

1 What Language is For

Before considering how language is structured and how it works, we need to ask ourselves—as with any tool—what language is used for. The answer seems self-evident: language is for communication. But, for human beings, communicating is never merely a question of conveying information. Often we talk for the sake of talking, or we say the opposite of what we mean, or say something the addressee already knows. A good deal of the information we convey, moreover, is implicit: that is, it is absent from the message itself. Indeed, people speak for all sorts of reasons which have nothing to do with the act of informing: in order, for instance, to emphasize a position of power or to establish a relation of solidarity. The spoken word is not only a tool, but also a means of self-expression, a form of action, a way of asserting oneself as a social being, and a locus of pleasure or suffering.

Every act of verbal communication brings into play a *speaker*, who addresses a *message* to a hearer or *addressee* (who may be absent or implicit). The message has a *referent*: this is the subject matter of the discourse, what it refers to. Then, in order to construct the message, the speaker draws on a *code* (i.e. a language), which the addressee is assumed to share. Finally, communication requires the use of a physical *channel*—voice, writing, gesture, etc.—which serves to establish *contact*. These six features are closely interdependent in any speech act, but one or two may assume special prominence in particular kinds of communication.

The Functions of Language¹

Six essential language functions emerge from the six features outlined above.

The *speaker* is associated with the **expressive** function conveying *emotion*.

The *addressee* is associated with the **conative** function conveying *commands*.

The *referent* is associated with the **informative** function conveying *information*.

¹ This presentation of the functions of language is adapted from Roman Jakobson's famous essay 'Linguistics and poetics', first published in Sebeok (1960).

The *channel* is associated with the **phatic** function conveying *communication*.
The *code* is associated with the **metalinguistic** function conveying *code analysis*.

The *message* is associated with the **poetic** function conveying *play, pleasure*.
As I have already hinted, an utterance does not necessarily come under the heading of one function alone. More often than not, several functions overlap: utterances are classified on the basis of the dominant function. Except in a few radical poetic experiments—such as sound poetry, which pares language down to the level of pure sound substance—the message is very seldom totally devoid of any referential value, even if it is clearly of subsidiary importance, as is the case in wordplay, rhymes and so on. Similarly, when you say 'ouch!', you are clearly articulating the expressive function. But at the same time you are also informing the people around you that you are in pain (informative function). Or again, when you sing the praises of a product in an advertisement, you are seeking not only to inform consumers but also to give the message more impact, make it more amusing (poetic function), while also trying to induce a certain type of behaviour (conative function). It is not, then, a matter of sorting out the functions, so much as assessing their relative importance in a given utterance.

Who Says What to Whom?

Each of the first three functions in the list above emphasizes in turn the speaker, the addressee, or the referent of the message. We find a correlation here with the three corners of the triangle formed by the grammatical 'persons' (see Figure 1.1).

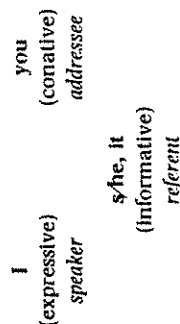


FIG. 1.1. The grammatical 'persons'

But there is a basic dissymmetry in this triangular relationship: the first and second persons are interdependent, as components of the *utterance situation*:

I [the speaker] am saying (this) to you [the addressee].

The first and second person are not necessarily expressed overtly in the message, although they can always be reintroduced into a discourse for

purposes of clarification as in 'Who said that?': 'I did'; or 'Who are you talking to?': 'Why you, of course'.

This leaves the third person as the odd one out. It is only a component of the utterance proper; that is, of what is actually said.

(1) I am saying *something* to (you) about *him/her/it*.

While the *referent* of the third person can always be found within the *verbal context*, the referents of the first and second persons can only be assigned within the *speech situation*. *I* and *you* are peculiar in that they have no other meaning than 'the person speaking' and 'the person being spoken to'. They are 'empty' words to which only the speech situation can give a meaning. *I* and *you* are the only 'true' persons, in the literal sense of the word. The third person is, in fact, a *non-person*, a way of designating the topic, what is being talked about, nothing more. It may be human or non-human, animate or inanimate, real or imaginary, concrete or abstract. And the third person can appear in one of a very large variety of guises: personal or demonstrative pronouns (which in some languages can vary between *masculine* and *feminine*, *animate* and *inanimate*, *human* and *non-human*, *near* and *far*, or a combination of these features), verb endings if no pronoun is used,² proper or common nouns, and so on.

I and *you* alternate during dialogue and for this reason are called *shifters*. An anecdote from Jewish folklore illustrates this aspect of communication. A man writes to his friend:

Dear Riwke, be good enough to send me your slippers. Of course, I mean 'my slippers' and not 'your slippers'. But, if you read 'my slippers', you will think I mean your slippers. Whereas, if I write: 'send me your slippers', you will read *your* slippers and will understand that I want *my* slippers. So: send me your slippers.³

The story points up a genuine difficulty. It is well known that for children the appropriation of the *I*, which allows the child to take on the role of speaker and enter into intersubjective communication, comes quite late in the language acquisition process. For a long time the child continues to speak of itself in the third person (a habit which persists—incidentally—in some forms of mental illness). In the same way, we can all remember that when Jane addresses Tarzan—'You Tarzan, me Jane'—he has great difficulty in responding correctly—'You Jane, me Tarzan', in other words in 'shifting' the pronouns. The use of the third person is also the norm in strip cartoon dialogues and films portraying the speech of 'natives', a fact reflecting the prejudiced view that 'developed' cultures have of the supposedly infantile mentality of such peoples.

² As is the case in Latin, Spanish, Italian, and the Slavic languages.
³ Cf. J. Milner (1976).

Q: What is it that is always coming but never arrives?

A: Tomorrow. When it arrives, it is today.

So goes the riddle. Adverbs of time and space are also shifters. Thus, the reference of *yesterday*, *today*, and *tomorrow*, *here* and *there*, can only be worked out in relation to the speaker's *co-ordinates*—the time and place of utterance—which are endlessly moving on. When the Queen suggests that Alice become her chambermaid, in exchange for which Alice shall have jam 'every other day', Alice declines the offer, arguing that she does not want any jam *today*. 'You couldn't have it', answers the Queen, 'if you *did* want it. . . . The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam *to-day*.' Alice protests, 'it *must* come sometimes to "jam to-day"'.⁴ Alice clearly believes in the power of shifters, whereas it is precisely the rule which allows tomorrow to become *today* and *today* to become *yesterday*—or *I* to become *you* and *you* to become *I*—which the Queen is denying.

The three basic functions—expressive, conative, informative—can, in turn, be used to define three types of poetry:

- (1) *Lyric*, in which the poet gives free rein to his/her feelings ('I wandered lonely as a cloud');
- (2) *Elegiac*, which incites the reader to follow the poet ('Let us go then, you and I | When the evening is spread out against the sky');
- (3) *Epic*, which tells of the great deeds of heroes ('Of Man's first disobedience . . . [singing, Heavenly Muse]').

More generally, in literature, the narrator can be a part of the narrative (the first-person narrative), can address the readers—or one privileged reader—directly (as, for example, in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*), or remain entirely outside the narrative (as in the so-called 'objective', naturalist or realist novel). A further process, consisting of the narrator addressing himself, as though addressing a double, has often been used by the French 'nouveau romanciers', such as Michel Butor in *La Modification*, or Georges Perec, in his novel *Un homme qui dort*.⁵ One of Alice's characteristics is to talk constantly to herself, either for encouragement, or to tell herself off:

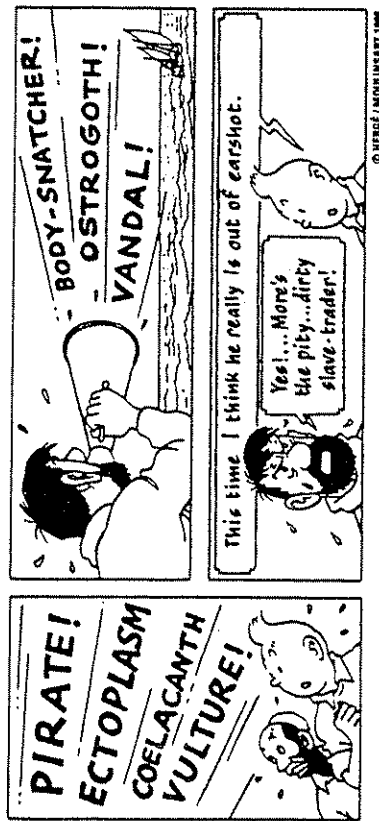
'Come, there's no use in crying like that!' said Alice to herself, rather sharply; 'I advise you to leave off this minute!' (31)

⁴ *Alice in Wonderland* (also containing *Through the Looking Glass*), Norton Critical Edition, ed. Donald J. Gray (London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 150. This is the edition used throughout. Page references are given in parentheses after the quotation.

⁵ *A Man Asleep*, trans. David Bellis.

Ego Tripping: The Expressive Function

Each different language function favours different grammatical and stylistic processes. The *expressive* function, for instance, involves the use of interjections, onomatopoeia, swear words, and exclamations. Captain Haddock, Tintin's companion in all of his adventures, is well known for proffering strings of very creative oaths and insults. Alice, for her part, is so polite that the only interjections she allows herself to use are 'well' or 'oh dear'.



'Well', thought Alice to herself, 'after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling downstairs! How brave they'll all think me at home!' (25)

... 'But, oh dear!', cried Alice, with a sudden burst of tears, 'I do wish they would put their heads down! I'm so very tired of being all alone here!' (37)

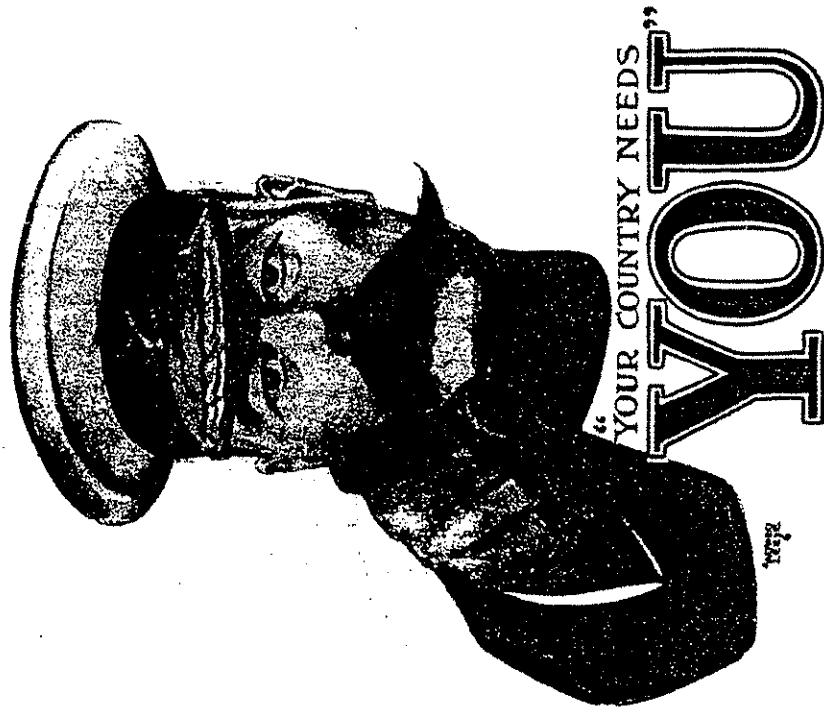
Intonation also plays an important role in the expression of the emotions: joy, anger, surprise, suffering, enthusiasm, and so on. Such *paralinguistic* features as mimicry, gesture, mannerisms, speed of delivery, tone and volume of the voice, can all support and complement the message proper. Dostoyevsky, for example, in his *Diary of a Writer*, tells of a conversation between six tipsy workers outside a bar, who take it in turns to pronounce the single word 'Shit!', each of them giving it a totally different emotional—and referential—meaning.

Open, Sesame! The Conative Function

The imperative mood, the use of various forms of address (socially codified for the most part) are specific to the *conative* function. They serve to create a link between the speaker and the addressee. In this way, relations which

are external to the utterance proper—that is to say *pragmatic* relations—can be asserted.

The spoken word is actually a form of action, often fraught with ritualistic or magical significance. God said, in *The Bible*, 'let there be light': and there was light. 'Abracadabra', 'Open, Sesame', religious or magical formulas, prayer: all reflect the conative function (even when addressed to an imaginary you). Here the important thing is that the speaker believes in the power of The Word over the addressee. A baby crying in order to get someone to come and look after it is also expressing this function. The child soon discovers the near magical effect of its crying on the people around it: one extreme example would be little Oscar, in *The Tin Drum* by Günther Grass, whose scream shatters glass. Or again, advertising or political posters, encouraging us to buy—a product, an ideology—make frequent use of *you*, pointing a finger at the targeted onlooker.



The conative function is also instantiated in a special category of verbs, called *speech-act verbs*, or performatives: these derive their meaning from the action which the speaker performs on the addressee simply by uttering them. The verbs are grounded in the action, not in the code. As with imperatives, performative predicates are unusual in that their truth cannot be challenged. When someone says, 'I baptize you', for example, or 'I pronounce you man and wife', 'I declare you elected', 'Arise, Sir John', or 'Sold!', the words embody an act, stand for that act: what we are witnessing in such cases is a codified ceremony which assumes a legally binding force (provided, of course, that the person speaking is qualified to perform the duty in question). If there is any pretence or play, the performative is emptied of its meaning, as in the trial of the playing cards at the end of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

Thus the conative function is expressed in any act of communication which transforms or attempts to transform reality or people, which aims to affect the course of events or the behaviour of individuals.

Elephants Have Right of Way: The Informative Function

Utterances with purely utilitarian value can be considered as strictly referential: 'Road Closed', 'This Side Up', or this amazing sign tourists may see in African game reserves: 'ELEPHANTS HAVE RIGHT OF WAY'. Other examples are telegrams—in which every single word carries information—or scientific and technical texts, from which any expressive or aesthetic intention has been removed.

As often as not, however, the informative function co-exists with others: while it may be the job of information science to stock and manipulate information in its purest, most rudimentary form, *human* language is never completely neutral. Whatever we say, we usually say more than we mean to say.

Nice Weather for the Time of Year! The Phatic Function

The phatic function (a word coined by the Polish anthropologist Malinowski) maintains *contact* between speakers and ensures the smooth operation of the channel of communication.

This function already exists prior to articulate language, since the babbling noises made by a new-born baby enable it to establish contact with those around it, while also reassuring its carers about the normality of its speech organs. Indeed, it is well known that without such contact the baby actually stops making the noises: it is of vital importance to speak to babies,

so as not to jeopardize their linguistic, emotional, and social development. Given this socializing function of language, play and contact are essential and take precedence over information.

In what is called *mediated* communication—by telephone, radio, etc.—all sorts of fixed expressions are available to check the 'circuit': 'Hello, can you hear me?', or 'Receiving you loud and clear', 'Roger'. The speech of a teacher, too, includes numerous interruptions intended to check that attention does not flag and to ensure understanding: 'Do you follow?', 'Do you see what I mean?', 'Listen carefully', 'Let me repeat that', and so on. In the same way, our conversations are riddled with automatic occurrences of 'you see' and 'you know'.

Listeners for their part use phatic words such as 'I see', 'oh dear!', 'right!', 'really?' to convey their appreciation or to signal attention to what the speaker is saying. This kind of feedback is essential in face to face communication and even more so on the telephone.

Finally, in our everyday lives, many exchanges aim only to initiate or maintain social contact. When, for example, a driver picks up a hitch-hiker, one or the other invariably feels obliged to strike up a conversation which by and large is an exchange of banalities, simply because silence in this kind of situation is usually interpreted as hostility. We find the same motivation in most cocktail-party conversations or 'small talk'. In Western society the rule is that we talk when in company, for the sake of talking, and it is only in certain situations (our dealings with our nearest and dearest, very formal relationships, or at work) that we can keep quiet if we have nothing to say. During a dinner party, a pregnant pause will cause general embarrassment and a carefully maintained stock of anecdotes and funny stories is the usual way of keeping up verbal contact without a break. Some people feel genuine panic when contact is broken, because it means that everyone is left to their own devices. And we all know people who endlessly restart the conversation on the doorstep when they are about to leave.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Alice in Wonderland* is that it challenges the phatic function. Alice finds herself in a rather disconcerting world, where the different characters show the highest disregard for *phatic communication*. The rules of conversation as practised in the real world are constantly derided and their stereotyped nature underlined. Polite expressions, sentences or phrases meant to establish or maintain contact, are all taken literally or deliberately misconstrued:

'Oh, I'm not particular as to size', Alice hastily replied; 'Only one doesn't like changing so often, you know.'

'I don't know', said the Caterpillar. (71)

'Goodbye, till we meet again!', [Alice] said as cheerfully as she could. 'I shouldn't know you again if we did meet', Humpty Dumpty replied in a discontented tone. (168)

There is no room in Wonderland, it would appear, for automatic language.

The Word 'Dog' does not Bark: The Metalinguistic Function

'Edwin and Morcar, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria, declared for [William the Conqueror]; and even Stigand, the patriotic Archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable

'found what?' said the Duck.

'Found it', the Mouse replied rather crossly. 'Of course you know what "it" means.'

'I know what "it" means well enough, when I find a thing', said the Duck. 'It's generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the Archbishop find?' (22)

What Carroll is exploiting here is the fact that a word—in this case the pronoun *it*—can either be used or mentioned in an utterance. The first occurrence of *it* refers to an element in the verbal context, announcing the infinitive clause which follows (even if the Duck does interpret it wrongly). In the second case, *it* is auto-referential, designating only the word 'it'; this is a metalinguistic use, which is consequently pointed up in the text by inverted commas or italics (which would correspond to a slight pause when spoken).⁶ The same opposition is exploited in child wordplay in 'Where Simon had had had had, Peter had had had'. Once punctuated the sentence reads more easily: 'Where Simon had had "had had", Peter had had "had".'

Now take the following sentence:

(1) The dog is barking.

If we were to perform a grammatical analysis of the sentence, we would say:

(2) The dog is the subject of the verb *is barking*.

The dog then has as its referent the phrase 'the dog' and no longer, as in (1), a particular dog which you could point to. Hence the principle which sums up the metalinguistic function: the word *dog* does not bark.

Language alone, of all sign systems, is endowed with the power of self-interpretation, to use Émile Benveniste's term. Language, alone, can talk about itself and all other codes. Language, alone, can take itself as object of analysis and establish a circular, reflexive relationship. Among the six lan-

⁶ Generally speaking inverted commas have metalinguistic value, sometimes even when a word is being used rather than mentioned. Inverted commas (or 'scare quotes') are a way of showing that the speaker/writer is distancing himself/herself from the word and is thereby taking up a position in respect of its linguistic value, its place in the system. It may be that the word constitutes a non-lexicalized figure of speech, or a neologism, a rather bold or unexpected use of the term, a word borrowed from a foreign language or a slang term, or one which is too familiar for the context.

guage functions, therefore, the metalinguistic function must be given a prominent place. Indeed, the expressive, conative, and phatic functions are not peculiar to language and can be expressed through behaviour, mimicry, or gesture. As for the informative function, it can be taken on by various other sign systems, such as graphic or ideographic codes (which is more and more the case for information of an international nature as in airports and stations), or mimicry—as resorted to by the traveller lost in a foreign country. The poetic function, to which we shall return later, can be seen as part of a broader aesthetic function including all forms of artistic expression. Only the metalinguistic function is inseparable from language, since it is focused on the code and how the code works.

A good deal of metalinguistic activity is unconscious. It underlies all language activity. Although it is made conscious when one learns a foreign language or explores one's native language in a systematic way at school, the activity is clearly unconscious in the child learning its mother tongue. It is partly conscious in speakers whenever they make language choices: stylistic choices, finding the 'right' word, in word games, punning, crosswords, anagrams, or any other game requiring the analysis of the meaning or function of words. In order to complete a crossword, for example, one needs a thorough knowledge of the workings of *synonymy*, *homonymy*, *polysemy*, and the ambiguities they generate and, therefore, of the figures of speech—metaphor, metonymy, transferred epithet—which are often responsible for that ambiguity.

Unconscious metalinguistic activity is apparent in a child learning to speak, since it often produces *neologisms* quite spontaneously, thereby showing that it has mastered the principle of analogy. It is in this sense that we can say that a child's 'mistakes'—*goed* instead of *went*, *taked* instead of *took*, or *putted* for *put*—are in practice evidence of the development of its linguistic competence, illustrating the child's acquisition of the rule for forming the simple past tense of regular verbs.

In aphasics who are affected by a similarity disorder, the metalinguistic function is impaired. Such speakers lose all capacity for metaphor,⁷ or the comparison of terms which are equivalent in their function or meaning. They are therefore incapable of organizing words into syntactic classes or semantic fields, they cannot paraphrase an utterance, translate it into another language or transpose it into another system of signs—for example, by putting into words the information on road traffic signs.

The whole of the famous dialogue between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, in chapter 6 of *Through the Looking-Glass*, is metalinguistic in nature. Humpty Dumpty gives Alice a lesson in semantics, first interpreting the poem *Jabberwocky*, the words of which were coined by Lewis Carroll (see below,

⁷ Cf. Jakobson (1941).

Chapter 9), then setting out his own theory on the arbitrary nature of the sign (see Chapter 8). 'Arbitrary', for Humpty, takes its strict etymological sense of 'free will', the will and whim of the language-user — which is clearly not the meaning of the word in linguistics. For Humpty, the speaker has the power to make words mean exactly what s/he likes. Words are therefore reduced to being the servants of a master, albeit a benevolent one: 'When I make a word do a lot of work . . . I always pay it extra' (164).

The Obscure Object of Desire: 'The Poetic Function

O mouths, Man is searching for a new language
Which no grammarian will have anything to say about
The old languages are so close to death
That it is only by force of habit or want of courage
That we still make use of them for poetry.

(Guillaume Apollinaire)

Human beings have a relationship of an erotic nature with language. Language is an object of love, and a source of pleasure.⁸ A child's natural tendency is towards play, disorder, pleasure, freedom, and creative imagination. This tendency is thwarted, during the child's socialization process, by an increasing realization of the rules—both structural and social—which govern language and language use. The child has to learn to speak like grown-ups in order to be understood and integrated into the linguistic community. The reality principle, which progressively supplants the pleasure principle, also manifests itself in the tough realities of learning the code, as well as the correlate of that: the *mistake*, which is somehow seen as akin to a moral fault. At the babbling stage, language is simply music for the child, a purely gratuitous game, which then gradually acquires its utilitarian value for communication. But, for a long time, language remains a game, unbridled exploration, sheer pleasure.

Playing with words—sounds or meaning—any activity which has language as both subject matter and as means of expression, constitutes the survival of the pleasure principle, preserving the gratuitous in the face of the utilitarian. Play is within language and *vice versa*, since humankind is, basically, made for playing. After all, humans copulate, but eroticism is a game. Humans need to eat, but cooking is an art. Humans speak to communicate, but speaking is also a form of play.

The word 'play' in English has (at least) the following meanings:

as a verb

(1) to take part in a game;

⁸ See Jean-Claude Milner (1978) and Wolfson (1970).

- (2) to perform;
- (3) to engage in activity for amusement; as a noun
- (4) rule-governed activity;
- (5) a text for performance;
- (6) leeway, latitude, freedom.

This gives us two apparently contradictory sets of meanings. On the one hand, there is the idea of elasticity, freedom, leeway and, on the other, the idea of rules or constraints. Indeed, it is a defining feature of play that it combines unruliness with rules, freedom with limits.⁹ There are constraints placed on language, yet if we could take no liberties with it, it would merely be a mechanical code. Only formal or artificial languages forbid play. Language has a certain play in it, in the same way we might say there is play in a mechanism or a structure. And, if play is, above all, a way of distancing oneself from something, then playing with words is a way of distancing oneself from language and, therefore, from oneself. The inability to play with words reveals an ontological shortcoming.

Language is a game (a structure) whose rules are frequently bent. It allows all kinds of cheating and hitting below the belt and it is quite impossible to define precisely the overall scope of what is allowed and what is not. And yet, neither can it be said—since there are rules—that absolutely *anything* is allowed (see Chapter 10). Language carries within itself the possibility of its own subversion or sabotage. This is what makes Jakobson (1973) say: 'To the theory which holds that verse corresponds to the spirit of language, we can oppose the theory that the poetic form commits organized violence on language.'

'Language has been given to man to make surrealist use of it', said André Breton in *Le manifeste surréaliste*.¹⁰ Clearly Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and many others also felt that words were made to be played with. If Eros and Thanatos are connected, it is understandable that love of language should make poets want to destructure it to its utmost limits, even to murder it. This is what Joyce or Gertrude Stein do, or the French surrealist writer and dramatist Antonin Artaud—for whom 'all real language is incomprehensible'. Love of language also motivates extremist experiments like Dadaism or lettrism. I deal with these extreme aspects of language use in Chapters 9 and 11.

Play is also a revolt against clichés, linguistic redundancy, and stereotypes, against all forms of mechanical, thoughtless, meaningless language use. Deliberate nonsense—as practised by Edward Lear for instance—is always preferable to meaninglessness.

⁹ See Huizinga (1951).

¹⁰ Translated into English as *The Surrealist Manifesto*.

A basic distinction can be drawn between two types of game: playing with form—spoken or written—and playing with meaning (as well, of course, as playing with both at the same time). 'In poetry', writes Jakobson (1973), 'every apparent similarity of sound, is treated in terms of similarity and/or difference of meaning.' But we should not restrict form to sound because many games also exploit the graphic dimension of written language.

Playing with sound is comprised essentially of rhyme, repetition, alliteration (repetition of consonants), assonance (repetition of vowels), the juxtaposition or substitution of paronyms (words which are phonetically very similar as in rhyming slang), misdivisions, and spoonerisms.

Playing with meaning comprises the unexpected juxtaposition of words which are quite unlike each other, or the artful exploitation of synonymy, all forms of ambiguity, deliberate violations of meaning—'Sethe looked down at her feet again and saw the sycamores' (Toni Morrison)—corruption and allusion.

These processes are found not only in poetry as such, but also in proverbs, aphorisms, and language-games of schoolchildren: in nursery rhymes, skipping or clapping songs. Children start playing with sound before they start playing with meaning. After a purely sensual stage, during which the child derives pleasure from repeating the sounds, it moves on to a more intellectual stage where meaning becomes increasingly dominant. One only has to observe, in the verbal behaviour of children aged between about 6 and 12, the importance of riddles and language games which set 'traps'. The same processes—corruption, allusion, paronymic progression, etc.—are also found in magical and ritual formulas, commercial and political slogans, book and film titles, and so on. For the poetic function is not limited to the field of poetry; it encompasses all verbal production—whether improvised or carefully prepared, rooted in tradition or ephemeral—in which is found an arrangement of sound and meaning meant to focus attention on the form of the message, regardless of its content or communicative aim.

Here are a few examples:

Paronymic progressions

There once was a fisher named Fisher
Who fished for a fish in a fissure
But the fish with a grin
Pulled the fisherman in
Now they all fish the fissure for Fisher

Slogans

These draw on paronymy, parallelism, repetition, rhyme and alliteration:

Clunk, click, every trip (a reminder to put on seat belts)
Kids cook quick (protect your children from the sun!)

Up yours, Delors (British press against EC federalism)
Hatch, Match and Dispatch ('Births, Marriages, Deaths')
Three tenors for under a tenner (opera advertisement)
Nintesting Nincentive Nintendo (computer game)
Check out our new check in (Airline advertisement)

Corruption and allusion are both highly prized:

Beauty and the piste (winter holiday advertisement)
A dedicated follower of function (Mercedes advertisement)
Merchant of venison (Sunday supplement cookery page)
All pomp and no circumstance (on lacklustre football match)
Fat and fiction (advertisement for margarine)

as are stylistic features and the ambiguity allowed by polysemic words:

Labour isn't working (Conservative election slogan)
France: discover a land of placid valleys, rocky gorges and mountainous lunches.

Biblical sayings

These are also often subject to the law of parallelism:¹¹

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth
The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak
as are

Proverbs

Like father, like son
He who laughs last, laughs longest
Once a thief always a thief
All's well that ends well
What's good for the goose is good for the gander
Take care of the pounds and the pence will take care of themselves
and

Children's rhymes

Finding's keeping
Taking back's stealing.
Giveses, keepses.
Finders keepers
Losers weepers.
Touch wood, no good
Touch iron, rely on.

¹¹ See Jousse (1978).

Cross my heart and hope to die
Drop down dead if I tell a lie.

Book titles

These make use of the same processes – repetition, paronymy, corruption, allusion, polysemy:

Absalom, Absalom!
Antic Hay
Arms and the Man
Endgame
Erewhon
Eyeless in Gaza
Language Through the Looking-Glass
Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy
Where Angels Fear to Tread

as do

Newspaper headlines

The merchant of venom (about a politician from Venice)
Star tekkies (high-tech design and architecture in Britain)
Saddling up for the future (about plans for rebuilding Sadler's Wells)
A marriage maid in heaven (about submissive oriental wives)
Day of the long knives (about a cookery competition)

and

Nursery rhymes

eeny, meeny, miny, mo
fee, fi, fo, fum

It should be noted that 'baby talk' makes spontaneous use of rhyme and repetition. At the babbling stage words are naturally binary: all languages have equivalents of: *bye-bye*, *choo-choo*, *din-dins*, *gee-gee*, *poo-poo*, *tum-tum*, *wee-wee*, etc., which correspond, according to certain psychoanalysts, to an urge to repeat. In the vocabulary of adults, words with affectionate connotations, are often experienced as an infantile regression towards an original binary rhythm: *coo-ty-coo-ty*, *lovey-dovey*, or the rather more evocative *rumpy-pumpy*. This is why the language linked to play and pleasure is often found in lovemaking.

But rhymed words are by no means restricted to child or childlike language; adult speakers use words such as *chit-chat*, *dilly-dally*, *helter-skelter*, *hocus-pocus*, *hatch-potch*, *mish-mash*, *riff-raff*, *willy-nilly*, *wishy-washy*, and so on. These words, whether through assonance or alliteration, are peculiar in that they defy analysis (see Chapter 5) and offer a meaning and a resonance

which are playful, or in any event frivolous. Frozen in the lexis of the language, they constitute a reminder of the natural tendency of speakers to play with sound.

What separates poetry proper from language used in such things as slogans is the absolute pre-eminence of the poetic over the referential or the conative. In slogans, the poetic function is only a superficial phenomenon, a means to an end, even if the formal processes are the same. On the other hand, what separates poetry from pure play is the communicative aim which persists in the poetic text. Poetry which was merely formal play, which evoked *nothing*, would be singularly limited (see Chapter 9).

Another important distinction can be made between spontaneous, free, creative play (poetry, wordplay, punning, etc.) and rule-governed play (anagrams, crosswords, *Scrabble*, etc.), which aims to impose order. In the same way, two stages can be distinguished in children: that of free, unconstrained play and a second, later stage, of rule-governed play which is part of the socialization process, since play – paradoxically – can be defined as both subversion of the social norm and integration into it.

In some societies verbal play is given very high status: such societies encourage and value such ritual manifestations of language as *verbal duelling*, or *verbal jousting*, *talking in riddles*, and *ritual insults*. Verbal duelling, a ritual confrontation in words, as practised for example among pre-adolescent Turks, demands virtuosity in the art of linking and rhyming repartee and insults. It amounts to a rite of passage, an initiation which gives access to the world of grown men. Among the young Blacks of the American inner cities the practice of ritual insults – *dozens* or *sounding* – which accompanies their adolescent years, allows them to let off steam.¹² It is a substitute for aggression and also demands virtuoso manipulation of the language: rhymes, puns, double-meanings, and figures of speech follow each other at breakneck speed. The rule is that what one says should have no link with reality, so the informative function is totally ignored. The use of riddles, which in our culture is restricted to schoolchildren, is also highly valued in many societies with an oral culture. In Madagascar, where language games are considered the supreme art form, verbal jousting, or *hain-teny* can go on for days at a time in front of fascinated audiences. By contrast, we in the West are increasingly buried beneath the mass of the referential, of the purely, merely informational and the utilitarian. Poets and word-jugglers have lost the pre-eminent place in the city which was formerly reserved for them.

¹² Cf. Labov (1972b).