



Recreational Linguistics and Second-Language Teaching: It's all in the (Word) Game!

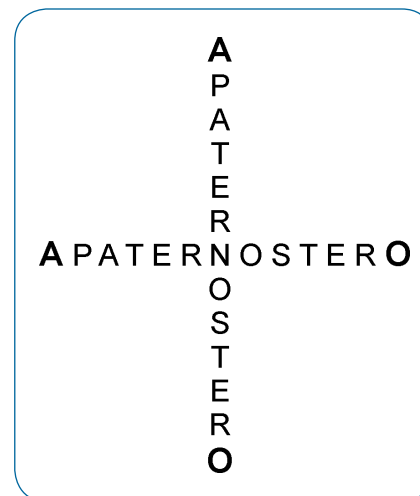
Recreational linguistics (*ludolinguistique* in French, *ludolinguistica* in Italian, *ludolinguística* in Spanish and, almost a tongue-twister in German, *Sprachspielwissenschaft*, as suggested by the Italian linguist Tullio De Mauro (2010), embraces all types of word games. Italian distinguishes between *enigmistica* and *ludolinguistica*, just as French distinguishes between *jeux de mots* and *jeux d'esprit*. *Jeux d'esprit* deal with crossword puzzles, riddles, rebus, and so on while *jeux de mots* emphasize pure word games: anagrams, word searches, acrostics, mesostics, and the like. In the classroom, I fuse the two and even add others such as proverbs, intruders, and maxims. In other words, any word game able to increase student vocabulary and spark conversation, discussion, or written assignments is fair game. Many teachers have sporadically introduced "recreational linguistics" into their day-to-day teaching to motivate students, but a systematic introduction to teaching via recreational linguistics has been published only recently (Mollica, 2010).

Figure 1



Language games have been used since the beginning of language, urging someone to state that perhaps *homo ludens* preceded *homo sapiens*. Umberto Eco places "games" in fourth place, after food, sleep, and love and before asking "why?" But perhaps the best example of word games is found in the "Sator square" (Figure 1), discovered during the excavations in Pompeii and other parts of the Roman world. The square is certainly unique. Words can be read from left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top (AREPO, OPERA, ROTAS, SATOR), recalling simultaneously today's word search and palindromes (a word that can be read forwards and backwards). It is interesting to note that the palindrome TENET is read in the form of a cross, thus acting as a springboard for an anagram: 21 of the 25 letters of the acrostic can be arranged in the form of a cross to spell PATER NOSTER (Figure 2), the opening lines of the Catholic prayer, leaving four letters, two A's and two O's. If an A and an O is put at each end, horizontally and vertically, they could represent Alpha and Omega, the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet, i.e., the *beginning* and the *end, life and death*. Furthermore, another remarkable feature is that the letters can form a second anagram: "Oro Te, Pater, Oro Te, Pater, Sanas" ("I pray to Thee, Father, I pray to Thee, Father, Thou healest"). We can conclude that the *Sator* square is a precursor of such word games as anagrams, word searches, palindromes, and acrostics.

Figure 2



But what word games can motivate our students and present vocabulary in an interesting and entertaining way? Let's look at acrostics and mesostics.

Acrostics and mesostics

The word *acrostic* comes from the Greek *akróstikhon*, a word composed of *ákros* meaning *extreme* and *stikhos* meaning *verse*. It is a poetic composition that forms a name, a specific word, a phrase, or a message, with the initial letters of the verses read *vertically* one after another. Poets would often hide the name of their loved one or even their own name, if they wished to remain anonymous. If the name, word, or phrase is in the centre, then it is called a *mesostic*. If it is at the end, it is called a *telestic*.

Acrostics go back to biblical times. The oldest known acrostic was discovered in the catacombs in Rome: the cryptic acrostic disguised in the shape of a fish



symbol that marked the secret graves of early Christians. The Greek word for *fish*, coincidentally, forms the first letters for *Ieosous Kristos THEon Owos Soter* ("Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Saviour").

Both acrostics and mesostics (Figures 3 and 4) are useful when teaching adjectives.

Figure 3 (Acrostic)

Figure 4 (Mesostic)

Students may be asked to write their names vertically, and then write an adjective (positive or negative) that describes their personality. Students may select an acrostic or a mesostic as their activity. To facilitate the task, teachers may decide to give them a list of adjectives in the language

being learned (or no list at all, at the advanced level). It is obvious that male students will write the adjectives in the *masculine form* while female students will write the adjective in the *feminine form*. In the French classroom, students will discover some of the rules of masculine and feminine singular adjectives:

1. Those that end in a consonant generally add an *-e* to form the feminine (*intelligent* → *intelligente*)
2. Adjectives ending in *-e* remain the same in both masculine and feminine (*riche* → *riche*)
3. Adjectives ending in *-eux* in the masculine will end in *-euse* in the feminine (*curieux* → *curieuse*)
4. Adjectives ending in *-er* change *-er* to *-ère* (*fier* → *fière*)
5. Some adjectives double the final consonant (*cruel* → *cruelle*; *bon* → *bonne*)
6. Some adjectives are irregular (*beau* → *belle*; *doux* → *douce*)

Acronymic acrostics

Acronymic acrostics are also useful in recalling grammar rules. All French teachers use the acronym: DR & MRS VANDERTRAMP to recall verbs using *être*: *descendre, retourner, mourir, rester, sortir, venir, aller, naître, devenir, entrer, revenir, tomber, rentrer, arriver, mourir, partir.*

Janc (2004) lists several other acronymic acrostics to recall adjectives, adverbs, indefinite articles, indirect and direct object pronouns, prepositions (verbs

followed by no preposition, by *à* or by *de*), disjunctive pronouns, adverbs of quantity, and so on.

Mason (2004) has suggested the word CHEATED (written vertically) to recall the uses of the imperfect tense: C(ontinuous action), H(abitual action), E(motions), A(ge), T(ime), E(ndless actions), D(escriptions).

Continuous action

Habitual action

Emotions

Age

Time

Endless actions

Descriptions

Knopp (1971) has suggested the acronymic acrostic WEDDING to recall the uses of the subjunctive. W(ill), E(motion), D(esire), D(oubt), I(mpersonal expressions), N(egative antecedent), G(eneralized characteristics). And, if we add an "S" to Knopp's suggestion, we can even mention the use of the subjunctive with S(uperlative adjectives)!

Will

Emotion

Desire

Doubt

Impersonal expressions

Negative antecedent

Generalized characteristics

Superlative adjectives



For Spanish, Nuessel (2008) provides a lengthy list of acronymic acrostics as mnemonic devices.

Whether they be acrostics or mesostics, crossword puzzles, intruders, or other word games, recreational linguistics will generate fun and learning in the language classroom, recalling Horace's *Ars poetica*:

*Omne tulit punctum
qui miscuit utile dulci,
lectorem delectando
pariterque monendo.*

(He wins every hand
who mingles profit with
pleasure, by delighting and
instructing the reader at
the same time.)

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Author's Statement:

The importance of this “new” methodology has been recognized both in Italy and in Canada. Since 2010, I have been teaching a one-week summer course at the Università per Stranieri di Siena, Italy and have taught courses on “Recreational Linguistics” at the University of Toronto Mississauga in 2009 and 2014.

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