

## Reconsidering language teaching through a focus on humor

NANCY BELL<sup>1,a</sup>, ANNE POMERANTZ<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Washington State University

<sup>b</sup>University of Pennsylvania

Received 9 March 2014; received in revised form 6 August 2014; accepted 14 August 2014

### ABSTRACT

**EN** Formal language education is often predicated on a series of modernist fictions that greatly simplify the nature of language and the process of communication. Acts of linguistic creativity involving humor and language play are frequently either ignored or considered deviant. In this paper, we contribute to ongoing efforts to re-conceptualize language education in ways that make use of more robust (and less modernist) theories of language and communication. We revisit calls for more pedagogical focus on humor and language play and illustrate how more attention to these types of language might help us to move away from some of the classroom fictions that currently constrain teachers and learners alike. Specifically, we present recent conceptions of language and of communication, and discuss how, in light of these, humor and language play can be used to increase learners' metalinguistic awareness and expand their communicative/interpretive repertoires.

**Keywords:** HUMOR, LANGUAGE PLAY, SECOND LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY.

**ES** La enseñanza de idiomas formal a menudo se basa en una serie de ficciones modernistas que simplifican enormemente la naturaleza del lenguaje y el proceso de comunicación. Los actos de creatividad lingüística que implican humor y juego lingüístico son frecuentemente ignorados o considerados desviados. En este trabajo ofrecemos una contribución a los esfuerzos en marcha para reconceptualizar la enseñanza de idiomas de manera que utilice teorías más sólidas (y menos modernistas) del lenguaje y la comunicación. Reivindicamos la necesidad de un enfoque más pedagógico en el humor y el juego lingüístico y mostramos cómo una mayor atención hacia estos tipos de lenguaje nos podría ayudar a alejarnos de algunas de las ficciones del aula que actualmente limitan tanto a los profesores como a los alumnos. En concreto, presentamos recientes concepciones del lenguaje y de la comunicación y analizamos cómo, a la luz de dichas concepciones, el humor y los juegos del lenguaje se pueden utilizar para aumentar la conciencia metalingüística de los alumnos y ampliar sus repertorios comunicativos/interpretativos.

**Palabras clave:** HUMOR, JUEGOS LINGÜÍSTICOS, PEDAGOGÍA DE SEGUNDAS LENGUAS.

**IT** L'insegnamento formale delle lingue è spesso basato su una serie di convenzioni moderniste che semplificano notevolmente la natura del linguaggio e del processo di comunicazione. Gli atti della creatività linguistica che coinvolgono l'umorismo o i giochi linguistici sono spesso ignorati o considerati fuorvianti. Con questo articolo vogliamo contribuire agli sforzi che si stanno compiendo per riconcettualizzare l'insegnamento delle lingue basandosi su teorie del linguaggio e della comunicazione più solide (e meno moderniste). Facendo nostre le richieste di un maggiore interesse pedagogico per l'umorismo e i giochi linguistici, mostriamo come una maggiore attenzione a queste forme del linguaggio possa aiutarci a discostarci da certe convenzioni che in classe ostacolano sia gli insegnanti sia gli alunni. In particolare, presentiamo alcune recenti concezioni del linguaggio e della comunicazione e discutiamo di come, alla luce di queste concezioni, l'umorismo e i giochi linguistici possano essere utilizzati per aumentare la consapevolezza metalinguistica degli alunni e incrementarne il repertorio comunicativo/interpretativo.

**Parole chiave:** UMRISMO, GIOCHI LINGUISTICI, PEDAGOGIA DELLE LINGUE SECONDE.

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<sup>1</sup>Contact: [nbell@wsu.edu](mailto:nbell@wsu.edu)

*Today, the modern and the late modern worlds coexist with increasing unease. Modernity, a product of the 18th-century Enlightenment, is characterized by all the features that FL teachers take for granted: the existence of nation-states, each with their national language and their national culture; the existence of standardized languages with their stable grammars and dictionaries that ensure the good usage of the language by well-educated citizens that FL learners are expected to emulate; the superiority of national languages over regional dialects and patois; the clear boundaries between native and foreign languages and among foreign languages so that one can clearly know whether someone is speaking French, German, or Chinese, standard Spanish or regional Spanish; the codified norms of correct language usage and proper language use that language learners have to abide by for fear of not being understood or not being accepted by native speakers. The language teaching profession in this sense has been a highly modernist profession. (Kramersch, 2014, p.297)*

## 1. Introduction: Language teaching as fiction

Formal language education is often predicated on a series of modernist fictions about the nature of language and the process of communication. These fictions are not lies intended to deceive unsuspecting students, but rather a loose set of tacitly agreed upon suppositions that make classroom language learning a more concrete, rewarding, and manageable activity for all participants. We might think of these fictions as *fabrications* rather than *falsehoods*, as teachers and learners alike are often well aware of the fact that what we call “language” in the classroom, looks, feels, and behaves a lot differently in the wild.

For example, in classroom settings the language of instruction is often presented and oriented to as if it consisted merely of a finite set of linguistic forms to learn, accompanied by an agreed upon set of rules to abide by for using particular bits of language in particular contexts. Utterances are deemed right or appropriate depending on how well they conform to an idealized version of how the focal language is used by an imagined, homogeneous group of idealized native speakers outside the classroom. Acts of linguistic creativity, and in particular those that play with form, are either ignored or considered deviant, thus creating the sense that language is a closed system not subject to its users.

It’s not just language, however, that is party to this fictionalization process; communication, too, is frequently reduced to a transmission model in which messages are transferred between people with little regard for the interpretive and interpersonal work that goes on in interaction. As Guy Cook (2000) has noted, a transactional view of communication has come to dominate in language classrooms, with the idea that the most important (or perhaps even sole) aspect of interaction is the transfer of utilitarian information from point A to point B. Indeed, aside from the framing of particular instances of register variation as marked (e.g., *tu v. vous* in French or lexical choice in academic v. non-academic contexts), there is often little attention paid in language education to the vast array of social meanings that are constructed within and through every act of language use, as people negotiate their actions, identities, and stances.

Academic publications are rife with critiques of these and other language classroom fictions, and professional conference proceedings, teacher education programs, and on-line discussion groups have been equally passionate in calling for new approaches to language and communication in the classroom. Thus, our purpose here is not to add to the choir. Rather, we are interested in contributing to ongoing efforts to reconceptualize language education in ways that make use of less modernist theories of language and communication (e.g., Block & Cameron, 2002; Cook, 2000; Díaz, 2013; Kramersch, 2014; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Magnan, Murphy, & Sahakyan, 2014). In particular, we focus on the frequent, but underexplored calls in such work for a broader acceptance of humor and other forms of playful talk.

Kramersch (2008), for instance, suggests that teachers address “accuracy and communicative effectiveness, but leave room for and, indeed, encourage stylistic variation, irony, humor, subversion” (p. 404). In this paper, we too recognize the importance and ubiquity of non-serious talk in everyday life and its many functions (cf. Cook, 2000). Humor is an important and frequently used resource for interaction and is particularly helpful for navigating face-threatening situations and critiquing inequitable relations of power. Yet, despite Cazden’s (1974) call to incorporate humor and language play into language pedagogy, instructional goals—like helping learners to understand the contextualization cues that can signal humor—

have been seen as either not important enough or too idiosyncratic to be deemed worthy of instruction. Here, we revisit these and other calls for more pedagogical focus on humor and language play, which we conceptualize broadly as any use of language that is non-serious, and illustrate how more attention to these types of language might help us to move away from some of the classroom fictions that currently constrain teachers and learners alike. Specifically, we present recent conceptions of language and of communication, and discuss how, in light of these, humor and language play can be used to increase learners' metalinguistic awareness and expand their communicative/interpretive repertoires. Throughout our discussion, we consider how humor and language play might be incorporated into curricula for learners at different levels of proficiency and in a variety of learning contexts in order to achieve these goals.

## 2. What is Language?

As noted above, language in L2 classrooms tends to be presented as an internally coherent, stable system. In recent years, however, applied linguists have become progressively more critical of the underlying theories of language that have shaped the field of language education. Increasingly, language is being recognized as a socio-cognitive system that exists in a dynamic state, continually being constructed and changed by its users. As Hopper (1998) describes it, "Grammar is ... simply the name for certain categories of observed repetitions in discourse. There is no natural fixed structure to language" (p. 156). This perspective not only emphasizes linguistic variability and change, but also the inherent tension between stability and instability in the system. Such views are detailed particularly well in the work of applied linguists using complexity or dynamic systems theory (e.g., Jessner, 2012; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; van Geert, 2008; Verspoor, de Bot, & Lowie, 2011) and ecological perspectives on language and language learning (e.g., Kramsch, 2002; 2008; Leather & van Dam, 2002; van Lier, 2004).

Diane Larsen-Freeman (1997), for example, introduced the idea of language as a complex dynamic system, rather than one that is unitary, stable, or closed. Since that time, she has continued to articulate this position and examine its implications for L2 teaching and learning (e.g., Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2010, 2011). From this perspective, the appearance of regularity and stability in language emerges as individuals interacting in specific contexts draw on particular linguistic resources to accomplish specific social actions. Some forms (lexical items, syntactic patterns) are more useful than others, and appear with greater frequency and across a wider variety of situations, giving rise to the perception of language as a pre-existing cognitive entity that is merely *used* socially, rather than an open system that is constructed in a flexible, bottom-up manner in social interaction that is *in use*. Dynamism is inherent to the system and the direction of change is unpredictable, in part because the things that will influence it are also unpredictable. These assertions require us to take an integrated view of language and context, as the two are not conceived of as separate parts. Rather, they exist in a dialectical relationship, with one constituting the other.

The ecological view of language, of which Claire Kramsch has been a strong advocate (e.g., Kramsch, 2002, 2008, 2014), further foregrounded the interconnectedness of language's cognitive, interactional, social and historical dimensions, eschewing the tendency within linguistics and language education to see language in discrete, static, or decontextualized ways. Consonant with this integrated, holistic stance is a particular emphasis on language as dialogic. Briefly, Bakhtin (1981) argued that "within the arena of almost every utterance [either spoken or written] an intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word is being waged, a process in which they oppose or dialogically interanimate each other" (p. 354). That is, Bakhtin conceived of utterances as fundamentally in conversation with other utterances. He wrote:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance, it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (p. 276)

Ecological approaches to language build on this perspective, further invoking the idea of language as embedded in multiple, but not necessarily equally accessible, layers of synchronically and diachronically organized context. Blommaert (2010), for example, underscored this point in saying that whereas language-in-use or discourse "occurs in a real-time, synchronic event" it is also "simultaneously encapsulated in several layers of historicity, some of which are within the grasp of the participants while others remain invisible but are nevertheless present" (p. 130). He refers to this as *layered simultaneity*. For Blommaert and other language ecologists, then, language cannot be divorced from its social and temporal locations. Indeed,

research on interaction in multilingual settings (e.g., Creese & Blackledge, 2011; Kramsch, 2008; Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008; Rampton, 1999; Rymes, 2014) has consistently illustrated that:

social actors in multilingual settings, even if they are non-native speakers of the languages they use, seem to activate more than a communicative competence that would enable them to communicate accurately, effectively and appropriately with one another. They seem to display a particularly acute ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes. (Kramsch, 2008, p. 400)

Such work challenges the tendency in language classrooms to view the relationship between L1 and L2 as “simply a matter of code replacement, where the only difference is in words and structures” (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 14). An ecological approach to language encourages teachers and learners to move beyond a view of language as a structural system to one that sees language as variable, dynamic, dialogic, and situated.

Not surprisingly, these views on language radically change the object of instruction. First and foremost, they function to dispel the persistent fiction of a stable, universally accepted (national) standard form of each language. This has major implications for learners’ metalinguistic development, as an understanding of language as variable, dynamic, dialogic and situated is quite different from the view of language that is usually constructed in classroom contexts. Moreover, rather than teaching “a language,” we might instead think of our goal as the development of learners’ communicative repertoires. Briefly, Rymes (2010) defines communicative repertoire as the aggregate of ways that individuals “use languages and other means of communication (gestures, dress, posture, and other media) to function effectively in the multiple communities in which they participate” (p. 528). An individual’s communicative repertoire is not simply an array of multiple, fully formed (national) languages, but rather an ever-changing assembly of various genres, speech styles, pragmatic routines, and other reoccurring chunks of language, complemented by an array of resources (e.g., gestures, dress, posture, etc.) for making meaning. This repertoire emerges organically, in bottom-up fashion, as an ever-changing product of an individual’s life experiences, with each new addition to the repertoire existing in a dialogic relationship with its other components. Here, it is important to note that we are *not* saying that educators must do away completely with any focus on more patterned or stable aspects of the language of instruction, as language consists of an interaction between stability and dynamism. Rather, we are advocating for an approach to pedagogy that recognizes characteristics like variability, dynamism, dialogism, and situatedness in its underlying conception of language and aims to help learners develop this kind of metalinguistic awareness.

### **3. Connecting new understandings of language to humor and language play**

How might a focus on humorous and playful language help to illustrate this view of language for language learners? How might an infusion of language play help learners recognize that, contrary to the way textbooks portray language, variability and change are fundamental features of complex systems and not aberrations or “exceptions” designed to confound them? In what ways does humor illustrate the dialogic and situated nature of language? Below we discuss how each of these features—variability, dynamism, dialogism, and situatedness—is illustrated in humorous and playful uses of language and how a focus on such talk can be a resource for the development of metalinguistic awareness.

#### **3.1. Variability**

Language play illustrates the continual push and pull between creativity and formulaicity, between variability and patternedness in language use and at all levels of structure. To be considered amusing, language play must exhibit some creativity. Too much, however, and the humor will be unrecognizable or incomprehensible. Too little and it will be considered stale. To achieve this, many instances of language play derive their humor from unexpected, but appropriate changes to formulaic sequences (see Veale, 2012 for an extended discussion). As a simple example, one could say, “I feel great! I really got up on the right side of the bed today!” This slight alteration to the formulaic phrase *get up on the wrong side of the bed* illustrates knowledge of a common phrase while playfully conveying information about one’s mood. Learners might be introduced to other types of alterations, such as Avril Lavigne’s song *Runaway*, which begins with the line “Got up on the wrong side of life today.” With these examples and some encouragement, students might choose additional formulaic sequences and create their own playful alterations to express various nuances of

feeling. This technique might be used for any formulaic sequence, including similes (e.g., *as angry as*), common collocations (e.g., *take your time*) or conversational gambits (e.g., *to make a long story short* as a way of introducing a summary). Moreover, such an activity can be adjusted for use with both novice and more advanced language learners through selection of particular formulaic sequences requiring varying degrees of lexical and syntactic sophistication to engage in this playful manipulation.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, playful examples of linguistic forms and patterns that “break a particular rule” can be deployed to help learners understand that such instances are a normal and regular part of language. For example, language educators and language learning materials often characterize forms that break with particular morphological patterns as “irregular” or as “exceptions” to some kind of pre-existing rule. Language play, however, can be used to counter this kind of prescriptivist orientation, by illustrating the bottom-up ways in which certain linguistic forms come into being. Language learners might be presented with a new word from the domain of technology, like *ping* (the act of sending a test message to another computer or user to check for responsiveness or measure response time), and be asked to speculate on what its other forms might be. Would this word follow “regular” verb morphology as in “The computer pinged me back immediately” or would it follow an “irregular” pattern like “The computer pang me back”? Learners could then engage in a data collection exercise in which they asked other users to generate the forms of *ping* or asked them which past tense form they preferred and why. Such an exercise could even make use of corpus tools (e.g., the Corpus of Contemporary American English or Google n-grams) and some simple quantitative analysis to identify, measure, and reflect upon actual instances of *ping* in action. Additional forms that are either new or whose forms are in flux might be added to the investigation (e.g., *dived/dove* or whether to “unfriend” or “defriend” someone on Facebook) in order to illustrate the lack of consensus among language users. Such activities would no doubt be appealing to adult learners at the high intermediate or advanced levels, though we would argue that even young learners (9+ years) could easily conduct this kind of sociolinguistic research provided that they had sufficient language proficiency and appropriate scaffolding.

### 3.2. Dynamism

Furthermore, humor and language play can be used to illustrate language change at various timescales across the system. Diachronic change is clearly apparent in examples of humor from the Middle Ages or the Victorian era; however, it is not necessary to reach that far into the past to find humor that no longer appeals to most of us. Television comedies from 40 or 50 years ago can usually furnish samples of humor that is now seen as dated and unfunny, often because of the language used. Topics, styles, and forms of humor are not only subject to personal, but also societal preferences, and these change over time. Not only can examples easily be found for illustrative purposes, but for a small project on language change, learners may be able to provide and explain their own examples, either from the media or from personal experience, perhaps from utterances they have heard from parents or grandparents. These are often memorable precisely because they have failed to elicit laughter from the younger generation.

Dynamism can also be illustrated through attention to the kinds of changes that happen over shorter timescales, such as within the course of a conversation. Humor often derails ongoing, serious talk, and as such is recognized as being potentially disruptive to conversation. A switch from a serious key to a playful key can persist, altering not only the mood, but subsequent uses of language. To highlight this type of change, learners might be presented with a short dialog in which they are asked to examine how participants enact different orientations to the acceptability of a humorous interjection, as in the following interaction. Here, Jason attempts to (seriously) discuss a painting, but is derailed when Margaret breaks in with a supportive (and still serious) move to provide the title of the work. Upon hearing the title, Roger begins joking. Jason attempts to correct him, but the others continue to create puns (*yawl/y'all, port/port*) and laugh. Jason withholds participation and is only able to return to his topic after Roger, whose apology suggests that he has seen his punning as disruptive, asks seriously about the artist:

Jason:	That painting in our living room of the boat in the-
Margaret:	Yawl in the channel? Maine?
Jason	There's a little boat and an island.
Roger:	Y'all in the channel? {laughing}

<sup>2</sup> Not only can this make for a fun activity, but mixing serious and humorous examples may also increase the memorability of the new terms (see Bell 2012 for a review).

Jason            Yawl. Yawl.  
 Margaret:      It's a boat, y'all.  
 Roger:          What are y'all doing in the channel. {laughing}  
 Margaret:      I need a little port.  
 Roger:          {laughs}  
 Trudy:          {laughs}  
 Margaret:      Y'all in that channel {laughing}. What are y'all in that channel for. I know.  
 Roger:          Sorry. Who painted yawl in the channel?  
 Jason:          It's a painting by a painter named. . .

(Norrick, 2003, p. 1340)

Reflection on talk-in-interaction such as this helps to illustrate the ways that language is constructed and changed by its users. More advanced learners can even be encouraged to record, transcribe, and analyze humorous episodes on their own to further explore this dimension of language. Finally, instances of humor that develop among intimates can also be used to illuminate the diachronic dimensions of language at a more intermediate timescale. Classrooms often generate their own in-group jokes. Teachers can draw attention to this by building on shared humor in the weeks, months, and years that follow and pointing out how the group's language practices have changed. New meanings for the played-with phrases may emerge and new students may become socialized into this particular humor practice and participate in it even though they were not present for the original joke.

In demonstrating how linguistic humor and language play change at various timescales, we can see how some of this humor continues to be used today, as new types of playful utterances are constructed using recognizable bits of previously used language—perhaps from movies or advertisements, but also fragments of intimately shared discourse. This is also an important illustration of the dialogic nature of language.

### **3.3. Dialogism and Situatedness**

Humor and language play can also be utilized as a way to counter the tendency in language education to view meaning in monologic and decontextualized ways. Much humor depends on highlighting and then traversing boundaries between particular national languages, language varieties, registers, genres, and speech styles. For example, bilingual sound play can be used to illustrate that the line between national languages is not as rigid as it may seem (particularly in classroom contexts). The sounds of one language can take on new meaning when they are recontextualized. Even novice learners may delight in noting that the Spanish word *quizás* shares some phonetic semblance to the English phrase *kiss ass*, but only when the English is uttered in according to the phonetic rules of Spanish [kis as]. Likewise, emergent English/Hebrew bilinguals might enjoy playing with the homonymy across the two languages' pronoun systems. The Hebrew word for *who* and the English word for *me* have similar phonetic realizations [mi], thus creating ample opportunities for language play akin to Abbot and Costello's famous "Who's on first?" routine or even simpler pairings like "Do you watch Dr. Me (Dr. Who) on TV?" Given that such play requires not only access to multiple national languages, but also access to various levels of context and timescales to be funny (themselves not limited by national borders), it presents a fine example of dialogism and situatedness in action.

With respect to more advanced learners, Belz (2002), Kramsch (2009), and Canagarajah (2011), for example, all detail projects in which adults were given the opportunity to compose and reflect on multilingual texts in language classrooms as a way to explore the resonances across (national) languages. While many of the resultant texts were serious in tone, some also had a playful element to them, particularly with respect to the places where "border crossing" took place. While these projects involved highly proficient bi/multilinguals with respect to the languages of composition, novice language learners can be asked to compose texts in their L1 that integrate small bits of the language of instruction and be asked to critically reflect on their rhetorical choices. The resulting texts—whether humorous or not—will no doubt illustrate language play in action and will be rife with dialogism.

Indeed, boundary-crossing humor can also be used to foreground the porousness of other forms of linguistic organization. In educational settings, for example, it is not uncommon to hear people speak of "academic language" as a stable, discrete register that is used by academic people to do academic things. What often emerges from such talk is a belief that particular words or grammatical constructions are inherently academic and used only in school settings, while others are not, when in fact the borders are much

more porous, with “everyday language” used at times in classrooms and “academic language” appearing in casual conversations (Zwiers & Crawford, 2009). Register humor is a powerful way to problematize some of this thinking, as it presents learners with opportunities to play with the boundaries between registers and to re-examine some of their ideas about constructs like academic language. To do this, learners can be asked to match samples of conventional and non-conventional registers to specific situations and discuss why some of the non-conventional choices are often so funny. Whereas such examples might be more appropriate for learners with more advanced levels of language proficiency, less linguistically complex forms of register play can be used to introduce novice learners to this concept. For example, greetings are a powerful way to show how the same person might use different registers to construct different levels of hierarchy and intimacy with his/her interlocutors. Learners might be asked to “guess the relationship” between interlocutors based on their greetings, with some options testing the boundaries of conventional language use by introducing humorous pairings. Likewise, learners might be presented with an array of greetings ranging from very “formal” to very “informal” and then be asked to invent a humorous scenario in which these greetings might be viewed as “normal” or “appropriate,” despite—or perhaps because of—the dialogic echoes of other situations that the language evokes. Here, it is important to note that while playful and/or humorous elements introduced into these activities will no doubt serve to make classroom language learning more fun, this is not and should not be their only purpose. When the instructional goal is squarely on developing learners’ metalinguistic awareness, humor and language play become valuable pedagogical resources.

#### 4. What is communication?

The theories of language described in the previous section also push us to reconsider what we mean by communication. These theories force us to acknowledge a wide—indeed, infinite—range of cognitive, social, and environmental factors that can influence communication and draw our attention to the dynamic ways in which meaning emerges in interaction. As noted above, common social situations become strongly associated with particular uses of language (e.g. greetings occur upon encountering someone and greetings beget greetings as responses), known as attractors (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). These patterns of language come to be used regularly as they ease the cognitive load on interlocutors and their predictability helps social interaction proceed smoothly. At the same time, we must remember that the system is dynamic. Meanings are not fixed and communication involves constant renegotiations as speakers make moment-to-moment mutual adaptations (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008).

Work in ethnomethodology and interactional sociolinguistics has been central in shaping these contemporary dynamic views of communication (e.g. Erickson & Schultz 1982; Goodwin, 1981; Jacoby & Ochs, 1995; Kendon, 1990; Linell 1998). Linell (1998), for instance, proposed that words and utterances should be regarded as having meaning potential. While the situation at hand helps to prime the meanings that are most likely to be relevant, he and others emphasize that participants work together to *jointly construct* or *negotiate* which aspects of the interaction are relevant and how they should be understood. Here, the work of John Gumperz (1982) on contextualization cues remains a valuable way of understanding how these situated interpretations take place. Gumperz defines contextualization cues as “any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions” (p. 131). Cues may include linguistic elements such as intonation and lexical choice, as well as paralinguistic features such as gesture, gaze, timing, etc. While some cues may have conventional interpretations (e.g., smiling is strongly associated with signaling an attempt at humor), each cue’s meaning must be negotiated between interlocutors each time it is used. The moment-by-moment presentation of and reaction to cues helps speakers and hearers to coordinate their action, adjusting their talk as meanings emerge in real time.

In addition, in order for interactants to engage in these sense-making activities they must have access to some shared frameworks for interpreting communication. In this way, it is important to understand that meaning is not only jointly constructed and emergent, but also mediated. We must be careful, however, in how we understand this mediation process, particularly if we are to embrace a view of language that foregrounds dialogism, situatedness, and layered simultaneity. Language classrooms, for example, often conflate shared ways of making meaning with the idea of national or ethnic culture. From this perspective,

Cultures then are the lens through which people mutually create and interpret meanings and the frame that allows the communication of meanings that go beyond the literal denotations of the words being used. (Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013, p. 20)

While we agree that the idea of shared interpretive practices is central to the notion of communication as mediated, we maintain that these shared interpretive practices are much more fluid, dynamic, and incoherent than terms like “culture” or “lens” or “interpretive framework” might suggest. Indeed, Gumperz (1982) himself emphasized that contextualization cues are learned and show some patterning across social groups, but as in the theories of language use we have been discussing, the variability and dynamism of cues must also be acknowledged, particularly as we can no longer see languages as located within clearly defined cultural and/or national spaces. Perhaps, then, it is more useful to think of people as relying on loosely organized and constantly changing “interpretive repertoires” as they negotiate meaning. Much like the idea of language as communicative repertoire, the notion of interpretive repertoire moves us away from static, unitary, and simplistic views of meaning making. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) put it, “this means that meanings are not simply shared, coherent constructions about experience but rather can be fragmented, contradictory, and contested within the practices of a social group because they are constituted moments of interaction” (p. 21). Moreover, as noted in the previous section, we must always remember that meaning is as much a synchronic concept as a diachronic one. Thus, we encourage language educators to move away from a transition model, to one that embraces the idea of communication as jointly constructed, emergent, and mediated across timescales.

This view of communication, much like the view of language embraced by Complexity Theory/ Dynamic Systems Theory and an ecological approach, serves to disrupt many of the fictions that find their way into language classrooms. When communication is understood as interpretive rather than transactional, the focus moves from questions about particular instances of language use as “correct” or “appropriate” to a broader concern with how we make meaning within and through language. This does not mean that teachers should not teach the kinds of vocabulary, grammar, interactional routines, or genres that might be conventionally associated with certain contexts; rather, it entails teachers and learners going beyond memorization and mimicry to critical reflection on what the use of these and other communicative resources might mean in terms of the actions, identities and stances they construct. And, in terms of instructional goals, it means focusing on the development of learners’ communicative and interpretive repertoires in terms of their pragmatic—or meaning-making—competencies.

## **5. Connecting new understandings of communication to humor and language play**

The introduction of humor and language play represents one way to accomplish this shift. Communication, as described above, is much less predictable than language textbooks make it out to be. Once language use is seen as an act of interpretation, humor becomes a kind of language use that should be central to language teaching, not ancillary. Humor not only creates and relies on unpredictability, but also often communicates multiple meanings simultaneously and in indirect and ambiguous ways. To illustrate these points, we discuss several ways that humor and language play can be used to help foreground a view of communication as jointly constructed, emergent, and mediated.

### ***5.1. Joint construction and emergence of meaning***

An accumulation of research into the ways that humorous intent is signaled in conversation shows that this information normally lies below the level of consciousness and is not likely to be something that classroom learners will pick up on their own. Such findings can be used not only to raise learners’ metalinguistic awareness of how meaning is co-constructed and emergent within interaction, but also to expand their communicative and interpretive repertoires. For example, laughter, as a contextualization cue, has always been intuitively associated with humor and play, and in many cases it is also indicative of an attempt to joke (Glenn, 1989; Jefferson, 1979). At the same time, however, it must be recognized that laughter is also a common cue of conversational instability or trouble (e.g., Glenn and Holt, 2013; Partington, 2006). Smiling, in fact, may be a more conventional means for cuing humor than laughter (Attardo, Pickering, & Baker, 2011; Pickering et al., 2009). Beyond confirming or dispelling these common assumptions about laughter and smiling, students can be introduced to additional communicative resources that can be used as cues to humor. Code, style, and register switching, for instance, are often used to contextualize an utterance as humorous (Holmes, 2000; Kotthoff, 1999; Norrick, 2007). These encompass a wide variety of linguistic resources (phonological, lexical, syntactic). Some cues are also associated with specific types of humor, such as the “blank face” as a signal of ironic intent (Attardo, Eisterhold, Hay, & Poggi, 2003) or the use of a third-person pronoun to tease an interactant who is present (Straehle, 1993). Furthermore, the use of cues changes



according to the relationship between interlocutors. In more intimate relationships it is more likely that the content alone will be used to signal humor (Flamson & Barrett 2008; Flamson, Bryant, & Barrett 2011).

The knowledge of these conventional cues can be presented in the classroom in order to help L2 users identify some ways that hearers might be able to identify an utterance as humorous or playful. Film and television clips seem to be a fairly reliable source for this type of activity, as scripted interaction has been demonstrated to represent well the pragmalinguistic aspects of utterances with respect to compliments and compliment responses (Rose, 2001), apologies (Kite & Tatsuki, 2005), request modification (Martínez-Flor, 2007), and teases (Janney & Bell, 2014). That is to say, the presentation of these speech acts in films closely resembles the form and content found in unscripted, everyday talk. Thus, examples of scripted interaction can be shown to students, who can then attempt to identify the contextualization cues. The cues described above for humor are also used for other keys or functions, which allows for additional, serious examples to be shown in order to emphasize the situated nature of interpretation. Teachers can easily adjust the complexity of the examples and the saliency of the contextualization cues to meet their students' needs, making this kind of work appropriate for both novice and more advanced learners.

Moreover, opportunities for production can also be highlighted so that learners go beyond noticing particular contextualization cues to the use of them in re-contextualizing interactions as funny or serious. Here, the instructional focus can be not only on which contextualization cues might be used in a particular context, but also on how learners might adjust their use of such cues in real time depending on their interlocutors' responses. Similar to Canale and Swain's (1980) notion of strategic competence, such work helps learners to understand that communication is jointly constructed and emergent. Moreover, it helps them to see how they might marshal existing communicative/interpretive resources or perhaps even access new ones over the course of interaction. Spontaneous role-plays and other forms of drama-based pedagogy that encourage a humorous or playful element are particularly suited to these instructional goals. Taken together, such activities not only contribute to the development of learners' metalinguistic awareness by introducing them to the notion of contextualization cues, they also serve as repertoire-building exercises in terms of learners' communicative and interpretive capabilities.

## 5.2. Mediation

In addition to proffering a view of communication as jointly constructed and emergent, humor, in particular, can be used to highlight the idea of communication as mediated by people's interpretive repertoires. Specifically, humor is especially well suited to addressing what Díaz (2013) calls "languaculture dissonance."<sup>3</sup> Briefly, languacultural dissonance

refers to any aspect of 'language practice' that originates either intentionally or unintentionally, and which, on the part of the interlocutor(s), comes across as unexpected within an array of evaluation that may range from the slightly incongruous to the extremely out of place. (p. 37)

Whereas Díaz (2013) goes on to elaborate the ways in which such dissonances may lead to negative stereotyping, we argue that particular attention to why/how someone might find such moments funny is a particularly rich starting point for discussion. That is, humor opens the door for talking about how communication is mediated by peoples' interpretive repertoires. Rather than focusing on what makes dissonance problematic, a focus on humor shifts the conversation to how mediation works.

For example, much humor is predicated on violations of shared, widely circulating "cultural scripts" that form part of many peoples' interpretive repertoires. This humor may poke fun at expectations for actions, identities, or stances in a particular situation or indicate something about the kinds of scripts that are even available for playful manipulation in a given context. An examination of humor asks one to engage with both what is actually present in an interactional moment and one's assumptions and expectations about what should have been there. Again, clips of scripted interaction can provide a way to access and reflect upon dissonant sequences of talk. While the studies of scripted and naturally-occurring discourse, cited above, have suggested that film and television talk provides a fairly good representation of the pragmalinguistics of speech acts, they have also suggested (with the exception of Martínez-Flor, 2007) that these sources do not accurately represent conventional language variation according to social factors, such as how speakers alter

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<sup>3</sup> Díaz draws here on the work of Agar (1994) and Zamborlin (2007).

the forms they use according to factors such as their hearer's age, gender, or social status. In other words, the sociopragmatics of speech may not be well represented in scripted discourse. Often, however, these unusual patterns are used as a source for humor, and in doing so implicitly index the cultural scripts that inform conventional linguistic choices. Because of this, humorous film and television talk can still be used to develop learners' understanding of communication as mediated, through identification of and reflection on the cultural scripts and their violations. Likewise, as in our discussion of contextualization cues, such noticing activities can be adjusted to the linguistic proficiency and maturity of the students. Moreover, they can be aligned with production activities, ranging from the scripted to the unscripted, so that learners have a chance to create their own humorous episodes.

## **6. Conclusion: humor and postmodernist language teaching**

As we noted at the outset of this paper, we are certainly not the first to highlight and critique modernist models of language and communication that have long guided—and many would argue constrained—language education. Although the alternative conceptions of language and communication that we discuss have become widely accepted in applied linguistics, their application to L2 pedagogy remains underdeveloped. This paper represents an attempt to remedy that gap. To this end, we have described several ways in which humor and language play might be used to counter particular fictions about language and communication, while simultaneously serving to develop learners' metalinguistic awareness and communicative/interpretive repertoires (for additional ideas and examples see Gardner, 2008; Lucas, 2005; Tocalli-Beller & Swain, 2007; Tin, 2012, 2013). Humor and language play provide ample opportunities to illustrate the variability, dynamism, dialogism, and situatedness that scholars emphasize in their accounts of language. Likewise, humor and language play allow for and even require learners to adopt a view of communication that is predicated on joint negotiation, emergence of meaning, and mediation. Moreover, we have shown how pedagogical activities designed around non-serious discourse can contribute to the expansion of learners' communicative and interpretive repertoires. In this way, we have attempted to build a case for using humor and language play in the classroom that goes beyond the "fun factor" as an instructional goal. This is not to say that we think enjoyment and pleasure have no legitimate place in language pedagogy—our stance could not be farther from this. However, we are focused here on the broader goal of contributing to the development of approaches to language teaching that connect theory to practice in meaningful and productive ways.

Readers, for example, may recognize that many of our pedagogical suggestions for incorporating humor and language play into the classroom have their origins in both cognitive and social approaches to L2 development. Focus on form (e.g., Doughty & Williams, 1998; Swain, 1998; Swain et al., 2009; Williams, 2001), the importance of noticing (e.g., Philp, 2003; Pica, 1996; Schmidt, 1990), and opportunities for output (e.g., Swain, 1985; Swain & Lapkin, 1995) all figure centrally in our activities. At the same time, our repeated emphasis on engaging learners in the process of critical reflection is rooted in the field's gradual embrace of notions like agency and identity (e.g., Atkinson, 2011; Block, 2003; Norton, 2000; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Zuengler & Miller, 2004). In our pedagogical approach, the idea of the learner as an empty vessel waiting to be filled with target language forms and rules has clearly given way to a view of the learner as an active constructor of meaning (e.g., Kramersch, 2008, 2009, 2014). And, in foregrounding the ambiguity and polysemy inherent in much humorous and playful talk, we pay tribute to the ways in which learners' multiple and ever-changing identities, histories, and desires mediate both their access to and use of particular communicative and interpretive resources. For us, the goal of language education is not to produce individuals who use and understand "a language" in exactly the same way, but rather to help emergent bilinguals to recognize, expand, and critically reflect on the various communicative and interpretive resources they have at their disposal.

Indeed, in recent years, ecological and intercultural approaches to language education have begun to emerge that build on precisely the theories of language, communication, and the learner that we discuss here (e.g., Díaz, 2013; Kramersch, 2014; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013). Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), for example, posit that the goal of language education should be the development of an intercultural orientation. They write:

An intercultural orientation focuses on languages and cultures as sites of interactive engagement in the act of meaning-making and implies a transformational engagement of the learner in the act of learning. Here, learning involves the student in a practice of confronting multiple possible interpretations, which seeks to decenter the learner and to develop a response to meaning as the result of engagement with another culture (Kramersch and Nolden,

1994). Here, the borders between self and other are explored, problematized and redrawn. (p. 49)

To us, it is not just the interactive and transformative aspect of their framework that stands out, but also the emphasis on “confronting multiple possible interpretations” and “decentering.” Humor and language play are frequently predicated on ambiguity and polysemy in both their structure and their functions. They are clearly dialogic, addressed to immediate aspects of the linguistic and social context, and also to our expectations about what should or could, as well as what has previously been a part of the dialogue. They push us to consider multiple interpretations simultaneously and to imagine various perspectives. In this way, humor and language play would seem to be prodigious resources for language education and not merely distractions from the serious business of learning. Moreover, the emphasis on critical reflection and the development of metalinguistic awareness complements our interest in language classrooms becoming sites not just for the learning of particular languages, but also for learning about language itself. As Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) put it, “[...] developing the intercultural includes not only developing awareness but also developing the ability to analyze, explain, and elaborate this awareness; that is, it involves a meta-level of awareness (or meta-awareness).” (p. 50)

As we have illustrated throughout this paper, humor and language play offer ample opportunities to engage in and develop just this kind of critical reflexivity. And, in thinking about what language education should look like in a postmodern world, Kramersch (2008) suggests that

we teach our students less the ability to exchange information precisely, accurately, and appropriately in monolingual conversations with speakers of standard national languages, but, rather, that we develop in them a much more flexible capacity to read people, situations and events based on a deep understanding of the historical and subjective dimensions of human experience. (p. 391)

It is precisely this kind of capacity that we hope to develop in our students, and we hope that we have demonstrated that humor and language play are particularly well suited to this task.

There are, of course, risks involved in using playful or humorous talk as a focus for language instruction. Chief among these is the fear that learners will not get the joke and that the teacher will suffer some loss of face and/or credibility, or even that some learners will see humor as inappropriate for the classroom and resist its implementation. While we recognize these as legitimate concerns, we believe that such obstacles can be overcome through careful planning and presentation. The types of activities we have proposed here do not rely on the students’ finding them amusing for their success. Rather, they are primarily language learning and awareness-raising tasks that happen to incorporate a playful or humorous element that students may or may not find enjoyable.<sup>4</sup> Teachers’ primary consideration should be what needs to be taught. If the elements to be addressed lend themselves to a playful lesson design, they then must prepare that lesson by thinking through the pieces of linguistic and contextual knowledge that learners might need in order to work with a particular example, and strive to put these pieces into place as part of the lesson’s overall design. At the same time, teachers should recognize that, even more so than with serious language use, humor and language play always entail some degree of unpredictability and thus teachers should be prepared to deal with such issues as they arise. Furthermore, we also suggest that, rather than fearing the unknown, teachers might use some of the ideas we have presented here to think about how they can, either in the moment or at some later point, capitalize on the spontaneous humor that arises in their classrooms, including in particular that which involves moments of languacultural dissonance.

A second, and equally pressing concern, is the fear that particular instances of humor or language play might be perceived as offensive by the learners or lead to the construction of negative stereotypes. Whereas the former may be dealt with, at least in part, through the careful selection of materials and the sensitive management of classroom discussion, the latter presents a more challenging scenario. Here we would advise teachers to again engage with—and not shy away from—such teachable moments. A teacher of Spanish, for example, once asked us what we would do with types of humor that one cultural group, as a whole, would typically find funny, but other groups might perceive as morally suspect. The example this teacher gave was of a scene where someone slips and falls and the spectators start laughing. First of all,

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<sup>4</sup> See Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) for excerpts of student interaction around a riddle-based activity. As students worked to decode the ambiguity that created the humor in the riddle, they exhibited signs of varying degrees and types of pleasure and amusement.

humor preferences are known to be highly idiosyncratic (Tannen, 1984), and students need only look to the variety of humor that is available and appreciated within their own extended circles in order to recognize that it would be foolish to assume that all members of a particular cultural group find the same kinds of humor amusing. At the same time, however, humor preferences are also strongly held and are used as important identifiers of in- and out-group status, particularly along cultural and class lines (Kuipers, 2006a, 2006b). In fact, individuals often express their distaste for certain comedians in vehement terms, and extend their scorn even to fans of these comedians (Friedman & Kuipers, 2013), something not seen in responses to other cultural realms, such as attire. Because of this, instances of languacultural dissonance involving humor can certainly be used to raise awareness and engage in some critical reflection around competing value systems and the dangers of stereotyping. Davies (2004), for instances, recommends a middle ground, in which we alert our students to the possibility of dissonance, while also emphasizing the impossibility of delineating national styles of language use. She suggests that abstract statements about the L2 “must be constantly linked in the classroom with specific instances of language use. Cultural styles have to be differentiated in relation to the kind of action being performed” (p. 213). Using German and American English, she provides examples of potential touchstones for the examination of languacultural dissonance, including joking, and how abstractions about language behavior can be linked to specific instances of situated interaction.

Furthermore, moments of languacultural dissonance involving humor that is offensive, discomfiting, or simply not amusing to some or all of our students can serve as catalysts vis-à-vis our goals as language educators. If, as Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) and others have argued, the purpose of language education is the development of intercultural language users, then such examples provide us with opportunities to help learners find “a personal intercultural style and identity” (p. 25). Work in pragmatics has demonstrated that using a language does not require taking on all of the values that other users of this language hold, and that even when familiar with the norms of the L2, learners may choose not to abide by them (Dewaele, 2008; Hinkel, 1996, Siegal, 1996; Rampton, 1987). As part of the process of becoming intercultural speakers, L2 users must come to terms with the fact that they can never become “native speakers” and must develop their own ways of using and understanding the language of instruction, both seriously and playfully.

This last point brings us to a vast and important area that we have not discussed in the present paper, that of teaching about humor itself. As we noted in opening this paper, serious talk has traditionally been privileged in the L2 classroom. This is understandable, as it is usually associated with the expression of transactional, utilitarian needs, which L2 users are imagined as requiring. Non-serious communication is thought of as extra and thus can be developed at a later date and outside of the classroom. Yet, playful discourse can have an equally important role in communicating practical, mundane information. Skill in using humor can make navigating certain social situations much smoother. Many face-threatening situations are made less so when the threat is framed as play. Humor is regularly used to manage refusal sequences, to do indirect critiques, or to respond to teasing or bullying. The ability to join in humorous discourse eases an individual’s entry into a new social group. It is also crucial to recognize that although we have been discussing this in dichotomous terms, discourse is not either serious or non-serious, and the ability to construct and detect utterances that are half-joking is important to interaction. All of these things are implicated in our pedagogical goal of expanding emergent bilinguals’ communicative/ interpretive repertoires. We hope that both teachers and researchers recognize what we have presented here as merely a brief foray into the terrain that remains to be explored, and we encourage future inquiry in this area.

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**Nancy Bell, Washington State University**

nbell@wsu.edu

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<b>EN</b>	<b>Nancy Bell</b> is an Associate Professor and coordinator of the ESL program in the English Department at Washington State University. Her research interests center mainly on the discourse analytic investigation of conversational humor and language play, especially with respect to second language users. Her work has appeared in such journals as <i>Applied Linguistics</i> , <i>Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Pragmatics</i> , <i>Language Learning</i> , and <i>Intercultural Pragmatics</i> . She is also the author of <i>A Student's Guide to the M.A. TESOL</i> .
<b>ES</b>	<b>Nancy Bell</b> es Profesor adjunto y coordinadora del programa ESL en el Departamento de Inglés de la Washington State University. Sus intereses de investigación se centran principalmente en la investigación analítica del discurso del humor conversacional y el juego lingüístico, especialmente con respecto a los usuarios de una segunda lengua. Su trabajo ha aparecido en revistas como <i>Applied Linguistics</i> , <i>Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Pragmatics</i> , <i>Language Learning</i> e <i>Intercultural Pragmatics</i> . Es también la autora de <i>A Student's Guide to the M.A. TESOL</i> .
<b>IT</b>	<b>Nancy Bell</b> è Professore Associato e coordinatrice del programma ESL presso l'English Department della Washington State University. Le sue ricerche si concentrano principalmente sullo studio analitico dell'umorismo nel discorso e dei giochi linguistici, soprattutto in riferimento agli utenti di lingua seconda. I suoi lavori sono apparsi in riviste quali <i>Applied Linguistics</i> , <i>Humor: International Journal of Humor Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Pragmatics</i> , <i>Language Learning</i> e <i>Intercultural Pragmatics</i> . È inoltre autrice di <i>A Student's Guide to the M.A. TESOL</i> .

**Anne Pomerantz, University of Pennsylvania**

apomeran@gse.upenn.edu

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<b>EN</b>	<b>Anne Pomerantz</b> is a Senior Lecturer in the Educational Linguistics program at the University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, where she teaches classes on language and identity, second language pedagogy, and intercultural communication. Her work has appeared in <i>Applied Linguistics</i> , <i>Critical Inquiry in Language Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Language &amp; Identity in Education</i> , <i>Journal of Language &amp; Intercultural Communication</i> , <i>Modern Language Journal</i> , and <i>Multilingua</i> .
<b>ES</b>	<b>Anne Pomerantz</b> es Profesor Titular en el programa de Lingüística de la Educación de la University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, donde imparte clases sobre lenguaje e identidad, pedagogía de segundas lenguas y comunicación intercultural. Su trabajo ha aparecido en <i>Applied Linguistics</i> , <i>Critical Inquiry in Language Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Language &amp; Identity in Education</i> , <i>Journal of Language &amp; Intercultural Communication</i> , <i>Modern Language Journal</i> , y <i>Multilingua</i> .
<b>IT</b>	<b>Anne Pomerantz</b> è Lettrice Senior (Professore Associato) del programma di Educational Linguistics presso la University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, dove tiene corsi su linguaggio e identità, pedagogia della lingua seconda e comunicazione interculturale. I suoi lavori sono apparsi nelle riviste <i>Applied Linguistics</i> , <i>Critical Inquiry in Language Studies</i> , <i>Journal of Language &amp; Identity in Education</i> , <i>Journal of Language &amp; Intercultural Communication</i> , <i>Modern Language Journal</i> e <i>Multilingua</i> .