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

Recreational linguistics (ludolinguistique in French, ludolinguistica in Italian, ludolingüística 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.

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.

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 ἀκρός meaning extreme and στίχος 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 Ieouos 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)**

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).

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)!
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*:

\[\text{Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci, lectorem delectando pariterque monendo.}\]

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

**References**


Anthony Mollica is professor emeritus of Education, Brock University. A speaker at the first CASLT conference, a recipient of the Robert Roy Award, a former editor of *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, and the current editor of *Mosaic*, he has published widely in the field of second-language education.

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.

mollica@soleilpublishing.com