Creative Multilingualism

A Manifesto

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Multilingualism is integral to the human condition. Hinging on the concept of Creative Multilingualism — the idea that language diversity and creativity are mutually enriching — this timely and thought-provoking volume shows how the concept provides a matrix for experimentation with ideas, approaches and methods.

The book presents four years of joint research on multilingualism across disciplines, from the humanities through to the social and natural sciences. It is structured as a manifesto, comprising ten major statements which are unpacked through various case studies across ten chapters. They encompass areas including the rich relationship between language diversity and diversity of identity, thought and expression; the interaction between language diversity and biodiversity; the 'prismatic' unfolding of meaning in translation; the benefits of linguistic creativity in a classroom setting; and the ingenuity underpinning 'conlangs' ('constructed languages') designed to give imagined peoples a discerning medium capable of expressing their cultural identity.

This book is a welcome contribution to the field of modern languages, highlighting the intricate relationship between multilingualism and creativity, and, crucially, reaching beyond an Anglo-centric view of the world. Intended to spark further research and discussion, this book appeals to young people interested in languages, language learning and cultural exchange. It will be a valuable resource for academics, educators, policy makers and parents of bilingual or multilingual children. Its accessible style also speaks to general readers interested in the role of language diversity in our everyday lives, and the untapped creative potential of multilingualism.

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10. Creating Languages

Katrin Kohl

Languages are so fundamental to our experience of the world from before we are even born that it is difficult for most of us to imagine what life would be like without them — and hard not to take for granted what they enable us to do. None of the scientific and technological inventions that make our modern lives what they are would have happened without language — the inventor will always be working with what has been passed on via linguistic communication, will often collaborate through speech or writing with other people, and will invariably be using cognitive abilities that involve linguistic processes. Moreover, that inventor will not be operating with ‘language’ in general, but with one, or perhaps two or more, particular languages in a particular era and cultural space. The concept of ‘language’ is an abstraction. What human beings actually listen to, speak, read and write is a richly varied panoply of languages that have been created by their speakers in the course of a long history that reaches back into the mists of time — a collective linguistic repertoire that continues to evolve as we speak.

Creative Multilingualism is about the creative processes that are at work in our use of languages, in the many ways in which languages connect, meld and bring forth new varieties, and in the living interaction between languages. This chapter initially considers some fundamental questions that have bearing on our understanding of the relationship between language, linguistic diversity and creativity, and goes on to look at the relevance of creativity to marginalized languages, at invented languages or ‘conlangs’ (constructed languages), and at the role of language play and language humour in relation to linguistic creativity.
Where Does Linguistic Creativity Happen?

A key moment in researching the role of creativity with respect to language was Noam Chomsky’s rejection of behaviourist approaches that assume we learn languages primarily by imitating others, and his observation that we could not possibly generate the infinite range of utterances of which we are easily capable without an innate capacity for generating language independently.

An Experiment in Linguistic Creativity

As we speak and write, we’re continually creating language sequences that have never been used by anyone else before. This is not about a special talent of the few, but something we can all do at any time.

You can conduct your own experiment by taking a short chunk of an ordinary email or other piece of text you have written (say, around ten to twelve words) and typing it into Google with double quotation marks round it (this ensures that it searches for exactly that string). See whether it finds the same string of words somewhere else on the Internet, and shorten or lengthen the chunk until you find it replicated elsewhere. You’re likely to find that your own day-to-day language is more original than you thought.

What we create in this way in the course of an ordinary day may be new, but it still consists of familiar elements. Yet it holds infinite potential for development, surprise, beauty, humour, a new twist. Using language is like engaging in a continual creativity workout. Meanwhile eloquent speakers, advertising wizards, imaginative poets and inventive performers are the language world’s Olympic sprinters.

Just imagine the mind-blowing potential for collective and collaborative creativity embodied by the continually evolving languages in the world!

The objective of the hugely ambitious research project that emerged from this observation is to identify a mental ‘universal grammar’ as the basis for every individual’s linguistic knowledge and processing. In Chomsky’s theory, rejection of behaviourist approaches entails separating ‘internalized language’ from ‘externalized language’: ‘the shift of focus from E-language to I-language, from the study of behavior and its products to the study of systems of mental representations and computation’. Restricting ‘language’ to its cognitive aspect,
he declares that ‘the central task is to find the basic elements of I-language — henceforth, language’ (Chomsky 1986: 51):

We should [...] think of knowledge of language as a certain state of the mind/brain, a relatively stable element in transitory mental states once it is attained; furthermore, as a state of some distinguishable faculty of the mind — the language faculty — with its specific properties, structure, and organization, one ‘module’ of the mind. (Chomsky 1986: 12–13)

Chomsky’s purpose was to give language philosophical and scientific legitimacy by defining it as a discrete and stable form of knowledge that is specific to the human species and quite distinct from communicative processes and effects. A key premise of research in the Chomskyan tradition is that stable, discrete ‘language’ underlies, precedes and is separable from the diversity of languages that is observable in the developed and actively deployed language competence of human beings. And an influential consequence has been an excessively narrow understanding of linguistic creativity, summarized in the definition of ‘creativity’ given in David Crystal’s standard Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics. This focuses exclusively on Chomsky’s ‘species-specific’ concept, highlighting that it is distinct from the ‘sense of “creative” [...] found in artistic or literary contexts, where notions such as imagination and originality are central’ (Crystal 2008: 122).

The research conducted in the context of Creative Multilingualism by contrast takes a holistic approach to the concept of ‘creativity’ and considers linguistic creativity in the mind to be intrinsically connected both with the creative imagination and with creative originality as it manifests itself in artistic expression. Our premise accords with the view prevalent in cognitive linguistics that language is integrated with other cognitive and physical abilities:

The organization and retrieval of linguistic knowledge is not significantly different from the organization and retrieval of other knowledge in the mind, and the cognitive abilities that we apply to speaking and understanding language are not significantly different from those applied to other cognitive tasks, such as visual perception, reasoning or motor activity. (Croft and Cruse 2004: 2)

Understood like this, there is no division between language in the mind and the language we use in social intercourse and cultural expression. There is also no necessary separation between human language and
animal communication, allowing for the possibility that the latter can inform our understanding of human communication.

We assume that linguistic creativity plays a potential part at every stage of the linguistic process, from thought through articulation to social intercourse. The field is wide open for exploring how linguistic creativity connects with other cognitive processes, with our perception of our environment, our active lives in society and our formation and expression of cultural identity.

What Light Does Linguistic Diversity Shed on Linguistic Creativity?

Linguistic diversity can help us to appreciate the creativity we bring to bear when we engage with our environment. For example, the different metaphorical ways of talking about time across cultures and languages (see Kohl et al. 2020 and Chapter 1 in this volume) indicate that language is inextricably connected with thought and the way we interpret the world. Similarly, there is considerable cultural diversity and corresponding linguistic diversity in the ways people across the world categorize colour and talk about it.

Human eyes are capable of perceiving thousands of different colours, but interdisciplinary research spanning psycholinguistics, cognitive science and neuroscience at the University of Lancaster has highlighted significant differences in their categorization and naming. Findings include the following (Casaponsa and Athanosopoulos 2018):

- Different languages and cultural groups carve up the colour spectrum differently. Some languages like Dani, spoken in Papua New Guinea, and Bassa, spoken in Liberia and Sierra Leone, only have two terms, dark and light. Dark roughly translates as ‘cool’ and includes black, blue and green. Light roughly translates as ‘warm’ and includes white, red, orange and yellow.

- The Warlpiri people in northern Australia have no term for ‘colour’ and instead use a rich vocabulary referring to texture, physical sensation and functional purpose.
• Most of the world’s languages have five basic colour terms: dark, light, red, yellow, blue/green. Historically, Welsh — like Japanese and Chinese — had a single term covering blue and green (glas). In all three languages, the term originally covering both has now been restricted to blue, while a separate term is used for green. Welsh introduced gwyrdd, a borrowing from Latin viridis.

• There exists evidence that the way we perceive colours can change. A study conducted with speakers of Greek as their first language, which has two terms for light blue and dark blue, found that they tend to perceive these two colours as more similar after living for long periods of time in the United Kingdom, where people refer in English to the one fundamental colour term blue (Athanasopoulos 2009).

The research indicates that our perception of our environment, and the ways we process conceptually and linguistically what we see, are interactive and influence each other. In conjunction with our conceptual creativity, our linguistic creativity contributes vitally to our ability to make the environment we inhabit meaningful, in interaction with the human beings in our social group.

What Can Animal Communication Tell Us about Linguistic Creativity?

Communicative diversification is not restricted to human beings. Distinct dialects have been found in species of mammal including sperm whales (Antunes et al. 2011) and goats (Briefer and McElligott 2012) and in birds including the yellowhammer (Pipek et al. 2018). So why is this significant — beyond suggesting that human beings are part of the animal world rather than separate from it?

Looking at species other than humans allows us to see some basic patterns which illuminate both the role of linguistic diversity and its interaction with creativity. Key findings emerging from studies in animal behaviour confirm that the development of distinctive ‘dialects’ and ‘accents’ is intrinsic to socialization and the formation of group identities.
Much as with human language, communication systems in animals involve both homogenization and diversification, continuity and change as groups constitute themselves, creating commonality within the group while distinguishing themselves from other groups. The above-mentioned study of goats involved twenty-three sibling and half-sibling kids who stayed close to their mothers for one week and were then split randomly into four separate ‘gangs’. At five weeks, ‘each kid gang had developed its own distinctive patois’, which ‘probably helps with group cohesion’ (Coghlan 2012). The study of yellowhammers focused on a community that originated in Brighton in the UK and was introduced to New Zealand in the nineteenth century (Pipek et al. 2018: 247). Drawing in part on historical data, the study concludes that dialects which have become extinct in the UK are preserved in communities in New Zealand: ‘We suggest that the yellowhammer dialect system is an avian equivalent of a phenomenon already noted in human languages, in which ancient words or structures are retained in expatriate communities’ (Pipek et al. 2018: 245). The similarities between the group formation and diversification processes in mammals and humans and the value these processes have for shaping societies suggest that we use language both instinctively and creatively as we construct our social identities.

Steven Pinker has argued in *The Language Instinct* that language is ‘a biological adaptation to communicate information’ and that ‘knowing a language [...] is knowing how to translate mentalese into strings of words and vice versa’ (Pinker 1994: 19, 82). While it is convincing to conceive language as instinctive and adaptive, communication systems evidently have roles that go far beyond the purpose of transmitting information, even in the animal world. And the concept of ‘mentalese’ — based on the premise that thought is fully separable from language — is inadequate to account for the richly creative ways in which not just human beings, but animals too, modify their identities in the course of forging culturally diverse social relationships.

**What is a Language?**

While the concept of ‘language’ is an abstraction in that it manifests itself only in the form of particular languages, the plural concept of ‘languages’ consists of a multitude of entities which may be distinct
where neighbouring languages are mutually unintelligible, but which are often fluidly connected in ways that elude easy classification. To take the example of Alpine communities in Austrian Tyrol: here, inhabitants of a particular village are generally aware of differences between their language and that of people in the next village, though they have no difficulty understanding each other. Do we define the language of such a village as ‘German’, ‘Austrian’, ‘Tyrolean’, ‘North Tyrolean’, as the language of the valley in which the village is situated or as the language of the particular village? And what about language change as new media influence language use, or language blends as people migrate and meet? Distinctions and fusions between languages and language varieties are influenced by the circumstances of the relevant speech communities and may be continually in flux.

A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.

Popularized by sociolinguist and Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich, who allegedly heard it from an audience member at one of his lectures.

Whether a variety is considered to be a ‘(standard) language’, a ‘dialect’ or a ‘regional variety’ depends on a multitude of factors, not least the language spoken by those who rule the territory, and the institutions this group puts in place to control language definition and language change. The people participating in the identity of a language create its ‘boundaries’ and negotiate its permeability towards ‘external’ influences, building and controlling its traditions and literary models, and curating the scope given to the inventiveness of its speakers as they respond to the new linguistic demands of an ever-changing world — see, for example, the continually evolving vocabulary for IT and online communication.

Taking account of multilingualism and interaction between languages in the course of power shifts and migration renders the question of ‘what is a language’ more complex still. To take the example of English, there is now a huge range of Englishes that extend from Manchester to Mumbai, New York to Nairobi. And that’s before we have taken account of the many creoles and forms of patois, sector-specific jargon and varieties that have emerged in the context of social media. Are they all part of one language, or are British, American, Indian and Kenyan English distinct
languages? The concept of ‘global English’ can be a useful generalization, and it comes with certain homogenizing tendencies, but the use of a language as a lingua franca also drives its diversification.

The most extreme form of diversification happens at the level of individuals: for example, twins will sometimes develop a private language that cannot be understood by others. And linguistic theory even allows for an individual dialect or ‘idiolect’ — ‘the speech habits of a person as displayed in a particular variety at a given time’ (Crystal 2008: 235). Our linguistic creativity is always hard at work, in each one of us.

**Creative Empowerment of Marginalized Languages**

The world of languages is structured by powerful hierarchies that tend to mirror political power structures and financial muscle. This is evident in the continuing dominant role of the languages exported by the European colonial nations from the fifteenth century onwards, and it is currently evident in the expansion of Chinese as China experiences unprecedented global economic growth and increasing international power. The rise of English as the current main global lingua franca was strengthened by its colonial expansion and establishment as predominant language of the United States, fuelled by the Industrial Revolution and given global reach by the Internet. So what are the implications for languages that do not gain high status and support from such political, economic and technological benefits?

From the perspective of monoglot English speakers, it can seem as if the whole world now speaks English and other languages are dying out. But that ignores the majority of people who do not speak English. It also entails misunderstanding the roles played by lingua francas. A lingua franca facilitates effective communication across language groups — but it does so as part of a multilingual ecosystem that is characterized by complex interactions between more and less local languages. Often it is these local languages, spoken in the home, that are perceived by their speakers as most emotionally expressive and culturally rich.

Human societies typically use many varieties alongside each other. In India and many parts of Africa, people may converse in four or five languages in the course of a day. Many workplaces and schools
in the UK, too, are now multilingual spaces which benefit from a diversity of cultures and languages that have come into the country through immigration and continue to be nurtured in homes and local communities. This collective multilingual competence is an asset that should be supported not least educationally since it gives young people career opportunities and the cultural intelligence and linguistic flexibility to connect the UK effectively with other parts of the world.

Languages with distinctive lexical and grammatical systems are dying in many places of the world where Indigenous people have come under territorial, economic and political pressure, climate change is destroying their ecosystem, their habitat has become more connected to the outside world, and/or members have left the community. This loss can justifiably be considered equivalent to the extinction of biological species. Moreover, biological diversity goes hand in hand with linguistic diversity, with loss of linguistic diversity exerting a negative impact on the environment (see Gosler et al. 2020 and Chapter 2 on ‘Creating a Meaningful World: Nature in Name, Metaphor and Myth’ in this volume). Many communities are responding to the threat of language extinction with proactive measures to preserve their language, in interaction with other forms of cultural expression such as dance, clothing and crafts, and, in some cases, connection with modern technologies and modern forms imported from elsewhere. Anthropologists, linguists and, in some cases, governments have long also contributed to finding ways of preserving linguistic diversity.

Meanwhile cities are bringing forth new linguistic varieties all the time as people from different parts of the world converge and create new ways of expressing themselves within and beyond their groups. In this process, as with regional and national varieties, identity formation plays a crucial part as a creative impetus, as does the need to negotiate status tensions. For example, the linguistic varieties found in Birmingham and researched in the project Slanguages as part of Creative Multilingualism’s research on ‘Languages in the Creative Economy’ (see Dudrah et al. 2020 and Chapter 4 in this volume) gain energy from groups of people who grew up feeling marginalized not least because of their ‘nonstandard British’ accent but who then discovered rich performative potential in that language difference — a
BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE
Eight Examples

LIE
A false statement made with deliberate intent to deceive.
Hand up against chin with forefinger outstretched. Mouths the word “lie” while moving hand away.

DRIVE
To convey in a vehicle.
Both hands grasp an imaginary driving wheel and move in a circular motion.

DRUNK
State in which one’s physical and mental faculties are impaired by excess of alcohol.
Fingers extended to make 'V' shape. Makes backward and forward movements.

RELAX
To release or bring relief from the effects of tension, anxiety.
Hands make repeated backward and forward movements with fingers outstretched.

BRILLIANT
Satisfactory in quality, quantity, or degree.
Hand with raised thumb on open hand moves upwards.

JEWELLERY
Articles of gold, silver, precious stones, etc., for personal adornment.
Hand moves across top of body to denote wearing of jewellery.

GREAT
Wonderful, first-rate, very good.
Same as BRILLIANT, showing the limitation of conveying slightly different meanings in sign language.

COMPLETE
The act of achieving attainment or accomplishment.
Both hands raised with thumb outstretched move downwards.
Fig. 1 Sign languages build on visible cues such as facial expression and gesture. Unlike British Sign Language (BSL), ‘Urban Sign Language’ (USL) has no official status. It reflects shared usage in parts of the Birmingham deaf community. Posters created for the Slanguages exhibition 2017, Wolfson College, Oxford, reproduced by kind permission of Rinkoo Barpaga (Artist), Nick Drew (Design), Rajinder Dudrah (Birmingham City University) and Simon Redgrave (Punch Records).
creative opportunity identified and developed by Slanguages partner Punch Records.

The complexity of what we understand by ‘language’ is evident in sign language, as is the huge creative potential that lies in embracing language difference. For the Creative Multilingualism team, engaging with the sign-language performances — and provocations — of stand-up comedian Rinkoo Barpaga in the context of Slanguages brought new questions and insights into issues around the nature of human communication: the role of gesture in relation to speech on the one hand and sign language on the other; the productive tensions between innovation and standardization; the processes at work in marginalization and recognition of languages; and not least the political implications of language difference for educational access — with Barpaga having turned disadvantagement in the Birmingham school system into the basis for a career in the performing arts.

Barpaga’s concept of ‘Urban Sign Language’ (USL) draws on the experience of acquiring a group-specific form of signing in an inner-city school context where no access to sign-language education was provided, and later being taught to adopt British Sign Language (BSL) as the only ‘proper’ form of deaf communication. Urban Sign Language doesn’t purport to offer a competing standard. Rather, it poses a challenge to the devaluation of non-standard forms by recognizing the importance of a language created by a group for its own communicative purposes and as an expression of its particular social identity. The provocation is showcased in a pair of posters depicting USL and BSL (see Barpaga et al. 2017 and Fig. 1). At first sight it offers straightforward word-for-word translations between the two forms. Closer comparison makes the viewer aware of the complex interplay between different aspects of language that yield changes of concept in the course of translation: territory and political status (urban versus national); ownership and control of a standard (national institution versus individual/group); class (middle/upper versus lower); cultural control (educated and powerful versus socially and educationally disadvantaged); register (formal versus slang). What the pair of posters shows even beyond the issues concerning different forms of sign language is the creative charge that is generated in the interstices between the categories. The multiple tensions that arise from the clash of unequal varieties provide a rich matrix for linguistic creativity.
Embracing linguistic diversity provides an important catalyst for questioning the enduring legacy of colonialism, addressing inequalities that threaten social stability, and engaging with the current challenges of globalization and environmental exploitation.

**Inventing Languages**

It has been claimed — on the basis of an ambitious research project published in 1957–1963 — that ‘the story of the confusion of tongues, and of the attempt to redeem its loss through the rediscovery or invention of a language common to all humanity, can be found in every culture’ (Eco 1997: 1). Whether or not such myths are indeed universal, it’s clear that human beings have not been content with the imperfections of ‘natural’ languages and the impediments to cross-cultural communication that come with their diversity. They have wanted to go beyond the use of a natural language as a lingua franca, for example Latin in the administrative and military classes of the Roman Empire. The Babel myth exemplifies the vision of a ‘perfect’ language common to all peoples — and conversely the frustration, framed as a divine curse, that linguistic diversity impedes effective cooperation not least on a practical task such as that of building a tower. Yet alongside the invention of perfect languages to be shared by all human beings, there is also a fascination with inventing languages that are culturally specific or group-specific and that may be designed to restrict communication to a closely defined group. In short, people across time and across cultures have been immensely resourceful in generating new languages by exploiting their linguistic creativity.

‘Perfect’ languages have not just remained general concepts in the world of myth, and language invention has taken many forms. David J. Peterson — creator of the Dothraki language for the *Game of Thrones* television franchise (2011–2019) — surmises that ‘the conscious construction of language is probably as old as language itself’ (2015: 7). In the Western world, the earliest records are from the Middle Ages, with Hildegard of Bingen’s ‘Lingua Ignota’ (‘unknown language’) as one of the earliest instances (twelfth century) — perhaps even the earliest. By contrast with this language ‘received’ via divine inspiration, the early modern era brought forth a rich array of languages designed to satisfy
the needs of philosophers and scientists for a medium that would be free of the ambiguities and metaphorical imprecisions of natural languages. An ambitious example is John Wilkins’ universal ‘Philosophical Language’ (1668) — amusingly critiqued by the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges in an influential essay (1937–1952) on the grounds that the underlying categorization attempts the impossible.

One of the most successful projects designed to overcome the problems of linguistic diversity was the creation of Esperanto, invented in the late nineteenth century by the Polish ophthalmologist Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof, who also produced the first grammar of Yiddish. Coming from a multilingual family, he presented his ‘International Language’ in 1889 under the pseudonym of ‘Dr. Esperanto’ — meaning ‘one who hopes’ in the invented language. This was then adopted as the name of the language itself. His purpose was to create a language that would be grammatically and morphologically simple, easy to learn and serve as an internationally shared auxiliary language. While being compatible with linguistic diversity, it would facilitate straightforward international communication and promote peace, an objective Zamenhof articulates with reference to the tensions caused by linguistic difference:

Indeed, the difference of languages is one of the most fruitful sources of the dissensions and differences among nations, for, of all things that impress a stranger in a foreign land, the language is at once the first and the greatest mark of distinction between him and them; not being able to understand or be understood, we naturally shun the contact of aliens. (Zamenhof 1889: 6)

Rather than constructing his language from scratch, Zamenhof aimed to use existing roots and structures, focusing on Indo-European languages. For the vocabulary, he looked mainly to European and especially Latinate words, given that these had already spread their roots widely through the languages of Europe by means of lexical borrowing (see Fig. 2).

While numbers of speakers have fluctuated, some enthusiasts have brought up their children as native speakers of Esperanto (Bergen 2001) and it continues to attract learners, recently also as one of the languages supported by Duolingo.

Inventiveness and ingenuity have also driven creative projects of a very different kind: constructed languages — or ‘conlangs’ — designed
Esperanto vocabulary is mainly derived from Romance languages. Nouns have no grammatical gender. Can you spot the markers for nouns, noun plurals and adjectives?

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![Fig. 2. Some common words in Esperanto. Picture compilation by Sharlene Matharu (2020).](image)

Fig. 2. Some common words in Esperanto. Picture compilation by Sharlene Matharu (2020).

to give imagined peoples a distinctive medium capable of expressing their cultural identity. The protagonist in Jonathan Swift’s satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) has at least a smattering of several languages and is able to learn other languages he encounters as he visits communities such as those of the Yahoos and the Houyhnhnms. But the reader’s imagination must fill in the detail. J. R. R. Tolkien went much further. Building on an early interest in Esperanto and experimentation with language invention, he created a whole family of languages as part of the project that has

given us *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955). The best-known languages spoken by the Elves in Tolkien’s legendarium are Quenya and Sindarin, which share a common ancestor, primitive Quendian. As a professor of Anglo-Saxon, Tolkien drew on a deep knowledge of etymology, evolving grammatical systems and scripts as well as the mythologies that formed their cultural context to create a world of languages that continues to inspire conlang experts today.

Tolkien’s most far-reaching achievement for conlangs was to establish an archetype for fictional languages that defined their scope and potential for the era of television, the Internet and computer games. As conlang professional Peterson acknowledges, Tolkien ‘set the bar very high’ (2015: 10). In *The Art of Language Invention* (2015), Peterson explains how he developed the languages created for *The Game of Thrones* from snippets given in the novels on which the adaptation is based, George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996). He also sets out the principles he followed in creating languages for peoples such as the Dothraki warriors of *Game of Thrones* and the alien Irathients and Castithans of the television series *Defiance* (2013–2015), showcasing the considerable sophistication of conlangs and the inspiring force of a fan community that looks forward with excitement to hearing a fictional people gain a new voice. Peterson has even satisfied the growing desire among fans to learn High Valyrian by writing and voicing a Duolingo course in the language.

**Experimenting with Our Linguistic Creativity**

Our linguistic creativity is at work whenever we think linguistically, speak, write or respond to the language of others. It is a flexible talent that enables us to use, and respond to, different modes of communicating and — depending on our cultural context — more than one language. Most of the time, we’re not aware of our linguistic creativity. But it comes to the fore in poetry, advertising, verbal humour and all kinds of play with language. These forms in turn allow us to appreciate the fact that linguistic creativity is continually part of our receptive and productive use of language.

In his study *Language Play* (1998), Crystal engages critically with the view that the chief purpose of language is communicative usefulness:
‘The whole point of language, it is assumed, is to foster the transmission of knowledge, however this is defined — as concepts, facts, opinions, emotions, or any other kind of “information”’ (pp. 1–2). He posits rather that the neglected ‘playful (or “ludic”) function of language […] should be at the heart of any thinking we do about linguistic issues’ (p. 1). His book is a tour de force of linguistic play in practice, showing how important language play is in our day-to-day lives and how fundamental it is for our social interactions.

Crystal’s argument concerning the crucial importance of language play is persuasive. His book however begs the question whether it should not be linguistic creativity that is regarded as primary, with language play being an exuberantly inventive expression of it. In summarizing what happens in language play, Crystal in actual fact comments on what we routinely control and manipulate creatively when producing language: ‘Any aspect of linguistic structure is available to become the focus of language play. We can alter the pronunciation, the writing system, the grammar, the vocabulary, the patterns of spoken or written discourse, or any combination of these’ (pp. 9–10). While he identifies such ‘bending and breaking’ of the rules of the language with an absence of communicative purpose — ‘if someone were to ask why we do it, the answer is simply: for fun’ (p. 1) — he offers a substantial chapter on the work of ‘professionals’ including advertisers, headline writers, comedians, collectors, comic writers, authors, artists and theologians (pp. 93–158). The common denominator here would seem to be not so much language play as a creative use of language for a variety of purposes, including commercially motivated persuasion.

Focusing on creativity also brings poetry more fully into view as a mode of expression which has stimulated people down the ages and across cultures to work with the stuff of their language and its special traditions while also discovering new possibilities in other languages. The result is an infinite wealth of forms and types of poem, with every type of language ‘rule’ being ‘broken’ — or, to put this in a way that foregrounds the infinite scope for creativity, every opportunity for linguistic innovation in a given language being exploited: seriously, playfully, satirically, experimentally.

Crystal argues that ‘language play is natural, spontaneous and universal’ (p. 93). Yet his first example, designed to illustrate that
‘everyone plays with language or responds to language play’ (p. 1), in fact also indicates that language play and linguistic creativity respond to characteristics of a specific language, and evolve in a particular cultural context. Introduced with the title ‘ping-pong punning’ (pp. 2–3), the example is embedded in the cultural tradition of the UK and influenced at least in part by the nature of the English language. It consists of a humorous conversation between two couples in a sitting room about a ‘confrontation’ between their respective cats, which gives rise to the creative modification ‘catfrontation’ and unleashes a pun exchange involving the syllable ‘cat’: catastrophe, categorical, catalogue, catalyst, catarrh, catechism, with a cartoon adding in ‘catatonic’. The puns in turn generate laughter, groans and comments such as ‘Oh, that’s Christmas-cracker standard’ (p. 3) — an allusion to the British Christmas dinner custom of each person having a colourful paper tube that pops when it is pulled apart with the person sitting next to you and contains a paper crown, small gift and slip of paper with a joke — normally involving a pun. The situation is recognizable as characteristic of English domestic life, tending towards middle-class social intercourse.

While punning is a popular social activity across cultures and languages — for example in Japanese, Spanish, and many languages of Indigenous peoples in South America — and might indeed turn out to be practised with every language, Crystal’s example is not transferable even to a relatively closely related linguistic culture. To take just one context, it is inconceivable that the conversation cited by him would take place in this form in a German sitting room — and not just because the equivalent of the trigger word, ‘Katze’, is morphologically more complex and semantically less flexible when forming part of a longer word. Reasons supporting the hypothesis of non-transferability are: German vocabulary, with many words formed by derivation and compounding, has far fewer monosyllables than English and far fewer homophones (words with the same pronunciation but different meanings), lending itself less readily than English to richly varied punning; there is no influential literary tradition of punning akin to that associated especially with Shakespeare; newspapers make far less use of puns and word play than English ones do across the spectrum of the press; punning is less prevalent among children; and Germans — for whom Christmas is traditionally associated with festiveness rather than fun — don’t
have Christmas crackers, which annually give rise to groans, laughter and punning across British dining tables. One may glean from this comparison that word play draws on the specific features of a language and is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of the society in which the language is used. We cannot therefore generalize about universal forms of linguistic humour on the basis of a single language let alone a single society.

If, on the other hand, we place ordinary linguistic creativity at the centre of inquiry, we don’t need to make presuppositions concerning its purpose, or generalize about the ways in which it manifests itself. We can still focus on exceptional or particularly complex forms, investigate the role of linguistic humour and take account of (non) purposes such as play and fun. Word play and indeed punning can have many functions depending on context — political, religious, competitive, sexual, poetic. In his book *The Pun Also Rises*, John Pollack (a Pun-Off World Champion and also speechwriter for Bill Clinton) recounts this ancient Hawaiian custom:

rivals often settled disputes by means of a riddling contest, challenging each other with conundrums built upon deep local knowledge and intricate wordplay. Making and catching sophisticated puns was often critical to victory, and such punning exchanges weren’t intended to be funny. In extreme cases, losers even paid with their lives. (Pollack 2012: 120; source: Beckwith 1970: 455)

Punning, then, may be deadly serious. What we can take from the immense range of language activities Crystal and Pollack discuss is that people love the creative potential of their languages and will exploit it in the entire range of activities that make up their lives.

People’s fascination with manipulating similarities and differences between words in language games and contests is just one manifestation of a talent that underpins our capacity to recognize similarities between our own language and related languages (see Maiden et al. 2020 and Chapter 3 in this volume). We have the potential for acute sensitivity towards subtle linguistic differences — in pronunciation, word choice, grammar, tone. But to what extent we train that sensitivity, what we focus it on, and the extent to which we think that a particular difference matters, will vary from language to language, from one speech community and cultural context to another, and indeed between individuals.
We can see this principle at work in the response different speech communities adopt towards new words coming into their language. The processes by which new words enter a language are infinite. A fascinating insight into the variety can be gained from following the quarterly ‘Updates to the OED’ provided roughly on a quarterly basis by the editorial team of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). They range from adoption of words incorporated from a wide variety of other languages to new formations created by abbreviating words, adding new prefixes, creating compounds, or establishing a combination of words as a fixed collocation that is listed as a lexical item. And they may have arisen for a host of different reasons, for example in response to a political development, as a result of the dissemination of a fictional work such as *Star Wars* that has appealed to the popular imagination or because a distinctive word by a particular group in society has gained wider currency.

Words that have been adopted for the *OED*’s online Third Edition include *peoplekind* (*OED* 2019c), *omnishambles* (*OED* 2019b), *whatevs* (*OED* 2019d) and *mama put* (*OED* 2019a). *Peoplekind* was formed from substituting an inclusive noun for the gender-specific prefix *man*, reflecting a linguistically creative response to changing social attitudes. *Omnishambles*, formed by humorously prefixing the (elevated) Latin word for ‘all, everything’ to an existing informal word for disorder, was adopted from a political satire for use in public discourse. *Whatevs*, formed from abbreviating e.g. ‘whatever [you say/want]’, was taken over from slang. *Mama put* was formed by joining the noun *mama* with the verb *put*, probably in the sense of ‘asking for food to be put for (i.e. given to) the customer’. It is classified as ‘Nigerian English’ and given with subtly different British, US and West African pronunciations. The compound noun is defined as ‘a street vendor, typically a woman, selling cooked food at low prices from a handcart or stall’ with the metonymic derivations of a restaurant serving such food, and the food sold by such vendors. The word reflects usage on the basis of distinctive cultural practices by English speakers in, or from, a country with UK links forged by colonialism. The designation of the word as ‘Nigerian English’ both highlights its origin and indicates the porousness and transience of ‘boundaries’ between different varieties. Its incorporation in ‘the definitive record of the English language’ (*OED* website slogan)
forms just one episode in the story of the word’s creation and creative integration in different Englishes.

In non-Anglophone countries, the expansion of English and widespread adoption of neologisms based on English has given rise to a wide range of different responses, often within the country. Some groups — for example technical innovators and frequently young people — respond readily to new imports from English, and this can give rise to word formations such as the German verbs ‘googeln’ and ‘relaunchen’ with derived forms such as ‘gegoogelt’ and ‘gerelauncht’, and pseudo-English formations such as ‘das Handy’ (‘mobile phone’). Meanwhile, more conservatively minded groups are concerned to preserve and protect the cultural and linguistic distinctiveness of the language that has been shaped by tradition. Such controversies can be followed, for example, in the debates generated in France and the French-speaking world by the pronouncements of the Académie Française.

Our languages are rule-governed, but we don’t just adopt the rules passively in order to reproduce them, and we don’t just ‘break’ them. Implementing them is a creative act in which individuals and groups, communities and institutions interact. We are continually interpreting the rules to fit the context, developing our speech habits, responding to new stimuli, and adapting our language to new people, situations and individual expressive needs and desires. Creativity is intrinsic to language and a driving force in generating linguistic diversity and language change, in interaction with the diversity and changing lives of people.

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