

NURSERY RHYMES AND THE EMERGENCE OF LITERARY COMPETENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

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INTRODUCTION

Children's literature in its various facets is a subject of great interest to many researchers, psychologists, and educationalists. Many books and articles are written about the characteristics of children's literature in verse and prose, the methods of teaching them, and their psychological and educational effects. All of these studies have dealt with the role and function of literature in the mental development of children (i.e. its educational role) and as a consequence many of the nursery rhymes which are written for young children have educational content. However, little is said about the origin of literature and how it emerges. One of the theories in this field is proposed by Ruqaiya Hasan (1989) in her book *Linguistics, Language and verbal Art*. According to her, the child *learns* literature, but this learning is so unconscious and unintentional that we sometimes hesitate to name it "learning". As the child rocks in the cradle, she experiences repetition. At the same time she hears her mother's or caregiver's lullabies. These physical repetitions are accompanied by the repetitions of sounds and words:

Toora, loora, loora
Toora, loora, li
Toora, loora, loora
Hush, now, don't you cry
Ah,
Toora, loora, loora
Toora, loora, li
Toora, loora, loora
It's an Irish lullaby.

Little by little these repetitions become meaningful for the child. He/She enjoys them and is amused by hearing them. Later he/she repeats them again and again without

knowing the meaning of each word. For the child, the meaning exists in the repetition itself and this is independent of the meaning of words and sentences. In other words these repetitions are a kind of play for him/her.

According to Hasan, in learning literature the child does not intend to learn and what is more he/she doesn't have any ultimate goal in his/her mind for learning. The child is exposed to the special rhythm of verses and enjoys it. Miller (2003: 4) believes that during the pre-linguistic period, aesthetic features such as intonation and stress provide raw material for the child's early language play. Now we are going to see if there is any evidence to show that during this period the child is able to identify and produce sound features related to human speech.

1-LEARNING RHYTHM PATTERNS IN CHILDHOOD

According to a table which is provided by Aitchison (Hajati, 1985: 185) for the stages of language development, the child learns intonation patterns at the age of 8 months. However she reports an experiment which indicates that children learn these patterns even at the age of six months. This experiment was conducted on a group of American, Russian, Arab and Chinese infants who were at the "babbling" stage (i.e. at the age of 6 months). The experiment showed that it is possible to distinguish Chinese infants from American, Russian and Arab infants. Since in Chinese, words are distinguished by changing "tone" or "pitch", Chinese infants usually use monosyllabic words with very diverse pitches. In contrast, American infants produce multisyllabic babblings, the intonation of which is distributed all over their speech. If we describe these two groups of infants in terms of tonal (Chinese) and non-tonal (American, Russian, Arabic), it seems that non-tonal infants babble in a similar fashion and their mothers are able to distinguish their sounds from those of tonal infants. Therefore infants are able to identify and produce speech rhythm from the early months of their lives.

Generally, based on investigations, the child's experience with learning literature begins with rhythmic patterns at the age of six months. However Betsy Hearne (2001:3) assumes that this experience is related to the period before birth and hearing the mother's heartbeat and her voice. This experience is followed by lullabies, finger plays and nursery rhymes.

2- LEARNING SOUND PATTERNS

Intonation patterns will gradually accompany sound patterns including repetition, contrast and rhyme. Together they nourish the child's imagination and creativity and take over the imaginative function of language. Hasan believes that the development of imagination takes place simultaneously with children's understanding of language

patterns and in this way the bases of verbal aesthetics takes form in children. One of these simple linguistic patterns which we pointed out earlier is repetition. Repetition has a considerable impact on forming children's imagination and aesthetics. The child hears many kinds of repetition in nursery rhymes:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high
Like a diamond in the sky
Twinkle, twinkle, little star
How I wonder what you are*

Most of the time this repetition is onomatopoeic:

*Ring-a-Ring o'Rosies
A Pocket full of Posies
"A-tishoo! A-tishoo!"
We all fall Down!*

According to Hasan repetition is one of the characterizing features of nursery rhymes and we can observe it at three levels: sound, word and meaning. Here Hasan alludes to an important point: sound repetition doesn't entail repetition at the level of wording and meaning. Repetition occurs at the level of phonemes, syllables, words, patterns and sentences. Hasan divides sound repetition into three kinds: "alliteration", "assonance" and "rhyme".

- A) **ALLITERATION:** alliteration is the repetition of the same consonant in the same phonemic position. This term is used for the repetition of initial consonants in stressed syllables, but we can use it for the repetition of initial consonants in syllables which are close to each other without paying attention to their being close and whether they are stressed or not. For example look at the sounds /s/, /p/, /f/ and /b/ in the following stanza:

*Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye;
Four and twenty blackbirds,
Baked in a pie.*

Cummings and Simmons (1983:10) agree with Hasan that alliteration is the repetition of the initial sound (usually a consonant) in different words. They believe that alliteration is a general technique that depends on our recognition of the similarity between special sounds, sounds which may look different at first glance but we as

speakers of a special language have agreed to classify them as similar. They assume that alliteration is an important facet of rhythm in a poem. McRae (1998:149) defines alliteration as "the repetition of the initial letter of successive words in a line of text".

- B) **ASSONANCE:** assonance refers to repetitive vowels in contiguous syllables or syllables with regular distance but we can use it for general sound similarities both in consonants and vowels. Look at the repetition of the vowels /i/ and /ei/ in the following rhyme:

*Simple Simon met a pieman
Going to the fair;
Says simple Simon to the pieman,
Let me taste your ware.*

Cummings and Simmons (1983:29) compare assonance in vowels with alliteration in consonants. They believe that, currently, assonance refers to the repetition of a vowel irrespective of where it comes in the word. If assonance occurs in a stressed syllable its rhythmic effect is stronger. Thus recognition of assonance like alliteration depends on whether we perceive them as the same or not, though these vowels may have different sound features.

- C) **RHYME:** rhyme is a type of assonance which comes at the end of the words. McRae (1998: 151) suggests that rhyme is the matching of words or syllables which have the same sound when spoken. Rhyme often comes at the end of lines. Look at the following rhyme:

*Ding dong bell
Pussy's in the well
who put her in?
Little Johnny Flynn
Who pulled her out?
Little Tommy Stout
What a naughty boy was that
Try to drown poor Pussycat,
Who ne'er did any harm
But killed all the mice
In the Farmer's barn!*

In addition to the above sound patterns which imply a kind of repetition we see a group of contrasts in nursery rhymes and lullabies. These contrasts cause an interruption in the regular rhythm of repetitions. Look at the following rhyme:

*Rain rain go away,
Come again another day.
Little Johnny wants to play;
Rain, rain, go to Spain,
Never show your face again!*

In these contrasts, the child encounters "the unexpected", a feeling which is experienced time after time in various poems.

All the sound patterns mentioned above are used prevalently and regularly in nursery rhymes and as Hasan claims we can't see them in this way in adults' poems. Hearing these verses and repeating them, the child enjoys patterning in language and its imagination gradually develops. Imitation and imagination are bases for the imaginative function of language and they finally lead to the development of the child's verbal aesthetics. In addition to sound patterns, lexical, grammatical and semantic patterns are formed unconsciously and unintentionally. As Hasan concedes the imagination and creativity which exist in these linguistic patterning is the stimulus for many kinds of learning and helps the child in the process of socialization.

3. FORM AND CONTENT IN NURSERY RHYMES

An important claim which Hasan poses is that in nursery rhymes, form is more prominent than content. She believes that the most obvious feature of nursery rhyme is patterning of patterns in a single text both at the level of sounding and at the level of wording. At this stage, linguistic form is the only means children use to cultivate their imagination. They are attracted to verses not because of their experiential meaning and cognitive content but because of their linguistic form. This is true of children's stories too but in her study Hasan uses nursery rhymes which are the most abstract kind of verbal art. It means that nursery rhyme is the only form of verbal art which is indifferent to informational content and is beyond the world realities.

Now we are going to see if the above claim is confirmed by psychological evidence or not and if it is confirmed, what implications it would have for teaching literature to children.

Tucker (in Hunt, 1992: 159) states that "it is more important for children to follow their instincts at their own pace than for them to become acquainted through books and teaching with the culture in which they were born". According to him children themselves prefer the first kind of learning. He (ibid: 166) cites Piaget who believes that the best way for children to learn something is to be confronted by experience itself rather than being educated through books.

Giles and Shea (2003) have conducted an interesting research on children's literature. They have chosen 6 famous nursery rhymes in which a kind of serious head injury is mentioned including "humpty dumpty", "Jack and Jill", etc. In each of these rhymes an important injury to the head of one of the characters is reported but no medical treatment seems to have been sought, in spite of the fact that in real life each of these injuries would need a special treatment.

Children recite these rhymes again and again and improper medical treatments don't surprise them. Little thought is given to their content as though children recite them just for verbal pleasure and language plays. In fact they don't mind the content of nursery rhymes.

Many researchers believe that we can place nursery rhyme in the category of "play" the endpoint of which is not learning a specific kind of knowledge but enjoyment and pleasure. Relatedly Aristotle suggests (in Hunt 1992: 72) that "imitation is natural to humans, innate from childhood".

In a paper entitled "Verbal Play and Language Acquisition", Eric Miller (2003) surveys the ways in which verbal play helps the child in the process of language learning. Based on what he says children play for the aesthetic pleasure of making rhythm, rhyme and other forms of repetition and patterning and also making opening and endings. He first touches on the prelinguistic period in which aesthetic features such as intonation and stress provide raw material for early language play. Repetitive, rhythmic vocalizations are especially associated with pleasurable sensations in the prelinguistic child. Caretakers' voices which are accompanied by finger-walking and tickling are the first models of vocal play that the infant encounters. As he says: " In the first year of the infant's life the communicative force of the caregiver's vocalizations derives not from their arbitrary meanings in a linguistic code, but rather from their immediate linguistic power to arouse, alert, calm, delight, etc". Although the exaggerated pitch patterns of the caregiver's vocalizations may eventually help the child in the second year to identify linguistic units in speech, the human voice becomes meaningful to the infant through the caregiver's vocalizations much earlier in the development. Through this distinctive form of vocal communication, the infant begins to experience emotional communication with others, months before communication with symbols is possible.

Another evidence we can provide for the insignificance of the verse's content for the child in the early years of life is nonsense verses which it recites and repeats again and again. Sometimes we hear them when the child is playing regardless of other people.

If we accept the above ideas, verse books which are written for children's early years of life must include a wide range of repetition and contrast patterns in order to raise imagination and creativity in children and to develop aesthetic and literary understanding in them. Allocating these books to educational content is of no use and just wastes the child's energy which can be used for nurturing her imagination and creativity.

4. FORMATION OF LITERARY COMPETENCE IN CHILDREN

Another important issue which is posed in Hasan's theory is what constitutes the essence of the child's understanding of a verse. As we said the child enjoys formal features of verses including repetition, contrast and dislocating words. According to Hasan this shows that the child distinguishes repetition from contrast and simple structures from complex ones and she comprehends the change in word order. In a sense the child knows these linguistic patterns. This is the same knowledge which makes /t/ in tall different from /w/ in well and /y/ in yell.

As was said, there is much evidence to confirm the child's interest in sound and verbal play. Hasan believes that the child's encounter with a wide range of verses allows her to acquire a seemingly natural and untaught ability in comprehending verbal art. The child finds out that verbal art is also a branch of meaning. The reason for this is that relations which are always evident for us without specific instructions are meaning relations. Here, it seems that, Hasan points to the emergence of a kind of competence which compared to linguistic competence we can call "literary competence". The child's encounter with linguistic patterns causes the emergence of a competence which he/she can use in later years and in the process of socialization to recognize complex types of structure which he/she sees for the first time. This competence justifies why the child's enjoyment from saying and hearing rhymes leads to consciously comprehending the aesthetics of poems and finally to the child's cognition of the language of verse.

There are some advantages in this theory of learning literature. It studies the formation and development of verbal aesthetics with great precision and finds the origins of verbal aesthetics in the first rhythmic sounds, lullabies and nursery rhymes. It explains the special mechanisms involved in the first stages of this learning in terms of repetition, contrast and different sound patterns.

Since this theory poses the emergence of literature and its special patterns regardless of language, it seems that this theory tacitly proposes two separate systems for literature and language. In another words, it uses the difference in the origin of literature and language as a sign of their being separate.

5. WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF LITERATURE?

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Hasan begins her discussion in this regard with the process of learning literature and explains that not all learning is conscious and voluntary. This is especially true of learning in infancy and early childhood and this is the time that one learns without the intention to learn and certainly without having an ultimate goal in mind. Learning one's mother tongue is an instance of such learning. One's mother tongue as a very complex system is learned without any attempt on the part of the child and by just being exposed to limited linguistic data which the child hears from his environment. The process is so natural that it is done as a part of everyday life. This theory contrasts sharply with the cognitive theory of Piaget. Piaget (in Zandi, 2002) believes that the child's cognitive development provides the basis for language learning. From this point of view, language development is dependent on the development of cognition and thought processes and not the opposite. In general, he believes that language development is an aspect of cognitive development and in fact it is cognitive development which leads to language learning in children.

Hasan's theory doesn't conform to the theory of B. F. Skinner, either. According to Skinner, language learning like other kinds of learning is influenced by the environment. Encouragement brings about reinforcement of a specific behavior and punishment hinders it. In Hasan's theory, learning literature is so natural and unintentional which doesn't necessitate parents' encouragement and punishment.

It seems that Hasan's definition of language learning and the competence which it implies has its origin in the innateness theory of Chomsky. According to Chomsky (in Wanner and Gleitman, 1982: 7-8) children receive little formal education about rules which probably underlie adults' competence or they receive nothing but they encounter limited samples of utterances accompanied by special events and situations in the world which are different from child to child. Sometimes, but not always, these utterances are proportionate to situations. However, Hasan doesn't believe in the innateness of language and literature. For Hasan, learning language and literature is just learning and she doesn't point to any innate ability in the child which prepares it for learning literature. In her words "it is not inherited or congenital. It is one of the invisible acts of learning" (1989: 28)

Referring to the complexity of human language, Hasan declares that children are able to learn many such complex systems and adults' understanding of this process is not always accurate. As another example of a complex system she mentions learning value systems, the learning of which is so implicit that it's sudden emergence surprises parents. Hasan believes that learning literature is like learning such a system. It is also learnt implicitly. Then she studies mechanisms which are involved in the system of literature. First, she surveys sound patterns (repetition and contrast), rhythm, grammatical, lexical and semantic patterns and in general and most important of all, patterning of patterns. A point which comes to mind here is whether

Hasan takes literature as different from other learning systems. More importantly, with regard to the modularity of mind theory propounded by Chomsky, we pose this question whether she thinks that literature is an independent module alongside with other modules of the mind including language and intelligence. After that we will see if this claim deserves posing at all.

It seems that Hasan develops her discussion with the view that literature and language belong to separate systems but she digresses from this view in two cases: First, she introduces nursery rhyme as the basis for imaginative function which is one of the eight primary functions of language and this shows that she considers literature as one of the variants of language. Second, she introduces language as an introduction to the understanding of verbal art. Now we are going to see if this claim about the difference between language and the origin of literature as two separate systems is defensible or not, and if so can we expand this difference in modules to the difference in the nature of language and literature.

To find an answer to the above questions we first consider modularity theory of mind and language which is one of the bases of generative grammar. According to Dabir-Moghaddam (2004: 18-19), in this theory the faculty of speech and linguistic knowledge is independent of the faculties of the mind such as intelligence, thought, logical reasoning, social and cultural principles and considerations involved in linguistic acts (or pragmatics), psychological processes involved in comprehension and speech, long term memory, and general principles of learning and conceptualization. In this theory, it is believed that both mind and language consist of modules which are independent and autonomous but at the same time cooperate with each other.

Various researchers confirm the independence of speech faculty from other mental faculties. For example, in many kinds of aphasia severe linguistic disorders occur but there is no change in one's intelligence or some cases are reported in which people with a very low intelligent quotient (IQ) have high degrees of linguistic abilities. Moreover, in some brain injuries, one loses one's speaking abilities but other mental abilities remain intact. (For similar cases see Aitcheson in Zandi 2002:148-152 and Dabir- Moghaddam 2004: 19-21).

According to Aitcheson (ibid: 154-155), specific aspects of intelligence, especially temporal and spatial intelligence (i.e. judgments related to time and space which involve using intelligence), are independent from language and processed in the right hemisphere of the brain. However, she believes that determining the relation between language and intelligence is difficult and requires more investigation. She also believes that non-linguistic sounds such as music are processed in the right

hemisphere and the left hemisphere is stronger in processing linguistic signals and speaking.

Considering the above-mentioned ideas, we can ask ourselves, what is the status of verbal art which begins with hearing rhythmic patterns and develops as a result of encountering repetition and contrast? To what category does verbal art belong? Can we claim that verbal art originates in a module independent of language and its only relation with language is the sameness of the medium of articulation? In order to find answers to these questions we must survey biological and psychological evidence.

Some researchers study the emergence of language and literature under the cover term of linguistic competence. Learning literature from their point of view is a subset and part of the process of learning language. For example, Lindfors (1987: 70) believes that different kinds of linguistic play like alliteration, assonance, rhyme, etc., which children employ in their verses when creating new words, they fall within the possibilities of sound combinations. This shows that children's knowledge of their sound systems of language is considerable. She (ibid: 73) also believes that the verbal play in children's literary books makes children happy and this is evidence for the fact that child's understanding of language is important for learning literature. For the most part it is the existence of "unexpected" things in the language of these books which attracts the child. If we name the sound sequence and lexical combinations of these books as "unexpected" this means that the child has "expectations". These expectations are its growing knowledge of linguistic structure.

Now we study the evidence which show the difference between the origins of language and literature. Reuven Tsur (2003) indicates that words express "intense" concepts but some poems at least, include defuse feelings, vague states or some kinds of mysterious experience. He claims that brain investigations in recent decades has shown that language is often considered a sequential activity, that it is logical and is typically related to the left hemisphere but defuse sentimental processes are usually processed in the right hemisphere.

We can take Tsur's view as evidence for the different origins of language and literature. However we have some other reasons for the existence of these differences. For example, many of us may have decided to write a short poem or story and after we have finished it we have come to the understanding that this doesn't conform to the feeling which we wanted to express. Each of us may have written many books to express a special feeling and yet think that we have not said it. In other words, there are unwritten poems and stories inside us for which we don't find words and sentences to communicate them. In this regard, Tsur (2003: 14) suggests that unstatable experiences are unstatable exactly because they are related to the right hemisphere's activity which contains defuse, indistinct and universal

information. Interestingly we try to state these experiences by using "language" which is an activity related to the left hemisphere which contains brief, distinct and linear information.

Further evidence for the difference between the origin of language and literature is Helen Keller's life story. As we know she was blind, deaf and dumb. She learned major communicational skills at the age of six. Before that she didn't have any word for "ice cream". When she wanted to eat ice-cream she felt a severe coldness all over her tongue and pulled her mother toward the refrigerator. After she learned the word for "ice-cream" the strange feeling on her tongue disappeared and she couldn't find it by conscious attempt.

Sharifi (2002: 6) also believes that, on the basis of findings in neurology and psychology, the left hemisphere is the location for language and language learning which in fact manages the whole brain. The right hemisphere is the creative-emotional hemisphere. It is fed by the left hemisphere for management and information but everything which falls within the scope of creation and creativity happens in the right one.

We must have in mind that acceptance of the above theory about the difference in the origins of language and literature is dependent on accepting modularity hypothesis. Here we don't have evidence to reject the above claims and so we accept them.

CONCLUSION

In this study we dealt with the theory of learning literature which is proposed by Ruqaya Hasan. According to this theory, learning literature begins in the early stages of life by hearing lullabies and nursery rhymes. The child gradually recognizes dominant patterns in verbal art and internalizes them. In this way, literary competence takes form in early childhood. This process of learning is like learning language and value systems which are formed without instruction and just by exposure to limited data. Sound patterns along with repetition, contrast and parallel structures come in turn and the child notices patterning of patterns in them. The child understands the meaning of these patterns. In Hasan's theory there is no direct interaction and overlap between learning literature and learning language. Therefore, it seems that she considers literature as an independent system and maybe an independent module which has its own principles and roles. This kind of learning involves learning two separate systems for literature and language and despite the existence of some ambiguities in this process; it justifies many of the apparent differences in the origin and type of processing language and literature.

In the present research, we confirmed the possibility that language and literature may be different and if this claim cannot be completely confirmed we can at least propose it as a line of research for the future. This claim demands that those who are involved in education pay special attention to the subject of cultivating verbal art as an independent system in children's minds and therefore in teaching literature to children especially in early childhood, give primacy to developing musical and linguistic patterns.

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