

Reading and Counting (1998)

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The acts of reading and counting are such important abilities acquired through education of one sort or another that there seems to be a misnomer in the fact that I want to confront it in such a short paper. The beauty of reading and counting for most of us is that once we have mastered these phenomena we discard the acts for the apparently more important one of gathering information required for the acquisition of much prized knowledge. The beauty of this sequence is that it ought to be this way, for it is the information that the marks allow an understanding of that is of greater importance, not the method of acquisition.

I intend to talk of reading and counting as a mechanical experience, rather than as a deciphering of the text. This is because it is the mechanics of reading that motivates the rearrangement of words and numbers into the forms that allow an appreciation of reading. When children read, the important requirement is to be able to make sounds from the marks on a page or other suitable surface. The recognition of the sounds made based on a collection of sounds already known leads to meaning for the child. This process of sound making helps to explain why children will identify a written word as a number of possibilities based on the combination of sounds possible from the marks. Words that are nonsensical to the adult with an extensive vocabulary able to recognise a word not accepted in the language is tenable to the child for reading is merely a process of code breaking and all permutations are acceptable.

Word play, like puns, help us to return to the structure and sounds of reading as we are amused by the whim. Even though puns are a sophisticated use of words, they are based on sounds and in the cases of written puns, on the accepted spelling of the words:

The success of a pun is often a matter of taste; if an ominous horoscope is called a horoscope or a genetic experiment is characterised as producing designer genes, this may or may not be regarded as witty, useful or relevant.¹

Intonation may also be called into play: