Linear Order in Language Games

Linguistic analyses do not agree as to whether so called language games, secret languages or ludlings have to be dismissed as purely meta-linguistic phenomenon (cf. Dressler 2000, Zwickey & Pullum 1987) or if such forms of speech disguise are built upon specifically linguistic structures and procedures (among others Yip 1982, Piñeros 1998, Yu 2007). I follow the second hypothesis and argue that the processes observable in language games are similar to processes active in natural languages, more specifically, that they are mostly analyzable in a similar fashion as morpho-prosodic processes such as reduplication, infixation and truncation. There is however one wide-spread type of language game which seems to resist analysis in these terms: So called precedence-modifying (Nevins & Endress 2007) or transpositional language games are often described as involving syllable reversal (e.g. Spanish Vesre from al revés, ‘reverse’) or the transposition of subsyllabic constituents like the onset (e.g. Swedish Allspråket: yinter → interyall). This kind of reversal is not commonly found in natural languages where metathesis refers typically to single, adjacent segments (Hume & Mielke 2001). I will present 3 different types of secret languages based on German dialects which exhibit apparent “unnatural” sequence exchange and analyze them as a combination of two prosodically conditioned morphemes with fixed segments overwriting material in the base. This allows us to do without the unnatural reversal operation and to bring these precedence-modifying language games more in line with natural language processes.

PiñEROS, Carlos (1998): Prosodic morphology in Spanish: Constraint interaction in word-formation, Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, Columbus.