

John M. Robson

## THE GAMES WE PLAY WITH WORDS

IN RECENT YEARS, many people have become interested in various kinds of "game" theory. The first important popular books undoubtedly were Potter's *Gamesmanship* and *Lifemanship*, while on a more speculative level Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* led to considerable discussion. Sociologists and social psychologists have used the concept in describing and defining social behaviour, and recently Eric Berne's *Games People Play* has dealt with some implications for individual behaviour of one kind of game theory.

The game analogy is used for various purposes and in various ways, so it is necessary to point out that the following argument is not based on games played to gain points over an opponent. Both Potter and Berne concentrate on this aspect of games—a very real aspect of course, and one found in word games—but their approaches depend on a narrow view of human behaviour. In psychological approaches generally (as in Berne's) games are seen as ways of avoiding a recognition of what one really is, and of forestalling development to what one should be. I reject this attitude as well, and look rather to a sociological definition that sees game theory as one way of describing human behaviour in non-normative terms. That is, the word is used neither to praise nor condemn, but simply to indicate an abstract model of behaviour.

To say that people play social games, in this sense, is to say that there are similarities between what people do in normal social situations and in game situations, and that these similarities can help us understand normal social behaviour. If the model is broad enough, we can say, quite simply, that we all play games because we must play games.

Still, the word gives trouble through its associations. To say that someone is "playing games" suggests, on the personal level, that he is trying to fool himself, and not following the classical injunction "know thyself". On the social level, the phrase suggests hypocrisy and arrogance, even undemocratic attitudes. Usually, that is, "playing games" implies that one is "playing" with others, with their expectations and feelings, and treating them as objects to be manipulated.

These connotations should be put aside for now, as not relevant to the term in the sense here adopted; indeed, their opposites are relevant. An understanding of games can contribute to an understanding of oneself and also to a sympathetic understanding of others. It must be remembered that a metaphor is involved: the implication is not that life is merely a game, but that life can be compared to a game, or better, to a set of games. Metaphors and analogies are generally used to illuminate by bringing out hidden or subtle characteristics—but comparison does not imply identity. For example, to say that a man is crooked does not mean that he is bent over, and whatever a cool chick may be, she is not procured from a supermarket freezing compartment.

If we consider what social life is *like*, we look for explanatory comparisons. In many ways, as Thomas Carlyle would say, it is like "work". Robert Frost introduces a qualification, saying his ideal is the life where "work is play, for mortal stakes", and there is much in this comparison. The notion, implied in the analogy, of life as play runs hard into the strong puritan element in our Canadian inheritance, the element that derives in part from such Scots as Carlyle, even when we talk of "mortal stakes" in the game. But I am going to run hard into it, at whatever risk to my skull, for I find the game analogy a useful one.

As has been said, it is better to think of life as involving a set of games rather than a single game. It is better because life demands flexibility, a capacity to adopt different roles in different games. Obviously this theory, if it may be thus dignified, has application in many directions. My brief today, however, has to do with only one application: games based on words.

Word games, like other games, occur on particular occasions in which people, knowing a set of rules, indulge in particular strategies, with tactical variations, to attain a goal. When the rules are not accepted, chaos results. Even when they are accepted, infractions occur and are punished. There is always, among professionals, an attempt to play against the limit of the rules, to do everything which the letter of the rule permits, and occasionally to break the rules for specific purposes. Good players are those who know the rules well, who have practised, who try hard—and, of course, have constitutions well adapted to the particular game being played.

The most obvious application of the game analogy to words is in grammar. For most of us, brought up on traditional grammar, it is wrong to say: "He don't know nothin'." Why wrong? Because rules have been broken in the grammar-game. In the classroom, the offender is punished ("two minutes in the penalty box", the teacher in effect says). Repeated infractions

lead to failure ("one-year suspension from the league"). This will be understood without expansion, I think.

But in the last few decades there has been a great commotion about grammar, as sophisticated theories of linguistics have upset the idea of proper rules. Some modern linguists, in rejecting traditional and prescriptive grammar, argue that in English the notion is an illegitimate and inadequate borrowing from languages of a different sort, the Classical languages. They claim that *description*, not *prescription*, is the proper role of the linguist, and set about describing the ways in which an English sentence can be constructed. But there always remains an element of prescription; rules cannot be done away with entirely. "He don't know nothin'" may possibly be accepted in some games, because it actually occurs in the speech of native speakers of English. "Know he nothin' don't" is not, however, acceptable, because it does not occur. There is a problem here, of course: this sentence has now occurred; I have used it, and I claim my right as a native speaker of English to have it recorded and stamped as authentic. But linguists are not such straw men as I am pretending, and their answer is to hand. There are no actual structural analogues to my nonsense sentence; the syntactical elements cannot be fitted together in this way in English.

In other words, there are rules of grammar and syntax, and, even if one refuses to accept the authority of textbooks written by traditionalists, one must see that these rules are in truth known by native speakers of English through experience. But it is equally obvious that such intuitive responses provide only minimal skills. Experience is much richer when education aids it, in language as elsewhere. As a particular example, modern linguistics has a proper place in our curricula, for it expands our knowledge of language and our power over it—we should be able to play the word game better when we have studied its rules. And even if we don't in fact play it better, there seems to a large place in our society for the armchair analyst, who pays more attention to the half-time statistics than to the playing field.

There is one limitation that a few linguists have inherited from their foes, the grammarians: the tendency to overlook the variety of word games, to forget that games are played on different levels, and to pretend that the rules are identical in detail in all games. For instance, locutions are found in some games that are improper in others. In the Toronto area—surely not in the Atlantic Provinces—it is now common for many people to say, "He come down the street." One school teacher of my acquaintance, for example, almost always, when out of the classroom, uses "come" in place of "came".

Notice, however, "almost always" and "out of the classroom." He knows—intuitively if you like—that the classroom game is played according to different rules. Another example is seen in the young linguist who discovered, during a summer's work in a factory, that his fellow-workers responded more warmly to him when he said "them there" rather than "those". Fine—one wants, even needs, warm responses from one's fellow-workers. I should be astonished, however, if as a university lecturer he directed his students to "copy down them there examples". If he did so, motivated by democratic feelings, I should not only be astonished; I should say he is wrong. Even at the immense risk of alienating popular sentiment, I must say that he is wrong, for my professional and non-professional life is dedicated to the proposition that some word games are *better* than others. I say "better" unabashedly, but will leave my main defence till later.

Part of that defence emerges, however, if we look now at another area of the work game, the area called literature. It will be recalled that I said that we can play the word game better when we have studied it. Especially is this true when we study how it has been played by great verbal athletes, that is, in the best literature. The great writer tries to find the best words that will best express his meaning. Viewed in this light—and there are other lights—literary criticism concentrates on the writer's means to his end, or, in the terms I'm using today, on his ability to play the word game.

Only a close and prolonged attention to the details of significant literary models can make one aware of the skill displayed, and that attention is frequently condemned as deadening. In a phrase current at least in Upper Canada, detailed analysis is denigrated as "petal-pulling". Considering how literature is taught in many of our schools and universities, one can understand the reasons for the denigration. But one cannot let the matter rest there. We all need to communicate, and a great deal of our communication is through words. Our culture rests on words, the intermediaries between ideas and things, and our greatest literature embodies our greatest cultural ideals, ideals shaped by our attempts through time to meet our needs. Fully to appreciate literature is fully to appreciate authors' ways of expressing their ideals and experiences through words.

We have now moved from rules to strategies and tactics in word play. In the study of literature, it will be evident, one great advantage gained from the game notion is an appreciation of the variety and range of tactics employed by great authors. Another is an understanding of the ways in which they use the rules to their advantage, and strain against their limitations, especially in poetry,

where "poetic licence" justifies many a ploy that would be penalized in prose (such as evident alliteration—"ploy, penalized, prose"). Yet another is the sense of personality that emerges as the author's "voice" is clearly heard. To deal adequately with these matters, however, I must pass from literature *per se* to the widest word game of all, Rhetoric.

"Rhetoric" is not a word commonly heard except in pejorative senses, but in advocating its revival I'm not trying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on a deservedly dead corpse. There are two main pejorative meanings attached to Rhetoric: the first is that of empty bombast, linguistic tomfoolery, nonsense on stilts, or, worse, evil manipulation. This meaning depends on the belief that the user of Rhetoric is trying to cover up something either feeble or wicked. The second meaning derives from the history of the subject: teachers of Rhetoric tended from the time of the Renaissance to concentrate on special devices, the "tropes" and "figures" of style, and as a result Rhetoric came to mean a desiccated and lifeless study of abstract terms and rules.

We all have a notion of the meaning of Metaphor and Simile, and many of us have some slight memory of Synecdoche and Metonymy, and perhaps even a few might reach to Litotes and Oxymoron. But what would we think—to use another common figure, the rhetorical question—what would we think of having to memorize some two hundred of these terms: Aetiology (giving a reason), Anacoenosis (arguing a case with others), Anadiplosis (repetition of final word in new clause), Anamnesis (call to mind past matters), Anaphora (repetition of clausal openings), Anastrophe (preposterous placing of words or matter), Antanaclasis (same word repeated in different significations), Anthropopathia (speaking after the manner of men) . . . , and so on.

Under this heavy freight the good ship Rhetoric has been going down for two centuries. But bombast and formality do not exhaust the meanings of Rhetoric, either in the Classical or the modern sense. You will notice that I assume there is a modern sense apart from those mentioned. There is no space here even to outline what the modern sense is; however, an extensive bibliography proves its existence. Most of the recent writings originate in the United States, where for about ten years there have been signs of a revival of Rhetoric, and we in Canada can profit much from a study of its fortunes.

The basic justification for a study of rhetorical games is quite simply that Rhetoric in its broadest meaning can never die as long as men attempt to communicate with one another through words. In its fullest meaning Rhetoric is the science and the art of shaping our communications to our ends. More commonly, and more in accord with Classical notions, Rhetoric is seen as the

science and art of persuasive discourse, but there is no good reason for limiting it to persuasion, since similar considerations are appropriate in all forms of communication. In brief, we use Rhetoric when we try to communicate, and we communicate effectively when we play the rhetorical game effectively.\*

The Classical method of analyzing the parts of Rhetoric into, basically, *discovery* of materials, *arrangement* of those materials, and *stylistic presentation* of them, is enlightening and always relevant, but from a contemporary point of view—one appropriate to game theory—it is more useful to look at the variable factors bearing on any verbal situation. The most important of these factors are: the speaker or writer himself, his materials, his subject, his thesis, his purpose, his audience, and the occasion. Any writer or speaker must, whether consciously or unconsciously, attempt to balance and resolve the pressures exerted by these factors.

This analysis is almost painfully simple and obvious, but it is hardly ever drawn on in educating people to communicate, except in the areas of public relations and advertising. And just here, of course, is one of the great obstacles to a revival of Rhetoric. We are all too aware that a study of what words can do to influence actions has been the concern of those who want words to do what merit and virtue cannot, that is, to persuade people to buy products and accept political images on insufficient or illogical grounds.

Clearly, one must defend Rhetoric against its current abuses. The heads of my defence are these: First, as already indicated, we must play the rhetorical game whether we want to or not, and so have the choice only of playing it well or ill. Second, Rhetoric is really a tool, and in any situation the end to which it is employed determines its good or evil qualities. Of course, evil means can pervert ends, but then the end is changed, and with it our judgment. The Classical authorities recognized this problem, as they did most problems, and rested on such definitions as this: the rhetorician is the good man speaking. If we are all good, then Rhetoric can do no harm. But, third, since we are not all good, a study of Rhetoric can make us aware of what means others are using to promote their selfish or evil ends, and we are thereby given a defence. For example, such books as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* are actually rhetorics of public defence, enabling us to resist the strategies used in one kind of rhetorical game, advertising, a game that will go on whether we like it or not.

---

[\*All communication involves non-verbal elements; this discussion is limited to the verbal, although rhetorical game theory can be applied to the non-verbal as well, and the factors mentioned below are the same.]

To say that the factors in communication are obvious—that we are all easily brought to see the importance of speaker, materials, subject, thesis, purpose, audience, and occasion—is not to say that the problems arising from their study are easily solved. Those connected with the materials are, for instance, complex in formal written discourse. It is possible only to outline some of them, for a book, and not one article, would be required to cover the ground in detail. The materials—the basic bits of information, if you like—are called for on demand in a particular situation, and so there are restrictions on comprehensiveness. Take a situation familiar to all students: an essay is demanded on a certain subject by a certain date. We cannot know all there is to be known by that date, or indeed at any time; we must therefore assess the relative degree of mastery we can attain, and deal not in certainties, but in probabilities: rhetorical games, like life games generally, are a matter of probabilities. Other rhetorical factors are clearly then involved: what is my authority, as essayist, concerning these materials? How is my purpose affected by the limitation on the materials? And so on.

Another range of problems connected with materials is brought out by the word "research". What does research in any one particular case involve? Students are generally given some help in this respect, even if only by assigned bibliographies and guided tours of libraries, but students are often confused by the bulk of available materials and by another problem too seldom faced by instructors, the problem of assessing the value of different research materials. "Well," a student says, "I read Grub on *Hamlet*, and then I read Gleebe, and now I don't know what to think." How should one respond? "What!" I thunder, "Is that wretch Gleebe still in the library? I told Miss Clutch to throw him out." "Please, sir," comes the answer, "I got that book from my Aunt Sarah, who read it when she was playing the Queen in an amateur production in Fredericton." There are other answers which, as this paper is not a report on my activities as a clinician, may be left to you; my purpose is simply to indicate the nature of the problem, which lies again in the question of authority: who knows what, and how well. Or, in terms of the rhetorical game: "Why should I believe him, and if I do, who will believe me?"

Another problem connected with materials was dealt with exhaustively by the classical rhetoricians under the heading of Discovery or Invention. Their treatment is much more sophisticated than modern adaptations in composition courses, and it is also more realistic. The root of the problem is this: what arguments are available to me in treating this particular set of materials? Aristotle, for example, in listing the kinds of argument as "Topics", points out

that some of them are more appropriate in one situation with certain materials, others more applicable elsewhere. These topics are essentially tactical weapons, comparable, say, to plays in a football game. Given certain resources (an end with good hands) and certain field situations (first down on the opponent's twenty-yard line), the quarterback calls for a short look-in pass. Or, in terms of the essay posited above, given an article on Hamlet's psychology, and an assignment to discuss his behaviour in the play, one selects cause-and-effect (one of Aristotle's topics) as a structural argument.

Glancing at two of the most interesting variables, audience and occasion, I shall in the interests of brevity invent examples, believing that though invented and condensed, they genuinely reflect the basic issues.

**THE SCENE:** *a college coffee shop. Two students are chatting together, with their backs to a table at which a professor is just sitting down.*

**STUDENT A:** . . . so I just don't get it. I even read the book again—gimme the sugar, willya?

**STUDENT B:** All of it?

**STUDENT A:** Well, the first cuppla chapters, anyway—thanks—and I can't figure this weird Gatsby out.

*(He drops his spoon, and bending to pick it up, sees the Professor.)*

**STUDENT A:** Oh, hi—hello sir.

**PROFESSOR:** Hello Blenkinsop; hello Mrtrup. *(He has forgotten STUDENT B's name.)*

**STUDENT B:** Would you like to join us, Dr. Slugg? *(The Professor's name is actually Sludge, but STUDENT B can never remember it.)*

**PROFESSOR:** Well, yes, thank you.

*(A minute of shuffling and silence.)*

**PROFESSOR:** I couldn't help hearing what you were saying—you were talking about Scott Fitzgerald, weren't you?

**STUDENT A:** Uh, yah. I was just—um—saying that I have difficulty in understanding Gatsby's—uh—character, though I've read the book twice.

**PROFESSOR:** What about you?

**STUDENT B:** Well—um—I haven't got through it yet, but I know what Bob means.

**PROFESSOR:** Yes, I've noticed that one of the problems students have with *The Great Gatsby* is that—uh—they can't understand why Fitzgerald calls the book after one character and has—uh—another—Nick—tell the story. . . .

And he goes on, finally suggesting that Blenkinsop take the problem as the subject for his next essay, and come to him with a draft of the essay before handing it in. Agreed. Two weeks later Blenkinsop comes to Sludge's



office, and they sit down over the draft, which begins: "Critics generally agree that F. Scott Fitzgerald achieves a deep masterful stroke in cleverly juxtaposing the nebulous shadowy Gatsby against the hard dominance of Nick Carraway. . . ." They get no further, for the Professor says that, apart from the opinion expressed, there seems to be something wrong with the tone. "Who," he asks, "did you have in mind when you were writing this?" "Why you, Mr. Sludge," answers Blenkinsop; "I thought you liked us to write like that." "Well," says Sludge, "I don't. Probably you don't know very much about what I want, and you wrote this for a vaguely conceived collection of dead judges who apply strict rules that you conceive even more vaguely. Let's try another approach. Think of this essay as being written for your classmates—say Mrtrup in particular—and if it's good enough I'll actually have you read it out to them."

We leave the record at this point for comment. It will be evident that Blenkinsop has done some thinking about the subject before we joined him, and that at various stages he does some more thinking. But it will be equally evident that there are changes in his expression that derive not from his thought about the subject, but from the audience and occasion. "I just don't get it" and "I can't figure this weird Gatsby out" become, in the Professor's presence in the coffee shop, "I have difficulty in understanding Gatsby's—uh—character"; in the written draft this element is suppressed, to be replaced by a positive statement about Fitzgerald's brilliance in hiding Gatsby's character behind that of Nick Carraway. The Professor's hint—Blenkinsop may well have said to another student "Old Sludge gave me a clue"—is transformed into "Critics generally agree" (the critics being Sludge and his disciple, Blenkinsop). And "this weird Gatsby" has become "the nebulous shadowy Gatsby". I need not dwell on the most obvious changes, the deletion of "uh" and "um," and the removal of such disturbing circumstances as the passing of the sugar.

Of course, the transition from speaking to writing may be held to govern most of the changes, and the brevity of the example precludes any detailed examination of niceties. The main point, a very simple one, will however be clear: even Blenkinsop, poor lad, automatically takes audience and occasion into account when trying to communicate, and his sad professor (who seems to be a lot like me) is trying to encourage him to study the problems involved by suggesting that he rewrite for another audience and occasion. Whatever we mean by style, we vary it at times and places, and the accomplished author is the one who knows how to vary it appropriately.

One more example will have to suffice. Let us imagine a small country,

Agra, between which and its large neighbour, Bagra, there is tension. None of the large news agencies has a correspondent in Agra, because it is so insignificant. Rumours suddenly suggest that there is border trouble, and the only available person who has first-hand knowledge is an ex-diplomat who has just been on holiday in Agra. He agrees to write a report on the situation for a news agency, and begins: "The viability of the Agranian economic infrastructure is dependent on long-contract exports of banana skins to the American west coast, as was indicated by the Agranian Minister of Economics in 1964. The BAGRANIANs, however, have always held that since they supply nine-tenths of the capital in the banana-skin industry, they. . ." and so on. Three paragraphs later he writes: "These long-term frustrations led, on Wednesday, to the seizing of a package of banana-skin extract at the border; when the AgrANIANs protested, a BAGRANIAN customs officer pushed one of the AgrANIAN guards out of his office."

This report is given to an agency rewrite man, who puts the story on the wire, beginning: "The Agranian border dispute worsened today as vital exports were seized during a scuffle. American interests are threatened, and rumours suggest that high-level action will be taken. . ." In the offices of the *Daily Drag*, a popular paper deep in the American mid-west, another rewrite man takes the wire story, and starts with a calm headline: "Blood Spilled Over Banana Skins." The story begins: "Communist inspired BAGRANIANs have threatened to take over Agra, reliable sources reported today. . . Meanwhile, in the staid premises of a great British daily, a small heading is composed: "Former Ambassador Arrives in London." The account begins: "J. C. Fflaun, former Ambassador to Bogland, who flew into London today after a holiday in Agra, reports that the situation on the border with Bagra is actually less tense than formerly. On Wednesday there was a slight disagreement at a border post, but in view of recent difficulties. . ."

There is no need to go on, or to apologize for exaggerating. Newspapers differ enormously not only in the range and type of news covered, but also in the way that news is reported and interpreted. This difference is largely dictated by the owners' and editors' evaluation—not always a reliable evaluation—of their audience and of the relative importance of news items at particular times. What I may need to apologize for is dwelling on the obvious in my examples; to those who constantly keep these considerations in mind when writing, speaking, reading, or listening, I do apologize.

My own experience as a talker, writer, reader, and listener, however, makes me confident that too few people are aware of word games that are

being played around them and by them. Since these games must and will go on, we have only the choices of ignoring them, playing them badly, or playing them well. If one ignores them or plays them badly, one can always fall back on moral superiority, arguing that such games are either evil or trivial. They may of course be both, but my contention is that the educated man is one who can discriminate between players and between plays, and isolate the great players and the successful plays. And if he aspires to be a good man as well as an educated man, his own tactics will be designed and devoted to the greater good of his fellow men. Of such men there can never be too many, and the revival of Rhetoric is aimed at the perpetuation and enrichment of the breed.

I committed myself above to a defence of the view that some word games are better than others, and admitted that to say this is to leave oneself open to accusations of non-democratic feeling. The battle should be fought on these grounds, for unless this issue is faced, one cannot expect an increasingly democratic educational system to take Rhetoric and subsidiary word games seriously. The best citizen in a democracy—where all depends on citizens equal before the law—is the one who has an active, continuing, dedicated concern for his society and his world. To develop this concern, he must read, think, and talk with others; he must place himself imaginatively where others stand, and try to feel, as it were, their lives. He must be compact, then, of intellect and imagination. It is ridiculous to believe that all are equal in intellect and imagination; it is even more ridiculous, and even more common, to believe that to exercise intellect and imagination, and so to depart from an imagined norm or standard for the democratic citizen, is to endanger democracy.

Read, think, talk, imagine: how much is possible without words? Much imagination and some thought are controlled by non-verbal processes, but we usually try to convey even these to others through words. Why should we not want to do so as well as possible? But this much will often be conceded by, let us say, such writers as Rudolph Flesch, whose book, *The Art of Plain Writing*, has had a wide vogue. Be clear, be brief, be direct; write as you talk. His advice is as unequivocal as that of many textbooks. It is also mistaken. We cannot always write in this way. But much of our writing would be improved by attention to these maxims. They have their place. But to accept them as valid everywhere and at all times—as I have, except for two or three words, in the last sentences—is to undervalue both the range and the problems of the human mind and imagination, and, in lesser terms, to

pretend that all writing is expository, and that the only method appropriate in essentially expository writing is the merely expository. This attitude is a corollary of the assumption that what really matters is the "fact," and that opinions should be hardened into factual statements. Our lives are not like that, however; we live by opinions and, as noted above, by probabilities. When communicating with our fellows, we must weigh our words, and they cannot be accurately weighed in crude scales. Their weight is their value, and they vary widely and continuously. This variability, this flexibility, to change the image, gives them their power to meet the enormous demands democracy makes on us.

The conclusion is, then, that crude word games, the kind that can be played without thought, imagination, and as much education and practice as each of us is capable of, are inadequate to our full citizenship. The best word games are those that involve the whole man, moral as well as intellectual and imaginative. In so far as our education is verbal, its greatest task is to teach us to play word games well.

## LATE SUMMER

*Brenda Large*

Today was that time just before rain falls,  
when the air lies placid, filled with the smell  
of dying roses,  
allowing little space for the traveller to walk.

Today was that time just before prizes are awarded,  
when a room stirs with whispers and scholars sit  
motionless beneath swaying tassels.

Today was that time just before waking,  
when the mind journeys from dream to dream,  
suspended in the quiet heavy light of the morning.

Today was that time just before dying,  
after the facts have been accepted and the candles lit  
but before the climax of the event.