

## Secret Wordplay and What It May Tell Us

Matthias Bauer

*Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen*

Wordplay frequently aims at an effect that goes along with a certain processing effort: the reader or listener must realize that there is a play on words intended, and will, as a rule, take pleasure in its discovery. Wordplay thus establishes a certain compact between speaker and listener: the speaker assumes that the listener will be able to get it and thus pays his audience a compliment, which is returned by their appreciation and expression of delight. Authors, however, may wish to heighten the pleasure by deferring it, or they may have other reasons for raising the hurdles, turning the play on words into a mystery that is only to be solved by the initiate or by a knowledgeable audience. In my talk, I will be concerned with such unobvious, mysterious or even secret wordplay by focusing on examples from English literature. Why, for example, is it that Elizabeth's neck, in Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* 64, smells "like [to] a bunch of columbines"? As Alastair Fowler (1975) has noted, it is not just because columbines are white but also because *collum* means 'neck' (96). We see that such unobvious wordplay may be based on expressions that are not even mentioned in the text, e.g. foreign-language words which provide the link between different parts of an utterance.

Some of the techniques and strategies employed in secret wordplay are to be explored, and some suggestions will be made as to its possible functions. Apart from deepening the understanding between speaker and listener, involving (as in the Spenser example) a compliment that would fall flat if presented openly, the use of such wordplay may have to do with the social context of the utterance, e.g. censorship, or it may have to do with the subject matter, e.g. a religious truth that would be profaned or treated inadequately by direct reference.

### Reference

Fowler, Alastair (1975). *Conceitful Thought*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.