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Processes of linguistic-literary sub-creation and gender identity. The case of Children's Literature

Procesos de subcreación lingüístico-literaria e identidad de género. El caso de la Literatura Infantil

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Abstract

The purpose of these pages has to do with the reflection on the search for equal opportunities between genders and the impact that linguistic and literary uses have on it. The analysis and reasoning behind it will be focused on Children's literature. Being the first texts children relate to, its importance as a bridge between knowledge and individuals is of decisive influence in the creation of thought. The main conclusion that can be drawn from these pages is that there is a need to adopt a dialogic approach in the treatment and mediation of texts, taking into account that the meanings of Children's literature are not unique. Moreover, raising awareness of the process of sub-creation the reception of the text involves will be the key to developing critical thinking

Resumen

El propósito de este texto tiene que ver con la reflexión acerca de la búsqueda de la igualdad de oportunidades entre mujeres y varones y la incidencia que los usos lingüísticos y literarios tienen en ella. Centraremos dicha secuencia de análisis en el caso de la Literatura Infantil. Al ser los primeros textos con los que se relaciona el ser humano, su importancia como puente entre el conocimiento y la persona es clave para la conformación del pensamiento. La principal conclusión reside en la necesidad de adoptar un enfoque dialógico en el tratamiento y mediación de los textos, teniendo en cuenta que los significados de la Literatura Infantil no son unívocos. También, la toma de conciencia con respecto del proceso de subcreación que supone la recepción del texto, será clave a la hora de permitir la generación de un juicio crítico.

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Reviving the concept of logosphere as a referent of social construction

The abstract concept that language implies is something inherent to the human being. As an exclusive element (Sapir, 1986) that differentiates us from animal species, it implies the overcoming of the unthinking sphere by humans and the construction of the cultural system that transcends people. Social conventions are underpinned by linguistic dispositions and we should be aware of this. Consequently, issues that concern human beings and go beyond an instinctive need have a linguistic origin, and the use of these structures conditions the way of articulating, perceiving and interpreting reality.

In line with Barthes (1984), Fernández-Martorell (2008) states that language comprises all knowledge and learning is accessing this understanding. Everything we read and understand covers us like a cloak, embraces us and envelops us like a medium: it is the logosphere. For this reason, in the possible deconstruction undertaken when we want to know the root of a social problem or concern, we should analyse the linguistic foundations that gave rise to the concepts that govern the behaviour in question, as well as the channels of communication that have facilitated the unyielding presence of these concepts over generations. Discursive constructions have a basis impregnated with communicative factors, giving rise to structures that shape thought. It is often possible to abuse discursive banality, formulating expressions of solution and change that are not real given that the basis of thought goes beyond the signifiers used.

The current social trend itself, its reference being dataism, a school based on the adoration of data (Harari, 2016), also has its main anchor in how language is used to show such figures. Moreover, such exposure requires a certain structure in order to reconfigure the view of social issues and to motivate behavioural change among members of society. Despite this focus on big data and specific communicative processes, the use of language to support such communication still underlies social functioning.

Albaladejo (2013) highlights the fact of communication between human beings through language and, based on Lotman (1988), shows us the primary and secondary modelling systems, in the first of which he places natural language and in the second artistic language; in the latter we would find -which use natural language as material- communication structures that are superimposed on the natural linguistic level (i.e., myths or religions) (Catalán, 2014a, 2014b). Both modelling systems follow the abstract view of language as a means to develop; and both natural and artistic language combine in the cultural fabric to provide people with stimuli.

Such processes are key to gaining an understanding of reality. Educational processes play a key role to deal with natural language and artistic language (the latter is encoded in most cultural manifestations that explain issues concerning humanity) correctly. Formal, non-formal and informal contexts are all references for the acquisition and development of an encyclopaedic competence that can host knowledge and understanding of artistic languages.

Therefore, Gottschalk's (2017) warning is significant. According to it, and highlighting Wittgenstein's (2017) contributions, the language games that are established in educational institutions do not always have a desirable effect on the people being educated, is of significance. There are also linguistic uses in schools aimed at maintaining levels of power, at conveying ideological issues; and, of course, there are discursive uses that generate sexist gaps. In view of this domination, Freire (1967) believed in dialogue as the only means to break the truths established by power.

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Fiction and myth linked to the meaning of the human. What does subcreation involve?

In their emancipation from nature and in their search for answers to their existence, human beings have generated a number of stories that remain in history as well as in the collective thinking. This use of fiction, which consists on relying on experienced reality in order to express solutions, beliefs or desires in invented parallel worlds or times, for example, through literature, is also part of the construction of societies and codifies perceptions and conceptions such as the one that concerns us in this text: the one that has to do with the feminine and the masculine.

The recurrent analogy of human beings expressing their concerns or questions through narrative can thus be traced back through the decades and centuries of their existence. These fictionalised creations reflect universal aspects that human beings share with other human beings, but through the non-real component, a better understanding can be achieved by distancing them from reality. Thus, myth is one of the oldest narrative manifestations. As a pre-rational unveiling of the world, it involves an explanation of situations experienced by people and human attributions to phenomena in nature that are beyond human understanding and explanation. Creation myth is already a narrative that aims to show and satisfy people's curiosity about its origin. Linking this mythology with the religious causes different visions and narratives depending on cultures and geographical areas of the globe.

Odero (1997, p. 92) points out that "myth is thus 'didactic' or wisdom, because its efficacy consists on showing what is true in a plausible, especially what is true that is not apparent". In other words, myth is intended to concentrate part of human wisdom, although its non-rational nature may call into question whether or not its content can be believed. In any case, as stated, the myth is linked to Nature, taking different phenomena from it, embodying them under a masculine or feminine form. It is the way we name the world that allows us to configure realities and it is this way that conditions the way we name natural phenomena.

Therefore, if we are able to assimilate a geographical feature to the forms of a woman, we are likely to establish a story associated with it that has her as the main character. This attribution probably has to do with a negative view, although it is not any obligation necessarily. One example concerns the strait separating Sicily from the Italian mainland, which has been considered dangerous waters. Today, small whirlpools caused by currents appear and disappear, and the low rocks threaten to wreck any sailor who gets too close to them. For this reason, the story linked two beautiful young women transformed into monsters by divine wrath is generated from such a situation of nature. Scylla (sea nymph who suffered the revenge of Poseidon's wife for a crush; and, Charybdis (daughter of Poseidon, who stole Heracles' cattle and was punished by Zeus' thunderbolt that sent her to the depths).

This demonstration coincides with Tolkien's vision of subcreation. According to Odero (1987, p. 105):

> Tolkien finds the proper identity of literature and art in the sphere of making, that is, in the sphere of human activity directed towards the creation of new works that should enrich Nature, the real world (primary world). The driving force of art is precisely the love of the real world in its otherness to man, a respectful love that manifests itself as a desire to see and understand the world for what it is worth in itself.

This means that the origin of literary creation lies in nature, and the reason for this production corresponds to the attempt to know nature and understand the role of human beings in nature. People recreate reality through reading and writing, they would rather sub-create something that is already given and adapt human issues that are repeated over time to the circumstances of their time. Metaphor is obviously the driving force of such sub-creations, which sometimes becomes allegory by its extension. This reflection is important in our

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contribution, since it is the basis of the argument as to why it is very difficult to modify certain narrative structures and contents and what is actually done is to sub-create from an already established pattern that is maintained in the cultural base due to issues of, for example, tradition, politics or history. Literature as an artistic language is thus linked to human development and the construction of its present (Martos & Martos, 2014a). We will now see how literature, often used in the early stages of growth and socialisation, can shape thoughts and how the reception of such stories and texts is sub-created.

Subcreative processes in the field of Children's Literature. How do they impact the construction of gender identity?

Insofar as it is not socially created by children (they can create texts, but they have the disadvantage of literary criticism), Children's Literature is a manifestation that contains human thoughts, beliefs and actions that follow certain cultural and social patterns that are ultimately shared by readers and mediators. In it we can find allusive explanations of how gender identity is constructed, because the actions of its main characters are role models for the target audience of the texts.

We could think that, from the perspective of subcreation, from a given human reality we have been interpreting the world, and this narrative generated for hermeneutic action has been weaving specific discourses that have resulted in different optics with respect to the feminine and the masculine over time. Thus, in the field of children's literature, both the classic tales and the works that turn out to be paradigmatic, a specific discourse has been created, shaped by the temporal, historical and contextual contributions through which the texts or narratives flow.

Once the story is established, settled, known and used by society, we cannot ignore the fact that narratives do not have a single reading, but that there are readings that imply different meanings.

Similarly, stories' interpretation also varies depending on where the focus is placed. For example, in the classic tale of *Little Red Riding Hood*, it is easy to think of "a popular version of a teaching that patriarchal societies inculcate in women: you have to be afraid" (Serra, 2019, p. 97), but from another point of view we follow Brothers Grimm's version and think that the wolf in the story -who personifies the male figure- has a cruel end at the hands of another man such as the woodcutter.

Therefore, we are heirs of ancestral narratives, which should never be judged from today's point of view, which have been modified over time. In the case of oral tradition, modification through subcreation has moulded such characters, data and actions, updating them with the elements of each time in which they have been told or used. In the case of written versions, they are less subject to change with respect to their structure but less subject to change with respect to their understanding and their transmission through cultural channels. As with the use of language, these narrative manifestations may or may not be considered discriminatory or sexist, but it is possibly their interpretation and connection to current realities that produce such an effect or thought. It is difficult to see classic tales as sexist, given that, when they emerged in a patriarchal society, such a concept had not been coined and, possibly, there was no sexist intentionality on the part of the creators.

In these cases, literature configures different realities but always linked to experiences. As we mentioned in previous sections, it is surprising to realise how these recreations or sub-creations have to do with nature. As far as so-called children's stories are concerned, the personification of elements of the natural environment is key to establishing a means to channel the values, beliefs or thoughts that are to be projected in the narrative. Thus, wolves, forests, piglets, kids or ducks are some of the examples that younger children become familiar with as they become socialised. Human beings try to embrace the nature that

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underlies them and do so by inserting it into the culture that transcends it.

In the 18th century, the recognition of the specificity of childhood implies the need to consider a corpus of texts that would serve for its enjoyment and education; the fact that authors such as the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault or Andersen provide narratives to the space of childhood does not imply that their creations or compilations were created for such an audience. Moreover, given that they are not critically acclaimed, productions conceived by children will always have an adult presence in the works used with this audience. But does this mean that all these narratives could be harmful in young children's education? From our point of view, we have already stated that such stories are sub-created by the person who transmits the story (e.g., fathers, mothers, librarians) and by the one who receives and interprets it. Moreover, in our era, we should not forget the interference of audio-visual presence, which in turn is another sub-creation, as an entire factory (i.e., Disney/Pixar) is enshrined to generating a reinterpretation of some reference stories and these new products will coexist with their references, making people have different versions that shape their minds (Aguado & Martínez-García, 2015).

In the last two decades, multimodal discourse -already identified by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001)- has become the platform through which people acquire multiple, mainly encyclopaedic, knowledge. Thus, the most analysed fact of sub-creations is related to the alleged values transmitted by Disney princesses (Marín & Solís, 2017), axiological guidelines based on submission and statism. The storyline of these film productions has emphasised the perception of male and female spaces, causing a significant gap. Despite the fact that, in recent years, political correctness has led to a modification of the female profile in Disney's productions (Perera & Bautista, 2019), the repetition of projections and its traditional burden still prevails in the literacy and learning of the new generations. For

this reason, Aguilar (2013) insists on the need for critical teacher training in order for teachers to act as mediators between the untouchable part that is the work and the shapeable part that constitutes the values issued. We should aim at knowing how to reflect and give an opinion on them.

As stated, the aforementioned works, their adaptations and their derivatives are penetrating the social structures and are imposing themselves as referents in both family and educational spheres. The repetition of these readings and the transmission between generations, in addition to the universal values contained therein, make them classics (Calvino, 1992). Additionally, certain ways of thinking and specific actions and customs of the history and context of other eras are codified in them. According to Ridley (2016), Literature and Art become primary sources for the psychological interpretation of thinking and, above all, for testing how the world can be seen in different ways.

It is difficult to assess how the construction of thinking came about. In other words, there is not much scientific evidence on how childhood memories work or how they are constituted. Rather, as Nikolajeva (2019) states, they take an unexplored path and it is difficult to follow their full trail. Therefore, we believe that it is not possible to state that the use of texts that could apparently have a sexist bias in childhood could be a reason for the construction of a gender identity marked by stereotypes or tending to enhance possible discrimination. The meanings of so-called Children's Literature will have to be taken as relative according to the period to which the texts belong and according to the social value attached to them. Such narratives *per se* will not have a plausible effect, but it is their use and interpretation in the different contexts in which they are used that will produce a specific effect. For this reason, in the following section, we have opted for a dialogical approach to texts in order to promote gender equality, starting with the use of children's literature.

Gender equality - a dialogical issue related

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to the interpretation of stories and texts?

Gender issues continue to much in fashion. Recent studies have been carried out on identity, differences, violence and other issues related to this issue (Flores, 2018; García-Ramos et al., 2020; Lomas, 2004; Serra, 2019; Solsona, 2019; Subirats, 2017, 2019; Subirats & Tomé, 2017; Yubero & Larrañaga, 2016). From our point of view, although such research is interesting and contributes to a relevant body of knowledge, it needs to be complemented by finding the initial contribution in the training of people. Human beings have a process of gradual incorporation into society and culture; in our opinion, the stories that surround them are extremely important in this access to the understanding of reality. The need to narrate and tell stories is a cultural element inherent to the development of humanity (Vilarroya, 2019). Thus, the meanings implied in these stories will be essential in influencing the thinking of these trainees.

As we are undergoing continuous sub-creation, in order for it to take place, we will be in constant contact with information and, in the case of the youngest children, with the stories that are told or read. For that reason, awareness on the part of the professionals who select and provide such narratives must be a given. The foregoing is not intended to encourage specific positions on the issue, but to open up spaces for debate that allow for a move away from dogmatism. The objective of building critical citizens with autonomy and access to equal opportunities mainly involves being able to convey a spirit of questioning to the new generations that leads to a free growth in terms of possible sexist attitudes. In line with Habermas (1994), we advocate for people who are not recipients of knowledge only, but who participate in an inter-subjective dialogue that generates practices of resistance and transformation, as well as elaborating their own meanings through a reconstructive and progressive action of knowledge, i.e., it is about being co-learners in social interaction with other people, in socially significant tasks.

It is not necessary to produce new literary texts based on reversing the roles of the characters, as in Anholt's texts (2002) where both the *Cinderella* and *Little Red Riding Hood* stories are rewritten according to gender, resulting in two new productions where stereotypes are repeated and do not show a good example of equal treatment between genders. The strategies of literary creation, whether in the educational or commercial sphere, do nothing but sub-creating the classics. In some cases, they achieve a certain social prominence, like the versions of Roald Dahl (2008), but they do not thereby unseat their references. In previous studies (Jerez-Martínez & Hernández-Delgado, 2015), we addressed Garner's subcreations. In that contribution, we showed how systems of social representation correspond to texts according to the times and demands. In the case of Garner (1995), satire and transgression are reflected in his version of classic tales. Curiously, if we oppose Disney's productions to Garner's, the power of the former will be at a higher level in terms of acceptance, the wit reflected in politically correct texts. Stimulating debate around these texts and the reinterpretation of their meanings in relation to the experiences of present times must be the best option for the possible access to the claimed equality.

There are a series of contributions that analyse what happens between sexism and its incidence in Children's Literature (Barragán, 1989; Tejedor, 1991; Turín, 1996; Monserrat, 2008; Colomer & Olid, 2009; Etxaniz, 2017). These papers are an example of the existing interest and concern in the discipline to find out to what extent these texts can contribute to equality and to what extent they contain aspects that induce discrimination.

The stories linked to Children's Literature have characters that are contextualised in their times but have transcended those times and are used today. Therefore, *Alice, Pippi Langstrumpf, Pinocchio, Peter Pan, Wendy, Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, The Tin Soldier,* are some examples of these characters. Depending on the point of view whereby it is interpreted and the treatment given to the texts

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or their orality, it may or may not influence the shaping of gender identity and the assimilation of stereotypes that lead to discrimination.

We do not believe that there can be a blue-oriented and a pink-oriented Children's Literature (although there are juvenile texts categorised as such), nor are we of the so-called violet Children's Literature that may be an emerging alternative. We must be aware that these labels condition access to texts and through this classification only the influence of linguistic use on the shaping of thinking becomes apparent. The introduction of current social issues -such as new family models, sexual orientation, harassment, or possible abuse - is found in the new productions offered in the literary market, but we do not think that they should have a specific space, but rather that they should be conceived as literary texts (as long as they comply with minimum requirements of fiction and use of artistic language and are not mere pedagogical materials) that join the offer that users may have at their disposal.

Therefore, we confirm that, in our opinion, gender equality between the sexes from the perspective of the use of Children's Literature is a matter of interpretation; it should not be individual, but should be approached from a dialogical point of view. Intersubjective debate (Habermas, 1987) has to provide people with a more complete vision of reality so that it can be interpreted in a less biased way. In the case of younger children, it is necessary to ensure that family, school and informal settings can provide mediated access to narratives so that the sub-creation that may originate has sufficient freedom to escape sexist stereotypes.

Conclusions

Upon going through the different sections that have supported the main idea that we wanted to convey in this paper, in this section we want to compile the most relevant and transcendental questions with a view to opening up new avenues of research or which could be a source for social reflection. We believe that our position regarding

language as a transversal element that articulates all human action has been made clear; it is through language and its manifestations that we interpret reality and our thinking is conditioned. Then, one of our first conclusions has to do with escaping from univocal meanings; as has been argued along the lines of this contribution, the metaphors with which we distinguish both reality and fiction rely on a strong symbolic apparatus, where symbols can be associated with different meanings and not just one. Starting from this linguistic arbitrariness encoded in signs, we will intervene, from the different spheres of education, so that people reflect on the semantics of these symbols. This will be done by acquiring knowledge through continuous exploration of reality. In this sense, dialogic reading and learning communities will be essential in this process.

The construction of the divided universe that we have mentioned in the text is produced through the harmful use of stereotyping. In its denominator function, it produces universes divided in such a way that we can appreciate areas characterised by pink, blue or violet (Subirats & Brullet, 1992). These social categorisations or classifications are derived from or transmitted to the population, which assimilates and reinterprets them, shaping both individual and collective thinking.

The second conclusion that we put forward by way of a demand has to do with the need to deconstruct knowledge in order to be aware of the processes of thinking shaping. As we stated, the function of myth as a pre-rational narrative is at the heart of many of the conceptual foundations we have in place in society. In this sense, people should be encouraged to access these precedents and understand that there is an explanation behind social processes, always through dialogue.

The third key point of the text has to do with the literature to which children have access, which, from our point of view, should be considered as the first path to knowledge. There is a clear need for mediation so that the processes of subcreation

do not lead to subversion as a result of the consumption of Children's Literature (Zipes, 1983). Therefore, we believe that gender equality in texts for the youngest children has to be a matter of a dialogical nature, of mediated interpretation of stories and texts. In this case, we take up Bakhtin's contributions (1986, 1992) where he claimed the word as a container of social issues; and where the consciousness of the person makes possible its impact on the state of things, in this case on the subcreation that can induce a gender identity. This dialogic approach would thus be applied to literature (Sánchez-Mesa, 1999) to generate shared knowledge in which the sense of the path marked by the social components is perceived (in the case at stake, the greatest stimulus would reside in the Disney company). From this perception and understanding, it will be possible to critically encourage people to take a position on the issue.

The fourth conclusion to be drawn is that such interpretation and editing of texts must be oriented towards inclusion, away from exclusion, but does not have to focus on the need for empowerment necessarily. This is possible, but without an hourglass effect (Blanco et al., 2019; Díez-Gutiérrez, 2019). In this regard, we again urge people to use their critical sense, as the amount of information received through social networks or the media must be filtered in order to have a real perspective on the treatment of equal opportunities between genders.

Before concluding our contribution, we would like to point out certain issues that could have an impact on the processes of sub-creation that we have dealt with. We are referring to cyberculture; according to Escandón (2012), conventions are gradually being surpassed by the irruption of multimedia and hypertexts, although in the case of literature there is still no emergence of the cybercultural world, given that the narrative patterns and schemes of the physical text tend to be repeated. If the internet as an exponent of cyberculture is really intended to be a cultural artefact (Martos & Martos, 2014b) that welcomes a transition from literate to digital sub-creation, it will necessarily impact the collectivity, trying not to imitate the aforementioned traditional narrative schemes. Therefore, we propose not to forget these factors, although they have a way to go to be significant so far in the field of literary creation.

We conclude by calling for an awareness of the interpretation of texts, especially those of Children's Literature, indicating that these are nothing more than a process of sub-creation that corresponds to an adaptation of elements to a given context and socio-political and educational conditions. Equal opportunities for women and men must be based on thinking. In its indivisible union with the use of language, must be stimulated in a critical sense in order to avoid informative biases and, above all, wrong attitudes that lead to undesirable consequences. We agree with Butler (2006) in the deconstruction of the concept of gender, based on knowledge of its nature, components and agents involved.

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