

Foreword

Three main forces lie behind our use of language. We need to be intelligible, and that promotes the use of a standard variety. We need to express our identity, and that promotes the use of non-standard varieties, typically in the form of accents and dialects. And – the reason for this book – we need to be creative, in the form of language play.

We can of course play with anything in the world. But nonlinguistic play has its limitations. It is restricted to particular places and times, the objects and games have to be purchased, and then stored and retrieved – from playrooms, cupboards, upstairs... By contrast, playing with speech, the earliest form of language play, is unrestricted. Speech is there for us in the light or dark, heard around corners, immediately available, and it costs us nothing. Not surprisingly, then, language play is universal, encountered in every language that has so far been described.

The academic study of the subject – ludic linguistics, as I like to call it – took some time to emerge. Nineteenth-century philologists and the earliest practitioners of twentieth-century linguistics either ignored it or gave it only anecdotal treatment. Danish linguist Otto Jespersen, for example, devoted a whole chapter to playful uses of language in his *Mankind, Nation and Individual* (1946), but it was buried at the very end of his book, and the chapter is headed, almost dismissively, ‘Other eccentricities of language’.

Things started to change in the 1960s when anthropologists began to take an interest. Terms such as ‘play languages’ and ‘ludlings’ begin to appear. In 1971, at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New York City, there was a ‘Symposium on Linguistic Play’, and this led, in 1976, to a ground-breaking collection of papers, *Speech Play*, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, which clearly demonstrated, from many languages, that the use of speech (and not forgetting writing) for enjoyment, as an end in itself, was everywhere. The subtitle indicated its fundamental role in human behaviour: ‘Research and Resources for Studying Linguistic Creativity’.

Linguists were increasingly involved too – notably Roman Jakobson, whose ‘poetic’ function of language included many of the notions explored in *Language Play and Children’s Literacy*; and the new (at the time) fields of sociolinguistics and stylistics generated hundreds of papers. A further

boost was provided by the development of research into child language acquisition. Several papers in the new *Journal of Child Language* (from 1975) focused on children's language play. These were some of the academic shoulders I stood on when I wrote my own introduction to the subject in 1998.

But something was missing. At the same time as linguistics was growing as an academic subject, there was a parallel development of applied linguistics, which included the study of the way language was used in clinical and educational settings. The initial focus, understandably, was on the first of the three functions of language I described above, concentrating on the teaching of the standard language, and debating the issues that arise, such as different approaches to the teaching of reading and the relevance of grammatical terminology. Language was, in a word, a very *serious* subject, and it was dealt with in a correspondingly serious way in several government reports (such as the Bullock Report, Department of Education and Science, 1975). Looking back, the topic of language play is conspicuous by its absence.

It didn't take long for academics and teachers to realize that there was a gap between the world of the child, in which language play predominated (as this book clearly shows), and the world of the school, where it was marginal or absent. Slowly, research studies began to accumulate, focusing on the way the ludic behaviour and expectations of children in their pre-school and out-of-school lives could be incorporated into their schoolwork, to make it more enjoyable and motivating. Children's authors joined in, as many of the examples in this book illustrate. And the results were truly impressive, with the young speakers and writers, liberated from a narrow linguistic focus, exploring their personal oracy and literacy with fresh enthusiasm and – as the examples of their writing in this book show – remarkable creativity.

Much of this story – routinely experienced in classrooms these days – has been hidden from public view. And that is why *Language Play and Children's Literacy* is so innovative. It brings together in a comprehensive and systematic way the findings of academic research and classroom practice, and demonstrates how the best children's authors have taken the principles of language play to heart and shown how they can be exploited – and, of course, used as models by the children themselves in their own schoolwork. That is the beauty of this book, to my mind: it repeatedly lets the children, as it were, speak for themselves in their creative writing. It hasn't been done like this before. It is a book that brings us up to date

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on what has already been achieved, and provides fruitful ideas for future progress, whether as researchers, teachers, or writers. It is a welcome and timely addition to the literature.

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