

Playing with Greekness: Impolite wordplays in online political discussions of the Greek crisis

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το παρόν άρθρο εξετάζει αγενή/προσβλητικά λογοπαίγνια που χρησιμοποιούνται από χρήστες των μέσων κοινωνικής δικτύωσης Facebook και YouTube σε συζητήσεις σχετικές με το δημοψήφισμα και τις μετέπειτα εκλογές του 2015. Η ποιοτική, συστηματική ανάλυση σχολίων από βίντεο στο YouTube και αναρτήσεων στις ιστοσελίδες του ΣΥΡΙΖΑ και της Νέας Δημοκρατίας στο Facebook ανέδειξε δυο βασικούς τύπους λογοπαϊγνίων. Αφενός, οι χρήστες δημιουργούν λογοπαίγνια με τα ονόματα γνωστών πολιτικών ή κομμάτων, είτε εισάγοντας στο όνομα καθιερωμένες λέξεις ταμπού, είτε εκμεταλλευόμενοι φωνολογικές ή σημασιολογικές γλωσσικές σχέσεις για να συνδέσουν το όνομα με μειωτικές έννοιες. Αφετέρου, οι σχολιαστές στοχοποιούν τόσο τους υπεύθυνους για την κρίση όσο και τους «πολιτικούς άλλους» μέσω λογοπαϊγνίων, τα οποία βασίζονται σε μια παιγνιώδη μίμηση είτε στοιχείων της ανάρτησης με το οποίο συνδέονται, είτε στοιχείων της κοινωνικής και πολιτιστικής πραγματικότητας των Ελλήνων χρηστών, στα οποία προσδίδεται χαρακτηρισμός επίκαιρης πολιτικής κριτικής. Και τα δυο είδη λογοπαϊγνίων, που συνιστούν έναν τύπο μεταγλωσσικής αγένειας, επιτρέπουν στους δημιουργούς να υποδείξουν όσους έβλαψαν την χώρα, να επιδείξουν τις γλωσσικές ικανότητές τους, προσφέροντάς τους έτσι επικοινωνιακή δύναμη και κύρος έναντι των πολιτικών και, μέσω της δημιουργικότητας των λογοπαϊγνίων, να πείσουν το ευρύτερο κοινό για την αυθεντία των πολιτικών τους επιχειρημάτων.

KEYWORDS: Facebook, impoliteness, language play, politeness, puns, YouTube

1. Introduction*

The global socio-economic crisis has been besetting Greece since 2008, leading to severe issues within Greek society: austerity measures (including cuts in salaries and pensions), a rise in unemployment, a decline in health and educational provisions, as well as increased social unrest. Due to these on-going developments, Greeks have been overwhelmed by negative feelings, ranging from anger and disappointment with the political status quo to national shame and self-pity for the country's public humiliation (Angouri & Wodak 2014). These feelings probably peaked with the referendum of summer 2015, regarding the acceptance/rejection of further austerity measures for Greece.

Consequently, public discourse surrounding these political developments has been characterised by intense polarisation and by a deep “us vs. them” division, which has led to increasingly heated political discussions. The aggressive nature of such debates is not only due to the sensitive nature of the topic but also to the generally combative character of Greek political affairs (Oz et al. 2018, Angouri & Tseliga 2010). Evidently, when these discussions were transferred online, in a social media setting already characterised by aggression-enhancing parameters (anonymity and de-individuation, vagueness of audience, time lag between responses, lack of paralinguistic and social contextual cues, foregrounding of users' group face), the comments on these critical socio-political issues became rife with intense impoliteness. Both on YouTube, notorious for its “trench warfare dynamics” (Karlsen et al. 2017), as well as on public Facebook pages of the two main Greek parties, users were directing their attacks against other users, political figures and unspecified “others” alike.

However, alongside the conventionalised ways to attack one's opponents (see Blitvich 2010), new ways to offend emerged in social media comments in the form of impoliteness strategies that are highly relevant both to the specific online context in which

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they appear and the Greek socio-political background. These insults are characterised by a high level of creativity, being a playful alternative to the aggravated attacks employed by the majority of users. A typical example of such creative insults are wordplays, which will be the focus of this article.

Although creativity has been previously associated with impoliteness (see Culpeper 2011) and wordplays have been approached as a typical instantiation of users' creativity, research has not yet examined in detail the impolite potential of wordplays and has not delved deeper into how social media users can employ this form of situated impoliteness to touch upon wider societal issues. In addition, wordplays as a form of online impoliteness are worthy of further examination, since they can be viewed as a form of meta-linguistic impoliteness: impoliteness that is not simply verbally expressed, but that employs and exploits linguistic conventions to enhance the attack's offensiveness and to play with established cultural and linguistic principles, thus interacting with and manipulating implicit understandings about the nation's dominant language. Since language use is inextricably linked to perceptions of national identities in countries in which the long-established national language holds historical significance (such as Greece, see Saridakis 2017), meta-linguistic impoliteness manipulating the linguistic code through wordplays can unearth linguistic ideologies and underlying socio-cultural perceptions. In this way, an analysis of wordplays can demonstrate how impoliteness can showcase users' uptake of key national events and how it can reflect their own, lay perceptions about the importance of their Greek language and heritage.

Hence, in this article I will be focusing on impolite creative wordplays employed in Facebook and YouTube discussions on the Greek crisis, exploring both wordplays on individual words and wordplays that extend beyond word-boundaries, covering longer chunks of speech. The article is structured as follows: the next section will explore studies on creative wordplays and their potential links with online and offline impoliteness, while also examining different ways in which wordplays can be organised. Section 3 will present the project's data and methods, followed by the analytical part of the article. I will present examples of the different categories of wordplays in the data, illustrating how they are exploited by posters to flag up their knowledge of the Greek language and their Greek background, as well as how they are tied with their perceived linguistic and political privilege. Finally, the highlighted findings will be summarised and discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Creativity and impoliteness, online and offline

Seargeant et al. (2018) discuss creativity as a feature of everyday language, which can be manifested in utterances of lay speakers, even though the concept had been previously associated with literary, elevated discourse. Culpeper (2011: 243-244) relates impoliteness to creativity, which can be used to manipulate standardised insults, thus enhancing their offensiveness.¹ Drawing on Carter's (2004) creativity theory, he postulates that lay creativity can be expressed through different impoliteness structures. For instance, pattern-forming creative impoliteness is grounded on repetition and playing on existing structures, while pattern-reforming impoliteness is based on the creative breaking of existing linguistic norms through exploitation of underlying parallelisms between an existing and a novel form.

Evidently, pattern re-forming creative impoliteness exhibits links to the creation of impolite wordplays, which typically exploit lexical or syntactic ambiguities and latent associations to lead to an original linguistic item with offensive connotations (Dyner

¹ See Miall & Kuiken (1994) on the related concept of "defamiliarization".

2009a, b, Carter 2004). On the other hand, although Culpeper (2011) mainly associates pattern-forming impoliteness with banter, he acknowledges that tit-for-tat patterns can also pertain to genuine impoliteness. Tit-for-tats involve the repetition of previous linguistic contributions, either in their original forms or with added impolite structures which escalate the offensiveness. Thus, tit-for-tats can be associated with wordplays that involve quoting of previous contributions (within the same interaction or originating from the exchange's broader context), which are re-contextualised from a non-offensive context to an impolite one (see section 2.2 on echoic wordplays). Hence, the created mismatch also links this strategy to situated creative impoliteness (Carter's third strategy), i.e. creative impoliteness built on the incongruity of the chosen expression with the context of use.

Regarding the links between creative impoliteness and social media interactions, a recent analytical line focuses on creative snarky remarks as a key way to react to previous insults (see Dynel & Poppi's 2019 "insult-retort" adjacency pairs in Twitter interactions) and as a way to "discredit a perceived enemy and gain approval from a knowing audience" (Tsvieriotis 2017). Regarding online creativity and impoliteness, Dynel & Poppi (2020) highlight the links between online creative political humour and political criticism, that may lead to "polyvocality" and democratic deliberation, to bonding of like-minded in-groups at the expense of the opponents and to grabbing the attention and persuading all ratified recipients (i.e. anyone who may be exposed to a post or comment in a social media platform) regarding the authenticity of the issuers' political views. In addition, online onomastic wordplays, as well as echoic wordplays based on widely disseminated pre-established linguistic material, which have been recognised as alternative ways to perform impoliteness in online political discussions (Dynel & Poppi 2020, Šarić & Radanović Felberg 2017, Vladimirov & House 2018) can denigrate and delegitimize the targets in the eyes of a vast and unpredictable audience, elevating the issuer.

2.2. Definitions and types of creative impolite wordplays

Delabastita (1993: 57) defines wordplays as follows:

Wordplay is the general name indicating the various textual phenomena in which certain features inherent in the structure of the language used are exploited in such a way as to establish a communicatively significant, (near)-simultaneous confrontation of at least two linguistic structures with more or less dissimilar meanings (signifieds) and more or less similar forms (signifiers).

Admittedly, previous literature is characterised by lack of consensus over the exact nature of wordplays (Giorgadze 2014). Despite claims that wordplays should be restricted into creative "plays" with single words (see Kjerkegaard 2011),² a definition of wordplay such as the above also allows us to explore wordplays that extend beyond word boundaries, since a wordplay can also be considered a "textual phenomenon". This means that wordplays can involve exploitation of broader parts of utterances.

² Wordplays are commonly associated with puns, although scholars do not always agree on the differences between the two concepts. Certain studies (Attardo 2018, Giorgadze 2014, among others) perceive puns as a sub-category of the broader, umbrella concept of "wordplay", which also involves creative strategies such as anagrams or palindromes. Conversely, studies such as Kjerkegaard's (2011) follow the opposite approach, considering wordplays more restricted than puns. Other scholars perceive puns as a type of wordplay exclusively based on homophony, thus playing on ambiguity between two competing interpretations (Leppihalme 1997). Since important studies in the field like Delabastita's (1993) or Gottlieb's (2005) consider the two synonymous, I will be incorporating into my account of wordplay certain elements related to the conceptualisation of puns, as well as relevant descriptive categories.

According to the definition, wordplays can exploit the incongruity between a pre-existing, established linguistic form and a novel version created by the user, the clash between literal and metaphorical meaning, or the discrepancy between different contexts of use (Trauth & Kazzari 1996). Based on this, impolite wordplays can be considered a condensed version of garden path structures, which, according to Taylor (2016), involve the creation of a specific intended meaning, through guiding one's expectations towards a given interpretation, which is then reversed by favouring a non-expected alternative. Garden paths exploit different types of ambiguity (syntactic, pragmatic, lexical), thus being potentially unpleasant for the receiver but cognitively rewarding for the audience, who enjoys decoding the sudden switch of expectations (Dynel 2009b).

The above description effectively summarises how impolite wordplays function: readers are introduced to the familiar version of a linguistic item, which is then manipulated to insult the targets through the unpredicted incorporation of impoliteness. Since the original form the reader has in mind does not include impoliteness, the incongruity and the offensiveness is enhanced once the modified form appears.

Coming to the forms that impolite wordplays can assume, as evident, Delabastita's definition can be associated with two different types of wordplays: those that operate within the limits of a single word and those that are grounded on longer word strings, thus centring around the combination, interplay and creative manipulation of different linguistic items. I will now discuss each of these two subtypes individually.

Although wordplays with individual words can take various forms, the form that can be mainly associated with political impoliteness is the offensive manipulation of political actors' names, i.e. in the case of Greece, wordplays with onomastics of key political figures involved in the Greek socio-political crisis. Such wordplays become offensive by providing an inappropriate version of a well-established surname, through exploitation of either lexico-grammatical or semantic relationships (i.e. homophony, paronymy, antonymy or polysemy), which link the name to conventionally impolite linguistic material. Creative manipulation of the written aspect of communication, of the textual nature of online comments or of established writing conventions (Weitz 2017) constitutes an alternative, online way to create impolite single-word wordplays (or wordplays involving collocations or a minimal amount of lexical items).

The conversion of the name can take two distinct forms. On the one hand, onomastic wordplays can involve alterations (through morphological or phonological processes such as homophony or near homophony)³ to parts of the name, so that it alludes to a pre-existing linguistic item. This item might not be offensive per se, but it does become impolite when re-contextualised in the field of politics and associated with authority such as ΜΠΑΤΣΟΚ instead of ΠΑΣΟΚ for the name of the respective party. This is wordplay with the word *μπάτσος*, a loaded term for policeman/cop, which implies a police-state mentality from the party. On the other hand, onomastic wordplays also arise through blending of "two elements which do not normally co-occur, according to the rules of the language". In this case, the actual name of a political figure and a standardised offensive adjective (which might also be an approximant homophone of the name) are joined by users within a single linguistic unit. In certain cases, the insults included in the creative, customised blend are providing an offensive evaluation of the target such as ΦΑΣΙΣΤΕΡΑ. This is a blend of the words ΦΑΣΙΣΤΑΣ "fascist" and ΑΡΙΣΤΕΡΑ "the left", which associates the left with extremist, undemocratic practices (see Hatzidaki 2017

³ Homophony describes the relationship of two words with the same pronunciation but different meanings and (typically) different written forms (Malmkjær 2009). Near-homophony characterises words that have almost the same or very similar (but not identical) pronunciation, but are dissimilar in terms of meanings and spellings (Delabastita 1993).

for an analysis of the “two extremes” theory in relation to the Greek left). Therefore, such wordplays are reminiscent of Culpeper’s (2011) conventionalised personalised negative assertions/vocatives (see links between the blended insults and impoliteness themes/taboo vocabulary).

Coming to wordplays that extend beyond single words, these are commonly based on the manipulation of pre-existing linguistic material, with which users are already familiar. Thus, they exploit Brône’s “hyper-understanding”, which occurs when a “speaker exploits potential weak spots in a previous utterance by playfully echoing that utterance, while simultaneously reversing the initially intended interpretation” (2008: 2027). Based on the above definition, hyper-understanding can be linked to Culpeper’s (2011) echoic mention (a key element of “mocking mimicry”), i.e. an echo of previously introduced lexical items which are repeated in later stages of an interaction, only to be ridiculed. Çelebi & Ruhi (2015) have associated echoic mention with wordplays exploiting standardised insults.⁴ However, the concept is potentially better suited to describe wordplays that capitalise on larger chunks of speech (such as phrases), since a more extensive echo can increase the wordplay’s offensiveness (due to the wider recognisability of the phrase and the incorporation of additional levels of meaning).

The first sub-type of echoic wordplays involves echoes of previous contributions. Expectedly, in polyphonic online political debates,⁵ these contributions can be previous comments by co-interactants (thus approximating a creative version of quoting), which are referenced and creatively adapted to offend the producer of the original. Nonetheless, given that online interactions are multi-layered (Dynel 2014), with platform affordances allowing users to interact and comment upon aspects of the post, such wordplays are not necessarily restricted to echoing other comments. They can also include wordplays based on elements of the immediate context in which commenters are immersed. This leads to wordplays that could echo the title of the post, statements by featured actors or aspects of the post’s phrasing that reflect its content. For instance, on a SYRIZA post titled “we vote for the one who is standing up”, the comments include the wordplay, “he [meaning Alexis Tsipras] will be standing up and we will be on all fours?”. Note how, through the links with kneeling and anal sexual activities, the created antithesis suggests that the prime-minister’s policies will impose greatly on the public.⁶

The second sub-type of wordplays extending beyond word boundaries involves the hyper-understanding of established, standardised phrases (see Dynel’s 2009a “pragmatic formulae”). Thus, the echo is tapping into the broader societal context of an interaction instead of being dependent on localised preceding verbalisations. In the case of online political discussions, such wordplays echo either material related to the socio-political background of the crisis or material resembling what Spitulnik terms as public words: “standard phrases such as proverbs, slogans, clichés, and idiomatic expressions that are remembered, repeated, and quoted long after their first utterance. Some public words are anonymous and unattributable, for others the sources may be well or vaguely known and

⁴ Çelebi & Ruhi (2015) provide the following example of a wordplay incorporating an insult:

A: K Y T V I’ve got on tonight, recorded that

B: S H I T more like

Speaker B exploits the name of a TV channel (KYTV), mentioned by A, to create a wordplay with the channel’s name (SHIT), targeting its quality. The wordplay exploits writing conventions (capitalisation) and (partially) alliteration.

⁵ Multi-participant settings where different speakers are exploiting their linguistic creativity to imply intellectual superiority (thus gaining conversational power) are presented as a typical environment favouring wordplays grounded on hyper-understanding (Brône 2008).

⁶ Title of post: Ψηφίζουμε αυτόν που στέκεται όρθιος. The wordplay in comments: “Αυτός θα στέκεται όρθιος και όλοι εμείςΣτα 4 ?”

perhaps even invoked” (1996: 166). Thus, the echoed material can be related to the country’s (literary or popular) culture (e.g. on a post laying out New Democracy’s plans for the country, a commenter implicitly comments on the ineffectiveness of these plans through the wordplay “CRY RESPONSIBLY”, which is a modified echo of the slogan of a well-known campaign for responsible drinking, “ENJOY RESPONSIBLY”).⁷

Evidently, the creation of such wordplays is grounded on the process of entextualisation, described by Vladimirov & House as “lifting discourse material (a linguistic, or a semiotic unit) from one interactional context and placing it into another, where it functions as a meaningful element within its new context” (2018:150). Hence, such wordplays approximate Dynel’s (2009a: 1290) “distortions”, which are “based on deletions, substitutions or additions, whereby extra chunks of various lengths (letters / syllables / words) are inserted, in any position, viz. preceding the original text, following it or splitting it”. In this case, such modifications mean that the wordplay is not just “alluding to the source but also entirely changing the meaning of the original formulation” to serve users’ impolite purposes. Hence, the wordplay’s offensiveness lies either on the clash between the original context of use and the transfer in an entirely different (albeit somehow relevant) context, or on the fact that knowledge of the source material (which might not be available to all recipients) is critical for decoding the wordplay’s subtext.

In summary, the mechanism behind both types of echoic wordplays involves a combination of pattern-forming and pattern reforming: the original, pre-existing utterance (originating from the on-going interaction between users, the post on which the interaction is unfolding or users’ shared offline background) is copied almost accurately (thus creating expectations of regularity), but a certain part of it is purposefully modified in a creative way to break that pattern.

3. Background, data and methodology of the study

This study focuses on a challenging moment for Greek political history, the referendum and the subsequent developments of summer 2015. In June 2015 the then SYRIZA-ANEL coalition government, after months of negotiations with Greece’s lenders regarding the terms of the Greek bailout programme, called voters to decide whether they approved the creditors’ suggestion for further austerity measures, which would ensure the country would remain afloat. The inherent importance of this national issue, as well as the heated debates and the dissenting rhetoric that surrounded the two referendum camps (YES-voters, assuming a pro-EU or pro-rightist stance and NO-voters, with an anti-EU and pro-leftist orientation), led to a period of polarised disagreements online and offline. The fact that the government went ahead with the signing of a third memorandum, despite the clear victory of the NO-vote in the referendum further intensified the schisms within the country and led to the resignation of the prime-minister and a call for new elections. Since the elections were the endpoint of a very turbulent political period, the examination of this specific time frame allows for an account on how impoliteness surrounding socially produced and discursively constructed socio-political events can be linked to blame-shifting and to in/out-group divisions.

The data I examine come from posts regarding seminal events during this four-month period, collected from a total of 54 posts from public Facebook pages and YouTube pages. Out of these posts, 30 originate from YouTube videos related to key developments from June to September 2015 and 24 come from posts of the same period in the Facebook pages of two main parties at the time, i.e. SYRIZA and New Democracy (12 posts from each party to ensure equal representation). The slight discrepancy in the

⁷ In Greek: ΑΠΟΛΑΥΣΤΕ ΥΠΕΥΘΥΝΑ is changed into ΚΛΑΨΤΕ ΥΠΕΥΘΥΝΑ.

number of examined posts from each platform is related to the fact that the YouTube posts (which do not originate from official channels) were not as widely commented upon as the more centralized Facebook posts, so more videos were included to even out the sub-sets from each platform.

These posts generated 4014 comments, out of which 2333 included the impoliteness strategies involved in the study's framework (i.e. strategies described in Culpeper's 2011, Bousfield's 2008 and Taylor's 2016 models). I should mention that, along with certain other context- and language-specific impoliteness strategies, wordplays, in the form described in section 2.2, were not among the impoliteness strategies featured in existing categorisations and were added to the model to enhance its analytical rigour.

When coding the dataset, each wordplay noted in the data, either word- or utterance-based, was classified as an individual instance of impoliteness (i.e. if an onomastic wordplay and an echoic wordplay or two onomastic wordplays grounded in different names appear in the same comment, these are calculated as separate instances). However, I would like to highlight that, although wordplays are not as widely represented in the data as other, more established impoliteness strategies (a total of 39 onomastic wordplays and 57 echoic wordplays were found), they are equally important, since they are an emerging strategy of meta-linguistic impoliteness that attests to users' creativity and provides an alternative way to target the perceived political opponents.

Regarding the study's methodology, I have performed a qualitative, close analysis of the data, which were collected, coded and annotated using the qualitative analysis software NVivo. I have also supported the qualitative aspect of my research with quantified numerical representations of the instances of prevalent impoliteness strategies, to ensure the generalizability and objectivity of results.

Two key methodological distinctions underpin this project. The former is related to the distinction into interpersonal and public impoliteness (Kwon & Gruzd 2017). Interpersonal impoliteness includes attacks against other interacting users. Public impoliteness is targeting non-interacting addressees and can be directed either to public figures or to what Dynel & Poppi (2019: 58) call the "collective third party, encompassing innumerable, frequently unidentified users". Specifically, the examined wordplays can target verbalisations by co-interactants (interpersonal impoliteness) or party officials (public impoliteness), or they can appear in floating turns, providing impolite variations of well-known phrases (in which case they could be considered impoliteness against unspecified, collectivised others). However, since wordplays, especially when associated with the names or the words of public figures, are also implicitly targeting the fanbase of the specific targeted actor (even when incorporated in an interpersonal insult), they can blur the boundaries between interpersonal and public impoliteness.

The latter methodological distinction is that between on-record, explicitly expressed impoliteness and off-record impoliteness, that is less direct and can be grounded on implicatures (see Bousfield 2008). However, as I will show in my analysis, impolite wordplays (unlike other, more conventionalised strategies that can be neatly labelled as on/off-record) can blur the boundaries between the explicit and the implicit, due to their construction, their many layers of encoded meaning and their intertextuality.

Before moving on to the theoretical examination of various examples from the data, I should point out that, due to length restrictions, I will not focus on echoic wordplays with other users' contributions, exploring instead wordplays that are mostly oriented towards public impoliteness (i.e. echoic wordplays based on public words or aspects of the post and onomastic wordplays with politicians' names).

4. Analysis

4.1. Onomastic Wordplays

Onomastic wordplays target well-known figures related to the crisis, being tied to users' extra-situational reality. Therefore, they are featured in comments which are not necessarily responding to previous impoliteness, suggesting that public impoliteness appears in comment-initial positions (see Vasilaki 2020). At the same time, the selection of the featured actors is based on the content of the post or on the political orientation of the page that accommodates the comment (in the case of Facebook): the figure featured in the wordplay is always situated within the specific political developments.

However, in this case there is a practical restriction that determines which political figures can be targeted: users have to opt for politicians or institutions whose names are conducive to the potential creation of a wordplay. The lack of elements that could be creatively manipulated (such as the non-existence of insulting words that would be homophonous with the name of the politician) immediately excludes certain potential targets from the process. Similarly, external political actors with foreign names are less likely to be featured in impolite wordplays, even if they are considered blameworthy, as Greek users may struggle to manipulate sounds and meanings that do not belong to the Greek "linguistic inventory". (Creativity is more easily manifested in materials expressed in one's mother tongue, see Vandaele 2011).

I will now illustrate different ways in which users produce onomastic wordplays targeting the selected politicians.

4.1.1 Onomastic wordplays with non-offensive lexical items

Wordplays which incorporate non-offensive lexical items into the name can be grounded on the phonological processes of homophony or near-homophony/paronymy, thus capitalising on the phonological contrast between minimal elements (either the initial phoneme or phonemes within the word) in the original name and the alluded word: the two can become associated as a type of minimal pair, i.e. "two words with different meanings that differ by a single phonetic element" (Trauth & Kazzari 1996).

The aforementioned process has been described as central for the creation of puns (see Žyško 2017 on "discrete ideative homophony"). Similarly, the hereby created wordplays exploit this phonologically-conditioned ambiguity to create a new lexical item arising from the combination of the name with its approximant homophone. Even though none of these two terms is offensive, the resulting wordplay becomes impolite (Nissan 2015). This is because the field of politics (typically characterised by elevated, formal vocabulary and austere principles) becomes linked to words from different registers, typically belonging to less elevated or inappropriate (albeit not necessarily offensive) semantic fields:

- (1) John Polikratis: Σημασία έχει να βάλει [ο Μείμαράκης] το μπάχαλο που παρέδωσε ο ΜΥΡΙΖΑ σε μια τάξη
 "What's important is that he [Meimarakis] sets in order the mess that MYRIZA [lit. I stank, wordplay with SYRIZA] left behind"
 YouTube video (7/9/2015). Title of post: Meimarakis: This is me, take it or leave it

In this case, the name of the governing party, ΣΥΡΙΖΑ/SYRIZA, is modified through the change of the initial phoneme (and letter), leading to the near-homophone ΜΥΡΙΖΑ. The offensiveness of the wordplay is not immediately evident, since the original meaning of μύριζα is "I smelled" (past tense of the verb μυρίζω "to smell"). However, the word can be treated as polysemous, with an additional meaning similar to "I stink" (in this case "I stank"). Thus, the wordplay's underlying connotation is that

SYRIZA “stinks”, which in the political context of the discussion would probably indicate that the party is unable to effectively rule the country. Hence, the user claims that New Democracy’s leader is the only one capable of handling the chaos “stinking” SYRIZA has created. We should also note that the wordplay is capitalised to further resemble the way a party’s name would be stylised. Thus, the user is exploiting the written affordances of online commenting to enhance the ambiguity between the wordplay and the original name, thus strengthening the garden path (since readers, at least initially, see exactly what they expect).

Using the process illustrated in (1), different users can produce different near-homophones for the name of a given political actor/institution (thus co-constructing the impoliteness in a way reminiscent of the collective “co-authoring” of meaning in the Greek social media interactions examined by Georgakopoulou 2014). This leads to a minimal set of creative variants, all of which retain their offensive character, despite originating from non-offensive words. The name of SYRIZA proves especially productive, allowing for the creation of a range of approximant homophones. This is because the final part of the party’s name (ΣΥΡΙΖΑ) coincides with the inflectional suffix *-ίζα*, one of the endings employed for the Greek past tense. Thus, through keeping the latter part of the name unaltered and changing solely the initial phonemes, users create wordplays alluding to various non-flattering verbs, such as ΤΣΙΡΙΖΑ “I shrieked”,⁸ the past tense of *τσίριζω* “to shriek”.

Wordplays with approximant homophones are not restricted to initial phonemes, as users can manipulate other parts of the word, based on the potential to create the most impolite version of the name. For instance, the prime-minister's surname Τσίπρας “Tsipras” is changed to Τσίμπλας”, a wordplay with the near-homophone *τσίμπλα*, meaning “eye gum”. The links with sleeping imply inertness and passivity on the part of Alexis Tsipras.⁹ Apart from the alteration of existing phonemes in the original name, insulting near-homophones can also be created through the addition of phonemes. For instance, Τσίπρας is changed to Τσίπουρας, a wordplay with the near-homophone *τσίπουρο*, a type of Greek alcoholic drink. The drunkenness connotations are probably suggesting lack of clarity in the PM's political decisions. Evidently, the words chosen as the baseline for the wordplays are irrelevant to politics. However, they become offensive when associated with the field, since they are unrelated to public life, while also hinting towards qualities that are undesirable for people in office.

I should highlight that such wordplays extend to actors from all sides of the political spectrum (depending on the political affiliations of the wordplay’s creator). Hence, through a similar process, the surname of New Democracy’s intermittent leader Μείμαράκης “Meimarakis” is changed into Μείμαγκάκης. Μάγκας is a Greek word referring to a macho, rather aggressive type of man.¹⁰ This characterisation had been linked to Meimarakis’s persona,¹¹ due to his physique, way of speaking and general behaviour. The wordplay is suggesting that the behaviour of a “mangas”, albeit seemingly “cool”, is not appropriate for a leader, who should be rational and composed.

All the above wordplays operate within word boundaries, exploiting phonetic elements of individual words and minimal contrasts. However, the manipulation of

⁸ Potentially alluding to the intense stance SYRIZA members assumed in public dialogue.

⁹ The same wordplay targeting the prime-minister is noted in Zafiropoulou et al.’s (2015) account of online reader comments discussing the Greek crisis.

¹⁰ According to Wikipedia (2019) “mangas was a label for Greek working-class men, behaving in a particularly arrogant/presumptuous way. In modern Greek language, mangas has become a synonym for “a swash guy, a swagger”. Depending on context it may have more negative (“bully, henchman, hooligan”) or more positive (“brave, crafty man”) connotations”

¹¹ <https://www.lifo.gr/team/gnomes/60481>

phonological principles is not necessarily effective when users are targeting political entities with compound names, such as the leading opposition party, New Democracy, whose name constitutes a collocation. In this case, users debase the targeted actors through exploitation of lexico-semantic relationships, such as opposition (see the antonymic onomastic wordplays in Šarić & Radanović Felberg 2015):

(2) Akis Kremmidis: Έχετε σκεφτεί να αλλάξετε το όνομα σε «Νέα Ραγιαδοσύνη»;
 “Have you ever thought of changing the name to ‘New Slavery’?”
 New Democracy FB page 29/6/2015. Title of post. Antonis Samaras: YES to Europe,
 as necessary for the good of our country

In this case, the insulting element is incorporated in one of the words included in the party’s name (Νέα Δημοκρατία “New Democracy”). More specifically, the user keeps the first part of the name unchanged, while substituting the word “Democracy” with “Slavery”, a term semantically opposite to the original. To enhance the offensiveness of the resulting wordplay, when referring to slavery the user picks the ideologically loaded term *ραγιάς/ραγιαδοσύνη* instead of the synonymous *σκλαβιά*. *Ραγιάς* was the term referring to the enslaved Greeks during the 400-years of Ottoman occupation of the country. The word has currently re-surfaced to describe Greece as being in a position of subordination, “economically enslaved” to the foreign creditors¹² (Hatzidaki & Goutsos 2017). Hence, the combination of the adjective “New” with the noun *Ραγιαδοσύνη* “Slavery” encapsulates such wider societal discourses, by implying that the current dependency from the creditors is a modern type of servitude (thus justifying the preservation of “New” as the first part of the wordplay). Thus, the Euro-dependent policies that New Democracy supports are presented as equally humiliating for the nation as the long-standing subjugation to the Ottomans.¹³ Evidently, previous crisis and historical turning points are re-contextualised in the impolite wordplay, aiding users’ attempt to interpret the on-going Greek troubles (see Vasilaki 2020).

Another example in which users employ the semantic relation of opposition is when the party name *Ανεξάρτητοι Έλληνες* “Independent Greeks” (the minor actor in the coalition government) is altered into *Εξαρτημένοι Έλληνες* “Dependent Greeks”. Users substitute the original pre-modifying adjective “Independent” with the opposite term “Dependent”. They are thus ridiculing the fact that, by siding with SYRIZA, the party ended up supporting the third memorandum and the related pro-EU policies, albeit having previously condemned the country’s reliance on external forces.

Finally, apart from opposition, users exploit additional semantic relationships such as the one between hypernyms (the broader, general category) and hyponyms (a specific instantiation of that category). Hence, when targeting the small opposition party *Ποτάμι* “River”, users alter the name to *Ρυάκι* “Stream”, a hyponym representing a smaller type of river. The substitution of the superordinate term with the subordinate one points

¹² Many articles on popular websites explicitly associate the period of the Ottoman occupation with the current Greek situation, re-appropriating the word *ραγιάς* (e.g. <http://www.mixanitouxronou.gr/ragiades-echis-mana-gi-skiftous-gia-to-charatsi-ton-evropeon-perigela-ke-ton-archeon-paliatsi-o-kostis-palamas-grafi-gia-ti-tapinomeni-ellada-opou-o-pseftis-idolo-ine-edo-to-proskina-i-pl/>). The word had also emerged as a twitter hashtag (#ragiades) around the time of the referendum and prevailed in crisis-related online debates, which discussed the Greek politico-economic situation in terms of a “syndrome of slavery” (Zafiropoulou et al. 2015).

¹³ The poster furthers the impoliteness by incorporating the wordplay in an unpalatable question (on-record impoliteness) to suggest that the party should have already considered altering its name to adopt his version. Thus, the user assumes a superior position due to having created the pun and having imposed it on the party.

towards the party's restricted power and popularity (its supporters are so limited that it cannot not qualify as a "river").

4.1.2 Onomastic wordplays through blends with offensive adjectives

The examples discussed up to this point concern the first type of onomastic wordplays, which alter the name through lexical items that are not per se taboo. The second type involves the incorporation of insulting adjectives in the name through blending. Hence, the addition of a standardised insult produces a new version of the name, which, although pronounced similarly to the original, alludes to a conventionalised swearword. These degrading connotations strongly clash both with the respect due to politicians and with the formality of the political field.

In such wordplays, apart from phonological rules, users exploit orthography and spelling to create wordplays that would "suffer from oral delivery" (Weitz 2017): they manipulate writing conventions to present the inclusion of the swearword in the actual name as a natural insertion. They thus enhance the ambiguity by bringing the emerging version of the name as close to the original as possible and this means that the authority of politicians will be further undermined upon the decoding of the garden path (similarly to 1):

(3) Yellow Decay: Με το όχι θα περιμένεις στη σειρά να πάρεις κωλόχαρτο και εκεί να δω πόσο αξιοπρεπής είσαι...

Mary Poppins: [...] Τράβα στήσε κανένα κόλο τώρα, και μην ανησυχείς, θα στο σκουπίσουν οι ναιναίδες Ευρωπαϊ φίλοι σου

"With a NO vote you'll wait in line for toilet paper [lit. ass paper] and then I'll see how dignified you are"

"Go take it up your ass now, and don't worry, your yes-parroting Europeanises friends will wipe it off you"

YouTube video (4/7/2015). Title of post: The YES-vote rally in Kallimarmaro

The wordplay which exploits a standardised insult ("Europeanises" instead of "Europeans") is found in the second comment and could be considered part of reactive interpersonal impoliteness directed against the first post.¹⁴ However, the wordplay itself targets Europeans (probably the creditors, who had urged Greeks to support a YES-vote in the referendum). This confirms that creative wordplays can serve both interpersonal and public impoliteness simultaneously.

The wordplay is grounded both on phonological principles and on graphological conventions, the manipulation of which is only possible when writing is the primary means of expression. More specifically, the ending of the word Ευρωπαϊοί ("Europeans") is fully homophonous with the plural form of the Greek noun πέος "penis", which is spelled as πέη "penises". Therefore, the only way to distinguish between the two would be orthographically, a fact which is exploited in the wordplay. Thus, the sexually-themed insult πέη takes the place of the original suffix -παίοι in the word for Europeans (the substitution is aided by the fact that the homophony occurs in the plural form of the noun πέος and the original word Ευρωπαϊοί is also pluralised). The resulting insult is a lexical

¹⁴ The intense reactive impoliteness comes after the dystopic, threatening future scenario (see Georgakopoulou & Vasilaki 2018) of the first comment, which blows the potential negative consequences of a NO-vote victory out of proportion: Greece will be in such dire situation that citizens will wait in line for toilet paper. In this way, Yellow Decay had attempted to ridicule Mary Poppins for her perceived lack of critical thinking, demonstrated by her previously-expressed support to the NO-vote.

item whose offensiveness arises through the divergence in the spelling, since the original and the emerging version are just homonyms and not homographs.¹⁵

The reason for targeting the European leadership is revealed by the insult's immediate co-text, which involves further on-record impoliteness. More specifically, the blend Ευρωπαϊκή functions as an adjective, intensified by the slot-filler ναιναίδες “yes-parroting”, which emerges from the repetition of the word for yes (ναι) twice, accompanied by the inflectional suffix -δες (employed for the plural of male nouns). Thus, the creative neologism ναιναίδες¹⁶ becomes an aggravator of the impoliteness, matching the creativity involved in the subsequent blend. The two terms are also complementary in terms of meaning, suggesting that the creditors are targeted due to their “obsession” with the victory of the YES-vote (which the user perceives as detrimental for Greece).

In addition, the sexually-themed insult (sexual organs) which is inserted in the word for Europeans is further supported contextually. Mary Poppins targets Yellow Decay through the negative expressive “take it up your ass” (sexual activities theme). The same theme is invoked in “they are gonna wipe it off you” (the “they” referring to the “yes-parroting Europeanises” and the “it” implying the semen). The combination of the thematically-linked, interrelated impoliteness strategies assists in framing Yellow Decay as a passive, easy prey for the creditors (see the links between homosexuality and submissiveness, Apostolidou 2010), while also presenting the creditors as dishonest, only pretending to support Greece to promote their agenda.

In the above example, the poster bases her grapho-phonological wordplay on a collective term for external political actors (“Europeans”), since, as explained, it is difficult to create wordplays with individual foreign names. However, the names of internal Greek actors do lend themselves to impolite wordplays that manipulate Greek graphemic and spelling conventions. For instance, users play with the full name of the then-president of the Greek parliament Ζωή Κωνσταντοπούλου “Zoe Konstantopoulou”, who, at the time of the referendum, was affiliated with SYRIZA. Since the politician's surname is long, one of the comments, among further impoliteness, shortens the name to Κώ/λου. In Greek, it is common practice to abbreviate multi-syllable words using the slash symbol (similarly to English abbreviations employing the slash). However, based on the conventions governing Greek abbreviations, the slash is typically placed after consonants and not after vowels, as in this case. Hence, the user purposefully chooses to abbreviate Κωνσταντοπούλου into Κω/λου (instead of the expected Κων/λου, which, through a simple Google Search emerges as the preferred abbreviated version of the name). The version the poster puts forward leads to a homographic wordplay with the Greek taboo word κώλος (“ass”), which in the genitive (κώλου) coincides with the proposed abbreviation. Hence, the user manipulates both medium affordances, such as textuality and standardised practises of Greek writing to create a wordplay which is only functional when typed. The target is humiliated through the blend of the name and the adjective, since an individualising characteristic (such as one's surname) is reduced to a de-humanising element such as a sexual organ.

¹⁵ The effort the user has put in to create the wordplay (instead of merely resorting to the taboo word “dick”) points towards the performativity of such online impolite wordplays and to the issuer's attempt to demonstrate command of the language.

¹⁶ *Slang.gr* includes the lemma ναιναίς, associating it with the “yes-man, the one who is uncritically saying yes to anything”. It underlines that the neologism “became prevalent during the time of the 2015 referendum, to refer to YES-supporters”, see: <https://www.slang.gr/definition/27453-nainais>

4.2 Impolite wordplays on pre-existing linguistic material

Having described onomastic wordplays, I am now moving to an examination of public impolite wordplays based on hyper-understanding of pre-existing linguistic material. As previously mentioned, these can be grounded either on the online context of the comment (i.e. on aspects of the original post) or on the offline reality (i.e. standardised phrases and references that are part of users' linguistic and socio-cultural background). Such wordplays can be linked to Dynel's (2009a) "free-floating puns": although relevant to the discussed matters, they do not implicate particular users and do not depend on preceding verbalisations or apparent triggers. Instead, they indirectly target either political figures or collectivised others and their respective political ideologies, which are denigrated through the wordplay's content (similarly to impoliteness strategies attacking a post's expected/imagined audience)

It is important to note that both types of wordplays that involve hyper-understanding and creative pattern forming/reforming can also be linked to the online practice of quoting. Quoting (i.e. the verbatim reproduction of previous content first expressed by other participants in a given exchange/thread) can be perceived as an important meta-communicative act: it facilitates cohesion in complex multi-participant interactions. At the same time, it can be perceived as an explicit address to previous commenters (similarly to vocatives) or as a reference to previous events (Langlotz & Locher 2012), especially when such events are part of emotionally charged contexts. Therefore, impolite wordplays that re-contextualise either previous contributions or established phrases transform quoting from a cohesive, navigating mechanism to a way of disrupting existing affinities and to ridiculing targets (Synott et al. 2017).

4.2.1. Echoic wordplays based on aspects of the original post

Although echoic wordplays based on previous contributions are typically associated with other commenter's contributions (interpersonal impoliteness), they can also appear in public impoliteness, appearing seemingly untriggered in comment-initial positions. In this case, users engage with different features of the original post, such as its title or description, or an opinion expressed in the post, indicating and acknowledging the dialectic relationship between the comments and the actual posted material (Weber 2014). This acts as the initial turn (the locally present trigger) which is then "creatively augmented or subverted" (Veale et al. 2006) to offend the relevant political actors and/or supporters, thus taking the place of a conventional "preceding" verbalisation (confirming the multiple levels of participation underlying YouTube and Facebook interactions, see Bou-Franch et al. 2012).

Evidently, through manipulating aspects of the post, users target political actors or institutions that are associated with the posted source material. I should note that such wordplays are mostly found on pre-electoral posts involving slogans or specific statements by politicians, as the echo becomes more effective if the source material has been widely disseminated and has become broadly recognisable. Since such mottos are short and memorable (see Tanaka 2005, on political advertising), they often lend themselves to creative alterations. Thus, the clash between the doctored form and the well-known original version ridicules the slogan's desired impact on the electorate.

This type of echoic wordplay follows a typical structure of garden paths, thus reinforcing their significance for creative impoliteness in the data. More specifically, the wordplay typically starts off by replicating the original material almost verbatim. This steers readers to expect a typical, standardised reproduction of the chosen slogan/statement. However, the initial material is subjected to an impolite change: it is either extended with extra elements or fundamentally altered in its last part. In this

fashion, the pattern-forming (through the repetition of the original) acts as a nod to users, which is then negated (through the modifications). This eventually leads to pattern-reforming impoliteness (Dynel 2009b):

(4) Mina Titara: Το αύριο έχει ταυτότητα...ευρωπαϊκή...ίσως!!!
Ελληνική...αποκλείεται!!!!
'Tomorrow has an identity...European...maybe!!! Greek...no chance!!!!
SYRIZA FB page (19/9/2015). Title of post: Tomorrow has an identity

In this case, as evident from the caption, the comment repeats the title of SYRIZA's Facebook post. *Το αύριο έχει ταυτότητα* "Tomorrow has an identity" was the party's main pre-electoral slogan for the September '15 elections. Through the process explained above, the original slogan is initially replicated in its entirety, implying that the poster endorses SYRIZA and its campaign. However, the ellipsis that follows suggests that the phrase is to be further completed. Hence, Mina Titara subsequently plays with the generic word "identity", which in the original catchphrase is referring to the "identity of tomorrow" (the association of political parties with generic positive notions is typical of the pre-electoral advertising genre, see Franz & Ridout 2010). The poster exploits this non-specificity to post-modify and qualify the noun "identity". Through the addition of adjuncts (European and Greek respectively), "tomorrow" is assigned a European identity, but not a Greek one.

Hence, the original, all-encompassing image of the "identity of tomorrow" (i.e. of the individuality that will characterise Greece's future after SYRIZA's electoral win) gets restricted in a way that negates the pre-electoral campaign's main argument, the party's suitability to rule the country. As the wordplay suggests, SYRIZA is more interested in preserving Greece's relationship to Europe (the country's "European" identity)¹⁷ than benefiting Greeks themselves. This practically nullifies the possibility of Greece's "tomorrow" having a "Greek" identity, which would entail the preservation of Greece's national interests and unique character. Contrary to what the party claims, both these features are now threatened by the creditors' agenda, that is by the European identity which SYRIZA is unable to keep at bay.

4.2.2 Echoic wordplays based on "public words"

In the above example, the wordplay is grounded on a re-contextualisation "within the same conversation" (Linell 2009): it exploits the inextricable links between a post and its comments, which allows users to ground the echoic mention on verbal expressions from the same communicative setting. Hence, the decoding of the wordplay's preferred impolite interpretation is facilitated, since the original material is readily available as part of the proximal online environment. Nonetheless, public impoliteness through echoic wordplays can also be grounded on hyper-understanding of verbal structures related to posters' shared background, evoking established and widely disseminated "public words" (see Spitulnik 1996 and section 2.2). In this case, the wordplay's offensiveness might be harder to unpack, since a different type of re-contextualization, requiring pre-existing familiarity with the source material (as well as activation of schematic knowledge) is involved.¹⁸ However, such wordplays are still prevalent, since the employed source material comes from the shared linguistic repository of users, touching upon the country's

¹⁷ This assumption could be grounded on the way SYRIZA handled the results of the referendum.

¹⁸ Georgakopoulou (2014) discusses how social media users are "re-scripting" aspects of their offline reality in their online comments, often through a process that involves creativity and sarcastic re-evaluations of current affairs and shared cultural repertoires.

longstanding tradition and (high or everyday) culture, which is widely disseminated and thus conducive to intertextual referencing and to creative manipulations.

In my data, the communal element of such “public words” facilitates their use for public impoliteness, after an offensive extension/modification gets introduced to the established original. Typically, the removal of the phrase from its initial context and its re-introduction/entextualisation in a different situation (online political debate) and in a different form “changes its semiotic references introducing an alternative way for viewing public and political incidents and figures” (Georgakopoulou 2015: 71). Thus, the wordplay’s impolite element is more evident to those recognising the distinct difference between the original and the current form (part of which is always quoted verbatim):

(5) Makis Tzimakis: άλλαξε τα ρούχα ο μανωλιός και έβγαλε την γραβάτα
“Manolios changed his clothes and removed the tie”

SYRIZA FB page (1/9/2015). Title of post: The new SYRIZA government will abolish VAT in private education

The offensiveness of the wordplay is challenging to decode, since it requires background knowledge of both Greek folk wisdom and of the wider Greek socio-political context, while also being dependent on the post’s topic. More specifically, the wordplay is built on a Greek proverbial phrase, the original version of which is Άλλαξε ο Μανωλιός κι έβαλε τα ρούχα αλλιώς “Manolios changed his clothes and wore them inside out”. The proverb’s meaning is linked to changes that are superficially impressive, but in reality futile (in the same way that wearing your clothes inside out does not really qualify as a change of clothes). As evident, the poster keeps the first part of the proverb intact, which assists in creating links with the source material (public words such as proverbs can be “condensations or extracts from much longer speech events”, which means that even the first part is enough to “activate the entire meaning”, see Spitulnik 1996: 166).

Nonetheless, in the comment, the established second part of the proverb is fundamentally altered, changed from “and wore his clothes inside out” to “and removed the tie”. The new version is only associated with the original ending through the reference to an item of clothing (*tie* is a hyponym of *clothes*) and through the relationship of opposition between the introduced verb έβγαλε and the original έβαλε (“wore” and “took off/removed” respectively). In the poster’s iteration, the superficial change required to complete the proverbial meaning is the removal of the tie. This creates an image of a man in a suit, removing the tie to suggest a more casual approach. However, the suit remains, thus not altering the outfit’s strict, ceremonial character.

The reason the tie is chosen as a token item is related to its centrality in recent Greek political developments. More specifically, the then PM Alexis Tsipras had become widely known for his reluctance to wear a tie even in official political engagements. Hence, the mention of the garment in the second, altered part of the proverb activates this piece of pre-existing knowledge to those familiar with the Greek political scene. In this fashion, the poster directs the impoliteness against the PM, without explicitly mentioning him as the target of his criticism (thus making the comment offensive to the prime-minister, the party, and, by extension, to its supporters).

To understand why the PM is at the epicentre of the proverb’s creative manipulation, we should revisit the original post. This is related to a pre-electoral promise of SYRIZA to abolish the VAT in private education, which had been recently introduced by the party itself, as part of the austerity measures agreed with the creditors (and was therefore unlikely to be removed). Hence, the first, evident layer of meaning created through the hyper-understanding is that SYRIZA’s ostensible promises do not qualify as real change and should not be trusted. Thus, the wordplay seems to be targeting the party,

both for this specific issue, as well as for generally backtracking on its promises. On a second level, however, the reference to the tie, in combination with the proverb's underlying meaning, target the PM personally. The user implies that the modern approach Tsipras claimed to be bringing in politics (symbolically represented through getting rid of conventional formalities such as a tie) and his guarantees that he steers away from the practices of corrupted previous governments are only superficial innovations, unable to mask the lack of true change in Greece.

Evidently, wordplays such as the above are capitalising on the wisdom encapsulated in proverbs, which is re-appropriated to better fit the present cultural experience, while also retaining the links to the Greek cultural past (Goshkheteliani 2013).¹⁹ Nonetheless, other public echoic wordplays adapt references to popular/mass culture, which, albeit obscure for certain readers, are generally of memorable character and become broadly disseminated (Rymes 2012). Hence, the re-contextualisation of such catch-phrases from other environments to online political debates allows individuals to express their political reactions, while also aligning with those that understand the original reference and share the issuer's interests (Seargeant 2017). At the same time, the removal of the original phrases from their everyday contexts and their re-introduction to the (unrelated) political setting involves the incorporation of "mundane" elements to a field expected to provide high-quality debate. This mismatch enhances the impoliteness of such wordplays:

(6) Όλοι οι μωροί στην πίστα – ίσα ρε καταστρέφετε την Ελλάδα
 "All idiots aboard – stop it, you're ruining Greece"
 YouTube video (3/7/2015). Title of post: The NO-rally at Syntagma

The wordplay in (6) is combining the two types of wordplays that we have examined, those based on individual lexical items and those exploiting larger chunks of pre-existing linguistic material. More specifically, the comment seems to be referencing a phrase by the popular 80's Greek singer Lefteris Pantazis. When he performed on stage, he would say Όλα τα μωρά στην πίστα "All babes on stage" to invite all young, pretty girls attending his live shows to get on stage and dance. The phrase has acquired a cult status, as it indexically links the 80's-early 90's kitsch style (popular culture was then "based on banal or even vulgar social types", see Karalis 2012: 265) to the triviality and superficial affluence that characterised parts of Greek society at the time. The phrase has thus been employed in newspaper articles about politics, re-contextualising these negative underlying connotations to sarcastically evaluate current political developments.²⁰

The present comment also assigns political meaning to the phrase, creatively modifying it to fit the current political situation, thus exacerbating its offensiveness. More specifically, the established phrase is echoed verbatim, with the exception of a wordplay between the word μωρά of the original and the word μωροί which replaces it in the comment. The two words are approximant homophones, but also belong to the same word-family, being etymologically linked. The word μωρός is an ancient Greek adjective, meaning "stupid, idiot" and the form μωρά (lit. "babies" in modern Greek) developed from the original ancient Greek word, after a modification of its original sense.²¹

¹⁹ Potentially, such wordplays function as a "challenge", aiming to ridicule, apart from the targets, those that lack the cultural capital to decode their meaning, while also being a positive nod to those that do.

²⁰ <http://www.kathimerini.gr/969004/opinion/epikairothta/politikh/ola-ta-mwra-sthn-pista> and <http://www.avgi.gr/article/10811/5882618/ola-ta-mora-sten-pista>

²¹ The wordplay's incongruity is enhanced by the register clash created when a formal word of ancient origins (μωροί) gets inserted into a phrase that became well-known for its informal, banal content and context.

The choice of *μωροί* (impoliteness theme of development and intellect, see Vasilaki 2020) indexes lack of critical thinking in political decisions. Thus, the user expresses accusations of *naiveté* (first implicit and then explicit, see the final pointed criticism “you are destroying Greece”) against NO-voters attending the rally shown in the video: the rally has allowed crowds of NO-voters to come to the foreground, similarly to the crowds that the singer invited to dance at the front (on the “stage”, which in the comment acquires a double meaning) during the golden era of Greek “*bouzoukia*” (night-clubs with popular, urban folk Greek music).²² Today’s crowds are thus tied to the country’s downfall, in the same way that those who indulged in the shallowness of the past Greek lifestyle (referenced in the original phrase) have contributed to Greece’s on-going issues.

5. Discussion

The analysis of section 4 can lead to certain significant observations regarding the structure and function of wordplays in the data. More specifically, wordplays in the examined Greek Facebook and YouTube political discussions can either be included within the word itself (onomastic wordplays with names of political actors) or they can exploit social media affordances (aspects of the post) or posters’ shared background (established phrases related to tradition or literary and popular culture) to offend through an extended echo. It is critical to note that both types of wordplays, become highly politicised in this context (thus being conducive to public impoliteness), due to the national importance of the on-going discussions and the attempt of users to attribute blame through their chosen impoliteness strategies.

More specifically, onomastic wordplays with names of public actors aim to ridicule the targeted political figures (who stand out in the political here-and-now), either through blending adjectives to names, or through paronymically or semantically associating the name with qualities impertinent for those in office. All such wordplays incorporate a seemingly unrelated element to the name, thus introducing extra information about the named person within the boundaries of the name itself (Nissan 2015). Thus, they are personally attacking the target by “contaminating” one’s most prominent identificatory characteristic (the name, which is how one becomes known to the world, see Milica 2011, quoted in Felecan & Felecan 2016). This process is facilitated by the general anonymity of the context, which renders names and surnames of politicians one of the few widely known and recognisable characteristics that are available for creative manipulation.

However, onomastic wordplays in the data can simultaneously function as a broader political criticism of the politicians’ fanbase, since they do not address but simply refer to the targeted political actors (thus offending those who have invested face in them). This explains their presence in comments that are not directly targeting politicians but are directed against out-groups (or co-interactants), thus confirming that the distinction between interpersonal and public impoliteness is not always clear-cut.

On the other hand, the political character of echoic wordplays is manifested by their grounding on aspects of the post or on statements by featured actors, which are related to memorable quotes associated with party rhetoric, such as pre-electoral campaigning or well-known statements by key figures. This adaption of the typical dyadic structure mimicry/hyper-understanding to the context of online political debates allows users to parody the original political contribution, thus “expressing a mocking, scornful or contemptuous attitude” (Wilson 2013).

²² The fact that the post commented upon includes musical performances (as part of the rally) anchors the wordplay to the original, music-related context of the catchphrase, creating even more complex links between the echoed utterance and its mocking echoic mention.

Similarly, users re-contextualise (and potentially impolitely modify) cultural, socio-political and popular culture references to the context of crisis-related political discussions, attributing a political character to fields that, albeit significant for the Greek lived experience, typically lack the intense, argumentative character of politics. This mismatch of the source and target contexts can lead to an incongruency that adds offensive connotations to the original linguistic formulae.

Hence, my study indicates that, in this specific context, all the examined wordplays become shaped by online affordances and are turned into customised, politically-oriented insults, serving as a token of users' access rights to their communal reality and to online/offline norms. Onomastic wordplays, which focus on domestic political figures, suggest that users have the grounds to verbally ridicule and chastise the proximal actors responsible for the crisis, by "dehumanising" them through their own identifying markers. On the other hand, echoic wordplays show that users can freely manipulate both online affordances and established, valued material, thus being able to assign political meaning to the national repertoire and to playfully manipulate the rules of the debate and the boundaries between the online and the offline.

Evidently, when users engage in this process, they attribute great significance to their shared repository of common resources, i.e. to their "Greekness", since they re-appropriate Greek civilisation, historical turning points and Greek everyday life to fit their experiences in crisis-ridden Greece. This means that "knowing participants" (Georgakopoulou 2016), who can demonstrate "full access" to the constructed Greek identity, are the one who possess the ability not only to create such wordplays, but also to decode them and to fully partake on the source of their offensiveness and on the encapsulated semiotic allusions.

Given that the national linguistic code emerges as an integral part of this notion of "Greekness", which is glorified by users, wordplays in the data can also function as a token of one's command of the language. Posters' "structured understanding" of Greek, which is an index of Greece's idolised, uninterrupted past, and their dexterity in creatively manipulating this understanding, acquires a renewed significance in a present which is marred by insecurity about Greece's cultural and national integrity (Saridakis 2017) and becomes a way to prove superiority and linguistic efficiency.

Thus, the created wordplays function as a legitimate way to react to a troubling everyday reality and to respond to an offline offensive move (Parvaresh & Tayebi 2019), i.e. the ineffective handling of the crisis by the targeted actors, which has jeopardised users' quality of life. This explains why the examined wordplays can appear untriggered, in comment-initial positions: they are the rightful response of the "underprivileged, who have been wronged by the "powerful and privileged others" (Vasilopoulou et al. 2014). Therefore, the victimised users, attempting to reverse the power differential, performatively showcase their ability to create multi-layered, ambiguous wordplays. They thus impress the audience with their wit display, setting themselves apart from those of lower rank (Kullmann 2015). This linguistic expertise, which is clearly linked to a perceived political expertise, apart from granting users conversational power, also assists them in publicly humiliating the targeted crisis culprits, thus enhancing an image of performed authenticity that guarantees them support and traction (Udupa 2018) in the era of "compulsory visibility" (Thomson 1995).

6. Conclusion

In this article I have examined impolite wordplays arising in discussions of the Greek crisis (focusing specifically on the period surrounding the referendum of 2015) on Facebook and YouTube, attempting to incorporate such wordplays in an integrated

framework of online impoliteness in Greek. I have suggested that wordplays can be a contextually-situated creative alternative to established impoliteness strategies, since, in such cases, the “personally significant expresses itself through the personally signified” (Seargeant 2017). Therefore, this individualistic expression of posters’ temperament can verify their knowledge and ability to discuss crucial crisis-related matters, as well as to partake on the essence of the notion of Greekness. Hence, the combination of the ludic and the performative with the nationally significant in the examined wordplays leads to a merging of “carnavalesque entertainment with serious political critique” (Vladimirou & House 2018: 160). At the same time, the discussion of wordplays in this article establishes them as a realisation of meta-linguistic impoliteness, due to their reflexive, introspective elements: when users attack their political opponents through wordplays, they interact, in different ways, with the linguistic system, they orchestrate their wordplays to carefully manipulate this system and they negotiate its function and value.

These observations are significant for theorising impoliteness in this context, since an examination of online wordplays can establish meta-linguistic impoliteness as a superordinate strategy of its own right: the linguistically shaped (and not just verbally expressed) impoliteness of wordplays foregrounds Jacobson’s meta-linguistic function (and by extension obscures language by backgrounding the referential and the conative, see Kullmann 2005). Therefore, given that wordplays are “essentially metalinguistic devices, because they ask the participants to pretend that language is other than it is” (Aarons 2017: 82), users are strategically exploiting their multiple layers of meaning in the process of blame-attribution and blame-shifting for the crisis, thus making “active and local use of the metalinguistic function of language in goal-oriented ways in communicative acts and events themselves” (Jaworski et al. 2004: 3).

Thus, the meta-linguistic elements of wordplays, along with their grounding on tacit linguistic knowledge (Aarons 2017) and the way they evoke an implicit, ambiguous meaning through a conventional linguistic item point towards their clear off-record dimension, which brings them close to floutings of Manner (Pop 2010). At the same time, however, users incorporate wordplays in the context of on-record impoliteness, or even modify and extend existing linguistic structures through the addition of explicit, standardised insults, suggesting that the examined wordplays demonstrate a clear on-record aspect. Hence, we understand that online impolite wordplays can simultaneously offend implicitly and explicitly, given that formulaic impolite elements contribute to the creation of non-formulaic impoliteness (Ruhi & Aksan 2015). Therefore, my study contributes to perceptions of impoliteness as a cline between the on-record and the off-record (see Bousfield 2008), through establishing the importance of creative, multi-dimensional impoliteness strategies that cannot be confined in one of the two sides of the spectrum.

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