Where does discursive creativity originate?

In making the statement that 'The measure of whether or not something is creative […] is that it creates some kind of change in the world' (The Open University 2023c), Jones takes the view that creativity is realised in the human interaction of a discourse rather than merely in the underlying morphemes, clauses and sentences that make up the atomic elements of that discourse.[1]   In general terms, this viewpoint can be said to be somewhat at variance with that of others such as Carter, Short, and Swann and Maybin who all see significant creativity appearing in the textual content of a discourse. On the other hand, Jones's viewpoint can be said to be partly in alignment with the work of Semino. In all cases though, there is no rigid binary partition between viewpoints. This essay will examine the strengths and weaknesses of each particular viewpoint and just how far the boundaries between them are blurred. In particular, some specific examples of creativity, taken from Semino's work on the description of pain, will be used to explore these perspectives. Finally, an assessment will be made of whether Jones's statement is reasonable or rather limiting view of creativity.

   Jones's view is that linguistic creativity is more than just the 'inventive uses of language in literature and in everyday life, things like metaphor, things like humour, rhyming, puns, and this sort of thing' (The Open University, 2023c). Instead, it is a strategic intention that what may be created need not be a simple inventive linguistic product, but rather a new way of dealing with a situation or a new set of social relationships. While Jones acknowledges that traditional approaches identify linguistic creativity as arising from how texts are assembled out of words, he sees creativity as being located in the 'concrete social actions that

[1] Linguistic discourse in this context is taken to be, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: "A connected series of utterances by which meaning is communicated, esp. one forming a unit for analysis; spoken or written communication regarded as consisting of such utterances" OED (2024).

people use these words and texts to perform' (Jones, 2010 quoted in Demjén, Z. and Seargeant, 2017, p.97). His view is that discursive creativity should be identified more by its impact, effect and social outcomes on the writer-recipient relationship rather than the mechanisms within the language that are used to achieve these effects. In particular, he sees discourse as something that involves the use of language in the social construction of knowledge, i.e. something that creates a change in the world. His focus is on the idea that creativity is only realised if it involves both ends of a linguistic communication channel, and thus it is discourse rather than the textual details of language that are important.

To consider the validity of his view, it is first necessary to consider the meaning of 'creativity', 'change' and 'world'. Jones does not require that the change associated with creativity is large, merely that some change occurs. Examples are 'some kind of reaction from another person, we might be creating some kind of change in our relationship with the people that we're interacting with, we might even be creating something much larger, we might actually be changing the world in some way' (The Open University, 2023c). Nor does he precisely define what 'world' this change must occur in. Thus, in the most general terms, he is saying, provided a single reader, listener or participant in a discourse is in some, indeterminate way different after reading, listening to or participating in the discourse, then creativity is present in that discourse.

In Jones's view, it is possible to use creative language (i.e. language that is novel or inventive) without actually being creative at all if the creativity is 'not appropriate to some task or some kind of situation'. In other words, the change effected by the creativity must be something that is valuable to the participants in the discourse. However, even the most apparently unpromising material can in some ways meet Jones's criterion. For example, Edward Lear's nonsense verse, which by its very nature makes no logical or rational sense, has been said to be creative in this sense since 'like nonsense verse as a whole, it influenced

such 20th-century aesthetic movements as surrealism and the theatre of the absurd' (The Poetry Foundation, 2025).

According to Swann and Maybin (2007, p. 491), research in language and creativity has broadly defined creativity as "a property of all language use in that language users do not simply reproduce but recreate, refashion, and recontextualize linguistic and cultural resources in the act of communication". For Jones, this is important because 'it locates creativity in the ways in which 'linguistic resources' themselves are recreated and reconfigured rather than in the acts of communicating for which they are used' (Jones, 2010 quoted in Demjén, Z. and Seargeant, 2017, p.97). Jones further points out that most work on language creativity concentrates on the formal aspects of language use (i.e. the textual lens). Jones prefers to locate creativity in the way that language is used in 'social contexts help to create new kinds of identities, social practices and relationships of power' (ibid). Jones, therefore, is focusing his attention through the contextual and critical lenses. He sees the act of communication and not just the recreation or recontextualization of the language as the fundamental root of creativity.

Carter takes an opposing view. He sees interaction as an important aspect of conversational relationships and 'playing with words, playing with grammatical patterns, playing with lexical patterns is an important part of maintaining those relationships' view (The Open University, 2023b). Thus, at least conversationally, invention at the word level is enough for Carter to identify creativity, whereas it is not so for Jones. Mick Short also takes a different position from Jones: 'I think that what analysing text in great detail does is enable you to understand how it is the writer has created the meanings and effects they have' (The Open University, 2022b). Thus, both Carter and Short are primarily concerned with working under the textual lens when seeking linguistic creativity.

Semino suggests that the '"value" or "success" in relation to creative uses of metaphor needs to consider the specific contexts in which they occur (including, as appropriate, co-text, situational context, socio-cultural context, addresser(s), addressee(s), as well as genre)' (Semino, 2017, p. 331). She examines how this value can be identified in three different genres - the textual context of a literary novel, the more casual conversational context of a doctor-patient consultation and the formal academic style of a scientific paper. Success here means that the use of the creative metaphor has some beneficial effect on the reader or listener's understanding of what the writer or speaker is trying to communicate.

For Semino, metaphor is a crucial element of creativity. She sees an important distinction between the 'conventional' and 'creative' categories of metaphor. Here a conventional metaphor is taken to be one 'that is commonly used in everyday language in a culture to give structure to some portion of that culture's conceptual system' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 33. A creative metaphor is one that is conversely not in common usage.

Semino suggests that metaphorical creativity should be analysed by identifying the metaphor's position on a number of dimensions: 'the uses of individual words or multiword expressions; the whole text or discourse event; previous relevant texts produced by the discourse community of which the speaker/ writer is part; conventional patterns of metaphor use in the relevant language, which may reflect conventional conceptual metaphors' (Semino, 2017, p. 351).

Semino examines three different texts: a literary novel, a doctor-patient consultation and a scientific paper. Before discussing these, a consideration of how Semino's views align with Jones's definition of creativity will be made. Semino's working definition of creativity in her paper is that proposed by Steinberg and Lubart (1993, p3): 'creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)'. Semino thus appears to disagree with Jones's idea that some

change must occur in the world for the metaphor to be creative. Perhaps, although she does not explicitly mention change, change does occur inevitably in some appropriate way in the reader or listener's world. This possibility will be considered for each example.

In Ian McEwan's (2001) novel *Atonement* he uses the idea of knifing or raking pain to describe Emily's migraine. Semino sees this as a conventional metaphor, part of the conceptual metaphor class of SHARPOBJECTS. McEwan also reflects the episodic nature of Emily's pain (sometimes dormant, like a 'curled and sleeping animal', sometimes highly 'awake' and 'mov[ing] as caged panther') and Semino identifies this as a new conceptual metaphor for pain, that of ANIMAL (Semino, 2017, p. 339-343). The ANIMAL metaphor incorporates the idea that migraine is an entity in itself, with its own concerns, (moving out of boredom') and that is 'indifferent' and 'bears not malice' to Emily, that leaves her undamaged, that is slow to move (unlike conventional shooting pain). Semino concludes 'All this suggests that McEwan's metaphor is also highly original at the conceptual level' (Semino, 2017, p. 341). This creativity is however still at the word level, as the words used to invoke the ANIMAL metaphor do not have conventional meanings to do with pain (e.g. 'curled and sleeping animal', 'furred creature'). Because of that, Jones would not regard this as discursive creativity that creates a world change.

In the doctor-patient conversational example, Semino sees most of the metaphorical expressions used by both doctor and patient are used in a conventional way. This is consistent with Carter's view that 'it is at the level of textual patterns, however, that we can observe a kind of creativity that is particularly characteristic of conversation' (Carter 2004).

However, Semino sees the use of 'bursting' as more a creative rather than a conventional metaphor. She provides evidence for this by examining the BNC and noting that 'bursting' occurs as a premodifier of pain just two times out of the 556 total occurrences of bursting in the 100 million-word corpus. From this, she deduces that due to the rarity of the use of the

phrase 'bursting pain', that this is a novel and creative use of the metaphor. While this adds qualitative evidence to her arguments, it is not clear how comprehensive her methods are of searching the BNC are. For example, 'bursting' may well have been used in the BNC in association with pain but not in close colocation. So, it seems possible that there are both adjectival and noun usages of 'bursting' in the BNC that Semino has missed, which may make her assessment of the novelty of its usage an overestimate.

Semino's doctor-patient example demonstrates the use of creativity in a non-literary, conversational environment. This takes the form of a type of negotiation and collaboration between the members of the conversation. Semino sees this as a form of the 'pattern forming choices' examined by Carter where 'creativity grows from mutual interaction rather than from individual motivation' (Carter, 2004, p. 101). For example, the Doctor's novel choice to repeat bursting' as a noun rather than a verb - confirms he understands (at least in some way) how the patient is already creatively using this adjective and also reinforces its validity in the conversation. So, this collaboration can be seen as a mechanism to change the world (or at least their mutual understanding) of the participants – and thus would meet Jones's criteria of creativity.

Semino's third example, an analysis of a scientific paper, shows how 'Scientists regularly engage in analogical reasoning to develop hypotheses and interpret results, and they rely heavily on metaphors to communicate observations and findings' (Taylor and Dewsbury, 2018). Semino restricts herself to discussing two use cases of scientific metaphor - (a) that of the expression of disagreement by the creative use of metaphors to challenge and subvert other uses of metaphors and (b) the use of metaphorical expressions to form creative patterns, both within and across texts.

In use case (a) Semino points out that the gate metaphor representation of pain proposed by Melzack and Wall (1965), as a representation of a pain mechanism directly challenges the

previous 'alarm bell' metaphor of previous specificity theories. The use of a radically

different metaphor to represent the new proposal is an effective way of reinforcing in the

reader's minds that this is a fundamental change in thinking about pain mechanisms. As

such, it certainly meets Jones's criteria of causing a change in the world (where the context of

this world is that of academic thought). Although this gate metaphor might not be considered

creative since it lacks contemporary novelty (since human neural networks have been

compared to networks of computing gates for many years (Shagrir, 2006), the application of

the gate metaphor to the concept of pain is indeed novel, as evidenced by Semino's

observation that Melzach and Wall's theory of pain (based on a gate metaphor) given its

rapid spread into in the areas of scientific texts and news stories as recorded by Google

scholar and Google news (Semino, 2017, p. 350). By spreading widely, this metaphor also

meets Semino's second use case, (b), showing that successful creative metaphors 'may be

used in different ways by different people in different contexts, thus leading to intertextual

chains of metaphor use involving both repetition and variation' (Semino, 2017, p. 349).

Thus, both Semino and Jones would identify the gate mechanism metaphor as creative,

though for somewhat different reasons.

In conclusion, Jones argues that creativity is located in the strategic way that people use

language to stimulate social change, rather than the inherent textual content of the language.

Others, such as Carter and Short prefer to see creativity originating in the way that the

linguistic resources in language are recreated and reconfigured rather than the actions and

outcomes of communication. Semino investigated linguistic creativity in a range of genres

and demonstrated that metaphorical creativity can arise in literary writing, conversational

discourse and scientific academic writings. She argues that it is essential to consider the text

and genre in which creativity occurs and the contextual goals of the writer/speaker and

reader/listener. In this sense she is supporting Jones's view that linguistic creativity should

be 'more than simply a clever use of language' (The Open University, 2023a) as at least two out of three of her examples lead to some level of change to the world of the recipients.

In conclusion, though, it is perhaps best not to nominate a single winner amongst the different views presented here. There are many complementary ways that creativity appears both in the textual and linguistic uses of language and the way it is used in discourse. There is no ultimate natural law to say that creativity in human language communication should have a single root. In that way, Jones et al can all be said to identify the originating site of linguistic creativity.

(2500 words)

References

Demjén, Z. and Seargeant, P. (2017) *Creativity in language: from everyday style to verbal art,* 2nd edition, Milton Keynes, The Open University.

Jones, R.H. (2010), Creativity and discourse. *World Englishes*, 29: 467-480. https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2010.01675.x

Lakoff, G. and Johnson 1980 *Metaphors we live by.* Chicago: University of Chicago.

Melzack, R. and Wall, P.D. (1965) 'Pain mechanisms: a new theory'. *Science* 150(3699): 971–9.

McEwan, I. (2001) *Atonement*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "discourse (n.)," December 2024, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3073732026.
.
Semino E. (2017) 'Metaphor, creativity and the experience of pain across genres', in Demjén, Z. and Seargeant, P. (eds.) *Creativity in language: from everyday style to verbal art,* 2nd edition, Milton Keynes, The Open University, pp. 331-355.

Shagrir, O. (2006) 'Why we view the brain as a computer', *Synthese* 153, 393–416 . https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-006-9099-8.

Taylor, C., & Dewsbury, B. M. (2018).' On the Problem and Promise of Metaphor Use in Science and Science Communication', *Journal of microbiology & biology education*, 19(1), 19.1.46. https://doi.org/10.1128/jmbe.v19i1.1538

The Open University (2023a) 'Clip 1.3 Rodney Jones: Making a change in the world'. *E302: Language and creativity*. Available at: https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=2111431&section=9 (Accessed: 9 Jan 2025).

The Open University (2023b) 'Clip 2.1 Linguistic Creativity in talk'. *E302: Language and creativity*. Available at: https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=2111431&section=9 (Accessed: 9 Jan 2025)

The Open University (2023c) 'Clip 2.3 Rodney Jones: Creativity in Discourse'. *E302: Language and creativity*. Available at: https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=2309937&section=6 (Accessed: 9 Jan 2025).

The Poetry Foundation (2025) 'Edward Lear', *The Poetry Foundation*, Available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edward-lear (Accessed on 10 Jan 2025)