Playing with Nonsense: Toward Language Bridging in a Multilingual Classroom

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Abstract

To meet the academic and educational needs of first generation school-goers, the Government of India has launched mother tongue based multilingual education for tribal education under the national flagship program of *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (Universal Elementary Education). In the current multilingual education programme, education starts in the home language. But as the grade advances, curricular subjects begin to be divided between the home language and the school language in a realization of parallel monolingualism in which languages remain closed from each other. This paper proposes the introduction of nonsense texts, including children's rhymes and folk rhymes and riddles, into the curricular content of language as a bridging subject. For this, I draw upon theoretical perspectives of language awareness, language play and the theories of nonsense. My focus is on the kinds of play that could be attempted with nonsense texts. School education envisages a mere cultural role for nonsense, as a homely, familiar game, and hence, teachers rarely make use of nonsense to initiate experiments with language or to open conceptual doors. I employ the help of some Indian multilingual nonsense texts to illustrate language play – from mimicking sounds and sound patterns to making linguistic connections and discoveries.

Keywords – multilingual education, language bridging, language awareness, language play, nonsense texts

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Introduction

This paper is based on my doctoral research on mother tongue based multilingual education (MLE) for tribal children in the eastern Indian state of Odisha. MLE was launched in four tribal dominated states of India – Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand – under the universal education programme to meet the educational needs of first generation school-goers. One of the strategies through which programme planners hope to achieve this is language bridging.

A typical Indian classroom is multilingual and multicultural and more often than not the teacher cannot speak or understand the languages of the students. 'Children don't understand my language, I don't understand the children's language, but I have to teach' – is a common refrain heard in the Indian classroom. In the schools in the tribal areas of the country, where most teachers belong to the dominant regional language group, the linguistic and cultural distance between the teacher and the students is even greater. Against this backdrop, the issue of language bridging is a pertinent one.

No official document on MLE defines language bridging, although a few studies exist which try to explain the concept (see the following section *Language Bridging: A Theoretical Exploration*). In the current MLE programme, education starts in the home language. But as the grade advances, curricular subjects begin to be divided between the home language and the school language in a repetition of 'parallel monolingualism' (Heller, 1999), in which languages continue to remain closed from each other. Most bilingual and multilingual education programmes keep languages strictly separate and allocate separate functions for separate languages. Cummins (2005) uses the expression 'two solitudes' while Hadi-Tabassum (2006) uses the term 'boarder-making design' to describe this phenomenon in language teaching. Of late, the MLE programme in India has attracted criticism for being 'yet another "bridge" model for tribal children who must exit from their mother tongue to more important "target" languages' (see Panda, 2012, unpaginated).

For this paper, I approach language bridging not as a means to an end but as an end in itself, in which there is a constant give and take between languages during curricular transactions in multilingual classrooms. With this approach, this paper proposes the

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introduction of nonsense texts, including children's rhymes and folk rhymes and riddles into the curricular content of language as a bridging subject. The purpose is to draw attention to the use of nonsense for playful and conceptual learning as well. It should be noted, however, that this paper only illustrates and does not demonstrate how nonsense texts can be used in actual classroom contexts.

This paper is broadly divided into two sections. The first section, divided into six sub-sections, explores the theories of language bridging, language play and nonsense while the second section, divided into three sub-sections, is about playing with nonsense.

Language Bridging: A Theoretical Exploration

Theoretical foundations

The theoretical foundation of language bridging may be traced back to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) formulated by Lado in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures* (1957). In it, Lado states, 'those elements which are similar to [the learner's] native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult' (1957, p. 2). CAH emphasized greatly the negative 'interference' role of one language on the acquisition of another. From this followed 'a generalised feeling of guilt that we are acting counter to the principles of good teaching when we use the learners' mother tongue as a tool to facilitate learning' (Ferrer, 2005, unpaginated), giving rise to the controversy about the use of the mother tongue in the classroom. Later scholars like Cook (2000), Widdowson (2003), Butzkamm and Caldwell (2009), Cook (2010), and Hall & Cook (2012) have sought the rehabilitation of the mother tongue in the language classroom. Atkinson (1987), Harbord (1992) and Schweers (1999) have in addition spoken about the use of the mother tongue in contrastive analysis as a 'consciousness raising' exercise (Ferrer, 2005).

Research on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) disagreed with CAH and proved that not all errors could be attributed to the interference of the mother tongue. SLA tried to deal with the learner language as an independent system but there was the constant striving toward a native standard which resulted in SLA's monolingual and utilitarian approach to language learning. At the same time, studies on the developmental sequences in the

acquisition of a second language (L2) gave rise to the morpheme order studies (now commonly known as the natural order studies) about the order of acquisition of morphemes in English both in the case of English own language (L1) acquirers and English L2 learners, which in turn gave rise to the Creative Construction Hypothesis or the 'L1 = L2 hypothesis' (in VanPatten and Benati, 2010, p. 78). This hypothesis held that 'learners with different L1 backgrounds tended to traverse the same stages of acquisition of a given structure (e.g., negation, question formation) over time' (VanPatten and Benati, 2010). This was based on Dulay and Burt's studies (cf. 1974), which showed that child L2 acquisition was similar to L1 acquisition. However, most morpheme order studies have concentrated on English (V. Cook, 1993) with exceptions like Dato's (1975) study of morpheme acquisition order, Pienneman's study of German L2 (1998) and Mendizabal's (2001) study of Basque. Rocca (2007) in her study on English and Italian shows that child second language learners display morphological awareness even while being influenced by the grammar and lexicon of their own language. Such studies could guide language play with nonsense texts as illustrated by an example of Tamil verbal humour relating to the use of particles (Cecaiya, 1982) discussed in sub-section *Proposal for a play with nonsense for language bridging in a multilingual classroom,* in the second part of this paper.

Language bridging in the MLE programme

The multilingual education programmes, at present, rely on Cummins (1981) justification that the use of the L1 for learning an L2 in his Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model and Hohulin's (1993) study on the First Language Component Bridging approach, which includes implicit bridging based on Cummins's CUP model and explicit bridging based on contrastive analysis approach. The CUP model describes the process in which literacy skills learned in the L1 are transferred to an L2. For example, reading comprehension skills or concepts learned in the L1 need not be re-learnt in the L2. One simply has to learn a new expression for a familiar concept. L1 and L2 are thus joined by a CUP bridge. Hohulin's First Language Component Bridging Program (FLC-BP), which seems to rely on Cummins's CUP model, has been tried out in a multilingual education programme in a district in the Philippines. In FLC-BP, literacy skills acquired in the L1 are bridged to Filipino and English (Jhingran, 2005). Implicit bridging is done in the case of

cognate languages whereas explicit bridging is considered necessary for languages very different from each other. The instructional materials are designed for the first two grades of school during which the bridging programme is completed. By third grade, the students are expected to be ready to be *transferred* to the Medium of Instruction (MoI).

Panda and Mohanty (2009) propose Vygotsky's Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to help bridge one language (home language) with another (school language). In this, they show how children's cultural resources including language and cultural practices are used to teach formal concepts and theories in school language. For example, they used a folk game called *Apphuchi* in grade 7 to teach Saora children the theory of probability (for details, see Panda and Mohanty, 2009).

Malone (2003) elaborates a sequence for bridging between L1 and L2 where L1 is very different from L2 and where there is little exposure to L2 outside school. The bridging sequence is as follows:

1. Develop competence in using L1 orally
2. Begin to read and write in L1
3. Begin to speak and understand L2
4. Build fluency in L1 reading and writing
5. Build fluency in oral L2 while using L1 as MoI
6. Bridge to L2 reading and writing while using L1 as MoI
7. Use L1 and L2 as MoI
8. Shift to L2 as MoI.

Pattanayak (unpublished document) suggests time management, grammar management, instructional material management and research management as four practical approaches to language bridging in the classroom. Pattanayak's grammar management approach is based on comparative analysis of gender, cases, tenses etc. in the home and the multiple school languages, which may be done during curricular lessons. Pattanayak also calls for cultural bridging through instructional materials in which two or more languages are pleated in such way that they reflect the socio-cultural reality of the area.

Manipravalam and Nissaya – the ancient models of language bridging

The ancient models of *Manipravalam* (a mix of Tamil and Sanskrit and sometimes of Sanskrit and Telugu languages) and *Nissaya Burmese* (a mix of Burmese and Pali languages) may be said to exhibit forms of language pleating. In Manipravalam, for example, Tamil used letters from the Grantha script to represent some Sanskrit sounds, which could not be represented by letters of Vatteluttu (Tamil script). Sometimes there were Sanskrit words with Tamil inflections (Blackburn, 2006). This gradually led to the evolution of a new writing system which is the modern Malayalam script. Nissaya Burmese is broadly about Burmese in Pali syntax. Yanson (2002) gives specific instances of Nissaya, like 'introduction of the Pali pronoun into the Burmese verbal syntagma' (p. 53) and respelling of Pali words in Burmese. According to Anttila (1989, p. 170), 'Pali words and phrases were glossed in Burmese (…) each Pali morpheme was matched by a Burmese one.' While Nissaya came about during attempts to make Buddhist texts written in Pali accessible to the Burmese, Manipravalam was more a literary language patronised by the elite.

The language awareness component in language bridging

Experiments in language like those in Manipravala and Nissaya have largely remained out of bounds for education. Our modern multilingual, multicultural classrooms, however, can now ill afford such conservatism. Some experiments in India like P. B. Pandit's lessons using common words between English and Gujarati are not available in the public forum and have remained on the fringe of curricular transaction. Halliday (1975) draws attention to the need for language awareness to address the learning needs of children growing up in modern multilingual, multicultural societies. Hawkins (1999) proposed the teaching of language as a bridging subject in response to the concern about how the different kinds of language teacher – of foreign languages, English mother tongue, English as a second language, ethnic minority languages and the classics – remained cut off from each other and had 'not even tried to agree a common vocabulary in which to talk about language' (p. 124). Hawkins's proposal was part of a broad language awareness programme supported by linguists who were making a 'theoretical case for language across the curriculum' (ibid. p.126). The content of language as a bridge subject, as Hawkins goes on to suggest, was to

be such that could help raise 'questions about language', develop listening skills, cause 'awakening to languages' and to learn how to learn language (ibid. p. 140). The discussions on language awareness were with the purpose of introducing the study of foreign language in the curriculum, so that children are offered 'an apprenticeship in accurately matching new sounds to written forms', as also to explore language and meaning (Hawkins, 1999, p. 135).

From language awareness to language play

In *Learning how to mean*, Halliday (1975) draws attention to the lag between the time when words as lexemes become an integral part of the child's linguistic system, and the time when words begin to be realised as structural units. That is, the child starts using words without necessarily understanding to what use they could be put to. In his 1997 article 'Language Play, Language Learning' (later followed up by his 2000 book of the same name) Cook also talks of this lag, although in different terms:

> Far from being fixated on meaningful language to effect social action (as Krashen and others would have had us believe), young children acquiring their first language spend a great deal of their time producing or receiving playful language. They have, after all, only limited reasons to use language for practical purposes in a world in which their every move (…) is decided by somebody else. If we imagine that, for the prelinguistic baby, speech sounds are like music - pleasurable, socially bonding, and affective - whereas for the adult language is conceived more as a way of doing things and making meaning, then the small child may be envisaged as making a transition from one of these poles to the other (Cook, 1997, p. 228).

Cook (1997) starts off by challenging the two premises which have guided language teaching practices around the world. They are: that 'authentic /natural language is best' and hence students ought to be exposed to 'authentic' or 'natural' language, and that 'authentic/natural language is primarily practical and purposeful, focused upon meaning rather than form' (p. 224). He questions the presumption that there is such a thing as *un*authentic or *un*natural language:

But what is that? If it is language produced to aid learning, it is not clear why. Simplified grammar, slow clear speech, and the selection of basic vocabulary, are natural features of adult speech to children, and for that matter natural features of speech to a foreign speaker of our language who does not understand. Indeed, in all circumstances an effective communicator adjusts to the level of his or her interlocutors. But this is overlooked in the literature. (…) what could be more *unnatural* and *unauthentic* than teachers trying to force themselves - against their better instincts - to talk to language learners as they talk to their compatriots? (Cook, 1997, p. 225, emphasis in the original)

About the second premise, Cook (1997) says:

[the] belief in a focus on meaning is the dogma of our time. It derives from an uncritical acceptance of theories of language and language acquisition developed without reference to what learners want or need. As such it is the antithesis of reflective practice […] (p. 226).

He then makes a case for play:

Like fiction, play is a kind of carnival reality (of the kind described by Bakhtin 1981), parallel to the real world but having its own meanings. It is also of necessity concerned with form. The players have to know the rules. (p. 227)

Showing how play predominates all areas of human life, Cook (1997) then advocates language play at the formal level – playing with sounds and grammatical structures and at the semantic level – playing with units of meaning, 'combining them in ways which create worlds which do not exist: fictions' (p. 228). Cook calls this play dimension in language learning 'ludic'. Having said this, he does recognize the need to retain focus on communication and meaning. True, the 'language classroom is not a real world' (p. 230), and hence it may be treated as a play world where children can practise and prepare. Nevertheless, Cook says nothing to show how the child can be taught to make a progress from language play to meaningful communication.

Language play and meaningful communication

The *Bijak* of Kabir, the celebrated saint of medieval India, contains excellent examples of the constant back and forth movement between language play and meaningful communication. Kabir's *ulat bamsi* language (scholars call it the 'upside down' language) 'rejects the possibility that formal, linear discourse can lead to enlightenment' (Heyman, Satpathy and Ravishankar, 2007, p. 3). About *ulat bamsi* expressions, Hess says:

> They intrigue because they are absurd, paradoxical, crazy, impenetrable, and yet they purport to be meaningful. Even in assuming that there is a hidden meaning to be dug out, you may be playing the fool: who is to say you aren't describing a naked emperor's clothes? (1977, p. 135)

Such *ulat bamsi* language is now being explored by scholars to engage students with creative language use (see www.kabirproject.org). For example,

> *Chalti ka naam gaadi*
> *Maal ko kehtey hain khoya*
> *Rangeen ka naam narangi*
> *Dekh Kabira roya.*
> [What moves is called interred/vehicle
> Commodity is called lost/dessicated milk
> What is colourful is called colourless/orange
> On observing these, weeps Kabir!] (Heyman et al., 2007, p. xlvii)

The words 'interred', 'lost' and 'colourless' are the literal meanings of *gaadi*, *khoya* and *narangi* just like 'vehicle', 'dessicated milk' and 'orange' are. Kabir, thus, 'illustrates the imprecision of language, its inability to capture reality' (Heyman et al., 2007). I would rather see in this an ability to capture the multiplicity of references in languages and cultures. Further, the substitution of the latter set of words for the former changes a meaningful verse to nonsense verse, not because it carries no sense but because the mind suddenly discovers unfamiliar connections and is not able to explain the connections in a coherent manner. The words *gaadi*, *khoya* and *narangi* are thus not just words with *a*

meaning but referents too. That is, the words seem to have been given a *sens*, as Lecercle (1994, p. 18) says a 'determinate' meaning - as well as a *sens*, which is 'direction'. According to Livingstone 'form and sound serve as a reliable guidepost for the content of nonsense' and help the author 'use the touchstones of reality – physical laws as well as objects and people – and transfer then, through carefully controlled imagination, to an *impossible* world' (Livingstone, 1981, p. 124, emphasis in the original).

If fiction, which is an instance of adult language play, can find a place in the language classroom of adults, there is no reason why nonsense, which is just another instance of language play, cannot find a place in the language classroom of pre-adult learners. This has important implications for using nonsense in language teaching. All that have been derided as meaningless activities can be reinstated – the activities which Cook enlists as the *via media* for language play:

> […] explicit attention to form, manipulation of form, repetition, rote learning, recognition that the language classroom is not a *real* world where behaviour has serious consequences but - like much of the discourse of native-speaker children and adults - a play world in which people can practise and prepare. (Cook, 1997, p. 230, emphasis in the original.)

Some such preparation is what Alice finds herself doing during her adventures in Wonderland. Lecercle (1994) shows, how in the trial scene in *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1998) even as Alice does not believe 'there's an atom of meaning in it' (p. 107) [the evidence in the form of a poem], the king shows one how to 'read things *into* rather than out of a text' (Lecercle, 1994, p. 100).

For the particular efforts toward language bridging in a multilingual classroom as stated earlier in this paper, I now look to this area of overlap – language play in form and sound, and creative meaning making – in the theories of language play and the theories of nonsense.

Playing with Nonsense

Language play in the classroom

Bushnell (2009) cites several studies which show that language play is a characteristic feature of child and adult language production and that 'we need to take non-serious language more seriously'. Forman (2011) examines some serious use of non-serious language in a Thai EFL classroom, where language play is initiated by a bilingual EFL teacher. There is the well-known example of an anonymous university-level Indian student who uses the phrase 'amplitudinous species' in his essay on the cow. The phrase was used to represent the large size of the animal as also its elevated status in the Hindu social and religio-cultural system.

Halliday (1975, p. 15) draws our attention to the 'mathetic' function of language, which is about using language to go beyond the familiar. Nonsense functions in similar ways. Taking a lesson from the king in *Alice in Wonderland*, who makes the words mean what he claims they mean, Lecercle (1994) concludes that 'there is no nonsense that is not capable of being turned into sense' (p. 98). Riddle is said to '[consist] of vague general description and a specific detail that seems to conflict with what had gone before' (Taylor in Georges and Dundes, 1963, p. 112) – this could also be said of nonsense. If a riddle can be turned into sense, so can nonsense.

Scholars like Heyman et al. (2007) enlist the importance of nonsense in ways that could inspire the use of nonsense for creative language teaching and learning in multilingual education programmes:

> It [nonsense] is inherently pleasurable (….) is an artistic expression of play (…) the texts present a cultural exuberance (…) serious business need not always be serious…it [language play in nonsense] teaches rules even in the very breaking of them, it is a source of community and a weapon against tyranny (…) (Heyman et al., 2007, p. xx)

For tribal children speaking an endangered language, or for first generation school-goers, the use of nonsense could just show them an escape from the tyranny of the dominant language as well as from the kind of academic language we find in schoolbooks.

Heyman (1999) thus sees nonsense as no less than 'a force for social change' (p. xxv). He notes his conversation with Lalita Handoo, a Kashmiri folklorist, who said that the seemingly nonsense folk texts 'are windows into cultural and historical study' (p. xxxi).

The linguistics of nonsense

No published instance of the use of nonsense for language play in the modern Indian classroom is available. But we have a few examples of ancient teachers indulging in language play with their disciples. Sant Kabir's *ulat bamsi* language in his verses, as noted down by his disciples, has been studied by Hess and Singh (2002) and Heyman et al. (2007). The following is a rare example of language play between Sankaracharya, the venerable guru of the Smarta Brahmins and his disciples:

> One day he said to his disciples: 'You are all thieves (*tirutarkal*)!' He then explained, 'The Sanskrit term *śrī* as in the name Srinivas is pronounced *cī* in Tamil. Sanskrit *śrī* [honorable] is furthermore equivalent to Tamil *tiru*. Since you are my disciples [*cītarkal*] I shall henceforth call you *tirutarkal*.' Knowing well that *cītarkal* is the Tamil plural form of Sanskrit *śisya*, with the result that *cī* in this case is not derived from *śrī*, the disciples greeted this complicated play on words with loud laughter (Cecaiya in Ferro-Luzi, 1986, p. 267).

In his study of Tamil verbal humour, Ferro-Luzi cites a number of examples illustrating the fact that a multilingual repertoire is an asset for language play. He cites Cecaiya (1982) for an example on the use of loanwords in Tamil verbal humour: '"How could anybody call an impure thing *tuppakki* [rifle]?" he asks intepreting [*sic*] the Hindi word as if it were composed of Tamil *tupp(u)*, "purity," and *akki*, "making"' (Cecaiya, 1982, p. 267).

Lecercle (1994) illustrates a linguistic reading, including phonological, morphological and syntactic analysis, of 'Jabberwocky', which he calls 'an emblem of nonsense as a genre' (p. 25). The syntactic analysis is as follows:

> […] 'the mome raths outgrabe' could be analysed into either a noun phrase ('the mome') followed by a verb in the third person present ('raths') and an adverb

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('outgrabe'), or as an article ('the'), an adjective and a noun in the plural ('the mome raths'), followed by a verb in the past tense ('outgrabe' is the past form of 'outgribe') (Lecercle, 1994, p. 21-23).

Humpty Dumpty chooses the second one which [Lecercle says] is right,

> […] not only because 'outgrabe' makes a recognisable verb in the past (complete with prefix and vowel change), whereas it makes a rather strange adverb, but because the sequence of tenses requires a verb in the past ('all mimsy *were* the borogoves, and the mome raths *outgrabe*'). (Lecercle, 1994, p. 22)

However, so far sense is treated as 'a black box' (p. 22), which is why Lecercle draws attention to the need to fill in the 'semantic blanks' (p. 23). These semantic blanks, he says 'are meant to be playfully explored, or exploited by our linguistic imagination, which is boundless' (p. 24). Heyman (1999), however, argues that there are times in nonsense, for example, while reading 'tumultuous tops of the transitory titmice', when 'our imaginations cannot be limited to linguistics' that 'our minds explore beyond the words' (p. 221).

Where the narrative structure of nonsense is concerned, the nonsense lexemes may represent the blanks, but the morphemes perform a real grammatical function and help lay the foundation in the meaningful construction of a sentence. See for example, the Spanish translations of 'borogoves' such as 'borogova', 'burgovo', 'borgove', 'borogobio', and 'borogovo' (Orero 2007, p. 118).

Lecercle argues that nonsense deserves a place in school education, preoccupied as it is with the rules of language. The most important reason being 'nonsense appears to give in to *paidia*, (…) the rule-free playing of the unruly child, in order to promote *ludus,* the rule-governed playing that acclimatises the child to the rules of adult society through imitation and constraints' (Lecercle, p. 216). To this, Heyman (1999), giving the example of Lear's limericks and Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, answers that nonsense for the most part is a parody of the 'oppressive restrictions' (p. 220-1) in the name of societal rules.

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For tribal children or for the first generation school-goers, as mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the tyranny of language manifests in more ways than one. Sometimes the language of instruction is one they have never heard or known, sometimes they are made to parrot and memorize texts they do not understand and sometimes they are even made to acquiesce in degrading their own kind (Kumar, 1989). When they refuse to participate in this nonsense, they are often punished for being impertinent. 'There is rich nonsense in school life', says Lecercle (p. 216) while citing the experience of a young Winston Churchill at Harrow in 1988. This is what followed when Churchill was asked to memorize the declension of the *mensa* table:

'What does O table mean?'

'Mensa, O table, is the vocative case,' he replied.

'But why O table?' I persisted in genuine curiosity.

'O table - you would use that in addressing a table, in invoking a table.' And then seeing he was not carrying me with him, 'You would use it in speaking to a table.'

'But I never do,' I blurted out in honest amazement.

'If you are impertinent, you will be punished (…)' was his conclusive rejoinder.

(Gathorne-Hardy, 1979, p. 155.)

Lecercle, thus positions the child's school experience in the conjunction of nonsense and the child.

Proposal for play with nonsense for language bridging in a multilingual classroom

This section proposes playing with nonsense for language bridging in a multilingual classroom. To invite students' interpretation of nonsense, the teacher could start with preparatory classes in which she draws students' attention to 'the three cueing systems that contribute to understanding text - grapho-phonics, semantics, and syntax' (Hetzel and Soto-Hinman, 2006, p. 4). Graphophonic cues involve relating the letters (graphemes) and sounds (phones), and usually take the form of sounding out words. For example, if one uses the grapheme ଓ, to say ଡ୍ରୁ, which in Juanga, is a drum like musical instrument, one could bring in the Odia grapheme ଦ and the word beginning with it ଦଦରୁ, which in Odia

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means a musical instrument similar to the Juanga ᰀ. The same could be done for the Hindi grapheme క with which begins కᰀ. Such a method does not permit a linear choice of graphemes and helps bring in as many similar/contrasting graphemes as possible to bring out a pattern of sounds. The Juanga tribal child would know in the very first few classes that Odia and Hindi have aspirated sounds, which are not part of the Juanga phonetic system. Odia students may be asked to think of as many Odia words as possible that do not have aspirated sounds. The teacher could do the exercise for Hindi. Similar examples are ᱛᰅ/ᱚᰨᰅᱛ/ᱚᰨᱛ (Juanga for 'mango', Odia for 'light', Hindi for 'hailstorm' and pronounced as *ɒle / aluɒ / ole* respectively). Such a multilingual dictionary, which builds up as a result of teacher-student collaboration, could be used to initiate word play and form input for multilingual workbooks. Apart from this, learners also grow aware of the fact that phonetics and graphemic relationships are manifested in different ways in different languages. Spike Milligan's 'The ABC' is an example:

> […]
> Said A to B, "I don't like C;
>
> His manners are a lack.
>
> For all I ever see of C
>
> Is a semi-circular back!"
>
>
> "I disagree," said D to B,
>
> "I've never found C so.
>
> From where I stand he seems to be
>
> An uncompleted O."
>
>
> C was vexed, "I'm much perplexed,
>
> You criticise my shape.
>
> I'm made like that, to help spell Cat
>
> And Cow and Cool and Cape."
>
> […] (Milligan, 1995, p. 15)

In India, students in the higher secondary classes are known to discuss the relationship of equivalence between *ghoti* (a nonsense word) and fish – the 'gh' of *ghoti*

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produces the same sound effect in 'tough' as 'f' does in 'fish'; 'o' in *ghoti* when combined with 'e' as in 'people' has a sound effect similar to that of 'i' in 'fish'; the 'ti' of *ghoti* has the same sound effect in words like 'tuition' as 'sh' in shut. Thus, 'gh' is equivalent to 'f', 'o' is equivalent to 'i' and 'ti' is equivalent to 'sh'. Therefore *ghoti* is equivalent to fish. Such play is an enlightening discourse for Indian students who, being familiar with the direct correspondence between letters and sounds – a common feature of Indian language alphabets, are befuddled when they find no such direct correspondence in the case of English. In one of the Indian movies, a famous hero speaks for all Indians when he asks – 'If do is /du:/ why isn't go /gu:/?'

In the multilingual classroom with tribal students, initially the children could be given three big alphabet charts - say of Juanga, Odia and Hindi. The teacher could round off the particular graphemes on the chart to show that they are similar sounding, yet when they are brought together, they mean different things in different languages. This shows that no language contains *the* word that has a universal meaning; every language is distinct. There is no reason why the sounds join together to give us words with such different meanings. Relating graphemes to sounds becomes easy with the common script of the Juangas and Odias. The exercise above can also help identify cognates – words which sound the same and have similar meanings – for example, the Odia ବିନ୍ଦ and the Hindi केल.

The grapho-phonic similarities/differences can be used to initiate wordplay and creating nonsense as, for example, when an alphabet does not have a particular sound; hence the sound is modified to resemble one of the sounds present in the alphabet. Heyman et al. (2007) offer an example:

VERY FISHY
There was a fish who called himself
THANKYOUBHERYMAACH
Till the fishermen caught and salted him
And ate him with boiled starch. (p. 64)

Here the play is on grapho-phonics. The 'v' sound, which is not present in the Bengali alphabet, has been modified into a 'bh'. Thus, 'very' becomes 'bhery'. Also, the

Bengali habit of prolonging vowel sounds turns English 'much' into '*maach*' (Bengali for fish).

Grapho-phonic exercises could also be attempted through *baragouin* which is 'the imitation of the sounds of another language' and *charabia* which is 'the imitation of one's language' (for *baragouin* and *charabia*, see Lecercle, 1994, p. 21). This requires awareness of the sounds as well as the sound clusters of a particular language. For example, consonant clusters like /kd/, /ms/, /nlk/, /md/, /nlg/, /ngn/, /nbd/ which abound in Juanga (Patnaik, 1983), are absent in Odia. For an Odia child hearing Juanga for the first time, such sounds may seem nonsensical or what Lecercle (1994) has called an 'unpronounceable illicit combination of phonemes' (p. 21).

Exercises could also concentrate on semantic and syntactic cues (like SVO, SOV and VSO) which could be used interdependently either to make sense of nonsense or to create nonsense out of sense. Some nonsense verses like 'Discovery of India' by Anushka Ravishankar have blanks in the original:

My cousin Nibboo—Boo for short
Once traversed India
South to North

At Parur he was very pleased
He said, 'I am—'
And then he sneezed

Sriringapatnam turned him soft
He sighed 'I do—'
And then he coughed
(Heyman, et al., 2007, p. 52)

With a bi/multilingual repertoire, the teacher could make use of semantic cues to encourage word play among the students. Let me take an example from Ferro-Luzzi (1986) to illustrate such a situation:

The Tamil particles *ta* (for males) and *ti* (for females) added to various words of a sentence in order to express familiarity or disrespect lend themselves particularly well to such interlingual play on words, as in the following conversation: 'I do not like being addressed with *ta'* [i.e. because it is disrespectful]. Interlocutor: 'All right, have a "so", it will do you in this heat' (Cecaiya 1982:198). The second syllable of the word 'soda' is treated as if it were the Tamil *ta* (Ferro-Luzzi, 1986, p. 267).

It is such morphemes that lead us to the syntactic cues in a text which in turn make the so-called nonsense lexemes open to a 'multiplicity of interpretations (…) almost any interpretation' (Lecercle 1994, p. 97-98). While Lecercle's syntactic analysis discusses 'raths' in 'the mome raths outgrabe' (Carroll's 'Jabberwocky', 1998, p. 269) as either a verb in the third person or as a noun in the plural, Deleuze (in Heyman, 1999, p. 234) offers a semantic interpretation of 'raths' as taxes, preferential rates, making use of the portmanteau technique (rath = rate + rather). Similarly Lecercle's 'outgrabe' as an adverb or as a verb in the past tense is interpreted by Deleuze as 'prohibitive'. Deleuze's interpretation is as follows: 'taxes, preferential rates (rath = rate + rather), far from their point of departure, were prohibitive (outgrabe)' (in Heyman 1999, p. 234). The nonsense lexemes, thus, are nonsense not because they mean nothing but because they carry an excess of referents.

Conclusion

On the subject of language, scholars say 'while learning a language in primary school is treated as fun, it rather suddenly gets taken as a serious business at secondary level' (Andrewes, 2011, p. 3). Andrewes attributes this unpleasant change to the higher cognitive needs of language learners as they grow up. Such unpleasantness may no longer be the case if one uses nonsense texts to lead young learners through phonological processing and exercises in logic and creative imagination. One could take lessons from Bisong (1995) who suggests ways to lead young learners through incomprehensible poetry passages, such as beginning with a chain rhyme to help learners acknowledge the rhythm and become aware of repeated structures and even recognize cross-cultural issues while translating a

poem. Parallel attempts may be made in the case of nonsense texts. Orero's analysis of the Spanish translation of 'Jabberwocky' as cited earlier in this paper is a case in point. Orero shows how one can simply substitute morphological elements to change 'borogoves' to 'borogova' or 'borogobia', or choose a real word to change 'frabjous' to *feliz* (Spanish for happy). 'Slithy' may be changed to 'blendes', 'viscotivas', 'agiliscosos', 'flexoso, 'viscoleantes' or 'agilimosas', based on textual cues or one's own intuition, as long as they are related to the root words in the original language, English in this case.

   Rupantar, the teacher training module in the MLE programme in Odisha, which was mentioned at the beginning of this paper, includes a host of nonsense in the name of folk games and folk tales. The potential for language play in these texts, however, is not foreseen in the module. The following is an example of a Sambalpuri nonsense verse *Dhana kidi kidi* (Sheaves of paddy) in *Rupantar* (p. 9):

Sheaves of paddy

O sheaves of paddy

An iron bar and a ripe wood apple

Together they went north

And found a pot made of brass.

The pot was lost

It made them angry

Dada had brought a small bird

Which they cooked and took a piece each

The youngest daughter-in-law

Was beaten with a tamarind stick

(translated into English by B. K. Tripathy)

   The Sambalpuri Odia original is a rhyming verse and is sung by children while playing a folk game. The sound effects in the original are lost in the English translation. However, as can be seen, the verse is a classic illustration of the 'faulty cause and effect situations' (Heyman, 1999, p. 236), a common feature in nonsense. The challenge for the advanced reader here is the 'blank [which] occurs in the logical sequence which must be

filled, even if that which fills it cannot make sense and must be laid aside or discarded' (ibid). Heyman talks about the blanks evoking 'imaginative possibilities' (1999, p. 237) and borrows Iser's word (1978) 'illusions' to argue that one should guard against too much illusion-building. What Heyman seems to overlook is the fact that the 'imaginative possibilities' may be based on real socio-cultural or psychological assumptions. There may be no harm after all in imagining possibilities to discover the narrative coherence in a text. In fact, children are at it most of the time when they face an incomprehensible text. Teachers now have to be careful before dismissing the possibilities as silly.

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