The Dynamics of Wordplay and the Modern Novel

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This paper starts by sketching the welcome evolution that the academic study of wordplay has seen in the last few decades from very 'static' to more 'dynamic' models. Static approaches tend to see wordplay as intrinsic features of an unchanging text to be merely unpacked by the perceptive reader or listener. Dynamic approaches are defined here as giving due recognition to the historicity of wordplay and to its generically, contextually, situationally and interactionally defined pragmatics and functions. This distinction between 'static' and 'dynamic' models will be explained by the demonstration of an 'open' definition of wordplay which places wordplay at the crossroads of four continua: 1. formal similarity, 2. semantic dissimilarity, 3. dependence on language structure, and 4. semiotic significance. Crucially, membership to the category of wordplay is to be assessed in gradual rather than binary terms along each of these four axes; moreover, diachronic shifts and synchronic variation affecting our understanding of wordplay are bound to occur along the four axes. The fourth axis (semiotic 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 and the different possible levels of intentionality and comprehension which these entail. Aiming to contribute to the under-researched subfield of wordplay in narrative discourse, the paper then applies these general principles to two recent novels, both of which present 'accidentally' produced wordplay of the interlingual variety. These novels are *My Sister, My Love* (2008) by Joyce Carol Oates and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* (2007) by Xiaolu Guo. The latter is a 'global' novel; it offers different wordplay readings to different readerships, depending on their cultural background and knowledge of other languages. Oates's *My Sister, My Love* is more firmly rooted in a single (American) culture; it shows a complex multi-voiced postmodern narrative style which endows the novel's wordplay with an elusiveness of a very different kind, as even its linguistically and culturally more homogeneous readerships will not always quite know to which of the various embedded narrative voices the wordplays and malapropisms have to be attributed.