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# **Czeching Out Puns and Clichés in Football Reporting**

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Punning, as the playful manipulation of linguistic forms and the exploitation of literal and metaphorical meanings, is a common strategy used in the media for increasing the engagement of the readers in a speech event. Regardless of the stereotypical and trite character of many puns and the varying degree of their explicitness, they divert the attention from the representational towards the formal aspect of the message. Puns are seen in the context of the mode of presentation as a part of the wider trend towards ‘infotainment’ in the media. The operation of the allusive character of puns is documented in examples of word play from headlines of various British papers on the pursuits of the Czech national team at the Euro 2004 Football Championship in Portugal.

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## **1 Puns and clichés – points of departure**

Punning, as an instance of word play, occurs when speakers focus on the form of the message, usually exploiting the polysemous character of words. The increased attention paid to the form, i.e. the manner of the presentation, can either complement the communicated content (the ‘representation’, cf. Leitner 1997) or push it to the background – to modify Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum, the form then ‘becomes the message’. The predominant role of the speech event can thus, in terms of Jakobson’s (1990 [1960]) language functions, shift from the informative (representational, communicative) to those which are metalinguistic, poetic, and phatic.

Although punning is an essentially creative linguistic activity, it often relies on stereotypical word play which is generally unimaginative. The resulting puns may become stale and trite and come close to clichés. Punning, however, is a device which supports the interactive aspect of the communicative event: it introduces an alternative dimension into a

text which, as a result, comes to be processed by its recipients on two levels – the literal and the metaphorical. In this way, punning works counter to the basic principles of effective communication and is another instance of when ‘more is meant than is said’.

The punning headlines used for illustration in this study were obtained from various news sources on the Internet (sports pages, on-line versions of daily newspapers, on-line game reporting, etc.) at the time of the European Football Championship in Portugal in June and July 2004. The examples collected concentrate on word play which concerns the Czech team with several examples involving the Greeks, who eventually defeated the Czechs in the semi-final match.

Puns, defined as instances of word play intended to produce a humorous effect (McArthur 1992: 822), have not always enjoyed the same level of appreciation: the status of punning has changed over the course of history. In Elizabethan England, for instance, they were very common – Shakespeare’s plays are said to contain about 3000 puns, often with ribald humour and undertones of innuendo (McArthur 1992). Since then, however, the general perception of this form of word play has deteriorated, greatly fostered by the Augustans’ attempts at cultivating correctness and preciseness (Mahood 1957: 10). Nowadays, “puns are widely considered so low a form of wit that they prompt a ritual groan” (McArthur 1992: 823). Such a ‘groan response’ is also mentioned by Lennon (2004) with respect to trite allusions in the press.

The perception of punning as a low form of verbal art may be due to its frequently stereotypical character and the occurrence of highly expected forms. In this sense, some puns may come close to clichés – words or phrases which are so overused as to have lost “freshness and vigour” (McArthur 1992: 222). According to McArthur, the resulting impression given by the user of such forms may be one of “insincerity, lack of thought or laziness”.

Nowadays, punning is seen as one of the typical characteristics of journalese (and headlineese in particular), where it is said to contribute to the immediacy of style and to attract attention (McArthur 1992: 553, 823). In headlines, puns often serve as attention-getting devices (cf. Lipka 2002: 189, Goddard 1998). Although this is mostly so in tabloids, which do not seem to spare any opportunity to use a pun or some other form of word play, sometimes even inventing their stories in order to be able to use a particular punning headline, this strategy is not alien to the quality press either. In the more up-market papers, punning is more of a resource occasionally resorted to rather than an almost programmatic rule to be followed at every available opportunity. The preoccupation with the form of language seems to be a general characteristic of the British press regardless of its intended audience (cf. Lennon’s (2004) findings on the frequency of allusion in selected British dailies).

The predilection of the British press for punning word play is supported by the structural prerequisites of the language and the acceptance of such a playful manipulation of linguistic forms by the community of native speakers of English. Structurally, punning as a type of word play is based on **homonymy**. It may take two forms: homographs, i.e. words spelt in the same way but pronounced differently, and homophones, i.e. words pronounced identically but differing in their spelling. The English language, thanks to its analytical character (mainly the reduction of inflections), the tendency towards monosyllabism, and the discrepancy between the written and spoken forms of words, lends itself particularly well to this kind of word play. It is thus no surprise that verbal wit is highly valued in the culture of the British Isles and has enjoyed a long tradition of cultivation – not only in fiction and drama (cf. G.B. Shaw, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce) but also, for instance, in word games, word-based humour and cryptic crossword puzzles (cf. Augard 2003, Nielsen 2003, Rambousek 2004).

## 2 Faded Czechs and Greek drama

A classic example of punning is the fairly stereotypical reference in the media to issues connected with Czech nationals by means of puns based on the homophony of the words ‘Czech’, ‘check’, and ‘cheque’. The media accounts of matches at the European Championship proved to be no exception. Thus in example [1], the adjective *Czech* is used as the *determinans* of a non-lexicalized allusive compound, and in example [2], as an attribute in a noun phrase which, though alluding to the same compound as [1], should rather be treated as a mere syntactic group:

[1] *Czechmate as Germany crash out* (Telegraph, 24.6.04)

[2] *Anfield duo vie for role as Koller’s Czech mate* (10.6.04)

Both examples above are allusive, though each to a different degree. The concept of ‘checkmate’, alluded to in the headline by means of the pun, originates in the game of chess from where its meaning has extended to that of a ‘total defeat’. While example [1] merely modifies the spelling of ‘checkmate’, which forms the basis for the pun, in order to identify the cause of Germany’s defeat (i.e. specifying the agency of the underlying predication), example [2] introduces an additional level of meaning: it can be read both literally and metaphorically. In its literal meaning, the phrase ‘Anfield duo’ refers to the Czech football players Šmicer and Baroš, who both play for Liverpool in the English Premiership League (‘Anfield’ is the name of the football stadium) and become ‘mates’ of Koller’s in the national team. In its metaphorical interpretation, the headline contains a similar pun as in example [1], although it relies only on the recognition of the homophone ‘checkmate’ and not on the explicit meaning of the term.

The ‘checkmate’ homophone pun is fairly commonplace and has been documented in other media as well. For instance, the Guardian (2.7.04) ran the simple picture caption *Czech mate* after the Czechs’ defeat by Greece. Interestingly enough, the spelling of this trite pun is quite loose: the forms ‘Czech mate’, ‘Czechmate’ as well as the hyphenated ‘Czech-mate’ have all been attested. With respect to the process of lexicalization, these puns exhibit a degree of institutionalization (cf. Štekauer 2000: 117) – they are so common and stereotypical that, though they are used ad-hoc to cover an immediate naming need, they can be considered to be already partially accepted by the speech community.

Example [1] above also illustrates the situation when word play in the headline speaks differently to the eye and to the ear. The pun exists only on the level of the sound; visually, it is an instance of a morphological adaptation – an ad hoc formation classifiable as a blend – which alludes to the target notion of ‘checkmate’.

Another instance of the situation when the spelling may yield one reading and the sound another occurs in example [3]. In the spoken form, the headline may be perceived as ambiguous, as it is based on the homophony of ‘Czech’ and ‘cheque’:

[3] *Faded Czechs not ready to expire* (19.6.04)

The written form unequivocally identifies the participants – ‘Czechs’, i.e. the members of the Czech football team. The rest of the headline, however, does not communicate directly: it contains the expression ‘faded’, meaning tired or exhausted, and ‘to expire’ – a formal and dated expression meaning ‘to die’, used here in the metaphorical sense of ‘to leave the championship by being defeated’.

It is again the pronunciation of ‘Czechs’ that the pun is based on. The ambiguity of the spoken form can be explained with respect to the **verbal context** (co-text) of the headline, namely the presence of another lexical item belonging to the same **semantic/lexical field** as

the word which carries the pun. It is for this reason that the concept of the ‘cheque’ as a ‘financial instrument’ is clearly connoted as it can be placed into the same semantic field as the verb ‘to expire’ in its literal meaning – that of the termination of validity due to the lapse of time (cf. the common collocations *the expiration of the lease / tenancy / document / contract; the expiry of a driving licence / lease / credit card / contract / agreement; and the lexicalized expiry date*). Interestingly, this meaning is not etymologically the primary one, as it arose from a metaphorical extension of the original meaning of ‘breathing out’, further extended to the meaning of ‘dying’ and, in the context of the headline, of ‘leaving the championship’ as discussed above.

If we stick to the literal meaning of the headline (in this case indicated by the spelling), we are led to the observation that it does not communicate very directly. The fact that the headline uses a word **in a metaphorical sense** may, on the one hand, obscure the straightforward meaning but, on the other, it contributes to a greater ease in perceiving (and potentially appreciating) the pun. We thus face the seeming paradox that **the literal reading** (‘Czechs continue undefeated’) **is based on a metaphorical meaning of the verb ‘to expire’ while the punning reading is based on the literal meaning** of the same verb, i.e. to lose validity.

A similar play on words – a kind of ‘collocation pun’ – is employed in the headlines in examples [4] and [5], where the use of the phrasal verb ‘to bank on’ (to place one’s hopes on) serves, due to the polysemous character of ‘bank’, as a signal for the potential pun based on the homophones ‘Czechs’ and ‘cheques’. In other words, the environment for the pun is constituted by the presence in the headline of two lexical items which can, in other contexts, belong to the same semantic field, namely ‘bank’ as a financial institution and the homophone ‘cheque’ as a financial instrument:

[4] *Don’t bank on Czechs* (22.6.04)

[5] *Holland bank on Czechs to pull them from brink* (23.6.04)

The pun, though based on the words ‘Czechs’, is only potentially present in these headlines – it is triggered by the occurrence of those lexical items which are associated with the same semantic/lexical field as the (absent) ‘cheques’ alluded to. In this sense, the pun is weaker than in example [1]. On the other hand, example [6] is even more straightforward because the headline introduces a news item which is really about money – it offers advice on “the value to be found in betting” on the semi-final match between Greece and the Czech Republic:

[6] *Cashing in on the Czechs* (The Guardian 1.7.04)

Apart from puns exploiting allusions to the game of chess and to various financial services, the word ‘Czech’ typically forms the core of another set of puns, this time to the homophone noun/verb ‘check’. This is illustrated in example [7] where, as in the previous examples, the hackneyed pun on the verb ‘to check out’ adds a degree of an entertainment value to the headline:

[7] *Milan Czechs out the semis* (The Sun 28.6.04)

Aimed at momentarily amusing the reader, the pun relies on two homophones which are used so often for punning purposes that they have lost any freshness and become rather clichéd. Such a stereotyped pun may be seen as an instance of the habitualization of language – an automatic and predictable use of language forms without much regard to creativity of expression (cf. Fowler 1991). The modified spelling of ‘Czechs out’ with the capital letter and the nationality name does, however, have some informational value – this type of punning is commonly used to convey the origin of the news participants (here Milan Baroš) or, in other instances, some qualities attributed to them.

At the 2004 European Football Championship, the Czechs were, against all odds, defeated by the Greek team in the semi-final match. To borrow the metaphors used by the press at the time, complete ‘outsiders’ defeated the ‘dark horses’ of the championship. The linguistic consequences of this event were clear: Czech-based puns were pushed out of the headlines and replaced by word play involving the victorious Greeks.

The word ‘Greek’, however, does not lend itself so well to punning as the nationality word ‘Czech’. As a result, though it is similarly commonplace and clichéd, the word play involving Greeks has a different character – it is based more on collocation and cultural allusions than homonymy, as in the following examples:

[8] *Greek tragedy for Czechs* (Electronic Telegraph, 2.7.04)

[9] *Greek drama takes centre stage* (www.euro2004.com)

[10] *Greece is the word. Dell of a shock* (The Sun, 2.7.04)

The playfulness in [8] and [9] concerns the cultural reference to Classical theatre, to which the match is being intertextually likened.

In example [10], there is an allusion to a set phrase. By means of a phonological modification, the headline alludes to the colloquial phrase ‘hell of a shock’. The alluding unit – *Dell* – is an abbreviated form of the name of the Greek hero of the game, the player Dellas, who scored the decisive goal in the last seconds of the match. There may also be an allusion to the phrase ‘mum’s the word’, indicating that up to that point, the Greek team had been the undiscovered secret of the championship, although this is highly speculative. As a commentator from the Sun commented on the match, playfully using another common English idiom: “It’s all Greek to me, and no doubt to everybody else who watched this clash, how they did it.”

As in the ‘Czech’ examples above, these instances exhibit a similar tendency towards not merely communicating factual information, but opening the utterances up in order to help increase the reader’s engagement. They do this by offering the reader the opportunity to appreciate the basic allusions, thereby flattering them because the readers are then able to apply their cultural and intertextual knowledge. In this sense, they perform a role similar to that of the puns of the ‘Czech’-type.

### 3 Conclusion

From the functional point of view, the headlines discussed above illustrate that they are not solely informative but satisfy a host of other language functions. If they were meant to be only informative, then the reader’s effort involved in processing them and avoiding potential ambiguity might be too high, given that much more straightforward, and arguably easier to understand, ways of expressing the same content are available (e.g. \*‘Czechs continue undefeated in [3] and \*‘Don’t rely on Czechs’ / \*‘Holland’s success depends on the Czechs’ in [6]). However, though the headlines introduce such information that increases the processing effort (cf. Dor 2003, Blakemore 1992) and, strictly speaking, violate two of the Gricean maxims – of quantity (because more information is provided than is necessary on account of the added metaphorical dimension of the utterance) and relevance (the evocation of the chess game and banking and financial services have little in common with the issues reported), they have **an interpersonal orientation** manifested by engaging the reader in the active deconstruction of the communicated meaning.

The focus on the linguistic form also betrays **a poetic function** (cf. Jakobson 1990 [1960]): these punning headlines do not merely provide information (thus acting as relevance optimizers, cf. Dor 2003) but have an aesthetic role as well – the pun is there to be identified

and appreciated by the recipients, either positively or negatively (e.g. by means of a grunt response). Indeed, the balance may be tipped entirely in the direction of word play rather than communication as headlines may mystify and lead astray (cf. the garden path effect identified by Lennon 2004 in the case of newspaper headline allusions). In some cases, the punning and word play takes over to such an extent that one is witnessing what might be described as a “verbal exhibitionism”, as in the following example:

[11] *Towards the Czech-ered flag* (a picture caption, The Guardian 28.6.04) followed by the text: *Czech-mate: Czech fans had to pinch themselves to Czech they weren't dreaming as their side delivered a reality Czech to ...*

Although such an accumulation of overused puns based on homophony is rather exceptional, the Guardian, a quality paper, does not resist the obvious temptation to use the clichés and obviously considers them acceptable for its intended readership.

Punning, as a specific type of word play, is a manifestation of what Crystal (1998) calls the ludic, i.e. the “playful” function of language, although the resulting forms may be stereotypical and automatic. In connection with the headlines discussed in this article, we can see that **news about entertainment is turning into entertainment itself**. This conclusion is supported by modern trends in the media towards infortainment (cf. MacDonald 2003, Schaffer 1995). On the linguistic level, this trend is evidenced by the media’s creative appropriation and manipulation of linguistic forms manifested not only by punning but also by various patterns of word formation and allusion (cf. Chovanec 2005). While it has been shown that in sports news the trend towards infortainment is achieved by a playful linguistic treatment of the stories concerned, it remains to be seen what role this manner of presentation has in the case of traditional ‘hard news’ about international and domestic issues and how, in Fowler’s (1991) terms, the axes of transformation (i.e. the linguistic treatment) and selection (i.e. the choice of particular news items) are mutually balanced.

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