

Lore, Language and Rhyming in the Australian Playground

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Adults have developed their own folklore in almost every aspect of life, and, unsurprisingly, so too have children, particularly in the playground where they spend much of their time. The playground folklore *of* children (as opposed to folklore *for* or *about* children), 'is passed down from one generation of primary school children to another, by observation, imitation, trial and error and sometimes direct instruction.'¹ In this way, it very much fits the essential characteristics of folklore in that it is informal and group-oriented, it displays considerable variation across time and history, it is traditional (given its lengthy historical context), and it is seemingly universal.

Another interesting characteristic of children's folklore, similar to that which occurs with the folklore developed and perpetuated by the adult community, is that it tends to 'borrow' from various areas of popular culture like the mass media. For example, the catchy and 'musical' advertising jingle for Australian Rules football from the 1970's was routinely parodied in the following rhyme, 'Up there Cazaly, meatballs and sauce/Fly like elastic, eat like a horse.'² Children's ability to rework contemporary items of popular culture is elucidated by Ian Turner in his interpretative essay *The Play Rhymes of Australian Children*:

What has happened, I believe, is this: urbanisation, compulsory education and the growth of mass communications, exemplified by television in particular, have taken children out of their former, more protected milieu within the family, thrusting them into school classes, allotted so as to roughly correspond to their age groups, thereby breaking whatever ties existed between older and younger children...as a result of this, the environment in which these older children communicate to the younger ones relatively complex dramatic games has been substantially altered. Therefore children have found they can transcend the limitations of their immediate environment by imitating the far wider range of adult activity and

¹ *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 62.

² *Ibid.*, p. 260.

experience now available to them within these changed circumstances and via the mass media.³

Interestingly, the playground is situated within the boundaries of a 'formal' educational institution, the school itself, yet despite this setting and all the official structures and rules attached to it, it is in this very environment that children's folklore develops and where children create imaginative games with rules of their own making, incorporating various rhymes, old and new, invented and corrupted, with language that is at once mainstream and experimental.

Following is a very brief analysis of various elements of language and rhyming which form part of the games and folklore of children in the unique setting of the playground. The links between lore, language and rhyming will be outlined, and examples of specific rhymes will be given to highlight the often crude and anti-authoritarian content and purpose of rhymes associated with playground games. Examples of rhymes which highlight the more didactic purpose of rhyming language will also be given. This, together with the obvious musicality of rhyming language, will demonstrate that children's language development is aided through the repetition of similar sounds and this ultimately has a mnemonic effect. Issues pertinent to living in today's society and how they may (or may not) impact on children's lore in the playground are also explored. How these issues may (or may not) effect the continuation of children's folklore as it has been presented in the vast majority of research will conclude the essay.

Games played by children at school like skipping rope games, ball-bouncing activities and hand-clapping games are not only fun and entertaining for the children concerned, participation in these games also creates a context in which rules, and therefore concepts of fairness, become necessary (for example, the elimination and/or selection of players.) While the use of rhymed language is an obvious and audible component of such playing, its underlying function is perhaps less obvious. Given children's 'acute sense of the paradoxical and the absurd,'⁴ there is little wonder that rhyming language (aside from its pragmatic function of providing a specific rhythm by which to play the game), is used in a humorous fashion by children to touch on taboo subjects such as sex and genitalia, and the peculiarity of bodily functions. However, as Ian Turner then qualifies this point:

³ *Cinderalla Dressed in Yella*, ed. by I. Turner, J. Factor and W. Lowenstein (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1969), p. 155.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

...not all playground rhymes serve the purpose of amusement only; some serve more particular ends. Prominent among these are self-defence—against the iniquities of the school system and ‘those placed in authority over us...’

Following is an example of a rhyme which shows the humorous expression of children about a ‘taboo’ subject, as well as an example which is anti-authoritarian in its sentiment.

Captain Cook did a poop	Glory, glory, allelujah,
Behind the apple tree;	We hit the teacher with the ruler;
A piece of grass	The ruler broke in two,
tickled his arse	So we hit him with a shoe,
And made him do a pee. ⁵	And now he’s black and blue. ⁶

The rhyming language becomes the vehicle through which children’s solidarity is expressed, which in turn, strengthens the lore inherent in the playground, created and transmitted as it is to the exclusion of adults or those in authority.

Another important and more technical aspect of language which serves to highlight the educational aspect of rhyming language includes the use of common rhetorical devices like alliteration, onomatopoeia and homophonic word play. Although at a very basic stage of poetic and musical exploration the following parody of a well-known song uses the rhetorical device of onomatopoeia (with the third line echoing the first):

Row row row your boat
Gently down the stream
Putt putt putt putt,
Out of gasoline.⁷

The following example of a children’s rhyme has repetition occurring at the end of each line and is combined with homophonic word play:

A sailor went to sea sea sea
To see what he could see see see
But all that he could see see see
Was the bottom of the deep blue sea sea sea.⁸

The acquisition of language skills is an ever-growing and changing world of exploration for children, and the following quote exemplifies the power and beauty of language in the hands of adventurous and spirited children:

⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

⁷ *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore*, ed. by Gwenda Beed Davey and Graham Seal (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 261.

⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

It is as if the communal, ritual language of children operates as counterpoint to the official melody of the adult world. Verbal play permits a dissident, occasionally raucous and vulgar, commonly disrespectful voice. Within the comparative safety of the peer group, the largely powerless young assert themselves through the power of language and laughter.⁹

Folkloric practices such as the playing of games and the utilisation of specific rhymes are not only derived from a rich history of playground tradition, but are also being constantly modified to suit the ever changing needs of the times in which they are practiced. Folklore, by its very nature, provides a reflection of any given group's experiences of the society in which they live. Acknowledging this raises certain pertinent issues which may affect the evolution and continuation of children's folklore and language in the playground in modern times.

Given that much of the research, data collection and surveys concerning children's folklore was carried out during the 1960 – 1980's (if not earlier),¹⁰ issues which may be of direct relevance in today's society have not necessarily been addressed. These include such areas as the technologically-driven era in which live and how children's exposure to, and preoccupation with all things 'digital' such as computer games, and the prevalence of internet usage, may (or may not) influence playground games. Is there a new vocabulary 'borrowed' from this far-reaching form of popular culture which lends new meaning not only to the 'rules' of game playing but to the nuances of (verbal) communication and, indeed, verbal capacity in general? Is there an inclusion of new words in an existing vocabulary which have their origin in computer game playing and 'computer-speak' or jargon? Similarly, modern means of mass entertainment such as the easily accessible worlds of big screen movies, and the easy to rent and play at home films and electronic games available on DVD, are not particularly conducive to self-initiated play. Does this inhibit playground play or in any way affect established patterns of play, or does it perhaps enhance playground activities by helping to stimulate children's imaginations?

⁹ Factor, J., 'Introduction', *Kidspeak: A Dictionary of Australian Children's Words, Expressions and Games* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), p. xxiv.

¹⁰ Two significant publications of relevance to the experience of Australian children are *Cinderella Dressed in Yella* (Turner, Factor and Lowenstein) and *Playground Game Characteristics of Brisbane School Children* (Lindsay and Palmer) which were published in 1969 and 1981 consecutively. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* was published later in 1993, however, the information contained therein is often given with reference to earlier research.

Additionally, the current society is one fostered, to a degree, on a culture of fear. Fear of the stranger (so-called ‘stranger-danger’) has had the effect of creating a type of ‘hyper’ parenting which has led to a significant decrease in the amount of unsupervised outdoors play by children. How might this impact on children’s play in the relatively safe setting of the playground? Does it make playground activities more ‘free’ imaginatively, or has a decrease in unsupervised play and an increase in structured play *outside* school impacted (negatively or otherwise) on the nature of play *inside* school? Are children being given the opportunity to develop the self-autonomy and decision-making skills that self-determined play affords them? And how, in turn, does this redefine the nature of folklore generated by children?

Regardless of the level or type of impact these various social issues may have had, or will have, on children’s playground lore and language, it is inevitable that the lore of children will be influenced by (if not directly dictated by) what is going on in the society around them. It helps explain the occurrence of variation of lore across time and history, a key feature of folklore generally.

Irrespective of the era in which children’s folklore is being observed and recorded, there is one overarching, ever-present and common factor that can be noted. Children engage with folklore in order to better understand themselves and others, and the environment around them. The creation and transmission of folklore, and the use of specific language and particular rhymes in the playground is central to children expressing themselves as individuals while simultaneously gaining acceptance of a broader, collective group of peers. The lack of adult intervention or interference in the folklore of children is key to its evolution as a genuine, and genuinely self-perpetuating area of folklore in society at large. This child’s world of exclusivity is best summed up by an expert in the field, a child:

It is impossible
for anyone to enter
our small world.
The adults don’t
understand us
they think
we’re childish.
No one can get in
our world.
It has a wall twenty feet high
and adults
have only ten feet ladders.¹¹

¹¹ *Cinderella Dressed in Yella*, ed. by I. Turner, J. Factor and W. Lowenstein (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1969), p. 163. (Poem originally

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sourced from Ross Falconer, aged 11, in 1966. Note its relevance more than 40 years later.)