

# Climbing the Language Mountain

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KEYNOTE

Near where I live in the small town of Holyhead, in North Wales, is a mountain. Holyhead mountain. It isn't a very large mountain, as mountains go – just 710 feet – but it stands out above a generally flat surface in the county of Anglesey, and cocks a snook at the grand old man, Snowdon, some 40 miles away. Because it is there, one climbs up it. And from the top one can see Ireland, on a clear day, and the mountains of Cumbria, and the Isle of Man. It is, more or less, the geographical centre of the British Isles.

Everyone climbs the mountain, from the earliest possible age. As I say, it is what one does. I have, I am told on the best possible advice, been up there while still in the womb. Certainly, one of my earliest memories as a child is being taken for a walk up this mountain. And insofar as I have done to my own children what then must have been done to me, and seen their reactions, I probably felt quite excited at the prospect. But what I remember most of all is not the view from the top, but the sense of anticipation as *I thought* we were arriving at the top, only to find that what I had perceived from my near-ground level to be the summit turned out on closer acquaintance to be only a child-sized hillock interrupting the path as it continued its climb upwards. And after that hillock was passed, there would be another, and another. Never did a mountain have so many summits! And before long the novelty would begin to wear off. I must have asked, as I have heard my own children ask, 'Are we there yet', a hundred times. And been told, as I have told them, that the top is just around the next bend. 'Never trust adults' is something one learns very early in life. And I have lost track of the number of occasions when we have given up, half way, and decided to come down again, having discovered that mountains and tiny feet are not always made for each other.

You may by now be thinking that you have arrived - or tuned in - to the wrong conference. Or that perhaps I have picked up the wrong set of notes, and am here on behalf of the North Wales Tourist Board. On the other hand, you have read my title, so you are expecting mountains to come into it one way or another. I am, indeed, intending to use the notion of mountain as a giant metaphor for what we are about when we engage in language teaching with the young

school child. I will not do the metaphor to death, I promise, but I do want to make something of it at the outset in order to explain why we have made relatively little progress in approaching the task of improving the abilities of children as they grow in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Although we have set out with great strides, I shall argue, we are still only in the foot-hillocks of the language mountain. And in a few cases where we have found paths which take us a significant way up the mountain, I want to suggest that these paths may not take us to the top, and that there is another route, almost totally neglected, around the other side. But it is a route which some old climbers say might be dangerous. They wouldn't go that way, if they were us. There may be dragons (Welsh dragons, of course).

Is language a metaphorical mountain? If we review its basic structural features, we must surely conclude that it is. In order to produce the speech I am using to you now, I am making use of an inventory of some 100 audibly different phonetic units, organized in my accent into 44 units which make differences in meaning - the vowel and consonant phonemes, such as /b/, /f/, /e/. These phonemes combine to make syllables, and there are over 100 possible syllabic combinations of vowel (V) and consonant (C) in English, ranging from the simple CV or CVC (*so*, *cat*) to such sequences as CCVCCCC (*glimpsed*, /glimpst/). There are a much larger number of ways in which these vowel-consonant combinations can be written down - the rules (and exceptions) of the spelling system. Indeed, because the spelling system is to such a large extent artificial, being partly the product of arbitrary manipulation over several hundred years, it takes a very large book indeed to tabulate all the constraints which we use when we encode sounds into spellings, or decode spellings into sounds: for example, there are over 500 decoding correspondences listed in *Camey's Survey* (1994: 522,ff.).

When we utter our spoken syllables, we must give them some prosody - pitch, loudness, speed, tone of voice - and there are (according to one system of analysis) at least 100 ways of varying these features in order to allow us the comment, 'It ain't what you say, but the way that you say it'. We then use these syllables, singly or in combination, to make up words, and words combine with other words to make up

phrases, clauses, sentences, dialogues, paragraphs, and other such things. We have now entered the world of grammar. It doesn't really make sense to ask 'how much' grammar there is in a language, but it is worth reflecting, in relation to our metaphor, that the largest descriptive grammar of English currently available, *The Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Quirk, et al, 1985) consists of 1800 pages, and weighs 2.4 kg. Its Index consists of some 8,000 headwords (excluding cross-references), each one dealing with a specific grammatical point: just under half of these relate to general statements about sentence or word structure; just over half relate to the idiosyncratic grammatical behaviour of individual words. But even if we consider only the general features, we must conclude that there are about 3,500 points of grammar - grammatical rules of one sort or another - to take into account when someone is beaming English.

Already our language mountain is looking uncomfortably large. But the whole of phonology, graphology and grammar gives us only the foundations of our subject. The bulk of a language lies in its vocabulary, and here the statistics begin to get truly impressive. How many words are there in a language? The biggest dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Webster's Third New International*, contain around half a million items each - but they are not the same half million, and there are many words which neither book includes (especially relating to the newly developing regional Englishes around the world), so the real figure must be well over a million. Most of this is scientific and technical, of course: if we consider only everyday vocabulary, the number of words available for us to learn is much lower - most people have an active vocabulary of 30-50,000 words, and a passive vocabulary about a third larger. This is quite impressive, but actually it is only the beginning of the lexical story. We must not forget that most of the common words of the language have more than one sense (sometimes 20 or so, in the case of verbs like *take*): the average in a college dictionary is about 2.5 senses per entry. So the average size of a 'domestic' semantic system - the number of everyday meanings available to us - must be around 100,000.

In this account of the language mountain, we have got as far as sentences containing a good vocabulary. But we all know that there is much more to language than this. We need to put our sentences together to make convincing connected speech and writing. We need to collaborate in using our language with others and make convincing dialogues. We need to learn the rules governing acceptable conversation - how to be polite, when it is permitted to interrupt, how to start and leave a conversation, and the like. All of this is the domain of pragmatic skills, and try as I might I cannot put a figure on just how many of these skills there are, but it is obviously very large. We all get a sense of just how large when we first encounter the realities of a foreign language. We learn in school the rules of grammar and pronunciation controlling the

use of, shall we say, *tu and vous*, and then realize that it takes the best part of an early lifetime to learn the factors controlling which of these forms should be used on what sort of occasions to what sort of person. Parents begin to teach their children to be aware of the importance of pragmatic behaviour from around age 3 - 'Don't speak like that to your gran', 'I don't want to hear any bloody swearing in this house' - and some of the basic patterns of conversational discourse are laid down much earlier, in the first year of life; but a great deal of first schooling is devoted (usually with neither teacher nor child being consciously aware of it) to the establishment of the language's pragmatic rules.

We are not finished yet, in identifying our language mountain. So far we have discussed the various features of language structure, and the factors which lead us to choose one structure rather than other. But as we look or listen around us, what is very noticeable is the diversity of linguistic experience. No language exists in a single variety, or dialect; and English, given its lengthy cultural and literary history, and its remarkable global spread, is very well endowed with regional, social, occupational, and other styles of speaking and writing, which in aggregate make up the thing we call the English language. The mature language user is aware of a large number of these, and makes active use of many of them. For example, we can all recognize, at least in broad outline, the difference between American and British accents, between religious, legal, and scientific English, or between different literary styles, and we can all employ the differences between formal and informal styles of expression, both in speech and in writing. Some of us, especially those with a mobile sociolinguistic history, are able to control more than one regional dialect, allowing us to identify with a range of diverse communities (we are *bidialectal*, or *multidialectal*; and some of us are able to go even further, in our search for linguistic solidarity, by being in the fortunate position of being able to use more than one language (we are *bi- or multi-lingual*). For bilinguals, the language mountain has two very distinct summits (though sharing - if Chomsky *et al* are right, in their account of universal grammar - the same structural foundation).

Even a brief account of the language mountain might seem guaranteed to lead those who have responsibility for language teaching into a state of unmitigatable gloom. On the other hand, at least, it fuels the argument that those involved in language teaching should be paid properly - for it certainly illustrates the nature of the professionalism which needs to be acquired. But the size of the language mountain inevitably prompts the question: how is it possible to become so aware of all these variables that one could ever make a full and proper assessment in the case of children who encounter difficulties - and they all do, some of the time. Indeed, with all this to learn, how do any children ever manage it? Well.

children and I speak to all who claim to remain young at heart - we did; and most of us have no memory at all of how we succeeded in our acquisition of what has surely been rightly called the most complex area of human behaviour we ever have to learn. The task facing our psycholinguistic brethren, of course, is to explain how on earth we did it. The contemporary wisdom on the matter reflects a much more eclectic view of the process than was apparent a decade ago, when the world of psycholinguistics was full of 'competing' theories - Chomsky vs. Piaget, nature vs. nurture, and so on. Today the research domain has matured to the extent that it is possible for fair-minded people - like you and me - to see the complementary contributions which the different theories can make to our understanding of child language acquisition. I like to talk of the three I's, in this connection: instinct, input, and interaction. Chomsky is right when he asserts that children must be credited with some kind of innate ability; but no child is going to learn language without appropriate linguistic input; and no amount of input is going to work if the child is not given the right kinds of opportunity to use this input in active interaction with other language users, both child and adult. It seems that, in the world of child language acquisition research, everybody has been right some of the time. Like the caucus race in *Alice in Wonderland*, everyone wins, and everyone gets prizes.

Insofar as there are children who scale the language mountain with unselfconscious ease - achieving their spoken language acquisition targets well within the age-range that the descriptive studies suggest, and taking to the written language like the proverbial duck to water - then the role of the teacher is minimal. These children seem to manage, whatever the reading scheme employed - or 'despite' the scheme, as some educators have put it. Let us all spend a moment in prayer that we shall be the one to have a classroom full of such children a prospect as remote as winning the National Lottery. The reality, of course, is the recognition that many children experience a degree of difficulty which attracts our attention and concern - and the scale of difficulty, as we all know, ranges from relatively minor problems within just one medium (listening, speaking, reading, writing) to fundamental problems affecting all four - and where we find ourselves having to think in terms of special educational needs, and making a close encounter with the terminology of diagnosis. For such children, the climb up the mountain is more difficult than it should be; for some, it is long and hazardous; and for some, as we know, there is little chance that they will ever reach the top.

To help such children, whether their problem is identified at an early age as one of listening and speaking, or whether it emerges in school, as they encounter unexpected difficulties with reading and writing, a variety of approaches have been devised in the past thirty years. All of them can be grouped,

linguistically, under one of two headings: they are either structure-orientated approaches or use-orientated approaches. The former has an ancient history, for it stems from the approach to language study which can be traced back to classical Greek times, and which found its expression in mainstream language education during the 18th century in the classifying and labelling procedures which those of us who are slightly less young in body will probably remember very well: in the field of grammar, parsing and clause analysis; in the field of poetry, the study of versification, with lines being analysed into sequences of metrical feet (iambic pentameters, and the like). All the domains of language teaching have their structure-based approaches: for example, there is the grammar-translation approach found in foreign-language teaching, the phonic or look-and-say approaches in the teaching of reading, and the procedures in speech pathology which painstakingly introduce a child to an array of sounds, words, and sentence patterns, graded on developmental principles. These all provide an important dimension of language enquiry - but they are only half of the story.

The other half of the story is the investigation of language in terms of its patterns and contexts of use. This approach emerged in the 1960s as an alternative to the structural approach, which was losing favour at the time. It focused on the communicative functions of language, identifying a wide range of situations, such as advertising, science, religion, journalism, and commentary, in which language received distinctive expression. This was the era in mainstream English education when teacher and student listened together to tape recordings of discourse, when children brought into school scrapbooks of examples of different genres, and when classroom discussion concentrated on the intentions behind a use of language, and on the effects a spoken or written text achieved. Because the texts were generally taken from areas of experience familiar to the student - there was much debate at the time over the use of comics, annuals, and television programmes - the language-in-use approach came across as a much more dynamic and realistic account of language than the one presented by the structural approach, with its often stilted and de-contextualized examples. And for some 20 years it was the orthodoxy, with parallel movements seen in the communicative approach to foreign language teaching, the focus on communicative skills in early childhood, various communicative and pragmatic approaches in speech pathology, and the notion of authentic materials, such as 'real books', in the teaching of reading.

The 1990s has seen a coming together of the two approaches. The problem with the language-in-use approach is that it was usually taught without any reference to language structure. Indeed, some official reports of the time, such as the *Bullock Report* (Department of Education and Science, 1975) went so

far as to suggest that structural knowledge was unnecessary or obfuscating. This meant that students were being asked to talk about an interesting use of language without having been given any of the tools they needed to carry on the discussion in a precise way. I well remember the time, when I was teaching first-year undergraduate linguistics, and realized that I would have to change my lectures (which talked, *inter alia*, about traditional rules of usage such as 'never end a sentence with a preposition') because most of my class did not know what a preposition was. Many of you will have gone through school without having had any systematic introduction to ways of talking about grammar. But how one is supposed to identify the most effective elements in a piece of advertising, or plot the emerging sentence patterns of a young child, or grade the readability of a piece of writing, without some semblance of technical terminology is beyond me.

And, of course, it proved to be beyond everyone else, too. During the 1980s the clamour grew for better metalinguistic tools. And metalanguage has become the buzz word of the 90s - a language for talking about language, as necessary within our own **field** as in any other. Imagine trying to talk about the structure of a flower, or trying to compare different types of flower, if the only terms available were to do with how pretty the flowers looked or how nice they smelled. People wanted structure back, but not the old way of talking about structures, with its dry-as-dust artifice; they wanted a structuralism imbued with the dynamism of real use. It ought to be possible, it was argued, to find exciting ways of introducing even the most technical aspects of language to children. It would take time and ingenuity, but it could be done. The new syllabuses, such as the British National Curriculum for English, have begun to insist that structure and use be brought together. And projects like the Longman *Book Project* (Palmer, 1994), aimed at Key Stage 2 of the National Curriculum, and *Language A to Z* (Crystal, 1991) or *Discover Grammar* (Crystal, 1996), aimed at Key Stages 3 and 4, have begun to show what can be done by way of teaching materials, across the age range.

However, as these examples indicate, most of this work has focused on the needs of the older child, from juniors on. And the question still needs to be answered, for a conference such as the present one: how exactly are the domains of structure and use to be brought together in the early school years? Let us assume that you agree with the prevailing mood, that structure without use is sterile, and that use without structure is vague. In other words, that, in teaching a sentence pattern, you would want to teach children how it is used, in contexts which they would find meaningful and relevant; and conversely, in presenting children with a novel use of language, you would want to draw their attention to the structural features on which it relies. If, as I say, you are in broad agreement

with this eclectic approach, then how are you going to implement it? What area of language is likely to be most fruitful in bringing notions of structure and notions of use together? Is there a path up our language mountain which allows you to do this?

I believe there is, but it is a path which many people would instinctively avoid, because it forces them to work with domains of child experience which have traditionally been thought of as impediments to oracy and literacy. This is the world of language play, of 'ludic' linguistics - a world which is built upon the notion that rules are there to be broken, a world which brings us into contact with comics, the playground, the television, and the video game. These are the dragons. But they are not dragons to the child. And I want to spend the next part of my paper saying why I think they should not be dragons to teachers either.

Let me first of all make sure that, when I talk about language play, we are all thinking about the same thing. We play with language when we take delight in manipulating its structures and uses - purely in order to enjoy ourselves, or to give enjoyment to others (Crystal, 1998). It involves changing what is nonnal and mundane into something which is unusual and eye- or ear-catching, and it affects all the areas of the language mountain which I identified earlier - sounds, spellings, grammar, vocabulary, discourse, and use. It is one of the most frequent of language behaviours, and yet one of the most neglected in textbooks on language. When people ask 'What is language for?', the answer is usually given in informational terms - for 'the expression of thought', says the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for 'communicating ideas or feelings', says the *Longman Dictionary of the English Language*. But there is far more to language than this. Any definition of language which mentions only the communication of information ignores vast tracts of language use which have other purposes: to express social identity or solidarity (that is what accents and dialects are about, after all), to generate social rapport (as in everyday chat about the weather or health) - or, simply, to play.

For we all do it. We engage in language play when we tell riddles, make puns, or are simply being silly with words. I have a record of a group of neighbours describing an occasion when their cats met in the middle of the street. One described this as a *catontation*, and this caused the others to engage in a game of 'ping-pong punning' as they scored points off each other by inventing sillier and sillier neologisms. One person said it was a near *catastrophe*, another said she didn't mean to be *categorical*, and so it went on, getting worse and worse - until their ingenuity got tired, and they moved on to another topic. We also engage in language play when we make jokes which rely on language (rather than on an absurd situation) for their effect - and most of them do. I'm sorry about this, but I need to illustrate. 'What do you get if you cross a sheep with a kangaroo? A woolly jumper'. This

is semantic wordplay, and jokes likewise play with sounds, spellings, grammar, accents ('funny voices'), dialects, and conventions of dialogue. Professional comedians make their living by it. In all these cases, the chief end of playing with language is to add humour to the situation.

But it is not only humour which is involved. Advertising copy-writers play with language all the time, in order to increase the impact of a brand-name: slogans typically play with language. The classic example is the slogan for Heineken lager, which began with the ordinary-sounding 'Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach', and over a 20-year period introduced a range of alliterative alternatives for *parts*, each accompanied of course by an appropriate visual image - *pirates, pilots, poets ...* Newspaper editors play with language when they put catchy or quirky headings above their articles - such as the heading I found last time I was in Australia, from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, above an article on marsupial food, 'A roo awakening at the table'. And, above all, authors play with language when they develop distinctive styles in their writing, especially in poetry, which is probably the most sophisticated form of language play. Robert Graves captured the spirit of this function of language when he commented that a poet needs to 'master the rules of grammar before he attempts to bend or break them'.

Poetry may be the most sophisticated form of language play, but it is by no means the most ingenious. That accolade falls to the many kinds of linguistic puzzle which we set ourselves, and which we play in our millions with evident enjoyment, such as crosswords, anagrams, and tongue-twisters, and brand-named activities such as Lexicon, Boggle, and (queen of language games) Scrabble. Scrabble in fact is an excellent example of just what is so distinctive about language play as a human behaviour. It is a grid game where the aim is to use up your letter tiles by making possible words, and to make as many points as possible in the process. Note that all you need to know is whether a word is possible; you do not need to know what it means. Indeed, some Scrabble books do little else than list all the 2-letter words in the official dictionary, or all the highest scoring words. Now this is not normal linguistic behaviour: we do not judge other people's speech or writing in terms of high- or low-scoring letters or sounds. We do not hold up cards after someone has said something, like in ice-skating competitions, and rate their performance. It is an aspect of language being enjoyed for its own sake.

A particularly interesting set of examples of language play occurs on radio and television, where a wide range of new genres have emerged in recent years, such as the chat show, the soap, the sports commentary, the weather forecast, and - the game show. Over half of all game shows broadcast involve language play, such as choosing from a selection of letters to build up a word, guessing the meaning of an

obscure word, or filling the gap left within a sentence (to take just three common examples). In the British TV game 'Blankety Blank', for instance, the aim is to guess the omitted word in a well-known phrase, such as *life and —*. There are various options (*life and limb, life and death, etc.*), and the player is given a selection of these options from which to choose. If the player selects the same option as the one chosen by a celebrity guest who acts as a partner, the player wins. They have used their intuitions to 'fill the blank' in the same way.

Now, it is important to appreciate that the only qualification required to play such a game is to have a linguistic intuition. The game provides a context where everyone is equal. There is no need for careful intellectual preparation, such as is required for games like 'Mastermind', in which you have to swot up on general knowledge (a misnomer if ever there was one) and become an expert in a specialized domain of enquiry. Nor does it require a period of physical limbering up, so that your body is allowed to qualify for the programmed torture demanded by such games as 'The Krypton Factor'. To play 'Blankety Blank' you do not have to be intellectually or physically fit. You just have to be a speaker of your language. Anyone can play, from prince to pauper - or, as there supposed to be no paupers in our new British socialist world (and maybe no princes either, if some have their way - but I don't need to tell Australians about that) - from publicans to politicians. In these games, everyone is equal - and that presumably is why they are so popular.

Everybody plays with language or takes pleasure from language play, in one or other of its manifestations. It feels natural and comfortable, and it is certainly commonplace. Indeed, it is so frequent that it must, as I have suggested, make us revise our basic definitions of language - or at least add to them. In language play, we come face-to-face with a function of language which is nothing to do with the communication of ideas at all. Whatever happened when the neighbours swapped their *confrontation* puns, and talked about catastrophes, and being categorical, and the animals having catarrh (I told you it got worse), they were not exchanging information.

Where does this deep-rooted love of language play come from? The answer is obvious; it is the foundation of the interaction between parent and child from the very beginning. Any examination of caretaker-child interaction during the first year of life brings to light very few examples of the intonation-exchange function of language. Only from time to time does a parent provide intonation instruction, of the 'That's a dog' type. For the most part, what both parties engage in is language play. Baby-talk is a good example - used by everyone instinctively (including children, who have been heard to use baby-talk to babies from as early as age 3) - because the chief feature of baby-talk is the way in which the normal rules of the language are manipulated to make the speech more noticeable

and appealing to the baby. What we all want is to elicit a reaction from the child - a personal rapport, a mutual recognition - and so we unconsciously exaggerate our normal behaviour in various ways - adding lip-rounding to our pronunciation, stretching our pitch-range, shortening our sentences, and making our discourse highly repetitive ('Oh you're lovely, yes you are, you're lovely, you are lovely', etc etc etc). Incidentally, the adoption of baby vocabulary, which some people hate (*doggie, choo-choo*, etc), is a minor and relatively infrequent feature of baby-talk.

But language play with babies involves far more than baby-talk. It involves genuine play, in the sense of specific game-like activities, but activities in which the focus of the play is speech, as opposed to some non-linguistic game, such as build-and-bash (and even that is never carried on in silence, but receives a spoken commentary which is very much part of the game). A typical example of language play is the peep-bo (peekaboo) game, where it is essential to choreograph the linguistic and the visual elements precisely - one cannot play peep-bo using words and no sudden-appearance actions, nor by appearing suddenly in silence. Another is the 'round and round the garden' game, in which the linguistic element is choreographed with the tactile. It is in fact difficult to find any routine interaction between parent and child in the first year which does not involve an element of language play. Even nappy-changing, with its obligatory tummy-nuzzling, has its linguistic counterpoint.

At the ARA conference in Sydney in 1995 I reviewed the course of language play in the young child, and this is now available in its proceedings (Crystal, 1995), so it would be otiose to tell the story again here. Let me just give a few illustrations to remind you of the kind of playful thing that children do very early on to language. During the third year, they will be heard playing with the sounds of language, making up nonsense words which rhyme with each other: one child took the word *dump*, which obviously appealed to it, then changed it into *tump*, then *tumpy tump*, then *tumpyfump*, and so on. Phonological play sequences of this kind can go on for a quarter of an hour. Bryant & Bradley (1985) report several examples of rhyme-play from older children, such as *The red house, made of strouss*. Children are very ready to invent new words, make up silly names for people (*Mr Poop, Mrs Dingly-Tingly*), use naughty words, put on silly voices. They are very ready to break the rules, saying *Good morning* when it is evening, and the like. All parents will recognize the 'silly hour', when it seems impossible to get their child to talk sense. Tape-record a conversation between 4-year-olds, and you hear them playing with language all the time inside and outside the house. Outside, of course, the range of street games has been well tabulated by Opie & Opie (1959), who spent years observing children jumping rope, bouncing a ball, and doing all kinds of repetitive or

tum-taking games, and cataloguing what they said.

And what do they say, these young children? They say things like *Shirley Oneple, Shirley Twople ... Shirly Temple (= Temple)*. They repeat jingles such as *Oh myfinger, oh my thumb, oh my belly, oh my bum*. Why? As the Opies say at the 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' (1959: 17). Indeed, there is no better account of the various factors than their comment on the above jingle which, they say, '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.'

All of this is intended to provide support for a simple but much-neglected point: that at the stage when children arrive in school, their linguistic life has been one predominantly devoted to language play. Not only have they learned a significant proportion of the structural rules of the language - the phonology, the grammar - and amassed a significant vocabulary (between 5,000 and 10,000 words), they have learned how to manipulate those rules in order to play. They take pleasure in language, they enjoy playing with language, they have interacted with adults who enjoy it too. In their view, language play is what language is chiefly for.

Then they arrive in school. Where language play has traditionally been widely frowned upon. If you heard a child dare to play with language in the classroom - adopt a silly voice, say some of the silly things I have illustrated - what would you do? Would you welcome it, reinforce it, praise it? Or would you perhaps say (and I am now quoting from classroom observations) that such language is 'better off in the playground', that this is 'where we are sensible, not silly', that we 'don't use words like that in here'. George, don't do that! But let me up the ante. When did you ever play with language yourself. Or, just as much to the point, when did you ever encounter language-teaching materials which are imbued with the spirit of language play? Do you allow the possibility that areas of language use which do routinely play with language, such as comics, TV cartoons, or video games might be a valuable source of language-teaching content? Would you welcome naughty words like *knickers* in a reading-scheme? Or maybe that is going too far, 'the slippery slope to pornographic literature', as someone said to me once? Oh yes, there be dragons, all right, and we have to be sensible. But are they enough to stop you exploring the neglected path up the language mountain?

If your answer to some or all of these questions is 'yes', you may sleep now. But for others, I need to argue the case, and the first point is to illustrate the

extent of the gap in terms of language play between the real linguistic world of the child and the language world which children encounter when they learn to read. The debate between reading schemes and real books has not focused on this issue, and yet it is - from a linguistic perspective - the chief point. Indeed - and again I stress, from the perspective of child language acquisition - it is the only point. For the axiom which should underlie all work on language intervention, whether in classroom or clinic, is the same as that which underlies all good educational practice: that one will make most progress when teaching can be related to what the student already knows. Putting this in linguistic terms, if the language of reading materials is essentially familiar, if the child can identify what reading is about, then a barrier is going to be removed. But no such language can be familiar if it ignores language play.

I see this argument as no more than an extension of what we have been doing in our language work in the past - but it is an extension which involves a more radical altering of perspective. If you recall, in the 1970s a great deal of attention was devoted to evaluating the words and sentence patterns found in reading materials in relation to the stages of spoken language acquisition which children would normally have achieved - avoiding advanced vocabulary or syntactic structures (such as the passive) in the early books of a scheme. For example, I remember collaborating in a whole project along those lines (Bevington & Crystal, 1975). In the 1980s more attention was being paid to making materials sociolinguistically familiar, especially in relation to such areas as gender and race - what Baker & Freebody have called 'the culture of literacy' (1989). You will I am sure recall the climate of the period if I say that 'Fetch your grandmother a Martini' was being replaced by 'Get your nan a Four X'. And in the 1990s we have seen especial progress in the movement to make materials intrinsically appealing, both in book form and electronically. All of these developments continue to be important: if materials are too difficult, structurally, or too alien or stereotypical, socially, or are simply unappealing, aesthetically, unnecessary barriers have been put in place.

I am at this point struck by a simple fact. If all this excellent research and debate had provided us with the final answers to our questions about literacy, we would not be meeting here to discuss it today. There would be no more need of conferences about language and literacy. But conferences there are, plenty of them, and there seem to be just as many questions calling out for answers as there were thirty years ago. They are rather different questions, now, admittedly; things have moved on. But none of us would say that the problem of how to teach reading has gone away. All of which suggests to me that neither of the two well-trodden paths up the language mountain have enabled us to get near the top. So maybe the time has come to

look for another pathway. And maybe this pathway could be language play.

The reason I find language play such a plausible candidate is because it provides a bridge between the two domains of language structure and language use. The argument, in essence, has four steps. (1) Children are used to playing with language, and encounter language play all around them. (2) Language play chiefly involves manipulating language structures. (3) Our aim is to improve children's ability with language structures. Therefore (4) we should make use of their abilities in language play - before going on to teach them other uses of language with which they are less familiar. Language play, on this account, becomes a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar linguistic world.

Moreover, it is a permanent bridge, not just one which applies at age 5. As children grow up, their language play becomes increasingly sophisticated (eventually ending up as the kind of play we use as adults), and it is thus always available to the teacher as a point of connection with the rest of the curriculum. At age 5, the kind of language play is going to be relatively simple, as we have seen - play with rhymes, perhaps, or with stories, as *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* so splendidly illustrates. At the age of 6, more advanced metalinguistic skills can be introduced, reflecting the cognitive linguistic shift which takes place at that time. Wolfenstein (1954), for example, shows how joke preferences vary with age, and draws attention to the transition which appears in the seventh year, as children switch from improvised fantasies to the beaming and telling of ready-made jokes (riddles, puns, and formulaic jokes, such as 'Knock, knock' or 'Doctor, doctor'). As one 6-year-old girl remarked, 'We didn't know any of these jokes last year'. There is great opportunity here for teachers to 'talk about language' with the children. And even more so as the language games become more intellectual with age, and the children experiment with talking backwards or adding nonsense syllables to words, and begin to play the range of grid games and puzzles found in any Book of Word Games. By the age of 10 or 11 it is possible to introduce children to the world of dialect humour, given that by then they will be expected to have made progress with standard English. One of the best ways of demonstrating the point of having a standard language is in fact the dialect humour book, where regional examples are mock-translated into standard English - but with *Let Stalk Strine* a classic example of this genre, you don't need me to tell you that.

Despite these arguments, language play has not yet been incorporated into our pedagogical thinking. I stress here that we are talking about language play - not situational play. There are of course plenty of examples of playful or absurd situations in our literacy materials. In *Wacky Wednesday*, for example, a child wakes up and finds that everything has gone mad:

shoes are on ceilings, palm trees grow out of toilet bowls, and so on. But the language describing these bizarre happenings is totally conventional. Nor is there any hint of language play in the traditional reading schemes of the 'Janet and John' type. Nor do Baker & Freebody, using an Australian corpus, make any reference to it. There is even an avoidance of imaginative figures of speech, such as metaphors and similes. In an analysis I did of the early books of one scheme for the ARA 1995 paper, you would have to read over 300 sentences, on average, before you would find an example of a piece of figurative language.

Nothing much has changed. I accept, of course, that readers these days, whether structured or 'real', do typically display much greater thematic relevance, with imaginative and ingenious story-lines taken from what we know to be motivating in children's everyday experience and fantasy. The dialogues, indeed, can be colloquial and vivid. But from a ludic point of view, the text is invariably sanitized. The illustrations can be wacky, but the captions are not. An alien spacecraft crashes into the sea, full of weird and wonderful creatures, but the text describes the event using the conventional word *Splash!* - not *Splaaash. Kerashhh I*, or any of the crazy spellings which are a routine part of the child's comic world. The amazing creativity which has characterized children's readers in recent years has been channelled very largely into character and plot, rather than language. Beautiful pictures. Lovely story. Linguistically unimaginative text. And, by degrees, children learn that, to conform, they too must produce linguistically unimaginative text - a process of conventionalization which has actually been observed in a study of the development of metaphor by Gardner *et al* (1975). They found that pre-schoolers were much more ready to produce vivid metaphors than older children, who became progressively more literal, concrete, and conservative during the junior school.

Of course there are some splendid exceptions. In the world of reading, I recall the tongue-twisters of Dr Seuss, the nonsense verse of Lewis Carroll, Spike Milligan and others (e.g. Foster, 1985), and the onomatopoeic creations produced by the children in James & Gregory (1966). 'Putting up the fair', for one child, was a sound poem:

"Glunk glunk glunk glunk Lock lock lock  
lock / Buzz Buzz Buzz Buzz / rolla clatter  
rolla clatter / patter patter tip tip tip / wing  
wang wang wang / bang bang / clatter clatter  
/ squeek squeek / clug clug clug / bang."

Eat your heart out, iambic pentameters. Another area where you will be likely to find some language play is the letter-recognition book (the 'ABC Book'), where there is often playful manipulation of letter shapes and use. Then there are the 'do it yourself (or maybe it should be 'pick your own') sentence books, such as *Find a Story* (Vidler, 1974), where you construct your

own sentence stories from an array of phrases provided by the author. The 'Dr Xargle' series (Willis & Ross, 1990) is a good example of texts which are lexically daring, using babytalk vocabulary, playing with word structure, and introducing neologisms (*walkiey, tiggers, tiggerlets, cowjuice*). Puns are beginning to make their presence felt (the Penguin books *Spooner or Later, Duck for Cover*, and so on). And sometimes a whole discourse can be the focus of language play, as in *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (Scieszka, 1989), where the story is told from the point of view of the wolf. You will be able to provide further examples from Australian publishing. But even a good range of isolated cases do not make a climate of opinion.

Maybe a new climate is forming. It's interesting that the two new schemes from major publishing houses to appear last year both pay special attention to language play - the first ones to do so. Rhyme, rhythm, and alliteration are the focus of the 'Rhyme and Analogy' programme in the *Oxford Reading Tree* (Goswami, 1996). Roderick Hunt's *Bad Day, Good Day*, for example, has this kind of thing: 'Thursday was a late day. / The sort of day I hate day. / Had to run - day. / Dropped my bun - day. / Thursday was a late day.' The same emphases are to be found in *Cambridge Reading* (Brown & Ruttle, 1996), where there are books like *Rhyming Riddles*, nursery rhyme books, number rhymes, and so on. Children are encouraged to adapt a published story to write a new story of their own. Both series are accompanied by extensive teachers' materials which draw attention to the relevant theoretical background. We are no longer talking 'exceptions' here: these are serious, systematic, and courageous attempts to build a new orthodoxy.

There are risks, of course. With missionary zeal, it is always possible to go too far. Whole books are written in rhyme, in these schemes. And this, of course, is a possible problem. If everything rhymes, rhyme ceases to have its point. It loses its effect. We are back with the caucus race. Moreover, rhyme is not the whole story. It has been shown to be important for phonological awareness, and thus for early reading - but there is far more to language development than phonological awareness, and far more to language play than rhyme. And if rhyme is focused upon to the exclusion of everything else, it is in danger of creating a world which is just as artificial as the rhymeless world of before.

I have to applaud these efforts to introduce aspects of ludic language on such a large scale, and they may well play an important role in developing a climate of opinion; but we are still far removed from any kind of pedagogical orthodoxy. There is as yet no general expectation that materials should include elements of language play, nor much discussion of what happens when such elements are included, nor how teachers should incorporate a ludic perspective



within their teaching. The earlier debate is not entirely relevant. Several decades ago we learned, from Piaget, Bruner, and others, about the importance of 'play as practice', but they were talking about play in general, not about language play, and the real nature of the link between language play and later linguistic ability still needs to be explored. So far there have been few studies demonstrating that there are such links - exceptions include Bryant & Bradley's work (1985) showing the relationship between rhyme and reading ability, and Ely & McCabe's (1994) showing a similar link with riddle comprehension. To motivate such discussion, I will content myself with a simple remark from the psychologist Chukovsky (1963), who suggests, with reference to rhyme-making in the second year of life - but the point can be generalized to the whole of language play - that it is 'an inescapable stage of our linguistic development. Children who do not perform such linguistic exercises are abnormal or ill'. And if you do not believe that language play is conspicuous by its absence in children suffering from language disorder, ask any speech pathologist.

My concern today has not been to devise new teaching procedures or materials. That is the next step. It has been simply to argue the case for a fresh perspective - a fresh path up a side of the language mountain where some people have said there are dragons, but where on closer inspection the dragons turn out to be friendly and helpful. I hope I have persuaded you - if you needed persuading - that this is a path worth exploring. That in the world of comics, game shows, playground rhymes, silly words, and so on, there is a domain of language which can and should be tapped. The message is that language play mustn't be marginalized. The children bring some powerful mountain-climbing equipment with them to school, and see adults using it all around them. It is an obvious way to scale the language mountain, and one which, by its nature, is likely to be more enjoyable than others. I think the tiny feet would not get so tired if we led them up that way. And I hope you will agree with me that the time is now ripe for some ludic linguistic exploration.

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