

Language play and linguistic change: When rule-breaking is rule-governed

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Language play – “bending and breaking the rules of the language...for fun” (Crystal 1998:1) – is found in every human culture; it is a normal part of language in everyday use (see also Kirshenblatt-Gimblett & Sherzer 1976). However, language play generally receives only a small amount of attention from linguists (Crystal 1998). We investigate language play from the standpoint of variationist sociolinguistics via a case study from two online English-language message boards. The phenomenon we target is the playful, nonstandard zero-derivation of abstract nouns from adjectives, as in the examples in (1) (see comments by Zwicky 2010, Francis 2013, Squires 2017, Modra 2018).

- (1) a. *My voice changes when I see cute*Ø (name of Facebook group, 2012)
b. *All it does is create 15 seconds of awkward*Ø (Cracked.com, 2012)
c. *All my bitter*Ø *has been used up* (“Yourmometer,” webcomic, 2012)
d. *Get simple*Ø *back* (Jott, 2012)
e. *Choose happy*Ø (Koodo, 2015)
f. *You just grabbed a whole bunch of healthy*Ø (Whole Foods Market, 2015)
g. *Delivers clever*Ø *along with cookies* (Thelma’s Treats, 2015)

As an alternative to suffixation (usually with *-ness* or *-ity*), this zero-derivation is nonstandard enough that it does not receive mention in reference grammars. However, between the two message boards, our analysis finds close parallelism in the grammatical constraints on this nonstandard option. Across 2,643 examples of abstract nouns from adjectives, the linguistic contexts in which users decide to employ zero-derivation (rather than standard suffixation) are the same on one message-board as on the other.

Given these findings, we argue that language play is fundamentally rule-governed even when no one intends it to be (see Bergs 2018). Under our proposal, this rule-governedness emerges from two opposing forces operating on language play: the desire to be subversive/noticeable (“extravagance” as per Haspelmath 1999, building on Keller 1994) and the need for the original, more standard alternative to remain accessible enough that the language play is intelligible (“recoverability” as per Veale 2021).

Notably, this conclusion converges with those of two other empirical studies of linguistic creativity: patterns found in creative respelling (Sebba 2007), and computational approaches to creative metaphors, idioms, and puns (Veale 2012, 2021). In all of these cases and others, the tension between extravagance and recoverability keeps language play anchored at a maximal distance from the present standard grammar – “on the boundary between what is acceptable and what is unacceptable” (Crystal 1998:155).

Linguistic variation is the necessary precursor to linguistic change (Weinreich et al. 1968), and we propose overtly recognizing that all language play is language variation. If so, language play must be a major, but largely unheralded, source of linguistic innovations. In other words, since standards shift over time, current playful language may establish itself and become an unremarkable part of the grammar. While we do not claim that this is the only source of

linguistic innovations, we do claim that language play so readily fuels language change that the universality of both is no coincidence.

References

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