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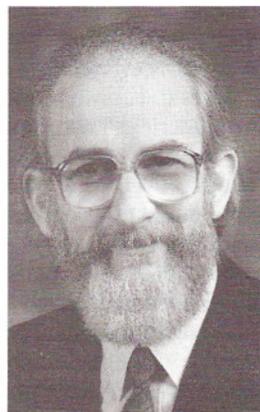
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# Language BLANK literature: from conjunction to preposition

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*A consideration of how language and literature run together and can be studied together*

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THE STUDY of language and the study of literature have been artificially separated for far too long. The origins of the separation can be traced back to classical times, but we have had our fill of it in recent decades, with generations of children being forced to live within the parallel universes of 'lang' and 'lit' in school, then moving to the more sophisticated and intellectually challenging world of the university only to be faced there with the same divide – though usually presented in a more intriguing (i.e., vituperative) mode. After university, some of them might engage in a career of teaching English as a foreign language, and find themselves in centres where the institutional demands of the syllabus require an interest in prepositions or pronouns to be rigorously separated from one in Pasternak or Pinter. There is rarely a chance to cross the divide, in either direction, to allow the interests to interpenetrate. So often the boundary lines between the two subjects seem to be universal, permanent, set in stone. Yet, though sanctioned by generations of practice, it can be argued that the division is intellectually indefensible, creatively

limiting, and pedagogically absurd. It surely has to go. At the very least, as my title suggests, in the new millennium we should be aiming to replace in our mindsets the use of conjunctions, which keep the two domains apart, by prepositions, which integrate them. But, which preposition?

## A unified approach

Let us begin with the conjunctions. Traditionally we talk of 'language AND literature'. Often a choice has to be made (in taking examination courses, for instance) between 'language OR literature'. Unfortunately, all too often we find people expressing their attitudes as 'language

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BUT literature', where – depending on intonation and facial expression – the locution means either 'language BUT (not on your life) literature' or 'language BUT (now you're talking) literature'. Or, vice versa, of course. When we stay with conjunctions, we have very few alternatives to choose between, and all are divisive. Conjunctions have a lot to answer for.

I suppose there must have been a time when I accepted this way of talking, but I cannot remember it. My earliest intellectual encounters with the issue always seemed to pull my sympathies in the opposite direction. My first degree must have had a great deal to do with it. I was fortunate to follow the kaleidoscopic University College London syllabus of the late 1950s, where the history of the language, phonetics, linguistics, Anglo-Saxon, Middle English, and all centuries and genres of literature rubbed shoulders in a single English degree. Marlowe or Milton one moment, plovers or place-names the next, then close encounters with Grendel or Grimm's law (the alliterative appeal of Anglo-Saxon verse never leaves you alone, once you have tangled with it), which forced lang and lit into an initially implausible but ultimately rewarding accord. As a consequence, I could never understand how anyone could look at a piece of literature without wanting to understand how it achieved the effects it did, or why anyone would want to study language without exploring its expressive potential to the full. Nor did the case seem any less compelling during my own sporadic forays into creative writing, where I found myself continually involved in a fruitful interplay between what seemed to be inspirational and analytical 'modes of knowing'.

Some sort of unified approach seems eminently desirable. For what is it, exactly, that we are studying when we say we are 'studying literature' or 'studying language'? In both cases, we are trying to obtain access to intuitions – of authors, in the first case, of non-authors (for want of a better term), in the second. The quality of thought is of course a crucial variable, in arriving at this distinction, but in the final analysis both groups of people are reliant on the same basic set of language structures. Under the one heading, intuitions about language are being used to shape poems, plays, novels, short stories... Under the other, the intuitions are being used to enter into a wide range of linguistic activities, both as producer and receiver – situational dialogues, telephone

conversations, letters, newspaper articles, advertising slogans. The important thing to appreciate is that the linguistic structures involved in each domain have a common point of origin.

## Common origins

The common origin of these intuitions is developmental in character. 'Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen', said US novelist Willa Cather – an observation which applies with particular force to language. Language acquisition studies have demonstrated that children – future authors and non-authors alike – acquire (within a language) the same patterns of sounds, syntax, vocabulary, and discourse at more or less the same rate and in more or less the same order. This is not to deny the possibility of linguistic precocity being present in some who eventually become literary greats; but precocity is always easier to recognize in retrospect. Far more difficult is to observe children in the process of acquiring language now and predict which of them will become the leading authors of the next generation. Indeed, it is impossible, for there is no simple correlation between linguistic fluency and such factors as intelligence or literary brilliance. There is probably no correlation at all. We all know people who are highly verbal, some of whom talk brilliant sense, others who talk embarrassing nonsense. And there is no way of predicting – not, at least, in our present state of developmental linguistic knowledge – which child is going to display that combination of insight and originality which will make him or her worth reading one day.

A few will of course come to do very special things with the linguistic rules they have learned. In due course, intuitions will diverge, as opportunities, motivations, and experiences diversify, and there must come a point when we are able to recognize important qualitative differences between the linguistic awareness of (at least some) future authors and non-authors. Doubtless these include, at least, a larger range of vocabulary, a greater consciousness of the stylistic contrasts available in the language, and an increased sensitivity to rhythmicity in speech and writing – along with a stronger propensity to make use of language's ludic possibilities (see below). But in all cases, the special ability is not one of kind, but of degree. It grows gradually,

from the same starting-point. At the outset, all learn the same rules, and share the same linguistic intuitions. And the option of increasing vocabulary range, stylistic sensibility, rhythmical sense, and ludic awareness is in principle open to anybody. Indeed it is surely to foster such developments that we have English departments in schools – or, for that matter, local drama repertory companies.

Asserting a common origin for authorial and non-authorial linguistic intuitions should not be interpreted as diminishing the importance of that 'special something' which is at the heart of literature. Literature is plainly special with respect to the quality of the inspiration which its authors have achieved, their insight into the human condition, the freshness of their perception, the power of their imagination, their creativity in interpreting characters and events, and so on. 'Literature is news that stays news', said Ezra Pound (in his *ABC of Reading*, Ch. 2). In short, it is produced by people who 'have something to say', and the evaluation of the significance of that 'something' takes us well beyond language. But, before we can go anywhere, those who have something to say must grapple with the medium in which they choose to say it. And there, the issues are at one with those who are learning language (whether as a first or foreign language), or who are learning about language, for non-literary reasons. 'It's not what you say but the way that you say it ...' This is the task facing language learners and authors alike. And it is in trying to explicate this notion of 'the way we say things' that the case for a unified approach to language and literature becomes, in my view, compelling.

## Linking the domains

This case rests on two arguments. First, the range of structures and functions which we encounter in everyday language is also found in the study of literature. Second, the kinds of linguistic effect judged to be important to literature are also to be found in everyday language. My feeling is that those who have traditionally argued for a link between the two domains have not made their case as strongly as they might have done, because they have focused on only the first of these two arguments, and on only the first part of the first one (structures, not functions). The stylistics literature is full of analyses in which the aim has been to show how particular liter-

ary effects can be explained as an extension of the structures found in everyday usage. Terminology varies: for example, some analysts talk about the breaking of rules, others about patterns deviating from a norm. But the common intention has been to demonstrate a structural relationship (lexical, syntactic, phonological ...) between what happens in everyday language and what happens in literature. This is then used as the basis for a semantic characterization of what is conveyed by the literary effect.

One example must suffice to remind readers of what is an enormous academic genre. Dylan Thomas attracted a great deal of attention in early stylistic studies because many of the effects he used could be easily discussed in this way. A usage such as 'a grief ago' would have its dramatic effect elucidated by teasing out the semantic potential in the everyday structure, 'a ... ago'. The nouns of time which are routinely acceptable in this slot would be illustrated ('hour, minute, week ...'), and interpretations suggested for what happens when an abstract noun of emotion is put within a temporal frame. Some features of this interpretation would be fairly obvious (e.g. the 'grief' in question becomes more specific and determinate), others would be less so (e.g. the fact that nouns of time are members of a potentially infinite series suggests that the poet is seeing this 'grief' as one of an indefinite series of griefs). There would be discussion of the effects, of how these fitted in with other features of the text, and whether a coherent interpretation could be achieved. Sometimes, coherence was defined purely in linguistic terms; sometimes, it would be related to hypotheses about the text, or about the author as a whole, which were literary in character.

This way of proceeding achieved mixed reactions. Stylisticians claimed to be illuminated, and to offer illumination, by means of such analyses. And even when there was no particular illumination being offered, supporters of the approach argued that a desirable objectivity was being introduced into the discussion of literary effect. Critics of the approach would tend to focus on the more obvious of the conclusions in a proposed interpretation, and claim not to be impressed. Some investigations were appreciated as useful contributions; but most of them made no significant impact on literary thinking, being dismissed as exercises in 'feature spotting and counting'. In particular,

proposed explanations which required critics to grasp large quantities of linguistic terminology before they received any pay-off in terms of promised illumination were rejected out of hand. And because few linguistic investigations of an author's style began with a literary hypothesis, it is not difficult to see why a unified approach, in which literary critical and stylistic contributions were complementary, failed to emerge.

Plainly, the traditional structural approach, from everyday language to literature, has not been as successful as its practitioners hoped. So let us turn to the two other options referred to above. Is there some merit in focusing on the notion of language functions, as a means of building a bridge between the two domains? And what would happen if we turned the structural argument on its head, and looked for principles in literature which had relevance for everyday language? The rest of this paper explores these two possibilities, arguing that any case for bringing the domains closer together must devote far more attention to them than has been found hitherto.

## The relevance of language functions

By 'language function', in the present context, I am referring to the kind of answers which would be given to the question 'What is language for?' For many people, this question is so obvious as to be hardly worth asking. Reference to any general dictionary would suggest that there is only one function: 'the expression of thought' (*OED*), 'expressing thought or feeling' (*Chambers*), 'communicating ideas or feelings' (*Longman*). The focus is plain. The purpose of language is evidently to transmit information – to send a meaning, a message, a thought, an idea, to someone else – and that is all. However, the whole thrust of sociolinguistic research since the 1960s has demonstrated that this is not all. Language has been shown to have several functions, most of which have little or nothing to do with the 'communication of ideas', but all of which have a great deal to do with literature. Here are three of them.

### *The identity function*

Language is used to express identity – as is notably illustrated by the presence of accent and dialect. A regional accent, for example, is

not there to communicate ideas; indeed, if anything, regional accents get in the way of communicating ideas. The further my accent is from yours, the greater the difficulty we shall have in understanding each other. The purpose of an accent is to express identity (a means of showing which community we belong to) and difference (a means of showing which community we do not belong to). When taken alongside dialects and languages, we find an immensely powerful force existing within everyday language – a force that has led people to campaign and march and fight and die. It is concern over identity which drives the troubles in Quebec, or Belgium, or India, or Wales.

The sense of belonging which pervades everyday language may be defined in several ways; traditional accounts focus on three – regional, social, and occupational. All three are relevant in literature. Most obviously, accents are central to characterization in drama. Less obviously, attempts at portraying accent are also scattered throughout the history of the English novel (Emily Bronte, Scott, Dickens ...); the range is well illustrated in Norman Blake's *Non-Standard Language in English Literature* (Blackwell, 1981), where it is plain to see that a considerable technical task faces the author who tries to represent a regional accent – as well as the reader (or critic) who tries to decode it (or evaluate its success). Least obviously, there is a role for accent in poetry, as we listen out for the 'voice of the poet' – or, indeed, voices.

This last point has been much neglected, so it deserves illustration. Some poems make no sense – or, at least, have their impact much reduced – if we fail to see that they contain several contrasting voices. Poetry readings regularly fail to do justice to them – even, it has to be said, when the authors themselves read their own work; the monotonously heightened drone of an authorial reading is a regrettably routine experience. Henry Reed's 'Lessons of the War' sequence, for example, requires the use of two accents if its structure is to be conveyed – the voice of the sergeant-major giving the orders, and the voice of the poet as he reflects on them. It does not matter exactly what the accents are, as long as they are recognizable. Your stereotype of a sergeant-major may be Cockney, or Scots, or Welsh, or something else. It is the contrast which counts (shown below by using italics for the poet's voice):

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday  
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow morning  
We shall have what to do after firing. But  
to-day,

To-day we have naming of parts. *Japonica  
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring  
gardens,*

*And to-day we have naming of parts.*

(*Naming of Parts*)

I am sure that's quite clear; and suppose, for the  
sake of example,

The one at the end, asleep, endeavours to tell  
us

What he sees over there to the west, and how  
far away,

After first having come to attention. *There to the  
west,*

*On the fields of summer the sun and the shadows  
bestow*

*Vestments of purple and gold.*

(*Judging Distances*)

Expressing the structural contrast is essential.  
Yet I have often heard the first of these poems,  
a widely anthologized piece, read aloud by  
someone in the same 'seriously poetic' tone of  
voice throughout.

Here is an extract from a three-voice poem:  
'One of our St Bernard Dogs is Missing', by N. F.  
Simpson. To follow the structure of this, we  
need to identify the poet now, the poet then  
(underlined), and the monk (*italics*):

A moot point  
Whether I was going to  
Make it.  
I just had the strength  
To ring the bell.

There were monks inside  
And one of them  
Eventually  
Opened the door.  
*Oh*

He said,  
*This is a bit of a turn-up*  
He said

*For the book.*

*Opportune*

He said

*Your arriving at this particular*

*As it were*

*Moment*

You're dead right

I said

It was touch and go

Whether I could have managed

To keep going

For very much  
Longer.

There are poems for even more voices than this.  
But the point is made: a core feature of every-  
day speech, routinely investigated and taught  
as a part of language work, turns out to be cen-  
tral to our understanding of the structure of a  
poem. Why shouldn't our linguistic knowledge  
of the way accents work be allowed to inform  
our growing appreciation of poetry? And why  
shouldn't poetry be used as a means of fostering  
our growing awareness of the function of  
accents? And if someone tries to insist on the  
equivalent of a Berlin Wall to hinder this inter-  
action, shouldn't the Wall be pulled down?

### *The social relationships function*

Language is used to express social relationships  
– of solidarity, distance, intimacy, rapport,  
accord, leadership, dominance, and much  
more. This too is at the heart of everyday lin-  
guistic interaction. And here a great deal of  
study has been devoted to the subtle ways in  
which language can signal the ups and downs  
of relationship – for example, converging or  
diverging with respect to social rapport. In the  
case of intimacy, critical will be the forms of  
address chosen (first names, surnames, titles,  
nicknames), or the use of distinctive pronouns  
(*tu vs vous, thou vs you*). We make unconscious  
decisions about such matters hundreds of times  
each day – and sometimes they come to the  
surface, as when we actually ask permission to  
use someone's first name, or are reprimanded  
for not using a title.

When we go looking for the use of such socio-  
linguistic forces in literature, we quickly find  
them. For instance, analysing the patterns of  
pronoun alternation can add an important  
dimension to the understanding of a text – as  
when Hamlet switches from polite *you* to emo-  
tional *thou* and back again, in addressing  
Ophelia (*Hamlet*, III.i.117):

Hamlet: I loved you not.

Ophelia: I was the more deceived.

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery ... Go thy ways  
to a nunnery. Where's your father?

The use of *thou* between people who would  
normally use *you* to each other would have sig-  
nalled a range of effects, such as anger and  
contempt. And the switch back again is an  
important sign that 'normal relations' are  
restored. It would be inappropriate for an actor  
to utter the last sentence of this quotation in

the same tone of voice as the one he had used in the preceding speech. But I've often heard it done.

Or consider the way in which dominance is expressed in this next example. It is now almost a cliché to say that Harold Pinter's plays convey an atmosphere of menace – but how is this menace expressed? A linguistic approach would begin by asking how we express menace as a general rule. There are some obvious ways – such as the use of aggressive vocabulary, or antagonistic intonation, tone of voice, and facial expression – but there are some less obvious ways, too, and we would expect a dramatist to make use of them. The manipulation of discourse conventions is one such way – as in the use of questions.

It is a maxim of conversation and a legitimate expectation that, if someone approaches you and asks you a question, you should be in a position to answer it. If the question is 'Can you tell me the way to the station?' there is no menace. By contrast, there would be something disturbing if a complete stranger were to come up to you in a London street and ask, 'Is it raining in Ottawa?' or 'Is the number six red or green?' Questions which are impossible to answer are used only by select people, such as lunatics, philosophers, poets, and people who want to cause trouble. They make an ideal source of menace, as the extract below illustrates. 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' is as everyday a piece of language as we could imagine – but it takes on special salience when it is used as the final twist in the linguistic straightjacket that Goldberg and McCann weave around Stanley Webber, in *The Birthday Party*

Goldberg: Is the number 846 possible or necessary?  
Stanley: Neither.  
Goldberg: Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?  
Stanley: Both.  
Goldberg: Wrong! It's necessary but not possible.  
Stanley: Both.  
Goldberg: Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?  
Stanley: Must be.  
Goldberg: Wrong!  
...  
Goldberg: Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?  
Stanley: He wanted to – he wanted to – he wanted to...  
McCann: He doesn't know!

Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?  
Stanley: He wanted to – he wanted to...  
Goldberg: Why did the chicken cross the road?  
Stanley: He wanted...  
McCann: He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!  
Goldberg: Which came first?  
McCann: Chicken? Egg? Which came first?  
Goldberg and McCann: Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

This method of suppressing the previously cocky Stanley is supremely successful. 'Stanley screams', says the script, and thereafter never says another word.

### *The phonaesthetic function*

We often encounter language whose chief or only function, it would seem, is to give delight purely as sound. This is a function which has been rather neglected, because it has suffered from the structuralist preoccupation with contrasts between sound, in the days when phonology was being developed as a branch of linguistics. From a phonological viewpoint, the phonetic nature of individual sounds was always seen as secondary to the changes in meaning which their contrastivity permitted. The evaluation of the significance of a pair of sounds was in terms of whether they did or did not distinguish words of different meaning. How the sounds sounded in their own right was judged an irrelevance, and the thought that sounds might have meaning in their own right was considered heretical.

There is a more balanced perspective nowadays. Several studies of onomatopoeia and sound symbolism have shown that the phonetic properties of sound cannot be written off. There is more to sound than its phonological function. It has an aesthetic function too. And slowly, research has begun to focus on whether certain sounds are (at least, within a language) perceived to be more beautiful, ugly, harsh, gentle, pleasant, unpleasant, and so on. I reported one such study in *English Today* in 1995 (issue 42). It is quite plain that in many everyday language functions – such as comforting, insulting, swearing, choosing names (of babies or products), and persuading (to buy products) – the sounds within a word can themselves carry as much weight as the meanings the words express. A 'communication' view of language functions cannot possibly explain any selection of language based on phonaesthetic considerations.

We would expect phonaesthetics to play a major role in any linguistic arts form – and, sure enough, it is pervasive, especially in the poetic ‘end’ of the linguistic spectrum between poetry and prose. Here are two examples from Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* – one of ‘poetic prose’, the other of verse. The opening lines of the play use a steady flow of metaphors to describe the sleeping town, and these are underpinned by a network of associated sound effects – such as the alternating use of /s/ and /b/ in the final prepositional phrase, hinting at the waves gently lapping on the sea shore.

It is spring, moonless night in the small town,  
starless and bible-black, the cobblestreets silent  
and the hunched, courters'-and-rabbits' wood  
limping invisible down to the sloeback, slow,  
black, crowblack, fishingboat-bobbing sea.

A little later, and we encounter the Reverend Eli Jenkins, who has written a morning poem in praise of his town. By the fifth verse, he has left meaning well behind, as he lists river names in sonorous and rhythmical sequence:

By Sawdde, Senny, Dovey, Dee,  
Edw, Eden, Aled, all,  
Taff and Towy broad and free,  
Llyfnant with its waterfall,

Clawen, Cleddau, Dulais, Daw,  
Ely, Gwili, Ogwr, Nedd,  
Small is our River Dewi, Lord,  
A baby on a rushy bed.

The names are grouped on the basis of their phonetic similarities. Semantics is irrelevant. There is nothing especially ‘broad and free’ about the Taff and the Towy. The Dee is broader, in fact. And Llyfnant is not the only river with a waterfall. Everything revolves around the sound effects – though I have no doubt that, somewhere in the world, there is nonetheless a doctoral student currently trying to establish a semantic reason for this particular fluvial selection.

## The ludic function

The functions of language identified so far – to express identity, social relationships, and aesthetic effect – are all part of daily language use. They are what ‘ordinary’ language is about – in addition to its role as a transmitter of meaning. But they are central to literature, too. Authors rely greatly upon them. So my point is simply this: that it is counter-productive to erect an

arbitrary barrier between the linguistic and the literary dimensions of study, given that both dimensions tap into the same set of forces within the language. In the final analysis, it is the same pronoun system that is employed, whether we are learning English, learning about English, writing English creatively, or explicating the creations of English writers. And an identical conclusion is forced upon us when we turn this argument around, and examine the kinds of linguistic effect judged to be important to literature. The linguistic force that drives literary expression is ubiquitous in everyday language too.

What is this force? In a word, ludicity. There seem to be few generalities which are easily applicable to literature as a genre, but surely one such is that all authors try to do fresh and individual things with language, to break away from convention, to devise forms of expression which make an impact. More than anything else, they wish to avoid banality. The conventions which are considered banale, and the norms of linguistic freshness, of course vary from age to age. For one age, the language which makes most impact might be far removed from everyday speech; for another, only the language which is closest to it might be judged as effective. But authors in all ages struggle to leave an original linguistic fingerprint on mankind.

How is it done? By the bending and breaking of rules. This phrasing is one which I took to heart when I first encountered it in Randolph Quirk’s *The Use of English* (Longman, 1962): the source is Robert Graves, who observed, in a letter to *The Times* (21 October 1961) that ‘a poet ... must master the rules of grammar before he attempts to bend or break them.’ It was an observation that could be generalized, for it applies not only to poets, but to all authors (male and female), and not only to grammar, but to phonology, orthography, lexicon and discourse as well. It also applies to those who try to understand authors, for they too need to know about these rules before they can hope to explain the precise nature of the bending and breaking which authors carry out. This, indeed, is the axiom underlying the whole of literary stylistics. But the phrase has a greater relevance, because it allows us to focus on a possible point of intersection between literary behaviour and language behaviour in general. Traditionally, rule-bending and -breaking is illustrated from such notions as rhyme, alliter-

ation, metre, word-order variations, word-coining, metaphor, simile, and other rhetorical or literary devices for structuring the expression of thought. However, these effects all have something in common, and it is this which can also be found in everyday language behaviour, in the form of language play.

'Everyone plays with language or responds to language play.' This is the opening sentence from my book, *Language Play* (Penguin, 1998). In its 225 pages, I attempt to support this assertion, first illustrating from such everyday manifestations as puns, jokes, dialect humour, funny voices, nonce words, bizarre spellings, limericks, and the use of nonsense. I move on to the complex creations of the word-play enthusiast, who manipulates sounds and letters shamelessly, in such forms as tongue-twisters, acrostics, univocalics, lipograms, pangrams, palindromes, anagrams, rebuses, gematria, grid games (such as crosswords and Scrabble), Tom Swifities, and all manner of improvisations. Then there is the world of the professional ludician – those who make a living from language play. They include advertising copy-writers, newspaper headline writers, comedians and comedy groups (the Goons, Monty Python, et al), comic writers, graffiti enthusiasts, artists, theologians – and literary authors. And in investigating where this universal penchant for language play comes from, I find it present from the earliest moment in parental interactions with their children, especially in the first year of life. Language play begins with baby-talk, blossoms with pastimes, and appears in its most sophisticated and complex form in literature. It is, indeed, a process which moves from babble, through Scrabble, to Drabble.

Of course, I am being misled by my own ludicity here. It is not that I think Margaret Drabble is the best exemplar of the bending and breaking of rules which my argument requires. Tom Stoppard would be better, for present purposes, but there is nothing in the language to rhyme with Stoppard. Why choose him? Because he provides an excellent example of how an identical piece of language play cuts across the barrier between lang and lit, and shows how illusory this barrier is.

In the British television show, 'Whose Line is it Anyway?', four comedians are made to improvise sketches of varying levels of ingenuity, using cues supplied by the studio audience or the master of ceremonies, Clive Anderson.

One such game is to hold a conversation in which the participants address each other only in questions. It might run like this:

- A: Can I come in?  
B: Do I look as if I want you to?  
A: Why are you always so cross?  
B: Why shouldn't I be cross?  
A: Are you going to let me in or not?  
B: Will you promise not to break anything?

And so on. It looks easy, but it's quite hard to make it fluent and funny. You also have to make some linguistic decisions about what counts as a question – for example, are intonational questions ('You're going to the cinema?') allowed? But it is, quite patently, an ordinary party-game, playable by ordinary people with ordinary subject-matter. It is certainly not 'literature'.

Cut now to *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. It is a fair way into the play, and the two protagonists are continuing to wonder what their life is all about, and what they are supposed to be doing. They look for ways to pass the time. Then Rosencrantz comes up with an idea.

- Ros: We could play at questions.  
Guil: What good would that do?  
Ros: Practice!  
Guil: Statement! One-love.  
Ros: Cheating!  
Guil: How?  
Ros: I hadn't started yet.  
Guil: Statement. Two-love.  
Ros: Are you counting that?  
Guil: What?  
Ros: Are you counting that?  
Guil: Foul! No repetitions. Three-love. First game to ...  
Ros: I'm not going to play if you're going to be like that.

But they do play on, for another 20 or so exchanges. It is the same game as in 'Whose Line is it Anyway?'. But this is now 'literature'.

## Which preposition?

I have been trying to demonstrate that those who engage in the study of language and those who engage in the study of literature make use of shared resources. My aim is to introduce a more positive relationship between linguistic and literary study – but at the expense of neither. To capture the nature of the relationship, I would make use of the word *symbiosis* – admittedly somewhat overused, these days,

but highly appropriate in the present context. One dictionary definition is: 'the intimate living together of two dissimilar organisms in a mutually beneficial relationship'. This is exactly right.

So, to return to the question with which I ended my first paragraph – which preposition can best capture this relationship, to fit inside the phrase LANGUAGE — LITERATURE or LITERATURE — LANGUAGE? There are several hundred to choose from. Obviously, in view of my argument, I will have no truck with those which express opposition, such as *versus*, *without*, *despite*, and *pace*, or precedence, such as *before* and *after*. I want something punchy, so the cumbersome complex prepositions are out

– *in aid of*, *in the light of*, *by means of*, and so on. I want a preposition which expresses the dynamism of a symbiotic relationship, so that eliminates the static *of*, *in* and *with*. *From* and *for* are not bad, and are desirably symmetrical (cf. *All for one and one for all*). *Through* is even better, nicely dynamic. *Towards* is where we are, but I want to go further than that. *Via* is interesting, too, but the Latin is not so cool.

I want a preposition which is symmetrical, dynamic, modern, and cool. So I choose one which is as yet listed in no grammar – at least not in this form. My vote goes for @.

LANGUAGE@LITERATURE.

LITERATURE@LANGUAGE.

That is, literally, where we should be at. **ET**

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