

From Scrabble to Drabble via Babble

EVERYONE PLAYS with language or responds to language play. Some take mild pleasure from it; others are totally obsessed by it; but no one can avoid it. Indeed, there seems to be more of it about now than at any previous period of linguistic history.

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

But "enjoyment" and "fun" are not words which usually come to mind when we start to think about language. What, after all, is language for? The sober, conventional answer talks about people "communicating" with each other; in the sense that one person sends a meaning, a thought, an idea, and another person receives it. The whole point of language, it is assumed, is to foster the transmission of knowledge, however this is defined – as concepts, facts, opinions, emotions, or any other kind of "information".

But if this is all there is to language, we can make nothing of "ping-pong punning". The sight of someone with an arm in plaster readily elicits such quips as "Don't worry, he's 'armless" – a pun which has been made thousands of times around the English-speaking world – and which is then invariably capped by someone adding "He's out of 'arm's way", "You've put your finger on it" and so on. This isn't anything to do with "communicating information". Nor is doing crossword puzzles, playing Scrabble, or enjoying such language games as *Call My Bluff* or *Blankety Blank*. Nor is manipulating language to do your bidding in poetry, or plays, or novels. From Scrabble to Margaret Drabble, ludic language exists in hundreds of different genres, adding enjoyment to our lives. It is not just a matter of humour, or laughter: enjoyment encompasses much more.

It is part of the normal human condition to play with language, or respond to the way others play. Some word-buffs devote extraordinary amounts of time to it, setting themselves absurdly complicated linguistic



Beckett: 'In the beginning was the pun'

tasks, then solving them. Write a story in which every word begins with the letter a? Already done. Write a novel without using the letter e? Ernest Wright's *Gadsby* does that, in 50,000 words. You can devote your whole life to it, and be paid for it at the same time. Advertisers, newspaper headline writers, comedians, authors, artists, even theologians spend a fair part of their professional lives playing with language.

Ludic language has traditionally been a badly neglected subject of linguistic enquiry – at best treated as a topic of marginal interest. Yet it should be at the heart of any thinking we do about language, for it is closely bound up with our ability to be creative. And it is central to social relationships too, for if people avoid playing with language, it is a sign that something is wrong. When partners cease to enjoy each other's language play – their Monty Python voices, made-up words, or nonsense noises – they will not be partners for much longer.

Where then does the need to play with language come from? Was Samuel Beckett right to assert, in *Murphy*, "In the beginning was the pun"? If we examine the way parents and babies talk to each other, we find that the bulk of their conversation, during the first year of life, is, in fact language play. In which case language play takes on a more serious role – that of aiding language acquisition. Remember "Round-and-round-the garden"? It is thus that we get from Scrabble to Drabble via Babble.

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