

A Response to Margreta de Grazia, “Homonyms before and after Lexical Standardization”¹

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The following remarks are a response to some of de Grazia’s arguments rather than a detailed discussion of the article.² The form chosen is a fictitious dialogue whose participants are **A**, the author of the article under discussion, and **R**, the reader, who is interested in various aspects of both literature and linguistics.

A: *Homonyms before and after Lexical Standardization* [title].

R: This generalizing title makes the reader look out for an analysis, however brief, of at least some occurrences of homonymy in at least a few texts. But all I can see is just *one* homonymy complex, and the number of works referred to does not exceed two.

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A: A description of one spectacular instance of this activity [*sc.* of actually making sense by drawing together semantic pieces and making them coherent] in *The Winter’s Tale* will lead to speculations on why language in Shakespeare’s time was particularly responsive to homonymic effects and why language since that time has become resistant to them [143].

R: Was it, and has it, really? One of the delightful features of Chaucerian poetry is the effect of puns: *the sonnes sone* ‘the Sun’s son,’ referring to Phaeton, in the *Canticus Troili* in *Troilus and Criseyde* V, 664; or *the hooly blisful martir for to seke, / That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke*, playing on what is *seek* and *sick* in modern English, *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* 17-18. A vast number of other examples could be quoted. In fact, paronomasia is a means that has

For debates inspired by this article, please check the Connotations website at <http://www.connotations.de/debate/homonyms-before-and-after-lexical-standardization/>.

always been used within *poiesis*, and it was used before Chaucer, too. The Old English *Rhyming Poem* is a fine specimen of the functional use of wordplay. Surely the heyday of paronomasia was yet to come in the metaphysical conceit, which was present, of course, already in the 'metaphysical' poetry of Shakespeare's own time. In our own age, Joyce is famous for using paronomasia as is Empson for theorizing on it in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Moreover, New English (as opposed to earlier stages of the language) is exceptionally favourable to wordplay because the language has become a rich repository of homonyms on account of the correlation between the loss of inflectional suffixes on the one hand and the increase of homophones (particularly monosyllabic ones) on the other.

A: They [generative puns] are a resource present in language itself before it became primarily a referential medium [149].

R: Do you really mean this? Language is, and always has been, a referential medium. To stress the referential and communicative function of language in no way means that one denies the existence of various other functions of language, ranging from the use of words and formulae in magic (which has a modern 'secularized' equivalent in the language of advertising) to the way utterances work within the framework of situational context and social interaction, a field that has been analyzed by pragmatics.

A: Before language became responsible to world or thoughts about the world, its semantics might legitimately conform to similarities among sounds and letters [149].

R: This sentence seems somewhat obscure. Could it be that you actually intended to say *might have . . . conformed*? To me, the syntax would then seem to be more perspicuous. Your statement is, in a vague way, reminiscent of assumptions that there could have been some sort of 'pre-lingual' state of mankind; but how does the *sounds and letters* part fit in? The *similarities* bring to mind, by way of a chain of associations, Cratylus' *physis* theory; but even he would not have postulated that 'pre-language' state of linguistic affairs.

A: In *The Winter's Tale* III.3, a beast called a *bear* appears just before the discovery of a babe called a *barne* . . . , wrapped in a mantle that is called a "bearing-cloth". The two creatures—savage animal and harmless infant—give body to a sound vital to the play Thus the bodily appearances of the fierce *bear* and the "new-born" *barne* in "bearing-cloth" make the presiding word of the play flesh three times over, and at the midpoint (III.3) and turning point of the play [143-44].

R: Indeed, *bear* occurs often in *WT*, as it does in many other Shakespearean plays. But not every *bear* (be it noun or verb) in *WT* has a common deonominator (however far-fetched) with childbirth, and thus does not make "sense by drawing together semantic pieces and making them coherent" (143). For example, there is neither an etymological nor a structural reason that would in any way support the idea of *gentleman born* being "a slightly transposed echo" of a *bear* (145). And what is more, at no time has there been a similarity, let alone identity, between the pronunciation of *bear* (be it noun or verb) and *barn*. Old English *beran* 'to bear' was subject to a regular lengthening of an open syllable in Middle English and appeared as *bæ:ren* whereas Old English *bearn* regularly changes into Middle English *barn*. The two forms could not converge even in Early Modern English (a vocalic similarity would at best be observable in Scottish *bairn*). The words *barn* and *born* have never been homophonous either. The oscillation between *a* and *o* existed only before nasals (cf. Old English *man/mon*, *land/lond*). Ironically, the words *barn* and *bear*, *bore*, *born(e)* do indeed go back to the same root; but it is one thing to point out that they are etymologically related and quite another thing to claim that their proximity can be established by reference to homonymy.

A: The shepherd's blessing materializes sixteen years later: in V.2 the shepherd's son reports how their foster relation to Perdita . . . raised them into the ranks of the royal family: for the King's son took me by the hand, and called me brother; and then the two kings called my father brother" The shepherds conclude that this makes them "gentlemen born," as if they had been naturally born rather than

artificially raised into gentility. Their seven repetitions of this phrase within a twelve line stretch . . . abundantly illustrate the rhetorical figure of *hysteron proteron*, a misplacement that posits progeny before generation, birth before the womb (*hystericus*, of the womb, *proteron*, before), a literally "preposterous estate" . . . [144-45].

R: I cannot see that the term *hysteron proteron* is applicable to the mere repetition of the phrase *a gentleman born*. There is, however, a sentence that is indeed illustrative of the term: the Clown's words that immediately precede the passage you have quoted: "But I was a gentleman born before my father" (V.2.139-40). Besides, any identification between *hysteros* 'something/the one coming later; the latter' and *hystera* 'womb' is wildly imaginative. As there does not seem to be any etymological relationship between the two words, there is no reason to identify the term *hysteron proteron* itself with the image of childbearing. As to Puttenham, whom the author quotes in note 2: his term "The Preposterous" interprets *hysteron proteron* as a reversal of order in space or time or value. The example "My dame that bred me up and bare me in her wombe" comes last in Puttenham, after two other examples which have nothing to do with childbearing. This speaks against his wish to identify *hysteron* with *hystera*. Last but not least, I cannot really see in what way the rhetorical figure of *hysteron proteron* is pertinent to the subject you are discussing in your article.

A: Puns are *generally* considered subversive oddities that work against the sense-making function of language. . . . —The word is *generally* considered the linguistic norm from which the rest of language generates . . . [143; italics the reader's].

R: I have my difficulties with this kind of apodictic statement about opinions said to be held by a majority ("X is *generally* considered to be Y"). Some would subscribe to your first statement and, perhaps, many would agree with the second but then there is the level of morphology, which involves units of meaning below the level of words.

A: That no exact rhetorical equivalent can be found for the pun is not surprising, for a single word cannot constitute a trope, figure, or scheme [154].

R: I regret to say that your statement according to which "a single word cannot constitute a trope, figure, or scheme" is, as far as the *trope* is concerned, not supported by the classical authorities on rhetoric. Quintilian says in the *Institutio Oratoria*: "Let us begin, then, with the commonest and by far the most beautiful of *tropes*, namely, *metaphor*, the Greek term for our *translatio*. . . . if it be correctly and appropriately applied, it is quite impossible for its effect to be commonplace, mean or unpleasing. It adds to the copiousness of language by the interchange of words and by borrowing, and finally succeeds in accomplishing the supremely difficult task of providing a name for everything. A noun or a verb is transferred from the place to which it properly belongs to another where there is either no *literal* term or the *transferred* is better than the *literal*" (Loeb ed., VIII, vi, 4-5; italics original, underscores mine). Cicero defines the trope as a *verbum translatum* (*De Oratore* III, 152) and in connection with the use of tropes explicitly mentions *verbum simplex* (*Orator*, 80).

The *figure* (Greek *schema*, Latin *figura*) is an entirely different thing: it is indeed a stylistic device that uses groups of words (*verba collocata*; Cicero, *Orator* 80) instead of individual words. There are *schemata lexeos* (*figurae verborum*) and *schemata dianois* (*figurae sententiae*); the former include, among other things, the *polysyndeton*, and the latter are represented by, for example, *anthitheses* and *rhetorical questions*.

A: It is the logic manuals that discuss the polysemous single sounds we call puns, referring to them as homonyms, ambiguous words, or equivocals [154].

R: This passage, I am sorry to say, contains quite an number of terminological problems. The most obvious being that single sounds are regarded as "polysemous." Would it not be terminologically helpful to differentiate between *homonymous* and *polysemous*?

A: If the exclusion of puns from ordinary language can be assigned to any single authority, it would have to be the critic and lexicographer Samuel Johnson [149].

R: Dr. Johnson's literary criticism bears witness to classicist aesthetics. Ingenious, homonymic wordplay did not go out with Shakespeare but it did go, indeed, against the grain of classicist critics of all ages as did the dark metaphor or *catachresis*, with which paronomasia (if worth the name and not a mere jingle) has much in common. So, as there is a clear line of demarcation dividing trivial from meaningful paronomasia, there is a similar one dividing "mannerist" from "classicist" taste. This comes to the fore most clearly in the Augustan age, but it is not at all restricted to this or any other period. Besides, the rejection of puns and their "exclusion . . . from ordinary language" would seem to be something that should be discussed against the background of the history of human thought and the use of language rather than within the framework of lexicography (regardless of whether its approach is prescriptive or descriptive). Representatives of classicist periods, who emphasize the priority of "rules," always tend to see any display of spontaneity from their own point of view. For example, Gottsched made every effort to banish the harlequin from the stage—but return he did.

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NOTES

¹ShJW (1990): 143-56.

²The present paper is the result of a discussion with Professor Leimberg on some points of the article, which provoke comments from the point of view of literary criticism as well as historical linguistics.