Puppets and Covid-19

Lockdown, Health Prevention, and Language Education for Children

BEATRICE SICA[*]

RIASSUNTO: Questo articolo guarda all'uso dei burattini in relazione al Covid-19. I burattini sono da tempo usati dagli psicoterapeuti per aiutare i pazienti a esprimere le loro paure, e dagli operatori sanitari per insegnare ai bambini la prevenzione. Questo articolo propone di usare i burattini non solo per aiutare i più piccoli a esprimere le loro paure o per insegnare la prevenzione, ma anche per far esplorare la lingua attraverso bisticci e giochi di parole. L'articolo è corredato di un video in italiano, visibile su Vimeo, che offre un esempio pratico dell'uso proposto.

PAROLE CHIAVE: burattini, Covid-19, lingua, traduzione, salute, prevenzione.

ABSTRACT: This paper looks at how puppets can be used to address Covid-19. Puppets have long been employed by psychotherapists to provide patients with a voice to act out personal fears, and by health professionals to teach children about health prevention and promotion. This paper proposes to use them not only to help children express their personal anxieties or teach them about the corona virus, but also to make them explore language more in depth by means of puns and plays on words. The paper is complemented by four short videos in Italian, posted on Vimeo, offered as a practical example.

---

[*] University College London.

This paper focuses on the use of puppets to address Covid-19 and shows how puppetry can at once teach children about the disease and its prevention and develop children's vocabulary. It is based on and complemented by four short videos that I made and posted on Vimeo, which are offered as a practical example. I am neither a professional puppeteer nor a video-maker, therefore I hope that my amateurish performance and the home-made quality of my clips will be forgiven. The videos, in Italian, are based on words related to lockdown and Covid-19; they address prevention and at the same time, by means of puns and plays on words (bisticci), they encourage children to reflect upon language. Eventually, the puppets' fun and engaging way to look at Covid-19 should help the children see the virus, quarantine, and confinement as less frightening and daunting.

This work stems from my experience in education; my interest in puppets; and personal reflections developed during and after the Covid-19 lockdown in March and April 2020 in Italy, with an attention to other world countries as well. I started from the challenges that I believe the Covid-19 lockdown posed to puppeteers: when usual shows cannot take place and the interaction with the public cannot rely on physical presence, how can we use puppets to communicate with children and make sense of what is happening in the world?

1.   Puppets, therapy, and education

Psychotherapists and health professionals have largely used puppets in a variety of contexts, with older people (McMurray 1989), but especially with children (Nutting 2015; Butler *et al*. 2009; Bernier, O'Hare 2005; Bromfield 1995; Hawkey 1951; Phillips 1996: 232; Bender and Woltmann 1936). "Puppets are a pathway to provide children with a voice, more so when the child is the operator and they can use the puppet as a tool to act out personal fears and anxieties" (Tilbrook *et al*. 2017: 77). Moreover, puppets can be used to educate children about wellness. For example, some years ago the Pitt Community College in Greenville, North Carolina, developed a project called "Healthy Teddy Clinic," in which 2- to 5-year-old

children were each given a teddy bear and encouraged to teach it about "hand washing, immunizations, going to the doctor, having a physical wellness, safety, exercise, dental hygiene, nutrition, preventing infection, […] poison prevention, and accident prevention" (Campbell and Brown 2008: 73). The clinic was complemented by a website, whose aim was not only to inform parents about their children's activities at the clinic, but also to provide them with information about health promotion and prevention (ivi: 75).

Puppets have also been largely used in preschool and school education, manipulated by teachers, artists in residence, or the pupils themselves (Bernier and O'Hare 2005: 1-106). Even in a classroom, they serve as mediators and support the children in expressing themselves and in relating to others. "Practitioners in the education setting can use a puppet to model prosocial behaviors, learning strategies, coping skills, and positive ways to handle big emotions" (Prendiville 2018: 208). In fact, "The use of puppets in the curriculum is endless" (Weiger 1974: 58): they can be used to promote the pupils' capacity for moral dialogue and inquiries (Brown 2004), to address the affective domain in relation to school subjects (for biology, see De Beer *et al.* 2018), to support the teaching of specific subjects (for mathematics, see Forsberg Ahlcrona 2012: 173-174), and to help children develop literacy and language skills (Reich 1968; Booth Church 2001; Siciliano 2016).

This latter use is of particular interest here. "When a puppet speaks, children can listen, identify, and understand different words and phrases emphatically performed by their teacher who stresses proper enunciation and pronunciation" (Belfiore 2013: 10). This is a scenario that becomes particularly important in lockdown conditions, when we have to rely on the internet and make either live-stream performances or videos to upload online: in these conditions, "words and phrases emphatically performed" are of paramount importance, because we cannot be with the children in a classroom and they cannot manipulate puppets to externalise their problems under our supervision, or watch our puppet performances in person[1]. It is true that, unless we are video makers with high-quality equipment at home, our live streams and videos are likely to be amateurish in their quality, with visual effects

---

[1] This does not apply, of course, to children living already under our roof.

reduced to a minimum, but "words and phrases emphatically performed" remain.

2.   Puppets and the language for Covid-19

In a recent interview with Marta Arnaldi, Principal Investigator and convener of the Oxford project "Translating Illness," Nicola Gardini said:

There is a language for […] Covid-19, and it is the language of science, it is the language of politicians, it is the language of statistics, but is it really a language […] we can all share and participate in? I do think that translating illness, translating Covid, is not just entertainment, it is indeed a primary activity which we should all take part in through finding words to make sense of what is going on. (Arnaldi and Gardini 2020)

Seen in this light, how can puppets translate Covid-19? What can puppets tell (us and) the children about this disease and the language we use to speak about it? How can we manipulate puppets to find words that go beyond the language of science, politicians, and statistics?

If we consider the work of puppeteers around the world during the lockdown in March and April 2020, we see that, following the dismay caused by the unexpected cancellation of all their shows, puppeteers reacted very positively and started to use social media differently, not to advertise their shows as before, but to have their performances precisely online. Interaction with the public was not allowed in the usual manner and premises, but puppeteers compensated for this lack of interaction by proposing a large number of make-at-home activities and workshops alongside filmed shows and interviews. One of the most remarkable examples of this reconfiguration was the Little Angel Theatre in London; in the United States, one should mention the Centre for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Georgia[2].

[2] See the Little Angel Theatre's website www.littleangeltheatre.com together with their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. The BBC covered their lockdown activities: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1095EBvUuYo. Remarkably, the LAT has kept all their online activities and shows free or donation-based. In the U.S., see The Centre for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta at https://puppet.org/. See also the

Understandably, Covid-19 did not feature in their online productions and activities with puppets: in fact, their aim was to stimulate people's creativity at home and to allow children to use their imagination freely, flying with their minds away from the everyday reality of lockdown. The only video with puppets dealing with Covid-19 prevention that I could find online during the first lockdown, before Summer 2020, is a very short "Demo Health Promo PSA for Coronavirus", with custom puppets made by the Picture to Puppet company (Picture to Puppet, 3 April 2020). The message to the viewers was the following: "Make sure you stay at least two meters away from people, and if you go to sneeze, sneeze into your elbow to make sure you don't spread the virus far around" (*ibid.*).

Online one could also find the guidelines from UNICEF to talk to children about the corona virus: in case of preschools, teachers were invited to "Use puppets or dolls to demonstrate symptoms (sneezing, coughing, fever), what to do if children feel sick (like if their head hurts, their stomach hurts, or if they feel hot or extra tired), and how to comfort someone who is sick (cultivating empathy and safe caring behaviours)" (UNICEF, 13 March 2020). Moreover, online we learnt that in Maarat Masrin, in northwest Syria, displaced children in a war camp attended a three-minute puppet show staged to teach them about the corona virus (Reuters, 15 April 2020); and that in Dungarpur, a small tribal town in India, "A complete video series was prepared […]. The writer of the series was Alok Sharma, […]. He wrote an interesting script to spread awareness on symptoms and prevention from the coronavirus" (IANS, 20 April 2020). Reportedly, the videos combine "The traditional methods of puppet shows and chitra katha (pictorial stories)". I could find neither the script nor the video series online, but it is interesting to note what is said about their language: apparently, "a simple and easy language with excellent dialogues" was used; "the dialogues were recorded in the local Wagadi dialect" and later the series "was also released in Hindi language" (*ibid.*), which in itself contains an element of translation.

These examples provide some useful suggestions on how to use puppets to address the issue of Covid-19 and its prevention. There is

special supplement on "Puppetry in the Age of Covid-19" in the Fall/Winter issue n. 48 (2020) of *Puppetry International*, the magazine published by UNIMA-USA (the North American Center of Union International de la Marionnette).

no doubt that health promotion must be the primary goal in this kind of initiatives; however, my aim here is not to focus on the disease and how prevention can be promoted through puppets, but how to use puppets with a wider scope. Is it possible to stage puppets in a way that, while teaching children about the corona virus, also makes them explore language more in depth? Can one find through puppets a more refined translation of Covid-19, one that does not merely tell us what to do with the virus, but also helps us see our own language more in depth?

3.   The dialogues between Matilda and Agilulf

In the four videos that I conceived in March and April 2020 (Sica 2020), there are two characters, Matilda and Agilulf (*Matilde* and *Agilulfo* in Italian). The format repeats throughout the series: Matilda comes first in the picture, rejoicing at the beautiful day; then comes Agilulf, usually with a question or in doubt about something. Agilulf asks his question or expresses his doubts, which always originate from a misunderstanding. At that point Matilda corrects him and explains how the thing really is, giving the correct word and its meaning. The puns, or *bisticci*, in Italian are: 1) *la corona / il Corona (virus)*; 2) *quarantina / quarantena*; and 3) *epifania / epidemia*. The fourth video offers a visual pun, so to speak, showing two different types of mask, with Agilulf wearing a simple, black eye mask that is clearly inappropriate when compared to the light-blue surgical mask needed against Covid-19.

    According to Tova Ackerman, puppetry is "a dynamic tool for developing language communication skills with both children and adults. […] It can go where the person is afraid to go; it can speak with mistakes without worry" (1993: 63, also republished in Bernier and O'Hare 2005: 8). We know that puppets are and are not at the same time: they are like humans, but they are not, in fact, real persons. Therefore, puppets inherently create a safe space where mistakes are allowed: we are less afraid to speak with and through puppets, because it is as if we were not ourselves, and we know that the consequences of our mistakes, if any, will take place in another world, that of imaginary stories.

Puppets, however, offer more than the possibility of speaking "with mistakes without worry". Gianni Rodari explained that mistakes can also be a source for creativity and provide a fun way to generate stories (Rodari 1999: 42-44), while Mariano Dolci, unlocking some of the core mechanisms of puppetry, spoke of the fascination for play on words:

> I giochi a base di storpiature di parole affascinano chi da poco controlla il linguaggio. Anche il miscuglio di realtà-finzione o animato-inanimato crea una regressione piacevole (anche per gli adulti […]). Ecco alcuni degli effetti sui quali ci si può basare per la realizzazione di scenette.
>
> - Il contrasto tra l'evidentemente «finto» burattino e qualche azione vera (alzarsi dal letto, fare toeletta ecc.) […]
> - Il brusco apparire di un bisogno fisico. (Dolci 1980: 76)

Going back to our four videos, we see that they have been devised with the same principles in mind: each one is based on a *bisticcio* that involves a word somehow related to Covid-19 (corona, quarantine, epidemic, and mask); and each shows Matilda and Agilulf, the puppets, dealing with everyday life situations: Matilda rejoices at the beautiful day; Agilulf reports what he has heard or has been told by others; at the end of the video, they remind the viewers about staying at home (alas, an imperative that had become part of our daily lives during lockdown). In video two, they talk secretly and do not want to be heard, while in video four they plan to go out with masks (alas, another everyday reality during lockdown and still today). Finally, in video one, we also see a "brusco apparire di un bisogno fisico": although it is not entirely natural, Agilulf's sneeze is very sudden and hopefully comic.

Conclusions

To my knowledge, so far puppets have never been used to address Covid-19 and language education together in the way I propose here and in my videos on Vimeo. I experimented with four *bisticci*, but my project could be expanded and developed further, ideally with

professional video-makers and puppeteers. This said, it is already possible to draw some conclusions.

Healthcare professionals can use puppets to educate children about wellness by simulating real-life scenarios. In this case, language is involved mostly with technical medical terms and vocabulary related to prevention. When addressing Covid-19 through puppets during a lockdown, however, it is possible to go beyond the plain, didactic goal of informing children about the disease, and help them cope with anxieties even if children are not the puppets' manipulators. The possibility of creating short videos to share online represents a tremendous resource. Plays on words, and the comic situations that they generate (Di Rosa 1986: 38) are a funny way to elaborate on the disease and the hardship of lockdown: they allow children to discover that reality, like words, can be seen from different angles. Puppets cannot offer a remedy against Covid-19, but while we wait for a vaccine, puppets can help *us* find words for, and the children make sense of, the unprecedented condition in which the disease has put everyone. Words, including *bisticci*, are not medications but, in their own way, are a cure, and as such, are important.

References

ACKERMAN T., *The Puppet as a Metaphor*, «The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning. A publication for language teachers at all levels, K-12 through College», edited by Clyde Coreil and Mihri Napoliello, 1 (1993), pp. 62-65; republished in Bernier M., O'Hare J. (eds.), 2005, pp. 5-11.

ARNALDI M., GARDINI N., *Translating illness: the case of COVID-19*, interview, 15 May 2020, https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/translating-ill-ness-case-covid-19 [accessed 27 July 2020].

BELFIORE C., *Puppets Talk, Children Listen. How puppets are effective teaching aids for kids*, «Teach», January-February 2013, pp. 9-11.

BENDER L., WOLTMANN A., *The Use of Puppet Shows as a Psychotherapeutic Method for Behaviour Problems in Children*, «The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry», 6:3 (1936), pp. 341-354.

BERNIER M., O'HARE J. (eds.), *Puppetry in Education and Therapy. Unlocking Doors to the Mind and Heart*, AuthorHouse,

Bloomington, IN, 2005.

BOOTH CHURCH E., *Using Puppets as Language-Building Partners*, «Scholastic Early Childhood Today», 16:2 (October 2001), pp. 45-46.

BROMFIELD R., *The Use of Puppets in Play Therapy*, «Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal», 12:6 (December 1995), pp. 435-444.

BROWN S., *Building Character Through Shadow Puppetry*, «Art Education», 57:6 (November 2004), pp. 47-52.

BUTLER S., GUTERMAN J.T., RUDES J., *Using Puppets with Children in Narrative Therapy to Externalize the Problem*, «Journal of Mental Health Counseling», 31:3 (July 2009), pp. 225-233.

CAMPBELL A., BROWN S.T., *The Healthy Teddy Clinic: An innovative pediatric clinical experience*, «Teaching and Learning in Nursing», 3 (2008), pp. 72-75.

CANEPA M., *ESL Community Puppeteers*, «The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning. A publication for language teachers at all levels, K-12 through College», edited by Clyde Coreil and Mihri Napoliello, 2 (1994), pp. 86-89.

DE BEER J., PETERSEN N., BRITS S., *The Use of Puppetry and Drama in the Biology Classroom*, «The American Biology Teacher», 80:3 (2018), pp. 175-181.

DI ROSA G., *A scuola con i burattini. Didattica dei burattini*, La Scuola, Brescia 1986.

DOLCI M., *La mano e il burattino. Guida pratica all'animazione di oggetti*, Fabbri, Milano 1980.

FORSBERG AHLCRONA M., *The Puppet's Communicative Potential as a Mediating Tool in Preschool Education,* «International Journal of Early Childhood», 44:2 (August 2012), pp. 171-184.

HAWKEY L., *The Use of Puppets in Child Psychotherapy,* «British Journal of Medical Psychology», 24:3 (September 1951), pp. 206-214.

IANS [INDIA'S LARGEST INDEPENDENT NEWS SERVICE], *This small tribal town used puppetry & social media to beat Covid-19*, 20 April 2020 https://www.outlookindia.com/newsscroll/this-small-tribal-town-used-puppetry-amp-social-media-to-beat-covid19/1-808-539 and https://gulfnews.com/world/offbeat/this-small-tribal-town-in-india-used-puppetry--social-media-to-beat-covid-19-1.1-58738-6037241 [both accessed 27 July 2020].

McMurray J., *Puppetry*, [Haworth Continuing Features Submission] «Activities, Adaptation & Aging», 14:1-2 (1989), pp. 83-94; republished as a book chapter in *Creative Arts with Older People*, Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 1990, pp. 83-94.

Nutting R., *The Strength of Children Externalizing the Effects of Chronic Illness Through Narrative Puppetry*, «Journal of Family Psychotherapy», 26 (2015), pp. 9-14.

Phillips M.E., *The Use of Drama and Puppetry in Occupational Therapy During the 1920s and 1930s*, «The American Journal of Occupational Therapy», 50:3 (1996), pp. 229-233.

Picture to Puppet, *Demo Health Promo PSA for Coronavirus with Puppets*, 3 April 2020, post on Facebook, https://www.f-ace-book.com/watch/?v=2471383016443722 [accessed 27 July 2020].

Prendiville S., *The Application of Therapeutic Puppet Play in the Schools*, in Drewes A.A., Schaefer C.E. (eds.), *Puppet Play Therapy. A Practical Guidebook*, Routledge, New York and London 2018, pp. 199-213.

Reich R., *Puppetry – A Language Tool*, «Exceptional Children», 34:8 (April 1968), pp. 621-623.

Reuters [Reporting by Mahmoud Hassano, Hamuda Hassan and Mai Shams El-Din; editing by Giles Elgood], *In Syria, puppets show displaced children how to deal with coronavirus*, 15 April 2020, https://it.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSKCN21X2SM   (see also   https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2020/04/16/in-syria-pup-pets-show-displaced-children-how-to-deal-with-coronavirus.html [both accessed 27 July 2020])

Rodari G., *Grammatica della fantasia. Introduzione all'arte di inventare storie* [1973], Einaudi, Torino 1999 reprint.

Sica B., *I dialoghi di Matilde e Agilulfo*, 2020 https://vime-o.com/user66450074 [accessed 27 July 2020].

Siciliano L., *Speech-Language… Puppetry?*, «ASHA Leader», 21:6 (2016), pp. 42-43.

Tilbrook A., Trudy D., Reid-Searl K., Parson J.A., *A review of the literature – The use of interactive puppet simulation in nursing education and children's healthcare*, «Nurse Education in Practice», 22 (2017), pp. 73-79.

Unicef, *How teachers can talk to children about coronavirus disease (COVID-19)*, 13 March 2020 https://www.unicef.org/coro-naviru-s/how-teachers-can-talk-children-about-coronavirus-disease-covid-

19 [accessed 27 July 2020].

WEIGER M., *Puppetry*, «Elementary English», 51:1 (January 1974), pp. 55-65.