From Scrabble to Babble:
Reflections on Language Attitudes and Language Play

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Everyone, regardless of cognitive level, plays with language or responds to language play. The responses range from the primitive pleasure experienced by severely mentally handicapped children when they hear dramatically contrasting tones of voice (in such interactive games as 'peekaboo') to the cerebral bliss experienced by highly sophisticated connoisseurs as they explore the patterns of sound-play in, for example, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake.* Between these extremes, there are the hundreds of books with titles such as *1000 Jokes for Kids* which are packed full of linguistically-based exchanges, read avidly by children - and not a few adults - all over the English-speaking world. Doubtless the same phenomenon exists in German.

Language play involves far more than jokes, however. I once counted all game shows on British radio and television, and found that two-thirds were language based. They included games in which the aim was to guess a word in a well-known phrase, to distinguish between real and false etymologies, to talk for a minute without hesitations or repetitions, and several which built up words using randomly generated sequences of letters. Open the published broadcasting guides, and you would see such programme titles as *My Word, Catch Phrase,* and *Chain Letters.* The names will differ in the USA, but the games will be broadly the same. Why are there so many such games? My own view is that language-based games are so popular because everyone can play them without training. Once you have learned to talk (or, for the writing-based games, to spell), you need no other special skill. It is not like those quiz games where you need to acquire a highly specialised area of knowledge, or those where you need above-average strength and athleticism. To participate in, say, *Blankety Blank,* all you need is your linguistic intuition about what word is most likely to fill the blank in such a phrase as, say, *life and — (limb, soul, death).* In such games we are all equal.

Media word games are only the tip of the iceberg of language games. There are hundreds of word games recorded in *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (1984), for example, ranging from the familiar crossword puzzle and *Scrabble* to linguistic pastimes which are bizarre in the extreme. *Scrabble,* for example, is now thought to be the most widely played game in the English-speaking world, with a formal competitive dimension, a world championship, and associated books of commentary, just like chess. But think, for a moment, about what we are doing when we play *Scrabble.* It is a game where we set ourselves a physical limit (a grid on a board), assign numerical values to letters (based on our intuitions of frequency), and then hunt out and use the

most obscure (because highly scoring) words in the language. This is not rational linguistic behavior. Words don't normally 'score' anything. We do not listen to a sentence, then hold up score cards, as in an ice skating competition (even though some psycholinguists have hinted that something like this may go on when we have intuitions about grammaticality). Moreover, in *Scrabble* it is not even necessary to know what the words mean: all we need to know is that they exist. There are many publications which list all the words in English consisting of two letters, of three letters, and so on, or those which are most useful because they are highest scoring (such as *xebec, qaid,* and *haji).* None of them say what the words mean. If challenged, we look them up in a dictionary, and in a market survey of dictionary use a few years ago, most people said they used their dictionaries most often when they were playing *Scrabble.*

The long history of word play has some strange episodes. *Gematria* is probably the strangest - a medieval mystical practice in which secret messages were thought to be hidden in the letters of words. If we use modern English, and assign numerical values from 1 to 26, in serial order, to the letters of the alphabet, Gematria texts will show you some remarkable correspondences - identical totals, or adjacent totals, or totals separated by 100. Let me show you how it works, taking just identical totals, from the present colloquium. If we add the totals for Gerhard (61) and Nickel (54) we end up with 115. And 115 is also the total for the following English words (I do not know what the results would be in German: the study of cross-cultural gematriology is in its infancy): *erudition, inspiring, intelligence, proficient - corkscrew, distilling, brandywine - resolute, toughest, expansive, uninhibited, raconteur, ambassadorial, masterful, gunfighter, Torquemada* - he must have been a ferocious supervisor! What else do we have? *proceedings* - yes, he has edited more than most; *consonant* - ideal for a professor of linguistics. And what should a professor be, especially these days? *preoccupied, classroom, accountant.* And a retired professor? *pensioner, refurbished.* The only puzzle is he should not be here, in Stuttgart (146), but in Frankfurt (115).

What a waste of time! Or is it? I enjoyed the half-hour I spent seeing what would work out, and most people find the results amusing. I don't suppose we will try and live our lives by these numerical coincidences, as did happen in medieval times - only travelling on days whose value was felt to be auspicious, or arranging marriages on the basis of numerical identity. Some people get very serious about word games. For instance, you don't mess with crossword enthusiasts. I know a man who gets very nasty if he can't complete his *Times* crossword in an hour. And it is perhaps no coincidence that so many crossword compilers, such as Ximenes and Torquemada, chose as their pseudonym the name of a practitioner of the Spanish Inquisition. But most of us appreciate the fun involved in playing with our language, manipulating letters, searching for coincidences, looking for the unexpected links between words. It is all around us. Look on the walls of many a subway and you will find thousands of examples of linguistic ingenuity.

Some professions rely greatly on verbal play. Newspaper sub-editors all over the English-speaking world devise playful headlines or subheadlines with great ingenuity, and advertising agencies make their living by it. But this is not just a professional matter. Listen to any informal conversation, especially among young people (which is most of us) and there is evidence of language play: the mock regional tone of voice adopted when someone is telling a funny story ('There was this Irishman . . .') or the twisting of each other's words to score or make a silly point. Literature aside, everyday conversation is the most creative of language varieties.

Lastly, nonsense. It would be wrong to conclude this brief review of adult ludic language without some reference to the occurrence of controlled unintelligibility as a feature of language play. At least all the above examples are meaningful. But literal nonsense also exists, in a range of everyday contexts from euphemistic swearing (where a nonsense word is used to avoid a blasphemy or obscenity) to the conversational use of such memory-fillers as *thingummy* and *watchamacallit.* Language play makes use of nonsense, too, as in the case of scat singing and, at a literary level, in such creations as Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky', many of the neologisms of James Joyce, or the crazy verbal concoctions of Ogden Nash. Malapropisms and spoonerisms are other famous examples. And while we are in the literary world, we should not forget the use of abnormal spelling as a source of language play, seen at its best in the oeuvres of Josh Billings and Artemus Ward, which so dominated the American social scene in the late 19th-century. Linguists are by no means immune, as the remarkable and ongoing discoveries of early *Max and Moritz* texts by Manfred Görlach illustrate.

These examples are brought together to substantiate the view that verbal play is natural, spontaneous, and universal. It is practised in some shape or form by everyone, whether they are born jokers, or people who would never receive an Oscar for their sense of humor. It is not solely a matter of humor, after all, but involves notions of enjoyment, entertainment, intellectual satisfaction, and social rapport. Although patterns and preferences vary greatly, the phenomenon seems to cut across regional, social, and professional background, age, sex, ethnicity, personality, intelligence, and culture. And if we turn now to children - from Scrabble to babble - we see it there from the outset.

Language play is at the core of early parent-child interaction. We see it in the deviant linguistic behavior which characterises much parental speech to babies - such features as higher and wider pitch range, marked lip rounding, rhythmical vocalizations, tongue clicking, mock threats, and simple, repetitive sentence patterns. We see it in the words and rhythms of the songs parents sing - their lullabies and nursery rhymes. We see it in the early play routines parents use, in which considerable pleasure is taken by all participants in developing a dynamic language that complements the patterns of visual and tactile contact. Nuzzling and tickling routines, finger-walking, peeping sequences,

bouncing games, build-and-bash games, and many other interactions are not carried on in silence: on the contrary, they are accompanied by highly marked forms of utterance (which people, incidentally, are often quite embarrassed to hear later out of context). Given the remarkable emphasis placed upon language play in child-directed speech during the first months of life, one would expect it to be a central element in subsequent language development.

What is extraordinary is that the development of language play in the young child has been so little studied. In a general review, Ferguson and Macken commented (in 1983): 'In the sizeable literature on play languages which has come to our attention, we have not found a single study in which children's use of a particular play language is followed developmentally'. And in a review of all issues of the leading journal in the field, *Journal of Child Language*, now over 20 years old, there is no paper on the general phenomenon, and only half a dozen on specific games, mainly from just one researcher. The domain is not mentioned at all in the standard child language anthology of the 1980s (Fletcher and Garman 1986) nor in the latest child language anthology to appear, *The Handbook of Child Language* (1995). However, from the limited literature which exists, some hints about developmental progress, at least for production, can be established.

Phonetic play seems to be the first step. From around age 1, children have been recorded in which long sequences of vocal modulation occur, with no one else around, which have been interpreted as a primitive form of vocal play. Vocalizations accompanying motor activities become noticeable between 1 and 2 - melodic strings of syllables, humming, chanting, singing. Symbolic noises increase, and sounds are brought in to represent actions, such as noises to represent ambulances, police cars, telephones, motor horns, and things falling down, and these may be lexicalised *(ding ling, pow pow, beep beep)*. Children, often in pairs, begin to 'talk funny', deviating from normal articulation: everyone in the group talks in a squeaky or gruff way, for example, and the sounds themselves seem to be the main focus of the play. They also begin to associate tones of voice with entities: in one babbling monologue, from a child aged 1;3, the babble accompanying play with a toy rabbit was uttered in a high pitch range, and that with a panda in a low pitch range.

Phonetic play is followed by more structured phonological play, from around age 1 introducing prosodic variations, producing language-specific, conversation-like utterance which is often referred to as 'jargon'. From around age 2, variations are introduced into syllable structure, using reduplication, sound swapping, and the addition of pause within a word. Garvey reports one girl of 3;0 who spent nearly 15 minutes engaged in taking apart and varying the syllabic structure of the word *yesterday* the versions being mostly whispered in a soliloquy as she played with various objects in the room. This kind of play is typically a solitary behavior, often heard in pre-sleep monologues, as reported in detail by Weir (1962). We should not be surprised at this: when you are alone in the dark, at this age, there is not much else you can do but play with language. Delight in the sound of words is also reported by James Britton, who tells the story of a small boy, brought to collect his father from a psychology conference, who went dancing through the hall chanting repeatedly the phrase 'maximum capacity'. 'Words are voices' said one 2-year-old, when asked.

Between 3 and 4, children start using each other's play language as a trigger for further variations. They may add rhymes: A says *Go up high,* B says *High in the sky.* They may alter initial sounds, sometimes to make real words, sometimes nonsense words, as in *The red house / Made of strouss, I'm a flamingo / Look at my wingo.* By 5, this dialogue play can be very sophisticated. There might also be morphological play, an ending being added to various nouns: here is a dialogue between children aged 5;2 and 5;7:

A: Cause it's fishy too. Cause it has fishes.

B: And it's snakey too cause it has snakes and its beary too because it has bears.

A: And it's ... it's hatty cause it has hats.

This is the first sign of children trying to outdo each other in verbal play, trying to score over the previous speaker, or maybe just trying to keep the game going.

Original sin manifests itself in the young child very early on. Once they learn a way of behaving, or are told how to behave, they seem to experience particular delight in doing the opposite, with consequential problems of discipline for the parent. This is obvious at the nonverbal behavioral level. What is less obvious is that exactly the same process goes on at the linguistic level. Being naughty with language seems innately attractive - the BADLAD notion again. From as early as 3, children can be heard to home in on an inadvertently dropped adult obscenity with unerring instinct. Within hours of arriving at school they learn their own rude words, such as *bum* and *knickers,* which will keep them surreptitiously giggling throughout kindergarten. They will be rude at adults or other children by altering the sounds of words: *Dad Pad* said one 5-year old to me in a real fury, as he was stopped playing in order to have a bath. His whole demeanour showed that it was the worst insult he could imagine saying, to express his disapproval. And name-changing is done for fun, too. Nonsense names might be *Mrs Poop, Mr Ding, Mr Moggly Boggly,* all coming from 4-year-olds. Nicknames appear soon after, and certainly after arrival in school. Older children often deliberately misname for fun, calling a cup a saucer, or mislabelling the objects in a picture. They break pragmatic rules, e.g. saying *good morning* when it is night time. I think all parents have encountered the 'silly hour' when they seem unable to get their child to talk sense. Verbal play exists in many forms by 6, both serious and humorous, and rapidly increases in sophistication over the next few years. They demonstrate sophisticated concatenation games, in which one rhyme is joined to another in a list.

Verbal games become fashionable after age 7. Riddle comprehension grows, and the type of riddle used increases in sophistication. There is an important transition at around age 6, from the improvised and original joking fantasy to the learning and telling of ready-made jokes (typically the riddle). Then later, at around 11, the formulaic structure of riddles gives way to a freer and more elaborate narrative. Metaphor studies also show a growth in awareness well into the teenage years. More 'intellectual' language games, often of great intricacy, begin to be used, such as Pig Latin and backwards speech.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that language play is an important element in language development. Chukovsky refers to 'the inexhaustible need of every healthy child of every era and of every nation to introduce nonsense into his small but ordered world, with which he has only recently become acquainted. For some mysterious reason the child is attracted to that topsy-turvy world where legless men run, water burns, horses gallop astride their riders, and cows nibble on peas on top of birch trees'. The various collections of children's play make this point empirically - the vast amount of rhyming material in the Opies' books, for example, in such domains as counting out, jumping rope, or bouncing ball, much of which is so nonsensical that the only possible explanation can be delight in the sound as such. As the Opies say, 'Rhyme seems to appeal to a child as something funny and remarkable in itself, there need be neither wit nor reason to support it'.

Piaget and Vygotsky, among others, had already drawn attention to the notion of 'play as practice': children are most likely to play with the skills which they are in the process of acquiring. And Bruner comments that language is 'most daring and most advanced when it is used in a playful setting'. The persisting absence of language play is likely to be an important (though hitherto little remarked upon) diagnostic feature of language pathology. Chukovsky argues that 'Rhyme-making during the second year of life is an inescapable stage of our linguistic development. Children who do not perform such linguistic exercises are abnormal or ill'. And indeed, children with language delay or disorder are known to have very poor ability even to imitate simple patterns of language play (copying rhythmic beats, for instance), and tend not to use it spontaneously.

What is the relevance of all this to linguistics? I see language play as pivotal in helping to resolve one of the most interesting theoretical confrontations of recent times. In *Knowledge of Language* (1986), Chomsky draws a distinction between two problems concerning human knowledge, which have passed into linguistic metalanguage under the headings of 'Plato's problem' and 'Orwell's problem'. Plato's problem is defined as 'the problem of explaining how we can know so much given that we have such limited evidence' – the obvious area of illustration being the existence of language acquisition in children. Orwell's is defined as 'the problem of explaining how we can know so little, given that we have so much evidence' – the obvious area of illustration

being the existence of institutionalised mind-sets which block our understanding (Chomsky's examples include various kinds of totalitarian system). 'To solve Orwell's problem we must discover the institutional and other factors that block insight and understanding in crucial areas of our lives and ask why they are effective' (xxvii). Chomsky had originally intended to investigate Orwell's problem in his book, alongside Plato's, but decided not to do so, because 'the character of inquiry into these two problems is so different'. The former, he asserts, is a question of scientific investigation; the latter one of socio-political inquiry, and, as a consequence, much less intellectually challenging. And he concludes his preface with the observation that, unless we can get to grips with Orwell's problem, and overcome it, the human race may not be around long enough to discover the answer to Plato's.

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

To see this, we must take fully into account the implications of the familiar observation that language is an institution in its own right. Language is not merely an exponent of the conceptualization of a regime; language is itself a regime. If Orwell's problem has to deal with 'the institutional and other factors that block insight and understanding' (ibid.), then we must ask what factors in the way we study language block our understanding of language - and then move on to ask how these factors might be eliminated. But first, a simple example of the way in which Plato relates to Orwell, in the popular mind.

In Britain at the moment there is considerable debate about the way in which the new National Curriculum on English language, which has brought a fresh focus on language analysis, should best be implemented. There are two sources of tension, one internal to the school, one external. Internal tension arises between teachers who have been trained in different linguistic descriptive methodologies (those of traditional grammar vs. one or other of the linguistics-inspired approaches) or who have received

no training in analytical terminology at all. External tension arises between teachers who understand and are trying to implement the egalitarian and realistic principles of the new curriculum (which recognises, for example, the importance of local dialect alongside the notion of national standard, and the inevitability of language change) between these teachers and parents, school governors, and other commentators (who are invariably schooled in the prescriptive tradition, and for whom any recognition of dialect use and language change is an attack on standards, and another nail in the coffin that 'trendy lefties' are preparing for the eventual demise of the English language).

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

As linguists, we should not be surprised at the notion that linguistic argumentation should introduce nonlinguistic considerations. When we ourselves routinely invoke such enticing notions as elegance and simplicity when evaluating linguistic models and analyses, we should not be too shocked to find linguistic arguments being routinely reduced to sociological ones. Linguistic discussion about usage leads inevitably to a discussion of linguistic standards and, just as inevitably, to a discussion of standards in general. It is a short jump from linguistic behavior to social behavior - and people are very ready to make it. Earlier this year, in Britain, we heard the BBC Reith lectures, an annual series of intellectual inquiries held in honour of Lord Reith, who founded the BBC. This year, they were being given by a linguist, Jean Aitchison. In her first lecture, she addressed, in terms which have been familiar to linguists for over 50 years, the question of popular attitudes to language, and in particular the view that language is sick and deteriorating. She quoted Lord Tebbit, a senior government minister in 1985, who said: 'If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy ... at school ... all those things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime'. In a ferocious counterblast to what he perceived to be Aitchison's dismissive approach to standards, Paul Johnson, writing in *The Daily Mail* of 8 February 1996 (under the headline, 'A woman wot hates English as it is writ'), comments: 'Norman Tebbit is almost certainly right to assume that the decline of English standards in the school and the increase in crime are connected'. In other

words, split an infinitive today and you will be splitting heads tomorrow. End a sentence with a preposition, and you will end up with your own lengthy sentence. Indeed, it is enough to make you think of suicide, but that 'the dread of something after death ... puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of' *(Hamlet,* III.i).

But you cannot win an argument through ridicule, or by quoting Shakespeare. If that were so, the Paul Johnsons of this world would have won two centuries ago, for their stock-in-trade is ridicule not reason. The matter was already being debated in precisely these ways not long after the publication of the grammars of Lindley Murray and Robert Lowth, in the 18th century, when such rules as 'Never end a sentence with a preposition' were being promulgated. 'It is no defence', these grammarians argued (though this is my paraphrase), 'to cite Shakespeare as authority for such a usage (as in the *Hamlet* quotation). Even Shakespeare can commit grammatical error. He is only human. None of us is immune. That is why we must always be on our guard.' The usage vs. standards issue has been debated regularly and frequently over the past 250 years, on both sides of the Atlantic. Whether we look at the differences of opinion between Robert Lowth and Joseph Priestley in the 1760s, or the criticism of William Cullen Bryant by Fitzedward Hall a century later or the arguments about usage in the great Webster dictionary debate a century later, the same points are being made on both sides. The points have often been made dispassionately, but the fact of the matter is that the vast majority of people remain unconvinced - or, perhaps more accurately, seem incapable of being convinced. Dissident linguists are pilloried in the press (and not only the conservative press). Any comment about being fair to divided usage is immediately construed as an attack on standards. The metaphors we are forced to live by are those of aggressive political radicalism. The Paul Johnson article uses such phrases as 'frontal assault on the rules' and 'frivolous linguistic sabotage'. We are close here to Orwell's world.

Indeed, the last 250 years has seen the largest and most successful exercise in popular brainwashing that I know of – largest, because it crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries with ease, and because within a language it affects everyone. Certainly questions of norms, deviations from norms, standards, acceptability, and related matters are in place long before children encounter formal education. We know that parents routinely draw their children's attention to matters of social linguistic etiquette from around age 3, and often their comments reflect a linguistic orthodoxy which sees children as prone to error from the outset. 'Don't talk with your mouth full.' 'Don't say that, it's rude.' 'You'll have nothing until I hear that little word' (e.g. *please,* or *ta).* 'I won't hear any bloody swearing in this house.' If there is a LAD, for these parents it is a BAD LAD - a functional linguistic manifestation of original sin. And once in school, the institution takes over, and the don'ts continue, proliferating as the child gets to grips with written language. We now find a more formal manifestation of original syn(tax), both in speech. - 'Don't say ain't, Johnny'. 'That sort of language may be all right for the playground...' - and in writing, notably in the myriad

corrections which appear in the margins of early essays, several of which (such as the opposition to sentence-initial *and*) are structurally unmotivated. The regime proves to be highly successful in instilling feelings of linguistic inferiority in most of us, by the time we have learned to read and write.

BADLAD, of course stands for 'Blind And Deaf to Linguists' Arguments and Data'. In a piece I wrote by way of commentary on the opening Reith lecture *(The Independent on Sunday,* 11 February, to be published in *English Today),* I expressed the view that the more interesting questions to address are to do with explanations rather than justifications: Why are people so reluctant to listen to linguistic reason? Why do they persist in believing that spoken language is sloppy, or that language is like a crumbling castle of former excellence, or that language change is a disease? Why is it so difficult to replace the view (only some two centuries old) that 'we need eternal vigilance to keep the language intact' by a view of 'eternal tolerance?' The really interesting question is not 'Is our language sick?' but 'Why do we want to think that our language is sick?' Or, 'Why is language sickness thought to be so serious a disease anyway? and why is it chronic?' It is not enough to say, as linguists tend to say, that there is no disease - to point out that language change is the normal state of health. Why do people think that there is a disease in the first place? We don't need the linguistic equivalent of a physician, to help us: we need a psychiatrist. Linguists on the whole do not ask why, and even less often look for solutions. It is not enough for us to adopt a modern perspective, which would incorporate the prescriptive tradition into a sociolinguistic model, handling it seriously and not dismissively, and recognizing it as an important element in the history of language attitudes. If we have any applied linguist in us at all - and deep within all theoretical linguists I do believe there is an applied linguist trying to get out (not even Chomsky is immune, as Orwell's problem illustrates) - we need to go further, and aim for a more explanatorily adequate view.

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

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

In the light of such examples, I am under no illusions about the difficulty of persuading people to change their attitudes about language, which may relate to deeply held feelings or beliefs about religion, ethnicity, history, and society in general. So how, then, can we engage people's interest in language in a positive way, so that the world of Plato (as illustrated in this talk by the notion of naturally emerging language acquisition) is brought into connection with that of Orwell (as illustrated here by the negative language attitudes imposed by a prescriptive linguistic regime)? I do not believe it is possible to do this by a frontal assault on these established language attitudes: notions such as the belief in language sickness, the fear of language change, the opposition to language deviance, and the intolerance of language variety, I am suggesting, are immune to linguists' tinkering. Rather, I think it is necessary to try out an alternative strategy, in which we focus on aspects of language which people value positively, and use these to demonstrate that such matters as change and deviance are not only normal, but are indeed widely practised and appreciated in contexts by

exactly the same people who in a socio-educational context perceive them to be threatening.

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

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

In view of these claims, then, it is all the more surprising that language play has never attracted much attention within our subject. Ludic linguistics, as we may call it, has been curiously neglected. For example, we have journals on pretty well everything these days - over 150 routinely covered by *Linguistics Abstracts* - but none of them yet on language play. In a well-known collection, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1976) brought together a contemporary statement of research into the genre, but it did not lead to an explosion of interest. Perhaps the intellectual climate of the 1970s was too sombre to take the subject seriously. Or maybe the fact that speech play was routinely referred to as a 'genre' kept it marginalised. For this paper, all I can do is argue that language play is much more than a genre. It is more than a ritual behavior occasionally indulged in by secretive cliques, street gangs, children in the playground, and other groups beloved of anthropologists and ethnographers. It is more than a limited range of fixed-format structures, such as the riddle and the joke. It is more than the deviations from norms plotted by stylisticians or the interactive strategies lauded by discourse analysts. It is more important than to act as a piece of extra evidence to bolster up a phonological theory (as in the quaintly named 'ludlings' much admired by non-linear phonologists). Language play, in my view, is - or should be - at the centre of our concerns as linguists. And as we are celebrating today the contribution to our subject of a man whose earliest academic work was in English and American comedy, it is, I believe, a highly appropriate topic to open this colloquium.

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