

## Reviews

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**Cook, Guy** *Language Play, Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 235 pp. ISBN 0-19-442153-8, \$25.95

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In this noteworthy book (winner of the 1999 Kenneth W. Mildener Prize of the Modern Language Association of America), Guy Cook offers language practitioners a thoughtful invitation to introduce—or reintroduce—an approach to language learning that is strikingly absent in today's prevailing curricula. Cook calls for play. His exploration of language play ironically opens a door to pedagogical territory that will appeal to those eager to integrate richer and deeper layers of life into curricula too often marked by superficial trivialities.

While we see no shortage of games in modern culture (think of sports, for example), it seems that the notion of play is taken to be virtually antithetical to virtuous activities of, say, work or learning. This divide has even been sanctioned by Christian piety. In *Language Play, Language Learning*, Cook has set out to remedy this divide and to reunite play with work and learning.

The book is divided into three parts: the first, descriptive; the second, theoretical; and the third, pedagogical. In order to focus on the connections of language play to language learning, this review will summarize only selectively the rich discussion in parts one and two.

The first part describes playful language. Cook observes language *forms*, such as paralinguage, gibberish rhymes, rhythm, and repetition, with an eye toward understanding why linguistic playfulness continues throughout our lives. He counsels that “[w]e should beware of ever dismissing

repetition, any more than rhythm, as *only* an aid to language acquisition” (p. 30). He then connects form and *meaning*—call it semantic language play. When the choice of words is dictated by some formal or random factor, a resulting effect is a lower predictability of meaning. This helps to explain the propensity of poetry to be richly suggestive and ambiguous in meaning. Finally Cook looks at the *uses* of language play, drawing upon Wolfson’s “Bulge Theory”—which holds that most interactions take place within the day-to-day unemotional transaction encounters of modern urban existence—to observe that most language play takes place outside of the transactional “bulge.” Examples include verbal duelling in political debates, riddles in Jewish culture, and puns in Shakespeare or even the Bible (Christ punned “You are Peter and on this Rock I build my church”). In our day, Cook argues, such language play has been marginalized. Cook wishes for language play to claim its rightful place between the traditional—and inadequate—opposites which see either significance emerging from words themselves or the power of language as its ability to refer to reality.

The ubiquity of language play calls for theoretical explanation; this is offered in part two of the book. Relating language play to play in general, Cook draws on perspectives from evolutionary psychology to argue for a “*balance* between biological, cultural, and individual factors, both in human life in general and in the two aspects of it which are of concern to us in this book: language play and language learning” (p.100, emphasis mine). Cook draws also from cultural theories of play, including Johan Huizinga’s classic text *Homo Ludens*, but placing more emphasis on Roger Caillois, who refined some of Huizinga’s categories in pertinent ways. In this context chapter five seeks to explore an aspect of play that is not easily accounted for by standard evolutionary or cultural theories, namely the “sheer delight which seems to arise from surrender to chance and unpredictability” (p. 125). Cook employs Caillois’ category of *alea*, a kind of play in which chance is dominant and players surrender to forces that elude them. Through elaborate explanations of game theories and randomness theories Cook brings into focus a central argument of the book. There are connections, he maintains, between interactions of random forces in language use and similar interactions in aspects of human behavior such as game playing. “This need for the random and the irrational is perhaps greatest at times when environmental demands for change are the greatest. In adult language use such a situation is encountered in the learning of a new language and adaptation to a new culture” (p. 144).

Part three of the book brings the foregoing description and theory to bear on foreign language pedagogy. Current Second Language Acquisition (SLA) orthodoxy, Cook argues, typically invokes three key criteria: needs, meaning, and authenticity. Cook traces the profound shift in consensus since the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century demise of classics towards an assumption that language courses should be driven by student needs. Hence the emergence of task-based education which has, for all practical purposes, aligned the notion of task with the realm of work. The orthodoxy that meaning is preeminent is perhaps most clearly recognized in a theorist like Stephen Krashen who claims that the only thing that counts is giving people comprehensible messages. Cook argues that our assumptions about play complicate our perception of many ideas currently in vogue in SLA circles. For example, opposition to invented (perhaps playful) examples in language teaching in favor of “authentic” language has become orthodoxy. Cook challenges reigning assumptions and seeks a healthy model of the triadic interplay between work, play, and learning.

One striking consequence of our professional focus on student needs is that the discourse material in our pedagogy ends up being entirely in Wolfson’s “bulge area”—with the result that “‘up-to-date’ language teaching tends to ignore linguistic patterning, controversial and imaginary content, or emotionally charged interaction” (p. 158). We exclude from our teaching precisely the discourse areas that are deeply important to people and which they would choose to address when freed from work to do so. Using a telling and, frankly, disturbing example, Cook shows us how these pedagogical assumptions have colluded with forces in the textbook market. He notes one recent set of publisher’s guidelines which forbids authors from including the following topics: “alcohol, anarchy, abuse, AIDS, Israel, narcotics, nudes and flesh, [...] politics, pork, pornography, religion, racism, rape, science (altering nature, e.g. genetic engineering), sex, sexism, stereotypes, terrorism, violence” (158). Cook’s point is that one sees creativity, passion, and language play around precisely these sorts of topics because they are the ones that rouse intensity of thought and emotion. Cook makes a valid case that even if our learners need to learn language skills primarily for activity within the “bulge” it does not follow that the pedagogy used to acquire the skills be restricted to the bulge. In light of this Cook appeals for broader notions of “task” such as “open-ended” tasks which feature a “meaning-mainly” approach, allowing for some attention to form.

In dealing with the reigning need for authenticity, Cook dismantles the dichotomy of real versus invented language. The long history of opposition to “invented examples” includes objections that they have no meaning, are not accurate reflections of the way language is really used, and tend to be bizarre. After carefully dismembering these claims, Cook’s notes the irony that students in fact often remember the “meaningless,” unusual, bizarre constructions such as this one that a former student, decades later, was able to recall perfectly in the original Greek: “The philosopher pulled the lower jaw of the hen.” The fact is that “[I]n play, those features rejected by advocates of real language and activity feature prominently: they include mimicry and repetition, the explicit discussion of rules, the structuring and atomization of processes, the creation of alternative realities, and a liking for form-driven rather than meaning-driven behaviour” (p. 171). Artifice, Cook notes, has its own authenticity.

Cook maintains that when the ludic function of language is recognized and appreciated, a more holistic interaction of play, learning and work can take shape in language learning. Cook says that the “damaging dichotomy” of the structural / communicative divide highlights the currently missing piece. Cook makes the striking observation that neither formalist nor functionalist theories do adequate justice to explaining why humans “delight” in the patterning of language. Similarly, Cook maintains that reigning theories miss the correlation of meaning and form: meaning can determine form, but meaning can also emerge from form. Cook’s claim is that the ludic function of language is at the heart of this link.

In the context of this journal I should note some of the book’s frustrating presuppositional gaps. In his efforts to consider biological evolutionary explanations for seemingly every phenomenon of play, Cook sometimes seems unaware of—or perhaps uninterested in—considering anything other than naturalistic explanations. For example, Cook notes with interest how *alea* is ignored in standard biological and cultural explanations of play, and how game theories and randomness theories are unable to fully account for phenomena such as addiction to gambling. One might expect some recognition of non-naturalistic explanations for such phenomena from fields of theology or a moral anthropology that recognizes a category like sin. Similarly, an anthropology that recognizes human beings as divine image bearers—created for dimensions such as blessedness, peace, and joy—could offer some answers to the naturalistic puzzling over, say, why humans seem to *delight* in language play.

I say here that one might expect such an openness to non-naturalistic explanations, because in many other ways, Cook shows himself to be a remarkable ally to foreign language pedagogues who are discontented with the marginalization or exclusion of religious content in mainstream textbooks. Cook offers a forceful challenge to the foreign language teaching establishment which will have to be considered seriously throughout the discipline:

“If language teaching were really to engage with a wide and representative sample of language use, it would include a far greater proportion of nonsense, fiction, and ritual, and many more instances of language use for aggression, intimacy, and creative thought. If personal importance, psychological saliency, and interests were taken into account in the selection of materials, then genres such as songs, soap operas, advertisements, rhymes, jokes, and prayers would figure equally with the ubiquitous discourse of business and polite conversation as the major source of teaching material” (p. 193).

If Cook is right, then many of us are justified in our discontent with teaching the bland content of “neutral” communicative discourse (basic tourist quips and queries, business encounter pleasantries, and consumer vocabulary). What is more, we are encouraged to incorporate—as an element of play—the meaningful topics and content that take place outside of the transactional “bulge.” It’s a double win situation for teachers who long to incorporate meaningful content (real or artifice) that respects the full range of our students’ humanity. Double win, I say, because Cook argues compellingly that playful learning is also better learning.