

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY ROUND TABLE
ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS 1996

*Linguistics, language acquisition,
and language variation:
Current trends and future prospects*



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Playing with linguistic problems: From Orwell to Plato and back again

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Introduction. According to tradition, King Arthur devised the round table so that, when his knights were seated around it, none of them could claim precedence over the others. This has always seemed to me to provide an excellent precedent for those who have found their happiness levels circumscribed because they are unable to determine priorities among levels of linguistic representation. There is something intuitively satisfying about circles, and I have always found it helpful to work with a circular model in which different levels of language rest side by side, with none constituting a beginning or end, and all patently equal. I am very comfortable with this—apart from one thing: that the segments of the circle which identify each level all narrow inexorably towards a single, shared central point. This of course (models being the way they are) makes the naive linguist ask, What might be there? Is this where the linguistic equivalent of the Holy Grail lies? Is there a function which informs all linguistic levels—or at least, the three main ones (if you will allow me to state succinctly, or minimally, a contemporary—albeit déjà vu—formulation) of a phonetic component and a semantic component linked by some sort of computational procedure—or, as my alliterative module prefers to say: the levels of sound, syntax, and sense?

We all know that you see further when you stand on the shoulders of others. Chomsky's shoulders must be especially strong, given the numbers who have stood on them in recent decades, so they will hold my few pounds also. *Knowledge of Language* (Chomsky 1986: xxv) begins by drawing a distinction between two problems concerning human knowledge, which have passed into linguistic metalanguage under the headings of "Plato's problem" and "Orwell's problem." Plato's problem is defined as "the problem of explaining how we can know so much given that we have such limited evidence"—the obvious area of illustration being the existence of language acquisition in children. Orwell's is defined as "the problem of explaining how we can know so little, given that we have so much evidence"—the obvious area of illustration being the existence of institutionalized mind-sets which block our understanding (Chomsky's examples include various kinds of totalitarian systems). "To solve Orwell's problem we must discover the institutional and other factors that block insight and

understanding in crucial areas of our lives and ask why they are effective" (1996: xxvii). Chomsky had originally intended to investigate Orwell's problem in his book, alongside Plato's, but decided not to do so, because "the character of inquiry into these two problems is so different" (1996: xxviii). The former, he asserts, is a question of scientific investigation; the latter one of sociopolitical inquiry, and, as a consequence, much less intellectually challenging. And he concludes his preface with the observation that, unless we can get to grips with Orwell's problem, and overcome it, the human race may not be around long enough to discover the answer to Plato's.

All of this makes an ideal frame of reference for the theme of this year's Round Table. The study of language acquisition, insofar as it helps to illuminate the nature of the language faculty, is of direct relevance to the solution of Plato's problem. The study of language variation, insofar as it draws attention to the distinctive way in which sociopolitical institutions use (or abuse) language, is of direct relevance to the solution of Orwell's. Linguistics sits in the middle, looking in both directions at once. The question for the linguist, it seems to me, is How do we relate these two perspectives? Let us call this "Crystal's problem"—for the next few pages, at any rate.

I'm not sure about the extent to which Orwell's problem is less of an intellectual challenge than Plato's, actually; but I do agree that unless we make some progress towards solving Orwell's problem we cannot fully solve Plato's. My impression is that the contrast between the two positions, as introduced by Chomsky, is there for rhetorical reasons. Indeed, after introducing it, Chomsky dispenses with it. There is no further reference to Orwell as he expounds Plato, and when he adds an appendix on Orwell, there is no reference to Plato within it. We are presented with two different worlds. These worlds can of course be related at an ideological, sociopolitical level, as people have recognized for some time: It is evident that a being with a language faculty of the kind which presents us with Plato's problem ought not to be treated in ways which are part of the characterization of Orwell's problem. But to be truly interesting as a linguistic (or sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic) issue, it ought to be possible to find an apolitical, purely linguistic account of the relationship between these two worlds. So, we arrive at Crystal's problem: How does our language ideology relate to the nature, development, and use of our language faculty? To answer this question, we need to move from Orwell to Plato, and back again.

From Orwell: Language as a regime. My starting-point is the nature of language as an institution in its own right. Language is not merely an exponent of the conceptualization of a regime; language is itself a regime. If Orwell's problem has to deal with "the institutional and other factors that block insight and understanding" (ibid.), then we must ask what factors in the way we study language block our understanding of language—and then move on to ask how

these factors might be eliminated. But first, a simple example of the way in which Plato relates to Orwell, in the popular mind.

In Britain at the moment there is considerable debate about the way in which the new National Curriculum on English language, which has brought a fresh focus on language analysis, should best be implemented. There are two sources of tension, one internal to the school, one external. Internal tension arises between teachers who have been trained in different linguistic descriptive methodologies (those of traditional grammar versus one or other of the linguistics-inspired approaches) or who have received no training in analytical terminology at all. External tension arises between teachers who understand and are trying to implement the egalitarian and realistic principles of the new curriculum (which recognizes, for example, the importance of local dialect alongside the notion of national standard, and the inevitability of language change) and parents, school governors, and other commentators (who are invariably schooled in the prescriptive tradition, and for whom any recognition of dialect use and language change is an attack on standards, and another nail in the coffin that "trendy lefties" are preparing for the eventual demise of the English language).

Feelings run high in such circumstances, and when one finds oneself (as I do from time to time) having to run a workshop on language for a group of teachers, the situation can become volatile. And on one occasion it came to pass that the group was discussing a point of usage in students' written work—whether a serial comma (as in *tall, dark, and handsome*) should appear before the *and*. One teacher felt strongly that it should be there, and said he would correct a student's work which did not have it; another felt that it should not be there, and would cross it out, if a student used it. Neither person would yield, as they talked (correction: shouted) their way around the point. Eventually, one of them reacted to the other by saying: "That's just what I would expect from someone who wears a tie like yours!" The other person responded spiritedly, and within a minute the basis of the entire debate had shifted from the linguistic to the couturiological.

As linguists, we should not be surprised at the notion that linguistic argumentation should introduce nonlinguistic considerations. When we ourselves routinely invoke such enticing notions as elegance and simplicity when evaluating linguistic models and analyses (as in the modern application of Occam's razor in the minimalist program), we should not be too shocked to find linguistic arguments being routinely reduced to sociological ones. Linguistic discussion about usage leads inevitably to a discussion of linguistic standards and, just as inevitably, to a discussion of standards in general. It is a short jump from linguistic behaviour to social behaviour—and people are very ready to make it. In February 1996, in Britain, we heard the BBC Reith lectures, an annual series of intellectual enquiries held in honour of Lord Reith, who founded the BBC. This year, they were being given by a linguist, Jean Aitchison, who

holds a chair at Oxford. (You will perceive that these lectures are very much an establishment domain.) In her first lecture, she addressed, in terms which have been familiar to linguists for over 50 years, the question of popular attitudes to language, and in particular the view that language is sick and deteriorating. She quoted Lord Tebbit, a senior government minister in 1985, who said: "If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy ... at school ... all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime." In a ferocious counterblast to what he perceived to be Aitchison's dismissive approach to standards, Paul Johnson, writing in *The Daily Mail* of 8 February 1996 (under the headline, "A woman wot hates English as it is writ"), comments: "Norman Tebbit is almost certainly right to assume that the decline of English standards in the school and the increase in crime are connected." In other words, split an infinitive today and you will be splitting heads tomorrow. End a sentence with a preposition, and you will end up with your own lengthy sentence. Indeed, it is enough to make you think of suicide, but that "the dread of something after death ... puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of" (*Hamlet*, III.i).

But you cannot win an argument through ridicule, or by quoting Shakespeare. If that were so, the Paul Johnsons of this world would have won two centuries ago, for their stock-in-trade is ridicule not reason. The matter was already being debated in precisely these ways not long after the publication of the grammars of Lindley Murray and Robert Lowth, in the eighteenth century, when such rules as "Never end a sentence with a preposition" were being promulgated. "It is no defence," these grammarians argued (though this is my paraphrase), "to cite Shakespeare as authority for such a usage (as in the *Hamlet* quotation). Even Shakespeare can commit grammatical error. He is only human. None of us is immune. That is why we must always be on our guard." The usage versus standards issue has been debated regularly and frequently over the past 250 years, on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether we look at the differences of opinion between Robert Lowth and Joseph Priestley in the 1760's, or the criticism of William Cullen Bryant by Fitzedward Hall a century later (Bolton and Crystal 1969: 41–53), or the arguments about usage in the great Webster dictionary debate a century later, the same points are being made on both sides. The points have often been made dispassionately, but the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of people remain unconvinced—or, perhaps more accurately, seem incapable of being convinced. Dissident linguists are pilloried in the press (and not only the conservative press). Any comment about being fair to divided usage is immediately construed as an attack on standards. The metaphors we are forced to live by are those of aggressive political radicalism.

The Paul Johnson article uses such phrases as "frontal assault on the rules" and "frivolous linguistic sabotage." We are close here to Orwell's world.

Indeed, the last 250 years has seen the largest and most successful exercise in popular brainwashing that I know of—largest, because it crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries with ease, and because within a language it affects everyone. Certainly questions of norms, deviations from norms, standards, acceptability, and related matters are in place long before children encounter formal education. We know that parents routinely draw their children's attention to matters of social linguistic etiquette from around age three, and often their comments reflect a linguistic orthodoxy which sees children as prone to error from the outset. "Don't talk with your mouth full." "Don't say that, it's rude." "You'll have nothing until I hear that little word" (e.g. *please*, or *ta*). "I won't hear any bloody swearing in this house." If there is a language acquisition device (LAD), for these parents it is a BAD LAD—a functional linguistic manifestation of original sin. And once in school, the institution takes over, and the "don'ts" continue, proliferating as the child gets to grips with written language. We now find a more formal manifestation of original syn(tax), both in speech—"Don't say ain't, Johnny." "That sort of language may be all right for the playground..."—and in writing, notably in the myriad corrections which appear in the margins of early essays, several of which (such as the opposition to sentence-initial *and*) are structurally unmotivated. The regime proves to be highly successful in instilling feelings of linguistic inferiority in most of us by the time we have learned to read and write.

Searching for explanations. BADLAD, of course, stands for "Blind And Deaf to Linguists' Arguments and Data." In a piece I wrote by way of commentary on the opening Reith lecture (*The Independent on Sunday*, 11 February, to be published in *English Today*), I expressed the view that the more interesting questions to address are to do with explanations rather than justifications: Why are people so reluctant to listen to linguistic reason? Why do they persist in believing that spoken language is sloppy, or that language is like a crumbling castle of former excellence, or that language change is a disease? Why do people continue to value written language over the spoken? Why is it so difficult to replace the view (only some two centuries old) that "we need eternal vigilance to keep the language intact" by a view of "eternal tolerance?" Indeed, why is it so difficult to be tolerant of other people's speech? Why do people ridicule accents, and are themselves so hurt when others attack the way they speak—even (there are several attested cases; for a report of one, see Crystal 1995: 298) referring to this as a factor in their suicide? The really interesting question is not Is our language sick? but Why do we want to think that our language is sick? Or, Why is language sickness thought to be so serious a disease anyway? and Why is it chronic? It is not enough to say, as linguists tend to say, that there is no disease—to point out that language change is the

normal state of health. Why do people think that there is a disease in the first place? We don't need the linguistic equivalent of a physician, to help us: We need a psychiatrist.

Ten "why" questions is enough for one lecture, especially if the lecturer is not going to be able to answer any of them. But I am not alone: Linguists on the whole (the much missed Dwight Bolinger is one of the few exceptions; see Bolinger 1980) do not ask why, and even less often look for solutions. It is not enough for us to adopt a modern perspective, which would incorporate the prescriptive tradition into a sociolinguistic model, handling it seriously and not dismissively, and recognizing it as an important element in the history of language attitudes. If we have any applied linguist in us at all—and deep within all theoretical linguists I do believe there is an applied linguist trying to get out (not even Chomsky is immune, as Orwell's problem illustrates)—we need to go further, and aim for a more explanatorily adequate view.

One problem is that people have gone for educational solutions without spending enough time finding out about social explanations. In particular, there is a widely held view that increasing a person's (and specifically a child's) awareness of language, through sensitively devised and linguistically informed educational programs, will be enough to change deep-rooted language attitudes. Although I have been much involved in writing such materials myself in the U.K., in collaboration with teachers, I am not convinced that this is the answer. Materials of this kind have now been around since the 1960's. Several generations of school children have been exposed to linguistic ideas. But I see no sign that the latest generations of university students are any less insecure about their language, or less intolerant of other accents, than those of a generation before. They may be more able to understand the rational basis of the linguistic situation, but emotionally they are no nearer applying it to themselves. Why is this? Perhaps they are being unconsciously influenced by their parents, who lack schooling in the modern perspective, or by the pundits whose words are prominent in the papers and magazines they read. Certainly these days I frequently encounter the "external tension" I referred to above, in which teachers are taken to task by parents (or even grandparents) for not correcting a grammatical shibboleth in a pupil's usage, or for conveying the message (by permitting such projects as the study of slang or local dialects) that "anything goes." And when employers, politicians, and the Prince of Wales are on very public record complaining about falling standards of grammar, and illustrating these by such matters as split infinitives, what is an ordinary parent, let alone a student, to believe? And what chance has an informed teacher, let alone a linguist, of altering the situation?

That there can be a major gap between intellectual and emotional acquiescence to beliefs about language is often unrecognized. We teach a class about linguistic equality and language attitudes, set assignments, and are satisfied if we find a fair number of A's and B's. We believe we have taught a point of

view. We have not. We may have provided a mind with some intellectual content, but it does not therefore follow that we have reached a heart. I recall a fascinating discussion with an Arabic student who had attended such a course of mine, and who had got an A for his assignment. At an end-of-course departmental party, he took me on one side, and spent some time trying to persuade me that, although my views about languages being equal were largely correct, they needed to be qualified in one major respect, for I had not yet taken into account the underlying truth that Arabic has special status, among all languages, because of its role as the language of the Koran. He understood why I had not mentioned this, but left me in no doubt that the fault was mine. I looked again at his assignment. There was nothing in his written work to suggest that he held anything other than the orthodox linguistic view. He had conceptually accommodated to this linguist's mind-set, and he got an A for it. I do not yet know how to incorporate ideological perspectives of this kind (they are by no means unique to Islam, or even to religion) into my bread-and-butter linguistics. This I hope will be one of the topics which that branch of our subject sometimes called institutional linguistics will one day investigate.

So I am under no illusions about the difficulty of persuading people to change their attitudes about language, which may relate to deeply held feelings or beliefs about religion, ethnicity, history, and society in general. But before linguists talk of change, they should first attempt to explain where these attitudes come from. And perhaps it is easier to find explanations by reversing the "why" questions I asked above: Instead of asking Why do so many people have an inferiority complex about their own language?, let us instead ask Why do some people manage *not* to develop such a complex? I have carried out no survey, except on me, so I ask: Why do *I* not have one? What follows is a psychiatrically uninformed answer, and I am quite prepared for reanalysis later, in which it might transpire that, as the child of a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, growing up in a world in which the Irish optimism which forms one strand of my DNA is mixed with the Welsh gloom that forms the other, I was forced into a spiritual and ethnic confrontation which has given me no complexes at all. (I should explain the issue of Celtic mood: It is said that an Irishman, faced with a field of dancing daffodils, is likely to say "Praise be to God for those lovely flowers." A Welshman, faced with the same field, is likely to say "Duw [God], they'll be dead soon!" [Only a mixed-race Celt like myself dare tell this joke, by the way.])

I do believe, in all seriousness, that mixed backgrounds of this kind provide a fertile soil for the development of a linguistically secure state of mind. A largely neglected benefit of a bilingual environment—Welsh and English, in my case, with the occasional piece of Irish Gaelic thrown in—is the way in which the young learner is led, wide-eyed, into situations where the juxtaposition of different languages inevitably shapes a dynamic relativism—and the more volatile the culture (where one language is under threat, as in the case of

Welsh), the more likely is this dynamic to be emotionally foregrounded. Nor is it simply a matter of bilingualism. Holyhead, where I live, is a port town where Irish, Welsh, and English populations coexist, all using very different varieties of English. One of my earliest memories is of having my attention drawn to the fact that I was so accommodating—in the sociolinguistic sense, I hasten to add (not that the other sense was ever in question either). My accent changed as often as the high and low tides, but (unlike the tides) I do not recall ever feeling, diglossically, that one accent was high and the other low. I would be Irish with the Irish at church, Welsh with the Welsh at school, and English with the English in the streets. Then, at age ten, my family moved to Liverpool, where I spent the whole of my secondary school career carrying the nickname of “taffy,” despite the broad Scouse (Liverpool) accent which grew within months. A degree course in London brought me into close contact with Received Pronunciation (RP, which I studied at length as part of my phonetics course), and marriage to an RP-speaking speech therapist would, some might expect, finally give me the chance to take on board God’s own accent which had been missing all my life. RP did indeed have an influence on my public speaking voice—though, unlike the public-school boys of old, for me it is an extra accent, not a substitute accent—and the kind of modified RP I use in lectures lacks the consistency and character of that still spoken by the news-readers of the BBC. My equally accommodating wife, in the meantime, claims that my Scouse-Welsh mix has destroyed her own pure RP forever.

This biographical excursus is intended to make more than the point that my personal accent and dialect is, technically speaking, a Mess. It is to suggest that early close encounters with language and dialect variation, and an early history of social mobility might have been factors in explaining my present equanimity with regard to usage. It might even explain why I became a linguist. But we shall not find out until, both for the exceptions as well as the norms, we obtain case studies. The analogy with the early history of medicine is not misplaced: Before people could arrive at confident diagnoses, there were decades of single-subject case studies. If we take seriously the metaphors of sickness and disease which imbue popular attitudes to language, then before we can arrive at confident linguistic diagnoses we need to look into people’s backgrounds. Yet a paradigm of sociolinguistic case studies, analogous to those which can be found in psycholinguistics or clinical linguistics, seems to be lacking—or when it appears it tends to be dismissed as anecdotal. But we should not miss out on the chance to use the techniques of oral history to accumulate information about language attitudes. The information is there, if we only take the trouble to listen. After a radio program on split infinitives I did once, a listener wrote to tell me: “The reason why the older generation feel so strongly about English grammar is that we were severely punished if we didn’t obey the rules! One split infinitive, one whack; two split infinitives, two whacks; and so on.” And he went on to make it clear that he didn’t want all that suffering to be in vain,

which is why he continued to complain whenever he heard a BBC presenter use one.

One thing we do not know is how representative such people are. A popular method of researching language attitudes is to collect corpora of data derived from newspaper letter columns, talkback radio programmes, and the like; but this produces a wildly unrepresentative sample—for the simple reason that the only people who write in about language are those who wish to complain about it. In 1986 I did a program for BBC Radio 4 in which I played people a piece of text in which various shibboleths had been hidden, and asked listeners to write and say what they thought of the language—I stressed I wanted good points as well as bad points. I got nearly a thousand letters, but only three said something positive. One other (from a 25-year-old housewife) said she did not know what the fuss was about. The generally negative nature of these communications is reflected in the BBC’s mail bags every week, and in the press. When did you last read a letter to an editor praising someone for an elegant use of word order or an appropriate use of inflections?

It might be that error detection (i.e. perceived errors) is simply easier to do than strength detection (witness the history of error analysis, but not of strength analysis, in foreign language teaching). More likely, the negativism lies in the personal background of the writers. BBC research into the nature of their audiences can be illuminating, in this respect. In the case of my 1986 program, for example, it transpired that most of the listeners were in the upper age bands—mostly over 50. This means they went through school in the 1940’s, long before any new language-teaching attitudes were being promulgated. (My solitary 25-year-old does not necessarily reflect a broadening of language attitudes. Admittedly, she would have been at high school in the early 1970’s, when very little formal grammar teaching was taking place in British schools; on the other hand, she couldn’t see any errors or strengths in the text I played—which rather suggests the need for some kind of formal language awareness teaching.) But in the absence of proper case studies, in which personality traits as well as personal educational histories are taken into account, it is difficult to say anything for certain.

I say “personality” advisedly. Two hundred fifty years of inferiority complexes and variety intolerance has led to a curiously schizoid public, where on the one hand people are ready to say they hate the dropping of *-ng* (in words like *fishin’*) as lazy and ugly when they hear it in the mouth of a schoolboy in inner-city Birmingham, then praise exactly the same effect as rustic and beautiful when they hear it in the rural speech of a Devonshire farmer. It is an overreacting public, too, well illustrated by the letter published in *The Listener* in 1981 during the week that the Pope was shot. The letter began: “Dear Sir, I was appalled ...” You would expect this letter to be about the assassination attempt; in fact, it was about a BBC presenter’s use of grammar. If words like *appalled* are to be used with reference to grammar, one might wonder, what

language is there left to express our feelings when people like popes get shot? Most letters, I also noticed, when doing these radio series, carried first- not second-class stamps—as if there was an urgency about the language observation. The impression was strongly conveyed: The bad news must reach the BBC as quickly as possible, otherwise it may be too late! I sometimes wonder what research programs into, say, language handicap in children might have been funded if all those second-class pence had been saved. And what political energies might have been rechannelled into the promotion of worthier causes if the attention of senior politicians had been directed less towards split infinitives and other such shibboleths, and more towards the genuine strengths and attractions of World Standard English, seen in relation to the difficulties of linguistic minorities and the plight of endangered languages. That is where the real issues are—as a U.S. audience, in these days of official English controversy, does not need to be told.

Searching for solutions. The search for explanations highlights what I believe is a neglected area of socio-psycho-linguistic research into the origins of language attitudes. If we were practitioners of scientific method, according to the theory, we would wait now until that research were complete before moving to a discussion of solutions. But no scientist I know is so scrupulous about method. Indeed, by investigating possible solutions, there may even be a chance that we shed some light on the nature of the explanations. The medics actually have a name for this way of proceeding, when carrying out a differential diagnosis: They call it “diagnosis by treatment” (Crystal 1988: 20).

The aim of the exercise is to engage people’s interest in language in a positive way, so that the world of Plato (as illustrated in this talk by the notion of naturally emerging language acquisition) is brought into connection with that of Orwell (as illustrated here by the negative language attitudes imposed by a prescriptive linguistic regime). I do not believe it is possible to do this by a frontal assault on these established language attitudes: Notions such as the belief in language sickness, the fear of language change, the opposition to language deviance, and the intolerance of language variety, I am suggesting, are immune to linguists’ tinkering. Rather, I think it is necessary to try out an alternative strategy, in which we focus on aspects of language which people value positively, and use these to demonstrate that such matters as change and deviance are not only normal, but are indeed widely practised and appreciated in contexts by exactly the same people who in a socio-educational context perceive them to be threatening.

There are of course many linguistic topics which do seem to attract positive interest. For example, most people seem to be fascinated by etymology, whether it be the history of personal names, place names, or vocabulary in general. There is also a genuine interest in language history—in such questions as the

origins of language, or the links between human and animal communication. But these issues are all somewhat removed from present-day realities: They do not engage the emotions, because they are often so speculative. They also make us look back in time, whereas the worries we have been talking about are worries about the future. If we wish to establish an ethos of positive language attitudes, we need to look elsewhere. The ideal topic will be one which is as emotionally deep-rooted as the attitudes which we are trying to confront. It needs to be one which people perceive to be widely relevant to their lives. And because prescriptivism is based on a “bottom-up” approach—focusing on the identification of low-level, individual solecisms, drawing attention to forms at the expense of functions—any fresh approach ought ideally to be “top-down,” giving centrality to texts as wholes, and where the end of achieving a particular functional effect is seen to justify the means.

My contention is that there is such an ideal topic: namely, language play. Of all areas of language use, I see language play as the one which is most capable of altering popular linguistic perceptions—powerful enough to “take on” prescriptive attitudes and provide an alternative, positive view of language. It has this power, I believe, because it is grounded in some of our earliest behavior in infancy, and is highly developed long before negative attitudes to language arise. It is a natural behavior—something which people do without conscious reflection. It is also pervasive—a democratic behavior, in the sense that everyone plays language games, without regard to educational background or social class; once a language has been learned as a mother tongue, no further special intellectual or physical skills are required. Because play is often incorporated within the educational process, there is a natural link with the development of early institutionalized linguistic thinking. And playing with language also presupposes the first step in metalinguistic awareness—the ability to step back and use (reflect on) language as an entity in itself. I conclude from these preliminary observations that, if we can promote people’s awareness of what is going on in language play, it may well be that we are in a better position to draw their attention to the more serious “games” which can be played with language, such as those which are characterized by Orwell’s problem, and perhaps provide a means of placing the games found under the prescriptive language regime in perspective.

In view of these claims, then, it is all the more surprising that language play has never attracted much attention within our subject. Ludic linguistics, as we may call it, has been curiously neglected. For example, we have journals on pretty well everything these days—over 150 routinely covered by *Linguistics Abstracts*—but none of them yet on language play. In a well-known collection, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976) brought together a contemporary statement of research into the genre, but it did not lead to an explosion of interest. Perhaps the intellectual climate of the 1970’s was too sombre to take the subject seriously. Or maybe the fact that speech play was routinely referred to as a

“genre” kept it marginalized. For this paper, all I can do is argue that language play is much more than a genre. It is more than a ritual behaviour occasionally indulged in by secretive cliques, street gangs, children in the playground, and other groups beloved of anthropologists and ethnographers. It is more than a limited range of fixed-format structures, such as the riddle and the joke. It is more than the deviations from norms plotted by stylisticians or the interactive strategies lauded by discourse analysts. It is more important than to act as a piece of extra evidence to bolster up a phonological theory (as in the quaintly named “ludlings” much admired by non-linear phonologists). Language play, in my view, is—or should be—at the centre of our Round Table concerns as linguists.

Towards Plato: Adults at linguistic play. 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 “peekaboo”) 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* and, I’m afraid, *Another 1000 Jokes for Kids*, which are packed full of linguistically-based exchanges, read avidly (though with surprisingly unsmiling mien) by children—and not a few adults—all over the English-speaking world. Most of the jokes involve plays on words of all kinds, as in these examples from Katie Wales’s *The Lights Out Joke Book* (1991). *Where does a vampire keep his money? In a blood bank* is a straightforward lexical pun. Most involve more than this, such as those which depend on phonological play (*What’s a ghoul’s favourite soup? Scream of tomato*), phonetic play (*Doctor, doctor, I’ve just swallowed a sheep! How do you feel? Very baaad*), graphological play (as in the book-title *Witch-hunting for Beginners* by Denise R. Nockin), or a fixed grammatical construction in the question stimulus (*What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo? A woolly jumper*).

Language play involves far more than jokes, however. I once counted all game shows on British radio and television, and found that two-thirds were language based. They included games in which the aim was to guess a word in a well-known phrase (*Blankety Blank*), to distinguish between real and false etymologies (*Call My Bluff*), to talk for a minute without hesitations or repetitions (*Just a Minute*), and several which built up words using randomly generated sequences of letters. Open the published broadcasting guides, and you would see such programme titles as *My Word*, *Catch Phrase*, and *Chain Letters*. The names will differ in the U.S.A., but the games will be broadly the same. Why are there so many such games? My own view is that language-based games

are so popular because everyone can play them without training. Once you have learned to talk (or, for the writing-based games, to spell), you need no other special skill. It is not like *Mastermind*, a quiz game where you need to acquire a highly specialized area of knowledge, or *The Krypton Factor*, where you need above-average strength and athleticism. To participate in, say, *Blankety Blank*, all you need is your linguistic intuition about what word is most likely to fill the blank in such a phrase as, say, *life and _____ (limb, soul, death)*. In such games we are all equal.

Media word games are only the tip of the iceberg of language games. There are hundreds of word games recorded in Gyles Brandreth’s *The Joy of Lex* (1987), Tony Augarde’s *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (1984), or Ross Eckler’s *Making the Alphabet Dance* (1996), for example, ranging from the familiar crossword puzzle and *Scrabble* to linguistic pastimes which are bizarre in the extreme. *Scrabble*, for example, is now thought to be the most widely played game in the English-speaking world, with a formal competitive dimension, a world championship, and associated books of commentary, just like chess. But think, for a moment, about what we are doing when we play *Scrabble*. It is a game where we set ourselves a physical limit (a grid on a board), assign numerical values to letters (based on our intuitions of frequency), and then hunt out and use the most obscure (because highly scoring) words in the language. This is not rational linguistic behaviour. Words don’t normally ‘score’ anything. We do not listen to a sentence, then hold up score cards, as in an ice skating competition (even though some psycholinguists have hinted that something like this may go on when we have intuitions about grammaticality). Moreover, in *Scrabble* it is not even necessary to know what the words mean: All we need to know is that they exist. There are many publications which list all the words in English consisting of two letters, of three letters, and so on, or those which are most useful because they are highest scoring (such as *xebec*, *qaid*, and *haji*). None of them say what the words mean. If challenged, we look them up in a dictionary—and if we are playing “professionally,” in the game’s official dictionary (*Chambers*). In a market survey of dictionary use a few years ago, most people said they used their dictionaries most often when they were playing *Scrabble*.

The impulse to play with words makes us behave in a truly bizarre way. What could be stranger than deliberately constructing sentences which are difficult or impossible to pronounce, as in the popular tongue twister? Perhaps deliberately constructing a written sentence which only makes use of one vowel (a *univocalic*). A Victorian wordsmith, C. C. Bombaugh, constructed several poems based on this principle: “No cool monsoons blow soft on Oxford dons/ Orthodox, jog-trot, bookworm Solomons ...”. Another game is to avoid the use of a particular letter of the alphabet (a *lipogram*)—not difficult with, say, Q or Z, but very difficult with the most frequent letters, such as E or T. Ernest

Wright wrote a 50,000-word novel, *Gadsby*, which made no use of letter *e*: "Upon this basis I am going to show you how a bunch of bright young folks did find a champion; a man with boys and girls of his own ..." Another is to find a word or a sentence which reads the same way in both directions (a *palindrome*), as in *madam* and *Draw o coward*—the longest reputedly over 65,000 words. Or constructing anagrams which make sense: You can, if you try long enough, take the letters of *total abstainers* and make up *sit not at ale bars*; *astronomers* produces *moon-starers*. There are competitions you can enter if you want to do this kind of thing. And, as a final example, there is the *pangram*, the target being to construct a meaningful sentence containing every letter of the alphabet, with every letter appearing just once. The typist's *The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog*, is a very poor pangram containing 36 letters. *Veldt jynx grimps Waqf zho buck* is a 1984 prize-winner, though you need recourse to a major dictionary to determine its meaning.

The long history of word play has some strange episodes. *Gematria* is probably the strangest—a medieval mystical practice in which secret messages were thought to be hidden in the letters of words. If we use modern English, and assign numerical values from 1 to 26, in serial order, to the letters of the alphabet, *Gematria* texts will show you some remarkable correspondences—identical totals, or adjacent totals, or totals separated by 100. If you add the numerical value for *arm* to that for *bend*, you get the total for *elbow*. *King + Chair = Throne*. *Keep + Off = Grass*. More significantly, according to its practitioners, *Jesus, Messiah, cross, gospel, and son God* each totals 74. Let me show you how it works, from the present conference. Why did Alatis end up a Dean? Because ALATIS is 62 and UNIVERSITY is 162. Why is Crystal at GURT? Because CRYSTAL totals 98 and GURT totals 66 ($\times 3 = 198$). Why are ALATIS and CRYSTAL sharing the same podium today? The numbers tell it all: 6x JAMES E. ALATIS is 690; 5x DAVID CRYSTAL = 690. People who know me well usually call me DAVE (32); people who know James E Alatis well call him JIM (32). We ought to get on famously, especially in WASHINGTON (130), the same as DAVE CRYSTAL (130). And where else could ROUND TABLES (131) develop but in WASHINGTON (130) and in GEORGETOWN (129), thus completing a series? Still, let's not get too cocky: That series can be capped by the combination of CLINTON and GORE (who together total 132). Is it especially significant that LANGUAGES = 87, and so does CLINTON? But I am not a political animal; therefore, let me say straight away that GEORGETOWN (129) also equals LAMAR ALEXANDER, and LINGUISTICS (142) equals PATRICK BUCHANAN.

What a waste of time! Or is it? I enjoyed the half-hour I spent seeing what would work out, and most people find the results amusing. I don't suppose we will try and live our lives by these numerical coincidences, as did happen in medieval times—only travelling on days whose value was felt to be auspicious,

or arranging marriages on the basis of numerical identity. Some people get very serious about word games. For instance, you don't mess with crossword enthusiasts. I know a man who gets very nasty if he can't complete his *Times* crossword in an hour. And it is perhaps no coincidence that so many crossword compilers, such as Ximenes and Torquemada, chose as their pseudonym the name of a practitioner of the Spanish Inquisition. But most of us appreciate the fun involved in playing with our language, manipulating letters, searching for coincidences, looking for the unexpected links between words. It is all around us. Look on the walls of many a subway and you will find thousands of examples of linguistic ingenuity—the apparently unending set of variations on—*rules OK*, for example. Begun as a soccer fan's slogan, *Arsenal Rules OK?*, it has generated thousands of variants, and continues to do so. (Recent ingenious cases include *Archimedes rules—Eurekay!* and *Mallet rules croquet?*)

Some professions rely greatly on verbal play. Newspaper sub-editors all over the English-speaking world devise headlines or subheadlines with great ingenuity. From the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for example: *A shedentary life* (an article on men's garden sheds), *A roo awakening* (an article on gourmet kangaroo meat). Advertising agencies make their living by it. One of the most successful sequences in advertising history, still going after 20 years in the UK, is the word-play of the Heineken lager series, which began in 1974 with *Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach*, and which later included such word substitutions as *pilots, parrots, pirates, poets, and partings*, each accompanied by a failed visual situation (such as a poet unable to compose verse) which was then turned into an immediate success after ingesting quantities of the appropriate lager (Crystal 1995: 389). But this is not just a professional matter. Listen to any informal conversation, especially among young people (which is most of us) and there is evidence of language play: the mock regional tone of voice adopted when someone is 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). Literature aside, everyday conversation is the most creative of language varieties.

Lastly, nonsense. It would be wrong to conclude this brief review of adult ludic language without some reference to the occurrence of controlled unintelligibility as a feature of language play. At least all the above examples are meaningful. But literal nonsense also exists, in a range of everyday contexts from euphemistic swearing (where a nonsense word is used to avoid a blasphemy or obscenity) to the conversational use of such memory-fillers as *thingummy* and *watchamacallit*. Language play makes use of nonsense, too, as in the case of scat singing and, at a literary level, in such creations as Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," many of the neologisms of James Joyce, or the crazy

verbal concoctions of Ogden Nash. Malapropisms and spoonerisms are other famous examples. And while we are in the literary world, we should not forget the use of abnormal spelling as a source of language play, seen at its best in the oeuvres of Josh Billings and Artemus Ward, which so dominated the American social scene in the late nineteenth century (Crystal 1990; 1995: 84).

These examples are brought together to substantiate the view that verbal play is natural, spontaneous, and universal. It is practised in some shape or form by everyone, whether they are born jokers, or people who would never receive an Oscar for their sense of humour. It is not solely a matter of humour, after all, but involves notions of enjoyment, entertainment, intellectual satisfaction, and social rapport. Although patterns and preferences vary greatly, the phenomenon seems to cut across regional, social, and professional background, age, sex, ethnicity, personality, intelligence, and culture. (See the review by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976.) Whether the motivation which drives it is innate or learned, I do not know; but when we examine the classic example of Plato's problem, child language acquisition, we see it there from the outset. From Scrabble, we therefore turn to babble.

Children at linguistic play. Language play is at the core of early parent-child interaction. We see it in the deviant linguistic behavior 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). Moreover, as Bruner and others have often pointed out (e.g. Ratner and Bruner 1978), these interactions have a clear-cut task structure, with a limited number of semantic components, considerable repetitiveness, and high predictability, and this promotes the emergence of a “play within the play”: Having established in the child, through repeated occurrences, an expectation that a game is to develop in a particular way, parents are then very ready to disrupt this expectation, in the hope that it will elicit an even stronger response. For example, a game such as “round and round the garden,” which has a rapid and highly tactile climax, is deliberately varied by introducing a pause before the climax—making the child “wait for it,” in effect—and thus eliciting extra enjoyment. 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.

What is extraordinary is that the development of language play in the young child has been so little studied. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provided an anthropological, cross-cultural perspective in 1976, but speech play seemed to fall out of fashion in the increasingly serious tone of academic linguistic discourse of the following years. 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 in a review of 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 1980's (Fletcher and Garman 1986) nor in the latest child-language anthology to appear, *The Handbook of Child Language* (Fletcher and MacWhinney 1995). However, from the limited literature which exists, some hints about developmental progress, at least for production, can be established. (See further Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976.)

Phonetic play seems to be the first step. From around age one, 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 one and two—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). They also begin to associate tones of voice with entities: In one babbling monologue, from a child aged 1;3, the babble accompanying play with a toy rabbit was uttered in a high pitch range, and that with a panda in a low pitch range.

Phonetic play is followed by more structured phonological play, from around age one introducing prosodic variations, producing language-specific, conversation-like utterance which is often referred to as “jargon” (Crystal 1986). From around age two, 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): Her Anthony at around 2;6 produced many such sequences of the kind *bink ... let Bobo bink ... bink ben bink ... blue kink ...* Some were also meaning-related: *berries ... not barries ... barries ... barries ... not barries ... berries ...* We should not be surprised at this: When you are alone in the dark, at this age, there is not much else you can do but play with language. Delight in the sound of words is also reported by James Britton (1970), who tells the story of a small boy, brought to collect his father from a psychology conference, who went dancing through the hall chanting repeatedly the phrase "maximum capacity." "Words are voices" said one 2-year-old, when asked.

Within a year, these monologues can become very complex—Britton calls them "spiels" (1970: 83). They may be spoken alone or to an audience. An example from Clare, nearly three: "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, what Britton calls "a kind of celebration" of past experience—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 three and four, 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 near (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 five, 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 (i.e. *No 'arm in it*) quoted above.

Original sin manifests itself in young children very early on. Once they 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 behavioral level. What is less obvious is that exactly the same process goes on at the linguistic level. Being naughty with language seems innately attractive—the BADLAD notion again. From as early as three, 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 kindergarten. They will be rude at adults or other children by altering the sounds of words: *Dad Pad* said one 5-year old to me 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. I think 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 six, 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 seven. 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 four to seventeen): She found an important transition at around age six, 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 eight/nine to talk back-to-front (Cowan and Leavitt 1982; 1987). Finally, there are the pseudo-intellectual games played by children of around ten ("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 (as nicely portrayed in the adolescent use of group solidarity nonsense which is the title of Jack Rosenthal's television play *P'tang yang kipperbang*, 1982).

Statistics on verbal play are few. In several studies on metaphor development, the frequency of figurative language in the language children hear around them is strongly stressed: Nearly 40% of teachers' utterances to students in Grades 1-8 contain nonliteral uses (Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson and Johnson 1989), and its frequency in reading materials for older children is regularly stressed (Milosky 1994). Wolfenstein makes some useful comments on joking preferences: "At six or seven about three times as many joking riddles are told as jokes in any other form. In the following three years the percentage of riddles is little over half. At eleven or twelve it is reduced to a third; riddles are being discarded in favor of anecdotes" (1954: 94). In an informal collection, Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976: 101) found that Opie-type rhymes varied from an average of one per child at age five to a peak of six per child at age eight, thereafter decreasing until about the age of eleven "at which point interest in many of these kinds of productions drops off sharply and other kinds of verbal art ... appear to be of greater interest" (1976: 102). Esposito (1980) found that word and sound play occurred in 13% of the experimentally elicited utterances of 3- to 5-year olds, though a third of the subjects showed none at all at that age. Ely and McCabe (1994) looked at several categories of language play in children between 5;5 and 6;8, and found instances in 23% of the utterances—almost one in four. Their context was natural discourse, where it is

evidently much more common than in experimentally controlled settings or those where a teacher or other adult is present. Language play here was defined broadly: It included distinctive sound play (repetitive, rhythmic or melodic phonation, onomatopoeic sound effects), word play (e.g. rhyming, neologisms, metaphor), role play (adopting another voice), and verbal humor (including riddles, jokes, teases, nonsense remarks, and jokey allusions, such as *What's up doc?*). Sound play represented nearly a third of all language play, showing the persistence of this modality from the first years of life.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that language play is an important element in language development. The point is nowhere more strongly stressed than in Chukovsky's book, where he 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). The "tumbling and rhyming" (a description by Dylan Thomas) of children as they spill out of school is universal. 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 that 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).

Piaget and Vygotsky, among others, had already drawn 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. And Bruner comments that language is "most daring and most advanced when it is used in a playful setting" (1984: 196). The persisting absence of language play is likely to be an important (though hitherto little remarked upon) 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.

But 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 suggests that there are important consequences for pragmatic development. Sanches and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976: 102) suggest there may be a developmental progress in the child's interests, moving from phonological to grammatical to semantic to sociolinguistic, but the situation is undoubtedly much more complex. 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: There is now a whole journal devoted to the topic (*Language Awareness*, from 1992). 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 understand 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). Much of the above discussion is only indirectly related to metalinguistic skills, and conversely, 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 (though it is conspicuous by its absence from most reading materials: See Crystal 1996).

And back again. The aim of my paper has been to find a way in which two very different kinds of linguistic concern—characterized as Plato's problem and Orwell's problem—can be interrelated. I believe that the task of forging such a relationship is important, in order to develop a conception of theoretical linguistics which applies equally plausibly to phonological, syntactic and semantic domains, on the one hand, and to sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, pragmatic, and applied linguistic domains, on the other. Language play is of direct relevance to both: Because it is based on the notion of formal manipulation—of sounds, structures, sense—it bears directly on the nature of deviance, which is a critical element in our sense of the grammatical. And because it is chiefly motivated by the desire to create an effect in others, it bears directly on fundamental issues in pragmatics, acquisition, and variation, as well as on our judgments about what counts as creativity. If anything should be proposed as a Grail at the centre of the 1996 Round Table, therefore, given its theme, it ought to be language play.

Apart from this general motivation for a renewed focus on ludic linguistics, I have also argued that it could be a promising means of getting to grips with the negative language attitudes associated with the prescriptive tradition which linguists routinely encounter. I hope it is not too much to suggest that, if some progress can be made with this regime, we may learn something about how to tackle the more dangerous games that people are known to play with language, and which motivated Chomsky's original characterization. But that is for the

future. All I have done today is begin with a manifestation of Orwell's problem, propose a way forward in the form of language play, and turn to Plato for a helpful perspective. By getting Plato talking back to Orwell, I think I have solved Crystal's problem—though, admittedly, I may have to use James Joyce as a translator.

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