# Playing Other Games with Language

Wittgenstein and Saussure both use the games metaphor to describe language (see *Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein*, Roy Harris). In particular, they use the chess metaphor to describe language transactions between people. Just as two people come to a chess game with a predetermined and pre-agreed view of how to play the game, so people come to language transactions with a similar predetermined view. However, is this a good metaphor to use? Harris takes the view it is inappropriate, and led to interpretive problems for both Saussure and Wittgenstein.

Chess has two characteristics that make it suitable for pre-agreed rules. First, it is a limited paradigm: there are only 32 pieces and 64 squares. Even if there were no rules about moving pieces within the limits of the board then there would still be a limited number of moves available. Second, Chess is an old game with simple rules. True, the strategies available are complex, but they are based in an unambiguous and regulated structure. Thus, memetically, Chess is a stable form that resists change and which does not allow rules variation "on the fly".

Contrast this with another game, not available in Saussure's time but popular in Wittgenstein's time: Monopoly. This is a newer game, but has the same sorts of limitations as Chess: a board of 40 squares and limited tokens (6 player-counters, 32 houses, 12 hotels, 28 property cards, a fixed number of Chance and Community Chest cards, and a stock of money). However, Monopoly is also a game replete with "house rules". How many can play? Some say no more than six, some say "find a button and you can play"; some say no less than three, some say two is enough. How many houses can you build? Some say no more than 32 houses and 12 hotels can be on the board at any one time, some say "find some buttons". What happens when the money runs out? Some say that when the bank is empty you don't get paid, some issue IOUs as virtual currency. How many hotels can you build on a property? Some say only one, some say "pile those buttons on". And so on. Are the buttons part of the game of Monopoly? Are the variants being played really Monopoly? In Chess, the idea of adding a second row of pawns to each side would evoke the response "Interesting game, but it isn't Chess". In addition, Monopoly can be played with two or more players, but the game with six players is qualitatively different from that with two.

Let us look at another game, apparently closer to Chess in terms of stable form: Bridge. In this game there are clear givens, and to violate them is to not play Bridge: four players in two teams of two; four hands of 13 cards each from a single deck of cards; and a fixed scoring system. However, inherent in the game is a free-form structure: the bidding process. Initially this was used only to claim the right to play the hand - the highest bid won - and to give a target to be achieved. However, over time it became obvious that between first bid and final bid was a lot of room for manoeuvre: bidding could become a signalling process by itself. So there is a somewhat freeform game within the game, wherein partners try to guide each other to their best contract while at the same time attempting not to disclose too much to the opposition. Of course, in competition Bridge there are rules about bidding conventions, but this does not prevent pre-agreed special bids being used at the table.

Finally, let us look at what happens when different "house rules" meet. In the case of Chess, there is no room for "idiolex", so no issue. In the case of Bridge, bidding rules should be declared beforehand (but sometimes are not), and there is no room for idiolex in the actual play of the cards. In Monopoly it is common for players to have differing house rules. Often these are not identified before the game (each person believes their house rules are the proper rules), and sometimes the differing rules are not tested in a particular game - thus, although the players are actually playing different games, they appear to be playing the same game. If the rule difference actually comes up (the Bank runs out of houses, say) then one of two things happen: either the game is abandoned because there is no agreement on the specific rule to be used in the current game; or one side abandons their rule and agrees to play by the other rule *for this game only.* Interestingly, the players are now playing the same game, but are calling it different things: the people whose rule is being used are playing Monopoly; the people whose rule has been abandoned are playing a Monopoly variant.

If the Language-as-game metaphor is to have any force then it must use a game format that mirrors as best as possible the nature of a language transaction. As we have seen, every game involving a board, pieces, or cards has limits imposed by those items. Does language have similar limits? It could be argued that the components in Universal Grammar (or Simple Grammar) act in this way, imposing limits on the types of rules that can be produced with that set of components. However, Universal Grammar would posit that the components actually impose the rules of language, while Simple Grammar posits that they limit the range of rules available. However, the components of a game are also the "lexis" of the game, so the number and type of components dictate the limits of what is expressible in a game; language, on the other hand, allows lexis to grow without restriction. Of course, the introduction of buttons can be considered to allow the limits to grow in at least one way; but it is precisely this redefinition of a game

that both Saussure and Wittgenstein attempt to forbid, by saying that the introduction of extra pieces or a different board creates a game that is not Chess.

Another feature of Language is reuse, or symbolism. A word in English like *mutton* can be extended by metaphor to mean *sheep:* the sentence *look at the muttons in the field* can be seen to refer to sheep without too much mental effort. It can also, by a tortuous route, be seen to mean deaf - rhyming slang for *deaf* is *Mutt and Jeff* (from a cartoon strip), which became transformed to *mutton jeff,* and then to *mutton.* Most of the components in a game are not subject to reuse, but there are interesting exceptions in the case of Monopoly. Spare play tokens are sometimes pressed into play as hotels, and hotels can sometimes be represented by five houses (or a house on its side).

In language we have an unlimited lexis, although a limitation on the types of word we can use. We also have highly flexible grammars, although there are limits on the components of grammar available, and limits on their combination. In addition we have "house rules" which determine how a particular language works, and possibly "game rules", which dictate the Universal Grammar. Finally there are individual "strategies", which determine which rules a player will encounter - and "cheating methods", which allow them to subvert both house rules and game rules in manners which are acceptable to other players but not legal within the established rules of the game. The description is very close to Monopoly as she is played.

Thus we can see that the games metaphor gives a viable model of language, but the game chosen by Saussure and Wittgenstein is far from a good fit to language. Thus, instead of the metaphor liberating their understanding of language, it has constricted their theories into inappropriate models. As Roy Harris points out, this may well have biased their language models and restricted their thinking.

*Martin Edwardes, June though August 2002*

**Postscript**

The following letter (Metro newspaper, Friday August 16 2002, p11) illustrates the variation in Monopoly rules in use, and shows that prescriptivism is not limited to the description of language.

GO DIRECTLY TO JAIL: Simon Coggy talks about invoking Monopoly Rules for Lord Archer, claiming that any money he earns in prison should go into a central pot on Free Parking (Metro, Wed). He is clearly one of those sad players who, unable to win by the rules, makes up his own.
*Pete Barclay-George, Mitcham, Surrey.*

**Bibliography**

| Author/Editor | Book/Article | Publisher | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| Harris, Roy | Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein | Routledge | 1988 |
| Huizinga, Johan | Homo Ludens | Beacon | 1955 |
| Saussure, F. de | Course in General Linguistics (Tr. Roy Harris) | Duckworth | 1983 |
| Wittgenstein, Ludwig | Philosophical Investigations (Tr. GEM Anscombe) | Blackwells, 3rd Edn | 1967 |
| Wittgenstein, Ludwig | Tractatus | Routledge (2nd Edn) | 1972 |