

“The toenails on the other hand never grow at all”: The  
functions of wordplay in Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz  
and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Bachelor’s Thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Huumori on hyvin yleisesti käytetty tehokeino niin arkisessa kielenkäytössä kuin populaarikulttuurissa ja kirjallisuudessakin. Yhtenä huumorin lajina voidaan pitää erilaisia sanaleikkejä, joissa leikitellään kielen monitulkintaisuudella. Sanaleikeissä on usein kaksi, tai jopa useampi, merkityksen taso, joiden yhtäaikaista ymmärtäminen johtaa sanaleikin tajuamiseen.</p> <p>Tom Stoppardin vuoden 1966 näytelmä <i>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead</i> on tunnettu absurdi komedia, jossa esiintyy reilusti sanaleikkejä, joten se soveltuu erityisen hyvin juuri tämänkaltaisen huumorin tarkasteluun. Tässä näytelmässä Shakespearen <i>Hamletin</i> sivuhenkilöt Rosencrantz ja Guildenstern ovat päähenkilöinä omassa tarinassaan, ja näytelmän tapahtumat sijoittuvat <i>Hamletin</i> tapahtumien keskelle sekä niiden ympärille. Rosencrantz ja Guildenstern viettävät valtaosan näytelmästä hämmentyneinä heitä ympäröivistä tapahtumista sekä omista identiteeteistään.</p> <p>Tämän kandidaatintutkielman tarkoitus on tarkastella millaisia sanaleikkejä tämän näytelmän dialogista löytyy ja analysoida niiden funktioita. Sanaleikkien tarkoituksena on usein huvittaa tai viihdyttää lukijoita tai katsojia, mutta tällaisessa näytelmässä, jonka päähenkilöt ovat jatkuvasti ymmällään siitä, mitä heille tapahtuu ja keitä he ovat, on hyvin mahdollista että sanaleikeillä on muitakin funktioita kuin yleisön huvittaminen.</p> <p>Näytelmässä esiintyvät sanaleikit on luokiteltu tätä tutkielmaa varten neljään kategoriaan: sekoitettuihin idiomeihin, epäselvään viittausten käyttöön, sanaleikkeihin reagointiin näytelmän sisällä sekä sanaleikkeihin tekstin ja yleisön välillä. Tämä jaottelu pohjautuu lähdemateriaaliin ja tuo esiin ne kaksi eri tasoa, joiden kautta sanaleikit toimivat näytelmässä: hahmojen välisenä kommunikaationa sekä tekstin ja yleisön välisenä kommunikaationa. Näistä jälkimmäiseen liittyy selvästi viihdyttämisen funktio. Sekoitettut idiomit ja epäselvä viittausten käyttö puolestaan tuovat esiin sanaleikkien funktion hahmojen kokeman hämmennyksen merkinä ja tämän hämmennyksen aiheuttajina.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

**Rosencrantz**      What are you playing at?  
**Guildenstern**    Words, words. They're all we have to go on.

(Stoppard 1966: 32)

Humour is a common and significant part of language use. Whether one looks at casual conversation, popular culture, or works of literature, humour seems to be everywhere. While humour and playing with language occurs often in conversation and popular culture, and has been widely studied in those contexts, it is also commonly found in literature. These games played with language, often referred to as wordplay, can also be found in the world of drama. Shakespeare's plays are particularly rich in wordplay, even and in particular his tragedies, and the humorous language of his plays has been widely studied. Another excellent example of the use of wordplay in drama is Tom Stoppard's first play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), which is also particularly rich in humorous language use. It is also closely connected to Shakespeare's work, since the two main characters of Stoppard's play are minor characters from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* also contains dialogue taken directly from *Hamlet* each time Rosencrantz and Guildenstern interact with the other characters from that play.

Despite being originally performed in 1966, Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is still a relevant and popular play and it has also been the focus of some academic interest. There have been various different productions of it during the past decades, which also speaks for the long-lasting effect and continuing relevance of the play.

The choice of this particular play is influenced by several factors. Firstly, it is a play that includes numerous instances of wordplay, and is thus particularly appropriate for the subject of this study. Secondly, the personal interest I have in British drama and the work of a number of playwrights, among them Tom Stoppard, also influenced the selection of the work. Finally, it is also a complex play which lends itself to numerous interpretations and portrayals, and thus the roles and functions of wordplay in this particular text might well be more diverse than simply that of amusement.

There have been a number of academic studies on *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and even in Finland there has been at least one Master's Thesis written on that particular play

(Heikkinen 1994). Many of the studies written on this play have either looked at it as an example of the theatre of absurd or analysed the Shakespearean references in the play. Nevertheless, there have not been many studies on the language itself, especially not on the use of wordplay in this drama text. Therefore this study will bring something new to the field and shed some light to the way language and, more specifically, wordplay is used in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.

Compared to other areas of literature and popular culture, drama has not been as widely studied in the field of language and linguistics (Birch 1991: 2). Thus any linguistic study of drama can be relevant in a wider academic context. Even though there are many studies on wordplay in different kinds of texts, many of them have concentrated on translating wordplay. Furthermore, the texts analysed have often been popular culture texts, such as movies, television series or magazines, where different kinds of verbal humour are particularly common (i.e. Yliräisänen 2009). As drama is, and has been since Shakespeare's time, particularly rich in verbal humour, it is a particularly relevant source for analyzing wordplay.

Plays are, of course, written for the stage and to be performed, but as I will analyse the language of the play as somewhat separate from the larger context of the play, concentrating only on the text seems appropriate. I will specifically focus on the dialogue of the play and draw from the field of pragmatics in the analysis.

I will analyse the wordplay in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* on two levels: as the interaction between the characters in the play, and as the communication between the text and the audience. This distinction is necessary since the functions of wordplay will likely differ depending on which level is focused on. Also, any analysis of the text simply as the conversation between the characters would necessarily leave out the intertextuality and dramatic irony that can only be analysed on the level of author/text and the audience interacting with each other.

First, I will introduce the theoretical background for this thesis by defining wordplay and discussing the analysis of drama texts, after which I introduce my research question. Secondly, the data and methods of this study will be introduced. Thirdly, I shall analyze the data and finally draw my conclusions based on the analysis.

## 2 WORDPLAY AND DRAMA

In this chapter I shall briefly introduce the theoretical background for my study. I will start with defining wordplay in 2.1 and continue with taking a further look at some of the possible structures and functions of wordplay in 2.2. I will take a look at analysing drama texts in 2.3 and present my research question in 2.4.

### 2.1 Definitions of wordplay

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines wordplay as “the action of playing with words; witty use of words, esp. of verbal ambiguities”. Chiaro (1992: 1-2) emphasizes the purpose of wordplay by describing it as a term used for all the different ways in which people use language in order to amuse others. It is the most commonly used term for playing with language so it seems to be the most appropriate term to use in this context. Other terms that have been used to describe similar language use are speech play and language play, but for clarity the main term used in this thesis will be wordplay.

Wordplay often works on two or more levels, with the intended audience recognising both the literal meaning of the utterance and another, hidden and implicit meaning. OED has the following definition for a play on words: “a pun; a playful use of (esp. similar-sounding) words to convey a double meaning or produce a humorous effect”. Here the word *pun* is given as a definition of a play on words. Wordplay and pun seem to be somewhat overlapping terms, although puns can also be defined as a more specific type of wordplay where “a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings” (Sherzer 2002: 29). Furthermore, puns are often considered to be a cheap form of humour, with the substitution of merely one word making an otherwise ordinary phrase into a humorous one. Puns are not always amusing either, and can result in groaning rather than laughing (Ritchie 2004: 109).

Since puns can be described a specific type of wordplay and often rely on the exchange of “two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect” (OED), wordplay can be said to encompass a wider variety of humorous language use and is thus a more appropriate term in the context of this thesis.

What is true of punning is true of all kinds of wordplay since “there are always two or more levels, manifest and latent, in some kind of coexistence, sequence, alternation or tension” (Redfern 1984: 24). Wordplay in media and works of fiction relies on the audience’s ability to discern both levels of meaning. Since the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is somewhat self-reflective and self-aware, it is perhaps not a surprise that the two level nature of meaning inherent in wordplay is directly addressed by the characters themselves when Guildenstern says: “Operating on two levels, are we? How clever!” (Stoppard 1966: 57).

Puns, and wordplay, can also be either intentional or unintentional. Since puns are a particularly common form of spontaneous humour, it can be assumed that they are often created unintentionally at least in that context (Ritchie 2004: 109). In a written work clearly containing some humour, such as the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, it can be assumed that the wordplay is intentional in the sense that the author has intentionally created it in order to amuse their audience, or to gain some other reaction. However, in the context of the interaction between the characters in the play, it might be the case that the characters themselves are not always aware of creating puns and wordplay - thus the same wordplay can be unintentional from the character’s perspective, but intentional from the author’s perspective.

## **2.2 Structure and functions of wordplay**

Understanding and appreciating wordplay depends on the ability to hold two different meanings at once. Being unable to understand more than one meaning results in ‘not getting’ the joke. Although wordplay uses linguistic strategies in order to create two layers of meaning, it often plays “with ideas as well as words” (Partington 2009). The various linguistic strategies which can be applied to construct wordplay usually share some similarities in pronunciation, spelling or meaning. Since these linguistic strategies are widely used in wordplay in general and also in some instances of wordplay in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, a brief definition of these strategies is relevant.

Linguistic strategies that are used to create wordplay often involve lexical relations, such as homophones and homonyms or polysemy. Homophones are words that have different written forms but the same pronunciation, such as flour/flower, while homonyms are used when

either the written or spoken form of the word has multiple unrelated meanings, as in bat, meaning either the flying animal or the item used in sports (Yule 2014: 116). In polysemy, the multiple meanings of words with the same form are related by extension (Yule 2014: 117). An example of this is the word head, which can refer to the physical head on a person's body or, for example, the head of a company, which is related to the first meaning.

Puns can have a cohesive function, linking different parts of discourse to each other, or a disjunctive function, breaking the discourse they occur in (Sherzer 2002: 31-3). Intended puns, like witty comebacks in conversation, often function as the latter, disjunctive elements in discourse. It is also possible for the same pun to work both as a cohesive and a disjunctive element in discourse. Again, what is true of puns is also true of wordplay in general: functions of wordplay differ depending on their context, and can either serve as a cohesive or disjunctive discourse element. In the context of this play where the main characters are often confused not just about the world surround them and the events they find themselves in, but about their own identities as well, it can be expected that the wordplay and more broadly the dialogue itself may have disjunctive elements.

### **2.3 Analysing drama texts**

Drama texts yield themselves to various different purposes – they can be written and read, performed and seen on stage and also academically analysed. Birch (1991: 27) argues that the written drama text is “only a site or surface for constructing meanings” in these different ways in which the text can be produced, performed or received. Thus the play can be said to encompass not just the physical text, but also the wider context of its production history and critical analysis.

The text of the play can be divided into the main text, including the dialogue of the play, and side-text, including everything else, for example the stage directions. Birch (1991: 11) suggests that the distinction is not a useful one since it prioritises verbal language over action and treats the two as separate. For the language analysis purposes of this thesis, however, it is necessary to separate the dialogue of the play and analyse it mostly on its own. Therefore the focus will be on analysing the dialogue of the play and other parts of the texts will largely be ignored. The stage directions, for example, are the device used by the author to physically organize the action on stage and do not include instances of wordplay. However, some stage

directions may be included in the quotes from the play, since they may occasionally have some relevance in establishing the context the quote is taken from, or the reaction a character is displaying to the wordplay. Some of the puns and instances of wordplay in the play also have a visual element, but since my focus will be on the dialogue, I will mainly be analysing the verbal humour in the dialogue of the play.

Furthermore, I shall analyze the dialogue on two levels; firstly, as the interaction between the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (and sometimes also between them and other characters), and secondly, as the interaction between the text and its audience. This is an important distinction especially since the characters seem to be aware of their audience at some points of the play and interact with them directly, as indicated in the stage directions, thus breaking the fourth wall, as in the following example from Act II. The names of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are abbreviated here, as they are in the text of the play.

*A good pause. Ros leaps up and bellows at the audience.*

**Ros** Fire!

*Guil jumps up.*

**Guil** Where?

**Ros** It's all right - I'm demonstrating the use of free speech. To prove that it exists. (*He regards the audience, that is the direction, with contempt - and other directions, the front again.*) Not a move. They should burn to death in their shoes.

(Stoppard 1966: 51)

As I am concentrating on analysing the dialogue of the play, I will draw from the field of pragmatics in this analysis. Pragmatics can be defined as the study of speaker meaning and involves the interpretation of that meaning (Yule 1996: 3). Thus it can be applied to the analysis of speech even when the speech is the form of a written text, a work of fiction, as is the case with the dialogue in a play.

## 2.4 The research questions

In this study I shall analyse the different instances of wordplay in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and to establish what kind of functions they serve in the context of the play. I will analyse the functions on two levels: as communication between

the characters of the play and also as the author (or the text) communicating to the audience. Since I will be looking at the text of the play as opposed to the wider context of the play and specifically the conversations between the characters, the focus will be on the dialogue. Firstly, I need to identify the instances of wordplay in the text, and then analyse their functions. Thus my research questions are the following:

1. What kind of wordplay is there in the dialogue of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and how can it be categorised?  
and
2. What are the functions of these instances of wordplay?

As wordplay can often, or indeed in most cases, be said to be intentionally created to amuse, it can be assumed that this will be one function of wordplay also in Stoppard's text, particularly on the level of the author's communication to the audience or reader. But as Stoppard's play also has some tragic elements and may be viewed as an existential commentary on the human condition, it can be expected that even something as seemingly light and silly as wordplay can have other functions than merely to amuse. It is also possible that a single instance of wordplay can have several different meanings and functions.

### 3 DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter I will briefly introduce my data, i.e. the play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, after which I shall present the methods of analysis.

#### 3.1 *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) is a play about the two courtiers from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. They are minor characters in a bigger chain of events that is completely out of their control. In *Hamlet*, after being asked to find out what is the matter with the main character and to cure him of his insanity, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are sent to their death. That is the extent of their roles in *Hamlet*.

In Stoppard's play, however, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the main characters, with the action of the play taking place within and around the events of *Hamlet*. Throughout this play

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are confused about what is happening around and to them, what they are supposed to be doing, and who they are. This confusion over their identities is highlighted in this example from Act I, where Rosencrantz attempts to introduce them:

**Ros** My name is Guildenstern, and this is Rosencrantz.  
*(Guil confers briefly with him.)*  
*(without embarrassment)* I'm sorry - his name's Guildenstern, and I'm Rosencrantz.

(Stoppard 1966: 13)

Unlike the audience, they also seem mostly oblivious to the tragic fate waiting for them. Even without any previous knowledge of the plot of *Hamlet* there are constant references to a tragic end in the dialogue of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. The name of the play itself is, of course, a clear indication to what happens at the end of the play.

Much of the play is characterised by inactivity. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “wait, talk, philosophize, play games, and spend much of the time trying to make sense of their situation and the events transpiring around them” (Fleming 2001: 52-3). There are bursts of action scattered during the play, whether it is Rosencrantz and Guildenstern being drawn into the events in *Hamlet*, or interacting with the group of actors lead by the Player, or being attacked by pirates on the ship in Act III. For the majority of the play, however, they are on stage alone, talking to each other. Thus the focus on the dialogue seems appropriate.

The confusing and arbitrary nature of their world is evident from the very beginning of the play when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern toss coins, and the coins invariably turn heads. Getting the same result each time a coin is thrown compels Guildenstern, who is losing the game, to contemplate the randomness of their actions (Stoppard 1966: 5). There is also a fine line between the hilarity of the confusion the characters experience and the despair it throws them into. This is demonstrated, for example, by the growing confusion exhibited particularly by Rosencrantz in Act I when mixing up similar idioms (Stoppard 1966: 29).

*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is often referred to as an existential comedy or as an example of the theatre of absurd and it is often compared to famous absurdist plays such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which also features two characters waiting around in a seemingly meaningless world. According to Fleming (2001: 53) *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* deals with several significant philosophical issues, namely “the nature

of truth, role-playing versus identity, human mortality, and whether life and the universe are random or deterministic”. These issues may presumably also arise in the analysis of the wordplay in the text, since they are widely featured in the play.

The characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern also exist on several different levels of reality: they are characters in two different plays, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, speaking in Shakespearean verse every time they interact with other characters from *Hamlet*; but they also exist on a metalevel and acknowledge and interact with their audience, as is evident from the example about yelling *Fire!* that was presented in 2.2. Fleming (2001: 53) suggests that the audience does not attempt to differentiate between these levels of reality and instead simply see them as characters whose experiences are relevant to humans in general. In the context of analysing the dialogue between the characters, however, it is important to acknowledge the existence of these levels.

### 3.2 Methods of analysis

In analysing the wordplay in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* I have drawn from concepts used in the field of pragmatics in order to analyse the intended meaning of spoken utterances in the dialogue, and indeed the failure to comprehend the intended meaning. One example of a concept that is applicable here is deixis. Deixis refer to “‘pointing’ via language” and deictic expressions are the linguistic forms used to do the ‘pointing’ (Yule 1996: 9). These words or phrases need additional contextual information in order to be correctly understood and interpreted. A slightly similar concept also used in the analysis is anaphoric reference, i.e. the subsequent reference to a previously introduced referent (Yule 1996: 22-3). Anaphoric references, or anaphora, are often for example pronouns used to refer to previously mentioned nouns.

I have also devised my own categories based on the examples of wordplay from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. I began by gathering all the examples of wordplay from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Although this is a qualitative study and not a quantitative one, the amount of wordplay should nevertheless be briefly noted in order to give an impression of the prevalence of wordplay in the text. There are approximately 27 separate

instances of wordplay in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, with most of them (16 altogether) in Act I, while Act II has five and Act III six instances of wordplay. Every single instance of wordplay will not be analysed, but the majority of them will be presented as examples from the categories in the next chapter and analysed in more detail.

The loosely defined categories in this analysis have emerged from the material and are based on these common factors between separate instances of wordplay. The first two categories are concerned with the linguistic and pragmatic side of determining the functions of wordplay.

**4.1 Mixing idioms** was a common factor between several separate instances of wordplay, and therefore it was a logical way to define and categorise them. **4.2 Ambiguous use of deixis** emanates from a pragmatic analysis of the wordplay and highlights the unclear and uncertain nature of communication in the dialogue, as well as the consequences of misidentifying the intended meanings of utterances.

In the last two categories I take a closer look at the two levels on which the wordplay works in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. As the title suggests, in **4.3 Reactions to wordplay within the play** I will analyse the reactions of other characters in the play when they encounter wordplay, and through the examples presented in this section the intended purposes of wordplay (e.g. to confuse or amuse) are made more apparent. Finally, **4.4 Wordplay between the text and the audience** and the examples contained in that section allow the analysis of wordplay as the interaction between the text and the audience, for example as a device to create dramatic irony, thus acknowledging the multiple levels on which the wordplay functions in the context of this play.

## 4 ANALYSIS

The analysis of the wordplay is divided under four separate categories. Each category contains at least two examples of wordplay that are representative of that particular category. Some of the examples may also have some overlap with other categories. Each category also allows a different way of looking at the functions of wordplay.

## 4.1 Mixing idioms

When identifying the wordplay in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, it is clear that many of the examples include one or both of the main characters confusing idioms or phrases, for example by replacing one of the words with a word from another idiom. Since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also at times confused about their own identities, it is perhaps not surprising that they cannot correctly remember the idioms they are using, thus creating additional confusion by the exchange of linguistic forms in their utterances.

Act I begins with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern tossing coins, which invariably end up heads, in favour of Rosencrantz. This leads to one of the first instances of wordplay in the text when Rosencrantz's line "I'm afraid it isn't your day" is interrupted by Guildenstern (Stoppard 1966: 6). Before Rosencrantz can say more than "I'm afraid" Guildenstern interprets that phrase in isolation to mean the emotion of fear, instead of the expression used to kindly introduce a bad or unpleasant piece of information, and answers immediately with "So am I". Considering the feelings of confusion and alarm that are experienced by these characters throughout the play, it is not particularly surprising that Guildenstern misinterprets the meaning of the phrase and promptly pays attention to the mention of being afraid and agrees with it. Here the wordplay functions as an indicator of the confusion and fear experienced by the characters, in this instance particularly Guildenstern.

In another similarly straightforward incident of wordplay the phrase "off course" used by Guildenstern and Rosencrantz's subsequent answer "of course" are homophones and are thus playing with the phonological similarity between the phrases (Stoppard 1966: 90). This is the type of simple play on words where a single word is changed, i.e. a pun, which is commonly used in casual conversation and often for amusement. There certainly seems to be no confusion over this instance of wordplay, unlike in the following exchange, which takes place in Act I, where the misuse of idioms takes a more disconcerting turn, spiralling into mutual confusion and desperation.

**Guil** We'll soon be home and high - dry and home - I'll -  
**Ros** It's all over my *depth* -  
**Guil** I'll hie you home and -  
**Ros** - out of my head -  
**Guil** - dry you high and -  
**Ros** (*cracking, high*) - over my step over my head body! - I tell you it's all stopping

to a death, it's boding to a depth, stepping to a head, it's all heading to a dead stop -

**Guil** (*the nursemaid*) There! .... and we'll soon be home and dry ... and *high* and dry [...]

(Stoppard 1966: 29)

Here Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are mixing idioms that sound similar but have different meanings and are thus perhaps unintentionally playing with words. First, Guildenstern confuses the phrase *home and dry*, meaning to have successfully finished something, with *high and dry*, meaning to do something inconvenient to someone (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). The mixed idioms spiral, leaving the characters even more confused, until Guildenstern puts a stop to Rosencrantz's nonsense by finally getting the phrases right. Both of the phrases seem appropriate for these characters, as they are probably expecting to be finished with whatever they are required to do, but are also left high and dry, i.e. put in a difficult situation. Thus the underlying reasons for these two idioms being the ones that they get confused with each other seem clear as they are both relevant to their current situation. The spiralling confusion expressed in this wordplay also is likely to result from their current, uncertain situation. In this instance, the wordplay functions not only as an indicator of the growing confusion experienced by the characters, but also as a source for additional confusion for them.

The same phrases are mixed again by Guildenstern at the very end of the play:

**Guil** (*worked up*) Can't see - the pirates left us home and high - dry and home - drome - (*furiously*) The pirates left us high and dry!

(Stoppard 1966: 111)

In this instance, the confusion does not last as long as it did in the previous example, but according to the stage directions in italics, Guildenstern becomes worked up and angry while trying to express his meaning and the phrase correctly. This instance of wordplay is a clear reference to the earlier instance with the same idioms, and thus indicates their importance to the wider context of the play and the situation in which the characters find themselves.

However, not every instance of correcting mixed up idioms results in such a strong reaction, as evidenced by this exchange from Act II:

**Ros** [...] We could remain silent till we're green in the face, they wouldn't come.  
**Guil** Blue, red.

(Stoppard 1966: 63)

Rosencrantz gets the metaphor right, apart from saying the wrong colour, but does not seem to be troubled or panicked by his mistake since he does not attempt to correct himself. It is possible that he is unaware of making the mistake, or perhaps he does not care. Guildenstern's suggestions for a more appropriate colour include the correct one, blue (blue in the face meaning exhausted), and also the colour red, a red face being commonly associated with being angry (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). Being green in the face, described in Rosencrantz's creative use of the idiom, would suggest being ill. All of these connotations seem plausible in the context of this play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are indeed exhausted by the events they have been involved in and their constant confusion, but being ill or angry for those same reasons seems also possible. In fact, considering the circumstances, getting the idiomatic expression wrong actually results in equally appropriate expressions. Thus the wordplay here functions again as an indicator of confusion, but also as a way of providing multiple possible reactions to confusing circumstances. Also, perhaps the characters themselves are not certain how they are or should be reacting, or they do not care. The reactions of the characters themselves to wordplay will be returned to in 4.3.

Another instance of mixing metaphors occurs when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern discuss the death of Hamlet's father and his mother's new marriage to Hamlet's father's brother:

**Guil** They were close.  
**Ros** She went to him -  
**Guil** - Too close -  
**Ros** - for comfort.

(Stoppard 1966: 42)

Here Rosencrantz's line "She went to him for comfort" is interrupted by Guildenstern, who elaborates on his previous line and states that Hamlet's mother and her husband's brother were too close, thus creating the phrase *too close for comfort*, i.e. something being so close to you that it makes you feel threatened (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). This clever use of wordplay references the underlying implications of the events of *Hamlet*: since Hamlet's uncle is responsible for the death of Hamlet's father, the closeness between Hamlet's uncle and mother is indeed alarming. Thus this instance of wordplay also functions on the level of

text-audience interaction, hinting at the dubious motives of Hamlet's uncle and playing with the previous knowledge and audience might have of the plot of *Hamlet*.

There are also some clear examples of intentional mixing of idiomatic expressions, as evidenced by the Player saying "They are two sides of the same coin, or, let us say, being as there are so many of us, the same side of two coins" (Stoppard 1966: 13). The Player, however, is not as confused by the world surrounding him as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern appear to be, and is probably more aware of himself and the world around him than they are, as demonstrated by his warning to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern not to lose their heads (Stoppard 1966: 57). The intention of the Player, at least when talking about "two sides of the same coin", seems to be to amuse, whereas Rosencrantz and Guildenstern rarely mix up idioms in order to amuse each other. While the Player uses wordplay to indicate his knowledge and greater awareness of events, along with his role as an actor and an entertainer, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern often end up using wordplay unintentionally in their confusion.

Based on these examples, it can be concluded that wordplay resulting from mixing idioms occurs usually either when the characters are stressed or confused and struggle to say the metaphors correctly, nearly panicking about language seemingly failing them, or when they accidentally say something incorrectly without noticing and the other one distractedly corrects them, as is the case in the "green in the face" example (Stoppard 1966: 63). The function of wordplay by mixing idioms appears to be to indicate the confusion experienced by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or possibly also to add to their growing confusion and distress.

## 4.2 Ambiguous use of deixis

The following seemingly absurd exchange between Guildenstern and the Player is another great example of the confusion created by wordplay. This time it is not particularly clear what is being referred to. The italics are from the original text, presumably added for emphasis.

**Guil** Aren't you going to - come *on*?  
**Player** I *am* on.  
**Guil** But if you *are* on, you can't *come* on. *Can* you?  
**Player** I *start* on.  
**Guil** But it hasn't *started*. Go on. We'll look out for you.

(Stoppard 1966: 25)

There seems to be some confusion over what *coming on* and *starting* mean in this context, or what the characters themselves mean by them. This is where the concept of spatial deixis is particularly useful as we consider the perspective of the speaker when their utterance appears to refer to a specific direction or motion (Yule 1996: 12-13). To come on refers to motion towards the speaker (indeed, the motion in the opposite direction, away from the speaker, would be referred to as *going* somewhere instead of *coming*). The Player, however, insists that he is on, and therefore cannot *come* on. It is possible that while the Player refers to a more figurative use of these expressions, Guildenstern might well mean them in the literal sense of coming on the stage and being on the stage.

This is actually more than a play on the words being used in the utterances; it also plays with the ideas being presented. To *come on* the stage implies a clear distinction between being *on* stage, i.e. performing, and *off* stage or not performing. Here the Player implies that he is always *on*, always performing, even when preparing to perform. This can be taken as a reference to the performative nature of life, or the possible awareness of the characters that they are in a play, which is debatable but suggested in scenes such as the yelling *Fire!* scene (Stoppard 1966: 51). Nevertheless, the Player displays more awareness and self-awareness during the play than Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do.

Another example of spatial deixis and the confusion created with the vague use of them comes in Act III when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are on a boat:

**Guil** (*pause*) No, somebody might come in.  
**Ros** In where?  
**Guil** Out here.  
**Ros** In out here?  
**Guil** On deck.

(Stoppard 1966: 91)

Prepositions are used to indicate the specific spatial contexts, but the use of prepositions in this exchange seems to leave the characters confused and uncertain what the other is referring to. As they are on a boat, Guildenstern's use of the preposition *in* is not understood by Rosencrantz, who then adds Guildenstern's other suggested preposition to form the nonsensical phrase *in out here*. Eventually Guildenstern uses *on*, yet another proposition, presumably for greater clarity. Any successful reference needs to be understood in the same way by both the speaker and the listener in order for the meaning of the utterance to be

understood (Yule 1996: 18). In this case, as in some other cases of wordplay, it is evident that the references being used are not understood in the same way.

Thus it can be seen that this intentionally vague use of spatial deixis creates additional confusion and chaos for the already confused characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, functioning as a disjunctive element in the discourse. They often misunderstand the intended meaning of the other, and the search for the correct meaning and any attempts for clarification often lead to even more confusing and nonsensical utterances. This disconcerting search for linguistic meaning can be seen as a reflection of the wider search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world, which can prove to be futile and exhausting, or even infuriating. This is also displayed in the reactions of the characters to wordplay.

### **4.3 Reactions to wordplay within the play**

One interesting aspect of analysing the wordplay in this play is analysing the reactions of the other characters to the wordplay. Are their reactions amused or frustrated, or something else? Do they, deliberately or not, ignore the wordplay they hear? Ignorance is a definite possibility when the dialogue moves quickly and the characters are talking over each other, and often also missing much more significant things than the additional meaning included in an instance of wordplay. As already discussed in the two previous sections, many instances of wordplay also lead to a frustrated reaction.

It should also be acknowledged that a large part of the reactions is left for the actors performing the play, and analysing a production of the play might well yield different results than simply analysing the dialogue without the performance of it. There are, however, instances of wordplay where the reaction is clearly discernable from either the stage directions included in the dialogue, or from the next line of dialogue. Thus it is possible to deduce at least some reactions to wordplay solely based on the text of the play.

At least one instance of wordplay has a stage direction, indicated here by the italicized font, which clearly indicates how Guildenstern reacts to Rosencrantz's possibly unintentional play on words as they discuss whether hair and nails grow after death.

**Ros** [...] the toenails, on the other, hand never grow at all.  
**Guil** (*bemused*) The toenails on the other hand never grow at all?

(Stoppard 1966: 9)

Rosencrantz's use of the idiom *on the other hand* is taken to be a literal reference to toenails growing on hands by a slightly puzzled Guildenstern. The reaction is not particularly frightened or frustrated, as it is in some other occasions where the intended meaning is misunderstood, such as the previously discussed *high and dry / home and dry* examples (Stoppard 1966: 29, 111). This is possibly because the subject they have been discussing is trivial and not likely to cause any existential confusion, unlike some other instances of wordplay. Here they are talking about death, but in a more theoretical sense, and not as a possible fate awaiting them. Therefore the misunderstanding of the intended meaning only causes slight confusion instead of anger or frustration.

That more absent-minded confusion can then be compared to the reaction this possibly more bewildering exchange has on Rosencrantz:

**Guil** Do you think it matters?  
**Ros** Doesn't it matter to you?  
**Guil** Why should it matter?  
**Ros** What does it matter why?  
**Guil** (*teasing gently*) Doesn't it *matter* why it matters?  
**Ros** (*rounding on him*) What's the *matter* with you?  
*Pause.*  
**Guil** It doesn't matter.

(Stoppard 1966: 36)

Here again the use of similar phrases escalates until it reaches its culmination point, in this case Rosencrantz's last line before the pause where he approaches Guildenstern more aggressively, as indicated by the stage directions. After this Guildenstern states his indifference towards the topic and they are distracted by the appearance of Hamlet on the stage. This type of sudden, escalating exchange which leaves the characters more confused but is then quickly forgotten is prevalent in the dialogue.

Also, a previous example already discussed in the context of mixing up idioms contains some clue to the reactions the characters have to wordplay. When Rosencrantz mistakenly says "green in the face", Guildenstern's answer is simply a suggestion of possible correct alternatives to the colour green and he does not appear angry or frustrated with the mistake

(Stoppard 1966: 63). As was discussed in 4.1, the reactions of both Guildenstern and Rosencrantz in this instance reflect the fact that this exchange does not cause them to be even more confused, but it still functions as an indicator of the general confusion they experience.

Thus it is clear that although the reactions to wordplay that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern display sometimes indicate the confusion they feel when faced with unpredictable events, this is not always the case. While the reactions to wordplay within the play vary, the indifference and confusion bordering on despair, which are indicated in the examples above, both display the effect the bewildering events have on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are either distressed by their inability to make sense of the ambiguous use of language presented to them, or indifferent to the linguistic confusion suggestive of their constant bewilderment with the world and events around them. Nevertheless, they are able to create some amusement in the absurdity of the world around them and the way language fails them, if not for themselves then certainly for their audience.

#### 4.4 Wordplay between the text and the audience

The tragic fate of the main characters is foreshadowed throughout the play, and indeed already in the title of the play. Since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are mostly confused and unaware of their fate, this enables the use of dramatic irony, where the audience is aware of what is about to happen to the characters that stay mostly oblivious to the fate awaiting them.

When the Player talks about losing heads, this wordplay works on the text-audience level, since the audience, unlike Rosencrantz and Guildenstern themselves, is completely aware of the tragic fate of these characters:

**Guil** We're still finding our feet.  
**Player** I should concentrate on not losing your heads.

(Stoppard 1966: 57)

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern seem to be indeed in the process of finding their feet, or attempting to gain more confidence in the face of a confusing situation, throughout most of the play (Cambridge Dictionaries Online). What is a seemingly innocent warning to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and a play on the lexical proximity between the 'feet' in *finding our feet* and 'heads' in *losing your heads* functions as an excellent example of

dramatic irony and reminds the audience of what is going to happen to these characters at the end of the play.

Other examples of the wordplay operating on the level of text-audience interaction often refer to the events in *Hamlet*, as in the following example:

**Ros** [...] Where's it going to end?  
**Guil** That's the question.

(Stoppard 1966: 35)

Here the wordplay works between the text and the audience, who are supposedly familiar with the most famous speech from *Hamlet*, which includes the line "To be or not to be, that is the question". Of course, since the audience is also aware of the fate of these characters, they might additionally interpret the question "Where's it going to end?" as a reference to where the play ends, which is of course at the deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Thus this short exchange between the two characters can work as dramatic irony as well as an intertextual reference to *Hamlet*.

Another instance where the events of *Hamlet* are being referred to for the benefit of the audience presumably aware of those events occurs when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern practice the conversation, or interrogation, they plan to have with Hamlet in order to discover the reason for his foul mood.

**Guil** He slipped in.  
**Ros** Which reminds me  
**Guil** Well, it would.  
**Ros** I don't want to be personal.  
**Guil** It's common knowledge  
**Ros** Your mother's marriage.  
**Guil** He slipped in.  
*Beat.*  
**Ros** (*lugubriously*) His body was still warm.  
**Guil** So was hers.  
**Ros** Extraordinary.

(Stoppard 1966: 41)

As in the *too close for comfort* example which appears shortly after this exchange and which was already discussed in 4.1, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are alluding to the events of *Hamlet*, more specifically to Hamlet's uncle murdering Hamlet's father and then marrying Hamlet's mother. The phrase *he slipped in* is used to refer to both of these events. Similarly

Rosencrantz's use of the phrase *his body was still warm* refers to the quick way Hamlet's uncle obtained the throne after the death of Hamlet's father, his body not having even gone cold yet. Guildenstern then implies that Hamlet's mother's body was warm was well, although for a different reason.

Interestingly there is no confusion over who is being referred to, even though the same pronouns are being used to refer to different people: *he slipped in* referring to Hamlet's uncle and *his body was still warm* referring to Hamlet's dead father. After the analysis of ambiguous use of deixis it is perhaps surprising that they do not mix up the anaphoric references when talking about multiple people simultaneously. Correctly inferencing the intended meaning and making the right connections between linguistic items is not always typical for these characters, as is shown in many previous examples of wordplay. However, a likely explanation for this lack of confusion is that here Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have something to do. They have a purpose, which is to practice their future discussion with Hamlet, in order to find out what is troubling him. That is also the one clear task they have been given. Thus this particular moment of clarity and fast-paced wordplay uninterrupted by confusion over references and intended meaning functions as a clear counterpoint to those instances of wordplay where the confusion and uncertainty about what they should be doing is evident in the confusion over linguistic forms and intended meaning.

To conclude, the wordplay between the text and the audience works either as dramatic irony, reminding the audience of the fate of the main characters about which the characters themselves remain oblivious, or as innuendo about the activities of the minor characters of this play, who are of course main characters in *Hamlet*. Thus it is presumed that the audience has some general knowledge of the plot of *Hamlet* and is thus able to understand these intertextual references and hidden meanings. Any possible inability to understand these references to *Hamlet* result in 'not getting' the joke, but the understanding of the overall plot of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* should not be affected by insufficient knowledge of these details. Thus the function of wordplay relying on previous knowledge of *Hamlet* can be seen as deepening the experience of enjoying this play by a humorous use of intertextual references to another play.

## 5 CONCLUSION

There are several instances of wordplay in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* with different functions and purposes. There are some instances of wordplay which clearly work mainly on the text-audience level, with the characters themselves being oblivious to the other layer of meaning and thus creating dramatic irony. These instances of wordplay mainly revolve around the tragic fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Majority of the wordplay, however, works also on the level of character interaction within the play, with the characters themselves reacting to the wordplay in different ways.

Many of the instances of wordplay consist of mixing similar idioms or idiomatic expressions. These often indicate the confusion and disconcertion the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern face throughout the play. The confusion experienced by these characters is also demonstrated by their ambiguous use of deixis, with the other character(s) sometimes uncertain what exactly is being referred to. When they manage to use deixis or anaphoric references correctly, it is a clear indicator of their lack of confusion at that moment and their focus on the task at hand.

From the point of view of the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, their use of wordplay seems often unintentional. For example, when they get confused with the correct use of idiomatic expressions, it is usually because they are unable to remember how the idiom actually goes, or simply do not care. Thus it can be said that in many cases of wordplay, it is not the intention of the characters to amuse each other. Instead, they can be seen spiralling into deeper confusion when they unintentionally create wordplay for the amusement of the audience. Their reactions are a good indicator of the functions of the wordplay intended by the author, with the confusing exchanges presumably intended as disjunctive discourse elements.

From the point of view of the author writing the text and communicating with his audience, however, the use of wordplay is very much intentional, as evidenced in the analysis of numerous instances of wordplay. Occasionally the wordplay references previous instances of wordplay, as when the idioms *high and dry* and *home and dry* are mixed up (Stoppard 1966: 29, 111). In other occasions, the wordplay refers to specific events in the plot of *Hamlet*,

assuming that the audience is familiar with those events. The function of these instances of wordplay that rely on intertextual knowledge is at least partly to remind the audience of this wider context of the play.

While it is not the intention of the characters themselves to amuse each other, at least not in most cases, it is clear that amusement is at least one function of the wordplay when analysing the interaction between the text or the author and the audience. Many instances of wordplay rely on the interchange of a word, thus relying on the audience's ability to understand both the original phrase and the altered phrase. However, amusement is not the sole purpose for which the author has created wordplay in this text. Since it is clear that the characters themselves are often confused by the wordplay they create and their occasional inability to get the words exactly right, the wordplay allows the audience to see the frustration, and sometimes indifference, with which the characters themselves react to the wordplay. Occasionally the wordplay also leads to additional confusion when the characters are unsuccessfully attempting to infer the meaning of the other or the correct words they want to use themselves. Thus the function of the wordplay in many of such cases is not only to indicate the confusion experienced by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, but to add to their growing confusion.

In conclusion, the main functions of wordplay in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* are to amuse the audience, to create confusion for the characters and to display the confusion they feel when faced with a senseless, meaningless world. Occasionally the wordplay also serves as a reminder for the audience of the tragic fate awaiting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, thus creating dramatic irony. In the world of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, there is a fine line between disconcertion and delight, with the first being mainly experienced by the characters themselves and the latter by the audience.

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