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Dirk Delabastita

The dynamics of wordplay and the modern novel: A paired case study

Abstract: The article opens by outlining a multidimensional definition of wordplay, designed to do justice to the "dynamic" nature of this complex field of phenomena. Of these various dimensions, the "communicative significance" of wordplay is the main focus of the present analysis, which investigates the wordplay in two recent English-language novels: *My Sister, My Love* (2008) by Joyce Carol Oates and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) by Xiaolu Guo. The latter may be described as a "global novel". It turns out to offer different wordplay readings to different readerships, depending on their cultural background and multilingual literacies. Like Guo's novel, Oates's *My Sister, My Love* abounds in wordplay, much of it of the malapropian variety, too, and with an equally elusive quality about it. However, Oates's novel, which is more firmly rooted in a single culture, also shows a complex multi-voiced postmodern narrative style which endows its wordplay with an elusiveness of a very different kind. Its readerships are likely to be linguistically and culturally more homogeneous but these readers will not always quite know to which character or narrative voice in this novel with its various levels of discursive embedding the wordplays and malapropisms have to be attributed. The corpus analysed is far too small to permit generalisation but the "global" and the "postmodern" qualities of the respective novels invite extrapolations and comparison with wider corpora. The discussion demonstrates the absolute need for dynamic approaches to wordplay in the novel no less than in other genres or speech situations.

Keywords: *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, bilingual pun, elusiveness, global novel, interpretive doubt, Joyce Carol Oates, malapropism, multilingual literacy, *My Sister, My Love*, narratology, postmodern novel, static vs. dynamic approaches to wordplay, modern novel, Xiaolu Guo

1 Introduction

Until some three decades or so ago "linguistic" approaches to the pun were strongly dominated by the structuralist paradigm. While the tide of post-structuralism was rising rapidly, "literary" approaches, too, still showed the influence of structuralism, as well as of the lasting legacy of William Empson and the New Criticism.[1] Moreover, the taxonomies and nomenclatures of traditional rhetoric remained an almost mandatory frame of reference for many students of the pun. For all its merits, this existing work turned out to be far too *static*, in that it tended to understand wordplay in terms of strictly identifiable *intrinsic* features of semantically stable texts merely to be unpacked by perceptive readers / listeners, and to be slotted into the linguist's or the critic's taxonomies. *Dynamic* approaches, on the other hand, are understood here as giving due recognition to the *historicity* of wordplay and to its *pragmatics* and *functions*, to be operationalized in terms of genre, context, situation and interaction.

From a literary studies perspective, relevant challenges and possible alternatives to such static models were provided by reader-oriented literary theories and by the functionalist approaches of the late Russian formalists and the Prague School.[2] Further sources of innovation included the idea of the prototype as a powerful format to conceptualize phenomena such as wordplay, as well as Grice's article on "Logic and Conversation" (1975), which remained untapped by students of the pun for several years. Drawing on all these sources, it became possible to define wordplay as a complex category that is graded and open-ended in at least four distinct ways. The term can thus be said to cover

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1 Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) became a foundational text for the New Criticism and contributed to making ambiguity one of the most central concepts of this extremely influential critical school, which produced many perceptive "close readings" of poetry; its strong emphasis on the "words on the page" and on the unique singularity of each text went hand in hand with a limited interest in historical contextualization and with a profound mistrust of general theory-building, linguistically inspired or otherwise.
2 Russian formalism was a critical school in Russia from 1915 until the late 1920s, when it was forcefully suppressed by Soviet totalitarianism. It is often seen as the starting point of modern literary theory. Unlike the New Criticism, its focus was more on the general rules and principles that define verbal art (e.g., defamiliarization) than on individual texts. Representatives such as Roman Jakobson and Y. Tynyanov illustrate the continuity with the Prague school, whose research programme had an intrinsic functional orientation.

the various discursive phenomena in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language(s) used are mobilized to produce a communicatively significant, (near) simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic units with more or less dissimilar meanings and more or less similar forms.[3]

The following diagram attempts to visualize the definition's main intuitions:
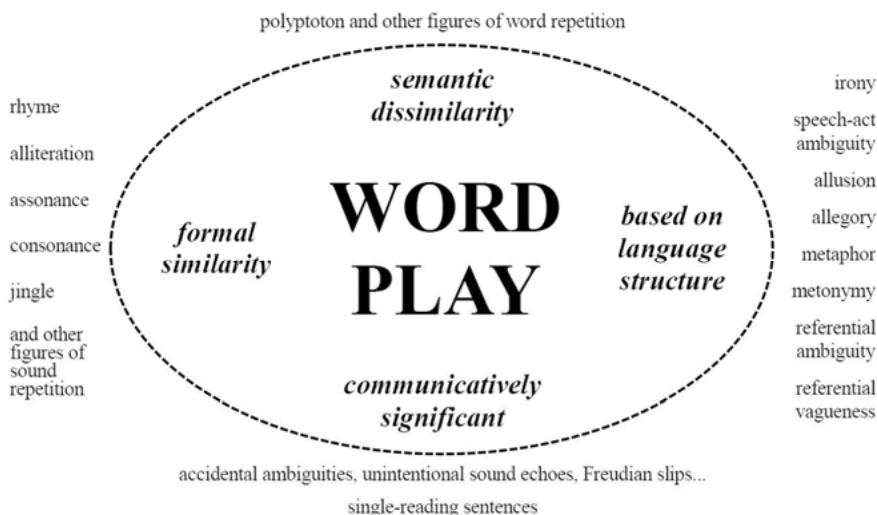

Fig. 1: Visualisation of definition of wordplay

The definition places wordplay at the intersection of four continua: a) formal similarity, b) semantic dissimilarity, c) dependence on language structure, and d) communicative significance.

Thus, "En attendant dodo" (title of a theatre review by a critic who was bored by the performance of Beckett's *En attendant Godot*) qualifies as a pun because it throws into opposition two verbal sequences *Godot* / dodo which show a) formal similarity and b) semantic difference c) on the basis of language structure [namely, paronymy] and d) in a way which is clearly deliberate, namely, as an overtly

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3 For a fine-grained discussion of this definition, see Delabastita (1993: 55–151). See, furthermore, Section I (The discussion forum) in *The Dynamics of Wordplay* 3 (Knospe, Onysko, and Goth 2016: 9–78), which illustrates just how much issues of definition and classification remain central to the field.

sarcastic expression of the reviewer's dislike of the show. While this example is a clear-cut one, the point that needs emphasizing is that we have to hypothesize a *graded notion* for *each of the four criteria*. Let us briefly exemplify this:

a) formal similarity: depending on specific context (e.g., through grammatical or prosodic foregrounding), the category of alliteration may, or may not, merge into that of sound-based horizontal wordplays (in other words, rather than being an either / or proposition, distinctions between alliteration and sound-based wordplay should be mapped on a continuum);

b) semantic difference: subtle nuances of meaning may, or may not, suffice for wordplay to spring into effect (here, too, we have a cline rather than clear-cut distinctions);

c) based on language structure: double readings and interpretive ambiguities may, or may not, be sufficiently language-based to count as wordplay (again, we often have a continuum here; witness the gradual nature of the process of lexicalization that allows "unique" or "creative" metaphors to evolve into lexicalized polysemy permitting "real" wordplay);

d) communicatively significant: wordplay somehow has to express a communicative intention or achieve a rhetorical effect to be recognized as such (but here, too, a graded notion is needed, as there are many forms, levels and degrees of intentionality or rhetorical effectiveness).

In other words, along each of these four axes separately, membership to the category of wordplay is to be assessed in gradual rather than binary terms and careful contextualisation is required in each specific case. That is what the dotted lines in the diagram are meant to visualize.

Moreover, and no less crucially, *synchronic variation* and *diachronic shifts* are bound to affect our recognition and understanding of wordplay along each of the four axes. To illustrate the former, witness the verbal jokes that work only in one dialect of the language (e.g., requiring US-English pronunciation) but not in another (e.g., when pronounced in British English). To illustrate the latter, consider the many wordplays in older texts (Ovid, Chaucer, Shakespeare, etc.) that have been obscured by later shifts in the language's sound system which had the effect of reducing or even obliterating the "formal similarity" needed for the pun to work as such. One of the reasons often quoted as justifying performances of Shakespeare in so-called OP[4] is precisely that they bring back to life rhymes and

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4 OP or "original pronunciation" refers to recordings, readings or performances of Shakespeare making use of a linguistically based reconstruction of what his English would have sounded like

sound-based puns that had been eroded by linguistic change. Thus, the famous lines "From forth the fatal loins of these two foes / A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life" in the Prologue to Act I of *Romeo and Juliet* show a thematically apt extra level of meaning when we discover that "loins" would have been pronounced the same way as "lines" (line of descent, lineage, ancestry). Conversely, semantic shifts may sometimes have to be suspected of "creating" wordplays that could not have been intended or understood at the time of the text's original composition. The semantics of modern English will highlight the sexual meaning in words such as "gay" or "make love" when they occur in Renaissance literature, while such meanings were absent back then, so that we should mistrust such words as historical false friends liable to lead us astray in the historical interpretation of wordplays.

The fourth axis (communicative significance) specifically introduces the pragmatic and functional dimension of wordplay; it challenges us to take into account the often complex communicative settings in which wordplay is found, to recognize the different possible levels of intentionality and comprehension which these entail, and to acknowledge the difficulty (and, indeed, sometimes the impossibility!) of firmly appraising intentions and effects. The impact of synchronic variation and diachronic shifts is perhaps nowhere clearer than on this level.

My present aim is to contribute to a somewhat less researched subfield of wordplay studies, namely, wordplay in recent narrative fiction. Against the background of the afore-mentioned general principles, I shall look at the wordplay in two recent novels: *My Sister, My Love* (2008) by Joyce Carol Oates and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) by Xiaolu Guo. As any Internet search indicates, readers, bloggers and reviewers have been struck by the wordplay in both novels, but it has never been submitted to a systematic scholarly study. Xiaolu Guo's book is a "global novel"; as we shall see, it offers different wordplay readings to different readerships, depending on their cultural background and multilingual literacies.[5] Oates's *My Sister, My Love* is more firmly rooted in a single culture (the USA); it shows a complex multi-voiced postmodern narrative style which endows the novel's wordplay with an elusiveness of a very different

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four centuries ago. The well-known linguist David Crystal is one of the most prominent champions of the movement.

5 Many "global novels" differ from *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* in this particular respect. It has been pointed out that novelists targeting a global readership will tend to deal with linguistic diversity in a very different way to Guo's novel, namely, by writing their books in a "bland" and easily exportable style for the purpose of enhancing readability and translatability and thus permitting a more or less homogeneous response to them.

nature, as even its linguistically and culturally more homogeneous readerships will not always quite know to which of the characters or various embedded narrative voices the wordplays and malapropisms have to be attributed.

2 *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) by Xiaolu Guo

2.1 Presentation of the novel

Xiaolu Guo was born in 1973 in a village in south China. She published six books in Chinese before moving to London in 2002. The diary she kept in English during this difficult period of linguistic and cultural adaptation provided the autobiographical inspiration for her *Concise Dictionary*; the story is set in the same timeframe. It was her first original novel in English; several have followed since.

The main character and first-person narrator is Zhuang Xiao Qiao; she starts calling herself Z when she finds that the English cannot properly remember or pronounce her name anyway. She is a young Chinese woman (aged 23) who is sent to England by her entrepreneurial parents in order to learn English as the language of international export and economic success. She arrives in England, settles down, follows English classes, and begins a loving but complicated relationship with an unnamed older bisexual sculptor, who will also help her improve her English. Following his advice to further open her mind by visiting other places on her own, Z travels to Paris, Amsterdam, Berlin, Venice, Tavira and Dublin. Towards the end of the book the couple breaks up and when her visa expires Z travels back home, totally transformed by her stay in the West, but also discovering that China has become a very different country during her absence, having been swept by the global wave of Western-style liberalism and consumerism.

The novel is about contacts, bumps and clashes between languages and cultures, and about their unsettling and alienating impact on individual lives. Having to constantly "translate" herself into another language and culture both literally and figuratively, Z experiences anxiety and feels her former self disintegrating. The character's journey of sexual self-discovery is a related subtheme in the novel. It reflects the emancipation of Z from the constraints of old rural China and the difficult search for a new identity. At the same time, the recourse to the universal language of the body also gives her a welcome respite from English grammar and existential dislocation.

Thematically, the novel is a kind of belated-coming-of-age novel. In narrative terms, it combines two generic templates, namely, the diary novel and the dictionary novel. It is a kind of *journal intime* but the chronologically arranged sections in which Z writes down the day's experiences are not prefaced by a date but by a dictionary definition explaining a word that she has had to look up and which was relevant somehow to the day's events.

Stylistically, the book displays vastly different levels of proficiency in English. The first chapters are written in error-riddled basic English, but we witness the rapid improvement of the narrator's linguistic skills. At the end of the book Z is a confident and articulate user of English, with few remaining "mistakes".

Not surprisingly, it is mainly Z's errors that provide a way into the book's ample wordplay. While being on the whole a "serious" book, *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* contains a lot of humour, much of which follows from the many cultural and indeed linguistic misunderstandings and errors that it stages. Some of these errors reflect the predictable format of funny foreigner English, as we find out in the first entry after her arrival:

(1) **alien**

alien adj foreign; repugnant (to); from another world n foreigner; being from another world

Is unbelievable. I arriving London, '**Heathlow**[6] Airport'. Every single name very difficult remembering, because just not 'London Airport' simple way like we simple way call 'Beijing Airport'. Everything very confuse way here, passengers is separating in two queues.
Sign in front of queue say: ALIEN and NON ALIEN.
I am **alien**, like Hollywood film *Alien*, I live in another planet, with funny looking and strange language. (p. 9)

We shall come back to the intentional (intended by the narrator) "alien" pun later. As to the "accidental" (but, of course, intended by the author) l-for-r substitution in Heathrow / Heathlow, this phenomenon is well-known and perhaps even overworked as a "Chinese" shibboleth and a source of jokes. Later in the book we also find it in:

(2)   In my home town everyone take cheap taxi, but in London is very expensive and taxi is like the **Loyal** family look down to me. [Royal family] (p. 19) (similarly on p. 41)

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6 Here and below, bold has been added to highlight the wordplay in the excerpts.

(3)   You laughing when you hear the names. 'I never knew **flutes** grew on trees,' you say. It seems I am big comedy to you. I not understand why so funny. 'You can't say your Rs. It's *fruit* not *flute*,' you explain me. 'A *flute* is a musical instrument [...]'. (p. 64)

These excerpts give a first idea of how the novel works. Looking at the few examples of wordplay they contain, we can also see a basic pattern in the use of wordplay beginning to emerge.

2.2 Multiple readers, multiple readings

2.2.1 Levels of linguistic awareness and rhetorical control

A first group of puns in the novel may be exemplified by excerpt (1) above, where we see the narrator deliberately producing a wordplay in English on the double meaning of "alien" in English as referring to either "a non-citizen, a foreigner" or a "strange creature from outer space".

Paradoxically perhaps, it is the speaker's very limited proficiency in English that enables her to make such wordplays. Being a newcomer to English, the language has a novel, unfamiliar and surprising aspect to her, which more seasoned EFL speakers and a fortiori native speakers have lost as the language became a habitual cognitive and communicative tool for them. As a language learner, Z keeps making metalingual comments on the differences between English and Chinese which express her strong linguistic curiosity. Not surprisingly, she is quite perceptive to the "strangeness" of form-meaning relationships in English. Even an ordinary street name attracts her attention and makes her wonder about double meanings and semantic motivations, whether she is naively assuming that street names in English are meant to reflect characteristic features of the street, or actually making a deliberate English joke:

(4)   Anyway, *hostel* called 'Nuttington House' in Brown Street, nearby Edward Road and Baker Street. I write all the names careful in notebook. No lost. **Brown** Street seems really **brown** with brick buildings everywhere. Prison looking. (p. 12)

While the semantics of this pun (4) are quite simple, the narrator would perhaps not have managed to foreground the polysemy of the word "alien" in example (1) without the help of her dictionary. This is the second way in which her limited proficiency paradoxically helps her produce these wordplays: her limited vocabulary frequently forces her to have recourse to her dictionary, where she finds definitions that heighten her sensitivity to linguistic meaning.

Here are two more examples, if we accept, as I believe we may, that the following plays on "Confucius"/"confusion" and on "deadly" [lethal/extreme] are deliberate on the part of Z:

(5) English food very confusing. They eating and drinking strange things. I think even **Confucius** have great **confusion** if he studying English. (p. 33)

(6) She always threatens to **die** the next day. Whenever it comes to this **deadly** subject, I can only keep my mouth shut. (p. 351)

Admittedly, instances like these, where we see the narrator being and feeling on top of some of the subtleties of English, remain relatively few. In the following example, we see Z realizing the potential ambiguity of "be my guest" [literal/ figurative] but only in retrospect, after the initial misinterpretation has had to be pointed out to her:

(7) 'I want to see where you live,' I say.
You look in my eyes. '**Be my guest**.' [...]
That's how all start. From a misunderstanding. When you say 'guest' I think you meaning I can stay in your house. A week later I move out from Chinese landlord. (pp. 53 and 54, respectively, separated by an ellipsis of a week)

The laconic wording conveys a sense of Z's amusement when she becomes metalingually aware of how the "silly" literal understanding of an idiomatic phrase had altered the course of the life.

In a similar way, Z retrospectively corrects her initial mishearing of "fizzy water" as "filthy water" in example (9) (see below), but this correction does not happen until more than 300 pages down the novel, when Z's stay in England is drawing to a close and she finds herself rereading her earlier entries: "I sit down [...] and open my notebook. [...] I look at all the words I learned since the first day I arrived in this country: *Alien*, *Hostel*, *Full English Breakfast*, *Properly*, *Fog*, *Filthy Water* (actually *fizzy water*, now I know) ... So many words" (p. 337). Incidentally, the idea of narrator rereading and possibly editing her earlier diary entries creates interesting critical perspectives, to which we shall have to turn later.

2.2.2 Accidental wordplay

In most cases, Z produces semantic misunderstandings or playfully ungrammatical utterances *without* the text indicating any form of metalingual awareness or self-correction either instantly or later. The pun on "loyal"/"royal" given above

falls into this category. In such cases, intentionality lies entirely and solely with the author.

In the following example, Z does not bother to check the word "homeless" in her dictionary and assumes it simply means *any* person not having a home or fixed residence:

(8) **hostel**

> **hostel** n building providing accommodation at a low cost for a specific group of people such as students, travellers, **homeless** people, etc.

> First night in 'hostel'. Little *Concise Chinese-English Dictionary* hostel explaining: a place for 'people such as students, travellers and homeless people' to stay. Sometimes my dictionary absolutely right. I am student and I am **homeless** looking for place to stay. How they knowing my situation *precisely*? (p. 11)

In the following instance, the misunderstanding has a phonological rather than semantic basis. Apart from the fact the word "fizzy" does not seem to belong to the lexical repertoire of Z, her ear is not well attuned to the [l] sound or to the phonological distinction in English between [z] and [θ] (unvoiced th-sound):

(9) Waiter asks me: 'What would you like? Still water, or **filthy** water'?
'What? Filthy water?' I am shocked.
'OK, filthy water.' He leave and fetch bottle of water. (p. 34)

In the following two instances, the wordplay is largely based on morphology, as we see Z comically – but also very meaningfully – misconstruing the compositional structure and etymology of the words "illegal" and "demonstrator" respectively:[7]

(10) Walking around like a ghost, I see two rough mans in corner suspicionly smoke and exchange something. **Ill-legal**, I have to run – maybe they desperate drug addictors robbing my money. (p. 14) (similarly on pp. 17 and 187)

(11) People in march seems really happy. [...] Can this kind of **demon-stration** stop war? From Mao's little red book I learning in school: [...] A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence with which one class overthrows another. (p. 29) (similarly on pp. 96 and 335)

The idea of "illegality" being a state of moral / legal "illness" that you suffer *from* and / or that the law can make you suffer *for* is a powerful one. So is the clever

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7 The cognitive mechanism behind these cases of re-analysis and pseudo-motivation is essentially that of folk etymology or popular etymology.

image of "demonstrators" potentially being "demons" about to break out in "street" (Lat. *strata*) violence.

The following list presents a number of other puns which were similarly intended by the author[8] at the expense of the narrator. For the sake of brevity, and since most of them can speak for themselves, they will be listed with a minimum of context and with brief glosses added for the vertical wordplays only:

(12) I get suitcase from airport's luggage **bell** [belt] (p. 12)

(13) Is cold, late winter. Windy and **chilli** [chilly / chilli peppers (known as a 'hot' spice)] (p. 13)

(14) **Spicy** Girls [Spice Girls / hot, exciting, slightly shocking girls] (p. 14)

(15) Abashed: (meaning to feel **embrassed** or regretful) [embarrassed / brassed (off), ?embraced, ?brazen] (p. 15)

(16) I even **saving bacons** for supper [literal / figurative "save one's bacon"] (p. 17)

(17) And verbs has three types of **mood** too: indicative, imperative, subjunctive. Why so **moody**? (p. 24)

(18) **Weather** it rain or **weather** it sunshine, you just not know. [weather / whether] (p. 32)

(19) Buckingham **Place** [Palace] (p. 41)

(20) You say prefer French **Patisserie**. '**Patty surly**'? (p. 49)

(21) You ask if I want visit **Kew Gardens**. '**Queue Gardens**'? (p. 52)

(22) '*For most of the last twenty years I have **been out with** men.*' I think is good try love men. World better place. But go **out** where? (p. 72)

(23) '*When I was a squatter, I made a lot of sculptures.* [...].' What **squat**? I take out dictionary. Says 'to sit with the knees bent and the heels close to the bottom or thighs.' Very difficult position, I imagine. (p. 72)

(24) 'I presume you are thinking of the *persistent **vegetative** state*,' you say. '***Vegetarian*** means you don't eat meat.' (p. 75–76)

(25) cheap **biscakes** [biscuits] (p. 79)

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8 It is worth noting that the novel contains three errors at least which were surely *not* intended by Guo: "mos<u>e</u> common" (p. 40), "sculp<u>u</u>ture" (p. 264) and "yo<u>u</u>self" (p. 320). These three words are spelled correctly "by the narrator" in all other instances in the book.

(26) It is too **out in blue** for me. [out of the blue] (p. 83)

(27) While I sitting here, many singles, desperately mans coming up saying, 'Hello **darling**'. But I not your **darling**. (p. 86)

(28) Maybe also why newspapers always report cases of **peterfiles** and perverts. [paedophiles] (p. 109)

(29) You want to show me somewhere special called the Burnham **Beach**. 'Is it the British ocean?' I ask, excited to visit sea for first time. You are laughing. '**B-e-e-c-h**, not b-e-a-c-h. In English, a beech is a type of tree, not an ocean.' (p. 110)

(30) I was hungry all the time, because I never can have something I really wanted eat, **like** meat, any **kind** meat. [like: preposition / verb] [kind: adjective / noun] (p. 127)

(31) 'That's your **clitoris**,' you tell me. '**Liquorice**?' (p. 137)

(32) 'This **Anon** very good writer,' I say. 'I think I prefer to Shakespeare, much easier.' (p. 144) [abbreviation for Anonymous / (mistaken for a non-existing) author's name]

(33) **Bees** are **beeing** around the jasmine tree. (p. 155)

(34) You move your body to the bathroom. You **throw** yourself **up**. [vomit] (p. 167)

(35) 'But what's wrong with a bit of **hoover**ing?' 'Because I hate that **woover**'. (p. 174)

(36) I thought English is a strange language. Now I think French is even more strange. In France, their fish is *poisson*, their bread is *pain* and their pancake is *crêpe*. **Pain** and **poison** and **crap**. That's what they have every day. (p. 203)

(37) A man, with a huge suitcase and a big **rocksack**, talk in mobile phone in a strange language. [rucksack /${}^{?}$sack with is heavy as a rock, or used for rambling in rocky landscapes] (p. 208) (similarly on pp. 208, 211, 218, 226, 230, 232, 236, 238, 246, 249, 254, 263, 266)

(38) The speaker on the platform **renounces** something loudly. It is 20.09. The train will leave in four minutes. [announces] (p. 212)

(39) 'I am an **avocado**,' he replies. '**Avocado**?' I am surprised to hear. Is a fruit also a job? [It. avvocato = lawyer] (p. 234–235)

(40) The rocks nearby the shore are dirty, polluted. [...] But some seagulls still **convolute** there. [revolve / make convoluted movements] (p. 246)

(41) The old man has very strong accent, and my English listening comprehension becomes hopeless. '**Turf**' or '**Tofu**'? I don't understand this word. Gosh, why they don't simply call it 'black burning stuffs'? (p. 258)

(42) 'Ah, those are *briquettes*, my dear,' the old man answers proudly. '**Briquettes**?' Why it sounds like a French bread? [baguettes] (p. 258)

While not being exhaustive, this list of inadvertently produced puns or near-puns by Z is definitely a representative sample.

Not surprisingly, looking at the page numbers, we see that the overall number of amusing linguistic accidents appears to decrease as the narrator's linguistic skills get better. Correspondingly, their occurrence is increasingly occasioned by the narrator's contacts with unfamiliar dialects (Dublin, in example (41)) or indeed with other languages than English (French and Italian, in examples (36), (39) and (42)), or by her efforts to raise her stylistic game and use a more sophisticated linguistic register (as in example (40)).

This increasing level of Z's proficiency along the book's chronology prompts us to briefly revisit the novel's narrative structure. As we have seen, all the wordplays, whether they are deliberate or accidental on the narrator's part, can be attributed to the same person. This suggests a very straightforward set-up of the book's situation of discourse and induces us to believe – perhaps too easily – that levels of intentionality can be mapped on a simple unilinear scale, which ranges from Z making deliberate jokes (few cases), to Z being blissfully unaware of the double meanings and verbal associations caused by her linguistic blundering (the majority of cases), with a number of intermediate cases (with Z showing at least *some* degree of metalingual awareness, as in example (4)). However, we should acknowledge the fact that for each story-world event reported by Z an analytical distinction can be made between three different "moments" in the novel's narrative logic:

a) the event itself (involving Z as the "experiencing self");
b) the first-time reporting of the event in Z's diary (involving Z as the "narrating self");
c) the subsequent rereading and the copy-editing of the diary (involving Z as the "editing self").

Let us revisit, for instance, the accidental joke in example (2). One may reasonably assume that some time – in both real and psychological terms – must have elapsed between a) the initial mentally made comparison between the rudeness of the cab driver and the arrogance ascribed to the members of the royal family, b) the actual reporting of the unpleasant taxi-taking experience in the day's entry in her notebook, and c) the rereading and possibly revising of this entry in her notebook towards the end of Z's year in the UK and (one imagines, though no mention of this is made in the book) before handing the manuscript over to whoever has accepted to publish the text. The distance in time between these

three consecutive moments is potentially relevant for our understanding of the wordplay in the book inasmuch we know that the book's chronology correlates with the rapid development of Z's linguistic proficiency in English. This gave Xiaolu Guo the possibility of exploiting a double gap – between a) and b), and between b) and c), respectively – thus raising interpretive questions such as the following:

a)–b): Could it be, for instance, that the narrating self has embellished her report of the day's events either by silently correcting "embarrassing" linguistic errors she made as an experiencing self (e.g., after having consulted a dictionary) or by inserting "clever" linguistic errors that actually did not occur in the fictional world?

b)–c): Could it be, for instance, that the editing self has corrected or removed certain errors from the manuscript; or, conversely, that a process of self-fashioning (depicting a progress from linguistic and cultural naïveté to greater maturity) has led the editing self to add "typical" or "amusing" linguistic blunders that never happened to the experiencing self or were never initially reported by the narrating self?

Such questions have to be asked, because the textual exploitation of the distinctions between Z's three "selves" could have added interesting polyphonic resonances to the wordplay in the novel. However, I believe that the questions can all be answered in the negative. Not only are there no textual signals that would support such polyphonic readings of the wordplay in the novel; in addition, one has to reckon with the strength of the conventions of the novelist's main generic template, namely, the diary (or notebook), which emphasize the temporal immediacy and the raw authenticity of the writing, thus dispelling the relevance of potential questions following from the theoretical distinction between a), b) and c).

As already suggested, the errors produced by Z mobilize a range of different *linguistic mechanisms*, including accidental sound similarity, morphological re-motivation, literal / figurative reading of idiomatic expressions, lexical polysemy, and so on. The errors show great variety in other ways too, which space restrictions prevent us from discussing in any detail. Some are made in language *reception*, while others occur in language *production*. Furthermore, the unintended meanings may display various degrees of *contextual aptness*: while several jokes in the corpus are quite clever, others strike us as being rather pointless. The puns also show various degrees of originality, with an example such as (36) clearly appearing at the lower end of this scale.

There is a further possible comparative perspective, which invites us to identify the degree to which the various errors result specifically from *Chinese/English linguistic interference* or have some other source. Phonological interference between English and Chinese is all too evidently the basis for the "loyal"/"royal" joke in example (2) or for the "flute"/"fruit" confusion in (3). By contrast, interference between English and Chinese can definitely be ruled out as the basis for the "weather"/"whether" pun in example (18), as a lot of European EFL learners or indeed native speakers of English would struggle to spell these words correctly. However, as soon as we move beyond these very obvious cases at either end of the spectrum, my inexistent knowledge of Chinese fatally disqualifies me from assessing the extent to which certain features of the language "shine through" in the errors, providing a plausible motivation for *why* our Chinese narrator Z makes *this* particular significant error in English and activating any double meanings in Chinese that may be lurking behind the error.

2.2.3 Bilingual Chinese/English wordplay

This brings me to a third group of wordplays in the novel: the "truly"[9] bilingual Chinese/English puns. Inasmuch as I can see, this set contains only one clear member, which, I think, like those is the previous group, is involuntarily produced by Z:

(43) How I finding important places including Buckingham Palace, or Big **Stupid** Clock? (p. 12)

Z is surely alluding to "Big Ben", which is the only landmark in London that has "big" in its name and that features a "clock". But why is Big Ben called "Big *Stupid* Clock"? As I was lucky enough to find out with the help of a generous Hong Kong-based colleague,[10] "bèn" means "stupid" in Chinese.

The corpus contains some Italian/English (example (39): *avvocato*/avocado) and some French/English bilingual wordplay (example (36): *pain*/pain, *poisson*/poison, *crêpe*/crap). There is also some punning on words such as "briquette" and "baguette" (example (42)) or "patisserie" (example (20)), which

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9 See Delabastita (2005) for a comparative discussion and classification of various types of bilingual and bilingually motivated monolingual verbal humour. Section II (Multilingual wordplay in different communicative settings) and to a lesser extent Section III (Translation of wordplay) of The Dynamics of Wordplay 3 are devoted to various aspects of the bilingual / multilingual pun (Knospe, Onysko, and Goth 2016: 97−257 and 261−378).

10 Dr Robert J. Neather, personal communication, 29 December 2014.

are French loans in English, usefully reminding us that the distinction between monolingual and bilingual wordplay, a subcategory of the "based on language structure" criterion in our wordplay definition, is ultimately no less gradual and porous than its other criteria. But, to the best of my knowledge, "Big Stupid Clock" is the only bilingual *Chinese/English* pun in the novel, and it is one I could never have worked out on my own. The point that needs to be made is precisely that "the best of my knowledge" is nowhere near good enough. As with other bilingual puns, proficiency in both languages is required to decode it.[11]

This is the right time to recall that *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is very much a "global novel" not just because of its themes, or because it has been translated into two dozens of languages so far, but also because it has reached out to a global and linguistically diverse readership from the beginning. The original book was written to appeal to monolingual native speakers of English (many of whom will take an interest in the novel inasmuch as they are losing their sense of "belonging" as they feel that their world is being engulfed by globalisation, migration and multilingualism); to non-Chinese and non-Anglophone readers who have acquired English as a foreign language (and who can therefore, albeit from a different linguistic angle, relate to the interlingual and intercultural struggles of Z); and, last but not least, to readers – both in China and in the Chinese diaspora worldwide – who have a certain degree of Chinese/English bilingualism (Li 2016). Crucially, Chinese/English bilinguals will better than other readers be able to imagine the narrative of Z "from the inside"; only they will show a smile of fond recognition when they see how some of Z's funny errors spring from familiar Chinese idioms and grammar shining through; only they will be able to pick up all of the novel's Chinese/English bilingual wordplay. This gives the wordplay in the book an elusiveness which correlates very specifically with the multilingual literacy of its various groups of readers.

3 *My Sister, My Love* (2008) by Joyce Carol Oates

3.1 Presentation of the novel

It is an indefinability of a very different type that characterizes the wordplay in *My Sister, My Love* (2008), written by Joyce Carol Oates, one of America's finest

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11 This is a well-documented fact; see, for instance, Nicole Nolette's (2015) book on theatre and heterolingualism in Quebec for an analysis of the inclusionary and exclusionary uses to which the principle can be put.

and most prolific novelists of the past half century.[12] As with our previous novel, *My Sister, My Love* contains a lot of punning of the "involuntary"[13] and often bilingual type, but the differences are more striking than the similarities. For a start, one would not qualify *My Sister, My Love* as a "global novel".[14] It is a profoundly "American" book in terms of language, characters, settings and themes. It offers a mercilessly satirical take on America's upper-middle-class in the 1990s and its obsession with money, conspicuous consumption, status and celebrity; institutions like the healthcare industry, the legal system, religion, and, especially, the media come in for some hard-hitting criticism, too.

The primary narrator and main character is Skyler Rampike, whose little sister Bliss ("my sister, my love") was found dead with a head injury on January 29, 1997, in the family home in Fair Hills, New Jersey. It is only towards the end of the novel that the reader learns for sure that Bliss had been killed by her own mother, Betsey Rampike. Skyler was only nine at the time; Bliss was six. But Betsey suggests to Skyler (and she makes her husband Bix believe) that he was to blame for his little sister's death. Skyler's grief and sense of guilt never go away.

Betsey Rampike, a faded beauty queen, had a failed career as an ice-skater as a young girl. She now projects her dreams and frustrations on her little daughter Edna Louise, who turns out to have a special talent for ice-skating. Betsey renames her as "Bliss" and spares no effort or expense to boost Bliss's career and to sexualize / commercialize the little girl, with herself parading in the media as the all-American "loving" mother. It is when Bliss develops an ankle problem, is no longer winning big competitions, and relapses into night-time incontinence that Betsey half-accidentally kills her daughter in a fit of drunken exasperation. Afterwards she never stops playing the part of the grieving but brave mum finding support in her Christian faith. Betsey is a shrewd rather than really clever person. She suffers from dyslexia, as we can see from the facsimiles of her handwritten notes and letters copied into the novel. At the end she dies of a botched plastic surgery operation.

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12 The author does not need introducing, but it is worth noting that she got her inspiration for this book from a historical murder case, namely, the JonBenét Ramsey case (Freeman 2016).

13 It may be worth noting that the novel contains a number of errors that apparently do not belong to the author's artistic design: "lifted lifted" (p. 26), "of indeterminte sex and age" (p. 104), "devastating" (p. 236), "contemproary American history" (p. 448).

14 It has been translated into six languages (into Chinese, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish), against no fewer than twenty-four for *Concise Dictionary* (Jaggi 2014). Note that the latter book was the author's literary début in English, whereas Oates is a highly acclaimed and indeed fully canonized writer in English; this is her thirty-seventh published novel.

The father, Bix Rampike, is from a wealthy family and was a top-class athlete at university. He is tall, muscular, sexy, gregarious, ultra-Republican and fond of showy big cars. He is also chronically adulterous, arrogant and overbearing, and ruthless in the pursuit of his professional ambitions.

Bix had earlier tried to make Skyler into a gymnast, which only resulted in a bad fall that leaves the boy with a permanent limp. That problem, combined with the guilt and trauma of losing his little sister, not to mention the totally inept parenting of Bix and Betsey, result in Skyler dropping out of school, getting over-diagnosed and over-medicated, moving between special-needs elite schools and treatment centres, and further sliding into isolation, depression, and drug abuse.

Skyler as the narrator of the book is nineteen years old now. He has broken with his parents, and is being looked after by the well-meaning evangelical pastor Bob, who encourages him to come to terms with his troubled childhood and traumas by writing the story in his own words. Skyler is highly gifted. He writes his therapeutic memoirs in the format of a postmodern novel, combining filmic narrative techniques with stream of consciousness, elaborate footnotes, embedded narratives, the use of different typefaces, drawings and other graphic gimmicks, self-referential metanarrative comments, disrupted chronologies, false starts, intertextual nods at other genres such as the teen romance (p. 423) and the dictionary novel (pp. 117, 139). In his retrospective narration, he mostly refers to the younger version of himself in the third person.

Importantly, the book's self-conscious postmodern style is Skyler's rather than Oates's. In the final analysis, the book portrays the un-postmodern search for truth, understanding and peace of mind by a young man who was horribly let down by both his parents and American society. It is an intensely human and moving novel which offers glimmers of hope and redemption in the end, to the point of making readers feel sorry for Bix and Betsey. These few notes do not even begin to do justice to the ambiguities and complexities of this massive novel, but they will have to suffice as background to our discussion of wordplay in the novel.

3.2 Punning names

Not in real life perhaps, but in fictional universes names do not have to be arbitrary and can inform us directly or more indirectly about the bearer's personality.[15] Oates's novel is one such novel that invests heavily in names.

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15 Name-giving is a traditional and well-documented technique of characterization. In some cases, the character's name sums up the key features of the speaker's personality or role in the

We have already mentioned that Skyler's little sister was "rebranded" as Bliss, which not only has the ring of divine joy and salvation about it (an echo to Betsey's religious fanaticism) but also sounds snappier and more marketable than "Edna Louise" (demonstrating the mercantile undercurrent driving Betsey's choices).

The first name "Skyler" had been chosen by Bix to express the high hopes of an ambitious father for his first-born son: "Sky's the limit" (p. 76). Unfortunately, several people characteristically misremember Skyler's name and start calling him "Skeeler" (from p. 74 onwards) or even "Scooter" (from p. 164 onwards), which is more suggestive of directionless horizontal movement than of a meteoric vertical rise to success, illustrating the boy's status as an anti-hero.

The surname "Rampike" (forceful and unsubtle like a battering "ram"; sharp like a "pike") is evocative in itself. So is the way in which it is frequently mispronounced as either "Ram-Pick" or "Ranpick"; the association with "prick" is never more than a single letter away. Elsewhere the name is deliberately and insultingly transformed into "Rampuke" (pp. 121 and 219).

Betsey's maiden name is "Sckulhorne". Does this name "merely" evoke venerable West-European ancestry, or are we to gather that Betsey is all "bone from the neck upwards"? Or consider the following names of secondary characters: the sports-paediatrician treating Bliss is called Dr Muddick; the specialist in child psychopharmacology treating Bliss has the name Dr. Bohr-Mandrake; the coroner who examines Bliss's dead body is called Dr Virgil Elyse; one of lawyers hired by Bix is named Morris Kruk; the pastor who offers Skyler an escape has the name Bob Fluchaus; the shrinks treating Skyler include Dr Splint and Dr Murdstone; and so on.

The name of Dr Murdstone especially ([capable of] "murd[er]" + [hard like] "stone") is a particularly broad hint urging the reader to read personality and satire into names, inasmuch as Murdstone – the name of a character in *David Copperfield* – is known as a textbook example of Dickensian suggestive name-giving. *My Sister, My Bone* is a treasure-trove of examples of such speaking names with degrees of motivation ranging between strong and vaguely evocative, and with intentionality sometimes operating at the author-level (family names), sometimes at the character-level (first names, nicknames). But, however cleverly used here, the technique as such is a well-established one. The effect of many other puns in the novel is contingent on more recent and specifically postmodern modes of writing. It is those we shall now focus on.

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story, as in overtly allegorical stories such as *Everyman*. In more modern narratives, the "speaking names" operate in more indirect ways. For more detailed typologies, see Birus (1987).

3.3 Multiple voices, multiple readings

3.3.1 Deliberate: looking for rhetorical effect

There is a group of cases where characters make puns which are undoubtedly deliberate in a manner which highlights their personality and their life's agenda.

For instance, the local ice-skating contests for young children are called "Tots-on Ice Capades", a brand name which puns on "escapades" to make it more memorable and commercially effective. Their habitual presenter is fond of making superlative mots-valises for "humorous" effect:

(44) His voice – gravelly baritone, subtly mocking – scraped against the microphone like finger-nails: "*Hel*-lo ladiez 'n' gentz 'n' all the rest of you" – pause for laughs, titters – "I am your 'umble 'ost for this **perspercarious** non-puerile Tots-on-**Ice Capades** 1994 – Jeremiah Jericho!" [perspicuous / perspicacious / precarious / perspire] [ice / escapades] (p. 104) (similarly [perspercacious] on p. 106)

To help her cope with the loss of her daughter and the break-up of her marriage and to perpetuate the memory of Bliss, Betsey launches a line of products, beginning with beauty products, later branching out into other markets (p. 477). The punning name of the line – Heaven Scent – shamelessly cashes in on the tragedy of Bliss and on buyers' spiritual sentiments:

(45) **Heaven Scent** [divine or sacred scent / sent by or from heaven] (p. 330 and ff.)

Bix, too, produces a few intentional wordplays that express his personality, more particularly his crude assertiveness. This is how he berates the Russian coach (named Vassily Andreevich Volokhomsky) who is in vain trying to make a gymnast out of Skyler:

(46) 'Scuse me, Vas'ly Andervitch – **Kolonoskopi** – whatever – I'm not seeing much progress here. I know you're a pro, you're a *bonafid* Olympic medal winner, I know because, comrade, I did a little background check, but at these prices, I have to admit that I am just a little disappointed, *verstayen*? [colonoscopy] (p. 82)

Here is Bix's standard joke about Pittsburgh, the city where his mother hails from:

(47) Skyler laughed when Daddy said how Grandmother Rampike and certain relatives of Daddy's lived in "**Piggsburgh**" which was the "gruntiest, stinkiest" city in the United States. [city of pigs] (p. 57)

This is how Bix speaks about Mr Kissler, who is Betsey's business partner and fiancé at the end of her life:

(48) This 'fiancé' – 'Nathan **Kissler**' – Betsey turned a deaf ear to my investigator, who'd turned up some frank evidence that **Kiss-my-ass** would've been arrested for embezzlement not once not twice but three times. (p. 530)

3.3.2 Accidental' wordplay – but whose linguistic accidents?

As opposed to these examples, most of the wordplays in the novel appear to have an accidental character within the fictional world; they often concern foreign phrases or rare words, so that we can refer to them as malapropisms. I am using the hedge "appear to" for a reason. Let us remind ourselves of the novel's narrative structure. The primary narrator is Skyler, who, at the age of 19 tries to come to terms with the traumas of his youth. Within the fictional universe of the book, he is a dyslexic as well as being an outcast and a junkie with serious mental health issues. No less crucially, he is writing his memoir in a self-consciously postmodern style. We cannot therefore avoid questioning his reliability as a narrator. This complicates the interpretation of the malapropisms that are found in Skyler's discourse. Let us review some of Skyler's self-produced malapropisms:

(49) A religious lunatic like who's it – **"Kirky-gard"**. Bullshit nobody believes except pathetic assholes with I.Q.'s drooping around their ankles. [Kierkegaard / guard = protector of the kirk = church] (p. 28)

(50) For you had only to glance at our pedophile, the pariah of Morris County, all knowledge of Gunther Ruscha's lurid past but a ***tabbouleh rosa***, and a primitive warning signal would detonate in the frontal lobe of your reptile brain: "Sex deviate!" [tabula rasa] (p. 360)

(51) *That this boy who assumes a pose of scowling indifference, picking at his face as the adults discuss his future, is so hesitant to acknowledge what is, by this time, a* **fête accompli** [fait accompli / reference to the divorce of Bix and Betsey, a cause for fête = celebration?] (p. 428)

(52) **POOR SKYLER! THWARTED MIDWAY IN HIS JOURNEY TO SPRING HOLLOW, NEW** York, and for all we know, maybe he never arrives there. While Skyler is lost **in *medias race*** in Fort Lee, New Jersey, we can use the lull in the narrative to present a miscellany of items too unwieldy to have "worked into" previous chapters. [in medias res] (p. 498)

Skyler – being the dyslexic junkie that he is, writing his memoirs in a frenzy and possibly with irregular access to reference books – may well be the inadvertent author of these misspellings. The use of inverted commas (in example (49)) would then signal his doubts; the use of italics (in examples (50), (51) and (52)) may perhaps not only signal "this is a foreign phrase" but also "I am not too sure about the spelling". The following example with self-referential metalingual comment goes some way towards backing up this hypothesis:

(53) **Sick** *transit gloria* or whatever the (Latin) expression is, maybe my editor will know. [Lat. sic transit gloria (mundi)] (p. 78)

As does this one:

(54) **Tabbouleh rasa**. *Damn "foreign phrase" isn't in my dictionary which is an ominous sign maybe I've misspelled it. No matter: for those of us haphazardly (if expensively) educated and pretentious as hell, dropouts eager to be mistaken as* **O current, O fate**, *and* **O fund**, *of the* cognozenti, polylingual *and* polymorphous *and* non plus ultra, *it means, possibly in Latin, "a smooth or erased tablet": that's to say "the mind in its hypothetical primary blank or empty state". (Sounds good!)* [Lat. tabula rasa] [Fr. au courant] [Fr. au fait] [Fr. au fond] (p. 60)

But then, Skyler's narrative is full of medical jargon and other rare polysyllabic words of foreign origin that he *does* spell correctly. Also, in example (54) the metalingual comment might strike the reader as spinning totally out of control, thus throwing into doubt the most straightforward "realistic" reading (Skyler's linguistic blunders result from his dyslexia and mental ill-health) and raising the suggestion that the malapropisms may be just another playful postmodern strategy. If Skyler is "steeped in irony" (p. 424), one wonders why his self-irony would not extend to his apparent malapropisms. Could they perhaps just be part of the "literary 'unreliable narrator' stuff?" (p. 205)?

(55) Think that I, Skyler Rampike, steeped in irony, *ressentiment*, and chronic **sand fraud** like a squid steeped in ink, can't put aside postmodernist strategies of "storytelling" for the naive, raw, throbbing emotions of mere storytelling? [Fr. sang froid] (p. 424)

Is it Skyler-the-dyslexic-junkie who commits such errors accidentally, or is it Skyler-the-smart-postmodern-narrator who produces them tongue in cheek? The novel offers no way to resolve the question.

The matter becomes much more complicated even when we consider the many malapropisms which were to all appearances initially perpetrated by others – not by Skyler-the-narrator but by the people he quotes. There are many of those. Skyler's narrative is reverberating with the discourses of other people, especially those of his parents, making *My Sister, My Love* into a very Bakhtinian novel.[16]

The narrator's quotees include the younger version of himself. The communicative set-up is perfectly clear in the following instances of this:

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16 For another application of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony in connection with wordplay in the novel, see Genz (2015).

(56) When the subject came up one day in the Rampike household, and Skyler happened to overhear, the silly kid piped up fearfully, "'**Headhunters**'? After Daddy's h-head?" and Mummy and Daddy laughed at Skyler, and filed away little Skyler's query to be repeated, for laughs, in subsequent years. (p. 63)

(57) Grimly smiling / carelessly shaved Bix Rampike jet-lagged and cranky from a trip to **Saudi Arabia** (which Skyler misheard as **Sandy Arabia**) on oil business, was late driving Skyler to the Gymnastics Lab on that final Saturday. (p. 81)

Skyler-the-narrator unmistakably distances himself from his own "childish" earlier misunderstandings. The same is true in the following two instances, even if context and plausibility have to be factored in to make up for the absence of metalingual comments:

(58) In Mummy's magazines you can read about what adults do all the time: '**adult'ry**'. It's something nasty called 'adult'ry' because that is what **adults** do. (p. 202)

(59) The throaty voice drops solemnly, as if Zelda were trying to keep from bursting into tears, Skyler has to strain to hear what sounds like *cancer of the service. Cancer of the* **service***?* Skyler shudders. [cervix] (p. 511) (see also p. 531)

Similarly, in the realistic terms of the novel, there is no doubting that Betsey has a permanent struggle with difficult words:

(60) scolds me for 'wasting gas'! 'Never staying home'! Next thing, he'll be checking the what-is-it on my car – '**odormeter**'. You know, tells how many miles you've driven? [odometer = milometer / odor = smell] (p. 34)

The following Freudian slip occurs in a verbatim transcript of the ransom note addressed to Bix we know to have been written by Betsey and which contains several other spelling mistakes:

(61) Your daghter is in danger of Hell. Yet we will return her to you if you repent. If you return to your **Martial Vows** to have & to hold until death part. [marital vows] (p. 332)

The most tireless generator of malapropisms, however, is undoubtedly Bix. Having picked up some foreign phrases during his education and his many business trips abroad, and always keen to make an impression on his interlocutors, Bix loves to make the most of his limited stock of French, German and Latin phrases, throwing them in at every half-opportunity. The following examples – the first one a misquotation-cum-mistranslation more than a pun – show that his Latin, let alone his Greek, is really non-existent:

(62) ***Homo homin lupus***. My father used to quote, know what it means? Greek for '**wolf is friend to man**.' Meaning you got to be man enough to harness the wolf, son, the wolf-blood coursing through your 'civilized' Rampike veins [Lat. homo homini lupus = man is a wolf to man] (p. 114) (similarly on p. 263)

(63) Daddy had returned to work on the morning following Bliss's funeral for Daddy had needed to throw himself into work at once: "More work, the better! ***Sick** transit mundi*." [Lat. sic transit gloria mundi /^?through sickness the world perishes] (p. 397)

Greek-derived words don't fare any better:

(64) your mother is a woman, and they are born with these extra **chromosomes** – 'sensitivity' – 'intuition' – 'nesting instinct'. The bottom line is, it makes them prone to **monogramy**, as the male of the species is naturally prone to **polygramy**, and we have to understand this distinction. [chromosome ≠ gene] [monogamy / monogram] [polygamy / polygram] (p. 269)

Here is another one:

(65) Must've been crazy for her when he'd married her, a fatal weakness he had for submissive / soft-fleshed females gazing up at him in undisguised adoration. Even when one of them reviled Bix as a selfish prick he found such women irresistible, the ***sin qua none*** bottom line is such females adored his prick, and him. [Lat. sine qua non] (p. 337)

It looks as if Bix never stops making a fool of himself trying to overreach himself linguistically. Perhaps he inherited this propensity from his mother (as, possibly, Skyler got it from his father):

(66) I hope to see her crowned – what is it? – your mother has been telling me – 'Little Miss Jersey Ice Princess' – and on TV! – the most beautiful amazing **prodity** in the Rampike family, at last – so emphasizing *prodity* with an excited clack of her formidable gleaming-white dentures, Skyler had to wonder if the mispronunciation was deliberate, as it often seemed her son Bix's mispronouncements / malapropisms must be deliberate. [prodigy] (p. 178–179)

Skyler's hypothesis expressed at the end of the quote is not to be dismissed too lightly. We did point out earlier Bix's talent for sarcastic punning. But the possible complications regarding intentionality in these reported puns go much further than this. Consider the following (and final) four examples, where Bix's apparent poor pronunciation of French produces extreme cases of semantic incongruity:

(67) As Daddy used to say with sheepish-shit-eating-Daddy smile *Forgive me my **foe paws** as you'd wish to be forgiven yours, hey?* [Fr. faux pas / enemy + animal's feet] (p. 24)

(68) Son, enough of ruining your eyes with that 'print' crap. We're going out. There's a surprise in store. **Pear** und **feese**, eh? **Veeta!** [Fr. père] [Fr. fils] [Fr. vite] (p. 62)

(69) though it did hurt, have to admit, when Betsey went on those damn TV shows promoting her damn 'memoirs' and spoke of me, her ex-, like I'm the woman's **beet-noir**... as if our marriage ending was my fault alone. [Fr. bête noire] (p. 529)

(70) Your mother prepared it for you 'in case God calls me' and it was her wish that you do with it whatever you want and, son, that includes destroying it which is what your dad recommends **toot sweet**. [Fr. tout de suite] (p. 532)

Skyler-now (the narrating self) is reporting and transcribing how Skyler-in-the-past (the experiencing self) heard what his father was telling him. Taking into account these levels of embedding, as well as the possibility that miscommunication can occur on either the production side or the reception side, a whole paradigm of possible interpretations opens up. Perhaps, the linguistic errors here are accidentally and unconsciously produced by Skyler-now (the narrating self), who is, after all, a dyslectic junkie. Or perhaps *not*: Skyler-the-narrator may be fully aware of them. In the latter case, the flippant misrepresentations of the French are perhaps merely another manifestation of the narrator's self-consciously postmodern and unreliable posture. Or perhaps they are *not*, and they are to be interpreted as having a "psychological" basis within the fiction of the novel. In the latter case, they might, for instance, be seen as a psychologically motivated strategy of Skyler as a narrating self to ridicule his father by ascribing to him in retrospect linguistic blunders that Skyler would not have been aware of at the time as an experiencing self. Or such wilful and antagonistic misquotation does *not* occur, and the experiencing self did hear and register the French phrases in the ridiculous form in which they are being reported here. In the latter case, they might have to be attributed to Bix and / or to Skyler. Indeed, perhaps Skyler committed a receptive error by mishearing / misunderstanding and wrongly registering an utterance that was otherwise unproblematic in itself. Or perhaps Bix did make the mistake, and if he did, it was perhaps out of ignorance – or, who knows, on purpose with a comic intent?

This paradigm of possible interpretations is represented visually in Table 1. Clearly, not all these interpretive options are equally plausible. Every single case would deserve separate examination and assessment with close attention given to context. But no amount of critical scrutiny will completely resolve all the text's ambiguities when it comes to attributing sources and causes to its many malapropisms. This makes the wordplay in Oates's novel hard to pin down on account of its multi-voiced nature and postmodern style rather than of the multilingual

literacies of its various readerships, as in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*.[17]

Table 1: Paradigm of possible readings

Skyler-narrator misrepresents the "reality" of the quoted speech event	**involuntarily**	errors are caused by Skyler-narrator's dyslexia and mental confusion at the time of writing the memoir	
	deliberately	*literary motivation:* Skyler-narrator indulges in postmodern rhetorical playfulness	
		psychological motivation: Skyler-narrator wants to ridicule his father through caricature	
Skyler-narrator represents the "reality" of the quoted speech event correctly		the errors are produced by Bix	**deliberately:** Bix is joking
			involuntarily: Bix is blundering
		receptive blundering by Skyler-experiencer	

4 Concluding remark

Needless to say, these two novels constitute a ridiculously small sample of the total literary output in English in the past decade or so. That should prevent us from even raising the question of representativeness. That being said, with one being a "global novel" and the other a "postmodern" one, they may to some extent be assumed to stand for two striking trends in the modern novel and therefore potentially aspire to at least a certain degree of typicality or comparability with many other recent novels. To find out whether the findings of our paired case study can indeed be extended to a wider corpus of modern fiction will need further research (as the hackneyed phrase goes). A no less intriguing question is how translators have responded to the major challenges that our two novels represent.[18] One conclusion stands absolutely firm, however. The study of wordplay in the novel requires a flexible, context-sensitive and dynamic understanding of the phenomenon – no less than in other genres or discursive

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17 This is not to deny that the linguistic skills of reader do play a part in the case of Oates's book as well, as several of the puns are bilingual ones.

18 For an excellent first exploration, see Zoé Denis's (2016) study of the French translation of Guo's novel.

contexts such as joking, comedy, sitcoms, advertising, etc., which perhaps tend to display contextual situatedness and pragmatic interactivity in more conspicuous ways.

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