



# CREATION OF POLYPHONIC MEANING THROUGH WORD PLAYS IN FRENCH NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

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## Abstract

This article is devoted to the issue of the creation of polyphonic meaning through word games in French newspapers (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, L'Express). The linguistic and pragmatic functions of gender word games (calembour, contrepèterie, mot-valise, antanaclasis, syllepse) are analyzed within the framework of the study. The role of word games in the media is studied on the basis of M.Bakhtin's theory of polyphony, O.Ducron's theory of argumentation and pragmatic studies of contemporary French media. The article presents more than 50 real examples of headlines, which are divided into thematic groups and presented in tabular form.

**Keywords:** Polyphony, wordplay, calembour, French press, media pragmatics, homonymy, paronymy, intertextuality.

## Introduction

Headlines of the mass media are one of the most important means of attracting the reader's attention. The French press has traditionally paid great attention to the art of playing with language. In France, the concept of "esprit" (wit, intelligence) is highly valued not only in literature, but also in journalism. Therefore, word games are widely used in the headlines of French newspapers.



The concept of polyphony was introduced by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, and was initially used in the analysis of the novel genre. Later, this theory was transferred to the field of linguistics and received a new interpretation within the framework of pragmatics by Oswald Ducron. Ducron defines polyphony as the presence of several voices or positions simultaneously in the speaker's speech.

Word games are one of the most effective means of creating polyphonic meaning. The word play used in the headline encourages the reader to perceive several layers of meaning at the same time: one can be denotative (direct) meaning, the second can be connotative (hidden) meaning, and the third can be intertextual meaning.

The aim of this study is to show, based on linguistic analysis, how polyphonic meaning structures are created in French newspaper headlines through word play. The object of the study was 120 headlines selected from Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération and L'Express newspapers from 2015 to 2024.

## **DISCUSSION**

The term polyphony is derived from the Greek words "polys" (many) and "phone" (voice). In music, this term refers to the simultaneous presence of several independent vocal lines. M. Bakhtin (1963)<sup>1</sup> used this concept in his analysis of Dostoevsky's novels. According to him, in a polyphonic novel, along with the author's voice, the voices of the characters also retain their independence and enter into a dialogical relationship.

O. Ducron (1984)<sup>2</sup> introduced the theory of polyphony into the field of linguistics. He distinguished between the concepts of "enunociateur" (declarer) and "locuteur" (speaker), showing that several enunciating voices can exist simultaneously in speech. This theory is especially valuable in the analysis of sarcastic expressions, quotations, presuppositions, and word games.

According to the argumentation theory developed by Anscombe and Ducron (1983), every discourse has some kind of argumentative direction. Wordplay

<sup>1</sup> Бахтин М. М. (1963). Проблемы поэтики Достоевского. Советский писатель, Москва. — 363 с.

<sup>2</sup> Ducrot, O. (1984). Le dire et le dit. Minuit, Paris. — 237 p.

complicates this direction and activates several argumentative lines simultaneously.

**Table 1. The main representatives of polyphony theory and their contributions:**

Scientist	Work	Year	Main idea
M. Baxtin	Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics	1963	Literary polyphony - several independent voices
O. Dyukron	Le dire et le dit	1984	Linguistic polyphony - the difference between speakers
J. Anscombre	L'argumentation dans la langue	1983	Argumentative polyphony theory
S. Moeschler	Argumentation et conversation	1985	Dialogue and polyphony
A. Rabatel	Homo narrans	2008	Media polyphony

Word play (French: jeu de mots) is the art of using the phonetic, morphological, lexical, or semantic properties of words or word combinations to evoke two or more meanings at the same time. In linguistics, the following main types of word play are distinguished:

Calembour (pun) - a word play based on the use of words or phrases with the same or similar pronunciation but different meanings. This is the most characteristic type of word play for the French language. It is built on the basis of homonymy (same spelling and pronunciation, different meanings) and paronymy (similar pronunciation, different meanings).

Contrepèterie - the creation of new, often humorous or meaningful expressions by replacing sounds or syllables within words. This is a very ancient art, widely used in French literature since Rabelais.

A word-valise (a portmanteau word) is a technique for forming a new word by combining two words. For example, "infox" = information + intox (meaning misinformation), "covidiot" = Covid + idiot.

Antanaklasis is the use of different meanings of a word in the same sentence in a sequential manner. Syllepse is the simultaneous use of a word that has the same grammatical form in both literal and figurative senses.



Calembour (pun) is the most common type of word play in French newspaper headlines. This type uses the phenomena of homonymy and paronymy. The following examples show how homonymous puns create polyphonic meaning: The headline “La peine de mort au cœur du débat” published in the September 14, 2022 issue of *Le Monde* is a vivid example of this. Here, the word “peine” means both “punishment” (death penalty) and “suffering, sorrow”. The headline simultaneously contains a legal and a human-emotional dimension. The headline “Le franc parler” from the newspaper *Libération* also evokes two meanings: “to speak franc” (incorrectness) and “the language spoken by the Franks” (in the context of the Francophonie problem). This is directly related to the content of this article.

**Table 2. Examples of titles based on calembour and layers of meaning:**

Title	Newspaper	Year	Meaning 1	Meaning 2	Polyphonic effect
«La peine de mort au cœur du débat»	<i>Le Monde</i>	2022	Death penalty	Suffering and sorrow	Legal + emotional
«Le franc parler»	<i>Libération</i>	2021	Inaccuracy	Frankish language	Political + linguistic
«La vague bleue»	<i>Le Figaro</i>	2022	Blue wave	Right-wing party victory	Natural + political
«Le temps presse»	<i>L'Express</i>	2023	Time is running out.	Press time	Time + media
«Vert l'avenir»	<i>Le Monde</i>	2021	Green future	Direction to the future	Ecological + direction
«Sans pitié»	<i>Libération</i>	2020	Mercilessly	City of Paris (Pitié)	Semantic + toponymic

Mot-valise is a method of forming a new word by combining the morphemes of two or more words. This method has become especially widespread in the modern French press, as it makes the headline concise and impressive and involves the reader in the process of active decoding.

A famous example: the word “Infox” is formed from the words “information” and “intoxication” (poisoning, manipulation). The headline “Les infox envahissent les réseaux” (2023, *Le Monde*)<sup>3</sup> conveys two concepts to the reader at once: the spread of information and its toxic nature.

<sup>3</sup> *Le Monde*. Archives en ligne. <https://www.lemonde.fr> [Murojaat sanasi: 15.08.2024]

“Covidiot” = Covid + idiot. This word, which appeared during the pandemic, designates people who do not recognize the coronavirus restrictions. Headlines such as “Les covidocenvahissent les plages” simultaneously perform the function of informing and sharply criticizing.

“Trumpiste” = Trump + fasciste (or Trump + iste). This word is widely used in political discourse and has carried a polemical meaning since its creation. The reader performs his own evaluation activity during the process of decoding the word—this is a key feature of polyphony.

**Table 3. Examples of titles based on the Mot-valise:**

Mot-valise	Components	New meaning	Headline example	Effect
Infox	information + intoxication	False information	«Les infox menacent la démocratie»	Information + poison
Covidiot	Covid + idiot	Pandemic denial	«Covidiot, le mot de l'année»	Medical + social
Écoanxiété	écologie + anxiété	Environmental concern	«L'écoanxiété chez les jeunes»	Psychological + environmental
Greenwashing	green + washing	Green deception	«Le greenwashing des entreprises»	Ecological + economic
Instagrammable	Instagram + -able	Suitable for photography	«Paris, la ville instagrammable»	Technological + touristic
Cyberharcelé	cyber + harcelé	Online stalking	«Être cyberharcelé à 12 ans»	Digital + human

Intertextual puns are titles that refer to famous literary, musical, cinematic or other cultural texts. This type constitutes the richest example of polyphony, since it contains at least three layers of meaning: the direct meaning of the title, the meaning of the source text and a new meaning created by the combination of the two.

The title "Être ou ne pas être féministe", published in the March 8, 2023 issue of *Le Figaro*<sup>4</sup>, translates the line "To be or not to be" from Shakespeare's play "Hamlet" into French and applies it to feminist debate. The French reader who reads this title immediately works with three codes: Shakespeare's text, feminist discourse and contemporary political context.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Figaro*. Archives numérique. <https://www.lefigaro.fr> [Murojaat sanasi: 15.08.2024]



The title of Libération "En attendant la croissance" refers to Samuel Beckett's play "En attendant Godot" (Waiting for Godot)<sup>5</sup>. The parallel between waiting for economic growth and waiting for Godot conveys both the tone of the absurd and the despair.

Antanaclasis is a play on words based on the use of different meanings of a word in a sentence. In French journalism, this technique is used to present the reader with two worldviews through one word.

In the headline of the newspaper Le Monde, "La politique de la main tendue tend les relations", the verb "tendere" is used in two senses: "the policy of the outstretched hand is straining relations" - here the words "tendere" (to extend) and "tendere" (to tense) form antanaclasis in one sentence.

Syllepse is a play on words based on the use of a word that is grammatically the same, but semantically in two different senses - simultaneously literal and figurative. In the sentence "Il a perdu la tête et les élections", "perdre la tête" (to lose one's mind) and "perdre les élections" (to lose the election) are used simultaneously, forming a syllabi.

In newspaper headlines, puns perform several important pragmatic functions. These functions determine the relationship between the reader and the press and shape the mechanism of influence of media discourse.

The first and main function of puns is to attract the reader's attention. From the point of view of cognitive linguistics, an unexpected semantic shift activates the reader's attention. The brain reacts sharply to novelty and surprise elements. Puns force the reader to stop and think again.

Psycholinguistic studies show that headlines with puns are read 37-42% more often than regular headlines (Oliva et al., 2016)<sup>6</sup>. This number rises even higher in the online media environment — to 54%.

Puns allow the journalist to express his critical position without directly expressing his own attitude. This is especially evident in political headlines. Headlines such as "Le capital-isme" (Le capital + isme — the game of capital and capitalism) implicitly express an ideological attitude.

<sup>5</sup> Libération. Archives. <https://www.liberation.fr> [Murojaat sanasi: 15.08.2024]

<sup>6</sup> Oliva, A., Besson, M., & Rodriguez, M. (2016). Newspaper headlines and reader attention: a psycholinguistic study. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 28(4), 152–163.



Ducron's (1984)<sup>7</sup> theory of polyphony fully explains this phenomenon: the speaker (journalist) introduces the voice of a second announcer into the text through wordplay and tries to keep his own distance from this voice. Thus, criticism is expressed not as a direct authorial voice, but as a polyphonic voice within the text.

France has a strong tradition of satirical journalism. Publications such as *Le Canard Enchaîné* and *Charlie Hebdo* work mainly with headlines based on wordplay and irony. The title “Fillon dans le pétrin” simultaneously conveys additional meanings such as “Fillon is in trouble” and “Fillon non pétrin de sa bouche”.

Humorous wordplay serves the function of softening social conflicts and transforming political criticism into a more acceptable form. Bakhtin (1965)<sup>8</sup> described this phenomenon in his work “*Rabelais and His World*” as “carnival laughter”.

Wordplay ensures that the title is retained in the reader’s memory for a longer time. This is due to a cognitive mechanism called “elaborative encoding”: the reader spends more mental effort decoding the title, so it is stored in the memory for a longer time.

## **RESULTS**

The study found significant differences in the characteristics of the use of puns in the four publications studied. These differences are directly related to the editorial policy, target audience and political orientation of each publication.

*Le Monde* uses puns mainly by intertextualizing and linking them to literary texts. This indicates the newspaper's orientation to an intellectual audience. *Libération*, on the other hand, resorts to sharp, often provocative puns on political and social topics. *Le Figaro*, in line with its conservative tradition, prefers the traditional calembour method. *L'Express*, as a weekly magazine, uses multi-layered puns that require deeper analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Ducrot, O. (1984). *Le dire et le dit*. Minuit, Paris. — 237 p.

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtine, M. (1965). *L'œuvre de François Rabelais et la culture populaire au Moyen Age et sous la Renaissance*. Gallimard, Paris. — 471 p.



**Table 4. Distribution of types of puns by newspaper (%):**

Word game type	Le Monde	Le Figaro	Libération	L'Express
Calembour (homonymous)	28%	42%	25%	31%
Mot-valise	18%	12%	24%	19%
Intertextual	31%	20%	22%	27%
Antanaclasis	12%	15%	17%	11%
Syllepse	8%	7%	9%	8%
Other types	3%	4%	3%	4%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

The table shows that Le Figaro relies more on the traditional calembour method (42%), which is explained by its classically conservative orientation. Libération leads the way in creating socio-political mot-valise (24%), reflecting its innovative and left-wing politics. Le Monde leads in intertextual puns (31%), reflecting its desire to reach its cultural and intellectual audience.

Puns are not just a linguistic phenomenon — they are inextricably linked to the sociocultural context. In France, the art of playing with words is considered an integral part of “l’esprit français” (the French spirit). This cultural phenomenon is deeply rooted in the French education system, literature, and social relations.

In France, the word “calembour” has been used since the 18th century and is widely found in the works of writers such as Voltaire, Rabelais, and Molière. In journalism, this tradition has developed since the 19th century. Caricaturists such as Carl Philippon and Honoré Daumier, who used puns and visual metaphors together, defined the tradition of political satire.

In modern conditions, puns have acquired new dimensions. In the era of social networks, short and effective headlines need to have a format that is convenient for “sharing”. Puns have become an integral part of such headlines. Hashtag culture also gave rise to its own wordplay: the headlines #EnMarcheOuCrève (walk or die), #LaRépublique\_En\_Marche formed the unique polyphonic discourse of the election campaign.

## **CONCLUSION**

First conclusion: In French newspaper headlines, wordplay is one of the main means of creating polyphonic meaning. At least two layers of meaning were identified in 78% of the 120 headlines analyzed.



Second conclusion: Five main types of wordplay — calembour, mot-valise, intertextual puns, antanaclasis and syllepse — each create a specific polyphonic structure. Calembour is the most common type (estimated at 34%), operating through the mechanisms of homonymy and paronymy.

Third conclusion: Among the pragmatic functions of wordplay, the most important are attention-grabbing, critical stance and memorability. These functions are justified from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, discourse analysis and pragmatics.

Fourth conclusion: The way in which each publication uses wordplay corresponds to its editorial policy and target audience. This gives reason to consider it as a linguistic marker of media identity.

Fifth conclusion: Puns are not just stylistic embellishments, but also effective means of conveying ideological meaning. Within the framework of Ducron's theory of polyphony, they should be analyzed as expressions of "hidden voices". The following directions for future research are recommended: the transformation of puns in digital media; methods for automatic detection of puns using artificial intelligence; comparative studies - a comparative study of puns in the headlines of the French and Uzbek press.

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