Speech Play, Verbal Art, and Linguistic Anthropology

Joel Sherzer and Anthony K. Webster

Abstract and Keywords

This article engages with the place of speech play in the concerns of linguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and other language-in-use oriented disciplines. Taking a discourse-centered approach to speech play, we argue that speech play is a crucial site in understanding the complex language, grammar, culture, and individual nexus. Speech play challenges the boundaries of languages and also acts as an engine of language change. Often those features most associated with speech play (sound symbolism, punning, reduplication, and the like) are considered marginal to the pursuit of linguistics. We argue, instead, that they are crucial in promoting an openness to different ways of conceiving of languages and recognizing the role of aesthetics in language use. Such a perspective has broader import in how we document and describe languages.

Keywords: speech play, discourse, language, linguistics, culture, sound, pun, grammar

Introduction

Speech play is the playful manipulation of elements and components of language, in relation to one another, in relation to the social and cultural contexts of language use, and against the backdrop of other verbal possibilities in which speech play is not foregrounded. The elements manipulated can be at any level of language, from sound patterns to syntax, semantics, and discourse; they can include the various languages used in multilingual situations and relations between verbal and nonverbal communication. Speech play can be conscious or unconscious, noticed or not noticed, purposeful or nonpurposeful, and humorous or serious. Nonetheless, given the focus on manipulation, speech play typically involves a degree of selection and consciousness beyond that of ordinary language use.

While speech play is present to some degree in all speech—informal, formal, conversational, or artistic—it is most evident in certain conventional forms that are found in many societies. These include play languages, puns, jokes, verbal dueling, proverbs, and riddles. There is a close connection between speech play and verbal art. Speech play provides the means and resources, such as metaphor, parallelism, and narrative manipulations, out of which verbal art is created. At the same time, various and overlapping ends are served by speech play, comic or humorous, religious, rhetorical, mnemonic, competitive, rehearsal, and artistic. To take as a brief example, note the ways that prophecy and riddling have been merged among contemporary Choctaw, an indigenous language group of North America (Mould, 2002). Levery, as Mould (2002: 412) notes, is appropriate for both prophecy and riddling among Choctaws, and prophecies of the past become riddles of the present. This twining of genres (riddles and prophecy) by contemporary Choctaw allows them “to praise their elders not only through traditional means of attribution but by transferring the respect earned in riddling to that earned in prophecy” (Mould, 2002: 412).

The study of speech play is relevant to various disciplines and scholarly concerns. For linguists, speech play provides insight into linguistic structure by revealing the ways in which various elements of language can be manipulated in different contexts. Speech play is relevant to both linguistic theory and linguistic methodology. It provides insight into the nature of language in general, as play is an important component of language structure.
and language use; play is inherent in grammar, and grammar provides potential for play actualized in discourse. The study of speech play also reveals information about particular languages, indicating what parts are available for play, how, and why. Methodologically, speech play provides a tool for the investigation of both language structure and language use. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, since speech play often emerges from language, styles, and varieties in contact, its study provides insights into the use and the attitudes toward the sociolinguistic repertoire of a community.

The discipline of linguistics has also marginalized the study of speech play, with some significant, mainly methodological exceptions. And yet speech play is critically relevant to linguistics. It enables one to deal with not only standard topics in the study of the grammars of languages but also and topics that are salient for the speakers of particular languages, for example an orientation to and focus on form, shape, texture, movement, and direction, found in many languages, or sound symbolism and onomatopoeia, also common in the languages of the world. An orientation to speech play also leads one to recognize, indeed insist on, alternative rather than unitary solutions to analytical problems. Paying attention to speech play argues for a plurality of theories and methods, an openness to different ways of conceiving of language and to different ways of collecting and analyzing data.

Speech Play and Linguistics

Let us look more closely at the place of speech play within a more inclusive view of linguistics. A number of years ago, Sherzer (1970: 351) argued that to understand the Kuna, an indigenous language of Colombia and Panama, play language sorsik sunmakke, “talking backward,” required recognition that Kuna grammar—here the phonological systems of Kuna—were “organizations in diversity.” Rather than assume a single uniform grammar, the examples from sorsik sunmakke suggested that individual Kuna “may be using distinct linguistic models when speaking to one another” (Sherzer, 1970: 351). For example, different Kuna speakers speak backward forms like aswe, “avocado,” as either weas or swea. Here they treat /sw/ as either a single sound or a segmentable consonant cluster. Thus, while speaking backward in Kuna acts as a modeling of the phonological system of Kuna, that system is not uniform. Different models coexist. Furthermore, as Bruce Mannheim (1986: 56) has suggested, Quechua speech play—where, for example, semantic couplets highlight and sediment markedness relations—provides “tools for learning grammar.” We would actually go further and suggest that speech play is a way of continuously recreating grammar. While we are not beholden to any theory of grammar here, we note that there are resonances with Paul Hopper’s (1987) concern with “emergent grammar.” The potential is always that grammars are relatively shared, not uniformly shared, and speech play is one place for grammars—as organizations of diversity—to be both recreated but also refashioned as well (see, e.g., Golovko, 1994, 2003; Minks 2013). This, we might add, is part of the central thrust of a discourse-centered approach to language and culture that recognizes that it is in dynamic and emergent speech play and verbal art that language and culture are intertwined (Sherzer, 1987).

For example, consider the literature on mixed languages and the arctic Mednyj Aleut as described by Evgeniy Golovko (1994, 2003). Mednyj Aleut is a mixed language partaking from Russian and Aleut. Golovko argues that one plausible scenario for the origins of the mixed language are found in the speech play of children and adults. Numerous examples of mixed forms occur in children and adult songs and show deliberate manipulation for aesthetic purposes. For example, Golovko (2003: 180) gives the following example from an “Aleut folklore song.” The Russian form is underlined, and we follow Golovko’s analysis:

agiitad-uska-kuza-ng
friend-DIM-DIM-1SG.POSSESSOR.1SG.PSD
‘my dear friend’, lit. ‘my little friend’

Here the Russian diminutive suffix –(y)ushk has been inserted into the Aleut form—and behaves like an Aleut suffix—for, potentially, aesthetic reasons. Such examples then become a site where speakers can find ways to indicate a new identity vis-à-vis the two dominant language communities (understanding that mixed languages are often the result of the expression of a new identity that is neither Russian or Aleut in this case; see also Bakker, 1997). Speech play here, then, creates the avenue—or groove—for the creation of new grammatical structures. Attendant linguistic structurings are then piggy-backed onto the mixed forms developed within speech play. As Golovko
(2003: 179) suggests, “language play is nothing but a conscious language change.” In an earlier work, Golovko (1994: 119) suggests that “maybe it is not by chance that a deliberate code-mixing is sometimes used to invent humoristic songs... it seems that only people with a good sense of humour could launch a new mixed language into the world.” Amanda Minks (2013: 122–128) provides a number of examples of the use of Miskitu, Kriol English, and Spanish code-mixing in the speech play of children on Corn Island (Nicaragua) in her ethnography *Voices of Play: Miskitu Children’s Speech and Song on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua*. She presents the following examples of code-mixing from the speech play of children (they are “playing school” here). We have followed Minks’s analysis of the forms (Spanish forms are bolded; Kriol English forms are underlined):

1. **respuestika** (Minks, 2013: 124)
   
   respuesta ‘answer’ + -ka construct state suffix

2. **bukkim ni kop taki kapram mochilikam aik** (Minks, 2013: 126)
   
   you were copying with your book, give me your backpack (mochila ‘backpack’ + -kam ‘your’)

3. **kop takaia baman** (Minks, 2013: 126)
   
   copier ‘copy, cheat’ + takaia aux only
   
   you only copy

4. **yang nu apu yang stadi takras kapri** (Minks, 2013: 127)
   
   I don’t know, I didn’t study (stadi = study + takras neg aux)

Here we see the use of Miskitu grammatical suffixes attached to Spanish lexical items and the use of Miskitu auxiliary verb constructions with both Spanish (a reduced form of copier here) and Kriol English verbs. It is important to note, as Minks makes clear, that while such mixed forms are relatively common in the speech play of children, they are not actually used in school. Speech play is one site for the breaking of putative boundaries between languages.

Beyond examples of code-mixing, interlingual puns—which exploit phonological similarities and the bivalency between forms—are another site for the boundaries between languages to be played with. By interlingual puns, we mean puns that are based on the phonological iconicity of forms that cross linguistic boundaries. They are, to follow the terminology of Kathryn Woolard (1998), “bivalent.” By “bivalency,” Woolard (1998: 6) means “a simultaneous membership of an element in more than one linguistic system” (but certainly expandable to polyvalent). For example, David Samuels (2001: 291) provides the following example from his work with Western Apaches concerning a place name:

As the story goes, two Apaches were passing by some white men coming from the opposite direction. As they passed each other at this particular watering hole, one of the white men hailed the Apaches.

“Excuse me!” he shouted out to them. “Do you speak English?”

One Apache turned to the other and, pointing to the well, said, “‘Ya’téshínízh néh’ nínlíi”—“he says ‘did you piss into the water?”

According to Samuels (2001: 291), the pun works because of the phonological similarity between “English” and -nlízh, “to urinate.”

While there is often delight in unintended punning and the stories that circulate afterward about such puns—as many a linguist or anthropologist can attest to—there are also potentially negative social ramifications. Jeffrey Anderson (1998: 93) pungently describes such an example this way:

Once, while teaching an Arapaho history class, I experienced poor vowel movement by saying “hebiyoo” instead of “heebiyoo” for ‘spoon.’ To the fluent speakers present, the former sounded like habiho, a command for ‘wipe your butt’. Slips of the tongue become material for gossip and are often the focus of anecdotal oral histories that attach to persons and events.

As Anderson (1998) goes on to explain, such calling attention of unintended puns can sometimes discourage novice speakers in endangered language situations. They become reticent to speak the endangered language for fear of teasing about mistakes (see also Lee, 2007).
Speech Play and Anthropology

For anthropologists, speech play can be seen as at the heart of intersections among language, culture, and society—testing, experimenting with, and sometimes creating the boundaries of appropriate behavior. While there is always some play for play’s sake, play often involves culture exploring and working out both its essence and the limits of its possibilities. It can be a cultural theme and as such is at the heart of the intersection of language, culture, culture, thought, and individual expression. Play occurs as people, and not just children, work out, experiment, exercise, and define the properties of their languages, cultures, and societies, and especially the intersections and relations among them. In this view language and culture and their interaction and intersection are viewed as dynamic, not static, in flux, not fixed. Methodologically, the study of people’s speech play gives researchers a tool for analyzing how natives express and live their own language and culture. For literary critics, attention to speech play focuses on the texture of language use and helps define the nature of verbal art.

In the course of doing ethnographic and linguistic work with Navajo poets, Webster (2009, 2013, 2015; Mitchell and Webster, 2011) learned that an important aesthetic practice among Navajos is saad aheel’têego diits’a’, “words that resemble each other through sound” or punning. Indeed, punning among Navajos has been repeatedly noted in the ethnographic and linguistic literature (see Hill, 1943; Kluckhohn and Leighton, 1962; Sapir, 1932; Webster, 2010a). Understanding that such forms of speech play also inform some contemporary Navajo poetry has allowed Webster to rethink questions concerning singular translations of any given poem written in Navajo. It has pushed him away from relying solely on literal translations. Indeed, this was most humorously expressed to Webster when he showed a translation of a poem to that Navajo poet, and the poet replied that Webster had gotten “all the words correct.” It was then that Webster realized he needed to think more carefully about the question of translation.

To see, then, how speech play is intertwined with contemporary Navajo poetry, we can look briefly at a poem by Navajo poet Rex Lee Jim. He is actually the poet who told Webster that he “got all the words correct.” Webster has spent the better part of a decade thinking about and talking to Navajos about this poem. In this poem, the first word of the poem can be heard multiple ways and thus creates a complex understanding of the poem (see Webster, 2006, 2013):

\[ \text{na’asts’ǫǫsí} \]
\[ \text{ts’ǫǫs, ts’ǫǫs} \]
\[ \text{yiits’a’go} \]
\[ \text{įįts’ǫǫz} \]

(jim, 1995: 37)

mouse
suck, suck
sounding
kiss

(Webster, 2006: 39)

The first line, \textit{na’asts’ǫǫsí}, is the conventional term in Navajo for “mouse,” but it can be morphologically analyzed as “the one who goes about sucking.” The word is based on the ideophonic (sound symbolic) verb stem –\textit{ts’ǫǫs}, “to suck, to kiss.” The independent ideophone is then used in reduplicated form in line 2 of the poem. The third line is the verb of sounding often used in conjunction with ideophones in Navajo. The last line is semantically ambiguous and can mean something akin to “to kiss,” “to suck,” or “to perform a sucking ceremony.” The sucking ceremony is a curative ritual in traditional Navajo beliefs where a Navajo medicine man ritually sucks out an object that is causing harm to a patient. The first line—\textit{na’asts’ǫǫsí}—is also homophonous with náá’\textit{asts’ǫǫs} “to perform a sucking ceremony again” (with the semeliterative náá- ‘again’ + \textit{asts’ǫǫs} “to suck, to kiss, to perform a sucking ceremony”). Given, as Jim explained to Webster in June 2001, that the mouse is an “omen of evil, the spirit of death” in “traditional” Navajo beliefs and now associated with the deadly Hantavirus, the poem—through the initial homophony—takes on a rather ominous reading. Another way to translate the poem, then, might be

sucking again [the one who again sucks]
suck, suck
sounding
a sucking ceremony is performed
There is yet another reading of this poem—a reading that led one Navajo teacher Webster knows to not use this poem in her class because she was concerned with what some parents might say. However, in translating this poem we see that speech play moves easily into verbal artistry. We also see the ways that speech play—here punning—works in Navajo and that such speech play is difficult—if not impossible—to translate into English. The English versions hint at the depth of the Navajo version, but they are only hints. As one Navajo remarked after hearing Jim read his poetry, “When you think about it [the sounds in the poem], the whole meaning changes.”

Speech Play and Ideophones

While often ignored in earlier work in linguistics (see Nuckolls, 1996), ideophones and sound symbolism are often crucial aspects of speech play. Janis Nuckolls’s (1996, 2010) work among the Runa (Quechua-speakers) of Ecuador highlights the crucial role of ideophony and sound symbolism in their speech play and verbal art. Nuckolls (1996: 118) presents the following playful order that was given to her using a reduplicated ideophone (we follow her presentation in the example):

*Mutsi mutsi miku-ngi janet tsawata shina*

mutsi mutsi eat-2 janet tortoise like

“Eat these *mutsi mutsi*, Janet, like a tortoise.”

Here Nuckolls was encouraged, playfully, to eat papayas in the manner of a tortoise, who are renowned for finding their way into agricultural fields and there being found busily “chomping away at ripe papayas that have fallen” (Nuckolls, 1996: 118). For a sense of the playful and aesthetic use of ideophony in Quechua, we encourage readers to view Tod Swanson’s videos of such usage (see, e.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FVzJh69jyQ). Nick Enfield (2007: 303) describes a series of Lao ideophones for “baldness” that are humorously deployed in a story about “an inter-kingdom head-butting contest.” Among the ideophonic forms found for kinds of baldness are the following (we quote the forms from Enfield’s examples):

a. *khim1-mim1*—’frog sitting by the pond’; i.e., with a patch of hair low on the forehead.

b. *qùù2-khùù2*—’a swidden in the middle of the jungle’; i.e., a clear patch on top of the cranium, with hair around it.

c. *sameng4-keng4*—’bald across the whole dome’; said not to be appropriate for civil servants.

(Enfield, 2007: 303)

As Enfield notes, the humor of the story comes in part from the way the storyteller uses the ideophones and describes the meaning of both those ideophones and the images of baldness they evoke and, in a move reminiscent of Edward Sapir’s (1915) famous piece on “Abnormal Types of Speech in Nootka,” “the corresponding personality of each” (Enfield, 2007: 303). What is especially noteworthy about Enfield’s examples are that they come from his grammar of Lao—suggesting the ways that linguists and linguistic anthropologists have come to better recognize the importance of such forms in describing languages. Also important here are the efforts to archive minority languages in use—especially noteworthy is the Archives of Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) housed at the University of Texas at Austin.

Speech Play and the Language/Culture Nexus

The study of speech play has a history that relates to several disciplines, including anthropology, linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, literary criticism, and folklore. Anthropologists have treated play and humor as marginal to concerns traditionally considered more basic, such as social organization and kinship or, more recently, political economy and the world system. Recent writing, in both literary criticism and anthropology, considers the concept of play to be central to their enterprise, but once again rarely provides extended and detailed linguistic analysis of specific forms.

Speech play figures prominently in language, culture, and individual nexus and reveals the ways that languages—
as they exist within cultured ways of speaking—are implicated in differing imaginative potentialities. That is, for example, what are sometimes called concerns with what John Leavitt (2011) labels “linguistic relativities”—this is not the relation between language and thought but rather the relationships between speakers, languages, and imaginative potentials as made real in and through discourse (see Friedrich, 1986; Sherzer, 1987, 1990). Take, for example, the use of punning as an aesthetic practice predicated on the particularity of linguistic resources. Recently Webster was in the Department of Anthropology’s main office at the University of Texas and overheard the office staff engaging in a bit of speech play about the fact that one cannot have a slaughter without laughter. That such speech play is predicated on the linguistic features of a particular language seems obvious enough. The pun is impossible in Navajo or Kuna. Likewise, the Navajo puns—as described by Edward Sapir (1932)—do not transfer into English (which, for example, lacks the rich array of classificatory verbs that Navajo has). Another example is from a bit of word play in a Thompson Salish story by Mabel Joe (2008: 317–319), which is predicated on the pun-like polyvalent senses of q’wáqsm, “break a branch, break a nose, break something protruding.” A daughter-in-law is told to go break some branches off the trees, and instead the daughter-in-law proceeds to break her own nose!

Notice as well the ways that repetition of words or phrases can be aesthetically pleasing forms of speech play. Keith Basso (1996) discusses the ways that some Western Apaches simply repeat place names for aesthetic reasons. One Navajo woman Webster worked with enjoyed repeating the Navajo word hahodíneestá, “it has been raining awhile and won’t stop.” This is the pleasure of speaking beautiful words. Here too, as Isbell and Fernandez (1977: 29) describe for Quechua riddle games, even when a riddle—especially riddles based on sound rhythm—is well known, “their sounds give the listener a sense of pleasure.” The following is an example of such a riddle (we reproduce the example from Isbell and Fernandez adding only a clarification in brackets for their use of dim as an indicator of a diminutive):

**Riddle:** Tillu tillucha

Tillu - cha

** * - dim [diminutive]

**Answer:** Puchkatillucha

Puchkatillu - cha

A spindle of whorl – dim [diminutive]

A spindle of whorl – dim [diminutive]

*Tillu* does not have denotative meaning (indicated by *) but native speakers find it pleasurable and say that it brings to mind something small and delicate. The riddle is based entirely upon the rhythm of the sounds in the question and answer.

(Isbell and Fernandez, 1977: 29–30)

Surprise is an important component of speech play but so too can be the satisfaction of form (see Burke, 1925). We return to a concern with surprise later.

Speech play, while sometimes humorous, is often deeply serious and significant. It is precisely because play is so important that it is so widespread in the world. A focus on speech play contributes to and is indeed a logical continuation of a tradition in anthropology and linguistics with regard to the relationship between language and culture, linguistic structures on the one hand and worldview or perception on the other. There are aspects of linguistic form and linguistic structure that emerge only through the study of language use in verbally playful and verbally artistic discourse. In fact, speech play and verbal art involve language, in its essence, on display. Potentials inherent in language are packed and pushed to their highest limits. Playfully imaginative and artistically creative language constitute the richest point of intersection of the relationship among language, culture, society, and individual expression and therefore the place in which language, cognition, perception, and worldview come together in their most distilled form. Heteroglossia (languages, dialects, and speech styles in contact and competition within communities) and intertextuality (combinations of forms of discourse) can be both sources of
play and results of play.

Here again let us look at some examples. In thinking not just about the ways that interlingual puns promiscuously expand the boundaries of languages, we need to also recognize the social work behind such forms of speech play. Webster has been told by Navajos how when they were children attending boarding school they would pun the phrase “and justice” as jástís, “call” in their morning recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Young Navajos took the chance that matrons and teachers would misrecognize the pun as not a pun, hearing not resistance but acquiescence. As one Navajo consultant told Webster, such group punning “probably helped our survival in boarding school” (see Webster, 2010b: 204). Brenda Farnell (1995: 136) describes several interlingual puns between English and Nakota (a Siouan language). That is, an English word is understood as a Nakota word. Farnell (1995: 136) describes one such interlingual pun in the following manner:

Often Nakota is used in a humorous way as a buffer against the foreign nature of the Euro-American’s world. For example, one elderly Assiniboine man referred to a cafe in the nearby town of Chinook named “The Cozy Corner” as “The Friendly Cafe,” making a pun on the Nakota word for “friend” (kona) while at the same time indicating that it was a place Indian people need not feel “shamed” to go into (i.e., they were not likely to be discriminated against or made to feel out of place).

Another example from Farnell is the punning of the “Napa” of “Napa Auto Parts” as nap’a, “beat it, run away, escape,” with the following explanation from her consultant: “They don’t want you to shop in there, they are telling you to beat it” (Farnell, 1995: 136). As Farnell (1995: 139) notes, border towns, because of rampant racism toward Nakotas, were often places where Nakotas felt uncomfortable using Nakota.

As Fernando Armstrong-Fumero (2009: 369) reminds us concerning Deep Maya, recognizing the role of speech play and interlingual punning as language practices with “strong historical continuities” allows language planners and activists to reimagine the supposed boundaries between languages and to recognize ongoing heteroglossic practices. Purist discourses often are reluctant to acknowledge the role of speech play and interlingual punning in their visions of languages. Interlingual punning, for example, among Navajos is attested by anthropologists and linguists from at least to the 1920s (Webster, 2010a, 2013). While there is a long tradition of describing Navajos as resistant to borrowing words into the Navajo language, such a perspective leaves the impression that Navajos have been disinterested in English. Whether it be Navajos punning God as gad, “juniper tree,” sin as sin, “song,” or Studebaker as hastoi bibia, “old man’s stomach” (Hill, 1943: 18; see also Webster, 2013), interlingual punning among Navajos suggests otherwise. A focus on speech play broadens our perspectives on issues concerning language documentation and language revitalization and reminds us that languages are not static or bounded billiard balls (see also Mithun, 2013).

As Peterson and Webster (2013) suggest, one way of understanding word coining among Navajos is to approach it from the perspective of speech play. Verbal dexterity is highly valued among many Navajos, and the ability to coin a term dexterously in a particular context thus is both a display of such dexterity but also creates moments of enjoyment, sociability, and delight for interactants. Consider the following example from Peterson and Webster (2013: 107–108), which we quote at length to highlight Peterson’s role in these performances as well:

one day in the summer of 2004 Peterson was up on the mountain at a friend’s mother’s house. She and her husband had recently acquired one of the federally subsidized cell phones. The phone, however, as is often the case, was actually useless at their homestead—Peterson’s own experience in the area suggested there was no signal for many miles around. Peterson’s friend’s mother was present, and she, her mother, and Peterson were sitting around outside of the house, swatting flies andWaiting for the hot summer day to cool off. Peterson asked Carol how they were able to use their new phone. She responded, “Biįl hajikháí” ‘with it-elevated place-they walk up.’ Everyone except for Peterson started laughing. “That’s what they call it,” Carol said. “They go up the mountain over there if they really have to make a call. It’s a lot shorter than going into town.”

“Aoo’ (‘yes’),” replied her mom, a monolingual speaker, in agreement. “Biįl hajikháí.” She continued to smile, put her hand to her ear as if she were talking on a phone. She was conspicuously eying Peterson for a reaction. While we have heard such terms before, for Peterson this was the point where he really began to recognize what they meant. “If they’re really in a hurry,” Carol continued in prosody designed for comedic effect, “then it’s biįl hajwóhl’iči (‘with it they run up an elevated place’).”
Both women let out a huge laugh. Peterson ran to his truck to get a pen to document this fleeting interaction. These creative terms for cell phones highlight the practice of having to search for a cell phone signal on the Reservation, a new form of local geographic knowledge. Many people, even in the less-interconnected areas of the Reservation, are able to find a cell signal, and have detailed knowledge about where to go to get a signal. Other behaviors related to cell phone use also become the foundation for speech play, as when another bilingual consultant in her 40s was describing cell phone users to me. “You know how people go when they can’t get a signal, or they’re just talking to the air and spinning around, that’s biil njoo báli (‘with it you go in a circular motion’).” This term for cell phones highlights the practice of a user positioning oneself to get a good signal, moving one’s head around and spinning around, and, it would resurface often. For example, in the summer of 2005, Peterson was helping another family dig holes for two outhouses. He and they were joking about the women’s progress in digging the hole vs. the men’s (Peterson was with the women, who it was thought, were doing much better than the men). One of the women present pulled out her cellphone—despite the lack of a signal in the area—and began a linguistic performance.

“Hanáá báli,” she said (‘it’s whirling around you’). She began to spin her hand around her waist, as this term highlights the practice of putting the phone on a belt clip. Everyone laughed. “Biil njoo báli,” she continued, mirroring the same example presented above, indexing the “spinning” involved when trying to strengthen the signal. Again, everyone laughed. “That’s just crazy,” said one person present. Again, Peterson ran to his truck to get a pen to document a fleeting interaction. Interestingly, unlike the examples above, there is not much about “talking” or “telling” in these humorous descriptions, nor is there a reliance on the lexeme bēésh ‘metal, apparatus.’ What these examples illustrate is movement—humorous descriptions of people’s behavior with cell phones. In a related example, a consultant, a bilingual man in his 40s known to be a talented joker, recounted that “the internet, it’s like jiits’ilidi, like a feed bag. You just stuff yourself.” Humor, often encountered, plays an important role in Navajoizing new concepts, and again, it... lends to the creation of a common sociality.

While as we noted previously, it is important to recognize the ways that speech play can act as an engine of grammar, we need to also keep in mind the social role the speakers make of speech play. These two features are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Witness again the role of speech play in the articulation of a distinctive social identity with regard to the emergence of mixed languages (Golovko, 1994, 2003). This is the serious work of speech play (see Basso, 1979; Sherzer, 2002). Perhaps no more dramatic example of the social work of speech play can be found than in Basso’s (1979) ethnography of Western Apache imitations of “whitemen.” Here a distinctive “whiteman” register has been created through the exaggeration of excessive nasality, rapidity in speech, loudness, and discourse features (pragmatically aggressive forms of questions and directives). Portraits of the whitemen comment, as Basso (1979) shows, on the culturally inappropriate behaviors often associated with white people, but they also simultaneously can index a closeness between Western Apache interlocutors. When done well, portraits of the whitemen are indexes of and affirmations of friendship between Western Apaches.

Acronyms—often thought of as prototypical expressions of bureaucracies striving for dehumanizing efficiency—can be the site for speech play as well and reveal, again, the overlapping of the playful and the serious. Speakers here play with the ambiguity of the acronym. Anyone, for example, who has spent time on an American Indian reservation will recognize from t-shirts that FBI is not an acronym for the Federal Bureau of Investigation but rather as Full Blood Indian (though Webster’s father preferred Fumbling Bumbling Idiots). The often contentious relationship between Western Indians and the Federal Bureau of Investigation looms large here. The acronym is bivalent, and its interpretation indexes in-group or out-group status. Myrdene Anderson (1994) describes the circulation of the “pseudoacronym” ČSV (pronounced, according to Anderson [1994: 281] as cha[e]ss-vay). The acronym arose, circulated, and was an aesthetically pleasing string of sounds; only later did speakers begin to assign words to each sound in the acronym. People wrote poetry inspired by the acronym (Anderson, 1994: 283). In many ways, the acronym worked to mock the imposing bureaucratization of Saami life by the state (or states), but it was also a playful way that Saami greeted each other as well and hence both created and signaled a degree of social intimacy. However, as Jane Hill (2008), Barbra Meek (2006, 2013), and Maggie Ronkin and Helen Karn (1999) have shown, speech play is not just a form of resistance but can be a powerful force to reproduce, circulate, and maintain structures of inequality predicated on, for example, racist assumptions.
**Conclusions: On Play**

The various meanings of the word *play*, in English as well as other languages, are all relevant to an understanding of speech play. One meaning is manipulation, and along with it freedom, but always within a set of rules. In language the different ways of pronouncing the same word or expressing the same idea are quite analogous to this sense of play, as is the lack of perfect fit between and among the various levels and components of language. Another meaning of *play* is that of performance, as in the playing of a musical instrument. Still another meaning of the term is that of playing a game, which raises the significant relation between play and games. Not all play takes the form of games, with sides and winners and losers, but some forms, such as verbal dueling, quite clearly do. Finally, there is the idea of play as the opposite of serious or literal, for which the Latin-derived term *ludic* has been used (see Huizinga 1955).

Different languages and cultures combine these concepts of play in different ways. In French, as in English, *play* (*jouer*) is used for manipulation, musical performance, games, and nonserious behavior such as joking and jesting. In Spanish the word *jugar* is used for manipulation and games, as well as nonseriousness, while *tocar* (literally, “touch”) is used for musical performance. In Kuna totoe is used for playing and joking in the sense of tricking and fooling, as well as playing games and dancing. The Indonesian word *main* signifies playing games, as well as nonseriousness. In English, like in French, the word *play*, as both a verb and a noun, is used for theatrical performance. One of the functions of reduplication in Indonesian languages is to indicate that an object or activity is nonserious or for play. A similar function is achieved in Kuna by means of the use of a verbal prefix *pinsa*, which means “for the hell of” or “just for play.”

These different meanings of play lead us to the very useful notions of frame and metacommunication, as developed by such scholars as Gregory Bateson (1972) and Erving Goffman (1974). *Frame* is the definition/conception/organization of an activity as either real/literal, rehearsed, practiced, talked about, lied about, dreamt, or fantasized. Play then is a type of frame. Related to frame is the concept of function of language and of communication more generally. In addition to functioning referentially, naming things, and providing information about them, language functions socially, expressively, metacommunicatively, and poetically. Speech play combines several of these functions. In turn speech play, as a form of language use, has various functions—psychological, cultural, humorous, and poetic.

These functions of language in general and speech play in particular overlap with one another and can be played down or foregrounded in particular instances. At one level there is no language use without speech play and verbal art involved to some degree. At the same time, there are verbal forms in which speech play and/or verbal art are the central and total focus. The notion of consciousness and purpose is notable here. Some forms of play are totally unconscious and unintended—certain sound or word associations, for example. Others are conscious, intended, and performed, such as jokes or stories. And there are various possibilities in between, as when an unintended pun gets laughed at and becomes the focus of commentary. This provides us with an insight into the nature of humor, clearly intimately related to play. Many scholars, including Freud (1905) and Bergson (1911), have noticed that humor results from surprise juxtapositions. The sudden coming into consciousness and public awareness and commentary of an unintended verbal play is a good example. Add to this the backdrop of entangled cultural and personal presuppositions and assumptions and we can begin to understand particular instances of humor, which can be quite complex.

It is useful to ask where exactly play is located. Play is located in language structure and grammar and is an inherent aspect of the formal properties of language. The inherent play aspects of language are exploited in rhetorical and poetic forms, as well as in discourse more generally. Play is located, again both actually and potentially, in sociolinguistic situations and in the juxtaposition of languages, dialects, and styles in use. Play is also located in everyday speech in the form of puns, word associations, repetitions and parallelisms, and clever responses and comebacks that feel creatively poetic. Play is also located in well-defined and developed discourse forms such as play languages, jokes, put-ons, stories, riddles, proverbs, and verbal dueling.

This focus on play fits well within current conceptions of discourse and culture, including language, as constructed, imagined, negotiated, and (re)invented. Instead of viewing language and culture as systems where everything holds together nicely and neatly, they can be seen as constantly emergent open systems with fuzziness, leaks, inventions, constructions, negotiations, and imaginations. Discourse is crucial to language and
culture intersection, the locus of the actualization of potentials provided by both language and culture, as well as personal experience. In this intersection, creativity, imagination, and play are essential. Another way to view this is that there is a lack of fit between words and world, so that while at times language reflects the world, it often is the creator of experience and perception. Again, speech play and verbal art are at the heart of this process and help us to understand not only relationships among language, culture, and thought but also the creative spirit that leads to constantly new forms of expression and aesthetic creation.

References


Lee, Tiffany. (2007). “‘If They Want Navajo To Be Learned, Then They Should Require It In All Schools’: Navajo Teenagers’ Experiences, Choices, and Demands Regarding Navajo Language.” Wicazo Sa Review 22(1): 7–33.


**Joel Sherzer**

Joel Sherzer, University of Texas at Austin

**Anthony K. Webster**

Anthony K. Webster, University of Texas at Austin