

# 童謡：その社会言語学的考察

## Language and Society in Children's Nursery Rhymes

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童謡, 言語, 子供の文化, 社会言語学, 文体論, 社会歴史

Nursery Rhyme, Language, Child Culture, Sociolinguistics, Stylistics, Social history

### ABSTRACT

童謡 (nursery rhymes: ナースリーライム) とは子供向けの短い詩歌のことで、通常、一つのストーリーを示すものである。童謡は、反復や言葉遊びを使ったり、風刺的だったり、特に意味のない音を使うなどの特徴をもつ、確立した言語類型である。文体的には、子守唄、指や手を使った遊び歌、なぞなぞ、数え歌や何かを覚えるための歌、早口言葉、言葉を重ねていく歌など、異なった種類の文体が存在する。音声構成についても、童謡ならではの特徴があり、例えば、形容詞はほとんど使われず動詞が多く用いられたり、強弱格や跳ねるようなリズムを持ったりする。子守唄には、わざと子供には発音しにくい音を用いたりするなど音声学上の「トリック」も使われている。童謡はまた、親と子供の会話も促す。童謡の歌詞には、パラドックスがあったり意味的に矛盾していたりするものもある。そしてさらに、例えば「牛が月を飛びこえた」など、通常の観念で理解できる「言葉と世界」とのつながりでは成立しないような、ぶつかり合いを含んだ言葉の世界観へ子供達を誘うのである。また、童謡は、様々な差異や同一性を含み、これによって、子供は、時間、場所、社会関係などの構造を理解していく。童謡の世界では、「なにか言う価値のある事を言うために発話する」という通常の言語行動の前提は成立しない。一つの世代から次の世代への電報ともいえる童謡は、独特の子供の文化を産み出すための言語や伝承的知識を含むものである。口頭伝承の童謡がもつ一つの重要な要素は、それがしばしばすでに絶滅してしまった言語の残存例を含んでいるということである。(例えば南アフリカの Kukasi など)。童謡には方言の違いが反映されていることもある。また「子守り」文化の中には、童謡の形を借りて、辛いしかしユーモラスな部分も含んだ、あざけりに近い歌が歌われることがあるが、これは、社会批判を含む一つのディスコースである。すなわち、童謡が文盲や社会的弱者にとっての抵抗の武器となるのである。本論では英語、日本語、アイヌ語、フランス語、そしてドイツ語の童謡を例にとり、童謡は社会言語学的に研究されるべき、独立した言語の一類型であることを論ずる。

## Linguistics and the Nursery Rhyme

The language play of children is a common code, the cultural expression of a unique social network. Typical of this network are children's nursery rhymes. Children's sensitivity to and knowledge of nursery rhymes and other forms of alliteration is well known. It is suggested here that this language phenomenon is specific to child culture, that it constitutes a recognizable sociolinguistic genre with its own norms and conventions.

Nursery rhymes are a well-defined genre or variety of language involving repetition, satire and phonetic play. Stylistically, there are distinct stylistic types: lullaby, finger / hand play, riddle, counting and learning, tongue twister, cumulative rhyme. The sound structure of nursery rhymes is unique. They employ trochaic meter and bouncing rhythm. Lullabies contain phonological tricks that are purposely difficult for children to pronounce. Children's songs satisfy the need for conversational interaction between parent and child. They invite the child's feel for paradox, semantic contradiction and embody colliding streams of language in which the usual word-world relations do not hold ("the Cow jumped over the moon") They involve difference and sameness which help the child orient the structural world of time, place and social relations. The basic assumptions of a speech act — "speak in order to say something worth to be said" — are suspended in nursery rhymes. These telegrams from one generation to another contain language and lore for the creation of a distinct childhood culture. A crucial element of an oral tradition, nursery rhymes often provide the remaining examples of extinct languages (e.g.

South African 'Kukasi'). They can reflect dialectal differences. The mock nursery rhymes of nursemaid culture — bitter and humourous — comprise another discourse involving social critique: weapons of resistance among the illiterate and powerless. With examples taken from English, Japanese, Ainu, French and German it is argued that we may profitably investigate children's songs as a useful resource for understanding of language use in society.

Nursery rhymes are frequently pressed into service by linguists when explaining linguistic concepts (e.g. Aitchison, 1996). Despite the fact they are an identifiable stylistic genre, they are not discussed in encyclopaedie of language and linguistics — Asher 1995; Crystal 1991; Bright 1996); even when encyclopaedia contain biographies of nursery rhyme researchers (viz. Opie entry in Asher 1995: 2875). Though sociolinguistic collections (Hudson, 1997; Romaine 1995; Wardaugh 1994; Fasold 1991) customarily describe the 'argot' generated by specific social groups (the professions, the elderly, etc.), child culture and its language is conspicuously absent. Hitherto, the study of playground language has been the domain of folklorists (Opie 1959). It is proposed here that children's nursery rhymes and songs constitute an independent genre worthy of sociolinguistic interest and study.

### What is a Nursery Rhyme ?

A nursery rhyme is a short composition in verse for children that often tells a story. The genre of nursery rhymes seems to span distinct several stylistic categories:

1. Lullabies
2. Singing Games
3. Nonsense
4. Riddles
5. Counting or Learning
6. Tongue Twisters
7. Verse Stories
8. Cumulative Rhymes
9. Finger / Hand Plays

‘Nursery rhyme’ is sometimes, as in Japan, synonymous with the term ‘Mother Goose’. The latter designation has been traced to Loret’s 1650 *La Muse Historique* in which appeared the line, *Comme un conte de la Mere Oye* (“Like a Mother Goose story”) and in 1697 Charles Perrault used the phrase in a published collection of eight fairy tales which bore the words *Contes de la Mere l’Oye* (Tales of My Mother the Goose). In Japan, English nursery rhymes are referred to as ‘Mother Goose’ partly because the poet and translator Kitahara Hakushu chose that term when he introduced the Mother Goose nursery rhymes into Japanese in 1921. Classic rhymes include: Humpty Dumpty, Old King Cole, Hey Diddle Diddle, Hush-a-bye, Baby, The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, Jack and Jill, Baa, Baa, Black Sheep, What Are Little Boys Made of? Solomon Grundy, Mary Had a Little Lamb, Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, Wee Willie Winkie, Hickery Dickery Dock, Ding Dong Bell, Jack Sprat, Little Jack Horner, This Little Pig Went to Market, Boys and Girls Come out to Play. (Arbuthnot 1995).

In English, the actual phrase “nursery rhyme” did not originate until 1824 in a Scottish periodical “Blackwood Edinburgh Magazine” (Encyclopaedia Britannica 1999).

Before then these rhymes were called “ditties” or “songs”. It is believed that nursery rhymes are pieces of ballads, prayers, proverbs, and street chants or tavern songs. Some may have been used for costumes or rituals. More still might have been based on real people (“Old King Cole”) or events (“Hey Diddle, Diddle”). These rhymes were mainly to entertain adults (before the 1800s) and only the alphabet or numerical rhymes were meant for children. Many of these rhymes did not come about until the 1600s but there are some that were around earlier.

### **Wired for Rhyme: Child Culture and the Nursery Rhyme**

The first song-rhythmic form that children employ is amorphous with no fixed, formal structure of intervals, melody or rhythm. It reflects the infant’s physical experiments with sound. It is part of the baby’s gradual mastery of language in which its linguistic / phonetic improvisations that are, in Vygotsky’s terminology ‘global and multifunctional’ (1975).

### **The Speech Community of Children**

Child culture is an organic and integrated social milieu. Child culture does not possess a dictionary of its own reflecting, ethnoculturally, children’s common code, their own way of communicating and speaking. If it did the ‘nursery rhyme’ would be an important entry. The nursery rhyme represents a “culturally specific musical code fellowship, a set of intersubjectively understandable structures which children systematically employ

among themselves” and as tradition bearers, children know the “deep emotional power and semantic secrets of their singing, treating them with virtuosity, poignancy and creativity in developing their own lives” (Bjorkfold 1984: 114). I stress the existence of an autonomous child culture but note also, along with a Dutch study on the relationship of family practice and play, that “children’s play seems to become more and more a product of the educational and cultural orientation of the parents” (Kooiji and van den Hurk 1991: 74).

A speech community of ‘children’ is a complex institution that has its own particular forms of address across generations, ways of interacting, establishment of verbal rituals and habits. Childhood evolves with its own perceptions and attitudes and linguistic behaviour. It can be said that the language of any social group is developmental — to describe but also foster the autonomy or collective self of its members (professional jargon, secret code, etc.). The function of nursery rhymes and children’s song in general is integrative and inclusive: a means of organizing reality.

### Pragmatics and Nursery Rhyme

Nursery rhymes embody “colliding worlds of discourse ... brought together in a single utterance, which creates an effect of incongruity as usual word-world relations do not hold” (Dolitsky 2000: 651) as in ‘The cow jumps over the moon’ Here we see semantic contradiction where the given combination of signs by which we understand the world is self-contradictory or opaque

### Ur-motif of chants

Chants and nursery rhymes contain what might be called *ur-motif* of child culture Consider the teasing rhyme ‘ I’m the king of the castle and you’re a dirty rascal’ (or Norwegian ‘Dumme dumme deg’). With such rhymes, children move from the objective to the subjective level. The rhyme is the symbolic representation of teasing. It is a song formula whose syntax of melodic elements makes its symbolic form a ‘teasing form’ recognizable in children’s culture when words are added. As Bjorkvold’s research has demonstrated (ibid. and following) children’s culture contains specific *types* of song-rhyme communication, which employ different song words and intervallic structure to signal to each other. Cross-cultural research on rhymes in Russia, Norway and the USA has pointed to the possibility of universals in these stylistic features. Children quickly learn what they want to achieve and how to achieve it. The song-rhyme conveniently conveys intersubjective meaning and may communicate between children themselves such *ur-motif* as: calling, teasing, bullying, relating, provoking, telling, commanding, and answering. Thus, these *ur-motif* are represented by one linguistic symbol: the rhyme. Children’s songs are sometimes intended to work out conflict through language (instead of resorting to the unjust solutions so thoroughly modeled by adult society and state). In the author’s experience of school in northern England here was a standard put-down for the school-bully :

God made the French  
God made the Dutch

Whoever made you  
Never made much

### Conversational Interaction

Children's songs satisfy the need for conversational interaction between parent and child and, without doubt, the study of children's songs reveals much about adult-child speech. Compare the way adults address small children in Japanese and English. When native speakers role-play the utterances below one can observe the difference in intonation patterns:

- 1aE. Hello baby! 1bJ. *konnichi wa!*  
 2aE. You're a very nice baby 2bJ. *totemo orikosan ne*  
 3aE. No! I mean no! 3bJ. *dame! ... ikemasen!*  
 4aE. Come on come on here 4bJ. *sa ... koko made oide*

In E the intonation contour is up and down; in J it is mostly flat. The characteristic of J is reflected in older, traditional *warabe-uta* (children's songs) which use a so-called 'monotony of scale' and a stomping (duple time) rhythm. 'Antagata dokosa' is a song for bouncing ball and runs as follows:

Antagata dokosa higosa  
 higo dokosa kumamotosa  
 kumamoto dokosa senbasa  
 senbayama niwa tanuki ga ottesa. .

### The Sense of Nonsense

Nursery rhymes provide examples of phonetic nonsense, where sounds are put together not so much to create meaning as for the vicarious pleasure found in the sonority of the words. An example of this is:

Hey, diddle diddle  
 The cat and the fiddle  
 The cow jumped over the moon  
 The little dog laughed to see such fun  
 That the dish ran away with the spoon

There is evidence from many cultures that children between the age of 2-4 delight in nonsense and in turning their newly developed language upside down (Whitehead 1999). A riddle is a question or statement designed to test the ingenuity of the hearer in divining an answer or meaning as in this riddle-chant from a Victorian book of nursery rhymes (Opie 1968):

The beginning of eternity  
 The end of time and space  
 The beginning of every end,  
 And the end of every place.

Answer: 'Tomorrow'

Nonsense play makes good sense from the child language-learner perspective. Research by Chukovsky (1963) suggests that nonsense verse is very popular because the craziness helps children to measure and compare their own grasp of reality and assert their superiority to people who 'go to sea in a sieve' or who behave like the 'The Greedy Man'

The greedy man is he who sits  
And bites bits out of plates,  
Or else takes up an almanac  
And gobbles all the dates.

Chukovsky's findings imply that attempts to suppress young children's exploratory use of rhyme and nonsense play by imposing adult information and realism are ineffective.

In nursery rhyme, the meaning of an utterance is not necessarily part of the structure of the utterance. It is rather negotiated by the participants and dependent upon the intention of the utterer and the interpretation of the speaker. The basic assumptions or conversational maxims of a speech act — "speak in order to say something worth to be said" — are transgressed or suspended in nursery rhymes and riddles such as:

Why did the chicken cross the road?  
To get to the other side

### **Stylistic Features of the Nursery Rhyme**

It is suggested here that children's rhymes comprise an independent stylistic genre with its own norms and conventions. Genre can be defined as a particular type of oral or written communication typified by a particular structure that reflects the communicative purpose of the genre in question. The traditional literature of infancy and early childhood is rhyming verse. Rhyme is the occurrence of identical or matching sounds in words or in the end sounds of lines of verse:

Around the green gravel the grass grows  
green,

And all the pretty maids are plain to be seen;  
Wash them with milk, and clothe them with  
silk,  
And write their names with a pen and ink.

The melody and movement of the verses enhance the action.

When the rhyme draws our attention to the end sounds of words, alliteration works by choosing identical or similar beginning sounds, as in tongue twisters like 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers'. The characters in nursery rhymes seem to be in motion and the action of verbs reinforces this: Jack jumps over the candlestick, the dish runs away with the spoon, a cat comes fiddling out of the barn, and a fearless old woman is tossed up in a basket "seventeen times high as the moon." Personal names often appear ('Robin Hood', 'Jack Horner' 'Nancy Etticoat' 'The Duke of York', etc.) and place names are much in evidence in English place names as Exeter, Gloucester, London Bridge. There is archaic language as in "doth" and "thee" and "thou".

Some nursery rhymes are long and contain many subordinate clauses (e.g. 'The Derby Ram', 'Sing a song of sixpence'). It is to be remembered, however, that it is a norm in child language research that children understand more language than they can produce (Slobin 1972). A child that can remember only a four-word utterance can still comprehend a nursery rhyme of much longer length. Similarly, when infants cannot yet state a negative correctly, they can identify the difference between "I sold it to an old woman" and "I'll not sing my song again" (The Hobby Horse) (Starr 1973).

On mornings all over the world, we can

catch the hum of children playing and singing their way to school (“This is the way we go to school, go to school, go to school, this is the way we go to school on a cold and frosty morning...”) As with the above going-to-school song there are two features that seem to make a good children’s song: rhythm and repetition. Repetition attracts the child and forms the basis for memorization, dance and mime:

Hot cross buns, hot cross buns,  
One-a-penny, two-a-penny,  
Hot cross buns’

And:

Sally go round the Sun  
Sally go round the moon  
Sally go round the chimney-pots  
On a Saturday afternoon’

The sound structure of certain categories of nursery rhyme is stylistically marked. Lullabies are adult (not children’s songs) purposely difficult for the child to comprehend, too cloying and sentimental to interest children and occasionally ruthless:

Rock a Bye Baby on the treetop,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall  
And down will come baby cradle and all

Lullabies may contain phonological tricks by including sounds that a child will find difficult to pronounce. They all share the characteristic of avoiding frightening or (mostly voiced) over-stimulating sounds (/ b /, / g / / z/). The Japanese flap (/ r / sound) is a difficult sound and it is found in many

lullabies; the ‘pirka’ series of lullabies in Ainu, for example (see below). Some linguists report that parents employ lullabies in a language unfamiliar to children (Pedro de Cuba 1997, March 13) or even a language unknown to parents themselves (Charbauski-Frohling 2001 6-23).

The many *warabe uta* or *doyo* developed in the Edo period were sung and modified by children. This was recited in duple time (i.e. stomping or walking time), the basic scale for Japanese folk songs being the tetra code (ra, do, re) which ranges through 4 scales ... so the tetra code plus so or mi-flat All syllables are short and therefore take about the same length to be pronounced. The syllables go pop-pop-pop as in *hisakatano hikarinodokeki harunohini* and *shizukokoronaku hananochiruran*.

Children, everywhere, avoid difficult sounds like / s /, / ch / and / ts / or sounds which need a lot of tongue work like the approximant / y /. There are few voiced plosives like / b / / d /, fricatives like / sh / or affricates / r / and / l /. In children’s songs there is much onomatopoeia. Japanese and Korean children repeat twice as in (K) *pasak-pasak* (dry), (J) — *pasa-pasa* or (K) *tugundugu* (‘the heart pounding’), (J) *doki-doki*.

Children’s songs are memorizable and sometimes convey the only existing example of an endangered or extinct language as in the lullabies of the now extinct South African language Kukasi (Allison, J. 2000). Repetition is an intensification of meaning like the *makka da na, makka da na* in *Makka na aki* (Crimson Autumn). This is unusual since most children’s songs have few adjectives and many verbs: Song helps the child orient the structural world of time, place and social rela-

tions. In anomaly we see the juxtaposition of two distinct or opposed sets of phenomena like: pretty maid-handsome lad, inside-outside, *ue-shita*, one-shoe-on and one-shoe-off. Songs invite the child's feel for paradox, difference, and sameness. Consider the play with contrast in *atchi* (there) and *kotchi* (here) and *nigai* (bitter) and *amai* (sweet) in this song of the *hotaru* (firefly) and *mizu* (water):

Ho ho hotaru koi,  
Atchi no mizu wa nigaizo  
Kotchi no mizu wa amai zo

There are seasonal songs like 'Rain Rain Go Away' and *Ame ame fure fure kaasan ga* (it's raining, mummy); game songs like 'One two buckle my shoe'; songs of plants and animals like 'Baabaa black sheep' or *Saita saita chuurippu no hana ga* (the tulip has bloomed), songs for play in groups like 'Ring-a-ring-a-roses'. Some nursery rhymes contain stories like 'The Three Little Kittens' or *Donguri koro koro* (the rolling acorn) and some are cautionary pointing out the fear of getting lost: *Maigo no maigo no neko chan* (the lost kitten) Charm songs are ubiquitous like 'Lady bird lady bird fly away home.' The friendly coccinella has sacred associations (Our Lady's bird) and is used by some children for divination; to kill one is unlucky. Some songs containing prophetic or satirical meaning were popular among adults and then taken over by children. In *Toryanse* you have A from the people's side and B uttered by God.

Two important features of traditional children's song are trochaic meter and bouncing rhythm. Trochaic meter means one stressed + one non-stressed syllable. Most children's

songs are sung in this meter as in 'Girls and boys come out to play.' In E the intonation contour is up and down; in J it is mostly flat. The characteristic of J is reflected in older, traditional *warabe-uta* (children's songs) which use a so-called 'monotony of scale' and a stomping (duple time) rhythm. Folk interpretation says that it duplicates the heart beat: Another feature is bouncing rhythm ("Polly put the kettle on..." and "One potato, two potato, three potato, four..." ) so that the song fits in nicely with physical movement like bouncing balls (*mari-tsuki*) or playing with bean bags (*otedama*). Ball-bouncing appears in the *Heike Monogatari* of the Heian period.

Sound symbolism works across all languages: a o u i are the dark-warm-soft-little series (e.g. *chitchai* = teeny weeny = itsy bitsy, etc.) and consonants / g / / b / are associated with strong-heavy-violent e.g. 'Billy Goat Gruff'.

Dialectal differences appear as in the Kanazawa (Ishikawa prefecture) version: *nennenkororin... nenkororin...* In former times, some songs were used specifically to teach language like *Nihongo no keiko*, a waka, for the teaching of kana or the 'a' *No Uta* for kindergartners to learn the letter / a / or the *yoobi no uta* for learning the days of the week. Children's songs may thus provide an occasional resource for the study of phenomena (reduplication, sound symbolism, unusual grammar, etc.) by researchers in many fields such as phonology and phonetics, grammar, dialectology, language learning and teaching.

Within the nursery rhyme genre, lullaby has a special place. The sound structure is different. Lullabies are adult (not children's) songs purposely difficult for the child to compre-



hend, too cloying and sentimental to interest children and occasionally ruthless (e.g. Rock a Bye Baby on the treetop), and may contain phonological tricks by including sounds that a child will find difficult to pronounce. They all share the characteristic of avoiding frightening or (mostly voiced) over-stimulating sounds (/ b /, / g / / z /). The Japanese flap (/ r / sound) is a difficult sound and we find lots of it in lullabies. Ainu for example :

*hatahata, hatahata hatahata ororrrrrrr*  
[baby talk for 'clothes']

and the well-known

*pirka, pirka tanto siri pirka*  
[Oh what a lovely day]

Why can lullabies be bizarre and difficult to pronounce (Opie, *ibid.* ; de Cuba, *ibid.*) ? I assume that parents do not want children to be wide-awake to a sing-a-long lullaby when they are supposed to be dozing off.

### Politics and Parody in the Nursery Rhyme

Politics and children's songs are closely connected. In Japan, as elsewhere, *shoka* or government-approved songs were employed to stiffen children's national spirit. War features prominently as in this ironic and brutal example from the streets of England in the 1940s (The Observer 9 Jan. 1949):

Ring-a-ring-o'-geranium  
A pocket full of uranium  
Hiro, shima,

All fall down!

In the same style, parody peaks at Christmas, as in these rhyme versions of two carols 'Nowel, Nowel' and 'While Shepherds Watch'

No ale, no beer, no stout, sold out  
Born is the King with his shirt hanging out

While shepherds washed their socks by night  
All seated round the tub  
A bar of Sunlight soap came down  
And they began to scrub

There are scatological rhymes which reflect the typical oral-anal preoccupation of younger children (Opie, *ibid.*):

Ladies and gentlemen  
Take my advice  
Pull down your pants  
And slide on the ice

Children like to parody their own rhymes and these deliberate mistake rhymes which mock the rhymes that adults teach them, are surely a means of establishing children's independence. Mary's lamb makes a fine target:

Mary had a little lamb  
Her father shot it dead  
And now it goes to school with her  
Between two chunks of bread.

### The Nursery Rhyme as Oral History

The nursery rhyme is a particular form of oral history. Consider, for example, the

common appearance of bridge nursery rhymes. At the mention of bridges, a child's thoughts turn to bridge rhymes like 'Le Pont-Levis' in French, 'Le Porte' in Italian or 'Die Magdeburger Bruck' in German. 'London bridges Falling Down' memorializes a dark history. Bridges collapse and must be rebuilt despite the antipathy of the river gods. Thus, stories of bridges are linked with human sacrifice. Living people, a 'watchman', often a child is built into the foundations. When the Bridge Gate of Bremen was demolished in the last century (likewise, the Bridge of Rosporden in Brittany) the skeleton of a child was found embedded in the foundations. Legend proposes a boy immured at the bridge's foot with a candle in one hand and bread in the other. Food and light to keep the guardian alive and watchful. The performance of a nursery rhyme in which a child is caught is a reminder of the historical reality that living people are built into bridges is reflected in the children. Note the French Le Pont-Levis played in a similar manner as the English game for London Bridges:

Trois fois passera  
 La Derniere, la derniere  
 Trois fois passera  
 La Derniere y restera

Thus, the last walker across the bridge — a fair lady — is 'trapped' (i.e. A pretty girl is sacrificed for the bridge] as in

London Bridges Falling Down  
 London Bridges Falling Down  
 London Bridges Falling Down  
 My Fair Lady

Nursery rhymes can be usefully considered a form of political satire. Nursery rhymes were not meant for children. The rhymes were told in bars and pubs; many are satirical and used to ridicule leaders, One could not, for example, make fun of a monarch, but one could tell rhymes in which everyone knew who was being mocked. Nursery rhymes were later sanitized and told in the nursery by the nanny in Victorian England. Thus, we get the name nursery rhymes. The Opies (1968) describes the origins of many of our well-known nursery rhymes: four examples: (1) Hush-a bye-baby on the treetop — The rhymes explained the birth trauma. Down will come baby, cradle and all. (2) Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle — This rhyme was directed toward Queen Elizabeth I, who was known as the cat. (3) Mary, Mary quite contrary — This rhyme refers to Mary Queen of Scots 4) Jack Sprat could eat no fat — Jack Sprat is King Charles I; his wife, Henrietta was Roman Catholic and could not eat meat on Friday.

### **Mock Nursery Rhymes: Weapons of Resistance among the Powerless**

Nursery rhymes are part of child culture but also make up the register of caretakers. Adult parody of nursery rhymes is common among childcarers. It may be that this act-turning the rhyme on its head as it were — is a satirical comment upon the sentimentalization of childhood. It can also be an objection to the idealization of the caretakers themselves. Lyrical weapons of resistance. This requires explanation. Consider the language of nursemaids from Meiji-Period Japan. In

the landscape of indenture, decaying wool mills, unemployment and the idealization of 'the worker' whom industrial capitalism patiently exploited we see the connection between the construction of children's songs and the rhymes of the nursemaids (*komori*) the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a centrepiece of state ideology and practice, workers everywhere in the factories and mills of Vladivostock or Boston or Liverpool were long made to play the game of surrogate heroes of the nation when it suited governments to want it so.

No less a role was carved out for the *komori* as the ethnographer Tamanoi (1998) exquisitely tells.

*Komori* did hear and manage to read what was spoken and written about them; they were frustrated by how others represented their lives and often attempted to resist these descriptions. "The *komori*'s resistance should be understood as part of everyday practices in which they tried to communicate their conscious rejection of the representation of their culture in the state's discourse on elementary education" (p. 59). The 'practice' referred to by Tamanoi took the form of nursery rhyme parody, a tool of resistance among the powerless, the peasant, the illiterate, the oppressed:

(1) Sleep !

Are you not sleeping, stupid baby ?

(2) I do not want to be working as a *komori* for this crying baby.

Master, could you please give me some time off ?

I want to go home

(p. 78).

The *komori*'s songs typically couched in the language of children's songs parody or consistently part company with the image of gentle, nurturing mother earnestly cultivated in the "good wife, wise mother" ideology.

(3) This baby cries a lot

I want to exchange it for someone else's.

What can we do with a naughty child ?

Let's put him on the drum

and hit him with green bamboo sticks

(ibid.)

The emotional burden on the indentured worker is also reflected in mock nursery rhyme:

(4) I fear my mistress

much more than my master.

She also watches me with her white and black eyes.

and

(5) Listen my master and mistress

If you treat me badly,

I may have an evil influence on your kid

The *komori*'s song — rude, mocking, bitter, humorous — embodies an alternative discourse from that of nationalist discourse. It mocks the 'moral teaching' specially designed for *komori*, which expected them to become *fujin*; it mocks also the discourse of the middle-class where the subjectivity of *komori* was fashioned and which the *komori*'s song was able to retrieve. In these strong songs, the *komori* was able to affirm her personal humanity. These women in the silk-spinning factories of Nagano had become a

centrepiece of state ideology and practice at the same time providing cheap labour for industry; they worked as farm labourers, nursemaids, and domestics. In the genre of their mock nursery rhymes we may explore the interconnectedness of nationalism and gender in the context of the modern nation-state.

## Conclusion

The child's sensitivity to and knowledge of nursery rhyme and other forms of alliteration has been studied across several languages. As Whitehead (1999: 23) summarizes, the research of Hassan (1989), Bryant and Bradley (1985), Goswamy and Bryant (1990) indicates that pre-5s who have considerable informal experience of sharing nursery rhymes and songs, alphabets and picture books "are already sensitized to language and literacy and are likely to make an early start on reading." Research in the USA indicates also that very young children spontaneously practise new words and phrases and create their own new sets of standard of nonsense rhyming (Weir 1963; Nelson 1989). Sensitivity to rhyme, rhythm, sound patterns and word play is a universal feature of all cultures (Whitehead 1999) and this would indicate that children are wired for rhyme.

Language is the medium through which a child discovers the world and the instrument by which people and society are increasingly understood. It is commonly observed that around the age of 24 months infants move to a new stage of verbal development (Donaldson 1984, Caplan and Caplan 1977). Even when they do not understand the words, infants

become fascinated or 'hooked' upon word play, rhythm and the repetition of sounds. Children seem to have a predisposition to the rhythmic system of language. In addition, there develops what Jakobson (1954) called a 'grammar or expectation' in which children like to recognize what is coming next in a story or song and chant it with the parent. Thus, a language-based, complex form of mutual understanding develops between parent and child (Trevarthen). Significantly, child researchers maintain that this kind of early responsiveness is the source from which human intelligence springs (Donaldson 1978). Nursery rhymes are a variety of language play which seem to reflect this stage of an infant's language needs. It may be possible to say that nursery rhymes comprise an important starting point for what Bruner (1966) termed the "ontogenesis of [more] complex speech acts".

A child's language play evolves from simple imitation to more complicated language games (from age 4) in which children will act out an adult role, adult language and behaviour. A child might make a mud pie having watched an adult cook. The social philosopher G. H. Mead (1934) calls this taking the role of another — learning what it is to be in the shoes of another (symbolic interactionism). At this stage children gain a sense of the self, an understanding of themselves as separate agents. The 'me' is a social self whereby children come to see themselves as others see them. Children's songs and rhymes are linguistic forms of organization of reality. Children's songs are most intense during early school (Opie 1968) and this surely coincides with "the age when children must understand the rules of play and notions of fairness and equal participation ... not unsystematic play

... but the overall values and morality according to which social life is conducted” (Giddens 1993: 72). Insofar as nursery rhyme culture confronts and provides commentary upon issues of morality and punishment, beauty, lightness and dark it would seem that nursery rhyme culture performs a socializing and mediating function as well as mere marker of a generational grouping.

In a study of children’s ‘silly songs’ Sutton-Smith (1976) concluded that such songs are exercises in classification of ambiguities and children who recite them seem to be dealing with the complexities of language. They are “models within which children both restate the paradox itself and obtain buffered experience in dealing with it” (quoted in Dorman and Rebelesky 1976:29).

A speech community of ‘children’ is a complex institution which has its own particular forms of address across generations, ways of interacting, establishment of verbal rituals and habits. Childhood evolves with its own perceptions and attitudes and linguistic behaviour. It can be said that the language of any social group is developmental — to describe but also foster the autonomy or collective self of its members (professional jargon, secret code, etc.) Nursery rhymes and children’s songs in general are a social instrument for organizing the reality of children and are also powerful items of sociolinguistic expression which can be usefully studied within that domain.

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