II

THE PLAY-CONCEPT AS EXPRESSED IN LANGUAGE

WHEN speaking of play as something known to all, and when trying to analyse or define the idea expressed in that word, we must always bear in mind that the idea as we know it is defined and perhaps limited by the word we use for it. Word and idea are not born of scientific or logical thinking but of creative language, which means of innumerable languages—for this act of "conception" has taken place over and over again. Nobody will expect that every language, in forming its idea of and expression for play, could have hit on the same idea or found a single word for it, in the way that every language has one definite word for "hand" or "foot". The matter is not as simple as that.

We can only start from the play-concept that is common to us, i.e. the one covered, with slight variations, by the words corresponding to the English word "play" in most modern European languages. Such a concept, we felt, seemed to be tolerably well defined in the following terms: play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is "different" from "ordinary life". Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call "play" in animals, children and grown-ups: games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds. We ventured to call the category "play" one of the most fundamental in life.

Now it appears at once that a general play-category has not been distinguished with equal definiteness by all languages everywhere, nor expressed in one word. All peoples play, and play remarkably alike; but their languages differ widely in their conception of play, conceiving it neither as distinctly nor as broadly as modern European languages do. From a nominalist point of view we might deny the validity of a general concept and say that for every human group the concept "play" contains just what is

expressed in the word—or rather words. For it is arguable that one language has succeeded better than others in getting the various aspects of play into one word. And such indeed appears to be the case. One culture has abstracted a general notion of play much earlier and more completely than another, with the curious result that there are highly developed languages which have retained totally different words for the various play-forms and that this multiplicity of terms has itself impeded the aggregation of all the forms under one head. One is reminded here of the well-known fact that some of the so-called primitive languages have words for the different species of a common genus, as for eel and pike, but none for fish.

Various indications convince us that the abstraction of a general play-concept has been as tardy and secondary in some cultures as the play-function itself is fundamental and primary. In this respect it seems to me highly significant that in none of the mythologies known to me has play been embodied in a divine or daemonic figure,[1] while on the other hand the gods are often represented as playing. The absence of a common Indo-European word for play also points to the late conception of a general play-concept. Even the Germanic group of languages differs widely in the naming of play and divides it into three compartments.

It is probably no accident that the very peoples who have a pronounced and multifarious play-"instinct" have several distinct expressions for the play-activity. I think this is more or less true of Greek, Sanskrit, Chinese and English. Greek possesses a curious and specific expression for children's games in the ending *-inda.* In themselves the syllables do not signify anything; they merely give to any word the connotation of "playing at something". *-inda* is an indeclinable and, linguistically speaking, underivable suffix.[2] Greek children played *sphairinda*—at ball; *helkustinda*—tug o' war; *streptinda*—a throwing game; *basilinda*—king of the castle. The complete grammatical independence of the suffix is a symbol, as it were, of the underivable nature of the play-concept. In contrast to this unique and specific designation of child-play Greek has no less than three different words for play in

[1]Needless to say, Lusus, son or companion of Bacchus and progenitor of the Lusitanians, is a bookish invention of very late date.

[2]At best we may conjecture some affinity with-*ινδος* and hence infer a pre-indogermanic or Aegæan origin. The ending occurs as a verbal suffix in *ἁλίνδω*, *κυλίνδω*, both in the sense of "revolving", variants of *ἁλίω* and *κυλίω*. The idea of "playing" has only a faint echo here.

general. First of all: παιδιά, the most familiar of the three. Its etymology is obvious; it means "of or pertaining to the child", but is immediately distinguished by its accent from παιδία—childishness. The use of παιδιά, however, is not by any means restricted to children's games. With its derivates παίζειν, to play, παῖγμα, παίγνιον, a toy, it serves to denote all kinds of play, even the highest and most sacred, as we have seen from the passage in Plato's *Laws*. A note of light-heartedness and carefree joyfulness seems to be struck in the whole word-group. Compared with παιδιά the other word for play—ἀδύρω, ἄδυρμα—stays very much in the background. It is tinged with the idea of the trifling, the nugatory.

There remains, however, an extensive and very important domain which in our terminology would come under the head of playing but which is not covered in Greek either by παιδιά or ἄδυρμα: to wit, matches and contests. The whole of this sphere, so extremely important in Greek life, is expressed by the word ἀγών. We can well say that an essential part of the play-concept is concealed in the field of operation of the ἀγών. At the same time we must ask whether the Greeks were not right to make a verbal distinction between contest and play. It is true that the element of "non-seriousness", the ludic factor proper, is not as a rule explicitly expressed in the word ἀγών. Moreover, contests of every description played such an enormous part in Greek culture and in the daily life of every Greek that it might seem overbold to class so great a section of Greek civilization with "play". This indeed is the point of view taken by Professor Bolkestein in his criticism of my opinions to the contrary.[1] He reproaches me with having "illegitimately included the Greek contests, which range from those rooted in ritual to the most trifling, in the play-category". He goes on: "When speaking of the Olympic *games* we inadvertently make use of a Latin term which expresses a Roman valuation of the contests so designated, totally different from the valuation of the Greeks themselves". After enumerating a long series of *agonistic* activities showing how the competitive impulse dominated the whole of Greek life, my critic concludes: "All this has nothing to do with *play*—unless one would assert that the whole of life was play for the Greeks!"

In a certain sense such indeed will be the contention of this

[1] *Proceedings of the 17th Congress of Dutch Philologists*, Leyden, 1937, where he refers to my rectoral address on "The Borderline between Play and Seriousness in Culture".

book. Despite my admiration for Professor Bolkestein's lasting and lucid interpretation of Greek culture, and despite the fact that Greek is not alone in linguistically distinguishing between contest and play, I am fervently convinced of their underlying identity. Since we shall have to return again and again to this conceptual distinction I shall confine myself here to one argument only. The *agon* in Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the formal characteristics of play, and as to its function belongs almost wholly to the sphere of the festival, which is the play-sphere. It is quite impossible to separate the contest as a cultural function from the complex "play-festival-rite". As to why the Greek language makes this remarkable terminological distinction between play and contest, this might, in my opinion, be explained as follows. The conception of a general, all-embracing and logically homogeneous play-concept is, as we have seen, a rather late invention of language. From very early on, however, sacred and profane contests had taken such an enormous place in Greek social life and gained so momentous a value that people were no longer aware of their play-character. The contest, in all things and on every occasion, had become so intense a cultural function that the Greeks felt it as quite "ordinary", something existing in its own right. For this reason the Greeks, possessing as they did two distinct words for play and contest, failed to perceive the essential play-element in the latter very clearly, with the result that the conceptual, and hence the linguistic, union never took place.[1]

As we shall see, Greek terminology does not stand alone in the matter of play. Sanskrit too has at least four verbal roots for the play-concept. The most general word for playing is *krīdati*, denoting the play of animals, children and grown-ups. Like the word "play" in the Germanic languages it also serves for the movement of wind or waves. It can mean hopping, skipping, or dancing in general without being expressly related to playing in particular. In these latter connotations it approximates to the root *nrt*, which covers the whole field of the dance and dramatic performances. Next there is *divyati*, meaning primarily gambling, dicing, but also playing in the sense of joking, jesting, trifling, making mock of. The original meaning appears to be throwing,

[1]This argument does not occur in the German edition of Huizinga's book, and the presentation of it in his own English version is somewhat obscure. It is hoped that the drift of his argument has been re-constructed without undue distortion. Trans.

casting; but there is a further connection with shining and radiance.[1] Then, the root *las* (whence *vilāsa*) combines the meanings of shining, sudden appearance, sudden noise, blazing up, moving to and fro, playing and "pursuing" an occupation (as in the German "etwas treiben"). Lastly, the noun *līlā*, with its denominative verb *līlayati* (the primary sense of which is probably rocking, swinging), expresses all the light, aerial, frivolous, effortless and insignificant sides of playing. Over and above this, however, *līlā* is used in the sense of "as if", to denote "seeming", "imitation", the "appearance" of things, as in the English "like", "likeness" or German "gleich", "Gleichnis". Thus *gajalīlayā* (literally: "with elephant play") means "like an elephant"; *gājendralīla* (literally: "elephant-play-man") means a man representing an elephant or playing the elephant. In all these denominations of play the semantic starting-point seems to be the idea of rapid movement—a connection found in many other languages. This is not to say, of course, that in the beginning the words denoted rapid movement exclusively and were only later applied to play. To my knowledge, the contest as such is not expressed by any of the play-words in Sanskrit; oddly enough there is no specific word for it, although contests of the most various kinds were common in Ancient India.

Professor Duyvendak's friendly help allows me to say something about the Chinese expressions for the play-function. Here too there can be no grouping of all the activities we are wont to regard as play, under one head. Most important is the word *wan*, in which ideas of children's games predominate, but extending its semantic range to the following special meanings: to be busy, to enjoy something, to trifle, to romp, to jest, to crack jokes, to make mock of. It also means to finger, to feel, to examine, to sniff at, to twiddle little ornaments, and finally to enjoy the moonlight. Hence the semantic starting-point would seem to be "handling something with playful attention", or "to be lightly engrossed". The word is not used for games of skill, contests, gambling or theatrical performances. For this, for orderly dramatic play, Chinese has words which belong to the conceptual field of "position", "situation", "arrangement". Anything to do with contests is expressed by the special word *cheng*, the perfect equivalent of the Greek *agon*; apart from which *sai* denotes an organized contest for a prize.

[1] We must leave to one side a possible connection with *dyu*—the clear sky.

To Professor Uhlenbeck, my former colleague at Leyden, I am indebted for examples showing how the play-concept is expressed in one of the so-called primitive languages—Blackfoot, one of the Algonkin group. The verbal stem *koani* serves for all children's games. It is not connected with the name of any particular game; it means child's-play in general. As soon as it is a question of the games of grown-ups or half-grown-ups, however, they no longer speak of them as *koani*, even if it is the same games that children play. On the other hand, *koani* now comes back again, curiously enough, in the erotic sense and especially for illicit relationships—as we would say, "dallying". Organized play according to rules is called *kachtsi*, and this also applies to games of chance as well as to games of skill and strength. Here the semantic element is "winning" and "competing". The relationship between *koani* and *kachtsi*, therefore, resembles that between παιδιά and ἀγών in Greek, except that the Blackfoot terms are verbs, not nouns, and that games of chance, which in Greek would come under παίζω, in Blackfoot come in the category of the agonistic. Everything that belongs to the sphere of magic and religion, i.e. dances and ceremonial, is expressed neither by *koani* nor *kachtsi*. Blackfoot has two separate words for "winning": *amots* for winning a contest, a race, or a game, but also for winning in battle—in this case in the sense of "playing havoc" or "running amok"; and *skets* or *skits*, used exclusively for winning games and sports. To all appearances the play-sphere proper and the agonistic sphere are completely merged in the latter word. There is, further, a special word for betting: *apska*. A very singular feature is the possibility of giving any verb a secondary meaning of "for fun", "not seriously" by adding the prefix *kip-*, literally "merely so", or "only". Thus, for instance, *aniu* means "he says"; *kipaniu*, "he says for a joke", or "he only says".

All in all, the conception and expression of play in Blackfoot would seem to be akin to, though not identical with, Greek.

So we have already found three languages in which the words for contest are distinct from those for play, namely Greek, Sanskrit and Chinese, while Blackfoot draws the line slightly differently. Should we therefore incline after all to Professor Bolkestein's opinion that this linguistic division corresponds to a deep-seated sociological, psychological and biological difference between play and contest? Not only does the whole of the anthropological material to be expounded hereafter, militate against

such a conclusion, but so does the linguistic counter-evidence. Over against the languages we have just named we can set a whole series of others, equally discrete, which may be shown to present a wider conception of play. Apart from most of the modern European languages this holds good of Latin, Japanese and at least one of the Semitic tongues.

As to Japanese, Professor Rahder's kind help has enabled me to offer a few remarks. In contrast to Chinese and very like the modern languages of the West, it has a single, very definite word for the play-function and, in conjunction with this, an antonym denoting seriousness. The substantive *asobi* and the verb *asobu* mean: play in general, recreation, relaxation, amusement, passing the time or pastime, a trip or jaunt, dissipation, gambling, idling, lying idle, being unemployed. They also serve for: playing at something (e.g. the fool), representing something, imitation. Noteworthy too is "play" used in the sense of the limited mobility of a wheel, tool or any other structure, just as in Dutch, German and English.[1] *Asobu*, again, means to study under a teacher or at a university, which is reminiscent of the Latin word *ludus* in the sense of school. It can also mean jugglery, i.e. a sham-fight, but not the contest as such: here again there is another if slightly different demarcation between contest and play. Lastly, *asobu* is the word used for those Japanese aesthetic tea-parties where ceramics are passed admiringly from hand to hand amid utterances of approbation. Associations with rapid movement, shining and jesting seem to be lacking here.

A closer investigation of the Japanese conception of play would lead us more deeply into the study of Japanese culture than space allows. The following must suffice. The extraordinary earnestness and profound gravity of the Japanese ideal of life is masked by the fashionable fiction that everything is only play. Like the *chevalerie* of the Christian Middle Ages, Japanese *bushido* took shape almost entirely in the play-sphere and was enacted in play-forms. The language still preserves this conception in the *asobase-kotoba* (literally play-language) or polite speech, the mode of address used in conversation with persons of higher rank. The convention is that the higher classes are merely playing at all they do. The polite form for "you arrive in Tokio" is, literally, "you play arrival in Tokio"; and for "I hear that your father is dead", "I

[1] I could not discover whether there was any influence here of the English technical term.

hear that your father has played dying". In other words, the revered person is imagined as living in an elevated sphere where only pleasure or condescension moves to action.

As against this masking of the aristocratic life behind play, Japanese has a very outspoken idea of seriousness or non-play. The word *majime* is variously rendered by seriousness, sobriety, gravity, honesty, solemnity, stateliness; also quietness, decency, "good form". It is related to the word which we render by "face" in the well-known Chinese expression "to lose face". As an question remains how far such a consciousness is compatible with the ritual act performed in devotion.

In Semitic languages the semantic field of play, as my late friend Professor Wensinck informed me, is dominated by the root *la'ab*, obviously cognate with *la'at*. Here, however, apart from meaning play in its proper sense, the word also means laughing and mocking. The Arabic *la'iba* covers playing in general, making mock of, and teasing. In Aramaic *la'ab* means laughing and mocking. Besides this, in Arabic and Syriac the same root serves for the dribbling and drooling of a baby (to be understood, perhaps, from its habit of blowing bubbles with spit, which can confidently be taken as a form of play). The Hebrew *sahaq* also associates laughing and playing. Lastly, it is worth noting that *la'iba* in Arabic is used for the "playing" of a musical instrument, as in some modern European languages. In Semitic languages, therefore, the play-concept would seem to be of a somewhat vaguer and looser character than in the ones we have examined so far. As we shall see, Hebrew affords striking evidence of the identity between the agonistic and the play principle.

In remarkable contrast to Greek with its changing and heterogeneous terms for the play-function, Latin has really only one word to cover the whole field of play: *ludus*, from *ludere*, of which *lusus* is a direct derivative. We should observe that *jocus*, *jocari* in the special sense of joking and jesting does not mean play proper in classical Latin. Though *ludere* may be used for the leaping of fishes, the fluttering of birds and the plashing of water, its etymology does not appear to lie in the sphere of rapid movement, flashing, etc., but in that of non-seriousness, and particularly of "semblance" or "deception". *Ludus* covers children's games, recreation, contests, liturgical and theatrical representations, and games of chance. In the expression *lares ludentes* it means "dancing". The idea of "feigning" or "taking on the semblance of"

seems to be uppermost. The compounds *alludo*, *colludo*, *illudo* all point in the direction of the unreal, the illusory. This semantic base is barely visible in *ludi* as denoting the great public games which occupied so important a place in Roman life, or in *ludi* in the sense of "schools". The semantic starting-point in the first instance is the contest, in the second—probably—it is "practice".

It is remarkable that *ludus*, as the general term for play, has not only not passed into the Romance languages but has left hardly any traces there, so far as I can see. In all of them—and this necessarily means at a quite early period—*ludus* has been supplanted by a derivative of *jocus*, which extended its specific sense of joking and jesting to "play" in general. Thus French has *jeu*, *jouer*; Italian *gioco*, *giocare*; Spanish *juego*, *jugar*; Portuguese *jogo*, *jogar*; Rumanian *joc*, *juca*; while similar words occur in Catalan, Provençal and Rhaeto-Romanic. We must leave to one side the question whether the disappearance of *ludus* and *ludere* is due to phonetic or to semantic causes.

In modern European languages the word "play" covers a very wide field. As we saw, in both the Romance and the Germanic languages we find it spread out over various groups of concepts dealing with movement or action which have nothing to do with play in the strict or formal sense of the term. Thus, for instance, "play" as applied to the limited mobility of the parts of a mechanism is common to French, Italian, English, Spanish, German and Dutch; also, as we noted above, to Japanese. The play-concept would seem to be covering an ever wider field much larger than that of παίζειν or even of *ludere*; a field in which the specific idea of play is completely submerged in one of light activity and movement. This is particularly observable in the Germanic languages.

These, as we have said above, possess no common word for play. We must take it, therefore, that in the hypothetical archaic Germanic period play had not yet been conceived as a general idea. But as soon as each individual branch of the Germanic languages threw up a word for play, these words all developed semantically in exactly the same way, or rather, this extensive and seemingly heterogeneous group of ideas was understood under the heading of "play".

In the very fragmentary Old Gothic texts that have come down to us—comprising little more than a part of the New Testament—there is no word for play; but from the translation of Mark x, 34:

καὶ ἐμπαίζουσιν αὐτῷ ("and they will mock him") by the words *jah bilaikand ina*, it is tolerably certain that Gothic expressed play by the same *laikan* which has fathered the ordinary word for play in the Scandinavian languages, and which also appears in this sense in Old English and in High and Low German. In the Gothic texts themselves *laikan* only occurs in the sense of "leaping". As we have seen before, rapid movement must be regarded as the concrete starting-point of many play-words. We recall Plato's conjecture that the origin of play lies in the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to leap (*Laws*, ii, 653). Thus in Grimm's German Dictionary the original meaning of the High German substantive *leich* is given as "a lively rhythmical movement", its further significations lying wholly in the play-sphere; while the Anglo-Saxon *lâcan* is given in the concrete sense of "to swing, to wave about" like a ship on the waves, or to "flutter" like birds, or "flicker" like flames. Further, *lâc* and *lâcan*, as with the Old Norse *leikr*, *leika*,[1] serve to describe all kinds of playing, dancing and bodily exercises. In the younger Scandinavian languages *lege*, *leka* is almost exclusively restricted to playing.

The luxurious outcrop of words from the root *spil*, *spel* in the Germanic languages is brought to light in the very detailed articles on Play and Playing by M. Heyne and others in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (x, 1, 1905). The points that matter here are the following. First of all, the connection of the verb with its predicate. Though you can "ein Spiel treiben" in German and "een Spiel doen" in Dutch and "pursue a game" in English, the proper verb is "play" itself. You "play a game", or "spielen ein Spiel". To some extent this is lost in English by the doublet *play* and *game*. Nevertheless the fact remains that in order to express the nature of the activity the idea contained in the noun must be repeated in the verb. Does not this mean that the act of playing is of such a peculiar and independent nature as to lie outside the ordinary categories of action? Playing is no "doing" in the ordinary sense; you do not "do" a game as you "do" or "go" fishing, or hunting, or Morris-dancing, or woodwork—you "play" it.

Another significant point is this. No matter what language we think in we have a constant tendency to tone down the idea of play to a merely general activity connected with play proper only by one of its various attributes, such as lightness, tension and uncertainty as to the outcome, orderly alternation, free choice, etc.

[1]See below.

This tendency can be seen very early on as in the Old Norse *leika*, which has an extraordinarily wide range of meaning, including "to move freely", "to lay hold of", "to cause or effect", "to handle", "to occupy oneself", "to pass the time", "to practise". We have discussed before the use of "play" in the sense of limited mobility or freedom of movement. In this connection the President of the Netherlands Bank said on the occasion of the devaluation of the guilder, quite without any intention of being either poetic or witty, that "in so restricted an area as is now left for it, the Gold Standard cannot play". Expressions like "to have free play", or "to be played out", show that the play-concept is becoming attenuated. This is not so much due to a metaphorical transfer of the idea to concepts other than that of the play-activity proper, as to a spontaneous dissolving of the idea in unconscious irony. It is probably no accident that in Middle High German play (*spil*) and its compounds were much favoured in the language of the mystics; for certain domains of thought have a special demand for these hazy play-terms. Compare Kant's evident predilection for expressions like "the play of imagination", "the play of ideas", "the whole dialectical play of cosmological ideas".

Before we come to the third root of the play-concept in the Germanic languages, i.e. *play* itself, we may note in passing that apart from *lâc* and *plega* Old English or Anglo-Saxon also knew the word *spelian*, but exclusively in the specific sense of "to represent somebody else" or "to take another's place", *vicem gerere*. It is used for instance of the ram which was offered up in the place of Isaac. This connotation, though proper also to "play" in the sense of "playing a part", is not the primary one. We must leave aside the question of how far *spelian* is grammatically connected with the German "spielen", and abstain from discussing the relationship between "Spiel" and the English "spell", "gospel". The ending *-spiel* as in the German "Beispiel" or "Kirchspiel" and the Dutch *kerspel*, *dingspel* (an old judiciary district) is usually derived from the same root as the above English words, and not from "Spiel" (*spel*).

The English "play", "to play" is very remarkable from a semantic point of view. Etymologically the word comes from the Anglo-Saxon *plega*, *plegan* meaning primarily "play" or "to play", but also rapid movement, a gesture, a grasp of the hands, clapping, playing on a musical instrument and all kinds of bodily activity.

Later English still preserves much of this wider significance, e.g. in Shakespeare's Richard the Third, Act IV:

> "Ah, Buckingham, now do I play the touch,
> To try if thou be current gold indeed".

Now, the formal correspondence between the Old English *plegan* and the (continental) Old Saxon *plegan*, the Old High German *pflegan* and the Old Frisian *plega* is complete and beyond doubt. All these words, from which the modern German *pflegen* and the Dutch *plegen* are directly derived, have, however, an abstract sense which is not that of play. The oldest meaning is "to vouch or stand guarantee for, to take a risk, to expose oneself to danger for someone or something".[1] Next comes "to bind or engage oneself (*sich verpflichten*), to attend to, take care of (*verpflegen*)". The German *pflegen* is also used in connection with the performance of a sacred act, the giving of advice, the administration of justice (*Rechtspflege*), and in other Germanic languages you can "pflegen" homage, thanks, oaths, mourning, work, love, sorcery and—lastly but rarely—even "play".[2] Hence the word is mainly at home in the sphere of religion, law, and ethics. Hitherto, on account of the manifest difference of meaning, it has generally been accepted that "to play" and *pflegen* (or its other Germanic equivalents) are etymologically homonymous: deriving from roots alike in sound but different in origin. Our preceding observations allow us to hold a contrary opinion. The difference lies rather in the fact that "play" moves and develops along the line of the concrete while *pflegen* does so along the line of the abstract; both, however, being semantically akin to the play-sphere. We might call it the sphere of ceremonial. Among the oldest significations of *pflegen* occurs the "celebrating of festivals" and "the exhibition of wealth"—whence the Dutch *plechtig*: "ceremonious", "solemn". In form, the German *Pflicht* and the Dutch *Plicht* correspond to the Anglo-Saxon *pliht* (whence the

[1]Cf. J. Franck, *Etymologisch Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, edited by N. van Wijk (Haag, 1912); *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, xii, 1, edited by G. J. Boekenoogen and J. H. van Lessen (Haag-Leiden, 1931).

[2]In one of the songs of Hadewych, nun of Brabant (13th century) there is the following verse:

> Der minnen ghebruken, dat es een spel,
> Dat niemand wel ghetoenen en mach,
> Ende al mocht dies pleget iet toenen wel,
> Hine const verstaen, dies noijt en plach.

Liedeven van Hadewijch, ed. Johanna Snellen (Amsterdam, 1907).
Plegen can here be understood unhesitatingly as play.

English *plight*).[1] While the Dutch and German words mean "duty" and hardly anything else, *pliht* means primarily "peril", secondarily "offence", "fault", "blame", and finally "pledge", "engagement". The verb *plihtan* has the sense of "exposing oneself to danger", "to compromise", "to oblige". As to *pledge*, Mediaeval Latin formed the word *plegium* from the Germanic *plegan*; and *plegium* in its turn became the Old French *pleige*—whence the English *pledge*. The oldest meaning of this is "surety", "warrant", "hostage", hence "gage" in the sense of a challenge or a "wager" ("wage" being a doublet of "gage"), and finally the ceremony of taking on the "engagement", and so "the drinking" of a pledge or of someone's health, a promise or a vow.[2]

Who can deny that in all these concepts—challenge, danger, contest, etc.—we are very close to the play-sphere? Play and danger, risk, chance, feat—it is all a single field of action where something is at stake. One is tempted to conclude that the words *play* and *pflegen* together with their derivatives are not only formally but semantically identical.

This brings us back to the relationship between play and contest, and contest and strife in the more general sense. In all Germanic languages and in many others besides, play-terms are regularly applied to armed strife as well. Anglo-Saxon poetry—to limit ourselves to but one example—is full of such terms and phrases. Armed strife, or battle, is called *heado-lac* or *beadu-lac*, literally "battle-play"; or *asc-plega*, "spear-play". In these compounds we are dealing without a doubt with poetic metaphors, a fully conscious transfer of the play-concept to the battle-concept. The same is true, if less obviously, of the line "Spilodun ther Vrankon" ("there played the Franks") in the Old High German song called the "Ludwigslied", celebrating the victory of the king of West Francia, Ludwig III, over the Norsemen at Saucourt in 881. All the same it would be rash to assert that every use of the word "play" in connection with serious strife is nothing but poetic licence. We have to feel our way into the archaic sphere of thought, where serious combat with weapons and all kinds of contests ranging from the most trifling games to bloody and mortal strife were comprised, together with play proper, in the single

[1]Presumably "plight" in the sense of "pledge", since "plight" meaning "predicament" is held to be an erroneous spelling. Huizinga's own note in this place runs: Cf. *pleoh*, Old Frisian *plê*=danger [Trans.].

[2]With *pledge* in these senses compare the Anglo-Saxon *beadoweg*, *baedeweg*=*poculum certaminis*, *certamen*.

fundamental idea of a struggle with fate limited by certain rules. Seen in this way, the application of the word "play" to battle can hardly be called a conscious metaphor. Play is battle and battle is play.

No illustration of the essential identity of play and battle in archaic culture could be more striking than the one offered in the Old Testament. In the Second Book of Samuel (ii, 14), Abner says to Joab: "Let the young men now arise and play before us" (Vulgate: "Surgant pueri et ludant coram nobis"). "And there came twelve from each side, and they caught every one his fellow by the head and thrust his sword into his fellow's side, so that they fell down together. And the place where they fell was henceforth called the Field of the Strong." The point for us is not whether the tale has any historical foundation or is simply an etymological legend invented to explain the name of a certain locality. The only point that matters is that this action is called play and that there is no mention of its not being play. The rendering of the Vulgate *ludant* is faultless: "let them play". The Hebrew text has here a form of the verb *sahaq*, meaning primarily "to laugh", next "to do something jestingly", and also "to dance". In the Septuagint the wording is as follows: ἀναστήτωσαν δὴ τὰ παιδάρια καὶ παιζάτωσαν ἐνώπιον ἡμῶν. It is clear that there can be no question of poetic licence; the plain fact is that play may be deadly yet still remain play—which is all the more reason for not separating play and contest as concepts.[1] A further conclusion emerges from this. Given the indivisibility of play and battle in the archaic mind, the assimilation of hunting to play naturally follows. We find it everywhere in language and literature and there is no need to dwell upon it here.

When treating of the root of the word "play" (*pflegen*) we discovered that the play-term can occur in the sphere of ceremonial. This is particularly the case with the common Dutch word for marriage—*huwelijk*—which still reflects the Middle Low Dutch *huweleec* or *huweleic* (literally "wedding-play"). Compare also *feestelic* (feast, festival), *vechtelic* (fighting: Old Frisian *fyuchtleek*). All these words are compounds of the root *leik* already discussed, which has yielded the ordinary word for play in the Scandinavian languages. In its Anglo-Saxon form *lâc*, *lâcan* it means, apart from play, leaping, rhythmical movement, also sacrifice, offering, gift,

[1]We may remark in passing that the strange contests between Thor and Loki are called *leika* in the *Gylfaginning*.

favour, even liberality, bounty. The starting-point of this rather curious semantic development is held to lie in such words as *ecgalâc* and *sveorda-lâc*, sword-dance; hence, according to Grimm, in the concept of a solemn, sacrificial dance.[1]

Before concluding our linguistic survey of the play-concept we must discuss some special applications of the word "play", particularly the use of it in the handling of musical instruments. We mentioned earlier that the Arabic *la'iba* bears this sense in common with a number of European languages, namely the Germanic (and some of the Slavonic) which, as far back as their mediaeval phase, designate instrumental skill by the word "play".[2] Of the Romance languages it appears that only French has *jeu* and *jouer* in this sense, which might be taken as an indication of Germanic influence; while Italian uses *sonare*, and Spanish *tocar*. Neither Greek nor Latin has it at all. The fact that "Spielmann" in German ("Speelman" in Dutch) has taken on the connotation "musician" need not be directly connected with the playing of an instrument: "Spielmann" corresponds exactly to *joculator*, *jongleur*, the original wide meaning of which (a performing artist of any kind) was narrowed down on the one hand to the poetic singer and on the other to the musician, and finally to anybody who did tricks with knives or balls.

It is quite natural that we should tend to conceive music as lying within the sphere of play, even apart from these special linguistic instances. Making music bears at the outset all the formal characteristics of play proper: the activity begins and ends within strict limits of time and place, is repeatable, consists essentially in order, rhythm, alternation, transports audience and performers alike out of "ordinary" life into a sphere of gladness and serenity, which makes even sad music a lofty pleasure. In other words, it "enchants" and "enraptures" them. In itself it would be perfectly understandable, therefore, to comprise all music under the heading of play. Yet we know that play is something different, standing on its own. Further, bearing in mind that the term "playing" is never applied to singing, and to music-making only in certain languages, it seems probable that the connecting link between play and instrumental skill is to be sought in the nimble and orderly movements of the fingers.

[1]Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, ed. E. H. Meyer, I (Göttingen, 1875).

[2]Modern Frisian distinguishes between *boartsje* (children's games) and *spylje* (the playing of instruments). The latter has probably been taken over from Dutch.

There is yet another use of the word "play" which is just as widespread and just as fundamental as the equation of play with serious strife, namely, in relation to the erotic. The Germanic languages abound in erotic applications of the word, and it is hardly necessary to cite many examples. German has "Spielkind" (Dutch "speelkind") for a child born out of wedlock; compare also the Dutch "aanspelen" for the mating of dogs, "minnespel" for the act of copulation. In the German words "Laich" and "laichen" ("spawn" and "spawning" of fish), in the Swedish *leka* (coupling of birds), and in the English "lechery" the old Germanic root *leik*, *leikan* still persists. Similar applications hold good in Sanskrit, where *krīdati* (play) is frequently used in the erotic sense: e.g. *krīdaratnam* ("the jewel of games") means copulation. Professor Buytendijk therefore calls love-play the most perfect example of all play, exhibiting the essential features of play in the clearest form.[1] But we must be more particular. If we stick to the formal and functional characteristics of play as summed up earlier it is evident that few of them are really illustrative of the sexual act. It is not the act as such that the spirit of language tends to conceive as play; rather the road thereto, the preparation for and introduction to "love", which is often made enticing by all sorts of playing. This is particularly true when one of the sexes has to rouse or win the other over to copulating. The dynamic elements of play mentioned by Buytendijk, such as the deliberate creation of obstacles, adornment, surprise, pretence, tension, etc., all belong to the process of flirting and wooing. Nevertheless none of these functions can be called play in the strict sense. Only in the dance-steps, the preening and strutting of birds does the real play-element show itself. Caresses as such do not bear the character of play, though they may do on occasion; but it would be erroneous to incorporate the sexual act itself, as love-play, in the play category. The biological process of pairing does not answer to the formal characteristics of play as we postulated them. Language also normally distinguishes between love-play and copulation. The term "play" is specially or even exclusively reserved for erotic relationships falling outside the social norm. As we saw in Blackfoot, the same word *koani* is used for the ordinary playing of children and for illicit sexual intercourse. All in all, therefore, and in marked contrast to the deep-seated affinity between playing and fighting, we feel compelled to regard the

[1] *Op. cit.*, p. 95.

erotic use of the play-term, universally accepted and obvious though it be, as a typical and conscious metaphor.

The conceptual value of a word is always conditioned by the word which expresses its opposite. For us, the opposite of play is *earnest*, also used in the more special sense of *work*; while the opposite of earnest can either be play or jesting, joking. However, the complementary pair of opposites *play-earnest* is the more important. Not every language expresses the contrast as simply or as completely as the Germanic group, where the equivalent of "earnest" is found in German and Dutch, while the Scandinavian languages use *alvara* in precisely the same way. Equally definite is the contrast in Greek between σπουδή and παιδιά. Other languages possess an adjective for the opposite of play, but no noun, as in Latin, for instance, where *serius* has no substantival equivalent. This would appear to indicate that the abstraction of an antonym for play is conceptually incomplete. *Gravitas*, *gravis* can sometimes mean earnest, but are not specific of it. The Romance languages also have to make do with a derivative of the adjective: *serietà* in Italian, *seriedad* in Spanish. French makes the concept substantival only with reluctance—*sériosité* is weak as a word, as also is "seriousness".

The semantic starting-point of the Greek σπουδή lies in "zeal" or "speed", that of *serius* in "heaviness", "weightiness". The Germanic word presents graver difficulties. The original meaning of *ernest*, *ernusi*, *eornost* is generally given as "strife", "struggle". Actually it does mean "struggle" in many cases. The difficulty arises because in the English *earnest* two different forms appear to have coincided, one corresponding to the Old English *(e)ornest*, and the other to the Old Norse *orrusta*, meaning "battle, single combat, pledge or challenge". The etymological identity of these two words is a moot point, so we leave the issue undecided and pass to our general conclusion.

We can say, perhaps, that in language the play-concept seems to be much more fundamental than its opposite. The need for a comprehensive term expressing "not-play" must have been rather feeble, and the various expressions for "seriousness" are but a secondary attempt on the part of language to invent the conceptual opposite of "play". They are grouped round the ideas of "zeal", "exertion", "painstaking", despite the fact that in themselves all these qualities may be found associated with play as well.

The appearance of a term for "earnest" means that people have become conscious of the play-concept as an independent entity—a process which, as we remarked before, happens rather late. Small wonder, then, that the Germanic languages with their very pronounced and comprehensive play-concept, also stressed its opposite so forcefully.

Leaving aside the linguistic question and observing the play-earnest antithesis somewhat more closely, we find that the two terms are not of equal value: play is positive, earnest negative. The significance of "earnest" is defined by and exhausted in the negation of "play"—earnest is simply "not playing" and nothing more. The significance of "play", on the other hand, is by no means defined or exhausted by calling it "not-earnest", or "not serious". Play is a thing by itself. The play-concept as such is of a higher order than is seriousness. For seriousness seeks to exclude play, whereas play can very well include seriousness.