

ON MOTHER GOOSE'S NURSERY RHYMES—AS MAINLY SEEN FROM A LINGUISTIC VIEWPOINT

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§ 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to see Mother Goose's nursery rhymes mainly from linguistic point of view. The total number of Mother Goose's rhymes is supposed to be close to one thousand, some of which had been translated into Japanese. Tracing the history of Japanese translations of Mother Goose's rhymes, we find that the first important one was made by Hakushū Kitahara (1885–1942), a famous poet in the Taisho era. He translated one hundred and thirty-three Mother Goose's rhymes and made a Japanese version of them, which was published by the 'Ars' Bookshop in Tokyo about the end of 1921. It is now out of print, but much the same edition is available in the *Kadokawa* Library. The second important rendering of Mother Goose's rhymes was done by Sōfu Taketomo (1891–1954) in 1921, who was also a noted poet of modern Japan and a scholar on English literature.

It might be said that by these two translations Mother Goose's nursery rhymes began to be introduced to the reading public of Japan, but to our regret they called forth little response either in the reading public in general or in the learned circles of English literature in Japan. But in 1971, Shuntarō Tanigawa (1931–), a poet, made a new translation of Mother Goose's nursery rhymes—we are sorry to say that the number of them was only fifty—which was published by the Chuōkōron publishing company. This was followed by his recent version of Mother Goose's rhymes, which was published in five volumes⁽¹⁾ by the Sōshisha publishing company

(1) The number of the rendered rhymes amounts to 175.

in 1975. This version of Mr. Tanigawa's, together with some others, won a sudden and tremendous popularity among the readers of Japan, the popularity which has kept on ever since.

§ 2. The World of Mother Goose's Nursery Rhymes

The world of Mother Goose's nursery rhymes is not only the world which dearly appeals to each and every heart of English-speaking countries, especially of Great Britain, but also is the world which has something to do with the distant memories cherished by all human beings of their forefathers.

Mrs. Yōko Kirishima, a Japanese woman critic, says in her essay, *Mother Goose and Her Three Little Pigs* (July, 31, 1977) now appearing serially in the *Asahi*:

"I have keenly realized, while living in the U.S., how deeply a whole collection of nursery rhymes called 'Mother Goose', passed on orally for centuries, has filtered into the linguistic life of the people of England and America. For us to read and understand English and American literary works, the knowledge of the Bible and 'Mother Goose' is indispensable.

For instance, most Americans who read the headline, 'Then there were none,' over the article about the collapse of the Nixon dynasty in the newspaper, are supposed to think instantly of *Ten little Injuns*,⁽²⁾ one of Mother Goose's nursery rhymes, which is very humorous and very ominous at the same time, and in which 'ten little Injuns' disappear one by one, 'one choking his little self, one swallowed by a red herring, one hugged by a big bear, and none remaining at last. Moreover, there may be not a few who are reminded of *And Then There Were None*, one of Agatha Christie's masterpieces, which makes full use of this nursery rhyme as exercising a frightful and horrid impression upon the reader.'⁽³⁾

(2) Of this there is a different and more popular version, the first line of which is 'Ten little nigger boys went out to dine,' which, it seems, Mrs. Kirishima should have quoted here, judging from her following words.

(3) This is my Japanese rendering of an outline of Mrs. Kirishima's essay. All errors, if any, in this translation are, of course, my own.

§ 3. The Contents of Mother Goose's Rhymes

As Mrs. Kirishima says, a huge mass of Mother Goose's nursery rhymes are a cultural heritage which the people of English-speaking countries possess in common, and out of which most of them often form their ideas and build their linguistic expressions.

Most of Mother Goose's rhymes were first recorded after the beginning of the eighteenth century, but some of them come from untraceable antiquity. Accordingly we can read in them some or other events which happened while the English people were still in the dark gloom of history, their ancient customs, and the naive feelings they had in those early days.

If we want to know what Mother Goose's nursery rhymes are, there will be no better review of them than the one in the form of an advertisement for Hakushū Kitahara's *Mother Goose* which was put by the 'Ars' Bookshop in the *Akai-tori*.⁽⁴⁾

"*Mother Goose* is a world-famous collection of those nursery rhymes which have been loved by the children of England and America since very early times. In this collection we find those rhymes which are strange, beautiful, laughable, nonsensical, amusing, irritating, exciting laughter or making us inclined to sing,⁽⁵⁾—we find in them 'the cow jumping over the moon,'⁽⁶⁾ 'the bells of St. Peter's which say 'Pancakes and fritters,'⁽⁷⁾ 'an old woman toss'd up in a basket, Ninety times as high as the moon' to brush the cobwebs off the sky,⁽⁸⁾ a little husband No bigger than my thumb,⁽⁹⁾ 'the mad father, the mad mother, and all their mad children riding away madly upon a mad horse,'⁽¹⁰⁾ and so on."⁽¹¹⁾

The above quotation from the advertisement for Hakushū Kitahara's *Mother Goose* has some signs of it having been written by Hakushū himself,

(4) The magazine which was started by Miekichi Suzuki (1882–1936) in 1918.

(5) These epithets aptly describes the characteristics of Mother Goose's nursery rhymes, but I should like to add another one, 'weird' or 'uncanny'.

(6) 'Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle' (the first line of the rhyme).

(7) 'Gay go up and gay go down' (ditto)

(8) 'There was an old woman toss'd up in a basket' (ditto).

(9) 'I had a little husband' (ditto).

(10) 'There was a mad man' (ditto).

(11) This is my translation, to which I am responsible for all errors, if any.

because it consists mostly of the same expressions that are used in the 'Preface' of his Mother Goose version.

Next, I should like to quote a beautiful comment on Mother Goose by Walter de la Mare (1873–1956), an English poet.

Her (i.e. Mother Goose's) rhymes, he writes, "free the fancy, charm tongue and ear, delight the inward eye, and many of them are tiny master-pieces of word craftsmanship—of the latest device in rhythm, indeed—the 'sprung'! Last, but not least, they are not only crammed with vivid little scenes and objects and living creatures, but, however fantastic and non-sensical they may be, they are a direct short cut into poetry itself. How any child who was ever delightedly dandled to their strains can have managed to grow up proof against their enchantment, and steadily and desperately more and more matter-of-fact and prosaic, is a question to which I can find no satisfactory answer."⁽¹²⁾

§ 4. The Meaning of the Term 'Mother Goose'

What does the term Mother Goose mean, and how did it originate? To state our conclusion first, it is a legendary name given to the author of a collection of nursery rhymes passed on orally in England and America. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* says that 'Mother Goose' is the legendary author of the collection of nursery rhymes first published in English (1760) under the title of *Mother Goose's Melody*.⁽¹³⁾ In England, however, the rhymes are known as nothing but 'nursery rhymes', and in America as 'Mother Goose Songs'. The term 'Mother Goose' seems to have originated not in England but in France. To be more precise, Charles Perrault's *Histoires ou contes du temps passé, avec des moralitez* was published in France in 1697, the frontispiece of which had the legend *contes de ma mère loye* (tales of my mother goose). In 1729 there began to appear English translations of these tales, the title for which

(12) From his introduction to *Nursery Rhymes for Certain Times* (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1956).

(13) *Mother Goose's Melody or, Sonnets for the Cradle*, London: published by John Newbery. The year 1765 is generally accepted as a reasonable date for this book, probably the first "Mother Goose" book, perhaps edited by Oliver Goldsmith. No copies of the first printing have survived.

was variously rendered as *Tales of Passed Times by Mother Goose* or *Mother Goose's Tales*. This would seem to have been the first use of the term Mother Goose in England, but Perrault's works were fairy tales in prose and not nursery rhymes.

The first nursery rhyme book entitled Mother Goose appeared in c. 1765, when the British publisher John Newbery, probably inspired by the titles of the above-mentioned English versions of Perrault's tales, printed a small collection of nursery rhymes entitled *Mother Goose's Melody*.⁽¹⁴⁾

The next famous book in the bibliographical history of the collections of nursery rhymes was edited by James Orchard Halliwell (1820–89), who was then a young man of twenty-two, but was later to become a world-renowned Shakespearean scholar. It was *The Nursery Rhymes of England*, which was published in 1842, including more than 600 verses, and interspersed with notes about the age and origins of them. Since that time, no attempt had been made to continue his work, but about the middle of this century the Opies (i.e. Iona and Peter Opie) edited *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (1951), which is by far the most comprehensive and authoritative collection of nursery rhymes ever published.

§ 5. Age of Mother Goose's Rhymes

How ancient can some of Mother Goose nursery rhymes actually be? Most of them were first recorded after the beginning of the eighteenth century, but some number of them suggest or indicate their coming from earlier times or a certain antiquity, into which we are going to inquire from literary, linguistic and some other angles. The Opies,⁽¹⁵⁾ whose work on nursery rhymes includes everything, says that nearly one in four of all the rhymes are believed to have been known while Shakespeare was still a young man, and concludes that a quarter of the verses originated before 1600, another quarter in the seventeenth century, and another forty per cent in the eighteenth century.

(14) This contains 52 verses.

(15) Iona and Peter Opie, the distinguished editors of *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*.

(a) 'Who killed Cock Robin!'⁽¹⁶⁾ is a typical example that indicates a certain antinquity, internally and externally.

Who killed Cock Robin?
I, said the Sparrow,
With my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.

Who saw him die?
I, said the Fly,
With my little eye,
I saw him die.

Who caught his blood?
I, said the Fish,
With my little dish,
I caught his blood.

Who'll make the shroud?
I, said the Beetle,
With may thread and needle,
I'll make the shroud.

Who'll dig his grave?
I, said the Owl,
With my pick and shovel,
I'll dig his grave.

This rhyme was first recorded in 1744, but only the first four stanzas appear in *Tommy Thumb's Pretty Song Book*, the earliest record of the entire rhyme consisting of 14 stanzas being found in *Tommy Thumb's Song Book for all little Masters and Misses* in 1788. In stanza five, however,

(16) The first line of one of Mother Goose's rhymes.

Owl is rhymed with *shovel*. This seems to be an indication that the rhyme may go back to the fourteenth century in the light of the history of English sounds. The reason is that during the period from the fourteenth century to the 16th century, *owl* had the form and the pronunciation *oule* [u:l], while *shovel*, though mainly in the northern dialect, had *schole* [ʃu:l] during the period from the 13th to the 16th century and *schule* [ʃu:l] in the 14th and 16th centuries. Moreover, the Opies says that "the rhyme is depicted in a fifteenth century stained-glass windows at Buckland Rectory, Gloucester, England, and a bird is there shown pierced through the heart with an arrow, and the painter has given the bird the markings of a robin."⁽¹⁷⁾

(b) Old Mother Hubbard
 Went to the cupboard,
 To fetch her dog a bone;
 But when she came there
 The cupboard was bare
 And so the poor dog had none.

 She went to the baker's
 To buy him some bread;
 But when she came back
 The poor dog was dead.

 She went to the undertaker's
 To buy him a coffin
 But when she came back
 The poor dog was laughing.

.....⁽¹⁸⁾

This rhyme was composed by Sarah Catherine Martin (1768–1826), an early love of Prince William Henry, afterwards William IV, king of England (1830–37), a little inspired by nursery rhymes then in existence. But the first three stanzas seem to be of some antiquity, as James Orchard

(17) Iona and Peter Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, p. 132.

(18) One of Mother Goose's rhymes, consisting of 14 stanzas.

Halliwell⁽¹⁹⁾ considers, judging from the rhyme *laughing* to *coffin* in the third stanza. For example, in the old editions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *lofffe*, which is an Early Modern English word for *laugh*, is made to rhyme with *coffe* (=cough) (See 'lofffe' in C.T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary*):

And 'tailor' cries, and falls into a cough;
And then the quire hold their hips and laugh,
—(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. i. 54–5)

Since the publication of the above rhyme (in a toy book, *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*, 1805), 'Old Mother Hubbard' has taken a leading place among the characters of Mother Goose's nursery rhymes. But the name Mother Hubbard itself was not new, like Tom Thumb and Mother Bunch, Edmund Spenser's satire *Mother Hubberd's Tale* having been produced in 1590.

(c) Jack and Jill went up the hill
 To fetch a pail of water;
Jack fell down and broke his crown,
 And Jill came tumbling after.

Up Jack got, and home did trot,
 As fast as he could caper,
To old Dame Dob, who patched his nob
 With vinegar and brown paper.

Then Jill came in,
 And she did grin,
To see Jack's paper plaster;
 Her mother whipt her,
Across her knee,
 For laughing at Jack's disaster.⁽²⁰⁾

This nursery rhyme was first recorded in John Newbery's *Mother*

(19) The editor of *The Nursery Rhymes of England*, 1842.

(20) One of Mother Goose's rhymes, consisting of 3 stanzas.

Goose's Melody (c. 1765), but it seems to have originated in the first half of the seventeenth century, judging from the rhyming of *water* [wá:tə] with *after* [á:tə] in the first stanza.

The Reverend Sabine Baring-Gould thought this rhyme to be of great antiquity, and Lewis Spence (*Myth and Ritual*, 1947) says that some ancient mystic ceremony may be traced in this rhyme, for "no one in the folk-lore sense climbs to the top of a hill for water unless that water has special significance."

(d) Eena, meena, mina, mo,
Catch a nigger by his toe;
If he squeals, let him go,
Eena, meena, mina, mo.⁽²⁾

This is the most popular counting-out rhyme both in England and America, its use being now almost universal among the children of English-speaking countries. The origin of this rhyme is Anglo-American, in that the first and last lines come from old Britain, and the second and third lines from New England. Many counting-out rhymes in Mother Goose are simple exercises in recreational mathematics to select an individual impartially. 'Eena, meena, mina, mo', though they are seemingly nonsense words, conceal memories of ancient numerals of Celtic origin. 'Hickory, dickory, dock',⁽²⁾ the first line of another counting-out rhyme in Mother Goose, is a garbled version of the numerals eight, nine, ten.

Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock.

The Opies refers to this rhyme as follows:

(1) One of Mother Goose's rhymes.

(2) Westmorland shepherds' telling numbers include *Hevera* (8), *Devera* (9), and Dick(10), numerals which are not inappropriate in connexion with a clock.

“ ‘Hickory, dickory, dock,’ another nursery favourite, is reminiscent of 8,9, and 10 of the Westmorland score. It seems certain that if further sets of early numerals were known, more children’s rhymes could be identified as coming from them. The theory is that, when the Romans and then the Saxons invaded and occupied Britain, it was in Scotland, in Wales, and in the west country that the Celts managed to retain their language and customs. The rest, in the course of years, came more and more completely under the influence of their conquerors. An exception was those whose work was lonely and who were left unmolested, particularly by the Romans, because of their value to the garrisons in supplying provisions: such were the stock-breeders. This is demonstrated by the snatches of language preserved through almost two millenniums by (i) people living in mountainous and outlandish parts, (ii) shepherds, (iii) children in the games. For children, as has been noted, are conservative and exact, and tend to be in touch with the non-working (oldest) members of the family, who themselves delight in recounting their earliest memories.” (*The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, pp. 14–15).

§ 6. Mother Goose’s Language

Mother Goose’s nursery rhymes have some usages of their own.

- (a) Three little kittens they lost their mittens,
And they began to cry,
Oh, mother dear, we sadly fear
That we have lost our mittens.
What! lost your mittens, you naughty kittens!
Then you shall have no pie.
Mee-ow, mee-ow, mee-ow.
No, you shall have no pie⁽²³⁾

In the first line of the above rhyme, ‘Three little kittens’ is in apposition to ‘they’, which is the subject of the sentence. In other words, ‘Three little kittens’ is an appositive qualifying ‘they’, which is the head-word for

(23) One of Mother Goose’s rhymes, consisting of 4 stanzas.

it. The usages of the above type are not only peculiar to Mother Goose's nursery rhymes, but also to ballads. Some other examples of the same type are as follows:

- (i) *Tom, he* was a piper's son,⁽²⁴⁾
- (ii) *A frog, he* would a-wooing go,⁽²⁵⁾
- (iii) *The cat she* seized the rat by the crown,⁽²⁶⁾
- (iv) Then *this little maid she* said,⁽²⁷⁾
- (v) Then *the little man he* sighed,⁽²⁸⁾
- (vi) *Every fiddler, he* had a fiddle⁽²⁹⁾
- (vii) *Anna Elise, she* jumped with surprise,⁽³⁰⁾

(b) In Mother Goose's rhymes, nonsensical words are often used for the sake of rhyming.

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
There came a big spider,
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.⁽³¹⁾

This rhyme provides suitable material for speculation of a linguistic problem above-mentioned. As to 'tuffet' in the second line, many Mother Goose's books have an illustration of Miss Muffet seated on a three-legged stool, but as many others show her perched on a grassy hillock. *The*

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- (24) The first line of one of Mother Goose's rhymes.
 - (25) The first line of one of Mother Goose's rhymes.
 - (26) The first line of the 11th stanza of the above rhyme 'A frog he would a-wooing go.'
 - (27) The first line of the 2nd stanza of the rhyme 'There was a little man, And he wooed a little maid.'
 - (28) The first line of the 5th stanza of the previous rhyme.
 - (29) The first line of the 2nd stanza of the rhyme 'Old King Cole.'
 - (30) The first line of one of Mother Goose's rhymes.
 - (31) One of Mother Goose's rhymes.

Oxford English Dictionary defines 'tuffet' as follows:

'tuffet' = (i) a hillock, mound. (ii)? a hassock or footstool.

(Doubtful: perhaps due to misunderstanding of the nursery rhyme, which may belong to sense (i)),

and it gives the above rhyme as an example.

We can find similar nonsensical usages in some variations of this rhyme.

James O. Halliwell gives us as the opening lines of this rhyme:

Little Mary *Ester*
Sat on a tester—(1812)

and Boyd Smith gives as an "older version":

Little Miss Mopsey,
Sat in the shopsey—(1842)

Both words, 'tester' and 'shopsey' in the above verses, are considered to be used for the sake of rhyming, having no material meanings.

(c) Then the little man so gent,
 Made the little maid relent,
 And set her little soul a-thinking, king, king;
 Though his little was but small,
 Yet she had his little all,
 And could have of a cat but her skin, skin.⁽³²⁾

In the final line of this stanza, the phrase 'of a cat' is called 'the partitive genitive, in terms of grammar, and is used as the object of the verb 'have,' to which Leon Kellner gives the term 'the elliptic genitive' in his *Historical Outlines of English Syntax* (§177). He says that in this phrase the governing word is omitted. He seems to mean that 'some' should be understood as the headword before the genitive. From a historical point

(32) The 6th stanza of the rhyme 'There was a little man, And he wooed a little maid,'

of view, *of*-phrase has taken the place of the pure genitive since Middle English:

Of smale houndes, had she, that she fedde
With rosted flesh, (=she had some small dogs which she fed
with roasted flesh)

—G. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 'Prologue,' II.146-7.

§ 7. From a Semantic Viewpoint

Professor Stephen Ullmann says, "It has been realized for a long time, and has been strongly re-emphasized in recent years, that language is not merely a vehicle of communication: it is also a means of expressing emotions and arousing them in others."³³

He also says in another part (p.129) of the same book, 'An early semanticist, K.O. Erdmann, recognized three factors: 'essential or central meaning', 'applied or contextual meaning', and 'feeling tone'. In recent years, a number of more complex schemes have been put forward; one of the latest would distinguish between no less than nine different components of meaning.'

We think that in the above-mentioned 'applied or contextual meaning' may be included the knowledge of Mother Goose's rhymes, without which we shall sometimes be unable to gain a full understanding of English used.

We are going to give below some examples to verify this view.

- (a) 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.³⁴

This rhyme is a riddle, and the answer is that Humpty Dumpty is an egg. That explains why, having once fallen and broken, he could not

³³ Stephen Ullmann, *Semantics, An Introduction to the Science of Meaning* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford; 1972), p. 128.

³⁴ One of the most popular Mother Goose's rhymes.

be put together again. What is more, 'Humpty Dumpty' is one of Mother Goose's characters made the more famous by Lewis Carroll in his *Through the Looking-Glass*. That is why 'Humpty Dumpty' is often alluded to by many as a favourite character symbolizing 'irreversibility'.

"All species are potential *Humpty Dumpty*'s. The process of evolution, as we know them, will *not put them together again* on this planet once they are destroyed." (*Time*, June 8, 1970)

The above quotation is from the book by Dr. Ehrenfeld, an American biologist, probably discussing the environmental pollution.

The phrase 'all the king's men'⁽³⁵⁾ is often used as an allusion, like Robert Penn Warren's novel, *All the King's Men*, which was awarded a Pulitzer prize in 1946.

We think that the knowledge of this rhyme is indispensable to the reading of such a book as *All the President's Men*⁽³⁶⁾ by C. Bernstein and B. Woodward, American journalists, as it treats of the Watergate scandal and the collapse of the dynasty of the ex-President Nixon, the name of the book itself being a parody of 'all the king's men.'

(b) 'Who killed Cock Robin?' is, as is often the case with famous nursery rhymes, parodied in various ways:

(i) 'Who killed Home Rule?' (*The People*, 1886).

(ii) 'Who'll kill inflation?' (issued by His Majesty's Government of Great Britain, 1948).

(iii) 'Who kill'd John Keats?

I says the Quarterly,

So savage and Tartarly;

'Twas one of my feats.' (by Lord Byron, mourning the death of John Keats, 1821).

(c) Tom, he was a piper's son,

(35) The 4th line of the rhyme 'Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,'

(36) Published by Simon and Schuster, 1974.

He learnt to play when he was young,
And all the tune that he could play
Was, 'Over the hills and far away';
Over the hills and a great way off,
The wind shall blow my top-knot off.⁽³⁷⁾

The refrain of this rhyme, 'Over the hills and far away' has been used by poets and song writers for centuries, and is thought to be very old. It appears as early as 1670 in a black-letter ballad, *The Wind hath blown my Plaid away, or, A Discourse betwixt a young Woman and the Elphin Knight* (c.1670).

My plaid awa, my plaid awa,
And *ore the hill and far awa*,
My plaid shall not be blown awa, (underlined by the
writer of this paper).

This ballad was possibly alluded to in 1549.

The following sentence by Alan Brien in *New Statesman*, August 23, 1971 (quoted from Professor Keiichi Hirano's book, *Mother Goose no Sekai*, ELEC Sensho, p. 148) is a beautiful example in which this refrain of the rhyme is used:

At least, when I was young, adolescence was marking time,
without power but also without responsibility, stretching on
over the hills and far away.

§ 8. Conclusion

Nursery rhymes are generally believed to have the vitality of oral transmission. This vitality can particularly be noticed in the case of children, for they say 'tell it again, tell it just the same', and will be tenacious in correcting the slightest variations from the original recital on the part of the teller. This trait in children makes their lore such a useful

(37) The 1st stanza of the rhyme 'Tom, he was a piper's son', which consists of 6 stanzas.

subject for research.

Besides, Mother Goose's nursery rhymes seem to have many elements of which the mentality of the English people is made up.

In this connection too, we think that they are interesting enough to be studied both from literary and linguistic angles.

October 29, 1977.

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