifies his choice as follows: "The variety of puns must be infinite [...] When I came to record the different types of puns, I gave up after identifying dozens of different species, for it seemed an endless task" (Esar 1954: 70).

<sup>4</sup> The label is a conceptual shorthand for puns which are homonymic only in terms of form, semantically representing cases of polysemy (see also footnote 2).

<sup>5</sup> The technicalities of recording the examples are as follows: 'R' stands for 'Reference' which provides the contextual background to verbal play, 'c' is short for '(wordplay) semantic component' which is a remodelled version of Delabastita's (1993) style of ...ciding meanings at play, the italic typeface marks the components at play, whereas the boldface is used for emphasis within italics.

*recepta*

c1 = golden mean, cure

c2 = prescription

- Kampania wyborowa

(R: The former President of Poland was delivering a speech after excessive alcohol intake.)

*wyborowa*

c1 = exquisite, first-class, perfect

c2 = name of Polish vodka

- Kwestia wyboru

(R: A transvestite, Rafalala, was denied the right to vote in the presidential elections due to inconsistencies in her ID, where she figured as a male named Rafał.)

*wyboru*

c1 = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *wybór* ‘choice’

c2 = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *wybór* ‘vote’

- Prąd zmienny

(R: Inescapable electricity price increase)

*zmienny*

c1 = alternating; *prąd zmienny* ‘alternating current’

c2 = (with reference to prices of electric current) unstable

- Hamulec tarczowy

(R: Protests against the American military shield in Redzikowo thought to weaken local economy)

c1 = disk brake

c2 = *hamulec* ‘check, bridle’ + *tarczowy* ‘related to a shield’;  
*hamulec tarczowy* (*fig.*) ‘blocking the American proposal concerning the shield’

(2) Homophonic puns

- *Hollyłódzka* produkcja/(*Hollywoodzka* produkcja)

(R: Polish-British movie co-production *Peter and the Wolf* (*Piotruś i Wilk*), for which all animations were made in Łódź, Poland, won an Oscar in this year’s awards.)

c1 (*Hollyłódzka*) = nonce word (adjectival hybrid of a portmanteau type between *Hollywood* and *Łódź*); *Hollyłódzka produkcja* ‘Hollywood-like film production made in Łódź’



c2 (*Hollywoodzka*) = related to Hollywood; *Hollywoodzka produkcja* ‘Hollywood film production’

- *Małe pivo/(małe piwo)*

(R: The start of the production of the tiny car in Japan)

c1 (*pivo*) = name of a tiny car

c2 (*piwo*) = alcoholic drink; *małe piwo* ‘a piece of cake; cinch’

- *Auta destrukcja/(autodestrukcja)*

(R: Setting fire to an MP’s (Julia Pitera’s) car, which indicates that her efforts to root out corruption are self-destructive)

c1 (*auta*) = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *auto* ‘a motor car’; *auta destrukcja* ‘car destruction’

c2 (*auto-*) = (combining form) of or by oneself; *autodestrukcja* ‘self-destruction’

- *Auto-straty/(autostrady)*

(R: Political discussion on heavy motorway tolls in Poland)

c1 (*straty*) = losses (*Nom. pl.*); *auto-straty* ‘wasting money on motorway tolls’

c2 (*-strady*) = as in *autostrady* (*Nom. pl.*) ‘motorways’

### (3) Paronymic puns

All puns of this type found in the present corpus can be further categorized into two sub-classes, *viz.* syntagmatic (horizontal) and paradigmatic (vertical), depending on the positioning of pun components against each other within *in praesentia/in absentia* patterning. In the syntagmatic type of a pun both components are physically present in a piece of punning text as individual carriers of discrete senses. By contrast, the *paradigmatic* structuring does not permit overt manifestation of the punning word which is subsumed under the word punned upon burdened, in consequence, with carrying double/multiple signification.

#### (a) Syntagmatic paronyms

- *Historia hysterii*

(R: Hysterical over-reaction of an MP, Beata Sawicka, who, having been beguiled by an undercover agent into accepting a bribe, laments, sobs and apologizes publically)

c1 (*historia*) = history

c2 (*hysterii*) = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *histeria* ‘hysteria’

- *Wysyp wysypisk śmieci*

(R: Rapid upsurge in landfill sites in Poland)

c1 (*wysyp*) = increase, upsurge, proliferation

c2 (*wysypisk*) = inflected form (*Gen. pl.*) of *wysypisko* (*śmieci*) ‘landfill site’

(b) Paradigmatic paronyms

- *Przelewki/(przelewy)*

(R: A worker’s appropriation of a huge amount of money in one of Polish biggest banks)

c1 (*przelewki*) = as in *to nie przelewki* ‘this is no joke’

c2 (*przelewy*) = bank transfers

(II) Typographical wordplay

(1) Acronym-based wordplay

Here, an acronym (*q.v.* below) is incorporated into a word, either directly or with some modifications, adding another level of interpretation.

- Bez **LiDości**/(bez *litości*)

(R: LiD, Polish left-wing party, steps up its election campaign.)

c1 (*LiDości*) = playfully corrupted version of an inflected (*Gen. sg.*) word *litość* ‘mercy’ based on a near-homophone (resulting from the substitution of a voiceless sound [t] with a voiced one [d]) and incorporating the acronym *LiD*

c2 (*litości*) = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *litość* ‘mercy’; *bez litości* ‘without mercy’

- Dziwny jest ten **śFIAT**/(Dziwny jest ten *świat*)

(R: A TV commercial for a brand new make of FIAT (*Fabbrica Italiana di Automobili Torino*) features touching scenes from Polish recent history.)

c1 (*śFIAT*) = corrupted version of *świat* ‘world’ based on a homophone (resulting from the substitution of a voiced [w] with a voiceless [f]) and incorporating the acronym *FIAT*

c2 (*świat*) = world; *Dziwny jest ten świat* ‘this world is strange’ (the title of Czesław Niemen’s popular song)

(2) Acronym-initialism interplay

This type of wordplay depends for its existence on a phonic interplay

between first-letter-abbreviations pronounced as words (*acronyms*) on the one hand and separately, i.e. as letters (*initialisms*) on the other.

- Ojciec z *DNA*/(ojciec z *dna*)

(R: DNA fingerprinting helped to identify the father of a ten-month-old Belarusian baby boy.)

c1 (*DNA*) = initialism for **d**eoxyribon**n**ucleic **a**cid

c2 (*dna*) = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *dno* ‘bottom’; *ojciec z dna* ‘father found at the back of beyond (after thorough and difficult search)’

- *PO**słanka*/(*po**słanka*)

(R: A member of PO, Polish right-wing parliamentary party, was caught red-handed accepting a bribe.)

c1 (*PO*) = initialism for *Platforma Obywatelska*, Polish parliamentary party

c2 (*po*) = as in *pośłanka* ‘a female MP’

### (3) Capitalization-based wordplay

Here, alternative readings are nicely subsumed under capitalized letters which yield words.

- Przedmiot *poRZA**Dania*/(Przedmiot *po**ż**ą**d**a**n**i**a*)

(R: Theft of a handbag belonging to minister Zbigniew Wassermann’s wife in a well-guarded governmental holiday resort)

c1 (*poRZA**Dania*) = misspelt version of an inflected form of *pożądanie* ‘desire’ based on a homophone (resulting from the substitution of the orthographically correct [ż] with [rz]) and incorporating the word *rząd* ‘government’

c2 (*po**ż**ą**d**a**n**i**a*) = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *pożądanie* ‘desire’; *przedmiot po**ż**ą**d**a**n**i**a* ‘an object of desire’

### (4) Parenthesis-based wordplay

The wordplay-triggering mechanism here involves the insertion of parenthesized letters (alternatively parentheses alone) which offer optional humorous interpretations.

- *Dyscyplin*(*j*)*arka*

(R: Members of PiS, Polish right-wing party led by Jarosław Kaczyński, dutifully follow the party line, being unanimously against ratifying the Treaty of Lisbon.)

c1 (*dyscyplinarka*) = disciplinary measures

c2 (*dyscyplinjarka*) = nonce word (hybrid between *dyscyplina* ‘discipline’ and *Jarka*, an inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *Jarek*, a diminutive of *Jarostaw*, the leader’s of PiS given name) suggestive of ‘discipline enforced by Jarek’

### (III) Phraseological wordplay

#### (1) Literalization of idiomatic expressions

The process which, as the name suggests, puts a literal interpretation on idioms pivots on a playful relexicalization of their semantically opaque component parts.

- *Za Chiny Ludowe*

(R: The Prime Minister’s, Donald Tusk’s, refusal to visit China to attend the Olympic Games opening ceremony)

*Chiny Ludowe*

c1 = as in *za Chiny Ludowe*, a turn of phrase meaning ‘by no means, under no circumstances’

c2 = People’s Republic of China

- *Ale kosmos!*

(R: Prof. Michał Heller, a philosopher and cosmologist, won the 2008 Templeton Prize.)

*kosmos*

c1 = as in *ale kosmos!*, a colloquial phrase for ‘It’s incredible!’

c2 = cosmos, universe

#### (2) Phraseological puns

This category of playful forms involves punning on selected constituents of phraseological units, be it homonymic, homophonic, homographic or paronymic.

##### (a) Homonymic puns

- *Belka w oku*

(R: PiS, Polish right-wing party, brings forward a bill to abolish the so called ‘Belka tax’, a kind of profits tax levied by Prof. Marek Belka, a former Prime Minister and Minister of Finance.)

*belka*

c1 = a beam; *belka w oku* ‘a beam in one’s eye’

c2 = a surname of the former Prime Minister and Minister of Finance

- *Pełne ręce roboty*

(R: A team of Polish scientists designed a hi-tech robotic device for use in cardiac surgery.)

*roboty*

c1 = inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *robota* ‘work’; *pełne ręce roboty*, a phrase for ‘up to the eyes in work’

c2 = inflected form (*Nom. pl.*) of *robot* ‘robot’

(b) Paronymic puns

- *Nauczka z jazdy/(nauka jazdy)*

(R: A case of a girl sexually harassed by her driving instructor)

c1 (*nauczka*) = something learned through experience; *nauczka z jazdy* ‘a bitter lesson from driving school’

c2 (*nauka*) = as in a phrase *nauka jazdy* ‘driving school’

Interestingly, the example to follow illustrates a happy combination of the categories (1) and (2) above, being the product of literalized *nóż* and *widelec*, as well as of homophonic punning *nóż/nuż*.

- *A nóż widelec*

(R: In his election campaign a presidential candidate, John McCain, is clutching at straws, appearing on a popular satirical programme *Saturday Night Live*, where he advertises a set of pork knives.)

c1 = (*a nóż widelec*) = common expression used to raise hopes that something desired but unlikely may happen (interestingly, the phrase is itself a playfully distorted version of *a nuż* carrying identical meaning, the corruption resting on a perfect homophone *nóż* (‘knife’)/*nuż* (as above))

c2 (*nóż; widelec*) = knife; fork

#### (IV) Interlingual wordplay

Interlingual wordplay, drawing on the lexicons of more than one language, is understood as the product of a playful cross-language transaction. In the examined set of data it is of bilingual variety at a time.

- *Rio Granda/(Rio Grande)*

(R: Public protests against the annual carnival in Rio de Janeiro)

c1 (*granda*) = row, brawl; *Rio Granda* (syntactically erroneous combination, with *Granda* capitalized solely for playful purposes) ‘a brawl in Rio’

c2 (*Grande*) = as in *Rio Grande* a geographical name

- *Persona non Grassa*/(*persona non grata*)

(R: Protests against the celebration of Günter Grass’ 80<sup>th</sup> birthday in Gdańsk, Poland)

c1 (*Grassa*) = surname *Grass*, with the ending added for a better aural effect

c2 (*grata*) = as in *persona non grata*, Latin phrase for ‘unacceptable or unwelcome person’

- **SORry**, to nie przychodnia/(*sorry*, to nie przychodnia)

(R: A bleak prospect of closing the accident and emergency departments in Polish hospitals which are, all too frequently, treated as outpatient clinics)

c1 (*SORry*) = a misspelt version of an inflected form (*Nom. pl.*) of *SOR*, an acronym for *Szpitalny Oddział Ratunkowy* ‘hospital’s accident and emergency department’; *SORry, to nie przychodnia* ‘hospital’s accident and emergency departments are not outpatient clinics’

c2 (*sorry*) = an English word *sorry* (here used for refusal/disagreement); *sorry, to nie przychodnia* ‘sorry, this is not an outpatient clinic’

## (V) Pseudomorphs

This linguistically non-specialist term borrowed from Nash (1985) refers to wordplay involving morphological similarity, whose component parts undergo structural decomposition (a form of etymological reinterpretation) incongruent with their true provenance.

- *Z-wody* i *do-wody*/(*zwody* i *dowody*)

(R: No action was taken to raise the wreck of a sports plane from the Vistula River possibly because a plane rental company failed to take out accident insurance.)

c1 (*z-wody*; *do-wody*) = from + inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *woda* ‘water’; into + inflected form (*Gen. sg.*) of *woda* ‘water’

c2 (*zwody*; *dowody*) = feints; proofs

## (VI) Portmanteau words

Portmanteau/telescope words are understood as linguistic hybrids blending the sounds and combining the meanings of two or more words.

- Szlaban *seksolatkom*

(R: Proposal to introduce a law prohibiting teenage sex under 18)

*seksolatkom* (Dat.) = a hybrid between *seks* ‘sex’ and *nastolatki* ‘teenagers’

- *Nikołajki*

(R: Presidential visit from Nicolas Sarkozy to Poland made on 6<sup>th</sup> December which is a gift-shower day called *Mikołajki*)

*Nikołajki* = a blend of *Nicolas* and *Mikołajki*

## (VII) Allusive wordplay on titles, dicta and catch phrases

### (1) Involving structural modification

- *Leo Zawodowiec*/(*Leon Zawodowiec*)

(R: Leo Beenhakker, a coach of Polish national football team, was awarded a high state distinction from Polish President.)

c1 (*Leo*) = Beenhakker’s given name; *Leo Zawodowiec* ‘Leo, the professional’

c2 (*Leon*) = as in *Leon Zawodowiec*, Polish translation of *Leon*, a movie title

- *Młody człowiek i ocean*/(*Stary człowiek i morze*)

(R: Recovery of a young Russian from the Atlantic Ocean)

c1 (*młody człowiek i ocean*) = ‘the young man and the ocean’

c2 (*Stary człowiek i morze*) = Polish translation of the title of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*

### (2) Involving no structural modification

- *Myszy i ludzie*

(R: Three scientists who prompted the outbreak of human diseases in mice were awarded the Nobel prize.)

c1 (*myszy; ludzie*) = mice; men

c2 (*Myszy i ludzie*) = Polish translation of the title of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*

(VIII) Oxymoronic play

- *Obrona przez atak*

(R: A nurse who had refused to admit to a hospital a dying child claimed it was her superior's order.)

The play hinges on the incongruous juxtaposition of *obrona* 'defence' and *atak* 'attack'. Another case in point might be *wojna o pokój* 'fight for peace'.

6. *Final remarks*

- (a) The present piece of research, yielding a highly elaborate structure of wordplay, supports a widely held view that any attempt at classifying playful forms is a pretty challenging task. While part of the difficulty lies surely in the lack of terminological rigor in the domain of humour studies in general, the main problem area seem to be highly confusing overlaps of categories, resulting from the fact that wordplay tends to fall into intricate patterns, emerging multiply piled up. A vivid illustration thereof can be the above mentioned *SORry, to nie przychodzi* which, while classified as interlingual wordplay, is at the same time acronym-based, incorporating a genuine homophonic pun. Since examples of such concatenated playful forms piled on top of one another are manifold in the examined set of data, an attempt to compile a complete list of them may easily prove counter-productive. Similarly futile, mainly due to the overlaps, appears to be any endeavour to generate a quantitative representation of individual categories of wordplay to show their productivity potential. Nonetheless, it can be concluded with certainty that in the domain of punning forms homonyms vastly outnumber homophones, whereas homographs are non-existent. These findings seem to tally nicely with the academic opinion that Polish, when compared to pun-friendly languages like English, lends itself less readily to the mechanisms of homophony and homography. What is more, remarkably productive are all sub-classes of typographical wordplay, apparently a firm favourite in the examined TV news headlines, which is little surprising, given their written character.



- (b) The year 1989, which saw a general relaxation in stringent controls of all sorts in Poland, has brought about wholesale changes in all areas of life, and the media, their language included, were no exception. Naturalness and easiness, adopted from the Western broadcasters and strongly promoted in non-verbal behaviour, have quickly found an echo in the decreasing level of formality in language. As can be expected, this has made considerable room for wordplay which is known to be a far cry from seriousness, rigidity and order. In this respect playful tinkering with forms and meanings of words can be said to be something of a novelty in Polish media and the inordinate amount of such practices, apparently more frequent in private than public broadcasters, a form of compensation for the losses sustained in the past.
- (c) Understandably, one of the necessary prerequisites for a highly ingenious and impressive verbal play are suitable and well-developed contextual settings for both surface-level and underlying readings involved. While the examined wordplay is for the most part successful, a substantial number of examples totally fail to satisfy this fundamental requirement, as a result of which the wordplay is forced and its effects pretty insipid; this points to a strong tendency towards wordplay-hunting in Polish media. Quite apart from frequent instances of deadpan humour, there seems to be a serious clash between attempts at casualness, elasticity and optimum communicative efficiency in broadcasts (particularly evident in the use of simplified syntax intended to make the contents of news readily accessible to the general public) and a marked tendency towards complex (e.g. interlingual) wordplay intelligible to the select audience only. Sadly, wordplay in the examined TV news headlines appears to support the bitter truth that quantity and quality do not necessarily go hand in hand.
- (d) The final question to be asked at this point is why should wordplay, which in a way subverts the preset order in language, be legion in news headlines. The answer seems to be hidden in manifold functions the phenomenon is capable of performing, the prime ones being: (1) labelling news items in an economical and clever manner, (2) riveting the audience's attention, (3) making serious, often tiresome and vapid, news more exciting (which is intended to win

the public's favour and fight off stiff competition from other broadcasters), (4) making news broadcasts more spontaneous, relaxed and witty so that they reach the western standards, as well as (5) improving the audience ratings of news programmes.

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## **Appendix**

### *Examples of wordplay subject to investigation*

1. Po(d)cięte skrzydła (2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2007)
2. Recepta na protest (2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2007)
3. Monodram(at) (2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2007)
4. Siostry be (2<sup>nd</sup> July, 2007)
5. Art B-is? (3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2007)
6. CO2 to nie jeden (3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2007)
7. Orlej Cień (3<sup>rd</sup> July, 2007)
8. Święta – rzecz święta (6<sup>th</sup> July, 2007)
9. Z tarczą czy na tarczy (18<sup>th</sup> July, 2007)
10. Śliwka w kompot (18<sup>th</sup> July, 2007)
11. Gadu gadu (30<sup>th</sup> July, 2007)
12. „M” jak moje (30<sup>th</sup> July, 2007)
13. Sam w obronie? (1<sup>st</sup> August, 2007)
14. Gra w kulki (4<sup>th</sup> August, 2007)
15. Ropi się! (9<sup>th</sup> August, 2007)
16. Przedmiot poRZĄDania (10<sup>th</sup> August, 2007)
17. Kosmiczny problem (13<sup>th</sup> August, 2007)
18. W sieci (21<sup>st</sup> August, 2007)
19. Łoś w wielkim mieście (21<sup>st</sup> August, 2007)
20. Wysyp wysypisk śmieci (21<sup>st</sup> August, 2007)
21. Powrót posłów (22<sup>nd</sup> August, 2007)
22. Łuczyć po polsku (23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2007)
23. Tory przeszkód (23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2007)
24. ALKOH-OLEK (24<sup>th</sup> September, 2007)
25. Młody człowiek i ocean (30<sup>th</sup> September, 2007)
26. Prapremiera (1<sup>st</sup> October, 2007)
27. POsłanka (2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2007)
28. Persona non Grassa (4<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
29. Polskie drogi(e) (5<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
30. (PO)parcie na rozłam? (6<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
31. Małe pivo (6<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
32. Myszy i ludzie (8<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
33. Owczy (po)pęd (8<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
34. Kampania wyborowa (9<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
35. (Pu)łapka w gabinecie (9<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
36. sPiS majątku (10<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
37. Cie choroba (10<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)

38. Oddział zamknięty (10<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
39. Smok wawelski (10<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
40. Eks-misja (10<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
41. O co lata? (11<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
42. PIS-tolecik (13<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
43. Czar par (13<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
44. Bezpieka na muszce (15<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
45. Pojedynek LiDerów (15<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
46. Partia zielonych (16<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
47. POgadaLi(D) (16<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
48. Historia hysterii (17<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
49. Na (d)okładkę głupie (17<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
50. Iran groźny (17<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
51. Bez LiDości (18<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
52. Ojciec prac? (18<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
53. Kto się sPiSał? (23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2007)
54. Coś za COS (25<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
55. POczucie humoru (25<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
56. Kwestia wyboru (25<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
57. Ruszamy z posad (25<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
58. (Re)sortowanie (25<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
59. Z-wody i do-wody (30<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
60. Czas myśleć czasem (30<sup>th</sup> October, 2007)
61. Prąd zmienny (2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2007)
62. Nie BALI się (13<sup>th</sup> November, 2007)
63. Słaba Expo-zycja (25<sup>th</sup> November, 2007)
64. Auta destrukcja (3<sup>rd</sup> December, 2007)
65. BanKNOT (25<sup>th</sup> January, 2008)
66. PoTYczki (28<sup>th</sup> January, 2008)
67. Czy leci z nami Miształ? (29<sup>th</sup> January, 2008)
68. sTiRani życiem (29<sup>th</sup> January, 2008)
69. Lap(w)topa (31<sup>st</sup> January, 2008)
70. Dasz BOR? (1<sup>st</sup> February, 2008)
71. Rio Granda (2<sup>nd</sup> February, 2008)
72. Koniec (Prze)targów (4<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
73. ParKING (4<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
74. How do you Phil? (4<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
75. Mokra robota (5<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
76. Przelewki (5<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
77. Po przejściach (5<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)

78. Strefa gazu (5<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
79. Mimo-chodem (10<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
80. BORze chroń? (11<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
81. Bez szczelność (11<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
82. Inter-niet (12<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
83. VIVA CBA! (13<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
84. Żelazne plany (13<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
85. Świat a pogląd (13<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
86. Dług wdzięczności (14<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
87. Eureka!/? (15<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
88. Kosmiczne zagrożenie (15<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
89. Ojciec z DNA (15<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
90. Dziwny jest ten śFIAT (18<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
91. Nowy roz-dział (18<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
92. Agent 017 (19<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
93. Tele-wizja sukcesu (19<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
94. Praca doktorska (19<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
95. Leo Zawodowiec (20<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
96. Auto-straty (20<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
97. PO(d) Trybunał? (20<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
98. PoTRAFILI (21<sup>st</sup> February, 2008)
99. SORry, to nie przychodnia (24<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
100. Hollyłódzka produkcja (25<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
101. Telefon do przyjaciela (26<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
102. Belka w oku (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
103. Randka www ciemno (27<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
104. Sprawy sercowe (28<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
105. Pani niedorzecznik? (28<sup>th</sup> February, 2008)
106. Wieje grozą (1<sup>st</sup> March, 2008)
107. Wypchajcie się (4<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
108. PO-wizja (5<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
109. Po nitce do Kaczmarka (10<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
110. Goło i niewesoło (10<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
111. Obrona przez atak (11<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
112. Ale kosmos! (12<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
113. Wejście prezydenta (13<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
114. Niemoralna propozycja (13<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
115. Masa strachu (13<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
116. Chiński mur (20<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
117. Dyscyplin(j)arka (20<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)

118. Daleko od szosy (20<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
119. Z poślizgiem (20<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
120. Gra w zielone (22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2008)
121. Rewolucje i rewelacje (23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2008)
122. Szlaban seksolatkom (25<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
123. Organy państwa (26<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
124. Melondramat (27<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
125. Za Chiny Ludowe (27<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
126. Współ w zespół (28<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
127. Kontrwywiad z klasą (28<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
128. Hamulec tarczowy (29<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
129. Gen-eza raka (29<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
130. Europa da się lubić (30<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
131. Pełne ręce roboty (30<sup>th</sup> March, 2008)
132. A nóż widelec (2<sup>nd</sup> November, 2008)
133. To jest szczyt (6<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
134. Profesor (nie)zwyczajny (6<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
135. O jeden most za daleko (8<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
136. Po słowie (13<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
137. 4. w RP (13<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
138. Nikołajki (14<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
139. Krajobraz PO roku (15<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
140. Walka o pokój (17<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
141. Nie chce, ale musi (17<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
142. Wyrwany z sieci (17<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
143. Znaczkę czasów (18<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
144. Nauczka z jazdy (18<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
145. Co im wisi? (18<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
146. Takie buty (25<sup>th</sup> November, 2008)
147. O CO<sub>2</sub> chodzi? (1<sup>st</sup> December, 2008)
148. (C)hamowanie (2<sup>nd</sup> December, 2008)

