

# THE POETICS OF EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

There is a growing recognition on the part of linguists that everyday 'ordinary' language is shot through with supposed poeticisms –metaphor, idiom and other varieties of non-literal language and language use. Gibbs (1994) has even questioned the usefulness of a literal– non-literal language divide, while Carter and Nash (1990) propose a more modest cline of literariness, from technical writing through ordinary conversations to advertising and on to literary text. In this view, possibly the only linguistic or formal feature differentiating literary language from more everyday uses is the tolerance of literature for almost all varieties and registers where non-literary texts are more conservative. The implications for the learner of a language are clear: if you really want to learn a range of language, you will need to engage with its 'literariness'.

In the light of such a position, this paper proposes and illustrates a 'poetic wager' (after Gibbs's 1994 'cognitive wager'), that is, that language is best understood not in a Saussurean mould as arbitrary and unmotivated, but as fundamentally poetically and performatively structured, at every level, validating in this way the native speaker or successful learner's intuitive 'feel' for 'le mot juste' in whatever situation, with the proviso that such intuitions can be systematically analysed and explicated and so also drawn to the attention of the learner.

Literature/literature (McRae, 1991), then, in the view of this paper, is not a luxury or optional extra, but central to language learning. Importantly, literary or poetic effects are to be found and exploited in all instances of language use, where in current practice they are typically ignored or marginalised in formal learning.

## KEY WORDS

Poetics-linguistic creativity, language awareness, everyday language, culture, foreign language teaching, focus on form-pragmatics

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## RESUMEN

Existe un creciente reconocimiento por parte de los lingüistas de que el lenguaje 'común' de todos los días está permeado de usos supuestamente poéticos —metáforas, modismos y otras variedades del lenguaje o del uso lingüístico no literales. Gibbs (1994) ha llegado a cuestionarse la utilidad de una división entre lenguaje literal y no literal, mientras Carter y Nash (1990) proponen una gradación de literariedad más modesta, desde los escritos técnicos, pasando por las conversaciones normales, hasta la publicidad y finalmente el texto literario. Desde este punto de vista, quizás los únicos rasgos lingüísticos o formales que diferencian el lenguaje literario de los usos más cotidianos es la tolerancia que presenta la literatura hacia prácticamente todas las variedades y registros, mientras que los textos no literarios son más conservadores. está claro lo que esto implica para quien aprende una lengua: si de verdad se quiere aprender un rango de una lengua, es preciso considerar su 'literariedad'.

Desde esta posición, este trabajo propone e ilustra una 'apuesta poética' (a partir del concepto 'apuesta cognitiva' de Gibb 1994), es decir, que se entiende mejor el lenguaje no como arbitrario y no-motivado según el molde saussureano, sino como fundamentalmente poético y estructurado de manera performativa, a todos los niveles, dando de esta forma validez a cómo los hablantes nativos o los estudiantes avanzados 'notan' intuitivamente cuál es 'le mot juste' en cualquier situación, bajo el presupuesto de que esas intuiciones pueden ser analizadas y explicadas de manera sistemática, y de esta forma también sometidas a la consideración del estudiante.

La Literatura/literatura (McRae, 1991) por tanto, a la luz de este artículo, no es un lujo ni un extra opcional, sino un elemento central en el aprendizaje de una lengua. Es significativo que puedan encontrarse y explotarse efectos literarios o poéticos en todos los ejemplos del uso de la lengua, mientras que la práctica habitual del aprendizaje formal suele ignorarlos o marginarlos.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Poética, creatividad lingüística, conciencia lingüística, lenguaje cotidiano, cultura, enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, atención a la forma, pragmática.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les linguistes reconnaissent de plus en plus l'utilisation fréquente, dans la langue quotidienne, de termes poétiques tels que les métaphores, les locutions idiomatiques et de tout autre type de langage non-littéral. Gibbs (1994) a même mis en cause l'utilité de la division du langage en deux catégories —littéral et non-littéral— tandis que Carter et Nash (1990) proposent plus modestement une graduation d'attachement au littéraire; des écrits techniques aux textes littéraires en passant par les discussions habituelles et par les annonces publicitaires. A cet égard, la seule caractéristique formelle ou linguistique qui différencie la langue littéraire de celle de tous les jours est probablement la capacité de la

littérature à accepter presque tous les types et variétés de langue tandis que les textes non-littéraires sont plus conservateurs. Les conséquences pour celui ou celle qui apprend une langue sont clairs: pour vraiment la maîtriser il faut s'engager avec sa 'littéarité'.

En prenant ce point de vue en compte, cet essai propose et exemplifie un 'pari poétique' (d'après le 'pari cognitif' de Gibbs, 1994), c'est-à-dire que la langue n'est pas comprise au mieux comme arbitraire (théorie de Saussure), mais en tant que structurée poétiquement et performativement à chaque niveau. De cette manière et dans toute situation, l'intuition pour le "mot juste" pour celui ou celle dont c'est la langue maternelle ou pour la personne qui apprend effectivement la langue est validée. Néanmoins cet instinct doit être systématiquement analysé, expliqué et ainsi porté à l'attention de l'apprenant.

A la lumière donc de cet essai, la littérature/Littérature (McRae, 1991) n'est pas un luxe ou une option facultative, mais quelque chose de central pour l'apprentissage de la langue. Il est important de souligner que les effets poétiques et littéraires doivent être recherchés et exploités à chaque emploi de la langue, alors que dans l'usage courant ils sont souvent ignorés ou marginalisés à l'apprentissage formel.

#### MOTS-CLÉ

Poétique, créativité linguistique, prise de conscience de la langue, langue quotidienne, culture, enseignement d'une langue étrangère, forme linguistique, pragmatique.

#### THE ARGUMENT

My title begs terms provocatively but is meant to stimulate the reader to a new view of language, and by extension to a new view of language teaching too. At the same time, I build upon a growing volume of research and publications, particularly in pragmatics, which argue the centrality of creative play to actual language use in the social world (see Carter, 1999, for an accessible introduction to such work).

In a sense, such a proposition –the linguistic creativity of everyday life– should not surprise us. Chomsky and followers have long insisted on creativity as a species unique feature of human language. However, Chomsky also notoriously insisted on at best agnosticism as regards the applicability of his ideas on language to language education or even the real phenomenological world individuals experience day by day (Chomsky, 1973). More influential for many applied linguists in recent years will have been Hallidayan sociolinguistic ideas on the routine prefabricated chunks of language typically cobbled together as we speak and write (Pawley and Syder, 1983, Nattinger and de

Carrico, 1992; Lewis, 1993), the formulaic nature of speech genres (Coulmas, 1981), or corpus studies which repeatedly show us the significant gap between what a language may theoretically, generatively, allow, and the selections that actual speakers in fact typically perform in their ongoing interactions.

Building on some of the previous work mentioned, then, and illustrating such ideas further with some of my own data, I will initially aim to demonstrate the significantly creative nature of everyday language use (English language in this case), and some of the forms this creativity takes. The argument here is that form is normally a key element of meaning (compare Halliday's 'language as a system of choices'), and that ordinary speakers in everyday interactions habitually demonstrate a keen interest in and awareness of linguistic form. Such an interest is not exclusive to archetypes of dreamy poets or pampered undergraduates who should go out and work for a living (or even to writers of articles in journals of philology and pedagogy).

Having established the extent and something of the nature of this poetics of everyday language creativity, my second aim is to persuade readers of the relevance of all this to a modern anthropological understanding of culture as the negotiated, interactive processes of everyday life, mediated, enacted, even coming into being, through language exchanges. Thus Street (1993) writes of 'culture as a verb', a contingent notion of what individuals do in their worldly interactions with each other, more than who or what they 'are' or 'believe' (French/white/middle-class/heterosexual/woman, etc.). (Compare Agar's [1994] 'languaculture'). In this view, 'Members of society are *agents* of culture rather than bearers of culture' (Ochs, quoted in Roberts, 1998, p. 110).

The point of such an understanding of culture, in moving to the third major stage of my argument, is to see the relevance to language teaching of the understanding of creative language use as central, even the norm, and in particular its relevance to a narrow 'communicative' view of language teaching. This dominant 'communicative' view is seemingly predicated upon the notion of language as information exchange, a drab model of encoding and decoding with no time for frills such as exploration of the expressive resources of a language (compare Reddy, 1979). While such a view may appeal to communications engineers, software designers or implementers of AirSpeak, it bears no relation to the realities of any existing language as language in extended use (outside the idealised fictions of grammars and dictionaries, that is), nor could it ever do so, since language (use) is not

like that. Ordinary language, paradoxically, doesn't exist, at least not unless it is understood as an extraordinary range of creativity and varieties (Fish, 1973; Pratt, 1977). Ordinary language use is a form –the primary form of human communication. A crude view of communicative language teaching has urged that our students should forget the niceties and get on with meaning. Rather, as those students with their well-motivated interest in form for its own sake have long been telling their teachers, form is crucial to meaning. How you say it and what you say are not easily separable, and in attempting to disregard form (as resource, note, not as prescription) we do a disservice to learners of the culture-language. Values, identities, modalities and attitudes are an inseparable feature of any language instance or event, however inconvenient they may be to those who would like to hypostatise and commodify the organic. But enough of these romantic flights –let us turn to scrutinise the real: but whose real?

## 1. THE POETICS OF EVERYDAY LANGUAGE USE

Too often, when we teach, the unit in the course book:

[M]ore often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life, or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be confined any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, [following] our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds (p. 188).

Thus Virginia Woolf (1919), articulating the modernist rejection of dominant models of the 'real' (in the novel, not in EFL textbooks admittedly!). In the same way, I argue, language teaching workers need to reject dominant reductive notions of communication as transactional information exchange as both undesirable and, perhaps more important, unattainable. Language that worked like that would not be recognisably language-like (as too many of our students speak the awkward classroom register of the language they are supposedly being taught). But what is the alternative? Woolf continues, in the same essay:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions –trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the

life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old (p. 189).

Interestingly, Woolf's own language in the passage is itself driving the meaning as much as the meaning drives the language. Consider 'moved off, or on, and refuses to be confined any longer', in which can be observed the self-conscious language user reflectively pausing on those prepositions that cause learners so much trouble too. Moreover, Woolf iconically enacts the idea she refers to, as her sentence itself 'moves on' (or off). A model of language as encoding and decoding of algebraically representable propositions is clearly inadequate here. Notice, too, that the phrases I refer to are themselves embedded (as we might say) in a metaphor of language as clothing, which (like the communication = information paradigm) seeks to perceive ideas and language as separable, but in practice finds the very condition of thought is linguistic (typically, as here, metaphoric).

But Woolf was a novelist, it will be objected. What can she offer the hard-pressed language teacher (except, perhaps, solace and escape)? Or in the words of another phenomenologist (himself deeply influenced by literary text), the conversation analyst Harvey Sacks, 'You do not get, from somebody doing "being ordinary", a report of the playful light on the liquor glasses, or the set of his eyebrows, or timbre of his voice.' ('On doing "being ordinary", p. 416). Instead you could hear (as found in Sacks' own data):

He's just a real, dear nice guy. Just a real, real nice guy. So we were really talking up a storm, and having a real good time, had a few drinks and so forth, and he's real easygoing. He's intelligent, and he's uh, not handsome, but he's nice looking, and uh, just real real nice, personable, very personable, sweet (p. 416).

Notice the patterning of this everyday utterance, the repetitions, the casual metaphor ('talking up a storm') and strategic vagueness ('and so forth' refers to a shared cultural schema of <evening in a bar>). Sacks' main point, however, is the creative effort that goes into presenting oneself in everyday life, through language, as ordinary. (See also Goffman, 1959). This woman has 'just' met a nice guy, nothing special, not super-intelligent, no large claims are being made for her experience. Nevertheless, Sacks and Woolf are not so far apart as may at first appear. The contention of Sacks and of conversation analysts more generally is that while everyday language is not always self-evidently poetic ('the timbre of the voice'), speakers put in a lot of hard linguistic

work to make themselves acceptable to interlocutors and audiences (who work co-operatively with them to achieve ordinariness. Ordinariness is not a default condition, it is a human social and creative achievement.

Thus, while Woolf insists on the extraordinariness of the everyday, and agonises over how to represent or re-create this in her writings, Sacks, not inconsonantly I think, insists on ordinariness as a linguistic achievement: 'it takes work' to "be ordinary"; it doesn't just happen (p. 414). And a key way in which we achieve the condition of ordinary language speakers in others' ears and eyes (fluency or 'competence' in the language teacher's terms) is through the stories we so artfully and continually tell each other in our everyday conversations (compare Polyani, 1979).

An increasing body of data provides eloquent testimony to creativity and polished performance in the narrative art of ordinary speakers in everyday conversation (Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Linde, 1993; Polanyi, 1979). There are even valuably annotated transcripts available to the language teacher. I have successfully used Crystal and Davy's (1969) collection in *Advanced Conversational English* in language teaching classrooms for many years, though increasingly supplemented by more recent corpus collections. Consider the 'Driving Incident' extract, which never ceases to fascinate students, and sends them off on their own driving anecdotes, incidentally promoting much valuable vocabulary learning! I have over many years investigated with students the ways in which the polished native speaker performance of this episode differs from their own versions. The characteristically British use of colloquial nouns as verbs is usually a surprise ('she backed out the car', where learners will say (or write, indifferently,) she 'reversed' the car), or all those phrasal verbs themselves, and lexically empty or vague terms, with scatterings of pronouns: 'she put it into reverse', 'she had to pull forward' and the like. Learners delight in the unknown term 'gingerly' ('she came out very GINGERLY'), which I always have trouble explaining, but which inevitably proves to be one of the most memorable vocabulary items on the course: colourful, lively language, note, is enjoyed and remembered, whatever the frequency lists might dictate. We also discuss the way that native speakers will always include in their narratives the onomatopoeic terms Saussure and his progeny have taught us to distrust or ignore, and which less confident speakers, characteristically, never dare employ: 'she ran into the garage doors/ THUMP'. Creativity may not be elegant, can even be clichéd if taken out of context, but used appropriately in a good story is very effective. Other

poeticisms used by this speaker fascinate my learners and are remembered by them (especially since they are usually reinforced within a few days –these creative resources are available to all fluent speakers): ‘she was getting into a bit of a flutter’, ‘put her into a bit of a flap’, ‘shaking like a leaf’, ‘she looked around frantically’. The fricative /f/ clearly has a related meaning in these phrases (discuss it with students!). Just so Bolinger (1950) proposed the initial ‘fl-’ sound in English as ‘phenomenon of movement’, and ‘gl-’ as ‘phenomenon of light, while ‘-itter’, ‘-ow’, ‘-are’, suggest (respectively) ‘intermittent’, ‘steady’, continuity, and ‘intense’, hence yielding *flutter*, *flow*, *flare* and *glitter*, *glow*, *glare*. Or what about ‘-ust’ (*must*, *rust*, *crust*, *dust*) referring to some kind of ‘surface formation’? Crystal himself has written of *slime*, *slither*, *slug*, *sloppy* and others as often reporting wet/ unpleasant experiences (Crystal, 1987, p. 174) Poets like Gerard Manley Hopkins or Tennyson were not complete eccentrics; they were exploiting meaning-sound resources known to the speaker of ‘Driving Incident’ as well as to his listeners, however subconsciously, but such competencies have been marginalised in mainstream linguistic approaches. Whether you are sceptical or convinced, the very exercise of exploring these possibilities with students can be an absorbing learning experience.

We should pause here momentarily on the question of iconicity to note that a feature of language referred to within living memory as frivolous, non-scientific and the like, pushed to the recesses of consciousness of language professionals, is making a strong comeback under the auspices of cognitive linguistics. Once again, the marginal (as with poetic language *vs.* ‘ordinary language’) may be more central than linguistic orthodoxies tell us. In other words, while Saussure may have right about the ultimate arbitrariness of the symbol ‘tree’ or ‘sheep’, the fact is that fluent speakers of a language develop a knowledge of the relatedness of items which is iconic and helps them to use the language fluently and creatively, and these iconic features are systemic and can (must) be accessed, discussed and learned. Teachers can facilitate or obstruct this natural and normal process of language acquisition. Notice too that iconicity has been observed at levels above the word: ‘He opened the bottle and poured the wine’, not \*‘He poured the wine and opened the bottle’ (example from Ungerer and Schmid, 1996, p. 251), up to the level of discourse. In brief, the important cognitive principle proposed in such work, is that linguistic labels and codings are mentally intertwined for speakers of a language in important ways. (See Ungerer and Schmid for a useful introductory discussion and further references).



Another important contribution of cognitive linguistics to what may be termed the poetics of everyday life is in the study of metaphor. Briefly, the proposal of Lakoff and Johnson, Lakoff, Gibbs (1994) and others of this persuasion, is that metaphor is pervasive in language use and –once again the reversal I hope the reader is almost beginning to expect by now– far from a minor and peripheral phenomenon, metaphor is the foundation of language use, and the crucial mediation of language, culture and thought. The idea is not without its critics (e.g. Steen, 2000), but undoubtedly, like vagueness and ambiguity before them, once you start looking for metaphor you find it everywhere, and, predictably, the metaphors we use can be viewed as systematically related in taxonomic ‘fields’ (see what I mean?) of ideas: ‘I’m dying for a drink’/ ‘I could kill for a drink’. Consider the metaphor of the Human as a Plant: someone can be called a cabbage, vegetable, couch potato, pansy, wallflower, weed, willowy, etc. We talk of the ‘flower’ of his youth, a ‘tuft’ of hair, ‘roots’ of hair, nails, teeth. Human beings can bloom, go to seed or wilt in the heat. She can be the apple of my eye, a peach, while another is a lemon, or even dead wood to be cut out (university lecturers). We peel off our clothes each night, and mellow with age. (These images are taken from Andrew Goatly’s very practical study of *The Language of Metaphor*, a delightful and stimulating browse for any language teacher. For further exploration of metaphors in everyday language use, see Goatly, 1997). A key point I would wish to make here, however, as the study of idioms also confirms (Moon, 1998) is that such metaphors are not as we might think frozen [sic], to be catalogued and learned in lists, but a creative resource. Foley (1997, p. 361) quotes a nice example of the anthropologist on a field trip in Africa, knowingly dropping his local proverb into a conversation with a native speaker:

Old Man: Ah, you are becoming a Maninka. You speak the language like one of us.

Newcomer: No matter how long a log lies in the water, it never becomes a crocodile.

Old Man: Ah, my son, a log lying in the water is still a cause of fear!

We are (and are not) a long way from asking the time of the next train to Oxford. (I am reminded of a recent joke about leaves on the line: What line? enquires the cynical British rail traveller. We are now in the thick of language culturing. For linguistic creativity and joking, see Chiaro, 1992; Norrick, 1993; Crystal, 1998).

Closer to home, let us follow a Mrs Dalloway, 'an ordinary mind on an ordinary day', as she pursues her way down the high street. She notices shop signs ('Cod Almighty' is a favourite of mine, in Southmead, Bristol, near a hairdresser's called 'Kutz'), advertising, newspaper headlines and other media. She might notice the van of the Man in a White Van (*The Sun's* modern equivalent of the man-in-the-street), 'Also available in white' graffitied in the dirt (see Cook, 1996, on creativity in graffiti), or (observed in the aftermath of petrol price demonstrations) 'Tony Blair is unfair'. She may hear a snatch of football commentary as several million did when Manchester United played Bordeaux in the European cup in 1999 (these examples collected by Goulioumis, a student at University of Wales Swansea, for his project on 'The Language of Sport'): 'a crisp, incisive United move four minutes before half time' (alliteration on /s/ and /v/, the language is generally itself crisp and incisive); or consider the linguistic celebration of United's goal: 'It's the first Ryan Giggs goal in the competition and what a beauty, so simple, so direct, so effective. It's Manchester United'; (it could just as easily be Persil, it seems to me). Atkinson (1986) elsewhere observes the importance of the rhythmic triplet in politicians' speeches. (Whatever happened to 'Education. Education. Education?'). Here we see that it is a rhetorical ploy (emphasis and closure) more widespread across other fields of discourse. If, as Sacks argues, one constraint on human communication is the need to appear ordinary, its complement (compare Labov and Waletzky's (1967) dreaded 'so what?' response to a narrative) is to keep attention and interest in one's story. In the same way, Attridge (1988) has argued that literary language is, indeed, 'different', if not always in the ways we might expect, yet cannot afford to be so different that, even with additional concentration, it remains incomprehensible. So, too, so-called ordinary language cannot be so ordinary as to be uninteresting (compare Tannen, 1989).

But, it will be objected, Woolf's characters and milieux are often criticised because they are *not* representative or ordinary, and the idea of Mrs Dalloway at a football match is deliberately absurd. One last example then, after which I rest my case for pervasive poetic qualities in ordinary language use. On Saturday mornings on BBC Radio 4, host John Peel (yes he who coached a generation in musical taste!) hosts a programme called 'Home Truths' in which the deadpan commentator interviews resolutely ordinary people only to repeatedly discover what extraordinary experiences they have had or how very different they are to the rest of us (or are they?). 'I thought this sort of thing only hap-

pened in films' (this edition of the programme) is a typical response to what life throws at us, or 'life is stranger than fiction'. At the very least truth and lies, fiction and reality, ordinary and literary language, are not easily distinguished.

On the morning of 25 November 2000, then, as I mulled the text for this paper, I noted down neologism in the second story of 'Home Truths' (a 'gazumpee' = one who has been gazumped, which requires an understanding of the absurd nature of housebuying in Britain, as well as of English morphology), or a pun in the third story (a listener's pet budgie called 'Onion' ('Onion budgie', which requires a good knowledge of traditional British fare). Another listener called in with a story of how he 'crawled up the stairs, literally' one night. It occurred to me (confirmed by entries in the Collins Cobuild Dictionary) that like many other adjuncts ('sincerely', 'honestly'... etc.), 'literally' usually indicates that one is about to tell a whopper, and that this was a relatively unusual use. It has been observed by Winner (1988), and others (e.g. Friedman and Tucker, 1990) that one of the most basic things children need to learn about language is to (at least) read between the lines. Pretence and deception (not just lies but metaphor, irony, implication, presupposition, sarcasm and more) are –yes, again!– more the norm than the exception. 'Literal' language, like 'ordinary' language, if it exists at all, is very much the exception. But I really began to pay attention to the radio programme as phrases I had discussed with students earlier in the week began to appear thick and fast –'out of the blue' (common in conversation, according to McCarthy and Carter, 1997), 'kick in/off', surely now the most common way to say 'begin' in British English conversation (back to football?). Similarly, the woman speaking had suffered a shock (contacted by a brother she had never even known existed), and naturally, 'I started to shake, y'know, like a leaf'. We know. Noticeable, too, in these interviews and comments is the density of metalinguistic reflection. My favourite on this occasion, though, was the creativity of morphology use: 'I was elated, exhilarated... and every other -ated'. Creativity indeed.

## 2. CULTURE AS THE LINGUISTIC PRACTICES OF EVERYDAY LIFE 'CULTURE IS ORDINARY' (RAYMOND WILLIAMS)

Speaking, or language use more broadly, is a cultural practice. Speakers transmit, reproduce, transgress and modify cultures as they speak

and in their very speaking. Thus words matter, and as I have tried to show, the precise forms of words matter, as any speaker is fully aware. In fact, studies in recent years of spoken data demonstrate again and again that the metalingual function of language, where the linguistic forms themselves become a focus of attention to speakers, is much more important than Jakobson's (1960) original account suggested. To study language uses is to study culture, and ultimately to study what being human means in various contexts of utterance. In such a perspective, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology take on a special relevance, as culture is viewed as performance, in particular linguistic performance. The ways in which communicative acts are executed takes on a special interest of its own (see Duranti, 1997):

[I]n the most ordinary of encounters... social actors exhibit a particular attention to and skills in the delivery of a message ... [I]n speaking there is always an aesthetic dimension, understood as an attention to the form of what is being said... We are constantly being evaluated by our listeners and by ourselves as our own listeners (Duranti, 1997, p. 16).

Speakers of a foreign language will be very familiar with varieties of evaluation! A further implication still of the view of language as performance (elaborated on in Duranti's helpful introductory chapter) is the view that language is pervasively and inescapably creative, as examples in this paper have already tried to suggest:

To be a fluent speaker of a language means to be able to enter any conversation in ways that are seen as appropriate and not disruptive. Such conversational skills, which we usually take for granted (until we find someone who does not have them or ignore their social implications) are not too different from the way a skilled jazz musician can enter someone else's composition, by embellishing it, paying around with its main motif, emphasising some elements of the melody over others, quoting other renditions of the same piece by other musicians, and trying on different harmonic connections –all of this done without losing track of what everyone else in the band is doing (p. 17).

Important theoretical elaborations of these ideas with more examples can be found in the linguistic anthropological literature. For example, Palmer and Jankowiak (1996): 'Culture ... is performed all the time... to be living, vital culture, it has to be performed constantly.' (p. 225). Or Sherzer (1987): [I]t is especially in verbally artistic and playful discourse, such as poetry, magic, verbal duelling, and political rhetoric, that the resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural mean-

ings and symbols, are activated to their fullest potential and the essence of language-culture relationships becomes salient. ... [Q]uestions of speech play and verbal art [are] central (p. 295)... I say that language does not reflect culture but that language use in discourse creates, recreates, and modifies culture.' (p. 301) Chapter 18 of Foley (1997) contains a useful overview of some of this work ('Genre: Poetics, Ritual Languages, and Verbal Art', pp. 359-378, with suggestions for further reading appended). Norrick's (1993) study of conversational joking is a good example of such an orientation, applied through valuable conversation analytic examples. Once again, we are faced with a Derridean reversal of values so far as language and the language arts are concerned (Derrida, 1974, 1977), as Norrick demonstrates that, far from frivolous, unimportant, barely worth noticing (and certainly often unnoticed), joking in conversation is frequent, important quantitatively, but also qualitatively in that normal conversation could not carry on without those painful puns, deliberate misunderstandings, narratives and the like exemplified and analysed in his book. Redfern (1984) is quoted approvingly, though now with a wider remit claimed: 'Puns illuminate the nature of language in general' (quoted p. 84; another very Derridean –that is, anti-Saussurean) proposition. 'The frequency and persistence of spontaneous joking in everyday talk suggest that our conversation often tends more toward performance and entertainment than to the expeditious exchange of information' (Norrick, 1993, p. 131)– the view I have elsewhere referred to a 'transactional' information-exchange view of language. (See also Cook, 2000).

Culture, then, is significantly performed through language, which is not so ordinary as was once thought. Ordinary language, if the term has any meaning at all (what is the standard from which 'literary language' supposedly deviates?) is itself playful, metaphoric, focused on form and the linguistic code, not arbitrary but typically motivated. Expressed in this way, the characterisation of language may be too provocative for some. Indeed, I would be the first to recognise the need to talk about specific instances of language use according to situation, participants and so on. Generalisations like 'language' are always dangerous. I believe the real test for propositions such as those advanced here will be to consider the poetics of the service encounter (restaurants, post offices) or of faxed sales orders as limit cases where poetic creativity is likely to be at a minimum, and which are certainly linguistic situations of interest to many of our more vocationally-oriented language learning students. I note, nevertheless, a colleague I

have recently shared an office with, who regularly opens serious transactions with state agencies with comments like 'Ah, you're not an answering machine, are you?' and proceeds in various other ways to establish rapport (or further antagonise!) as the transaction proceeds. Not so far after all from Norrick's leisure-time joshing within an extended family. And any academic will confirm that the language students who wish or need to study through English need is highly performative (compare Dunbar, 1996).

### 3. THE RELEVANCE OF THE POETIC VIEW OF LANGUAGE TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

By this point, the more sceptical reader will have departed to read something more sensible (commonsense-last refuge of the ideologue). Yet I also envisage a language professional interested by much of the preceding argument, perhaps even convinced to some degree as regards the nature of language and the making of culture. At the same time, this more sympathetic reader – a re-run of the long-established unease of all applied linguistic work – will want to know how this should affect syllabuses, materials design and even individual language class activities and classrooms. It is not the intention here to offer detailed recipes to teachers already drowning, to my perception, in a sea of commercially produced resources, internet chat sites and bulletin boards. I would like in closing, rather, to situate my argument with regard to the two traditional justifications for language teaching work, by target aim of the learners (end) and by means (how the end might best be achieved through formal education). First, the end. If real language is (to revert to Woolf's phrase) 'like this', then educationalists and learners should be made fully aware that is so. Second, the preceding argument for the importance of linguistic form is one that seems to me highly relevant to language activities, and likely to be favoured by learners for face validity and memorability as well as interest value. That is, we can now respond with informed conviction to the age old demand for a focus on form, which has for so long been a bugbear of the communicative language teacher. This is not the old 'clamour for grammar' vindicated; our students, like us, still need to learn much about the nature of language, and in particular of this specific language they are learning. Ironically, though, as Cook (2000) points out, we remember the philosopher who 'pulled the jaw of the hen', so ridiculed by Sweet,

along with snatches of poetry, jokes and other aesthetic language instances: these can stay in the mind for reanalysis by the learner, just as the child learning a first language listens to incomprehensible 1920s language from Beatrix Potter, formulaic pragmatic language routines, 18<sup>th</sup> century nursery rhymes and others. Initial comprehensibility is not always as important as patterning and salience in psycholinguistics. Face validity, interest, relevance, memorability. Ellis (e.g. 1993) and others (Hulstijn and Schmidt, 1994) have in parallel ways been emphasising the importance of language awareness and focus on form from within a more orthodox applied linguistics. There are advantages as well as difficulties of dealing with real language data but at least we can now posit that real language data (including Literature or literature) will be creative verbal art. Evidence from child first language acquisition is suggestive. Pre-linguistic and early phonological awareness developed through word games, nursery rhymes and the like, predicts and promotes literacy skills and so success in education (Adams, 1990; Goswami, 1982). Infant and pre-school metaphoric proficiency predicts vocabulary size and, again, literacy skills in later school life (Paprotté and Dirven, 1985; Becker, 1994). Learning a second language, we are frequently reminded, is not the same as learning a first language. The aspects in which the two processes differ, however, –the previous knowledge and experience of another language system, principally–, seem to me only further argument in favour of the poetic view of everyday language. The forms are what the learner wants and is right to want: the forms are indeed important in all the ways I have outlined.

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