

Approaching Writing Skills through Fairy Tales

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Why Fairy Tales?

When I was asked to choose a topic for a seminar for second year students of English I thought of a way of combining linguistics with the teaching of writing skills. At that stage my ideas were still unclear and all I knew was that I had to select a text type which could be analysed and discussed at first and then serve as a model.

The aim of the whole second year course is to understand that language is a communicative instrument that can be adapted to different interactional and transactional situations. Consequently, learning something about the nature of the language as a semiotic system involves conscious reflection and understanding, but it is through reflection and the development of more specific knowledge about the language that the skills and competence to use it more proficiently can be generated (McCarthy & Carter 1990). This is of course a long-term aim, but our immediate, short-term goal was to develop the students' sensitivity to textual appropriateness and communicative efficiency. Communication takes on so many different forms, each of which has its own distinctive qualities, which depend on the people with whom we talk and on the different purposes for which we talk.

Susan George, professor of English language and linguistics and responsible for the second year, proposed I took up fairy tales thanks to her own positive experience both in Pisa and in Camerino. I was enthusiastic at the idea, although still looking for a connection between them and linguistics.

On the one hand fairy tales are a well established, typical text, with distinctive thematic and formal features (Pisanty 1993: 27; Lavinio 1993: 15-21). However, despite their typicality, fairy tales allow more scope for creativity than other text-types, and, what is even more important, they can touch a place deep within our subconscious. They are much more than just stories: they are teachings that have been handed down from generation to generation, from which people learn about both the dark and bright sides of life. And I nursed the hope that they would delight us, stimulate our imagination and call up memories from our own childhood.

Which Fairy Tales?

I had to pick a model which would be our reference text, something we could analyse, dissect, tear into pieces and still love as something which has and will stay with us forever. So I opened my book of memory and... out came Little Red Riding Hood.

I chose it because it is a tale that is heard around the world. Perhaps it is the prototypical fairy tale everyone has in mind.

When I began to collect some material for the seminar I was scarcely aware of the number of different versions that spread out after the first medieval legends. I was of course acquainted with both Perrault's tale and the version by the Grimm Brothers, but I had no idea whatsoever that the basic plot elements of LRRH can also be found in tales from Japan, China and Korea.

Jack Zipes (1982) has collected many versions of the tale, from the first literary versions to the present-day politically correct adaptations. He has also commented on the history of LRRH's textual development through centuries, by comparing texts with their illustrations. He has shown that their referential systems are strongly interlinked and in fact, in most cases, signs which belong to two different codes reinforce each other to the point that images become signifiers of the signified text. I have heavily relied on Zipes's anthology, first of all because it provided me with a reference model of a viable teaching path. Secondly, it was from this collection that I selected the traditional versions by Perrault and the Grimms, Anneliese Meinert's *Little Red Cap '65*, Anne Sexton's poem *Red Riding Hood*, Rodari's *Little Green Riding Hood*. I also included Angela Carter's two tales about LRRH, *The Company of Wolves* and *The Werewolves*. But apart from the debt I owe to Zipes, I drew most of my material from the Web. It was surfing here and there that I came across many interesting, exciting sites devoted to fairy tales. Some of them display research projects that are going on at different universities around the world: "Little Red Riding

Hood" (<http://www.southwestern.edu/lewisv/fairytales/redridinghood.html>) and "Little Red Riding Hood Project" (<http://www-dept.usm.edu/~engdept/lrrh/lrrhhome.htm>). Both of them are about LRRH, but whereas the former collects the traditional versions by Perrault and the Grimms and two medieval Italian versions (*The False Grandmother* and *The Wolf and the Three Girls*), the latter gathers many texts and adaptations, as well as comments, references to important criticism and a selection of other major links in the Internet. This generous, free corpus of resources provided me with some other interesting texts, such as Roald Dahl's poem *Little Red Riding Hood And The Wolf*, the politically correct version of LRRH (from *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* by James Finn Garner), and an Italian oral version entitled *The False Grandmother* (with a parallel English/Italian version).

Despite significant differences in language and tone, all the versions share some dominant themes. This may explain why LRRH is so widespread around the world: it is about many basic human themes, such as initiation to independence, family ties, obedience or disobedience to parents, female pubescence, sexuality and/or rape, social order versus nature, female or male heroism, death and rejuvenation, gluttony and even cannibalism. On identifying such themes one might ask a question: are fairy tales like this for children or for adults? Some associations in the U.S. have found some of the classical fairy tales too overtly sexual or even subversive and have therefore proposed blacklisting them. As Fromm (1957) and Bettelheim (1976) have pointed out, erotic material has been present in folk and fairy tales from the very beginning. The Grimm brothers themselves consciously adapted the tales they had collected to make them more innocent and less erotic than the popular versions. They also restored a happy ending to LRRH, which both the folktales and Perrault's version do not have.

In any case, Little Red Riding Hood lives on, because it can talk to anybody, especially on account of the fact that fairy tales may be read at many different levels, and so it opens many stimulating topics to discussion.

During the seminar I also distributed copies of other popular tales by Perrault, the Grimms and Andersen. I wanted my students to have a small corpus of fairy tales to read and analyse for themselves, where they could go and check the appropriateness of their own creations. Despite the differences in style, these texts are all traditional, literary tales. So, since I did not want to prevent the students from writing modern stories, at the risk of infringing the limits of the genre (which sometimes happened), I also gave them examples of modern narrative. They were some of the stories written by Roald Dahl, which display different strategies and technique devised to appeal to a present day audience.

Which Approach?

As I have briefly touched upon above, my aim was to find a method of text criticism that could bear some systematic relation to the development of linguistic and, more in particular, writing skills in students, and which might also be re-applied whenever analysing a text, be it spoken, written, literary or non literary.

In spite of what is rather commonly stated, I think that the study of a language and its functioning mechanisms (linguistics), and literary texts (in this case fairy tales, as a literary genre) are not mutually inimical, but can and should rather supplement each other as integral stages in the development of both language and textual awareness. So the employment of a linguistic framework in the reading of fairy tales was meant to produce an inventory of the recursive linguistic forms available in that type of text but also to isolate the relevant features of the genre, such as the situation, i.e. the writer-audience relationship, the informative structure, the level of formality, the ratio between narrative and dialogic text chunks, etc. Yet, this type of categorisation usually runs the risk of oversimplifying texts in order to make them fit into some preordained framework. So I did not start by giving any theoretical framework to my students. On the contrary, we tried to elaborate regularities from the texts we read together, and eventually interpret deviations as instances in which the author had broken the rule for creative purposes. The reasons were the following:

1. I did not want to impose a fixed model which could later on curb the students' creativity and inventiveness;
2. text-internal features are not important in themselves but in relation to other contextual parameters such as the audience and the aim of the genre (cf. the notion of genres as processes in Benison 1998);
3. genres are themselves dynamic objects that vary according to the needs of social systems. Therefore new genres arise and others take on different features over time. So it would be more precise to conceive genres as points along a continuum, with some of them so near to one another that it becomes difficult to identify which is which.

The selection of one text type only was constrained by the fact that I wanted my students to develop a good awareness of at least one textual world. Therefore, exposure to many different text types would have probably resulted in less competence, less sensitivity, or

would have required more time. The main criteria for choosing fairy-tales were usefulness and the feasibility of application, for my students are students of languages and literature, and are expected to produce well-written texts and critical essays. Through my choice, I hoped to contribute to their general curriculum, so that they might re-use what they learned in other courses, especially in written exams (e.g. the critical/literary essay in third/fourth year exams). Our workshop was meant to analyse, anatomise texts to discover their inner mechanism, and to understand which elements one has to employ to achieve certain communicative functions. Apart from the immediate goal of increasing proficiency in the written language, the pedagogical value of the second year project was to "sensitize students to rhetorical effects, and to the rhetorical structures that tend to recur in genre-specific texts" (Swales 1990: 213). Once they had developed such an interpretative model, they could easily transfer it to other fields. During the seminar students wrote both narratives and commentaries, which varied from critical evaluations to linguistic analyses of texts. In this way their competence in both these contrasting genres was regularly exercised.

Which Narrative Features?

Fairy tales belong to the wider category of the narrative genre, which has been extensively analysed from many different viewpoints (Eco 1979; Marchese 1983; Pugliatti 1985; Labov 1972; Levorato 1988). Yet, they distinguish themselves especially for the relationship between writer and audience. In fairy tales communication is asymmetrical, consisting in an adult author or teller who tells his tale to an audience or readership made up of one or more children. The aim of the genre, of sub-genre, is to teach by delighting the child, which often, if not always, implies transporting him into the world of the tale. Therefore the author arranges his reader's textual journey before it actually starts.

Like any other kind of narrative and also like any form of formal organisation, fairy tales are able to exploit the features of the medium they use. In particular, all verbal narratives exploit the characteristics of language by way of encoding narrative form in linguistic form. One of the clearest cases of encoding of narrative form in linguistic form is the use of initial/final fixed phrases. Traditional folk tales, which belong to the oral tradition, count on some outstanding characteristics, that is to say all the possibilities of speech, such as prosodic phonology, intonation, the use of pauses, rhythm, the different qualities of voice, as well as on paralinguistic codes, among which gestures, mimicry, eye contact and so on. Written narratives cannot exploit all the devices of oral story telling, but have developed an independent tradition of narrating with its own techniques. This is one of the first aspect one must be aware of when dealing with narratives, and for this reason we started by comparing the strategies of oral and written tale-telling (Lavinio 1990, 1993).

As for the content, it was essential to grasp the basic nucleus of the plot, which corresponds to the macro-structure (van Dijk 1977). The macro structure of a narrative constitutes its line of development from the beginning to the end and does not depend on the way in which events are narrated, but must be reconstructed after reading the text. Macro-structures and story-lines (a subtype of the more general category of macro-structures) are often elaborated *a priori* by the author, who has the whole narrative in mind before writing, and *a posteriori* by the addressee, who on the contrary processes information during the act of reading and retains only the most basic pieces. The act of narration does not necessarily follow a strict chronological order: quite the contrary, authors strategically exploit the dimension of time and often call their readers to co-operate in the construction of meaning.

The basic characteristic of a story-line is that it usually involves some initial difficulty and a final resolution. Each narrative consists of a number of episodes and sub-episodes that make up the story line. Labov (1972) identified various components of the story line, among which the *complication* and the *resolution*. He also distinguished other stages: the *abstract*, which announces the topic of the story; the *orientation*, which introduces the setting of the narrative; and the *coda*, which is placed at the end and can therefore perform different functions. It can in fact comment on the events and provide the audience with a moral lesson, or signal that the narrative has come to an end and it is time to move back to reality. Clearly, not all stories have all these ingredients, but *complication* and *resolution* are essential. Resolution in particular, despite its variable significance in different stories, always brings forth a new state of affairs where order has been re-established, "by the righting of the [initial] wrong" (Fabba 1997:165). In LRRH *complication* corresponds to the meeting with the wolf and *resolution* to the killing of the wolf in the Grimms' version and to the moral teaching in Perrault's one, which is not a proper resolution, since the girl dies and the moral may only warn other children. The identification of the main stages is an important help when students begin to write their own stories. In this way they can rely on a schematic framework and move from simple to more complicated narratives.

When we analysed LRRH we agreed on a macro-structural plot, made up of the main stages in the narrative, and then checked if this plot could be successfully applied to the adaptations and re-writings. In many cases the texts did not follow the same stages, so we just ticked those which were present, but for other texts we had to add extra stages, especially to be able to consider fundamental details. It should also be remembered that stages can overlap and/or some categories may have blurred margins and extend over the whole narrative. This is the case of *evaluation*, in which the narrator often comments on the *resolution* and expresses his view on the

significance of the story (Fabb 1998: 167). This does not necessarily occur through a moral since, as Labov (1972) and others have noticed, narrators more frequently intersperse evaluative comments throughout their narratives with varying degrees of explicitness.

Which Linguistic Features?

Turning now back to the linguistic features, it is worth bearing in mind that any narrative piece is conceived to be communicated to an audience, who must be able to follow it and understand its meaning. The linguistic form of a narrative depends partly on the genre and partly on the audience for whom it is written.

In the telling of a tale, linguistic form communicates a part of the information and may provide evidence for it. Our reading of fairy tales was mainly aimed to identify the most recursive, outstanding features of the genre and the most frequent ways of encoding and grading information in linguistic form (Taylor Torsello 1997). The procedure of scanning texts for significant patterns is text oriented and its major purpose is to help students to get at their own interpretation of phenomena without offering them theoretical models and metalinguistic terminology beforehand. Once they had identified and understood the textual aspects on which we had concentrated, it was easier for them to learn a metalanguage for text description. My students indeed discovered things for themselves and thanks to their active role were able to re-apply the same devices when creating their own texts.

As I have already pointed out, one of the clearest cases of encoding of narrative meaning in some fixed phrases is the opening and closing formula "once upon a time" and "lived happily ever after". These expressions indicate the threshold between reality and the narrative world and vice versa. So they both belong to the narrative agreement which each writer establishes with his audience (Eco 1979; Pugliatti 1985). With this pact the reader engages himself to "suspend his disbelief" and not to question the possible oddities he will find (e.g. talking animals, spells). This feature is also reinforced by the constant use of third person narration, "not [to] arouse any doubt in the receiver's mind about the real nature of the supernatural events that he is presented with" (Pisanty 1995: 132).

Along with these ritual formulas, fairy tales make extensive use of repetitions of both expressions and events (stereotypical numbers, binary or ternary rhythm; see Pisanty 1993: 31 ff.; Lavinio 1990: 144). This cohesive device is not only helpful in making the text easier for the audience to understand, but is most of all a trace which oral tradition has left in the literary tale. All these recursive mechanisms were essential to the storyteller as long as they gave him time to think, recollect ideas or even invent brand new episodes. In the meantime, they eased the task of the hearers by refreshing their memory and giving them some basis for future predictions. The ability of a storyteller consisted in weaving together episodes which were typecast so that the final outcome was not particularly original for its narrative material, but for the way in which such material was organized. Redundant structures are still one of the main features of written fairy tales and perform a function that is practically identical to the one of oral narratives: they allow the addressees to get a tight grip on the narrative world and impose on them a minimal co-operative effort. They also contribute to the processing of information, for they reproduce shared information that may serve as a common basis on which unshared information hinges. As Taylor Torsello demonstrates (1997: 138), fairy tale writers usually organize information within texts so that "structure [...] perfectly reflects the actual knowledge set". In other words, writers write their stories starting from children's knowledge sets and not from their own.

Some other formal features include the absence of detailed descriptions. Both people and objects are rather sketchily outlined, usually through a single attribute, to achieve semantic clarity and uniqueness and avoid psychological complications (Luthi 1947; Lavinio 1994). This feature has again been inherited from the oral folk tale where action prevailed over description. The result is that in fairy tales characters may undergo moral development, but they do not change physically, nor do they grow old. Both the temporal and spatial dimensions are either obliterated or exaggerated: sometimes the tale world is not identified and events take place in an undetermined nowhere at an unspecified time. Other times the author provides the narrative with some spatial or temporal information, which is nonetheless indeterminate: it may be the case of hyperbolic distances ("he walked for hundreds of miles") and extended time (e.g. a hundred-year slumber). There is nonetheless no gap between story and plot (Propp 1966), because oral narratives followed an ideal linear axis of development. Writing (and modern literature in general) can rely on a physical space, the page, which can be visualized, and can therefore make use of temporal deviations. Finally, as I have briefly hinted at above, the presence of the narrator is hidden under the mask of third person narration, but his voice is frequently heard as he breaks in and comments on what is happening in the hope of influencing his readers' response. The conative function (Jakobson 1966) was much more developed in the oral folk tale because the telling of the tale was a collective action in which the storyteller led the narration and his audience actively contributed by posing questions, suggesting changes, and making comments (Zipes 1979).

Another interesting feature is connected to the use of different tenses. As Weinrich (1964) clearly points out, verbal tenses function as indices that guide addressees and help them to discover basic information such as linguistic attitude, perspective and focus. Tenses may

be either "commentative" or "narrative": in the first case a commentative attitude is associated to a deep involvement of the speaker, and consequently of his addressees, in the world he describes. In English the present perfect is an example of commentative verb. Narrative verbs (e.g. the English past tense) convey a more detached attitude. Perspective is concerned with the temporal sequence in the narrative, so tenses are classified into two categories, the retrospective, which point to the past, and the perspective, which point to the future. Focus is instead the dimension that regulates the perceptual evidence of information through verbs. There are in fact verbs that describe background actions (cf. Italian *imperfetto*) and verbs that outline more salient events. In English the choice is more limited, because there is no tense corresponding to Italian *imperfetto*, French *imparfait*, or German *Präteritum*, so the expression of salience is entrusted to other means. After all the defectiveness of the English verbal paradigm turns out to be positive, for the massive use of past tense in fairy tales (apart from a few occurrences of "commentative" verbs, when the author crops up) makes the students' task very much easier.

As for the content, it must be observed that it is not often extraordinary in itself: ordinary objects coexist with supernatural ones. When everyday objects are inserted in a fantastic world they lose their real nature to fit the dynamics of the narrative. To use Eco's terminology (1979), they are "narcotized" in that they lose any social or psychological value to become instrumental in smoothing the proceeding of the action. So content is rarely fairy-tale like in itself, but it becomes so when it is framed within the fairy tale architecture.

Audience and Reception

The audience usually does not object to the presence of supernatural elements or phenomena, but accept them readily because they recognize them as typical traits of that genre. As Levorato (1988) claims, people have a schematic knowledge about narratives that enables them to decide what is a narrative text and what is not. This mental model is abstract and predictive, and concerns the ways in which sequences of actions and events are narrated. It is thanks to this that readers make predictions on the type of information they will find. This schematic pattern is rather narrow in children, but becomes more flexible and widens to include less prototypical members of the same narrative category for more sophisticated readers.

Reception is very important for narrative sub-genres and distinguishes fairy tales from other narrative types such as myth, science fiction and so on. Todorov (1977) locates fantastic tales between the two categories of "l'Étrange" and "le merveilleux". When the reader notices something odd in the narrative world he has two options: either he finds a convincing explanation, or he has to postulate new laws which may justify them. In the first case "le fantastique" dissolves into "l'Étrange" (cf. the case of thrillers), whereas in the second it turns into "le merveilleux". As often happens with classifications, the categories are not enough to cover all the possible texts: Todorov added some borderline sub-genres, such as "le fantastique-merveilleux" where a tale that begins as a fantastic story ends up with a supernatural explanation. When on the contrary the supernatural elements are not questioned, either by the characters or by the readers, the genre is "le merveilleux pur", which encompasses many different narrative types, among which fairy tales. Despite the results of the application of this taxonomy, which might be disappointing, this classifying task is useful because it familiarises students with genres, so that "they learn to make distinctions, think about subtle categories, and apply abstract thinking in imaginative and concrete ways" (Zipes 1995: 17)

Concluding Remarks

The task of establishing what distinguishes one sub-genre from another is indeed difficult and I myself experienced it when I read my students' fairy tales before their examination. Some of them are clearly meant to be traditional fairy tales and even share some plot elements with traditional ones. Some others also belong to the genre, but they indulge in the characterisation of both people and places, and are therefore more suitable to an older audience or readership. Students were justified in adding complexity to their plots because even some literary tales indulge in detailed descriptions and impart moral lessons to readers. Besides, a certain tendency towards deeper psychological characterization can easily be detected in modern tales (e.g. Calvino's tales). Some of the stories hardly fit the paradigm of fairy tales at all and cross the frontier into the domain of short stories. I had in fact warned my students that I would accept any story provided they were ready to defend their choices. They had the same freedom in the writing of their commentaries. During the seminar they had done different types of analyses, ranging from linguistic descriptions to more general comments about content and genre. For their final paper they had full freedom and were allowed to choose how to organise their comments. Some of them concentrated on the linguistic aspects, some on the plot, while others tried to reconcile both aspects and showed how they wanted to communicate meaning through specific constructions.

The final results were very pleasing: the fairy-tales were all rich in inventiveness, imagination and more or less overt messages to the

audience. The students demonstrated to be capable of mastering the genre and their competence in the written language was quite good - although they varied from individual to individual-. Linguistic knowledge was however sufficient to communicate well, whereas deficiencies mostly occurred in the handling of the narrative material (especially in managing information and in sequencing episodes). On the whole it can be said that students not only have learned how to reduce a text to its macro-structure, but are now also familiar with the most typical linguistic and rhetorical strategies of the genre they have concentrated on. The parallel structure of text-analysis and production was essential to stimulate a better pragmatic awareness in the students. At the end of the year, I was glad to verify that it had been possible to account for the specific rhetorical functions and speech acts that characterize different text-types by closely analyzing texts. This investigation allows to identify the parameters which guide textual organization and the recurrent features of different genres. All these patterns are not only factors of increased "readability" in that they make both reading and comprehension easier, but become cardinal in the act of text production.

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