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Examples and poetics of wordplay in Han Shaogong's language-reflective novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao*

Abstract: As a literary format, the dictionary of words and verbal phrases provides an important reflection model that points to an evidently self-referential interest on the part of literary authors in the elements and uses of language. With his lexicographic novel *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (originally Chinese 1996), the Chinese author Han Shaogong continues a Western literary tradition of writing alphabetically structured text sequences which are presented as a dictionary or lexicon. Wordplay here becomes an important medium of reflection, concerned with language and culture, and in this context even an indirectly used device for political criticism.

Keywords: alphabet, Chinese history, Cultural Revolution, dictionary, language reflection, lexicographic novel, lexicon, local dialect, names, satire, vocabulary

1 Literary dictionaries

For centuries the text form of the dictionary has been used as a model for literary writing (cf. Corbin and Guillerm, eds., 1995: 345–355). One might already regard artificial word lists, as compiled by Rabelais and by mannerist writers, as a kind of dictionary, a form which is here placed in a broader context. Literary dictionaries in a stricter sense emerge in the eighteenth century, when language, words and the usage of words become the focus of criticism. Since the Age of Enlightenment, language reflective writers and satirical critics of culture have adapted the dictionary form for literary projects. The German satirist Gottlieb Wilhelm Rabener ([1746] 1751) conceived of a satirical German dictionary (*Deutsches Wörterbuch*) whose entries would be dedicated to selected words, and he wrote a few entries as model texts.¹ In these entries, Rabener does not actually explain the conventional meanings of the selected terms, but criticises forms of human behaviour linked to the (mostly euphemistic) misuse of words – as for instance when they are applied by hypocrites in order to conceal their vanity and selfish

¹ Cf. Jung (1974: 37–46).

interests. Thus, the entries in the dictionary cast light on strategies of social behaviour and their verbal expression. Publishing only a few articles himself, Rabener suggested that this project should be extended and become a collective enterprise. Georg Christoph Lichtenberg took up this idea and wrote a number of new articles for “Rabeners Wörterbuch”, following, however, different satirical writing principles (Schmitz-Emans 1993: 141–167).

Rabener’s, Lichtenberg’s, and other satirical “dictionaries” focus on the use of words as a process of labelling ideas, objects, attitudes, modes of behaviour, characters etc. According to the implications of their model of language use, these labels can either be used ‘appropriately’ or ‘inappropriately’ – i.e. either in a way that transparently provides information about the respective signifieds (ideas, objects, attitudes, modes of behaviour, characters etc.) – or otherwise in a way that renders the signifieds opaque or misinterprets them. The language concept implied here is closely linked to the ideal of clarity, precision and transparency in speaking and writing, but also to the ethical requirement of truthfulness, honesty and sincerity. Berkeley’s and Locke’s critical reflections on the misuse of words probably paved the way for Enlightenment satirical dictionaries. As they suggest, there may be two possible reasons for the misuse of words that obscures facts rather than conveying reliable information: on the one hand the speakers’ incompetence, their stupidity or one-sidedness, on the other hand their conscious and intentional abuse of words in order to conceal the truth or themselves. Hypocrisy, pretence, bluff, allusion and misleading euphemisms form a complex of dominant issues in satirical literary dictionaries.

In spite of their serious thematic interest, the satirical dictionaries of rationalist writers are playful pieces of literature. According to their basic model of labelling words or expressions and labelled items – that is, of an arbitrary relation between signs and signifieds – their play is mainly concerned with these relations: it is a play with ‘false’ or misleadingly used labels – and it usually suggests at the same time that there are rules for the language game that ensure ‘correct’ and ‘appropriate’ ways of labelling. In this context, correct and appropriate usually means that the labelling process both documents and catalyses knowledge and insight. In a way, the rule for the game newly established by the satirical dictionary writer superimposes the conventional rules of language: it is a rule of systematic and transparent violation of the rules of ‘proper’ labelling. The basic rhetorical device of satirical dictionaries is irony, more precisely irony with regard to the individual explanations and comments on certain words’ meanings – and with regard to the apparent intention and function of the dictionary as a whole. Dictionaries written as satirical devices are fundamentally ironical; and their irony also affects the dictionary as a text form and its particular writing

styles. The probably best known satirical dictionary based on the idea of ‘false labelling’ is Ambrose Bierce’s compendium of words, which was first published as *The Cynic’s Word Book* and later on as *The Devil’s Dictionary*. Bierce ([1911] 1993) has had many successors, and dictionaries similar to his prototype are still published by contemporary writers. Following Bierce’s model, many comparable satirical projects were dedicated to the criticism of language, although they sometimes operate according to new rules and focus on new subjects.² As a device complementary to cynical, ‘diabolical’ or (sometimes) just fuzzy and weird vocabulary, the idea of an honest and transparent use of words provides the frame of reference.

Motivated by a generally strong tendency to reflect on language and language use, the dictionary format was sometimes also used as a means of direct, non-ironical criticism in twentieth-century literature in referring to ‘false’, hypocritical, illusionary, mendacious or stupid ways of speaking. The “Dictionary” Ewald Gerhard Seeliger (who playfully called himself “Ewger Seliger”) combines indirect ironical writing strategies with open criticism; frequently he replaces neutral or euphemistic expressions for evil and dangerous things with clearly negative and pessimistic terms, thus revealing what, in his opinion, is the true nature of things. In his *Wörterbuch des Schwindels* (“Dictionary of Fraud” but also “of Dizziness” as “Schwindel” means both) of 1922, Seeliger eloquently articulates his protest against obscure and dangerous political ideas and practices, forms of violence and stupidity, intolerance and uniformity, social injustice and the abuse of power, and he emphatically proclaims the freedom, the rights and the importance of the arts.³

A new chapter in the history of literary dictionaries begins when surrealist writers start exploring this text format.⁴ Several surrealist dictionaries have been produced by either collectives or individuals. In some cases, there is a strong focus on explaining or at least naming things, persons, art works, art styles and projects, institutions and so on – rather than on the headwords as such. The surrealists’ dictionaries are usually written in conventional language. Most of the

2 Cf. for example Bowler (1979); Finkielkraut (1981); Adams and Lloyd (1990, 1992); Drews (1990).

3 Cf. for example his dictionary entry about “Kunst” (art): “KUNST. Die Arbeit an der Erde bezweckt die gegenwärtige, die K.[unst] die künftige Lebenssicherung. Eine Menschenmenge ohne K. ist kein Volk, denn sie hat keine Zukunft. [...] Nur der völlig freie Mensch vermag ein richtiger Künstler zu sein. Der allerfreieste Künstler aber ist der Dichter [...], da er zu seiner K. keines Erdenstoffes bedarf. Er schafft durch sein richtiges Denken und Vorausdichten die ewige selige Menschheit.” (Seeliger [1922] 1986: 132–133).

4 Cf. Breton and Éluard ([1938] 2005).

entries do not create a tension between ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’, literal and ironical, conventional and unconventional ways of naming things, although at least some of René Magritte’s paintings focus on the way signifieds are ‘labelled’ by ostentatiously using ‘false labels’ (as, for instance, in *Le clef de songes*). Such new constellations of words and images seem to allude to unfamiliar, often dreamlike dimensions of the world – and to hidden meanings of everyday and seemingly familiar words. Several surrealist dictionaries are collective projects and invite their readers to continue the game: to create new constellations of words, meanings and things, to modify the familiar rules of verbal expression, to create textual alienation effects in order to stimulate new ways of thinking and imagining.

Generally, in the broad aesthetic context of a poetics of defamiliarization (and especially under the influence of avantgardist practices), the literary dictionary was sometimes used quite inventively as a device, a kind of starting platform for creative language use. Neologisms, elements of ‘alternative’ languages, practices of defamiliarization on different levels formed different types of ‘poetic dictionaries’. Often the main focus lies on subversive attitudes towards conventions of speaking and thinking. Likewise, as is often the case, the dictionaries are aimed at discovering hidden meaning potentials of words and verbal expressions. Against the background of a poetics which is mainly focused on language, the ‘alternative dictionary’ may even be regarded as the very metonymy of poetic writing itself. Under various preconditions and with different emphases, authors such as Michel Leiris, Francis Ponge and Michel Tournier explore the existing dictionaries, but also the dictionary form as such as devices for poetic writing. Ernst Jandl (1985: 562–564) in his essay “Das Gedicht zwischen Sprachnorm und Autonomie” programmatically distinguishes between different types of dictionaries: normative, descriptive and ‘projective’ ones.⁵

5 “[...] es gibt solche [Wörterbücher], die sagen, welche Wörter es geben soll, was sie bedeuten sollen und wie sie gebraucht werden sollen, und es gibt Wörterbücher, die sagen, welche Wörter es tatsächlich gibt, was sie tatsächlich bedeuten, nämlich tatsächlich alles bedeuten können, und wie sie tatsächlich gebraucht werden, nämlich alle die verschiedenen Arten wie jedes einzelne tatsächlich gebraucht wird und gebraucht worden ist, egal wie viele es tun oder getan haben und egal ob es irgendwer tun soll oder nicht.“ (Jandl 1985: 562) „Um aber endlich zur gemeinten Art von Autonomie zu gelangen [...], bedarf es [...] einer dritten Art von Wörterbuch, eines ‘projektiven’ Wörterbuchs, die alles an Sprache enthalten, was es daran und darin noch nicht gibt. [...] ein vorauseilendes Wörterbuch, nicht von Sprachen, die es als ganzes noch nicht gibt, einer künftigen Kunstsprache etwa, wie Esperanto es war, ehe es da war, sondern von allem, was es in und an einer Sprache, die es gibt, geben wird, das heißt jetzt noch nicht gibt. [...] ebenso [wie eine entsprechende projektive Grammatik] haben wir uns ein projektives Wör-

Around 1970, the lexicographic novel emerges as a specific novel genre, inspired by and derived from a number of different impulses: first of all, obviously, from literary dictionaries, which had explored strategies, conventions and concepts of lexicographic writing by using the dictionary form. Secondly, lexicographic novels present themselves as programmatic examples of ‘open artworks’: structured as a series of relatively independent articles which are ordered alphabetically and thus arbitrarily, they encourage the reader to explore them in a non-linear way. Reading thus becomes a combinatorial game with multiple possible results – similar to the combining of playing cards and other playing devices. In fact, although the alphabetical order of the articles may render their sequence arbitrary, it does not however necessarily do so. In certain cases, there may be a hidden meaning in the way individual articles follow each other – although the lexicographic order suggests that they just follow each other by chance.

Richard Horn (1969) and Andreas Okopenko ([1970] 1983) use the form of dictionary entries to distinguish elements of fictitious worlds. In Okopenko’s novel *Lexikon Roman* the text elements, presented as articles of different lengths, resemble children’s building blocks from which the reader himself can build a world, exploring possible combinations. In Okopenko’s and in Horn’s novel the articles form a complex network referring to different fictitious characters and to fictitious events, but also to elements of the factual world and its history, including historical figures and other realities. In Okopenko’s second lexicon novel *Meteoriten* the experiment of the “Lexikon Roman” is continued. Here the concept of textual “building blocks” is varied and even stressed. Several lexicon novels following the prototypes of Horn and Okopenko use the text format in order to reflect on the distinction between fiction and historical fact, and to develop their respective narrative strategies. The probably best known example internationally is Milorad Pavić’s *Hasarski recnik* [The dictionary of the Chasars], originally written in Serbian and published in 1984, later on translated into various other languages.⁶

Comparable to novels which are written entirely as lexicographic texts are novels using the lexicographic format in certain parts – as building blocks consisting of smaller building blocks. In Milan Kundera’s novel *Nesnesitelná Lehkost Byti* (1984) [L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être; The Unbearable Lightness of Being], a dictionary is inserted into the main narrative. It consists of different sections,

terbuch des Deutschen zu denken, das alle Wörter enthält, die es geben wird, aber bisher nicht gibt, und alle Wörter, die es anders geben wird, als es sie bisher gibt” (Jandl 1985: 563).

6 Cf. also Sebestyén (1999); Marlowe (2000); Zilahy ([1998] 2008).

all belonging to the third part of the novel, entitled “words that were not understood” or “incomprehensible words” (“Unverstandene Wörter”).

Why is the dictionary format so attractive for critical, avantgardist, experimental and language reflective writers? With regard to the wide range of historical examples, a number of different reasons must be taken into account.

- (a) They refer to and eventually stress tensions between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Dictionaries in the ordinary sense help their readers to use their respective language’s vocabulary resources according to their individual purposes. However, it may occur that the established dictionary fails, that ‘proper’ terms are missing and new, unfamiliar terms must be found. Literary dictionaries often contain unfamiliar words or diverging explanations; and both strategies stimulate reflection on language itself, its functions and its uses for interpreting and ‘ordering’ the world – and sometimes also reflections on the tension between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. In a way, dictionaries of completely invented languages can be regarded as the extreme form of representing an ‘unfamiliar’ language.
- (b) In literary dictionaries, language use becomes self-referential. The pattern of the dictionary automatically steers attention to words ‘as words’, to language ‘as language’. And it raises – among other things – the question of what kind of linguistic knowledge is transmitted here. Is it conventional and codified knowledge framed in an unconventional way by the literary context? Is it ‘another’ kind of knowledge about words, differing from the subjects of academic linguistics? What kind of alternative knowledge might be transmitted? And what functions does the dictionary pattern have as a framework? As many examples especially from the new avant-gardes confirm, there is a strong affinity between lexicographical literary writing and the poetics of defamiliarization. Literary dictionaries appear to invite their writers to explore alienation effects with regard to their vocabulary, their subjects – and the order in which the subjects appear.
- (c) As ‘iconotexts’, literary dictionaries increase attention for the structural and visual dimensions of texts, for semantic distinctions and hierarchies created by structural and visual means, by typography, layout, page and book design. A structural characteristic of dictionaries is the list-form. The words or phrases themselves are listed, and within the individual entries there are also lists of possible meanings. One typical structural element of dictionary entries is the typographical highlighting of headwords. Vocabularies are often presented in two columns, one consisting of the items which are explained, the other of the explanations (or translations).

- (d) Dictionary formats stimulate reflections on bi- and multilingualism, on the identity and distinctiveness of languages, translation and the untranslatable. Literary dictionaries may even raise the question whether the difference between monolingualism and bilingualism is an absolute one. According to the linguist Mario Wandruszka (*Interlinguistik*), we are multilingual within the realms of our own language, using different languages corresponding to diverse practical contexts of living. Languages are not monosystems, and thus there is only a relative difference between the command of the different idioms any language consists of and real multilingualism. Moreover, we never master our native language perfectly; it remains, at least partially, a foreign language for us. Examples of experimental poetic writing have been interpreted as intralingual translation projects pointing to the relativity of this difference and revealing strange and unexplored dimensions within the seemingly familiar everyday language.

Wir sprechen mehrere Sprachen, Teilsprachen, schon in unserer Muttersprache. Wir lernen im Laufe unseres Lebens Regionalsprachen, Sozialsprachen, Kultursprachen, Fachsprachen, Gruppensprachen [...]. Wir ‚übersetzen‘ immer wieder von einer Teilsprache in eine übergreifende Gemeinsprache oder in eine andere Sprache. [...] wer Ohren hat, zu hören [...], weiß aus alltäglicher Erfahrung, daß eine Sprache eigentlich ein Konglomerat von Sprachen ist. (Wandruszka 1982: 127)

[We speak several languages, language subsets, even in our mother tongue. Throughout our lives we learn dialects, sociolects, languages of specific cultures, languages of different disciplines, languages of different groups [...]. We regularly ‘translate’ from one language subset into a general common language or into another language. [...] Anyone who has ears to hear [...], knows from everyday experience that a language is a conglomerate of languages; translation by Martina Bross]

With special reference to the French poet Michel Leiris, but also to Edmond Jabès and Georges Perec, the writer and literary critic Felix Philipp Ingold has stressed the significance of what he (also) calls intra-lingual translation as a basic poetic strategy (cf. Ingold 1991: 112–115). Intralingual translation, in Ingold’s opinion, dominates large, though peripheral areas of poetry, including phenomena such as anagrammatical texts, palindromes, phonetic readings and other kinds of experiments based on the language- and letter-“material”.

As one might summarise, literary texts structured according to dictionary models reveal both the borderline between different ‘languages’ and the borderline between ‘language’ and ‘non-language’ – but at the same time suggest that these borders might be relative and open, even if ambiguity and confusion are the results. However, complementary to this relatively optimistic idea, dictionaries in literature and art may also suggest that on the other side of the

borderline – and even on EITHER side of it – there might be something which cannot be explained or translated at all.

2 *A Dictionary of Maqiao*

Han Shaogong has provided a Chinese translation of Kundera's aforementioned novel *L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être*, which contains lexicographic passages about "incomprehensible words". Adapting the Western genre of lexicographic fiction and literary essayism, and thus contributing to a modern, culturally hybrid form of contemporary Chinese literature, Han followed in the footsteps of Kundera, and also of Okopenko, Horn and Pavic, and explored the options of lexicographic writing for a project of his own that also includes many auto-fictitious elements. The Chinese writer's book *A Dictionary of Maqiao* (Han [1996] 2003) is an entirely lexicographic novel.⁷

It was first published in Chinese in 1996 and translated into English in 2003. (I will refer to the English translation by Julia Lovell, authorised by the writer himself.⁸) The whole text is composed of entries; the titles of the entries appear as keywords or headwords as with dictionary entries. The entries are arranged as they would be in a dictionary – originally in (Chinese) alphabetical order; the translation is re-structured according to the Latin alphabet and to English vocabulary. It is framed by a preface and a number of paratextual elements. The preface, written by Han himself, who is, however, speaking about himself from the perspective of an anonymous editor, suggests that Han Shaogong has compiled this dictionary of a village himself (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, p. XV), although as a writer of fiction and essays he possesses no lexicographic skills. By alluding to a fictitious process of research-based compilation, the framing text turns into a piece of fiction itself, and thus from the very beginning, Han's "Dictionary" may be read as a self-referential and autoreflective piece of literature.

⁷ Cf. Iovene (2002: 197–218); Lee (2002: 145–177); Leenhouts (2002: 168–185); Choy (2008); Lin (2005).

⁸ In her "Note on the Translation", translator Julia Lovell explains that in agreement with Han she left out five entries of the original Chinese text and shortened one – in order to avoid "extensive and distracting explanations" which would have been necessary with regard to the relevant parts of the novel. These entries concern special verbal expressions and examples of Chinese script and refer in part to the fact that in Chinese writing homophonous words are sometimes written in different, distinct characters.

With regard to Han's limits as a lexicographer, as the "Preface" also explains, his entries were accepted just as they were written, although they are mainly narrative texts, unlike conventional dictionary entries. (Obviously, this is another auto-referential remark indicating that Han's "Dictionary" is a piece of literature.) The novel is based on notes the author himself actually collected during the years he spent in the Southern Chinese province of Hunan. Mainly based on personal observations, his book portrays the concrete reality of a historical world, but also includes references to objects of popular religious belief, myth, legends and superstition. A list of entries at the beginning of the novel functions as a table of contents, and the keywords listed form the titles of the chapters. Within the chapters, the predominantly narrative texts are combined with elements of historiographic information and more general remarks and reflection on a number of different subjects. Sometimes the articles are divided into different parts in order to give space to more extended narratives.

In its more than 100 entries Han's "Dictionary" describes the fictitious Southern Chinese village of Maqiao, its history and its inhabitants, its customs, habits and especially its communication practices. It tells numerous stories about people of different decades, forming a complex network and covering several generations. Most of the stories are situated within the historical framework of Chinese history during and after the Cultural Revolution.

The narrator – a kind of literary alter ego of the author as a youth – named "Han", is one of the village's inhabitants, but at the same time a stranger. Coming from a city, he is a member of the so-called educated youth, who, during the Cultural Revolution, were sent to the country after leaving school so that they should become integrated into rural society by becoming accustomed to physical work. Generally, the young man accepts resettlement; his story is not a story of homesickness, isolation and lost roots, but about curiosity, new experiences and sympathy with several village inhabitants. According to the narrative framework, the dictionary is based on this 'educated youth's' observations in the village, combined with information concerning the past in the form of second-hand information provided by other characters who tell him their stories or the stories of other persons. This second- or sometimes third-hand information includes stories from previous decades and centuries, always from the same region.

As the title "A Dictionary of Maqiao" already indicates, language, vocabulary and the use of language are central issues of the novel. The major focus lies on idiomatic peculiarities of the local dialect, which differs from the official Mandarin Chinese regarding both vocabulary and pronunciation. Maqiao is a fictitious place, but its dialect as depicted in the novel is based on the actual Hunan dialect. (According to the author's explanation, he invented some phrases

but generally used his factual knowledge.) By explaining typical Maqiao words, expressions and phrases and their respective histories, Han's narrator depicts a whole world with its social structures and cultural habits. There is an implicitly political accent on the difference between the regulated and standardised official language of politics and bureaucracy on the one hand, and the lively and in some respects irregular Maqiao way of speaking on the other. The inhabitants of Maqiao are no less shaped by their language than those who use the official language, but they differ remarkably in how they express themselves and interpret the world. The novel's main story complex takes place in the era of the Cultural Revolution. The particular language of Maqiao differs from the languages of cultural revolutionary bureaucracy – as well as from later, post-revolutionary language use.

In Maqiao, common words are often used in a way that differs remarkably from their official meanings and functions. As a consequence, seemingly self-evident truths, seemingly self-evident concepts and conventionalised major differences concerning knowledge and ethics are questioned, either implicitly or explicitly. For instance, in the Maqiao language the word “scientific” has negative connotations referring to something removed from everyday practice, something complicated, even absurd. So the lazybones who refuse to participate in the villagers' collective work are contemptuously characterised as “scientific”. With this example (and others) the reader is invited to reflect on the relationship between public order and individual deviance, on ideology and life, abstract theories and concrete ways of life. The narrator explicitly states that the meanings of words depend on the spaces of everyday experience in which they are used – and that these contexts can differ significantly with regard to different collectives and different individuals.

[...] the process behind understanding a word is not just an intellectual process, it's also a process of perception, inseparable from the surroundings in which the word is used and the actual events, environment, facts relating to it. Such factors often largely determine the direction in which understanding of this word proceeds. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 45)

Due to the local history of semantics, the word “awakened” in the Maqiao language also expresses something different from the usual meanings: for the villagers, “awakened” people are “odd”, “crazy” or “stupid”. As the narrator explains, more than 2,000 years ago, rebels against the established order of things, who paid for this rejection with their lives, were characterised as “awakened” – with reference to their claimed deeper insights. In Maqiao, the “awakened” are those who are too sensitive not to get upset about life's deficiencies, unable to

cope with reality as a consequence of their ‘awakedness’ – whereas those who sleep are regarded as clever.

Directly opposed to normal understanding in standardised Chinese thinking, this pair of antonyms exchanged places when their meanings were extended in *Maqiao*: as *Maqiao* people see it, regaining consciousness is stupid, while sleeping is in fact clever. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 49)

There is a strong thematic emphasis on the distinction between the general and the specific, the official and the private, general regulations and specific cases, common ideology and concrete experience. Several special terms are used in *Maqiao* to refer to people who refuse to participate in social life and collective work. The ‘lazybones’ Ma Ming is one of the most interesting characters in the novel. Is he ‘awakened’ in a positive or a negative sense? The narrator’s dictionary does not suggest proper terms, but it sensitises the reader for the inconsistencies of language – as for instance for antonyms that sometimes even exchange their meanings. The narrator comments:

Every pair of antonyms is in fact the fusing of different understandings, the intersection of different lives and paths of practice, leading in turn to two paradoxical extremes. This type of intersection is concealed in a secret language which often gives those traveling abroad pause for thought. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 50)

Several typically *Maqiao* expressions are ambivalent with regard to the facts they indicate; this kind of “double-talk” is called “jasmine-not-jasmine”: it is “ambiguous, vague, slippery, vacillating” (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 352). Other expressions are used in an confusingly euphemistic way, as for instance the term “Reincarnation” (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 350–352), which refers to the slaughtering of animals – which as a consequence of being killed can ‘reincarnate’ more quickly compared to other animals. The narrator points to the performative effects of such modifications in the semantics of words.

Language can change the way people feel: altering a word can mitigate, even erase, the pity that scenes at a slaughterhouse evoke [...]. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 351)

Playing with words is displayed as one linguistic practice among others – however, as a grammatical one. In the context of the novel it occasionally characterises either the characters themselves (as, for instance, in the case of a Daoist outsider, who refuses to adapt to communist ideology and to integrate into the village workers’ community and who, although he appears to be poor, turns out to be a cultured man with a literary education) or it characterises the reality to which the wordplay implicitly refers (as, for instance, the practices of ideological

cadre talk according to established speaking rules and based on a codified vocabulary).

With regard to Han's novel, no clear distinction can be made between intentional examples of individual wordplay on the one hand and conventionalised expressions that are based on collectively adapted wordplays on the other. Sometimes individual characters consciously play with words, expressions, and phrases, but often their inventions then become part of the *Dictionary of Maqiao* – and unless the narrator explains the stories behind such expressions, their playful character may even be forgotten or neglected. One might argue that conventionalised modes of ambiguous and allusive speaking – for example using 'talking' names or ambiguous expressions – are not 'word-plays' in a stricter sense, as there is nobody intentionally 'playing' in such cases. But actually an important point in Han's entire novel may well be to portray everyday language itself (so to say) as the instance which plays by inspiring people to become inventive and to transgress linguistic norms and conventions. Everyday spoken language as such appears as a driving force that stimulates its users to modify and expand its vocabulary – and to give familiar words an unfamiliar meaning.

Acts of naming people (especially of giving them by-names) more than once appear as inventive plays with the names' meanings. After a time, however, the villagers become accustomed to these names, and only the narrator reveals the complex meanings and the almost forgotten stories behind them. But in his role as the village's annalist, he also adds his own inventions and names his characters according to his personal perspective.

Maqiao is a relatively remote place where the culturally dominant Mandarin Chinese and in particular the official language of the Cultural Revolution is losing its formative influence on collective life (or never gained such an influence to the officially required degree). From this point of view, the provincial space might be regarded as an enclave resisting centralist authorities, unification tendencies and the extinction of regional traditions. But Maqiao and its language are not idealised, as the entry on "Little big brother (etc.)" illustrates (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 31–33): in the Maqiao language there is no specific word for sisters or for other female relatives. Women do not even have proper names – or at least they are not usually called these names. On the contrary, they are designated by combining the terms for the respective male relatives with the adjective "little": "little big brother" is the term for older sisters; younger sisters are called "little little brother". Thus, as the narrator explains, women are not only deprived of their identification as something special which would be more than just a derivation of the male – their linguistic 'derivation' is also associated with diminution, with a secondary existence, with social inferiority.

Language, it seems, is never absolutely objective or neutral. A linguistic space will always be distorted under the influence of a particular set of beliefs. Bearing in mind the namelessness of females, it's easy to draw further conclusions about their social status around here; it's easy to understand why they always bound their chests flat, [...] harboring a deep-felt fear and shame that sprang from their status as females.

To be given a name is a right of life, the product of love and respect. People always give names to pampered pets, like 'Kitty' or 'Lulu'. It's only the names of criminals that are usually ignored and replaced by numbers [...]. Those we deem nameless vermin are those whose names have no function in public life or are used with such infrequency that they become erased. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 31)

Complementary to the lack of a 'female' vocabulary – a lack that indicates disregard for women and ignorance of female identity – there are playful modifications of language that create new 'realities', such as, for instance, the names for various kinds of imaginary illness. As we learn, the word "streetsickness" alludes to and fosters a local belief: the idea that staying in towns and especially in larger cities is doing people harm.

Although standard Mandarin has words like 'seasick', 'carsick', and 'airsick', it doesn't have Maqiao's 'streetsick'. Streetsickness was an illness with symptoms similar to seasickness, but which struck sufferers instead on city streets, causing greenness of face, blurred eyesight and hearing, loss of appetite, insomnia, absent-mindedness, apathy, weakness, shortness of breath, fever, irregular pulse, sickness and diarrhea, and so on [...]. A whole swath of quacks in Maqiao had special decoction prescriptions for curing streetsickness [...]. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 166)

Streetsickness is an imaginary disease to which village people, unaccustomed to streets, fall victim during the time they spend in the unfamiliar city space. But the term "streetsickness", invented as an analogy to "seasickness" or "carsickness" is not just a label for an uneasy feeling: it literally creates this feeling, as it suggests the existence of such a malady (Art. Streetsickness, Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 166–172):

Dogs have no language, and so dogs are never streetsick. Once humans become linguistic beings, they attain possibilities that other animals lack completely – they can harness the magical powers of language; language becomes prophecy, a mass hysteria that confuses true and false, and that establishes fictions, manufacturing one factual miracle after another. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 167)

Examples like this highlight the power of language to modify the ways in which speakers explore the world. Playing with words (as, for instance, inventing new expressions in analogy to already existing ones) means playing with the world experienced and the self experienced – including his or her somatic experiences.

[...] language isn't something to be sneezed at, it's a dangerous thing we need to defend ourselves against and handle with respect. Language is a kind of incantation, a dictionary is a kind of Pandora's Box capable of releasing a hundred thousand spirits and demons [...]. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 168)

And in this very context of reflections on a word referring to sickness, the narrator asks himself what kind of impact words like “revolution”, “knowledge”, “home town” have had on his country and his fellow-citizens (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 168).

The deeper ‘truths’ of wordplay are revealed in the case of homophonic expressions, as the article about “Gruel” illustrates. Gruel is a kind of porridge, a typical poor people's dish. Its Chinese name is pronounced “gang” in Maqiao, in Mandarin, however, ‘jiang’. The young people who have come to Maqiao as ‘Educated Youths’ initially misunderstand local conversations about “eating gang (gruel)” because the name sounds so different from what they are accustomed to. And they take it for an expression for “eating gang (dry grain)”. This stirs certain reflections on the role liquids play in Maqiao cuisine. Due to their poverty, in certain seasons Maquian dishes are prepared with so much water that compared to these meals normal porridge resembles dry grain.

In fact, the people around here always replaced the j sound with a hard g sound: the word for ‘river’ (jiang), for example, was also pronounced ‘gang’. So ‘eating gruel’ sometimes sounded like ‘eating river.’ [...] When the harvest was late and the pot in every household held nothing but water thickened with only a sprinkling of grain, this phrase fit perfectly well. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 144)

As a means of pointing to hidden relations and analogies, homophonic wordplay is an important playful device for the lexicologist and narrator. Sometimes homophones refer to concealed experiences – as for instance in the article about “Bramble Gourd”. In 1948, there had been a terrible massacre here: a group of counter-revolutionaries, called ‘bandits’, were shot in an ambush. Older people who still remember this event consider the place to be haunted, as strange and mysterious things have happened here ever since. A wordplay coined by the local Feng Shui master suggests a connection between political terror and spooky places.

Mr Fengshui [...] bubbled something about these being ‘guan’ (‘Government’) ghosts, ghosts connected to catastrophes in government, ‘guan’ being homophonic with the word for ‘coffin’, which referred to souls which hadn't scattered after death [...]. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 127)

The function of wordplay as a medium of political criticism is highlighted even more clearly by the article about the “House of Immortals (and Lazybones)”. The “House of Immortals” is an old and somewhat spooky building, the home of the so-called lazybones who refuse to participate in the villagers’ collective work and choose isolation instead. Ironically, the village people call them “Immortals” because they are old and appear even older than they are. One day, the narrator is sent out to write Cultural Revolution slogans on the walls of the village houses – in a simplified version of Chinese script, now the official writing system, invented in order to foster general literacy by facilitating the process of learning to read and write. Not only have many old characters fallen out of use, the new ones are also less complex than their predecessors, for which they are no real equivalents. Writing on the walls of the “House of Immortals”, the young man meets old Ma Ming, a neglected, shabby philosopher. As Ma Ming reads the characters the young man has painted on the wall, he reacts with a wordplay referring to the symbol for “time”, which has also been changed. Ma Ming analogises the deficits of present life and culture with the deficient new character for “time”: “When time is confused, it must be a time of confusion” (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 35). Entering into a dialogue with the ‘educated youth’, the old man stresses that the writing reform has done great damage to the distinctiveness and rich meaning potentials of Chinese script. He points to important relations between the written and the spoken dimensions of traditional language and disapproves of the reformed writing characters because they are confusing: “These simplified characters had no logic at all” (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 35). And his visitor now understands why the confusion of the written symbol for “time” refers to a “confused time”: “What was introduced as a measure to reduce confusion in fact completely confused the texture of Chinese characters.” (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 37).

All in all, Han’s novel actually provides a kind of catalogue of options for playing with words – pointing out the different functions of wordplay in a spectrum which ranges from humorous ludic invention to encoded expressions of political criticism. Even though it reflects on words from different perspectives, Han’s novel generally opts for individuality, plurality and the right to be different – as against generalisation and standardisation both with regard to language as well as in a profoundly political sense. It thus develops a thoroughly affirmative view on strategies of linguistic deviation and inventiveness, as they are exemplarily characteristic of wordplay – especially at the level of the public use of language. Wordplay is significant on at least two levels in the dictionary novel: obviously there is a remarkable number of concrete wordplay examples at the content level. We learn about individual wordplays invented by individual char-

acters as well as about collectively used playful ways of expressing oneself or describing things – wordplays that were established in the course of history as part of the specifically Maqiao way of speaking. As an example of individual, specific wordplay one might refer to the old lazybones Ma Ming's remark about a confused symbol for 'time' reflecting a confused time; discourses on 'streetsickness', on the other hand, are derived from an anonymous and collectively used invention. Moreover, the entire novel presents itself as a wordplay in a more specific sense. By means of its form as a lexicographic novel, it plays with the format of the dictionary in its function as a book about words and consisting of words. Han's narrative playfully uses a text format that conventionally serves to transmit information to construct a fictitious world for his novel. And he integrates empirically based 'dictionary knowledge' (knowledge about words, which is represented by words in a specific style and arrangement) into a work of narrative fiction. Thus, he plays with a verbal form as well as with the verbal units of composition themselves. Related to these two levels of content and composition are the author's free inventions of some elements of the Maqiao dictionary (as, for instance, "streetsickness"). They can be described as links between the meticulously observed and documented world of the Hunan dialect and its respective language culture on the one hand, and the world of literary fiction on the other: a playful bridge between documentary and inventive narrative.

In his "Afterword" (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 385–388), the author explicitly stresses the individuality of all language use and the necessity to regard it as individual.

Strictly speaking, what we might term a 'common language' will forever remain a distant human objective. Providing we don't intend exchange to become a process of mutual neutralization, of mutual attrition, then we must maintain vigilance and resistance toward exchange, preserving in this compromise our own, indomitable forms of expression – this is an essential precondition for any kind of benign exchange. This implies, then, that when people speak, everyone really needs their own, unique dictionary.

Words have lives of their own. They proliferate densely, endlessly transform, gather and scatter for short bursts, drift along without mooring, shift and intermingle, sicken and live on, have personalities and emotions, flourish, decline, even die out. Depending on specific, actual circumstances, they have long or short life spans. For some time now, a number of such words have been caught and imprisoned in my notebook. Over and over, I've elaborated and guessed, probed and investigated, struggled like a detective to discover the stories hidden behind these words; this book is the result.

This, of course, is only my own individual dictionary, it possesses no standardizing significance for other people. (Han, *A Dictionary of Maqiao*, 388)

"Languages" are abstractions; "dictionaries" are based on abstractions, and language regulations are a means of exercising political power. Literary story-

telling, however, appears as a strategy to subvert abstract authorities and the authority of abstractions. Composed of stories, the *Dictionary of Maqiao* is conceived of as an alternative dictionary, giving room to what Han calls the individual 'lives' of words – and of their individual users. With regard to the author as well as to his characters, the licence to use words in a playful, allusive and ambiguous way appears constitutive – not only of Han's poetics.

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