Wordplay, plurisemy, wit:

overturning the interpretation of what is said

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My aim will be to show how wordplay is made possible by a specific use of very general interpretative mechanisms, which:

- allow the same semantics constraints to be associated with different forms of satisfaction, and allow hence the interpretation of a linguistic sequence to shift from one form of satisfaction to another;
- allow any discursive/textual addition to what has been said to alter/modify the set of semantic/pragmatic constraints which have to be satisfied, and also to modify the way each constraint will be satisfied and hence overturn the initial interpretation;
- allow within a contribution (i.e. a sequence of utterances) the interpretation of any utterance and the whole contribution to be constantly updated as the contribution develops until completion.

I shall then show that wordplay contributors are often using these mechanisms to initially orient the interpreter to an interpretation which ultimately will prove misleading. So that this intentional interpretative deception, the revealing of the deception and the blending of the two interpretations appear pragmatically definitional of such wordplays.

For each of these steps, I shall provide various concrete illustrations drawn from jokes, comics and advertising of the existence of the mechanisms at stake such as

(1)   Madame, Madame, est-ce que je peux être puni pour quelque chose que je n'ai pas fait ?
Madam, Madam, can I be punished for something I have not done?

This will allow me to show that wordplays are not just playing with pre-existent polysemy or ambiguity but are actually revealing completely overlooked plurisemic connections between interpretations and, as such, are considered as proofs of wit and interpretative virtuosity.

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