

EXUBERANCE, A MOTIVATION FOR LANGUAGE

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What motivates people to use language? The standard answer is to say the need for communication. True enough, but that is only part of the picture. Even more fundamental is the zest for living, an exuberance that carries healthy human beings along in life. It manifests itself in language as what can best be called the "play spirit". This may even have been the prime mover in the development of language itself.

The areas in which word play is evident are wide indeed. We think at once of the sportive coining of new words, punning, metaphor, pig Latin, mock Latin, double talk, intentional mispronunciation, schizoverbia, and the like.

In the scholarly world, such subjects have been pursued mostly by folklorists and anthropologists, whose interests overlap with those of linguists in many areas. For instance, in 1971 at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New York City was held a "Symposium on Linguistic Play", resulting in the very provocative volume Speech Play, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (Philadelphia, 1976). Later meetings resulted in the formation of The Association for the Anthropological Study of Play, which held its first annual meeting in Detroit in April, 1975.

In 1978 Don Nilsen and Alleen Pace Nilsen brought out their brilliant book, Language Play, in which they subsumed the whole field of linguistics under the play spirit. Their chapter "What Is Language Play?" contains substantial insights.

But the subject had a longer period of formation. The great Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, is best known in this connection. In 1933 he chose as the subject of his address as Rector of Leyden University, "The Play Element of Culture", and he developed this into his classic study, Homo Ludens, finished in Dutch in 1938. It underwent revisions for a German version in 1944 and an English one in 1950. His purpose, he said, was to lay "stress on the concept of play and on the supreme importance to civilization

of the play-factor." [Homo Ludens: a Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), "Foreword," p.x.]

Some important theoretical questions have arisen in the study of play. The terminology requires careful discrimination. Much depends on how one allocates the semantic area of somewhat related terms like **sport**, **games**, **contest**, **myth**, **ritual**. Huisinga has stated: "No other modern language known to me has the exact equivalent of the English 'fun.'" But is "fun," even in English, a necessary component of play? Huisinga believes that "the fun of playing, resists all analysis, all logical interpretation." [p.3.]

A remarkable characteristic of play is the high degree to which it is structured. In this matter linguistic considerations have a strong bearing. Can play be serious? If activities are serious, can they still be classified as play? In this regard, the nature of ritual is deeply involved. It has been claimed that all poetry is motivated by play--in fact, that the whole realm of esthetic matters can be called play. According to this outlook, much of language falls into the area of play, especially because all metaphors are evidence of play, and metaphor permeates deeply into all language.

A number of my studies already in print strongly indicate the play motivation. In 1941 in my paper on spelling bees, I showed how the intractable problem of English spelling, with its social pressure toward uniformitarianism, was turned into a game. The spelling contests began in the schools of Elizabethan England, but in New England around 1800 they were turned into an evening entertainment of a neighborhood, and the practice moved westward with the frontier. ["The Spelling Bee: a Linguistic Institution of the American Folk," PMLA June 1941, 495-512.]

If you accept the wide definitions of Huisinga, another study of mine, published in American Speech in May, 1961, concerns the play spirit. This is my analysis and history of the "Rebel yell." Huisinga's chapter on "Play and War" aroused more dissent than any other of his positions, but he supported his argument by reference to medieval tournaments and the "single combat" that sometimes substituted for martial engagements. He recognized that the Nazi version of war altered the relationships drastically. As he said: "It remained for the theory of 'total war' to banish war's cultural function and extinguish the last vestige of the play-element." [p.90.] Believing as he did that "civilization is rooted in noble play" [p.210], he was much shaken by the Nazi reversion to barbarism. But the American Civil War was a different story, in which gallantry often prevailed. The yelling of the Confederate soldier, described as "a shriek, sky-rending, blood-curdling, savage beyond description," was part of the "play" that he brought into his fighting. ["The Rebel Yell as a Linguistic Problem," American Speech XXXVI May 1961, 83-92.]

Many commentators have remarked on the relationship of the play spirit to creativity. This is richly apparent in the coinage of words and the lexicographer is constantly surprised at the ingenuity displayed at all levels of social status.

The westward movement of the American frontier resulted in a throng of lawless coinages: discombobulate, hornswoggle, absquatulate, squablification, explunctify, slantindicular, angeliferous, lallapalooza--these are samples. I concluded in my study, "The Criteria for a Class of Jocular Words in English," in Maledicta VI 1982, p.178: "The play spirit is so diverse and uninhibited that any attempt to find 'underlying principles' would be forcing it into a Procrustean bed."

I have discovered that the play spirit was the chief motivation for the coinage of the most notorious Americanism that has been added to the vocabulary of English. I refer to O.K. To displace the dozens of etymologies that have been put forward, I built up an edifice of documentation that I think represents the historical fact. In Boston, Massachusetts, in the late 1830s, a remarkable craze developed for the use of abbreviations. The letters n.g. were popular for no go, O.F.M. for Our First Men, a.r. for all right. Sometimes the words were misspelled, as all right spelled ollwright, with the abbreviation O.W. On this model, all correct was respelled oll korrekt, with the resultant abbreviation O.K. It is this one that lasted on with such success. The earliest known written use is in the Boston Morning Post of March 23, 1839, in the repartee of its editor, the witty Charles Gordon Greene. ["The First Stage in the History of 'O.K.'," in American Speech XXXVIII Feb 1963, 5-27. Cf. also "The Folklore of 'O.K.'," ibid XXXIX Feb 1964, 5-25.]

I have recently been working at the derivatives from geographic names, to find out what patterns direct the Bostonian from Boston, the Cantabrigian from Cambridge, or the Provincetowner and Provincetonian from Provincetown. The play spirit introduces many complexities. An early student of the American vocabulary, John Russell Bartlett, announced in 1859: "[the names] Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Arkansas refuse to yield to the process at all." [Dict. of Americanisms 2nd ed. 1859, p.xxiv.]

But the actual record shows that many forms can be found. For the name Connecticut I have found seven derivatives:

- (1) Connecticutian, used in 1702 by Cotton Mather in his Magna Christi Americana
- (2) Connecticutensian, used in 1781 by Samuel Peters in his history of Connecticut
- (3) Connecticutter, used in 1897 in a California periodical
- (4) Connectican, used in 1942 in a letter to the Baltimore Evening Sun
- (5) Connecticutan, used in 1946 by the book reviewer John Cournos
- (6) Connecticutian, reported in 1947 from New Britain
- (7) Connecticutite, used in 1968 by an anonymous reviewer in Playboy

But in addition are several jocular forms, the cleverest being Connecticutie, referring to a pretty girl of Connecticut, first used in 1938 by the essayist Frank Sullivan about Mrs. Heywood Broun and in 1947 by a journalist about the Hon. Clare Boothe Luce. Also

jocular is Connecticanuck for a Connecticut person of French background, as well as Connectikook, an oddball or eccentric from Connecticut, and Connecticutup, a prankster from Connecticut. It is dangerous to say, as Bartlett did, that forms cannot be found. I have given the documentation in "What Connecticut People Can Call Themselves," in Connecticut Onomastic Review No. 2 1981, 3-23.

The play spirit has wide manifestations in the whole of human life, and it can be studied with profit as the motivation for much of human behavior, as soon as food, shelter, and sex are taken care of. Especially in language, exuberance accounts for much that happens.

ANGUISHED ENGLISH

Word Ways does not ordinarily review humor books, but an exception must be made for Richard Lederer's Anguished English (Wyrick & Company, Charleston, 1987), a 117-page paperback selling for \$7.95. This is an anthology of "accidental assaults" on the English language--student bloopers, double-entendre headlines, Irish bulls, malapropisms, excuses given to accident-claim adjusters, mixed proverbs, and the like. Much of the material will be familiar to Readers Digest readers, and many of the student bloopers appear in a book first published by Viking Press in 1931, but the author has done a great service in bringing this widely-scattered material together.

There is, in fact, a relationship between the humor in this book and recreational linguistics. Many jokes depend for their effect upon the unexpected juxtaposition of words different in meaning but similar in sound (homonyms or near-homonyms) or letter-patterns (single-letter substitutions, letter-interchanges, letter deletions). Others depend upon ambiguity of meaning caused by the omission of auxiliary words (TUNA BITING OFF WASHINGTON COAST; HERSHEY BARS PROTEST), a topic extensively analyzed in Petr Beckmann's The Structure of Language: A New Approach (Golem Press, 1972).