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Linguistic Strangeness

David Crystal

War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength. And Strangeness is Familiarity. Also, familiarity, as everyone knows, breeds content.

The argument of this paper is that linguistic strangeness is, in fact, a perfectly normal, everyday occurrence. That we are so used to it that we have learned to ignore it. That we forget to look for it, and therefore we do not see it. It is easy to fall into a stereotyped way of thinking, a mental set which makes us expect to find strangeness in certain well-defined circumstances, notably in literature, and most notably in poetry. And we expect to find explanations of linguistic strangeness coming from literary critics, part of whose job is to explicate the abnormal in literary language. Thus for many years we have become used to hearing of the clear divide between norm and departure from norm (often referred to by such terms as "foregrounding"). Robert Graves's well-known remark, "A poet needs to master the rules of English grammar before he attempts to bend or break them," was taken a stage further by stylisticians: literary linguists, too, would need to know about the rules of English grammar (and, by extension, vocabulary, phonology, graphology, and pragmatics) before they attempted to explain how it is that poets (and, by extension, novelists, dramatists, *et al.*) bend or break them.

But is linguistic strangeness the prerogative only of works which, under some dispensation, we would want to call literature? It is by no means a novel observation to answer "no." However, I have been increasingly struck by the *extent* to which linguistic strangeness can be encountered in non-literary environments. If one goes looking for it, as it were, one finds it. And this raises all kinds of implications about the nature of language in general, and of "literary" language, in particular.

In order to make the hypothesis interesting, I will assert it in its

strongest possible form: that it is normal to be strange, as regards the use of language; that it is normal linguistic behaviour in most linguistic situations to depart from what is conceived of as a norm for that context. And before the evidence, some definitions. By "norm" here I mean only traditional, majority usage, intuitively appreciated and potentially quantifiable. And by strangeness I mean some untraditional, minority usage, again intuitively appreciated and potentially quantifiable. But "minority" here also needs a gloss. I do not mean only "used by some of the speech community all of the time they are engaged in a particular activity" (this is the standard stylistic notion of a distinctive variety, or register, such as the language of law or religion), but in addition "used by all of the people some of the time." In other words, linguistic strangeness is permanently available to all members of the speech community, who find themselves regularly responding to it (a passive awareness), with many of them regularly making active use of it in their speech.

I should also add that although strangeness is a time-dependent, diachronic notion, it is not my purpose in this paper to try to state the factors governing the process, or the time scale whereby a linguistic innovation becomes shared and ultimately part of the norm (though I believe that this is a much shorter period than is often assumed). I am not here interested in origins (such as who actually introduced a feature of strangeness), but in the extent to which strange linguistic behaviour is manifested throughout an entire linguistic community. This leads to a second qualification. The concept of strangeness is more than personal idiosyncrasy: it is not solely linguistic individuality or uniqueness, and is thus much broader than the traditional literary focus. I am looking for evidence of *shared* strange linguistic behaviour, a tacit agreement that it is acceptable to be strange, with a range of people using the same conventions — norms of strangeness, if you will.

To support my strong hypothesis, I will look at examples taken from central areas of human interaction. If I cannot find strange behaviour here, then my case falls. On the other hand, lack of strangeness in a highly restricted language domain, such as heraldry, air traffic control, or the radio weather reports from coastal stations — all examples where it is unusual to depart from convention even in minor respects, without incurring social sanctions — would not concern me. I therefore illustrate from several everyday contexts, and then from a range of more specialised — but nonetheless frequently occurring — situations.

Everyday Settings

It would be difficult to think of a clearer case of strange linguistic behaviour than the deliberate use of unintelligible speech; but such cases are by no means uncommon in everyday speech activities. A particularly striking instance (because it turns out to be so widespread, cross-cultural, and international) is the speech of adults talking to babies, where the phonetic structure of words is radically altered, nonsense syllables are introduced, and bizarre (from the point of view of normal adult language) intonation and rhythm patterns used. Moreover, this kind of "baby-talk" is by no means restricted to talking to babies. It may be heard when people address animals, and even at times between adults on occasions of special intimacy, though objective data is here rather difficult to come by! Another example is the range of nonsensical expressions which may accompany a moment of sudden emotion. One person was observed to utter an expletive (approximately transcribable as "shplumfnooeeah," with a crescendo at "fnoo") when he stood on a broom and the handle came up and hit his head. Southey is on record as swearing by the great decasyllabon "Aballiboozobanganovribo." Such expressions vary enormously in kind and degree of complexity, and their incidence probably varies greatly in terms of speaker sex, personality, and background, but they are commonplace.

More complex levels of systematic nonsense also exist. The phenomenon of "scat" singing is a case in point: it reaches its peak in the performances of Ella Fitzgerald and other professional jazz singers, but can be heard at lower levels of creative expertise in many a kitchen or bathroom. Glossolalia is another interesting domain: "speaking in tongues" is practised by large numbers of ordinary people as part of their regular religious behaviour. In published cases of glossolalia studies (see, for instance, Samarin), it is evident that the syllable sequences produced do not add up to a real unknown and "alien" language (what would technically be called "xenoglossia"), but rather to a radically modified form of the speaker's own language, which is used as a sign of spiritual conversion or belief. Several people admit to praying "in tongues" in private. Here too the data, because of the intimate nature of such occasions, are difficult to obtain.

The same point applies to a further area of linguistic abnormality, the use of hidden or secret languages by criminals. Forms of "speech disguise" have been studied in many parts of the world, ranging from the heavily

coded messages of US gangsters arranging a murder to the use of personalised private slang between groups of stewards at religious centres in India talking about the pilgrims in their care (Mehrotra). The development of Cockney rhyming slang displays similarities. Rather more easy to study is the use of secret language by children, where many varieties have been shown to exist. Large numbers of children experiment with "backslang" (producing a word backwards with a letter-by-letter or syllable-by-syllable pronunciation), and some can reach great speeds of utterance. In "eggy peggy" speech and in "Pig Latin," extra syllables are added to each word in a sentence. Such games are found widely across languages, and are not unknown amongst adults — though adults usually have more time to experiment with versions of the written language (Crystal 1987, 58ff.).

Adult word games, in fact, provide the clearest example of the lengths to which people are prepared to go to indulge in strange linguistic behaviour (Crystal 1988, Chapter 7). There are hundreds of variants, providing over half the game show topics on radio or television, and some of the most successful home and party games on record. Scrabble, a word grid game, is played by vast numbers of people, with international championships held at regular intervals. Such games have evolved from the crossword puzzle, invented in 1913, and itself a fine example of strange linguistic behaviour — as can be readily seen from an examination of the contortions imposed on language in the puzzle clues. The names of famous puzzle devisers also hint at the abnormality of the pastime: Ximenes, Torquemada, the Azed Club to which many crossword aficionados belong (Deza in reverse) — all members of the Spanish Inquisition.

But there are much stranger linguistic manipulations than these, practised as leisure activities in many countries. The introduction of acrostics into a piece of writing is a practice which can be found in English from Anglo-Saxon times. Children's play books introduce the "magic" word square (in which words can be read both horizontally and vertically), and the search continues among adults, often with computational assistance, for the largest possible word square in English (9-letter squares have so far been devised). Anagram competitions can be found, in which the aim is to devise a transformation displaying ingenious semantic relevance: famous examples include *moon-starers*, which is an anagram of *astronomers*, and *sit not in stale bars*, which is an anagram of *total abstainers*. Palindromes (words or sentences which can be read the same in

both directions, such as *draw, o coward*) have been devised of several thousand words. Until recently, no truly satisfactory pangram (a sentence in which each letter of the alphabet appears once only) had been contrived; then this 26-letter offering for English emerged in the mid-nineteen eighties: *Veldt jynx grimps waqf zho buck* (all words which can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Party word games include "words within words" (finding as many words as possible within a given word) and the several pastimes devised by Lewis Carroll (such as word chains: *human-mankind-kindness . . .*).

Increasingly complex variants are perennially being invented, but some have ancient histories. Lipograms (writing a text which makes no use of a common letter of the alphabet) can be found in Ancient Greek. A modern example is Ernest Wright's novel *Gadsby* (1939), which continues for some 50,000 words without using the letter *e*:

Upon this basis I am going to show you how a bunch of bright young folks did find a champion — a man with boys and girls of his own — a man of so dominating and happy individuality that Youth is drawn to him as is a fly to a sugar bowl. It is a story about a small town

Univocalics, in which only one vowel is used throughout, are much trickier to construct, but people are prepared, it seems, to spend large amounts of time setting themselves this linguistic task (surely one of the strangest), as in one of C. C. Bombaugh's poems:

No Monk too good to rob, or cog, or plot.
 No fool so gross to bolt Scotch collops hot.
 From Donjon tops no Oronoco rolls.
 Logwood, not lotos, floods Oporto's bowls. . . .

(in Augarde 112)

Dingbats (Waddington Games, 1987) has taken the strategies used in children's puzzles (for example rebus equivalents, such as "H&" for "hand") to an extreme, with players trying to find familiar words and phrases in abnormal configurations, such as *Mandogger* ("Dog in a manger"). And, as a final example, there are the various forms of code game, such as those which assign number values to letters and then look for correspondences. For example, if one assigns values 1-26 to letters A-Z, then *book + loan = library*. In earlier centuries, this type of activity, called *gematria*, was used

for serious purposes, as a system of numerical divination: thus *Mount Sinai* and *The Laws of God*, for example, both added up to 135. Some totals (such as those involving a 3 or a 6) were attributed particular significance by interpreters. The practice of gematria is still to be found, and books on it are still published. (Incidentally, SAUTE = 66).

The extraordinary array of word games which a culture displays is surely strong evidence of an underlying penchant for the linguistically bizarre. Nor are such phenomena restricted to literate societies. Speech play activities (such as tongue twisters), sometimes highly complex, have been noted in many cultures. Their popularity is intriguing. Perhaps their appeal lies in their essentially non-specialised nature. In the world of television games, for example, there are several competitions where to be successful you must have specialised knowledge or strength, and a period of careful preparation or training is required (such as for *Mastermind* or *The Krypton Factor* on British television). But for language games, the only requirement is that you can speak and/or write your language. Linguistic memory is a remarkable thing. We hear an old record on the radio, and find we can sing the words along with it, even though we might not have heard them for decades, and would have been unable to recall them deliberately five minutes before. Our brains are crammed with fragments of old nursery rhymes, poems learned in school, prayers, local dialect expressions, jokes, advertising slogans, old catch phrases, and much more. And beneath all of this is the solid foundation of the rules of grammar, sounds, and vocabulary laid down in early conversations. It is this which gives us the ability to play such word games as the extremely popular *Blankety Blank*, where we have to decide on the probabilities of words going together, and to fill the — —.

It is only a short step from this kind of playing with language to the more complex and sophisticated forms of word play which characterise literary expression — the jump, as it were, from *an — — ago*, where the blank is filled with *hour*, and no one notices anything unusual, to *a — — ago*, where the blank is filled with *grief*, and a poem (by Dylan Thomas) is given its title. Or rather, it is a series of short steps (compare *a cigarette ago*, *two secretaries ago*) in which one can recognise a wide range of quasi-literary activities — the many forms of verbal art (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett). Included here would be puns, riddles, jokes (where the point is linguistic in character, rather than, say, visual), West Indian rapping, ritual cursing, Germanic flyting, and the many forms of verbal duelling (which often

involve complex patterns of rhythm and rhyme). The value of these examples is that they indicate that manipulating the linguistic conventions of a language is not solely the prerogative (as the word games illustrations might suggest) of sophisticated, middle-class language users, but something in which people from all social backgrounds can and do engage.

The "bottom line" of everyday uses of language is, of course, conversation, often taken to be a norm for purposes of linguistic description. At first sight, textbooks and materials presenting conversational dialogues, especially those compiled for foreign language teaching purposes, display very little sign of linguistic strangeness; but this is because the conversational situations presented are generally conventional or stereotyped, with people interacting in set situations. They may not know each other well, or at all, and if they belong to the same family they are invariably seen on their "best behaviour." The realities of everyday, natural conversation of the most informal or intimate kind are rarely presented – partly because it is so difficult to obtain natural samples of such situations (see Crystal and Davy). However, when one listens to such situations, as a participant observer, evidence of strange linguistic behaviour begins to accumulate.

Two main patterns can be found. The first involves the use of abnormal voices – often the adoption of a regional or social accent that is not the speaker's own, or the use of an unnatural tone of voice which recalls, perhaps, a famous film or television or cinema personality. Often, especially with the younger generation, the voice is simply "funny" or "stupid." Examples include the following:

* A man in his mid-twenties enters a room and sees his brother. He addresses him in a high-pitched, larynx-raised, querulous voice, to which the other immediately responds, using a similar voice. Several exchanges are made in this voice, and then they adopt normal voices.

* A group of teenagers are larking about. One does something the others consider stupid. They all adopt a low, nasalized, drawling tone, imitative (as they imagine) of someone with a mental handicap, as they chide the unfortunate one. A few minutes later, one of them threatens another with death and destruction, and puts on a mock German accent, reminiscent of the Nazi interrogator of classic British war films.

* Several students in a pub are well into their evening. Somebody brings a round of drinks, and one says "Tanks" (i.e. thanks) in a mock Irish accent. A second student picks up the accent, saying "No tanks here, sure and all." A third

begins to half-sing: "Tanks for the memory. . . ." And they then fall to trying to out-pun each other (I recall hearing "Time to make tracks," for example) before the conversation collapses into general laughter, and a new topic emerges.

The range of abnormal voices adopted by speakers in informal settings is endless. Further examples I have heard recently include Bugs Bunny, characters from the Goon Show (BBC radio), the announcer of Star Trek ("to boldly go . . ."), and Robert Newton (as Long John Silver). Presumably people adopt such voices as a means of confirming rapport, of affirming group identity, of promoting informality and humour, and other such social psychological purposes. Whatever the underlying reasons, it is an observable fact that bizarre voices are extremely common, and they constitute an important strand in my general argument that strangeness is normal.

The other main aspect of conversational strangeness is its readiness to engage in lexical creativity, in the sense of "nonce-formations" — neologisms devised for a particular moment, to solve a communication problem or to introduce an element of informality or humour into the situation (Tournier, Ayto). Few of these coinages ever reach the status of becoming "real" neologisms — entering the language as a whole. Several in fact deliberately break standard rules of word formation. Examples here include:

* A group of teenagers for several months added the suffix *-ness* onto many nouns, in order to express abstract notions, as in "Look at the sizeness of it!" Other examples included *bookness*, *upstairsness*, and such double suffixes as *sadnessness*.

* A group of adults at a party were struck by one speaker's (normal) use of the prefix *neo-*, mocked him for being hyper-intellectual, and placed *neo-* before all kinds of words for several minutes (*neo-cake*, *neo-door handles*, and so forth). After a while, the joke faded, but it returned at the end of the evening, when someone made a further coinage, and a new "round" of *neo-*isms was instituted.

* During a conversation before dinner, one speaker, asked if she were hungry, replied "hungry-ish," which led others to add "-ish" on to their responses, and to play with the suffix: "starving-ish," said one; "I'm ishy as well," said another.

When one investigates the lexicon of formal conversation, a remarkable number of lexical items emerge which would not be listed in

dictionaries. No other variety of the language, with the exception of literature, demonstrates such lexical creative dynamism.

Special Settings

There are many varieties of language where strangeness would be unexpected, unwelcome, or positively disallowed. The clearest example is in public legal settings, where there are well-established conventions about what one should say and how one should say it (and where, if one does not follow these rules and guidelines, one may be "in contempt of court"). But there are also several situations where it is perfectly in order to be strange, and indeed where the breaking of rules is seen as a positive and desirable feature of communication. Several of these are among the most frequently encountered of all specialised linguistic domains. The world of newspaper headlines and headings provides a case in point, with some newspapers taking a positive delight in breaking linguistic rules, such as the pun-filled sub-headings of *The Guardian* or (for puns are not solely an intellectual pastime) the plays on words in the often one-word headlines of the *Sun*. But it is probably the world of advertising — both press and television — which provides the major class of examples. Many (probably the majority) of advertising slogans deviate from linguistic norms at one or the other levels of language. Random examples include grammar ("Only two Alka Seltzers ago/You were feeling downhearted and low"), lexical collocations ("Kelloggs. That's how you can eat sunshine"), phonology ("Drinka pinta milka day"), and spelling ("EZLern" driving school, "Loc-tite" glue, "Hyway Inn," and "Beanz Buildz Kidz").

This last example illustrates the way in which a particular deviant convention can quickly become part of national linguistic consciousness, and remain with the community over a considerable period of time: the original mis-spelling ("Beans Means Heinz") was introduced several years before. Probably the most famous example of the nineteen eighties was the series of Heineken advertisements which introduced repeated changes to the original slogan "Heineken refreshes the parts other beers cannot reach." Later slogans played with the word *parts*, replacing it by *pirates*, *pilots*, and other phonologically similar words. In a recent example, the television screen shows an idyllic woodland scene with a carpet of flowers. The voice-over is that of a man apparently trying to tell a story about the

scene, and failing miserably. There is the sound of a beer being drunk, and the voice-over continues, in high poetic vein, "I wandered lonely as a cloud. . . ." "Only Heineken can do this," the ad continues, and the caption reads: "Heineken refreshes the poets other beers cannot reach." To understand the ad, one must keep in mind the original slogan (coined a decade before) and make the phonological connection. Foreigners unaware of the slogan's origin are unable to make much sense of it. In isolation, "Heineken refreshes the poets other beers cannot reach" is nonsense. In its historical context, it makes excellent sense.

As a final example of the way in which specialised fields consider it normal to deviate in language, I cite contemporary theology, and the reflex of this domain in the daily religious language of a community. Theologians are always (to adapt an aphorism used in the thirties of philosophy) trying to say what cannot be said. And since the sixties, there has been increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional way of "talking about God." Paul Tillich is one of many who argues for a radical shift in linguistic consciousness: "the words which are used most in religion are also those whose genuine meaning is also completely lost. . . ." Such words must be reborn, if possible, and thrown away if this is not possible" (94-95). Paul van Buren is another who has examined ways in which language can be pushed to its limits in order to generate fresh insights: one of his books (significantly, for the theme of this paper) is called *The Edges of Language*. The devising of new ways of talking about God is a controversial occupation, but whatever its religious significance, there is no doubt we are encountering novel and strange uses of language, whose purpose is to attack the complacency of the average believer. Here, the whole point of language is to be refreshingly strange by continuously undergoing criticism and revision. "O God, who hangs on street corners, who tastes the grace of cheap wine and the sting of the needle, Help us to touch you . . ." (from *Litany for the Ghetto*, quoted in Van Noppen 43). The more pentecostal the believer may become, the stranger the language may prove to be; and the strangest language of all, as we have seen in the case of glossolalia, is taken to be a sign of being close to God.

Linguistic strangeness can be encountered in the most unexpected of places, therefore — even in science, a domain where it is said that it is unusual to be strange. Yet here one finds particle physicists happily adopting unusual terminology for their units of matter, such as quark, charm, and — highly appropriate for my present theme — strangeness.

Moreover, the impression we have that scientists do not go in for strange language is based only on the written texts they produce. Listen to a spoken discussion, and you encounter a very similar range of variants to those outlined earlier in this paper. The same applies to medicine. I heard a recording of the language used by a surgeon in an operating theatre in which an appendix was referred to as Jiminy Cricket, and a suture that would not close properly addressed in terms which no course on medical English for Special Purposes would dream of teaching. The monosyllabic, compressed tones of the serious operation, as seen on television, no doubt exist, but far more usual is the banter, slang, and jocularly which accompanies the fourteenth hernia operation of the day.

An Applied Perspective

Linguistic strangeness, I claim, is a normal, everyday state of affairs. What is strange is not to be strange. The most distinctive varieties of language seem to be those where strangeness (in the sense of unpredictability) is not to be found; but they are of course strange in their own right, by virtue of the distinctive language which constitutes their identity.

I am not entirely sure where this path of deconstruction leads. It is certainly not a usual linguistic procedure, to look for the abnormal in the normal. Linguists usually do the reverse, attempting to reduce abnormality to normality, to marvel at creativity, then try to reduce it to a set of rules. But certain general conclusions suggest themselves. First, in the context of foreign language learning: if strangeness is so normal, then pedagogical settings ought to take more systematic account of it. There ought to be a greater willingness to persuade students to experiment, to balance on the edge of language, and success in this domain should be seen as a positive sign of fluency. The risks in encouraging students to experiment in their speech production are evident, but at the very least, examples of linguistic strangeness might be incorporated into work on listening comprehension. Similarly, in the context of mother-tongue teaching, more attention ought to be paid to the way in which people break linguistic norms, and what happens when they do. There ought to be more strangeness preparation in educational work on language — a trend which does seem to be becoming more evident in contemporary approaches to the teaching of language in schools.

And in literary training? Linguistic intuitions are more attuned to strangeness than we imagine, and this must have implications for our sense of what counts as literary effect. At the very least, the concept of "departure from a norm" becomes more difficult to work with. However, I do not think the notion of distinctiveness in literary style is much affected. The structured clustering of related features of strangeness in a literary text is a world away from the more random strings of unpredictable features encountered in conversation, or the focus on single facets of strangeness, such as we find in advertising slogans or religious statements. There is probably a useful distinction still to be drawn between the literary and the non-literary; perhaps it is that between relatively structured and relatively unstructured strangeness. At the very least, I conclude that the widespread nature of linguistic strangeness must make it a significant factor in any attempt to explain our intuitive response to the language of literature.

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