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William J. Vande Kopple

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Some Language Games in Language-arts Classrooms

William J. Vande Kopple

For many years, I have enjoyed the kinds of language play that depend on double or multiple meanings. For example, I enjoy many Tom Swifties. These consist of a quoted statement and a conversational tag, and in the tag we find an adverb that is intended to carry at least two meanings: "I can't believe I ate that whole can of pineapple," Tom said dolefully." (For more examples of these, see some of Richard Lederer's books, such as *Get Thee to a Punnery*. He also has a website devoted to language play: <http://pw1.netcom.com/%7Erlederer/>.) Further, I like jokes that involve recognizing that a phrase can be interpreted in at least two ways: "Trying to get them to join the diet club was a losing proposition." Finally, I relish sentences that can be interpreted in more than one way since they have more than one possible underlying grammatical structure: "Tom is cooking in the backyard."

I believe that language-arts teachers on every level should devote some time in their classes to these kinds of language play. When I use language games in my college classes for prospective language-arts teachers, I come to class with sheets on which appear twelve to fifteen different items. Typically I read each item, my students puzzle about the correct answer and begin to shout out all sorts of responses, and I stand at the front acting obnoxiously superior with my prior knowledge of the correct answer. Sooner or later a student will usually give the correct response, I acknowledge it as such, and the students begin to make all sorts of sounds—the sounds of laughing, choking, groan-

ing, honking, and the like. If no one gets the right answer, then I am truly in my glory: I get to proclaim the correct response, and the aforementioned sounds are intensified.

For example, I might come to class with a sheet of what are often called Tom Twisties or Croakers. These consist of a quoted statement and a conversational tag, but in these a verb, not an adverb, carries the two or more meanings: "Wouldn't just gold and frankincense do? the magi _____." Do you know what verb fits in the slot? I do; it is demurred. (For more examples of such twisties or croakers, see the following web site: <http://www.thinks.com/words/tomswift.htm>.)

Some of the teachers and student teachers whose classrooms I have visited also use these kinds of language games to start some of their classes. And some of these teachers sometimes use such games to fill up those few minutes after they have completed their lessons but before the bell signaling the end of class. And some find ways to integrate such games into their lessons. If they are teaching about verbs, they bring in some Tom Twisties or Croakers. If they are teaching about adverbs, they bring in some Tom Swifties. Going through a list of Croakers or Swifties usually takes only five to eight minutes, and engaging with such games can have many benefits for students.

This engagement can help students expand their vocabulary, distinguish similar sounds, develop metalinguistic skills, overcome

the fear that language-arts instruction centers on an embarrassing hunt for grammatical errors, and use parts of their brains that they might not be most accustomed to using.

But what I would like to focus on in more detail here is another kind of benefit. Consider some of the things we can do with language. We can convey to others all kinds of information about the real world and worlds that we imagine. We can request all kinds of information from others about the real world and worlds that they imagine. We can move others to feel, think, and act in many ways. We can express many emotions. And we can establish, maintain, and repair all sorts of social relationships.

However you divide up and classify the meanings that are involved in these linguistic actions, in them we almost always operate with one meaning at a time.

Such play has as its primary purpose to lead to enjoyment—to a smile, a laugh, a moment of communal joy.

But when we invent language play such as I am focusing on here, we hold in our minds at least two meanings at the same time, as in this Tom Twisty or Croaker: “Adherents of my religion don’t all have to believe the same things,’ Tom decreed.” If we share such bits of play with others, and if they recognize our intentions, they too will hold at least two meanings in their minds at the same time. If we put such bits of play into print, we will then have to project the holding of two meanings to other places, people, and times. I see such inventing and sharing as an extension and celebration of the potential of language.

Such play has as its primary purpose to lead to enjoyment—to a smile, a laugh, a moment of communal joy. Maybe this is not the most important purpose of language. But it is beneficial, not harmful, and it is probably more important than we often think.

Our enjoyment of multiple meanings, I believe, also begins to explain some other human

fascinations. We are usually fascinated by allusions, metaphors, symbols, and even remarks that depend on double-entendre.

Of course, we all frequently encounter samples of language for which two or more meanings are possible but for which one meaning is not intended. I once saw this headline reprinted from a newspaper in Hamilton, Ontario: “Large church plans collapse.” This has at least two possible meanings: (1) plans for a large church collapse, and (2) a large church is making plans to collapse. (There is also some possible play between the literal and figurative meanings of *collapse*.) I found the headline amusing, since the second meaning involves an action that most people, I think, would say large churches should try to avoid. But the first meaning is the intended one, the one that works in the context.

So I chuckled over the incongruity of the second meaning or even over the possibility that with some churches the second meaning might not be so incongruous. But without being able to see that both meanings work in context and thereby to feel confident of a writer’s intention, I did not experience that joyful meeting of minds I feel when I recognize that someone is playfully extending the normal limits of language. I did not experience the pleasure I felt, for example, when a student once told me this Tom Swifty: “‘Now no one will be able to detect my halitosis,’ Tom said *breathlessly*.”

It is also true that, as with many things, double meanings can function for other than good purposes. I once saw a book entitled *What Every Single Person Should Know about Taxes*. Without more background, I couldn’t tell whether this book was meant for each and every person on Earth or only for the unmarried. This double meaning probably was unintentional, but it and others like it usually prove to be confusing and frustrating.

Worse, I recently read in a rental agreement a very long sentence that could be interpreted in at least two ways. The agreement was written by the landlord’s attorney, and the intended meaning favored the landlord. But another, unintended

meaning, was also possible, and it favored the tenant. It is easy to imagine the billable hours that such a sentence could lead to, and such scenarios should help us understand the trouble that double meanings can sometimes cause. But the fact that such dangers exist does not mean that we cannot enjoy language games that depend on double meanings.

At this point, you can probably understand why I cringe when people label the kinds of language play I like as “lowly.” And perhaps you understand why I flinch when people utter puns in which one or both meanings do not work in context or in which one word struggles somewhat to call forth two meanings (“Knock, Knock. Who’s there? Gorilla. Gorilla who? Gorilla hamburger for me, will you?”). But I hope you can also understand why I have come to feel a special thrill when someone shares a Tom Swifty such as this with me: “‘We’ve lost the book of fairy tales,’ Tom announced *grimly*.”

Not all kinds of language play depend on simultaneously recognizing two or more meanings. Nor do they all have the same kinds of appeal that such recognizing does.

I wonder whether teachers who enjoy other kinds of language games would be willing to write about what they see as the keys to and appeals of those games. The invention of language games bespeaks impressive creativity, since these games can focus on every sub-domain of language, from sound through syntax to sense. Moreover, as David Crystal points out in *Language Play*, the invention of such games seems to be open to almost everyone; people representing many different age brackets, social backgrounds, educational levels, and degrees of intelligence can come up with good ones. And the enjoyment of a language game, which often shows itself in vulnerable laughter, can build a strong communal bond.

But as we have seen, language play can be used for ill, too, and it would be interesting if other teachers were to write about the harm they see their students using “play” with language to inflict. Do they see children excluding others by re-

fusing to enjoy what those others offer as jokes or play? Do they see children using “play” mainly to exalt themselves over others? Do they observe language “play” that reinforces prejudices?

If we explore such issues, perhaps we will discover that language play broadly considered is far more interesting and important than we ever imagined.

About the author

W. Vande Kopple teaches courses in language and secondary English at Calvin College. He has published in *Research in the Teaching of English*, *College Composition and Communication*, and *Written Communication*.