Language play in children - Introduction

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CAHIERS DE PSYCHOLOGIE COGNITIVE-CURRENT PSYCHOLOGY OF COGNITION

Volume: 17

Issue: 2

Pages: 131-134

Published: APR 1998

To the memory of Neil O'Connor, 1917-1997

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON LANGUAGE PLAY

There is considerable evidence that play with the linguistic patterns of language is an important activity for many children from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Rivkai, 1937; Opie & Opie, 1959; Weir, 1962; Chukovsky, 1925/1959/1968; Chao, 1971; Aimard 1977; Heath, 1983; Schieffelin, 1983; Dowker, 1989, 1991; Dowker & Pinto, 1993). The patterns that are manipulated in such play include phonological patterns (e.g rhyme and alliteration); syntactic patterns (e.g. modified repetition and variation of sentence frames); semantic patterns (e.g metaphor and other forms of figurative language); and pragmatic patterns (e.g. playful violations of discourse conventions).

Although most studies of language play have involved children, it is clear that in many cases language play, defined in a broad sense, persists throughout life in forms ranging from riddles to rhetorical devices. In particular, adult oral poetry is an important feature of many cultures (Finnegan, 1977, 1978; Roazzi, Dowker & Bryant, 1993). Although only one of the articles in this issue deals specifically with adults, most deal with linguistic and metalinguistic abilities and activities that are relevant to adults as well as children

There are several reasons why language play is an important topic for cognitive psychologists to study:

(1) It provides information about the nature of language acquisition. For example, children's playful manipulations of linguistic devices give clues to their understanding of these devices and their functions. Moreover, it has frequently been suggested (cf. Kuczaj, 1982, 1983) that language play plays an important role in facilitating the mastery of language. Further study of language play (including the extent to which it is a cross-cultural universal) could enable us to evaluate these claims and to gain a better understanding of the processes whereby different aspects of language are mastered.

(2) It tells us not only about people's linguistic awareness but also about their metalinguistic awareness: their ability to reflect on language (Clark, 1978; Chaney, 1992; Gombert, 1992). Metalinguistic awareness has been shown to be of considerable importance in facilitating the acquisition of literacy (e.g. Bryant, Bradley, Maclean & Crossland, 1990; Rego & Bryant, 1993; Huang & Hanley, 1995). From a more theoretical point of view, metalinguistic awareness is of interest as a form of metacognition.

(3) The study of people's perception and manipulation of linguistic patterns, regularities and analogies may be relevant to understanding their perception and manipulation of pattern, regularity and analogy more generally. For example, issues of the possibilities

and limitations of computer generation of jokes, metaphors and poetic language play an important part in artificial intelligence approaches to the perception and production of patterns and analogies in a variety of contexts (Boden, 1990; Hofstadter, 1995).

Although a considerable amount of work has been carried out on language play, it had, especially recently, been rather fragmented. There had been little cross-disciplinary integration, or even communication concerning studies of the topic from different perspectives (e.g. those of education, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology and developmental psychology).

The purpose of this issue is thus twofold: to explore the current state of the art regarding the psychology of language play, and to bring a variety of different approaches to the topic within a single volume. The contributions have indeed turned out to represent an enormous variety of themes, ranging from the development of narrative, to cross-cultural influences on language play, to the nature of language play in children with disabilities.

The issue begins with Stan Kuczaj's evolutionary theory of language play and discussion of possible precursors among non-human animals. Several articles follow on one of the central themes of this issue: children's narratives, especially in relation to pretend play. The articles by Tullia Musatti, Edy Veneziano and Susanna Mayer; Daniela Plesa; Carol Fox; Alyssa McCabe; Tony Charman and Yael Schmueli-Goetz; and Giuliana Pinto and Piero Salzarulo all deal with aspects of this theme, ranging from dream narratives to the relationships between pretence and theory of mind.

The following articles move from narrative to humour. Diane Mahony and Virginia Mann; Brigitte Nehrlich, Zazie Todd and David Clarke; and Orit Ashkenazy and Dorit Ravid all deal with children's production and/or comprehension of jokes, in relation to their language abilities including reading skills, metalinguistic awareness and the understanding of polysemy.

It may be noted that the articles so far have dealt with children from a number of cultures: English, American, Italian and Hebrew. Indeed, Ashkenazy and Ravid's article addresses, among other issues, the effects of the Hebrew language on the form that linguistic humour takes. The next two articles - by Ann Dowker, Grazyna Krasowicz, Giuliana Pinto, Antonio Roazzi and Anita Smith; and by Miyako Nakamura, Regine Kolinsky, Carmela Spagnoletti and Jose Morais - deal specifically with cross-cultural similarities and differences in language play and metalinguistic awareness.

The next two articles deal with language play in populations with disabilities: blind children (Sarah Norgate, Vicky Lewis and Glyn Collis) and children with specific language impairment (Victoria Joffe). The issue concludes with Eve Clark's discussion of children's lexical creativity. I am very grateful to all the contributors - and reviewers - who made this special issue possible.

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