**Seriously Surreal: lunacy in language learning**

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“The chief difficulty Alice found at first was in managing her flamingo.”  
― Lewis Carroll: *Alice’s adventures in Wonderland*.

“‘…and then I decided I was a lemon for a couple of weeks.’”

― Douglas Adams: *Life, the universe and everything.*

**Irresistible Incongruity**

Allow me to introduce Millie Tant. Millie is an old-school feminist, and a long-running character in the adult comic *Viz*. “We are one, sisters!” she proclaims in her opening frame, fist raised aloft. Her default mode is angry. You don’t want to get on the wrong side of Millie.

Now let me introduce Frank Butler. You may have met him. Frank is the romantic lead in the 1950 MGM musical *Annie Get Your Gun.* His defining moment is when he sings *The Girl that I Marry*, while the rough-and-ready sharpshooter Annie Oakley turns to swooning mush:

*“The girl that I marry will have to be*

*As soft and as pink as a nursery*

*The girl I call my own*

*Will wear satins and laces and smell of cologne*

*Her nails will be polished and, in her hair,*

*She'll wear a gardenia and I'll be there*

*'stead of flittin', I'll be sittin'*

*Next to her and she'll purr like a kitten*

*A doll I can carry, the girl that I marry must be.”*

What to do with this unlikely mix of source material? The task I set was conceptually simple, yet rich in possibilities. Having introduced the two characters in their respective contexts, I put the students in pairs and asked them to produce a letter - from Millie to Frank. The class was preparing for the Cambridge CPE (Certificate of Proficiency in English) exam, so I was confident that their language skills would be up to it.

My expectations were surpassed. Oh, how they got into character! I remember a letter from one pair in particular: beautifully crafted and replete with Millie’s righteous indignation. It started by showering Frank with a variety of well-chosen adjectives (*“To the chauvinist, misogynist…”*), then spitting his words back at him (*“so you want a woman to ‘purr like a kitten’ … we’re not ‘dolls to be carried!’”*) and ending with a punchy finale that told Frank, in no uncertain terms, to get lost.

This encapsulates the approach which I call “Keep it Surreal”. By combining weird and incongruous content within a rigorous linguistic framework, the mechanics of the language -which can easily be arid and uninspiring- are given life, colour, vibrancy. Most importantly, the students’ imagination comes bursting into action, along with their sense of mischief and playfulness.

**The Postmodern Connection**

At the heart of my approach is a blurring of conventional boundaries. These boundaries include those of fiction and non-fiction, high and low culture, silly and serious, plausible and fanciful, orthodox and outré.

In other words, at the heart of my approach we have Postmodernism.

It is easy to conceive of Postmodernism as a somewhat nihilistic “end-of-days” philosophy: the idea that there is no longer anything new to create, just an endless re-hash of what has gone before. However, I believe this to be a pessimistic misconception. The dissolving of distinctions and re-combining of source material in fact enables a heart-thumping range of possibilities.

I will now explore three key aspects and their relevance: 1) intertextuality; 2) bricolage; 3) parody.

1. **Intertextuality**

Intertextuality, in the words of Aly (2018), “postulates that all texts are intrinsically entangled with other texts.” Kristeva (1986, p.37) elaborates upon this: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”

So what does this mean for the surreal classroom? The answer: everything. As demonstrated earlier, the students’ Millie-to-Frank letter adopted Millie’s characteristically furious voice and typical phraseology to hurl Frank’s words back at him as she rails against his values. These two characters, decades apart and very much of their respective times, collide and intertwine in a fresh new scenario. They truly become “intrinsically entangled”.

This colliding of worlds can have equally striking results when we deposit a well-known person into an incongruous genre. As an example, we might take a magazine problem page and study the form and content of a sample of authentic replies (which typically offer encouragement, sympathy and/or “tough love”, followed by an assessment of the situation and possible options). Then we consider: which celebrity -real or fictitious, living or dead- could we place in the role of guest agony aunt/uncle? Cinderella? Snow White’s stepmother? Scooby Doo? Donald Trump? Henry VIII?

The delectable challenge for students is to adopt the persona of that character, and pen a response to a specific problem (whether it’s a boyfriend’s vile aftershave, an intolerably pedantic friend or a colleague with an irritating laugh). Ill-fitting; perhaps wildly anachronistic…? All the better.

1. **Bricolage**

Bricolage can be considered a kind of extreme collage. Lévi-Strauss (1966) characterised it as the skill of using whatever materials are available, and recombining them to give new context and meaning. In the surreal classroom, this can manifest as an anything-goes/ let’s-throw-in-everything-but-the-kitchen-sink-what-the-hell-let’s-also-throw-in-the-kitchen-sink, glorious mixture of text, image, object, idea.

At the start of the Presessional Academic English course at University of the Arts London, students take part in the “99p project”. This starts with them visiting the local 99p store and buying whatever items appeal to them. Crucially, they are not told why - merely that they needn’t concern themselves with whether the items are actually useful or not.

Once back in the classroom, the items are pooled in the middle of the floor. There’s always a gloriously eclectic selection: toilet brushes, party poppers, dog biscuits, hair gel … you name it. Students are then put in groups and their task is revealed: to create a collaborative artwork (one per group) using items chosen from the pile; to give their piece a title - and finally to talk their classmates through the concept. All kinds of communicative skills come into play: negotiation, presentation, asking and responding to questions and comments. Shyness becomes less paralysing amid the creative gaiety (remember that these are students who, at this stage of the course, barely know each other). The concepts -and the Q&A- can be as outrageously pretentious as they wish. Returning to our old friend Intertextuality, we can even appropriate the typical tropes and clichés from the existing body of art criticism, transforming the po-faced into parody.

There’s also a minimalist version in which students create their artworks using only what is already in the classroom. This includes themselves: they can be part of their own installation.

What’s more, bricolage in the surreal classroom needn’t depend on the availability of real, physical objects. I like to run debates in which students pick a random noun (pot luck, and drawn from an envelope - they cannot see what they are choosing). They are then paired up and asked to prepare and deliver a statement on why their “thing” is better than their partner’s “thing”. This is followed by a class vote. So we could have, for example, socks versus sandwiches/ horses versus handkerchiefs/ carpets versus pencils. The communication skills at play include: language of persuasion, structuring an argument, comparison and succinctness (there are strict time limits).

1. **Parody**

In the previous section, I wrote: “we can even appropriate the typical tropes and clichés from the existing body of art criticism, transforming the po-faced into parody.”

But what is parody? In the context of modernist literature, Jameson (1982) defines it thus:

Now parody capitalizes on the uniqueness of these styles and seizes on their idiosyncrasies and eccentricities to produce an imitation which mocks the original (…) the general effect of parody is -whether in sympathy or with malice- to cast ridicule on … these stylistic mannerisms and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write.

Transferred to language teaching, and especially the exploration of genres, the relevance is striking. A glorious mismatch between form and content can be a godsend when teaching the more tedious genres such as job applications, letters of complaint and promotional leaflets.

I say “the more tedious genres”; in fact we can derive huge pleasure from forensically analysing examples to see what is reallygoing on beneath the surface of respectable, genre-appropriate language. When torn apart in this way, even the particularly turgid specimens of officialese can bring pleasure. *Especially* those.

We might then draw the following conclusions:

* Job applications: self-aggrandising adverts beneath a veneer of wide-eyed eagerness and humility;
* Letters of rejection: seeping insincerity. *“After careful consideration, we regret to inform you…”*
* Letters of reference: surely no employee can be that perfect? What is the referee not telling us? Can we read between the lines…?
* Promotional material: nauseatingly perky and upbeat, no matter what the reality might be;
* Letters of complaint: a masterclass in how to strike the right tone of outrage/ disappointment/ smug superiority/ snotty pomposity/ frosty politeness/ softly-softly diplomacy, depending on context.

So how about writing … a perfectly-formatted application for the post of Prince Charles’s personal toothpaste squeezer: a letter which strikes the right balance of self-promotion and obsequiousness? Or a letter of reference for Hello Kitty as she pursues a career as a traffic warden - trying to gloss over the fact that she’s a remarkably old kitten with a giant head? How would the subsequent rejection letter reconcile dismissiveness with diplomacy (at least superficially)? And what of a promotional leaflet for the Martian Tourist Board, which tries to spin the barren, inhospitable environment as a plus?

As for a letter of complaint, we could choose one of two ways: overstatement or understatement. It may be a display of outrage at what is in fact a tiny triviality, and/or clearly outside of the recipient’s control. Or it could be the opposite: a calm, sanguine and impeccably polite missive expressing mild disappointment at a major calamity. The former might be, for example, a complaint to a tour company that the weather was cloudy during twenty minutes of a full-day excursion (*“I am sure you will appreciate that this is quite unacceptable, ruining what should have been a perfect day out. As it was your responsibility to ensure sunshine throughout, this was clearly a gross dereliction of your duty to the customer”).* The latter might be a gentle “just so that you are aware” note to the manager of a 5-star hotel, explaining how a live boa constrictor was discovered in the bed (*“…but I fully understand that these things happen from time to time, and in no way did it spoil the wonderful weekend I enjoyed at your establishment”*).

It is sometimes said that the difference between pastiche and parody is that the former celebrates the original text, whereas the latter holds it up to ridicule (see, for example, their respective definitions on literaryterms.net). However, Jameson’s (1982) definition of parody, quoted earlier, specifically states that it could be “*in sympathy or* with malice” (italics mine). We might also recall that he mentioned “these stylistic mannerisms and their *excessiveness and eccentricity* with respect to the way people *normally* speak or write” (italics mine).

Official written communication of all types carries a weight of genre-specific customs, requirements and expectations - in terms of structure, content and phraseology. Much of this can indeed seem “excessive” and “eccentric” when compared with more “normal” discourse - whether it is the relentless positivity of a job application/ letter of reference/ PR campaign; or the haughty, frosty politeness of a rejection letter or a complaint. In parodying these genres, we are affectionately enjoying their wealth of possibilities and linguistic richness - while also highlighting their potential for absurdity. Jameson’s definition very much applies.

**Let’s Hope for the Worst**

A classic classroom activity might get language learners delivering some kind of a sales pitch. So far, so bland.

But what if, instead of trying to promote a really *good* product or idea, they had to draw upon all their personal charm, ingenuity and linguistic prowess in order to sell something astoundingly *bad*?

Back in the day (the ’80s and ’90s), the *Innovations* catalogue would regularly come tumbling out of the UK’s weekend newspaper supplements. The products it had on offer were a joy to behold. Slippers with headlights; a phone that looked and sounded like a frog; a portable personal astrologer; a fresh-breath checking device … it was an Aladdin’s cave that combined the outrageously kitsch with what would have been, at the time, genuine cutting-edge technology (e.g. an early electronic route finder). Of course, these hi-tech gadgets now appear clunky and quaint.

The catalogue is long-defunct. Happily, it lives on in a compilation entitled *The very best of the Innovations catalogue*. And I have a copy.

You see where I’m going with this? It’s awe-inspiring to hear students extol the virtues of a home-security garden gnome or questionable fashion item (*“this adult snuggle suit is 100% polyester: you won’t need a sauna when you can sweat in this!”*). The last time I conducted the activity was with a group of International students on a postgraduate business course. One of them told me afterwards that she’d initially had some misgivings regarding the value of such an apparently frivolous task - but by the end of the lesson, she was fully on board. It really stretches their persuasive communication skills to the maximum.

And moving away from the *Innovations* catalogue … if time allows for some artistic diversion, students might collaborate to create a fully-labelled diagram of Bad Taste Man. Or a beautifully designed poster for a particularly disgusting restaurant menu. It provides an opportunity to become so engrossed in the creative act that linguistic self-consciousness is happily cast aside.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In regard to creative language learning, Avila (2015) notes:

In Csikszentmihalyi’s (2013) view, the components of creativity include domains, fields, and people. A domain is defined as a set of symbolic rules and procedures. A field includes all the individuals who act as gatekeepers for the domain. I would agree with the author since creativity is achieved when a person using the symbols of a given domain-like language has a new idea or sees a new pattern. Thus, educators can build a repertoire of strategies carried out to spark a novelty in the English language domain and bring out a spirit of creativity in the foreign language field. Therefore, creativity is expanded to its fullest potential.

The very phrases “symbolic rules and procedures” and “gatekeepers for the domain” contain within them the hint of rebellion. When we take genres of language that come laden with customs and expectations regarding style and structure, we can diligently examine and obey the rules - but all the while subverting them with gloriously weird content, transforming the potentially bland and formulaic into something which sparkles and sings.

My exhortation is: we should merrily mix and match. Create multitudinous possibilities. Play with Postmodernism. Expand our students’ linguistic repertoire and powers of manoeuvre.

Let’s keep it seriously silly and surreal.

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