



## **The Need for Linguistic Creativity in Foreign Language Classroom Discourse**

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**Abstract.** The aim of this study is to propose that the concept of linguistic creativity, traditionally applied to aesthetic and literary use of language, should be extended so as to bridge the gap between language and literature teaching. Creativity not only contributes to increasing students' motivation but also promotes problem solving, a higher order thinking skill.

Language learners' ability to manipulate linguistic and semantic units for fun may be considered as a vital component of metalinguistic awareness. The role that explicit knowledge about language plays in language learning and teaching needs to be clearly identified. The paper intends to deal with a possible relationship between language ability and metalinguistic knowledge.

Since double meaning or ambiguity is a relevant feature of language play and verbal humour, the study also attempts to illustrate how lexical and structural ambiguity, puns and riddles can contribute to developing learners' language proficiency. The paper discusses some possibilities to develop learners' linguistic creativity through language play from a psycholinguistic and cognitive aspect.

**Keywords:** linguistic creativity, metalinguistic awareness, cognitive control, verbal play

### **1. Linguistic creativity revisited**

The concept of creativity in general is still difficult to define, in spite of numerous empirical investigations within different scientific disciplines and qualitative ones within human and social sciences. Carter (2004) presents an

overview of the construct from a variety of perspectives including psychological, pragmatic, psychometric, psychodynamic, biographical, cognitive and sociocultural approaches. His conclusion is that a “systems” approach, which takes into consideration the multiple components of creativity is probably the most valuable one. The Hungarian psychology professor Csíkszentmihályi is also positive that “Creativity is not the product of single individuals, but of social systems making judgments about individuals’ products” (cited in Carter 2004: 37). If we agree with such a definition, it stands to reason to accept the importance of a constant interaction between the individual as creator, the field in which he or she works and the reaction of people who assess the abstract, virtual or physical product. This socially and culturally established systems view can probably most fully answer the question what creativity is.

The concept of linguistic creativity, the topic of the present paper, has also been approached from a variety of perspectives. Looking at the construct from a historical aspect, we will discover generative, lexical, cognitive and cultural dimensions appearing through time.

One of the numerous definitions claims: “Creativity is an all-pervasive feature of everyday language. ... Linguistic creativity is not simply a property of exceptional people but an exceptional property of all people” (Carter 2004: 13). Creativity in language has been investigated from several aspects since its generative perspective was presented by Chomsky in the 1960s (Chomsky 2009). Zawada (2006) claims that this view fails to account for the ability of all human beings to create and innovate in various ways and for various motivations. By now the Chomskyan view has been replaced by the view in semantics of lexical creativity, according to which human beings can create new meanings whenever necessary. The possibility of combining these opposing views of linguistic creativity provides the basis for the cognitive perspective.

Similarly to Carter (2004), Maybin & Swann (2007) also talk about the democratization of creativity and examine recent work by researchers who claim that creativity in language is not only a property of especially skilled and gifted language users, but is pervasive in routine everyday practice. Language users who creatively design meaning are in the focus of attention, with the consequence of interactional functions of creativity being shed light on alongside the textual analysis of poetic form. Literariness, language play and humour are approached from a much broader perspective.

### **1.1. Homo ludens**

More than 50 years ago the Dutch cultural theorist and professor Huizinga (1955) discussed the importance of the play element in culture and society.

Creativity, language play or ‘ludic’ language (Crystal 1998) has not received appropriate attention in linguistic studies, although the importance of features of language that may make people laugh is stressed, among others, by Ross (1998). Riddles, limericks, haikus, jokes, playful uses of accents break the rules of language for the simple reason of being funny. Language play has importance in children’s metalinguistic development, and like other forms of play, in fact, contributes to children’s educational and social development according to Cook (2000). Humour very often results from the conflict between what is expected and what actually appears in the joke. He is positive that “the most obvious feature of much humour is: an ambiguity, or double meaning, which deliberately misleads the audience, followed by a punchline.

*Do you believe in clubs for young people?*

*Only when kindness fails* (Cook 2000: 7).

A common feature of literature and verbal humour is that special care is taken in terms of variations in self-expression, as Crystal (1987) remarks. Pomerantz & Bell (2007) consider how instances of spontaneous, creative language play can afford access to a range of linguistic practices that are often devalued or ignored in classrooms. University students in an advanced Spanish conversation course jointly manipulate linguistic forms, semantic units, and discursive elements for the amusement of themselves and others. These humorous moments provide opportunities for new and more varied forms of participation and language use, contributing to the expansion of learners’ overall communicative repertoires.

Language play has recently come into increasing focus in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, at least according to Bushnell (2009). In addition to research findings in L1 that have long shown the prevalence of language play in both the language data available to the learner and learner production, recent research in L2 has shown that language play is also a prominent characteristic of the language production of both child and adult L2 learners. The author argues that language play is potentially of great benefit to the linguistic development of L2 learners – echoing Cekaite & Aronsson’s argument in favour of a *ludic* model of language learning, in which they contend that “we need to take non-serious language more seriously” (2005: 169). In the authors’ study of an immersion classroom it was found that children with limited L2 proficiency recurrently employed form-focused language play in spontaneous peer conversations. Playful mislabellings and puns often generated extended repair sequences that could be seen as informal “language lessons” focused on formal aspects of language. Simultaneously, shared laughter and shifting alignments between peers were central aspects of the local politics of classroom life. Yet joking included artful performance and collaborative aestheticism, involving alliteration and other forms

of parallelisms, as well as code switching, laughing, and artful variations in pitch, volume and voice quality.

## **2. The notions of metalinguistic awareness and knowledge**

Meta-linguistics, according to Mora (2001), is the ability to consciously reflect on the nature of language and it incorporates the following skills: 1. knowing that language has a potential greater than that of simple symbols (it goes beyond the meaning) 2. knowing that words are separable from their referents (meaning resides in the mind, not in the name) 3. knowing that language has a structure that can be manipulated (language is malleable, you can change and write things in many different ways; for example, if something is written grammatically incorrectly, you can change it). Metalinguistic awareness is also known as metalinguistic ability which is closer to metacognition (“knowing about knowing”).

The ability to manipulate linguistic and semantic units for others’ and/or one’s own amusement may be considered as a vital component of metalinguistic awareness, with the help of which learners’ attention is focused on formal rather than functional aspects of language. This special dimension of language performance or skill, (cf. Cazden 1974) which probably requires more cognitive control than the acquisition of speaking skills, should play a particularly important role in education. Furthermore, Cazden (1974) claims that metalinguistic awareness is a unique construct because endowed with this ability people attend to language forms in and for themselves. Establishing links between metalinguistic awareness and figures of speech, Carter states that “different figures of speech in use require different degrees of conscious processing effort by speakers and listeners” (Carter 2004: 126). Mora’s definition seems to be the most concise one: it is an ability to objectify language as a process and as a thing. In Birdsong (1989: 163) metalinguistic awareness is described as “a perceptual and cognitive trait involving sensitivity to formal aspects of language”, whereas Roth, et al. (cited in Zipke 2008) emphasize that metalinguistic awareness enables one to deal with the linguistic code independent of meaning.

Birdsong (1989: 58-59) gives an overview of at least 15 metalinguistic task types with their relevant demand on cognitive control. As can be seen, judgments of ambiguity seem to require a higher level of cognitive control than grammaticality judgments since analysis of structure involves ignoring initial reading of sentence and subsequent analysis.

### **2.1. Metalinguistic awareness in L1**

Evidence for the early development of metalinguistic abilities in the native language is provided by Clark (1978), among others, observing that two-year-old

children are able to attend to linguistic structure and function, and their cognitive and linguistic development enhances their metalinguistic abilities. In Birdsong's (1989) overview of metalinguistic abilities and activities that are arranged by the chronological order of their emergence, the starting point is the age of one and a half, when the child, wishing to imitate adult pronunciation, repeats words. Depending on individual differences, major metalinguistic abilities – including the ability to judge acceptability, to recognize paraphrases and to understand structural ambiguity – develop by the age of 12. The child's creativity, high verbal intelligence and sophisticated use of language as a tool for communication have been found as variables influencing metalinguistic development (Van Kleeck 1982). As metalinguistic awareness grows, children begin to recognize that statements may have a literal meaning and an implied meaning. They begin to make more frequent and sophisticated use of metaphors such as the simile, "We packed the room like sardines". Between the ages of 6 and 8 most children begin to expand upon their metalinguistic awareness and start to recognize irony and sarcasm. These concepts require the child to understand the subtleties of an utterance's social and cultural context. Children develop a creative repertoire of interactive linguistic skills from around the age 7, as Crystal (1987) reports. Such skills include learning to tell jokes, riddles and make up language games. The ability to talk backwards is one of the most remarkable skills.

## **2.2. Similar or different: metalinguistic ability and language ability**

Contradictory views have been presented with regard to the concept of metalinguistic ability. According to some experts it must be recognizable as a distinct achievement while integrating into other aspects of linguistic and cognitive skills. Metalinguistic ability may be considered to equal knowledge about language, but then "the problem is to separate that knowledge *of* language from the knowledge that is needed to *use* the language" (Bialystok 1993: 4). However, by giving it a separate label, a knowledge base of its own together with a separate course of development, might result in assuming that metalinguistic ability is independent of linguistic ability that is responsible for using language. The advantage of treating metalinguistic ability as an autonomous skill is that in this case accounts of linguistic development have no relevance for its development. If metalinguistic ability is a mechanism separate from linguistic ability, then there may exist unique explanations for its functions and development.

In contrast, there is another view in which metalinguistic ability forms an integral part of linguistic ability allowing the possibility to be similar to it in certain aspects and different in others. If it is not a different kind of thing from linguistic ability, then presumably it does not need a different kind of label and certainly does not need a different theory to account for its development. It is clear that a proper

definition of metalinguistic ability must be a compromise between these two positions. Accepting such an approach to the definition of metalinguistic ability, one should find out how to relate it to linguistic ability, and how to reconcile its development with the facts and theories of linguistic ability. Nonetheless, most accounts of metalinguistic ability tend to treat it distinctly from the notion of linguistic ability.

Metalinguistic knowledge and language proficiency, though both appear to be part of linguistic ability, are usually considered to constitute its separate factors. As a result, teaching one is no means of improving the other. Formal metalinguistic knowledge, in other words a conscious awareness of the formal properties of the target language, is regarded to be less important than the ability to detect systematic and meaningful patterning in it.

Bialystok (1993: 7) conceptualizes it to be an identifiable body of knowledge to be distinguished from knowledge of grammar. It is the level of explicitness characteristic of metalinguistic knowledge that distinguishes it from linguistic knowledge. "One is able to identify, understand, and produce grammatical sentences without much access to the system of rules and conditions that makes those sentences grammatical". Metalinguistic knowledge necessarily includes some detailed representation of those rules. While knowledge of grammar may be part of what is meant by metalinguistic knowledge, it seems to be inadequate to equal the concept of metalinguistic. Metalinguistic knowledge should be knowledge of the abstract structure of language, and obviously, knowledge of the abstract principles is distinct from knowledge of a particular language. The content of metalinguistic knowledge must be broader than any that applies to knowledge of a particular language.

### **2.3. Metalinguistic awareness in L2**

Roehr (2008) claims that existing research indicates that instructed learners' L2 proficiency and their metalinguistic knowledge are moderately correlated. However, the operationalization of the construct of metalinguistic knowledge has varied somewhat across studies. Metalinguistic knowledge has typically been operationalized as learners' ability to correct, describe, and explain L2 errors. More recently, this operationalization has been extended to additionally include learners' L1 language-analytic ability as measured by tests traditionally used to assess components of language learning aptitude. The study reported employs a narrowly focused measure of L2 proficiency and incorporated L1 language-analytic ability into a measure of metalinguistic knowledge. It was found that the linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge of advanced university-level L1 English learners of L2 German correlated strongly. Moreover, the outcome of a principal components analysis suggests that learners' ability to correct, describe, and explain highlighted

L2 errors and their L1 language-analytic ability may constitute components of the same construct. The theoretical implications of these findings for the concept of metalinguistic knowledge in L2 learning are undoubtedly important.

### 3. Definitions and types of ambiguity

The study attempts to illustrate how lexical and grammatical ambiguity, in other words local and global ambiguity, and language play can contribute to developing learners' language proficiency. Without metalinguistic skills language learners cannot understand or generate verbal humour. The paper intends to shed light on some possible pedagogical implications involved in preparing learners to become competent language users.

Depending on the particular aspect of life or scientific discipline, various definitions have been provided. For social psychologists the term is inseparable from situations characterized by some kind of uncertainty. For language teachers it may function as a challenging task with the help of which learners can be forced to disambiguate sentences containing syntactic ambiguity. From a linguistic point of view McArthur (1996: 36) defines "ambiguity", which derives from Latin *ambiguitas* – as "acting both ways, shifting from *ambi* – both ways, *agere/actum* to drive, act. Actual or potential uncertainty of meaning, especially if a word, phrase, or sentence can be understood in two ways." The presence of context definitely enables one to disambiguate many statements that are ambiguous in isolation.

The traditional approach to identifying and resolving ambiguity usually distinguishes lexical (part of speech or category) ambiguity (Sample sentences without the source given in brackets have been devised by the author of the article):

[1] *Father looked very hard.*

For some authors like Radford (1999) the categorial status of a particular phrase would belong to the simple case of structural ambiguity. Others (cf. Pinkal 1995) claim that lexical ambiguity includes only instances of homonymy and polysemy:

[2] *I deposited \$100 in the bank.*

The importance of context in which an ambiguous word is used cannot be forgotten. According to Cruse (2000) what used to be called as ambiguity tests are more likely to be labelled as tests for discreteness:

[3] *Mary is wearing a light coat; so is Jane* (Cruse 2000: 106).

Antagonism is criterial for ambiguity, and in case a sentence calls for two antagonistic readings to be activated at the same time, it gives rise to the phenomenon of zeugma, or punning:

- [4] *When the Chair in the Philosophy Department became vacant, the Appointment Committee sat on it for six months* (Cruse 2000: 108).

Many syntactic ambiguities arise from the possibility of alternative constituent structures:

- [5] *We need more highly trained scientists* (Close 1988: 103).

Quantifiers and quantifying adverbs are to be found as causes for ambiguity as to the range of applications, whereas pronouns and indexical adverbs may lead to referential ambiguity. A different kind of structural ambiguity occurs when a given word or phrase can be taken as modifying any one of two (or more) different constituents:

- [6] *I saw the man with the telescope* (Hindle & Rooth 1993: 103).

In another example:

- [7] *The President could not ratify the treaty* (Radford 1999: 66),

ambiguity relates to the scope of the negative particle so for this reason this type is commonly known as scope ambiguity. We talk about elliptical ambiguity when certain predicates can occur in multiple argument positions:

- [8] *He loves his dog more than his children.*

Semantic ambiguity arises when a word or concept has an inherently diffuse meaning based on widespread or informal usage:

- [9] *Iraqi head seeks arms* (Pinkal 1995: 75).

Ambiguity is different from vagueness, which arises when the boundaries of meaning are indistinct. Pinkal (1995) considers the two phenomena to be related, however declares that they refer to different things. "Ambiguous expressions can assume an arbitrarily but finitely large number of readings, whereas vague expressions allow infinitely many precisifications" (Pinkal 1995: 75).



### 3.1. Types of structural ambiguity

A detailed analysis is provided on the topic in Hirst (1992: 131-163). Whenever a sentence has more than one possible parse, structural disambiguation is necessary. The author introduces four basic types of structural ambiguity and labels the first type as ambiguity due to attachment problems emphasizing the importance of modifier placement. Due to its flexible position in a sentence, it is the Adverbial realized by a Prepositional Phrase that will typically be the reason for such type of ambiguity. Sentences [10]a.- 14 can be found in Hirst (1992: 131-163):

- [10] a. *The door near the stairs with the 'Members Only' sign had tempted Nadia from the moment she first entered the club.*

Interestingly, hardly anyone would have a problem to accept the sentence:

- [10] b. *The police will shoot terrorists with rifles.*

to be ambiguous, and the other one:

- [10] c. *Last week an 18<sup>th</sup> century chair was bought by a dealer with beautifully carved legs.*

unambiguous. Therefore, the priority of meaning should be acknowledged. When a sentence contains a sub-clause, both clauses may contain places for the attachment of the Prepositional Phrase or the Adverb Phrase:

- [10] d. *Nadia knew that Ross fried the chicken with garlic.*

Analytical ambiguities are also quite common and they occur when the nature of the constituent is itself in doubt:

- [11] a. *The tourists objected to the guide that they couldn't hear.*

The preferred reading is that the '*that clause*' is a relative clause modifying the guide. However in the sentence:

- [11] b. *The tourists signalled to the guide that they couldn't hear,*

the preference is that it is a sentential complement modifying the verb 'signal'. Sometimes it is problematic to distinguish a Present Participle from an Adjective in an isolated sentence like:

[12] *They are cooking apples.*

Similarly, to distinguish between a Present Participle and a Noun:

[13] *We discussed running.*

Participles and adjectivals can be troublesome when they occur at the end of the clause:

[14] *The manager approached the boy smoking a cigar.*

The use of non-finite clauses can easily lead to more than one interpretation, at least without context. Close (1988) invites students to expand each dependent clause in two different ways:

[15]a. *I ran over a dog crossing the square.*

[15]b. *Dressed in white robes, we thought the visitors looked like priests in some strange ceremony.* (Close 1988: 95).

If two sentences differ in syntactic structure, they will also differ in semantic structure. There are at least four different structures that can underlie sentences with the following structure: NP+be+Adjective+to Infinitive:

[16] a. *He is splendid to wait.*

[16] b. *He is slow to react.*

[16] c. *He is furious to hear it.*

[16] d. *He is hard to convince* (Close 1988: 114).

The third type of structural ambiguity, viz. gap finding and filling ambiguities occur when a moved constituent has to be returned to its pre-transformational starting point and there is more than one place that it might go:

[17] *Those are the boys that the police debated about fighting* (Hirst 1992: 154).

Taking the first gap gives the meaning that the police debated with the boys on the topic of fighting; the second gives the meaning that the police debated among themselves about fighting the boys.

Finally, Hirst (1992) declares that if a word is categorially ambiguous, a sentence containing it can be structurally ambiguous:

[18] *The Japanese push bottles up the Chinese.*

The term that is used for such a type is the interaction between categorial and structural ambiguity. As has been illustrated there are many different kinds of structural ambiguity, and there is at present no agreement on any general principles that can be used for disambiguation. Knowledge from several different sources is used. For the reasons mentioned above, the methodological significance of controlling subject and task related factors in metalinguistic tasks like ambiguity judgments should be emphasized.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of the present paper has been to illustrate that linguistic creativity and language teaching should not be separated in L2 classroom discourse. If teachers looked for sample sentences to illustrate ambiguity per se in literary sources instead of relying on examples from grammar books, they would make an important step in combining literature and language teaching. L2 learners' literary and linguistic knowledge ought to be exploited in an interactive way in order to offer them the possibility to become not only better users of the foreign language but also better human beings. In case creativity is applied to teaching, old issues are dealt with in new ways, in which verbal humour and language play may function as language teaching and learning tools contributing to intellectually challenging, pedagogically stimulating and enjoyable lessons.

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