In *Language Play, Language Learning*, Guy Cook picks up a theme that already surfaced in his *Discourse and Literature* (1994), namely the value of texts that do not, in any immediate sense, serve practical purposes. Cook claimed there that, contrary to appearances, competence in reading literature does contribute significantly to people’s functioning in contemporary society. The author now generalizes this view by arguing that ostensibly non-functional uses of language, like repetition, rhythm, and nonsense words, are manifestations of linguistic play (children’s as well as adults’). Such play is noticeable in widely divergent genres, including poems, advertisements, newspaper headings, skipping songs, football chants, nursery rhymes, and taunts. Cook proposes to investigate ‘language play’ as a specimen of play in general, and defends the claim that this activity is far from useless: ‘Disconnection from reality, disruption and subversion of social structures, and the introduction of random elements, have particular benefits for all of us, and that is perhaps why we are so fond of them, even when they are forbidden’ (p. 5).

*Language Play, Language Learning* has a tripartite division. Part One focuses on description, Part Two on theory, and Part Three on the implications of both for teaching and learning. Cook begins by emphasizing how children are sensitive to, and enjoy, playful language before they are capable of understanding its contents, and suggests that adults reciting poetry or learning a new language experience the same pleasures. This should not surprise us, as the continuous interplay between sameness and difference that characterizes language play has strong parallels in the rhythms of bodily behaviour (heart beats, breaths) and daily routines (eating, sleeping, going to school or work). The joys of ‘useless’ linguistic play parallel the immersion in the text-genres that often exemplify these verbal games: the make-believe of novels, soaps, theatre performances and impersonations. While admitting that people’s preference for this type of text is no doubt partly purpose-driven (it can aid language acquisition, social education, and foster group solidarity), Cook points to the strong link between fiction and creativity, and to the esteemed ambiguity in literature and its counterpart in sacrosanct texts to show that these interests also serve less practical goals.

Part One ends with a chapter discussing the fascinating phenomenon (whose discovery is attributed to Wolfson, 1988), that certain forms of language, and the bodily behaviours accompanying them, are similar both in very intimate and very aggressive situations: only your best friend and your worst enemy are likely to address you as ‘you bastard’, use the imperative, and touch you. Cook investigates the similarity between competitive and collaborative linguistic behaviour in a discussion of such phenomena as verbal dueling (both by rappers and British MPs), riddles and puzzles, jokes, puns, and religious (e.g. ‘Kabbalistic’) formulas.
Part Two opens with a chapter that investigates both the ‘nature’ and the ‘nurture’ aspects of human play by signaling both what it has in common with animal play and what characterizes it as specifically human. To establish the latter, criteria are derived from Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1944) with some modifications suggested by Roger Callois. Cook accepts Callois’ fourfold subdivision of playful activities into competitive sports, chance games (‘alea’), (theatrical) pretense and the physical excitement caused by such activities as waltzing, skiing, and merry-go-rounding. In Chapter 5, Cook concentrates on alea in order to chart ‘how the exploitation of formal patterns and random coincidences is a key to creativity and adaptability’ (p. 122). The element of chance crucially enters language when form is no longer completely subservient to meaning, but is allowed to encroach on, or even subvert, meaning. Cook here makes a short excursion to the young science of ‘complexity studies’ for ‘laws’ that apply to complex systems like economic orders, organisms, the weather, and language. One important insight is that complex systems have an in-built resistance to stasis, since only dynamism ensures adaptability to new environments. Another is that complex systems are ‘sensitive to feedback from the effects which it itself produces’ (p. 140) – an insight that Cook warns is virtually ignored by applied linguistics.

In Part Three, the focus is on how language play should feed into the (British) applied linguistics curriculum. Cook advocates replacing the current dichotomy between play and work, and the concomitant alignment of learning with work, by a triad model showing overlap between all three. To begin with, such an approach reduces the danger of turning language study into a mere work-oriented activity; after all, education is about more than maximizing one’s chances on the job market. But even if instrumental values should be seen as justifiably prevailing, it is by no means clear, Cook argues, that one should start with a definition of utilitarian goals and then design the language program in light of these, as if there were a straight line from means to end. In other words, pupils and students will reach the utilitarian goals – with which Cook has no quarrel as such – by being allowed a wide range of detours, and these detours should give high priority to play. Both traditional and communicative syllabuses could benefit from this, for instance by including precisely the materials that publishers, always mindful of their markets, avoid like the plague: the juicy texts that are the bread and butter of the ‘bestselling novel, lead news story, or blockbuster TV series’ (p.159). Contests, songs, graffiti, daring jokes – they are full of language play and guarantee pupils’ interest. All of these strongly exemplify Roman Jakobson’s ‘poetic function’ – the function that according to Cook is systematically neglected in current pedagogical approaches. (Somewhat surprisingly, he nowhere mentions Rob Pope’s (1998) *The English Studies Book*, which surely activates students to ‘play’ with literary texts in myriad ways.) The long and the short of Cook’s defense of studying linguistic play is that ‘meanings and social relations not only determine forms, but they can also emerge from them. … If formal patterning is approached as an end in itself, meanings and interactions will emerge from it, if they are allowed to do so’ (p. 192-193).

Cook’s *Language Play, Language Learning* is a rich book. First of all it is of course a passionate defense against attempts to turn the study of language into a mere handmaiden of a society that believes values can be measured in terms of stock market statistics. Verbal play is closely related to creativity and imagination, and as such should be nurtured and cherished precisely to provide an antidote to language’s utilitarian uses.
Moreover, linguistic play is an important thermometer of free speech in societies. But such arguments about the socio-cultural importance of language play are likely to appeal only those who need little convincing anyway, so Cook made a wise decision to balance these arguments by the sort of argument that cuts more ice with the utilitarians that rule the world: if you want to teach people to employ language to maximum practical use, teach them to employ it uselessly.

But because Cook embeds his view on language play in a wider, socio-cultural perspective on the ludic, his book chimes with developments in related fields. Cross-fertilizations with these developments arise from the form/meaning and learning/play dichotomies to which he devotes so much attention. Cook’s point that an unknown language’s formal features ‘communicate’ before their contents do reminds me of the sociologist Shore’s (1996) report about the ritual of the ‘Walkabout’ of the Australian Murngin tribe. In this initiation ritual, the junior members of the tribe are immersed in increasingly complex and complete versions of the same rites, and gradually begin to grasp the mythic genesis story of which these rites are the formal manifestations. Shore emphasizes that ‘from the perspective of the novices, the rites produce the narrative and not the other way round’ (Shore, p.247, italics in original). That is, they begin to understand the content via the form. This strikes me as a telling corroboration of Cook’s insistence that in the beginning form should, indeed cannot but, rule over matter. Perhaps this challenging view sums up the essence of learning processes in general.

Cook’s suggestion that we are wrong to neglect the ‘uselessness’ of verbal play in favour of studying language as the glorious vehicle of communication also parallels the revived interest in metaphor (for a recent review see Steen, 2000). Long relegated to a role in the background of language studies because of its blatant literal falsity, metaphor has experienced a remarkable comeback. Rather than being a byproduct of thinking, the trope reflects the fundamental workings of the human mind, as Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown. This reversal of the importance of the ‘literal’ and the ‘figurative’ in language was further attested by the psychologist Raymond Gibbs (1994), who extended the experiments to other figurative’ forms of language use, such as proverbs, idioms, irony, oxymora, tautologies. Although one cannot, of course, simply equate literal and non-playful language on the one hand, and figurative and playful language on the other, it seems pertinent that both authors advocate a reversal in the weight normally attributed to them. Cook suggests that ‘we try to turn the usual order of importance inside out: to make the periphery the centre and the centre the periphery, so that language play is no longer seen as a trivial and optional extra but as the source of language knowledge, use and activity’ (p. 204), while Gibbs pleads in favour of ‘a greater recognition of the poet in us – to recognize that figuration is not an escape from reality but constitutes the way we ordinarily understand ourselves and the world in which we live’ (p.454).

Cook’s plea that we concentrate on form, play, and creativity rather than get bogged down in content, work, and convention thus may well reflect broader tendencies in the social sciences. Hence his book offers important insights both to educators in language departments and to theorists stressing the fundamental role of intimacy, the body, the figurative, and other ‘soft’ concepts for the survival of our species.

References


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