

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

This Monday 29th is puzzle day. Whether your favourite kind of puzzle is based on language (crosswords), numbers (sudoku), visual skills (jigsaws) or deduction (an escape room, for example), this is day to be celebrated by challenging yourself and doing a puzzle. Something which we might consider a way of passing the time actually has a very significant role to play in cognitive and evolutionary development. Puzzles allow us to create order from chaos. The training we receive in problem-solving can be directly applicable to the skills we need in our lives and work. Then there's also the question of rewards. The sense of satisfaction when we do solve the puzzle is not accidental your body produces dopamine when you solve a puzzle.

The origin of the word itself is, a puzzle. It appears in English at the end of the 16 century and it's been suggested it's derived from the word meaning to bewilder confound perplex with difficult problems or questions. That word is PUSLE. The use of puzzle to describe a toy contrived to test one's ingenuity dates from the early 19th century. The curious thing for me about puzzles is that they need to be perfectly measured in terms of complexity and solvability. What I mean is that they need to be challenging, we have to feel that it's only by a significant effort that we can finally produce that order from chaos mention earlier but at the same time we need to be sure that it is possible. That's a very fine balance for the puzzlemaker to achieve. As a teacher I have often used puzzles as a pedagogical tool one of my favourites is jigsaw readings. These are readings where three people have different information which, once put together describes a mystery that can then be solved by careful attention to details and comparison of information. What I've noticed over the years is how frustrating it is when the language level is a bit too high for my students to manage. In effect, there is a kind of mismatch between the challenge the puzzle proposes and the skills you can bring to it. Anyone who is trying to understand the complex mathematical explanation of something where they lack the necessary mathematical knowledge will be familiar with this experience I think.

As my particular interest is literature I'd like to think about the puzzle as a literary form and medium. What comes to mind immediately is the detective novel, something which uses but also subverts the relationship between the information and the interpretation that I just mentioned. I'm specifically thinking of the British version associated with Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, rather than the American version with its hard-boiled detectives.

A detective story or murder mystery where we solve the problem before the end is actually deeply unsatisfying. We need to be engaged and curious and puzzled but the final revelation that make sense of the story should come as a surprise. I don't think we enjoy a crossword or a sudoku where there are certain gaps that we are simply unable to fill-in. So why does the literary genre do something different? I suspect the answer has something to do with reassurance. A feeling that when we reach a point where it seems that only chaos exists somebody can show us that order is possible. Life is much more complicated than a jigsaw puzzle and if a good story focuses on those human characteristics that are responsible for dramatic events – love, anger, jealousy, ambition, et cetera and finally shows us that order exists, when we reach a point where we feel there is only chaos, that is enormously

reassuring. It comes as no surprise that the detective in 19th and 20th century fiction often has the same characteristics as a priest. He or she are part of, but separate from a community or society, they are usually loners, they have a deep understanding of human nature but at the same time are distanced and separate from the world they observe. They give us answers and they reassure us that things can be explained, that shocking, disturbing, and apparently random events are part of a pattern and of course, that justice will be done. About twenty years after one eminent Victorian - Charles Darwin had caused people to doubt the Bible's claim to give us answers and explanations, another writer – Arthur Conan Doyle – created a character who seemed to give hope to the idea that human intelligence and the scientific method could substitute religious text. The fact that 150 years later Sherlock Holmes is undiminished in popularity through his many, many versions and reincarnations maybe underlines how much we desire at least the possibility of order in a chaotic world.

Well, I hope you have enjoyed this talk about puzzles. If you have any thoughts about the topic – or examples of puzzles you enjoy, please leave a comment.

Thank you