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NOTES ON GIANNI RODARI AND THE GRAMMAR OF FANTASY

edited by



GIANNI RODARI

Gianni Rodari was an Italian writer and journalist, most famous for his children's books.

First, he started working as a teacher in elementary school. But in the World War II, he decided to work as a journalist in the newspaper "L'Unità". That was when he wrote his first children's works.

After 1950, he dedicated to keep writing children's books that were translated into many foreign languages, but very few in English. His famous works are: "Cipollino", "The book of children's poems", "The Blue Arrow", "Gip in the Television"...

For his lasting contribution as a children's writer he received the biennial Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1970 and many consider him Italy's most important twentieth-century children's author. This biennial award in literature is the highest recognition to any writer of children's books.

He is perhaps best known for developing the story of *Cipollino*. The story of *Cipollino* was popular enough to have a ballet staged in the Soviet Union in 1973, composed by Karen Khachaturian and choreographed by Genrik Alexandrovich Maierov. Cipollino, or Little Onion, fights the unjust treatment of his fellow vegetable townfolk by the fruit royalty (Prince Lemon and the overly proud Tomato) in the garden kingdom. The main theme is the "struggle of the underclass and the powerful, good versus evil" and the importance of friendship in the face of difficulties.

Gianni Rodari was not only the author of many beloved children's books, he was also an educator and activist who truly understood the power of the imaginative life. In **The Grammar of Fantasy** Rodari presents numerous and wonderful techniques for creating stories. He discusses these specific techniques in the context of the imagination, fairy tales, folk tales, children's stories, cognitive development, and compassionate education. Gianni Rodari was one of the founders of the innovative educational approach that began in Reggio Emilia, Italy, and is now making itself felt throughout the U.S. The Grammar of Fantasy grew out of a series of informal workshops that Rodari conducted for the teachers of Reggio Emilia.

The Grammar of Fantasy: An Introduction to the Art of Inventing Stories (1973)

*“Reality can be entered through the main door,
or it can be slipped into through a window, which is much more fun”*

Rodari believed that stories lie in the connections between objects or concepts that belong to completely different worlds, and seemingly have nothing to do with each other. This idea lies at the heart of the following activity: The teacher asks two children to each write a word (noun) on opposite sides of the board. One can either give free choice or direct children to write animate nouns on one side, and inanimate nouns on the other. This may be repeated until there are two longer lists of words on the board. The educator then invites the students to come up with a story that features two words, one from each list. It's important to encourage the students to be adventurous and find connections in apparently absurd combinations. One way to do this is to find connections between these words through prepositions. If, for example, the two words are "chicken" and "cabinet", the teacher could write the following connections on the board: The chicken on the cabinet; the chicken in the cabinet; the chicken under the cabinet; the chicken's cabinet, etc. A way to guide children through a set plot structure is to suggest they build the story in three parts: first something good happens to the chicken with/and the cabinet, then something bad happens, but in the end everything turns out well when another good thing happens.

Why do we love it so much? Rodari was funny, smart and he truly understood kids. He packed this book with ideas, games, stories, random thoughts and serious buffoonery.

In his preface, Rodari writes:

"I hope this small book can be useful for all those people who believe it is necessary for the imagination to have a place in education; for all those who trust in the creativity of children; and for all those who know the liberating value of the word".

Later he says:

"In our schools there is too little laughter, if I may generalize. The idea that the education of a mind must be a dismal affair is among the most difficult things to overcome."

He writes about the fantastic binomial, taking two unrelated items to make a story. When he was a teacher, he'd have a kid write a word on one side of a two-sided blackboard and another kid write on the other side, at the same time.

Then they would create a story from those two. He talks about story logic: for example, a character made of wood has to be careful around fire.

We can find great games in this book, such as "Little Red Riding Hood in a helicopter." Take a familiar story and add an unfamiliar element, then see what happens. Or "Fairy tale salad" where the characters from one story meet those of another.

He was a puppeteer at a few times in his life. Here's something he says about puppets: The true language of the puppets and marionettes is in their movement. They are not made for long monologues or dialogues. If Hamlet recites his monologue in a puppet play, there must be at the very least a devil who from time to time tries to steal the skull and to replace it with a tomato. On the other hand, a single puppet can maintain a dialogue for hours with its audience of children without tiring them, if it knows how to do this.

In **The Grammar of Fantasy**, written in beautiful, accessible and poetic language, a teacher who wants to learn how to help children make stories has here all the tools she or he needs.

Playing with language is something that comes easily to some of us. It feels like a gift, like perfect pitch. But Gianni Rodari shows us how to invite others into the games we play with language. He tried this out at Diana School in Reggio Emilia and gave a series of lectures there in 1972. This book tells us some of the stories he made up, but far more important shows us the process of making up stories, by oneself, in a group, and giving the tools to the children so they can do it also. Their stories are quite perfect, and, like children's drawing and painting, have a quality which charms both adults and children in the audience.

Schools have traditionally relegated imagination to a very small place, valuing memory and attention much more highly. This book leads us into imagination. It shows us how we can help children use their images — pictures in their minds which have importance and meaning to them — and make wonderful creations from them.

So Rodari talks about "The Fantastic Binomial" that is, the ability of the mind, given two words that normally are not related, say, streetcar and refrigerator, to make a connection, a story, that is satisfying.

Children can do this too, as is illustrated in the book with stories about "light and shoes" and "dog and closet". What would the children in your class do, if presented with such word-pairs?

And he talks about hypotheses: What if a lion walked into the police station? And *fairytale salad* What if Cinderella bumped into Tom Thumb on the way to meeting the wolf, what then?

What we have in **The Grammar of Fantasy** is a map into a world neglected in most schooling, but not at campfires nor at bedtimes in "nurturant" homes. We have the enchantment of story and the science of story connected. People have made up stories for very good reasons and need them as surely as we need food and drink. When schooling avoids storytelling, the schooling maladapts us for being human.

When Rodari helps us see connections between science or math and story, he helps us knit our lives back together. When he helps us see how education and art come together, he helps us do our jobs well.

Rodari says: "By using stories and those fantastic methods that produce them, we help children to enter reality through the window instead of through the door. It is more fun. Therefore, it is more useful."

THE STONE IN THE POND

Rodari compares the word to a stone thrown in the pond. Like it, a word "thrown into the mind at random" produces waves, it causes an endless series of chain reactions, involving experience, memory, fantasy and the unconscious because the mind does not passively assist to the representation, but it co-creates it. For example: the Italian word "sasso" (in English "stone") refers to all the words that begin with "s", those that rhyme with "asso", and many others. But for Rodari the word "sasso" reminds him also the Sanctuary of *Santa Caterina del Sasso* and the friend with whom he visited it. His flow of thoughts continues, like the sinking stone, and Rodari remembers his friend, his life, the experiences lived together. This shows how "any word, chosen at random, can function as a magic word to dig up fields of memory that lay under the dust of time". Since here we are talking about creating stories for and with children, this interests us not so much as a cue for writing stories about our memories, but as a demonstration of the "fantastic theme" that can arise from a single word when we leave it free to define strange combinations. Rodari makes the example of "mattone (in English "brick"), which brings with it the word "canzone" ("song"), and builds an absurd but well-formed story about these words, linked together by instinctive combinations, and not by logic. In an almost unconscious way, in this little story the images come from other rhymes ("mattone" - "prigione", in English "brick" - "prison"), and literary suggestions of ancient and recent readings. Then Rodari takes the word "sasso" and builds acronyms that form a meaningful sentence.

S - Sulla (On the)

A - Altalena (Swing)

S - Saltano (Jump)

S - Sette (Seven)

O - Oche (Geese)

From this sentence, from this image, it is possible to create a story and Rodari admits to have used this method several times to find inspiration. He encourages the use of this method because it is at the service of children: he does not use them to measure what they know, but he helps them to imagine.

THE WORD “CIAO”

After Rodari had explained the acronym method in Reggio Emilia, one of the teachers present at the course asked her students to use it to invent a story starting from the word "ciao" (in English "hello"). A five-year-old child creates a story in which the protagonist becomes ill because he can only say bad words, until he finds the beautiful word "ciao" that makes him becoming good.

During the tale in the classroom, the reference to the "bad" words triggers in the children what Rodari calls "the excrement comedy" and the pupils begin to list all the bad words they know. For them it is a game of associations that travels on what Jakobson calls "axis of selection", or the axis that connects words that are close by meaning. The children also intervene at another point in the story, the one in which the visit to the doctor is mentioned. Here they have fun finding the strangest directions ("look inward"), in a game that is already theater, "it is the minimal unit of dramatization."

The interesting thing for Rodari is that, in creating their story, the children did not focus on the meaning or the sound of "ciao", but on the identity of "ciao" as a word and built on that, by identifying and contrasting the "ugly" and "beautiful" words, the "short" and "long" words. When they talk about the length of the words, the children indicate it with both the hands, taking up the action of a publicity of the time. Rodari interprets this action as an act of appropriation, which starts from the television and turns into a spark of creativity.

The bad words of the story are not only swear words, but also "what a bore!" and "manage yourself!". Thanks to the values of the non-repressive Reggio Emilia School, the children have understood by themselves that these words are negative, because they distance the others. "The mind has arrived to this result by reacting to its own images, by judging them and governing the associations with the contribution of the whole small community in action".

“LIGHT” AND “SHOES”

Rodari reports the story invented by a group of five-year-old children: a child steals shoes from his father and as a punishment he is attached to the light, turning himself into a lamp that switches off only if the shoes are removed. In this story, Rodari notes various things:

the psychological meanings linked to the figure of the father, the child's game of putting on the shoes of a parent that allows children to immerse themselves in another identity, but above all the image of the child similar to a lighted lamp because it is attached to the current. According to Rodari, this analogy was not immediately revealed, but arose on the axis of the "verbal selection", from the echo generated by the "attached" word. "The verbal analogy and the non-pronounced rhyme triggered the analogy of the visual image" in a work of "condensation of images" that Freud described by studying the creative processes of the dream.

In this case, the main narrator is the detonator of an explosion that involves everyone ("amplification") and all the other children participate in finding variations on the theme by analogy (the father tries to "switch off" the son turning his head, crushing his nose, ...). Children seek ideas by observing the bodies of the other children, the present intervenes in the story. The gestures are listed in rhyme, they have a rhythm.

The final solution, as a logical conclusion, breaks the dream: the father takes off his shoes to the child who goes out. There was a magical element (shoes) that triggered the situation and it was sufficient to delete it to make it all back as before. Children discover reversibility as a metaphor, not yet as a concept.

Lastly, Rodari notes that the story embodies traditional values, as it tells of a punished disobedience, and concludes by noting how in this short story they find space the unconscious with its conflicts, the experience, the memory, the ideology, the word in all its functions. (Exactly as he said while talking about the stone in the second chapter).

THE CREATIVE MISTAKE

Another thing that can take flight to fantasy is the misspelling and the stories that arise in this way can have comical implications: the Lapponia ("Lapland") turns into the juicy village of "Lamponia" (lampone=raspberry), the Lago ("Lake") of Garda becomes L'ago ("the needle") of Garda.

Many of the mistakes that children make are autonomous creations, inspired by phonetic or semantic association, which they need to assimilate an unknown reality. This is how the "pasticchina" (the little pill) becomes a "mastichina" (a little mastication).

In every mistake lies the possibility of a story. For example, writing "casa" (home) with two "s" offers the opportunity to invent a story about a man who lives in a "cassa" (box). From one word, we can obtain many mistakes, that is many stories. We can invent from mistakes. Also, laughing at mistakes is the first way to get rid of them.

The exploitation of the mistake, voluntary or involuntary, is an interesting and subtle case of the now known *fantastic binomial*. The meaning of the "wrong" element can only be inferred from the meaning of the first: this is how "Quore" (Cuore = Heart) is a sick "heart" that needs a dose of vitamin C.

OLD GAMES

The search for the fantastic theme can also take place through games already practiced by the surrealists, such as cutting out newspaper headlines and mixing them together to get news of absurd, sensational or simply entertaining events. These compositions can just entertain, or offer the opportunity to create a story. "Technically, the game pushes the process of "estrangement" of words to extreme consequences and gives rise to real chains of fantastic binomials".

Another game is "the question and answer cards": you write a list of "questions that already configure events in series, that is a narrative" (for example, Who...? Where...? What ...? ...), then you give the list to the first of the group who answers the first question, folds the sheet so that nobody can see what he/she has answered and gives the sheet to the second who answers the second question, and so on. The answers are then read one after the other as if it were a story. Even here, you can just laugh at it or turn it into a story. The same procedure can be applied to compose a multi-hand drawing.

The important thing about this game is not the result, but the discoveries that take place at every step, when each component interprets in his own way what was designed by those who preceded him. Umberto Eco would call him "bustle of meaning". Moreover, if that drawing becomes a story, it is the words that continue the game and there is once again a movement from nonsense to meaning.

Rodari reiterates once again that "the stimulus of imagination also arises in this game from the intuition of a new bond between two elements brought into contact by chance".

They can be "forms of expression" or "forms of content", but the binary rhythm remains at the bottom of their exchanges. "The empire of dialectics expands over the territories of imagination".

POPULAR FAIRIES AS RAW MATERIAL

Fairy tales were the raw material of many fantastic procedures: just think about Perrault, Calvino, the commercial exploitation of Disney. The Grimms transcribed them, recording their names in the history; Andersen wrote them, reliving and redeeming through them his childhood in a fantastic binomial of "fairy tales and I" till finding his own language. Even in Collodi's "Pinocchio" one perceives the substratum of the traditional Tuscan fairy tale, but once again the result is a composite material. "The Grimms, Andersen and Collodi were - on the fairytale side - among the great liberators of children's literature from the edifying tasks that its origins (linked to the birth of the popular school) had assigned it". Andersen took the characters out of the limbo of "no time" and put them into the present. Collodi made children the protagonists. And they were innovators without perhaps knowing it and certainly without the widespread knowledge of the fairy-tale heritage that we have today. Rodari counts on this and begins to illustrate some fantastic games to "treat" the classic fairy tales.

AT GETTING THE STORIES WRONG

This game consists in telling a known story but in being intentionally wrong in some of its parts (Little Yellow Riding Hood, instead of Red). It can be done by anyone and at any time, but you have to play it at the right time. Children are conservatives regarding stories: they always want to listen to the same ones, they want to recognize them and be reassured by the fact that the world they are giving shape to is still there and that step by step they will manage to build it. Listening to the changes they can get annoyed because they don't know how to react (the new character is good or bad?). When that story has exhausted its value for them, then they will be ready to let it go and will accept the changes. The novelty becomes pleasant because it leads them to challenge each other, to discover that they are able to jump into the void.

This game can be therapeutic because it helps the children to get free from certain fixations: it defrauds and ridicules things that before were scary, it establishes a boundary between real and imagined things.

Rodari also points out that those who "mistake" the story must first perform a true analysis of the fairy tale and do it in the points that characterize and structure it, not in the changes from one significant node to another.

FAIRY TALES IN REVERSE

"A variant of the game of making mistakes in stories consists of a premeditated and more organic reversal of the fairy tale theme". Little Red Riding Hood becomes bad and the Wolf becomes good, Tom Thumb wants to abandon his parents and so on ... The reversal can be applied to one or more elements of the story. The stories originating from the overthrow of historical facts are particularly funny.

WHAT HAPPENED AFTER

Since we know the characters and what has happened to them, we can play to invent what happens after the end of the story. The fantastic binomial consists of two elements of the fairy tale that are analyzed at an intuitive level and then readapted. This happens easily when the children wonder what happened to a certain element that particularly struck them ("privileged theme"), such as "What happens to the boots of *The Cat with boots?*". Imagination continues through "inertia" and becomes an autonomous reverie which must then be rationalized into a story.

SALAD OF FAIRYTALES

Mix different fairy tales, "choosing a new road that will be, in some way, the diagonal of the two forces acting on the same point". Then Pinocchio becomes the eighth dwarf of Snow White and the clash of the two energies forces the stories to recompose themselves in a new result.

The *fantastic binomial* in this case is made up of two proper names: two proper fairy-tale names.

THE CHILD WHO LISTENS TO THE FAIRY TALES

We can only assume how it is the experience of three or four year old children to whom the mother reads or narrates a fairy tale ("axis of listening"). At this age the content may not have any value at all. Surely, the fairy tale represents a way for the children to keep the adult with them. When they want a second one, the request could simply be an attempt to prolong the enjoyable experience of the exclusive moment with that adult. Perhaps this is why they always ask the same story, so that they can concentrate not on the story but on the observation of the adult.

Their mother's voice tells them about Little Red Riding Hood, but above all it tells them about the mother herself. The children are interested in the content and its forms, in the forms of expression, but also in the substance of expression, that is, in the nuances of the maternal voice, in its ability to transmit tenderness and dissolve the fears.

Almost simultaneously, there is the pleasure of the contact with the mother tongue, its words, its forms, its structures. The learning and structuring of the mother tongue in the infant brain is still explained only by theories, but what matters to us is that the fairy tale is a very important linguistic activity for its development.

The fairy tale serves to build mental structures, to define relationships like "I / the others" or "real / invented things", to take distances in space ("far / near") and in time ("once / now", "before / after").

(Evidently Rodari, despite having previously quoted Bruner, had not read his essays on the narrative mind. He would have been fascinated by it.)

As Calvino wrote in the preface of *The Italian Fairy Tales*, the fairy tale is also an initiation to humanity, it offers a vast repertoire of characters and destinies. To the criticism that fairy tales depict an archaic world now obsolete, Rodari replies that they are not made for imitation, but for contemplation, and the children know it. They will get disinterested in fairy tales in a natural way, when they reach the phase in which they are more interested in content than in form.

When they listen to a fairy tale, the children contemplate its structure and at the same time they put the basis for developing their own stories.

Listening to a fairy tale is a training: children need it to commit themselves, to know themselves, to measure themselves (with fear, for example). Fairy tales are often criticized for their horror content but it all depends on the conditions in which they meet the scary elements. If it's the mother's voice that evokes the monster, in the safety and peace of the house, the children can challenge it without fear. They can "play to be afraid", a fundamental game for building their defence mechanisms. If the fear of the children is agonizing and exaggerated, the fairy tale has probably awakened it but it is not the cause: it was already inside of him. The story of *Tom Thumb* told by the mother is not scary. If it is told while the mother is away from home, it might be frightening. Or if it is told to a child to whom it happened to wake up, to call his mother and not see her arriving, it can be scary. The "decoding" of the fairy tales is based on very personal laws and it is important to keep it in mind.