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Review of Ildikó Tamás: „Adj netet!” – Linguistic, visual expression and creativity in children’s and student folklore

There is something in common in a child and a poet. And art often reinforces that. Think of children’s graffiti, Sándor Weöres’ doodle verses, or artistic endeavours that use graffiti. This “commonality” is best captured in creativity. The child and the poet move more freely in the world of language, less bound by rules. It is because a child learns the language with an internal, innate program and adapts it, rightly or wrongly, to the already set expectations of the environment, and the poet because he dares to go beyond the linguistic conventions he has already mastered.

Perhaps the most striking phenomena of creativity and linguistic and visual expression are the surprises and “irregularities” offered by the new information technologies of our time. Ildikó Tamás, a linguist and ethnographer, has focused her attention primarily on children’s and youth folklore, but she also occasionally cites poetry as an example. The title of her book is “Adj netet” (Give me net) because, in her experience, this is the most frequently heard request for mobile net sharing in schools after the end of the lessons. In the

Source: Balassi Kiadó



past, in the same situation, it was probably said: “Give me a bite”, a taste of your food. When parents who are concerned about the internet dependence restrict their child’s use of the net and “the data run out”, children also use this request to ask for more time. Ildikó Tamás’ book explores the linguistic phenomena (genres) of children’s and students’ folklore, the characteristics of the creative groups (old and new genres, verbal literacy-written literacy, offline-online register shift, “meme culture”), and two key areas of the creative process: ethno-ethymology and gibberish. Method: anthropological-folkloristic, including observation and interview.

The child lives mostly in a linguistic world shaped by themselves or by their parents, while the student is influenced by other community (school, college, group cohabitation), cultural (learning) and technological effects. The study of the culture and language of childhood is an old and rewarding task, because it was recognised early that the world and culture of the child is very specific, not necessarily the world of the adult simplified and reduced, but with its own rules and phenomena. The language world of a child is not merely a reproduction of the language spoken by adults, but has something of its own, something that is built up from within (from evolution and history). It is also a feature of children’s folklore. Research on the linguistic world of youth has so far been particularly interesting in the field of group language (subcultural), and slang phenomena with another approach. However, for both age groups, little attention has been paid to the new linguistic folklore that has emerged as a result of modern, mainly technological, phenomena. For some time now, children have been born to the world of new technological devices. Even children who cannot read and write are now using smartphones, and are developing a way of communicating and using technology that they could not have learned from their parents. This phenomenon is similar to the learning of a mother tongue, where patterns are not the only factor.

The ethnographer Vilmos Voigt, a teacher of many of us, recognised early on the problem of the survival and transformation of traditional folklore phenomena and predicted ‘technological folklore’. His 1983 study in *Ethnography* on the research of children’s folklore in Budapest is relevant for our topic. For the folklorist and the linguist, it is striking that a significant repertoire of texts has emerged which cannot be classified in traditional, fixed, unwittingly learned genre typologies. Ildikó Tamás has also taken note of these. A specific form of cultural transmission is paraphrasing or imitation, or even tran-

scription (transcription of prayer texts). Mixed-medium, picture-text humour (graphic text, caricature, montage; today's – incorrect – summary term: internet meme) is spreading. There are also the (absurd) 'tall tales' based around Chuck Norris (world karate champion and actor), reminiscent of tall tales. The absurd are a source of intellectual humour ("The coronavirus is not dangerous to the young, only to those who catch it"). The playful interpretation of foreign words and proper names is a well-known process. There are a remarkable number of jocular lists (e.g. nonsense occupations, Hungarian language features). There have been macaronisms (language mixes) in the past and still are today, e.g. in the past animal texts (Ton a lud atus > tonaludatusz), these days there are more English examples (This no all ~ pigsty), jibberish jargon (e.g. Big in Japan > bikicsunáj), foreign language imitators and interpreters (What is the name of the rich Dutch man? Stex van Boeven). Several people have been interested in antiproverbs (distorted proverbs). Pseudo-sentences are spreading. Real linguistic plays on words are the use of cyiasms (e.g. a traditional one: Nem mindegy, hogy mögöttem vagy nem öttem mög, (it doesn't matter whether you're behind me or not), and another: egyöntetű, (you are alouse). There is also intellectual humour in segmentation language games: For the one who lives on top of the tent, the bottom of the tent is a new place = Sátoraljaújhely). Everyone is enchanted by children's mouth-texts (in fact, specific narrative language examples of children's mother tongue learning, e.g. "I don't know how old I am because it keeps changing"). There are also divinatory challenges today, reminiscent of divination. segmentation language games...

Ildikó Tamás draws attention to a particular genre group, which is characterised by containing 5-7-9 etc. (brief) statements about something. It is a kind of collection, perhaps the closest to a sorting, listing designation. For example: book and film humour (e.g. Parents' meeting: Final Countdown), one-line justifications for failed dates (e.g. The lawyer: not my type). Nowadays, it is mainly spreading on the internet through online journalism, but it used to be a popular genre in student newspapers. Its motivation may be space saving and the fact that people don't like to read long, concise texts, but this outline is easy to read. Tamás Ildikó provides a very good introduction to the cento genre. Cento is a literary form (quotation, enumeration, elaboration) of literary works. There is nothing new under the sun so the list (cento) "deaths and crafts", which is now circulating on the Internet, can be found word by word in the 1912 volume of the Magyar Nyelvőr (Nyelvi halálok (Deaths in Language), and in the book on

page 69): “The tailor’s thread of life is broken. The gardener goes to paradise. The door of heaven opens for the doorman. The watchmaker strikes his last hour. The conductor reaches the last station. The Darwinist returns to his ancestors. The pen falls from the writer’s hand.”

As it can be seen, there is a precedent for everything, because man is basically always the same. The chain letter described by Mihály Hoppál anticipates the texts to be forwarded (reproduced, shared); the memorial book, the manuscript booklet, the social media timeline; the wallpaper, the comic book, the Internet meme; the reader’s letter, the comment...

Anti-proverbs or proverb-mixing is interspersed with an underlying meaning (the similar proverb) and becomes humorous. This is possible in some cases. But e.g. “pulls the wet sheet off” is, in my opinion, only humorous to someone who knows the source (puts the wet sheet on), and this is rare, because we hear similar mixes in the media every day, not intended to be humorous at all – which are then happily picked up by the press. (E.g. The cardinal question hangs over Hungary’s head.) The humorous nature of the new (hybrid) genres is striking. If it is humour, it is of course almost certainly student humour, because humour is not a feature of children’s folklore. Physical, action humour develops into adolescent humour (self-humour, abstract humour) after the age of 10 – if it develops, because we know people who are humourless (‘acidified’). It is possible to live without humour, but for some reason our age is very favourable to the spread of the types of humour. But why is there so much humour? Asks Ildikó Tamás. It is a good question. Humour has probably always existed, think of the laughter culture of the Middle Ages (Bahtyin), or the traditional Hungarian folklore forms of humour, from the naughty stories to anecdotes and jokes. We know that humour is therapeutic: it cures fear and is also a way of life and conflict management. Laughter is an age-appropriate characteristic; a form of resistance to the dominant and restrictive culture of adults (a phenomenon of rebellion, counterculture, vernacular authority). But the important, and partly unanswered, question remains: why is folklore ‘humourised’?

The main characteristic of old and new folklore is its spread. Gossip is also a well-known medium for folklore. Fashion, as a cultural factor, is expressed in the form of group rituals of ‘enthusiasm’ in adolescence: badges, dress codes, and especially ‘accessory’ habits. An interesting and under-reflected observation is the infiltration of the world of the East: anime, martial arts, Korean (K) pop.

A common interest of the folklorist and the linguist is the grammatical and semantic analysis of the textual repertoire. According to Ildikó Tamás, in children's folklore, "rhythm and sound are much more important than the meaning of the text", as is shown, for example, by the gibberish texts. How accurately this phenomenon echoes my introductory thought, since it is clear who likes to 'gibberish': children and poets. The other important observation is the research into the origins and etymology of children's language texts, which gives us an insight into the world of earlier periods, cultural-linguistic and possibly sacral influences. And also, of changes. With reference to Piroska Tóth's collection of urban (Budapest) children's folklore, it is noticeable that images of rural life, of flora and fauna, are being displaced, thus also indicating an alienation from nature.

Research into children's and student folklore has already uncovered many linguistic treasures; new technologies offer even more opportunities for observation. What is this new medium? The boundaries of reality are blurring. Offline and online are merging, hybrid behaviour and communication (language?) are emerging. Many of the folklore phenomena have moved online, images, written and spoken content are merging, a new form of folklore (folklorism) has emerged, internet or e-folklore, but there is also the term newslore (a collective term for folklore works of various genres spreading through different channels). The common feature is distribution (e-mail, SMS, Facebook, Messenger, Viber). The author draws attention to certain narratives: I, when..., You know, when..., but, I might add, this elliptical beginning, for example, is very common: The feeling when..., even without an article: Feeling when... (it would be a full expression so: You also know the feeling when...).

The author highlights the process of creation of gibberish and folk etymology. She notes that there is a lack of in-depth folkloric-linguistic study of gibberish, which is widespread throughout the world (i.e. in all linguistic cultures). Gibberish is a text without a specific meaning, but if it is artistically motivated, it is absurd (nonsense). Here too, child and poet meet. But it seems that gibberish is not quite gibberish either. Certain regularities can be detected in it. For example, phoneme sequences that imitate sounds, such as the stress on the deep vowels being greater. In other words, there is a kind of system to gibberish, words are built up from more phonetically motivated, expressive sound sequences. At first sight, the phonetic structure and possibly onomatopoeic emergence of the gibberish texts overrides the scholastic Saussurean tradition

– that is, the notion of the obligatory arbitrariness of the linguistic sign. Yet it is indisputable that the linguistic sign is synchronistically arbitrary. Only we do not stress enough that it is purely synchronic. Because historically it is indisputably not. From a historical point of view, the linguistic sign is most certainly motivated, whether we realise it, or we don't. But there is a latent, subconscious belief and desire in man that things are motivated, that something is what it is for something, so if we don't know the reason, we will find a reason. We do this mainly with the help of folk etymology (folk etymology), and at a higher level, of course, we can also draw on the history of language, folklore, the concept of indexicality and iconicity in semiotics, and psychoanalytic linguistics, and, more recently, cognitive linguistics (echoing the effects of sound metaphor tests, as already suggested by Fónagy Iván in the 1950s, or the phenomenon of sound symbolism, often described by stylists).

Folk etymology is an instinctive way of creating words, e.g. to facilitate pronunciation, but it can be more than that. As a psychoanalytic explanation, it is man's eternal desire for meaning, and this is a real anthropological linguistic subject.

I suppose that there is some kind of connection between language learning and sound imitating phonemes, that gibberish involves two moments (the playful instinct to play with language at the subconscious level and consciousness at a higher level); the gibberish may well have preserved relics (inclusions), so it is not futile to investigate them, but they may also lead nowhere, remaining indecipherable because they contain an ancient mode of language production that is inaccessible to our present logic. Béla Hamvas writes that man today has lost his sensitivity to symbolic vision and language, in other words, he does not understand the language of earlier times. But in us – in every human being – a kind of continuous motivation (aspiration, need, urge) for interpretation (folk etymology), and a system of rules of patterns, musical samples, principles of editing (thought patterns) operates unconsciously in every human being have still remained in us. This is also where (organic) misinterpretation appears, but there is also conscious, humorous misinterpretation. Nonsensical, absurd texts also appear on a higher level, as an artistic endeavour, especially in the avant-garde (Futurism, Dadaism, Lettrism, Weöres Sándor: “blind text”), the obvious reason for this being a kind of conscious return to language misuse. It is often asked whether children learn culture and language by imitating adults, by learning from them. For me – precisely on the basis of examples from

folklore and language – it is clear that the child’s programme of culture and language acquisition (i.e. their innate nature) is a programme that offers broader possibilities and contexts than the specific cultural environment, and it is precisely these that are reflected in certain phenomena that cannot be explained by the culture in question. Children’s folklore, and with it children’s language, is the (hidden) collective unconscious in the Jungian sense, the world of current stimuli and contexts surrounding the child and the infinitely free creativity that it brings with it. Children’s folklore and children’s language are evidence of our all-humanity.

Ildikó Tamás also refers to the continuation of this kind of research (which is not rootless in Hungarian culture), and I see great potential in this, especially if our disciplines do not retreat into ivory towers and closed professional frameworks. Her interesting, exciting book, with many examples of language, will be useful for those who want to know and understand the art of language better.

■ Tamás Ildikó. 2022. *„Adj netet!” Nyelvi, képi kifejezés mód és kreativitás a gyermek- és diákközlőben*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó.