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Everyone plays with language or responds to language play. We play with language when we manipulate it as a source of enjoyment, either for ourselves or for the benefit of others. I mean 'manipulate' literally: we take some linguistic feature - such as a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters - and make it do things it does not normally do. We are, in effect, bending and breaking the rules of the language. And if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun.

But enjoyment and fun are not words which usually come to mind when we start to think about what language is and why it is used. We tend to adopt a more sober perspective. What is language for? The conventional answer talks about people 'communicating' with each other, in the sense that one person sends a meaning, a message, a thought, an idea, and another person receives it. The whole point of language, it is assumed, is to foster the transmission of knowledge, however this is defined - as concepts, facts, opinions, emotions, or any other kind of 'information'. Why use language? - for 'the expression of thought', says the *Oxford English Dictionary*; for 'expressing thought or feeling', says *Chambers*; for 'communicating ideas or feelings', says the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language*.

But if this is all there is to language, what are we to make of such episodes as the one I report at the beginning of my *Language Play* (1998), on which I based my centenary lecture? There I reported a fragment of a conversation recorded between two couples who had got together for an evening. Following a story about their respective cats meeting in the street, one person coined the word *catfrontation*, and the others then tried to outdo each other by finding words beginning with *cat*- which could be plausibly related in meaning to the conversational topic. The event was said to have been a *cat-astrophe*, perhaps a *cat-alyt* for further meetings, even though one of the cats had *cat-arrh* - and so on. The humour bounced back and forth between them, in an almost competitive spirit - which is why this kind of behaviour has sometimes been called 'ping-pong punning'. Judged by any professional standards of comedy, the efforts of these four conversationalists ranged from the pathetic to the brilliant. But that is not the point. The real point is that all were having an excellent time. They did not mind that the conversation had been temporarily disrupted, and they were happy to keep the main topic in suspension. They applauded each other's cleverness, using groans and laughter, and nothing else seemed to matter.

It is difficult to see how ping-pong punning can possibly fit in with the view that the purpose of language is to communicate ideas. For what new knowledge was being transmitted between the participants, as they bounced jokes off each other? None. What had they learned, at the end of that part of the conversation, that they did not know before? Nothing. There seemed to be a tacit

agreement that none of their language was to be taken at its face value, while the exchange was in progress - that no sentence was to be interpreted as containing any real information. After all, the feline situation was not truly a catastrophic one. Nor was one of the cats really going to develop catarrh. The rules governing literal discourse were evidently suspended, while everyone delighted in verbally showing off.

This conversation gives us a hint of what the world of language play is like. It is not that it lacks rules: when we play language games - as any games - there must always be rules. Rather, the rules of ludic language are different from those which govern other uses of language. In particular, there are special ways of speaking, and often special facial expressions, to show that an utterance in a conversation is intended as a piece of word-play. The part of the word which is the focus of the pun (*cat-*, in this conversation) is usually pronounced in a more careful or prominent manner, and the speaker often looks quizzical or smug. Listeners are expected to make energetic use of just a small range of possible responses, such as the forced (or real) groan. And - very important - the participants must not make the same pun twice in a single sequence. No-one would consciously re-use someone else's pun, any more than they would listen to someone telling a joke, then tell the same joke all over again.

If the *catfrontation* exchange were an isolated instance, it would hardly have motivated a whole lecture - or indeed a whole book. But pun-capping sequences of this kind are a very common feature of informal conversations, especially between people who know each other well. As James Boswell said, 'A good pun may be admitted among the smaller excellencies of lively conversation' (1791, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, Ch. 61). Men and women seem to use them equally. Nor do they seem to be restricted to particular ages, professions, or educational backgrounds. While the *catfrontation* conversationalists were evidently educated enough to be able to use such words as *catalyst*, ping-pong punning as a genre of word-play does not rely upon learned examples, and usually taps into words which most people know. For example, in another conversation, the sight of a chair with an arm missing elicited the quip *Don't worry, it's 'armless* - a pun that has probably been made (along with *'armful* and *out of 'arm's way*) thousands of times around the English-speaking world, by people from all educational backgrounds, as they encounter damaged armchairs or someone with an arm in plaster.

Personality, of course, can't be ignored. To say that 'everyone engages in language play' is not to say that everyone engages in the *same kind* of language play. Some people are good at puns, and never miss a chance to drop one into a conversation; others never use them, and cannot stand people who do. Joseph Addison thought of punning as 'false wit' (10 May 1711, in *The Spectator*, 61); John Dryden as 'the lowest and most grovelling kind of wit' (1672, 'Defence of the Epilogue', appended to *The Conquest of Granada*). But those who do not wish to be involved in ping-pong punning do not thereby cut themselves off from the world of language play. People who do not practise one form of language play always favour another. If it is not puns, then it might be puzzles. If not puzzles, then panel games. If not panel games, then poetry. Ludic language exists in hundreds of different genres, and adds enjoyment to our daily lives in many routine ways. It is not just a matter of

humour, or laughter: the notion of enjoyment encompasses much more, and has a range of different functions. Four of these deserve separate comment.

First, language play is important socially. It brings people into rapport with each other: groups of people bond by sharing each other's language play. Word games may be the means of bringing people into organized relationships, as with those who enter anagram competitions or play Scrabble in clubs; or they may simply help people break the ice, as when a comment on the day's crossword puzzle may be the only vocal exchange allowed to intrude into the silence of a commuting railway compartment. Permitting others to play with your name (a pet name or nickname) is an important signal of intimacy; rejecting someone's use of that name is just as important an intimation of distance. Enjoying others' language play is a sure sign of a healthy social relationship; and disaffection with someone's language play is just as sure a sign that a relationship is on the way to breaking down. When you get annoyed by someone's silly voices, find their mock regional accents extremely irritating, or their favourite word-game pointless and boring, then all is definitely not well. As George Eliot put it, 'A difference of taste in jokes is a great strain on the affections' (1876, *Daniel Deronda*, II, Ch. 15).

Secondly, language play is important personally. It adds to our quality of life, providing opportunities for personal enjoyment that are both free and unlimited. If we perceive it as a challenge - such as when we try to construct a story in which every word begins with the same letter, or a poem which makes use of only one vowel throughout - then it is one to which few sports can compare, except perhaps a game like golf, where there is You, The Ball, and That Hole - nothing else counts. With language play, there is You and The Language - that's all. You can set your own targets for achievement. And if you choose to engage in competitive language play, then if the course of language acquisition has run smoothly, everyone starts on a level playing field. Language play is a fundamentally egalitarian pastime.

Thirdly, language play is important educationally. Children value it too. They grow up within a ludic linguistic world. It is the first kind of language they experience, and indeed they experience little else throughout the whole of their first year. It comes to permeate their lives. It is their main means of achieving rapport with their parents and peers. And they quickly become competent in it themselves. By the time they get to school they know that language play is one of the more enjoyable reasons why anyone should want to engage in the task of language learning. That is why a school world without language play is so alien, and perhaps it is the very lack of ludicity in many reading materials which explains why the progress of so many children towards literacy and advanced language skills has been slow.

Fourthly, language play is important creatively. There are many domains in which people express themselves in a creative way through language - including advertisers, newspaper headline writers, comedians, comic writers, artists, theologians, and, of course, literary authors. A thorough study of the ways in which professional authors manipulate the rules of the language to suit their purpose ('bend or break' them, as Robert Graves once put it) would be a very large work indeed. Virtually the whole of poetry would be encompassed. As soon as we accept the facilitating

constraint of a poetic structure, such as a line length, a rhyme-scheme, a verse pattern, or a graphic design, we have begun to play with language. The 'bending and breaking' appears in the contrasts of rhythm and pause, of alliteration and rhyme, of word order and lexical choice, and in the many other effects which lie dormant in the storehouse of language. Anything can be bent or broken, for special effect, and it is usual for several things to be broken at once. In the non-literary world, this tends not to happen: most of the effects are the result of the breaking of a single rule - a particular point of pronunciation, spelling, or syntax, or a simple play on words. In the literary world, by contrast, we must be prepared to encounter multiple effects, where sounds, grammar, and vocabulary collaborate to produce a level of linguistic expressiveness which ranges from playful and intriguing to moving and profound.

These are some of the reasons why language play is so important, as a topic of enquiry. And also why it is surprising to see that it has been so much ignored in our definitions and descriptions of language. As pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the ludic function of language is generally not mentioned in dictionaries or introductory texts - or is at best marginalized. Yet it is one of the most important dimensions of language. How can it have been so neglected? Perhaps because our academically enquiring minds, over the centuries, have been taught to look steadfastly only in one direction - that of 'language as information'. Or perhaps scholars have unconsciously dismissed language play as being too trivial a topic for serious study. The situation is slowly changing, as psycholinguists and sociolinguists, in particular, investigate it. But we have a long way to go before it comes to be widely appreciated that language play is universal, frequent, and normal.

My centenary lecture illustrated this argument: I claimed that it is part of the normal human condition to spend an appreciable amount of time actively playing with language within some of these genres, or responding with enjoyment to the way others play. I gave examples of cases where the time involved in ludic behaviour becomes truly significant - possibly even excessive; and illustrated ways in which one can devote one's whole life to it - and be paid for it at the same time. I asked where the need to play with language comes from. Was Samuel Beckett right to assert, in *Murphy*, 'In the beginning was the pun'? I looked back over the course of child language acquisition, and suggested that, if we do have a 'language instinct', as some authors have maintained, then it is indeed chiefly for language play.

My Penguin book, I hoped, would provide a source of further illustration and support for these remarks. I did not expect that, just three days after I gave my centenary lecture, I would receive strong support from no less a source than *The Times*. But indeed, there was an article by Tim Jones (19 November 1998) reporting on a poll conducted to mark the launch of a new puzzle magazine in the UK. Its heading was 'Britain is a nation proud to be puzzled'. Of course, this is 'puzzled' in the broadest sense, including the non-linguistic as well as linguistic; but the thrust of the piece clearly supports the spirit of my argument. I therefore quote most of the article below, and conclude that in its detailed observations there must be topics for several possible doctoral dissertations into ludic linguistics.

Britain has become a nation addicted to solving puzzles, with nearly three quarters of the population regularly confronting challenges from the intricacies of The Times crossword to simple coffee-break teasers.

Puzzle-solving, a MORI poll shows, is more important to many people than making love and is an obsession that spans the generation gap. One woman in three, it appears, spends more time on puzzle solving than love-making, while one man in four admitted the same.

The poll shows that half of those who do puzzles attempt them every day, with a fifth devoting more than an hour to the pastime.

Puzzle-solving is more popular in Scotland and the North of England, where people spend more time on it than southerners. Even young people, the survey showed, are hooked, with three quarters of 15 to 24-year-olds tackling puzzles, a quarter of them every day. While the sitting room is the most popular place for puzzle solving for six out of ten people, only one in 12 takes puzzles to bed or to the kitchen.

People who admit to doing puzzles in the lavatory spend up to an hour there. Not surprisingly, only one in a hundred tries to do them in the bath, and one in ten admits tackling them at work, with men more likely than women to waste their boss's time.

My title was meant to suggest that people have a love of language play. Until I read this article, it had not occurred to me that the 'of' in that sentence could ever be replaced by 'or'.