Language play and linguistic intervention

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Abstract

Language play is a normal and frequent part of adult and child behaviour. This paper characterizes the phenomenon of language play in adults, examines the ways in which children make use of it, suggests developmental stages, and discusses its relation to linguistic and meta-linguistic awareness. Its importance in child development is emphasized, and points of connection with issues in language pathology and the teaching of reading are explored. The paper suggests that a focus on language play can help to bridge the gap between the world of the home/playground and that of the clinic/classroom.

Introduction

Language play occurs when people manipulate the forms and functions of language as a source of fun for themselves and/or for the people they are with. Everyone, regardless of cognitive level, plays with language or responds to language play. The responses range from the primitive pleasure experienced by severely mentally handicapped children when they hear dramatically contrasting tones of voice (in such interactive games as 'peep-bo') to the cerebral bliss experienced by highly sophisticated connoisseurs as they explore the patterns of sound-play in, for example, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Between these extremes, there are the hundreds of books, with titles such as *1000 Jokes for Kids*, which are packed full of linguistically-based exchanges, most involving word-play. Over half the game shows on radio and television are language based, involving various kinds of word-guessing, the manipulation of

letters, or deviant forms of monologue and dialogue. There are dozens of word games recorded in Augarde (1984), for example, ranging from the familiar crossword puzzle and *Scrabble* to linguistic pastimes which are bizarre in the extreme.

Some professions rely greatly on verbal play. Newspaper sub-editors all over the English-speaking world devise headlines with great ingenuity. Advertising agencies make their living by it. It is widely present in informal conversation, such as the use of mock regional tones of voice when telling a funny story ('There was this Irishman . . .') or the twisting of each other's words to score or make a silly point, as in the repartee which followed the arrival of someone whose arm was in plaster, in which various participants said such things as *No 'arm in it, Got to hand it to you, Put my finger on it, did I?* (Chiaro, 1992: 115). Language play may even make use of nonsense, too, as in the case of scat singing and, at a literary level, in such creations as Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' or the crazy verbal concoctions of Ogden Nash. The whole field is reviewed in Crystal (1995: 404,ff.).

Language play in children

We all know that language play is at the core of early parent–child interaction. We see it in the distinctive linguistic behaviour which characterizes much parental speech to babies – such features as higher and wider pitch range, marked lip rounding, rhythmical vocalizations, tongue clicking, mock threats, and simple, repetitive sentence patterns (Snow, 1986). We see it in the words and rhythms of the songs parents sing – their lullabies and nursery rhymes. We see it in the early play routines parents use, in which considerable pleasure is taken by all participants in developing a dynamic language that complements the patterns of visual and tactile contact. Nuzzling and tickling routines, finger-walking, peeping sequences, bouncing games, build-and-bash games, and many other interactions are not carried on in silence: on the contrary, they are accompanied by highly marked forms of utterance (which people, incidentally, are often quite embarrassed to hear later out of context). Given the remarkable emphasis placed upon language play in child-directed speech during the first months of life, one would expect it to be a central element in subsequent language development, and to play an important part in such domains as language therapy and the teaching of reading.

What is extraordinary is that the development of language play in the young child has been so little studied, and its implications for language teaching and therapy so little explored. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provided an anthropological, cross-cultural perspective for the topic in 1976, but some years later in a general review Ferguson and Macken commented (1983: 249): 'In the sizeable literature on play languages which has come to our attention, we have not found a single study in which children's use of a particular play language is followed developmentally'. And if we look at all issues of the leading journal in the field, *Journal of Child Language*, now over 20 years old, there is no paper on the general phenomenon, and only half a dozen on specific games, mainly from just one researcher. The domain is not mentioned at all in the standard child language anthology of the 1980s (Fletcher and Garman, 1986) or in the latest child language anthology (Fletcher and MacWhinney, 1995).

Fortunately, the topic has not been totally ignored, and those who address it are in no doubt about its developmental significance. Chukovsky, for example, refers to 'the inexhaustible need of every healthy child of every era and of every nation to introduce nonsense into his small but ordered world, with which he has only recently become acquainted. Hardly has the child comprehended with certainty which objects go together and which do not, when he begins to listen happily to verses of absurdity. For some mysterious reason the child is attracted to that topsy-turvy world where legless men run, water burns, horses gallop astride their riders, and cows nibble on peas on top of birch trees' (1963: 96). The various collections of children's play make this point empirically – the vast amount of rhyming material in Opie and Opie (1959), for example, in such domains as counting out, jumping rope, or bouncing ball, much of which is so nonsensical that the only possible explanation can be delight in the sound as such. As the Opies say, at the very beginning of their book, 'Rhyme seems to appeal to a child as something funny and remarkable in itself, there need be neither wit nor reason to support it' (p. 17). And if one asks why they do it, there is no better account of the various factors than that provided by the Opies who, commenting on the jingle 'Oh my finger, oh my thumb, oh my belly, oh my bum', remark that this 'is repeated for no more reason than they heard someone else say it, that they like the sound of the rhyme *thumb* and *bum*, that it is a bit naughty, and that for the time being, in the playground or in the gang, it is considered the latest and smartest thing to say – for they are not to know that the couplet was already old when their parents were youngsters' (p. 17).

Stages of development

There seem to be several stages in the development of language play. Phonetic play seems to be the first step, from around age 1. Children have been recorded in which long sequences of vocal modulation occur, with no one else around, which have been interpreted as a primitive form of vocal play (Garvey, 1977). Vocalizations accompanying motor activities become noticeable between 1 and 2 – melodic strings of syllables, humming, chanting, singing. Symbolic noises increase, and sounds are brought in to represent actions, such as noises to represent ambulances, police cars, telephones, motor horns, and things falling down, and these may be lexicalized (*ding ling, pow pow, beep beep*). Children, often in pairs, begin to 'talk funny', deviating from normal articulation: everyone in the group talks in a squeaky or gruff way, for example, and the sounds themselves seem to be the main focus of the play (a contrast with the adoption of special tones of voice in games of pretend role play, later).

Phonetic play is followed by more structured phonological play, from around age 1 introducing prosodic variations, producing language-specific, conversation-like utterance which is often referred to as 'jargon' (Crystal, 1986). From around age 2, variations are introduced into syllable structure, using reduplication, sound swapping, and the addition of pause within a word. Bryant and Bradley affirm: 'the two-and-a-half-year-old child recognize[s] rhyme and produce[s] rhyming sentences with ease: she also changes the very form of words which she knows to suit the rules of rhyme' (1985: 48). Garvey reports one girl of 3;0 who spent nearly 15 minutes engaged in taking apart and varying the syllabic structure of the word *yesterday* – the versions being mostly whispered in a soliloquy as she played with various objects in the room. This kind of play is typically a solitary behaviour, often heard in pre-sleep monologues, as reported in detail by Weir (1962).

Within a year, these monologues can become very complex. They may be spoken alone or to an audience. An example from Clare, nearly 3: 'There was a little girl called May . . . and she had some dollies . . . and the weeds were growing in the ground . . . and they made a little nest out of sticks . . . for another little birdie up in the trees . . . and they climbed up in the trees . . . and they climbed up the tree . . . and the weeds were growing in the ground . . .' This is not communicative language: the tone of voice is sing-song, meditative, and there is no logic to the sequence of ideas. It is associative freedom, recall for its own sake, with repetition of favourite strings ('the weeds were growing in

the ground' is repeated three more times in the next 10 clauses). It is a primitive poetry. Such speech may be dialogic in form, but the one child performs both parts in the dialogue. If there are other children in the room, they tend to ignore such vocalizations, not treating them as communicative. Sharing of language play seems to follow later. (An exception is the twin situation, where the twins do play with each other's vocalizations, as seen in the report on the Keenan twins (Keenan, 1974).)

Between 3 and 4, children start using each other's play language as a trigger for further variations. They may add rhymes: A says *Go up high*, B says *High in the sky*. They may alter initial sounds, sometimes to make real words, sometimes nonsense words: in one of Garvey's examples, A says *Mother mear (laugh), mother smear,* then *I said mother smear mother near mother tear mother dear*, B responds with *peer* and A adds *fear* (1977: 37). Bryant and Bradley report several examples of rhyme-play by 3- and 4-year-old children (1985: 47), such as *The red house/Made of strouss, I'm a flamingo/Look at my wingo*, and use this as evidence to support their hypothesis about the importance of rhyming and reading ability. By 5, this dialogue play can be very sophisticated. There might also be morphological play, an ending being added to various nouns: *teddy* leads to *fishy, snakey*, and others. Here is another Garvey example, this time between children aged 5;2 and 5;7:

A   Cause it's fishy too. Cause it has fishes.
B   And it's snakey too cause it has snakes and its beary too because it has bears.
A   And it's . . . it's hatty cause it has hats.

This is the first sign of children trying to outdo each other in verbal play, trying to score over the previous speaker, or maybe just trying to keep the game going, as in the adult *'armless* sequence quoted above.

Once children learn a way of behaving, or are told how to behave, they seem to experience particular delight in doing the opposite, with consequential problems of discipline for the parent. This is obvious at the nonverbal behavioural level. What is less obvious is that exactly the same process goes on at the linguistic level. From as early as 3, children can be heard to home in on an inadvertently dropped adult obscenity with unerring instinct. Within hours of arriving at school they learn their own rude words, such as *bum* and *knickers*, which will keep them surreptitiously giggling throughout the early years. They will be rude at adults or other children by altering the sounds of words: *Dad Pad* said

one 5-year old to his father in a real fury, as he was stopped playing in order to have a bath. His whole demeanour showed that it was the worst insult he could imagine saying, to express his disapproval. And name-changing is done for fun, too. Nonsense names might be *Mrs Poop, Mr Ding, Mr Moggly Boggly*, all coming from 4-year-olds. Nicknames appear soon after, and certainly after arrival in school. Older children often deliberately misname for fun, calling a cup a saucer, or mislabelling the objects in a picture. They break pragmatic rules, e.g. saying *good morning* when it is night time. All parents have encountered the 'silly hour' when they seem unable to get their child to talk sense.

Verbal play exists in many forms by 6, both serious and humorous, and rapidly increases in sophistication over the next few years. They demonstrate sophisticated concatenation games, in which one rhyme is joined to another in a list (Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1976: 88). Verbal games such as 'Knock-knock' and 'Doctor doctor' become fashionable after age 7. Riddle comprehension grows (Fowles and Glanz, 1977), and the type of riddle used increases in sophistication (Sutton-Smith, 1976). Wolfenstein's classic study (1954) shows how joke preferences and performances vary with age (from 4 to 17): she found an important transition at around age 6, from the improvised and original joking fantasy to the learning and telling of ready-made jokes (typically the riddle): 'With striking punctuality children seem to acquire a store of joking riddles at the age of six. As one six-year-old girl remarked: "We didn't know any of these jokes last year". Then later, at around 11, the formulaic structure of riddles gives way to a freer and more elaborate narrative.' Metaphor studies also show a growth in awareness well into the teenage years (Gardner, Kircher, Winner and Perkins, 1975).

More 'intellectual' language games, often of great intricacy, begin to be used. Cowan (1989) monitored a boy's acquisition of Pig Latin (where the onset of the first syllable is shifted to the end of the word, and followed by [ei], e.g. *please* becomes *izplei*) throughout the year preceding first grade (5;3–6;5). At the beginning of the period, the boy seemed unable to transform any words, after an explanation of the game, but performance improved over time. Cowan and his colleagues have also studied backwards speech in some detail, indicating some developmental changes in the ability of children aged 8/9 to talk back-to-front (Cowan and Leavitt, 1987). Finally, there are the pseudo-intellectual games played by children of around 10 ('If you insinuate that I tolerate such biological insolence from an inferior person like you, you are under

a misapprehended delusion': see Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1976: 101) which continues into the early years of high school.

The developmental role of language play

Piaget and Vygotsky, among others, have drawn our attention to the notion of 'play as practice': children are most likely to play with the skills which they are in the process of acquiring. But their discussion was focused on the notion of play (and symbolic play) in general – an area which, in the context of specific language disability, has attracted several reviews and studies (e.g. Leonard, 1987; Rescorla and Goossens, 1992). The present paper is not about play in general, but about language play, where the enjoyment is a direct consequence of deviating from the normal use of language forms or of using normal forms in unexpected contexts. Nor is it about humour, which is a much more general notion. Of course, there is probably a relationship between general play and language play, or between humour and language play. Bruner, for example, comments that language is 'most daring and most advanced when it is used in a playful setting' (1984: 196). But these are different topics.

Which aspects of language development is verbal play related to? It would seem: all of them. The play as practice model suggests that it makes a major contribution to phonological development through its focus on the properties of sounds and sound contrasts; there are examples of morphological play in the literature, and the riddle is a genre which heavily depends on syntax for its effects; playing with words and names, and the notion of nonsense, suggests a link with semantic development; and the kinds of dialogic interaction illustrated above suggest that there are important consequences for pragmatic development. Above all, it is suggested that language play, by its nature, contributes massively to what in recent years has been called metalinguistic awareness, which in turn is a major element in language awareness.

It is important, at this point, to stress that language play is not the same as language awareness. In recent years, a great deal of attention has been paid to language awareness in general. But this topic is a very broad one: it includes, for example, adult awareness of the functions of different languages within a community as well as issues to do with the learning of foreign languages. Language play is just one piece of the evidence to show that children are developing their linguistic awareness. Similarly, language play is not the same as metalinguistic awareness. The latter is also a much broader notion, including all reflective activity relating to language. Metalinguistic awareness is the ability to under-

stand and use words and terms for talking about language (from the most primitive, such as describing a tone of voice as 'high' or 'loud', to the most complex, such as describing the syntactic structure of a subordinate clause). A great deal of what goes on under the heading of metalanguage is nothing to do with language play. Ability to name the letters of the alphabet is part of metalanguage, but is not language play. The same applies to a child's ability to say that certain words begin or end with the same sound, or to describe words as nouns and verbs: this is not part of language play. On the other hand, language play and metalinguistic skills have one thing in common: they both involve the person 'stepping back' from language – in the case of language play, by intuiting the norm and manipulating it; in the case of metalinguistic skills, by talking about what is normal or abnormal.

The relevance of all this to later language skills should be apparent. Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976: 105) conclude that 'speech play is instrumental to the acquisition of verbal art' (by which they mean eloquence, rhetoric, poetry, etc.). And there is an equally apparent link with reading: several authors have concluded that the ability to manipulate language is associated with success in learning to read. We know that early awareness of nursery rhymes can predict later literacy skills (Bryant and Bradley, 1985), and ability to understand riddles seems to have some relationship to reading ability, both according to teacher report (Hirsh-Pasek, Gleitman and Gleitman, 1978) and in relation to a reading ability test (Ely and McCabe, 1994). Phonological awareness has been isolated as 'a major determinant of the early acquisition of reading skill and one of the keys to the prevention of reading disability' (Stanovich, 1987: 22). Play with language is a direct contributor to metalinguistic awareness (Cazden, 1976), and as reading and writing are first and foremost metalinguistic tasks – they are both one remove away from the natural state of speech, and in almost all cases are interpreted through the medium of speech – it is obvious that language play is likely to relate to later literacy achievement.

Language play and language pathology

The persisting absence of language play is therefore likely to be an important diagnostic feature of language pathology. Chukovsky (1963) suggests as much, with reference to rhyme: 'Rhyme-making during the second year of life is an inescapable stage of our linguistic development.

Children who do not perform such linguistic exercises are abnormal or ill'. And indeed, children with language delay or disorder are known to have very poor ability even to imitate simple patterns of language play (copying rhythmic beats, for instance), and tend not to use it spontaneously. However, looking back at the articles in *CLTT* over the past twelve years, I am struck by the paucity of papers on language play by or to children with language disability. Play in a general sense is not totally ignored, of course: it emerges as a natural medium for the interaction between child and adult when the latter is engaged in intervention. It is routine to teach through the medium of play – whether what is being taught is sounds, grammar, vocabulary, or pragmatic behaviour. It needs no apology or justification, and teachers and therapists are adept at finding the right level of play to engage a child's interest and motivation in a language task. Excellent examples from the pages of this journal include North and Parker (1994) and Parkinson and Gorrie (1995).

But I have not found a paper which has looked closely at the way the children themselves play with language, in contexts other than when they are engaged in a particular teaching task (though the possibility of an intervention strategy to enhance children's understanding of jokes and riddles was explored in the last number of this journal: Ezell and Jarzynka, 1996). Nor do I know of a study of the way their teachers play with language, as part of their general conversational interaction with the children. Nor do I know whether the older caretakers of children with language disability (both adults and siblings) introduce language play into their interactions in the same way that the caretakers of normally developing children do – or whether any language play routinely takes place at all. An examination of videotapes of therapy in progress shows very little use of it. I have found just a few examples in my collection of clinical transcriptions – the occasional use of nicknames, or of jocular chiding, for instance. On the whole, teacher/therapy dialogues with children are very sober affairs. Indeed, the absence of language play, I would suggest, is the main difference between a 'normal' and a 'teaching' situation.

Language play and reading

When it comes to the world of reading materials, the contrast with the spontaneous and frequent use of language play in everyday conversation

is even more striking – and puzzling. For it is now surely axiomatic that the more we know about the linguistic skills of children, both in terms of comprehension and production, as they begin the task of learning to read, the better we shall be able to present them with literacy tasks which build systematically on what they know and do, and do not conflict with it (Clay, 1979; Ferreiro and Teberosky, 1983). This axiom has motivated a great deal of research in such areas as vocabulary selection in early readers, the choice of sentence construction, and the selection of more realistic sociolinguistic models of the children's universe – what Baker and Freebody (1989) call the 'culture of literacy' – but there is little sign of language play in these supposedly real worlds. There are also many books which capitalize on Chukovsky's 'topsy-turvy world' – in *Wacky Wednesday*, for example, a child wakes up, and finds that everything is wrong: a shoe is found on the ceiling, a palm tree grows out of the toilet – but the language which describes these bizarre happenings is totally conventional. Our authors and illustrators are very ready to play with situations, it seems, but hardly at all with language.

Beginning with traditional reading schemes of the 'Janet and John' variety, a review of some 200 early readers from the pre-1970s did not bring to light a single example of language play. Baker and Freebody, using an Australian corpus, make no reference to it at all in their thorough account of early school books (1989), and their copious examples show no sign of it. There are certain types of exception – in the more adventurous phonic readers, for example. Dr Seuss is the classic case; indeed his *Fox in Socks* (1965) is subtitled 'A Tongue Twister for Super Children', and the first page advises: 'Take it slowly. This book is dangerous', as is plain when we find such sentences as 'Fox on clocks on bricks and blocks' or 'Six sick bricks tick'. But apart from this, you have to go back to Victorian times, in the comic alphabet books of that period, before you find a genre which is willing to routinely incorporate language play. Although the contrasts between the relatively unreal linguistic world of traditional (i.e. mid-20th-century) readers and the greater reality of modern materials have been often recapitulated, I have never seen the lack of language play in the former stressed, yet it may be the most dramatic difference of all.

Even if we look for the most established category of language play, the use of imaginative figures of speech – metaphors and similes, in particular – there is little to report. Taking some books at random: in the whole of *Ladybird* 6a (1964), there is only 1 such figure in 333 sentences (*'The time does fly', says Jane*). Three stages later, there is

only 1 in 403 (9b: *This cupboard is like a treasure house*). There is nothing at all in the early books of 'Janet and John' (1956); and even well into the series, in *High on a Hill*, we find only 11 instances in 256 sentences (e.g. *a sleepy little river, The white gate was wide and friendly, lily leaves spread themselves like green plates,* and *frogs made a chorus*), but that is still only 1 in 23. The only category of figurative language which occurs with any frequency is personification, such as when a bird is given the attributes of a human being, and the story talks about his family, friends, furniture, etc. The contrast with earlier speech norms is striking.

Is it too much to suggest that the lack of a perspective derived from language play is the biggest single factor hindering children from seeing what the task of reading is all about? (Indeed, the conventional wisdom of describing reading as a 'task' illustrates the mind-set which is endemic. None of the examples in the earlier part of this paper could be sensibly decribed as a 'task': it is not a task to tell a joke, or make a silly rhyme, or see a figurative resemblance.) If language play is the normal perspective for pre-school children, how far will the lack of this perspective become a barrier, as they try to acquire another linguistic skill? If it is not present in the reading materials they see or, perhaps more importantly, in the attitudes of those who work with those materials, what follows? If absence of language play is a sign of pathology (see above), then how are we to interpret the textual dimension of early readers? How much, indeed, have readers improved in this respect in recent years?

My impression is: not a lot. This is not to gainsay the enormous progress there has been in narrative technique and visual presentation. Readers these days (whether structured or 'real') typically display thematic relevance, with imaginative and ingenious story-lines taken from what we know to be motivating in children's everyday experience and fantasy. The dialogue can be colloquial and vivid. But from a ludic point of view, the text is invariably sanitized. Daring departures from the norm are far from likely in the situation or illustration (as in the incongruities of *Wacky Wednesday*) than in the accompanying text. The books may be full of wonderfully bizarre situations, such as an alien spacecraft crashing into the sea, but the text is, by contrast, linguistically conventional – *Splash!*, for example, rather than *Splosh!, Splooosh!, Kerashhh!* or any of the other crazy symbolic forms which are so much a part of the child's comic world. Any comic, in fact, will show vastly more sound symbolic creativity: in one *Desperate Dan* annual, we see him

use a range of emotional vocalizations which include (just taking letter *Y*) *yah*, *yahoo*, *yeeha*, *yeow*, *yeuch*, *yeurgh*, *yikes*, *yip-yip*, *yipes*, *yowch*, and *yup* (see further, Crystal, 1995: 250). We tend not to see this kind of thing in reading books. The amazing creativity which has characterized children's readers in recent years has been channelled very largely into character and plot, rather than language.

Of course, there are exceptions, but you have to search a long time on your bookshelves before you find them. Here are some examples from my shelves. The nonsense names in Lonzo Anderson's *The haganinny* (Level 9.2 of *Reading 360*, 1974) are a cross between Lewis Carroll and Star Wars: 'The worst day of my life, I guess, was the time I made that trip into the zangles of Arroom./I had been hired by the Blazon of Ammerwok to hunt down the hateful haganinny that was threatening the Blazon's people who lived in the zangles.' *Mount Gravatt* Level 1: 24 (1977) has a booklet called 'Monster Things' which has a triple rhyming sequence: 'I'm making monster things on the wall. / This one's got paws, / and claws, / and two big jaws.' It is the extension to three rhymes which makes this interesting – going beyond the expectations of the traditional rhyming couplet. The *Jets* series (1993) illustrates the use of phonetic play in its titles: *Grubble Trouble*, *Sharon and Darren* – and indeed in the latter case, the opening lines make a metalinguistic point: 'I've got a boyfriend. / His name is Darren. / Sharon and Darren – / we make a poem.'

What is especially fine is to see language play in action using all linguistic levels simultaneously. The best example I have seen of this happening in practice is from the 'Jets' series: *Ernest the Heroic Liontamer* (1993). The main text is supplemented by accompanying cartoons, in which can be found a great deal of language play – people make comic-like noises (*Aaah!*, *Cor!*), as do objects (*Ker-blam*), make smart remarks about what they see (*She's hot* says someone at the sight of the fire-eater), use pseudo-intellectual language (*Jollity! Jollity!* says someone, at the sight of the clowns), use 'clever' word play (*Splats entertainment, folks*, says another), and make rhyming lists (says the ringmaster to Ernest: *it's time to act on the fact of what your act lacked. With tact; it's time for your act to face facts.*). At several points in the book, cartoons play with the meaning of an idiom. The text says . . . *the drums rolled*, and this is followed by a picture of a drummer chasing his drum and calling *Stop rolling!*). As the lion-tamer is about to put his head inside the lion's mouth, the text says *Not a soul stirred*; this is followed by a cartoon showing several members of the audience, one

of whom is seen to be stirring a cup of something; *Except me!* he says, and around the spoon can be seen the words *Stir! Stir!*, using the standard comic technique of verbalizing object noises. There is pragmatic fun, also, as the voice of the reader is seen in a speech bubble making an observation about the way the story is being told.

Language play is thus an integral part of the text. Indeed, in the case of *Ernest*, there are two levels of play, as metalinguistic awareness is invoked as well. For example, the conversation interaction between author and reader continues over the first 34 pages, but on p. 35, the MAIN TEXT includes a request to the reader not to interrupt so much, and this is immediately reinforced by a cartoon of Ernest also telling the reader to *put a sock in it*. And on the last page, Brian the lion, who has saved the day, asks Ernest: *if anyone ever writes a book about us . . . promise me it'll be called 'Ernest and Brian', and not just 'Ernest the heroic lion-tamer'*. *I promise*, replies Ernest, ironically.

Most scheme readers do not seem to favour this kind of innovation, however. Rather, the world of formal reading is one where language play is conspicuous by its absence. Children come to reading prepared by their previous experience of language play to have fun, then find that there is no fun there. They encounter a world which (I say again, in *language* terms) is serious and conventional. Beautiful pictures; lovely story; linguistically unimaginative text. And before very long, by copying older children, the teachers, and the textbooks, they become linguistically conventional themselves.

Conclusion

Children who have no problem with learning take all this in their stride. They quickly learn the linguistic differences associated with fun and work, and develop an ability to recognize and use a range of styles, both in speaking and writing. But in the case of children for whom learning to talk is difficult, it may be that a greater linguistic playfulness while engaging with them in spoken interaction would help to bridge the gap between the world of the home/playground and the world of the clinic/classroom. And for children whose experience of domestic language play is limited or absent, a model incorporating elements of language play introduced by the teacher/therapist might be helpful to parents and other caretakers.

Given the amount of play in pre-school child society, a principled

transition in early readers might enable children to move from a world in which language play is so important to a world in which language play has been so marginalized. Given the amount of language play in our society, it should be possible to encounter it more regularly in a child's reading world than is currently the case. Furthermore, because there is so little, linguistically, in early readers which children can use as a model to refine their creative language interests and skills, readers give children no basis for approaching the more imaginative domains of language use, such as poetry and satire, and may even impede the implementation of a child's creative urge. Improvements are needed here, too.

There is still an enormous gap between the world of child language work and the world of real language. The problem of limited 'carryover' remains real. Might not language play provide one of the foundations of a bridge for this gap? Whatever else therapeutic programmes and reading schemes are, they are not usually conceived (or perceived) as fun. This is not to deny that children find many therapeutic tasks and reading materials highly enjoyable; but enjoyment is not fun. I enjoyed writing this paper, but it was work, not 'fun'. By contrast, jokes, word-play, comics, and many so-called 'real books' are regularly perceived to be fun. And the distinction between these two categories, from a linguistic point of view, is chiefly a matter of their willingness or otherwise to engage in language play.

Postscript

After this paper was completed, I encountered two new projects which, in their emphasis on language play, will undoubtedly foster the kind of pedagogical linguistic world which the paper recommends.

- The 'Rhyme and Analogy' project (Oxford University Press, 1996), part of the Oxford Reading Tree, written by Clare Kirtley and Roderick Hunt, with a teacher's book by Usha Goswami.
- The 'Cambridge Reading' project (Cambridge University Press, 1996), general editors Richard Brown and Kate Ruttle.

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