English Nursery Rhymes in the U. S.: The Importance of Cultural Aspects in Education

Luca Rausch-Molnár

Abstract: Nursery rhymes have long been perceived as fundamental in young children's education, not only in a first-language environment, but also in foreign language teaching. While most research focuses on the benefits of rhymes, rhythm, as well as the playful features of nursery rhymes, the aim of this article is to emphasize the importance of their function as transmitters of cultural values. The role of oral tradition was, originally, rather to preserve, process and reflect on cultural and historical events and crises than to educate children. Still, most American nursery rhymes have origins rooted in British tradition and culture, which means that culturally specific content in British nursery rhymes should be interpreted in an American cultural context. It is by analyzing and retracing the origins of four British nursery rhymes widely known in the Unites States that the paper intends to show how these rhymes remain social models and serve cultural educational purposes today.

Keywords: nursery rhymes, U. S. folklore, cultural education, cultural values, EFL

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> "The life of the past never seems so comprehensible, and the historic interval never so insignificant, as when the conduct and demeanor of children are in question. Of all human relations, the most simple and permanent one is that of parent and child." (Newell 1883: 28)

Introduction

Most nursery rhymes we know today date back many centuries. As the rhyming patterns and rhythmic structures of these short poems are enjoyable to children (Glenn & Cunningham 1982; Fazio 1997a) and easy for them to remember and recite, they have been widely used in first, second and foreign language education. They have been highly esteemed for their playfulness and language play and for their ability to improve memory (e.g. Fazio 1997b), imagination, as well as language skills, such as phonological awareness, pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (e.g. Dunst, Meter & Hamby 2011). The use of nursery rhymes is also beneficial for literacy development (Dunst, Meter & Hamby 2011; Laakso, Poikkeus, Eklund & Lyytinen 2004; Maclean, Bryant & Bradley 1987; Nwokah & Gulker 2006a and 2006b). Besides their obvious linguistic and cognitive benefits (Lee, Torrance & Olson 2001), however, nursery rhymes are also carriers of history and culture.

The analysis of the term "nursery rhyme" shows that while "rhyme" clearly refers to the rhymes and the rhythm most nursery rhymes are known best for, "nursery" implies that these rhymes (and songs, jokes or even riddles) are more than simply catchy lines: the word derives from "nurse" or "nursing", which mean *feeding* the child. "Nursery rhyme" therefore describes the parent-child relationship, in which the child accepts food from the parent – and this "food", metaphorically may mean "word" (Mintz 1966: 24) or even "culture". When the parent tells a rhyme to the child, along with the words, the child receives a number of cultural values, oral literary criticism and traditional attitudes and interpretations (Dundes 1966: 243).

If that is indeed the case, how is it possible that many nursery rhymes known and sung today in the U. S. not only have British origins, but also seem to refer to important moments in British history and elements of old English culture? What cultural values or message can these nursery rhymes transmit to American children? Is it only for their rhyme and rhythm that they are still used? It is by briefly analyzing three examples of well-known nursery rhymes that this paper aims to highlight British references in an American cultural context: *Mistress Mary, quite contrary*, *Humpty Dumpty* and *Goosey, goosey gander*. All three are believed to have roots in English history and culture, and they all appear in the 20th-century American collection, William Stuart Baring-Gould and Ceil Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Mother Goose: Nursery Rhymes Old and New*, published in New York (1962).

It is hypothesized that these nursery rhymes have not lost their cultural values, but must be analysed in an American context to decipher the messages that they may transmit to children today. As Korney Chukovsky, 20th-century Russian children's poet says: "everything that is out of tune and incongruous with the psychology of the young child is gradually forgotten and becomes extinct" (Delamar 1987: 25). In other words, culturally and historically relevant nursery rhymes that have remained popular might in fact be *in tune* with the young child's psychology. This article, by adopting an interdisciplinary approach, intends to show that British historical

and cultural references implicitly or explicitly present in nursery rhymes can and should be exploited in young children's education in the United States.

Nursery Rhymes as Vehicles of Culture

Nursery rhymes are a small, but significant part of folklore, as they reflect on many aspects of culture: from historical events, religious beliefs, traditions and customs to superstitions, fears, regrets and desires all appear in nursery rhymes told and sung to children from an early age even today. This is what the title of Dundes' essay, *Folklore as a Mirror of Culture* (2007) suggests, and it also refers to the concept of Franz Boas – 20th-century folklorist of German origin and editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* between 1908 and 1923. Even though the statement that folklore is the mirror of a culture can be questioned, and several scholars have argued with it (e. g. Dorson 1959 and 1978), it is indeed generally accepted that the study of folklore is a tool to get to know and understand a culture. Concrete examples will be analyzed later in this paper, but first it is important to specify what nursery rhymes are and how it is possible to define them in order to position them in American folklore.

Following in the footsteps of Boas, Bascorn called folklore "verbal art" (Bascorn 1954), but his point of view was questioned by Alan Dundes, who pointed out that folklore is not necessarily oral (Dundes 1966: 233): from the perspective of folklore as a discipline, a generally accepted definition of "folk" is a group sharing at least one common factor, and folk-lore is whatever this "folk" produces: it is sufficient to think of for example quilts, furniture, or even the gastronomy of a certain "folk". As far as nursery rhymes are concerned, even though they are primarily passed on orally, research has shown that it is not exclusively the oral tradition that needs to be studied. There are nursery rhymes of which the origins are known – *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, for instance, which was written by Sarah Josepha Hale in 1830 in Boston, Massachusetts –, but they can nonetheless be considered as part of folklore. As C. W. Sullivan points out, even if the written source of the material is known, it is "often passed on in the same dynamic way that all folklore is passed on" (Sullivan 1999: 146). This means that a song, rhyme or riddle that the parent accesses in a written form will eventually be orally transmitted to the young child – who cannot read yet. This makes the object of this study twofold: on the one hand, nursery rhymes that have been preserved orally should be examined, and on the other hand their origins and the history of their printed publication have to be taken into consideration.

It is also important to make a distinction between nursery rhymes and schoolchild-rhymes – both of which can be considered as part of children's folklore. While the latter are generally transmitted (orally) by children to children often of the same generation and include games, counting-out rhymes and jumprope-rhymes, nursery rhymes are generally passed on to children by another generation, most often their parents or caretakers (Mintz 1966: 25). This paper focuses on nursery rhymes, as their preservation depends on adults, so rhymes and songs which accompany games that children play among themselves are not part of the current corpus. The following section, by taking on a historical approach, will briefly present how nursery rhymes became part of the printed literary canon by mentioning the most relevant publications, with special emphasis on those pieces that have remained part of this corpus and have become embedded in American nursery lore.

Collecting, systematically ordering and publishing nursery rhymes in English probably started after 1729, when Charles Perrault's French collection, *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* became accessible to English readers thanks to Robert Samber's translation: *Tales of Mother Goose*. The first English collection that we know about was *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book* that appeared in 1744, published by Mary Cooper, and in the same year, John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* appeared. A decade later, in 1755, John Newbery's second publication, *Nurse Truelove's New-Year Gift* reached the public, and in 1760 Stanley Crowder and Benjamin Collins published *The Famous Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book*. Even though the exact date of its publication is unknown, the first most influential book of English nursery rhymes was published by the already

mentioned John Newbery and Oliver Goldsmith between 1760 and 1780, and its title was *Mother Goose's Melody* or *Sonnets for the Cradle*. It was this collection that was reprinted by Isaiah Thomas, "the American John Newbery" in 1785, in Massachusetts, entitled *Mother Goose's Melody* and *Tommy Thumb's Song Book for All Little Masters and Misses*. In 1842, James Orchard Halliwell published *The Nursery Rhymes of England* (of which the third edition, published in 1843 is used in this paper), which included notes on possible origins and meanings of the rhymes – it is therefore believed that his work was intended to please adults and not children. The sequel to this book, *Popular Rhymes and Nursery Tales* appeared in 1849, and Andrew Lang published the *Nursery Rhyme Book* at the turn of the century, in 1898. Although it is not a collection of nursery rhymes strictly speaking, it is important to mention that in 1930 Katherine Elwes Thomas wrote *The Real Personages of Mother Goose*. In her "Foreword", she claims to present the rhymes "in their correct historical sequence" (Elwes Thomas 1930: 7). In the 20th century, even though the publications of nursery rhymes multiplied, Iona and Peter Opie made remarkable contributions to the preservation of English children's folklore: among the numerous collections for which they did outstanding field work, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* must be highlighted, which was published in 1951, and which still serves as the basis for today's research. Following in the footsteps of Halliwell, this book also aims to clarify the origins and offers interpretations of the rhymes. The 1982 American edition of annotated nursery rhymes (Baring-Gould 1962) has already been mentioned in the Introduction, which was followed by the publication of Gloria T. Delamar's work in 1987: *Mother Goose: From Nursery to Literature*, adding even more historical details to the descriptions of the rhymes – of which I am using the second edition published in 2001.

Although the aim of the present study is not to examine the terminology used to describe or label nursery rhymes, it is interesting to observe how the titles of the first collections evolved: the initial Tommy Thumb's songs and stories seem to have transformed into Mother Goose collections, and the term "nursery rhyme" appeared only around the middle of the 19th century. Even though the origin of the term "Mother Goose rhymes", used even today as a synonym for "nursery rhymes" is unclear, certain scholars believe that it was Perrault's publication that made the expression popular, even though Perrault's work is not a collection of rhymes, but stories (Tsurumi 1990: 28), while other experts, such as the Opies think that it was because of the growing popularity of imported American Mother Goose picture books in Britain that the term became widespread (Opie 1951: 94).

What can already be seen from the history of the publication of nursery rhymes is that indeed the corpus of rhymes seems to be the same for British and American readers (and children), and that although these rhymes are mostly of British origin, American influence on their distribution is also relevant. The original question in this study appears to be even more pertinent: why did American publishers include rhymes with obvious English references and how did they remain popular with American parents and children?

Defining Folklore and Culture in the American Context

It is indispensable to define what the "American cultural context" means in which nursery rhymes are analyzed in this paper. As Dorson remarks, in the case of the U. S., the researcher faces many difficulties: it is a country with special historical conditions and special folklore problems (Dorson 1959: 203) that have been widely studied (Abrahams 1989; Bell 1973).

The first American folklorists in the 19th century also had to tackle this problem. When in 1888 the American Folklore Society was founded (following the British example, the English Folk-Lore Society, founded in 1878), in the first issue of their journal, *Journal of American Folklore*, William Wells Newell – author of the lines chosen as the motto of this article – wrote regretfully about the "fast-vanishing remains of folk-lore" in the U. S., by which he meant among others "relics of old English folklore" (quoted by Dundes 1966: 227). There is no sign in his article of "any folklore arising new in the U. S." (Dundes 1966: 228). In an earlier work, Newell expressed

the same idea by insisting that it is the old English folklore that Americans preserved (Newell 1883: 1). These writings prove that Newell seemed to follow the European concept of folklore that means the survival of traditions and customs from a time long past, and American folklore to him equalled the folklore imported by immigrants. This is not surprising, as European folklore studies focused on the historical aspects of folklore and regarded it as a key to the past. European folklorists' aim was mainly historical reconstruction, which resulted in nationalism in American folklore studies and the creation of "fakelore" (Roberts 2008). It was only in the middle of the 20th century that American scholars, such as Alan Dundes, Dorson, Bascorn shifted from using folklore to reconstruct history to using history to understand the significance of folklore. Their aim became to discover the social and cultural context of folklore and its functions (Bascorn 1954: 333). By collecting folklore and observing people, they concluded that folklore is no longer a true and accurate mirror of culture, as we cannot ignore the actual behaviour in society. They managed to position folklore in the 20th century American context. Their aim was no longer to follow the Finnish historical-geographical method and discover all variants of folklore to find the oldest elements and the mystical *Ur*-form (Dorson 1959: 198), but rather to compare nationality traditions in the U. S. with their forms and functions in lands of origin, and make a difference between regional and general American mass culture.

It is in this context that nursery rhymes seemingly carrying British cultural references are analyzed: what form do they take and what functions do they have in the U. S.?

Nursery Rhymes with Historical and Cultural References: Three Examples

Gloria T. Delamar warns that given the lack of evidence, popular interpretations of nursery rhymes might be unfounded or even misleading. She identifies three reasons for people's interest in them despite their being doubtful:

> One, there have been a number of self-published books that have borrowed, and therefore perpetuated, the many unfounded conclusions drawn by Katherine Elwes Thomas […]. Second, few people bother to check on scholastic credibility on something that seems on the surface to be a likely interpretation of something so insignificant (to them) as a nursery rhyme. And third, there is the human tendency to like the fact that there is something behind the seemingly simple words that reflect a deeper and adult interpretation (Delamar 1987: 121).

This means that while many people (even if erroneously) believe that nursery rhymes have British cultural and historical (or even political) references, the rhymes are still beloved, sung and told to American children.

To illustrate how British nursery rhymes maintained their importance in American nursery lore, three pieces have been chosen that appear in James Orchard Halliwell's British edition (1842) and William Stuart and Ceil Baring-Gould's New York collection (1962). Unsurprisingly, in the case of the rhymes presented below, there are minor differences between them, however, the historical and cultural references did not disappear from one publication to another. It also has to be emphasized that the aim of the present paper is not to retrace the origins of these rhymes, but rather to examine which rhymes and what information authors found worthy of noting in their collections and how their interpretations were kept – or changed.

Mistress Mary, quite contrary – or as it is probably more well-known today: *Mary, Mary, quite contrary* – appears in Halliwell's collection in the following version:

> MISTRESS Mary, quite contrary
> How does your garden grow?
> With cockle shells and silver bells
> And muscles (*sic*) in a row. (Halliwell 1843: 165, CCXC.)

The last two lines of the rhyme are modified in the Baring-Gould edition:

> With Silver Bells,
> And Cockle Shells,
> And so my Garden grows. (Baring-Gould 1962: 31)

In the notes, Halliwell mentions that "cockle shells", "silver bells" and "muscles" may refer to a Scotch song (Halliwell 1843: 165). William Stuart and Ceil Baring-Gould make attempts to interpret these motifs, but they also add several further variants of the last line of the nursery rhyme: "Today the last line is usually given as, *And pretty maids all in a row, but there are many other variants: Sing cuckolds all in a row; And cowslips all in a row; With lady bells all in a row; And columbines all in a row.*" (Baring-Gould 1962: 32) In their notes, the American authors refer to the Opies' *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* and write that "Mary" in the rhyme is probably Mary, Queen of Scots, which might also explain other elements of the rhyme, such as "pretty maids", who are believed to have been Mary's maids of honour (Baring-Gould 1962: 32). Katherine Elwes Thomas confirms this and adds that "pretty maids all in a row" was also an expression frequently used as a reference to maids of honour (Elwes Thomas 1930: 171-173). In her book, Gloria T. Delamar also confirms the identity of Mary by interpreting "silver bells" and "cockle shells" as motifs on the dress that was a gift to Mary by her husband, the Dauphin, but they might even be references to Sanctus bells – and thus, to Catholicism (Delamar 1987: 132). Margaret Chisholm claims to have discovered the "truth" about nursery rhymes, and she also believes that the rhyme is reference to Mary, Queen of Scots (Chisholm 1972: 1141). The tragic life – and death – of Mary marked an important moment in British history and religion, but Katherine Elwes Thomas emphasizes that the rhyme contains "no hint of tragedy, bubbles over with the joyousness of her life's springtime" (Elwes Thomas 1930: 170). If most people believe that it is indeed her that the rhyme refers to, how do the same lines affect American people (children or adults)? Before answering that question, the possible origins of the other two popular nursery rhymes chosen for this study will be focused on.

Believed to be a riddle meaning "AN EGG" (as it appears in Halliwell's book, 1843: 116), *Humpty Dumpty* is also one of the most beloved nursery rhymes even in the U. S. Alan Dundes writes that riddles are special tools for children to reverse the adult-child relationship:

> In our society, it is the parent or teacher who knows all the answers and who insists upon proposing difficult if not "impossible" questions to children. However, in the riddle context, either the parent doesn't know the answer to the elephant or little moron joking question—in which case the child can have the great pleasure of telling him or her what the answer is [...] (Dundes 2007: 60).

While riddles in general have the above-mentioned function in folklore, in the present study aims to highlight the possible historical and cultural references of *Humpty Dumpty,* which have been passed down by one generation to the other. This is also what Gloria T. Delamar emphasizes in her notes on *Humpty Dumpty*: "Lullabies [were] created by adults to soothe children, "infant amusements" created to entertain them, and riddles created to test the wits of other adults and then handed down to the nursery in rhyme-form" (Delamar 1987: 49). This is how the nursery rhyme is printed (by adults to adults) in the "Riddles" chapter of Halliwell's book:

> HUMPTY Dumpty sate (sic) on a wall,
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
> Three score men and three score more
> Cannot place Humpty Dumpty as he was before. (Halliwell 1843: 116, CLXXIII)

In the notes, Halliwell adds another version of the last two lines: "All the king's horses and all the king's men, / Could not set Humpty Dumpty up again" (Halliwell 1843: 116). Both versions can be found in the Baring-Gould collection, too, and similarly to Halliwell, the authors put the following version in the notes:

> Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall,
> All the king's horses,
> And all the king's men
> Couldn't put Humpty together again. (Baring-Gould 1962: 268)

The American authors inform their reader that *Humpty Dumpty* exists in a similar form in other languages, such as French, Swedish and German, it is therefore a common motif in European folklore. They also mention other explanations of the meaning of "Humpty Dumpty": an ale-and-brandy drink, a short and clumsy person or even a game for girls (Baring-Gould 1962: 268). It is also popularly believed that Humpty Dumpty refers to Richard III, the usurper, defeated in 1483, as explained by in Katherine Elwes Thomas (Elwes Thomas 1930: 39-40), but Delamar claims that there is no proof to verify this (Delamar 1987: 121-122). Even if the political and historical reference cannot be supported, it is interesting to note that although Elwes Thomas's way of interpreting *Humpty Dumpty* seems to be accepted by many, its popularity did not fade in the U. S. The fall of a clumsy person, or the consequences of one's clumsiness – be it an egg, a usurper or any other person – seem to have remained important in American nursery lore.

The next nursery rhyme in Halliwell's book, directly after *Humpty Dumpty* is *Goosey goosey gander*. Even though it appears in the same "Riddles" chapter, there is no clue, no solution to the riddle mentioned – as compared to *Humpty Dumpty* ("an egg", Halliwell 1943: 116), and there are no notes either that would tell us about the origins or possible meanings of the rhyme/riddle. However, in Baring-Gould's American edition published about a century later, some notes inform the reader about these. Halliwell uses the following version of the rhyme:

> GOOSEY goosey gander,
> Where shall I wander?
> Up stairs, down stairs,
> And in my lady's chamber;
> There I met an old man
> That would not say his prayers;
> I took him by the left leg,
> And threw him down stairs. (Halliwell 1843: 116, CLXXIV)

The version presented by Baring-Gould (and which Gloria T. Delamar believes to be the original version, 1987: 250) seems to be quite different:

> Goose-a, goose-a gander,
> Where shall I wander?
> Up stairs, down stairs,
> In my lady's chamber;
> There you'll find a cup of sack
> And a race of ginger. (Baring-Gould 1962: 86)

In the notes, the authors mention that "sack" and "race" are references to the French words "sec" ("dry", meaning "dry wine") and "racine" ("root"), as well as the previous version of the rhyme (Bring-Gould 1962, 87). They also add that the lines from "There I met an old man…" are taken from another rhyme, *Old Father Long-Legs*, which had merged with *Goosey goosey gander*. Nevertheless, Katherine Elwes Thomas remarks that the "old man" most probably refers to Cardinal Beaton, dear to Mary, Queen of Scots, who suffered a brutal death by being thrown

down the stairs and stabbed (Elwes Thomas 1930: 180-181). Gloria T. Delamar only evokes that the Opies found traces of "early Anglo-Saxon imagery" in the rhyme (Delamar 1987: 251). Either way ("cup of sack" or "old man"), secret as a motif seems to dominate the rhyme.

Teaching (with) Nursery Rhymes

The attitudes to nursery rhymes and the reasons why American parents (and older generations) sing or tell nursery rhymes to young children need further examination, but this study has tried to show that these short poems are essential parts of folklore and transmitted along with beliefs and interpretations. It has yet to give a final answer to the original question: why are these rhymes still popular with American children and what do they mean to them?

As Alan Dundes points out – „Folklore is passed on by means of person to person contact. And an item of folklore [such as a nursery rhyme] may be changed by different individuals in accordance with their own individual needs, the demands of a particular social context" (Dundes 2007: 58). It therefore seems that it is not the historical moment or the historical figure about which nursery rhymes teach children, but rather about the human condition in and the cultural understanding of historical moments or culturally important elements of folklore, which meet the demands of a "particular social context". It is the universal or "quasi-universal" (Dundes 2007: 58) human experiences that they transmit.

If we observe how British nursery rhymes have evolved in Britain, we may notice that old (classic) nursery rhymes are constantly re-written: for example, rhymes about English royalty are used as satires of contemporary problems or people (Delamar 1987: 138). Thus, the same can be told about the American context of nursery rhymes. Old rhymes that are commonly believed to have British references could be used to teach about how situations can be dealt with. *Mary, Mary, quite contrary* might be a rhyme about a queen and her religion, but it might also convey the message of enjoying life even in difficult situations. As for *Humpty Dumpty*, it seems to be a warning by telling the tale of the failure of a clumsy person, so it might have educational purposes today. *Goosey goosey gander* might teach about keeping and breaking rules or hiding secrets. Of course, these are only some ideas on how such nursery rhymes can be used in contemporary education (mainly the informal education of young children), but having ideas about their origins – whether or not these origins, implications and interpretations can be proven – may have a positive effect on how older generations pass them down. Nursery rhymes have the potential – just like any other item of folklore – to transmit cultural values, such as tolerance, perseverance, responsibility, etc. by setting examples.

By the same token, the use of nursery rhymes may be further exploited in teaching English as a second or foreign language – to young and older learners alike. Not only because of the linguistic and cognitive benefits mentioned in the introduction, but also as a tool to improve intercultural communication and understanding. The Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* emphasizes the importance of "intercultural awareness" (*Common European*... 2020: 251), but as it points out, its boundaries are not really "clear-cut", so the Council of Europe gives practical help to teachers in the form of publications, such as *Developing the Intercultural Dimension in Language Teaching. A practical Introduction for Teachers* (Byram, Gribkova & Starkey 2002). But it should be noted that instead of limiting cultural education in foreign language teaching to facts, the emphasis should be on "culture as a dynamic set of practices" (Liddicoat & Scarino 2013: 23). As Liljana Skopinskaja's 2003-study – that examined the attitude of teachers to the presence and absence of culture in materials designed for teaching English as a foreign language in Europe – shows, this approach is still not widespread: one of the negative trends that the study highlights is that culture in foreign language education appears to be the "stereotypical representation of target cultures as well as students' own" (Skopinskaja 2003: 52). Instead, as Liddicoat and Scarino point out, "[i]n approaching language education from an intercultural perspective, it is important that the view of culture be broad but also that it be seen as directly centered in the lived experiences of people"

(Liddicoat & Scarino 2013: 21-22), which may start with raising teachers' attention to different aspects of teaching culture int eh foreign language classroom (Bayyurt 2006). As this article has shown, nursery rhymes are capable of transmitting cultural values and an understanding of the human condition in general, all in all, the *human experience* – therefore, the use of these rhymes in foreign language education might make culture more accessible to language learners.

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