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# From Grammar Mistakes to Creative Errors: Using Gianni Rodari's *The Grammar of Fantasy* to Teach Creative Writing to Japanese Learners of Italian as a Foreign Language

## ＜文法的誤り＞から＜創作的誤謬＞へ

—— 第二言語としてイタリア語を学ぶ日本人学習者向け、ジャンニ・ロダーリの『ファンタジーの文法』に基づいた創作的作文の教授法 ——

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### 要約

本論文ではイタリア人作家ジャンニ・ロダーリの『ファンタジーの文法』（1973年）に基づいた日本人学習者向けの創作伊作文の教授法について考察する。筆者は2013年度から大阪大学で中級（CEFRでA2レベル）と上級（CEFRでB1－B2レベル）のイタリア語作文の授業を担当し、外国語学部イタリア語専攻の2、3、4年次の学部生を対象に、日常的な通信からビジネスレターにいたるまで様々な手紙、物語、日記、漫画、学術論文など異なるジャンルの文体的特徴と作法について指導をしてきた。授業で扱ったジャンルの中で、筆者は創作的作文に焦点を当て、ロダーリが提案した「ファンタジーの二項式」、「創作的誤謬」、「ひっくり返しのおとぎ話」、「ファンタスティックな仮定」、「お話をまちがえること」などの物語創作法を適用した伊作文の教授法について紹介する。また、第二言語（L2）学習者向けの学術的な伊作文マニュアルのメリットと課題を検討し、第二言語教育に適用されたロダーリのアプローチの特徴と意義について考察する。授業で利用した資料、学生によって実行された課題、ロダーリの『ファンタジーの文法』に込められている現代の若者たちへの伝言を分析しつつ、伊作文の授業の教授法について論じる。

Keywords: Gianni Rodari, Italian creative writing, Italian as a foreign language, Japanese learners, teaching L2 composition

### 1. Introduction

Starting from the 2013 academic year, in the last six years I have developed two courses on Italian writing for learners with intermediate and advanced Italian language skills in the Graduate School of Language and Culture at Osaka University. They both address students majoring in Italian, in small classes of approximately twenty people. The intermediate course is aimed at second-year students who have reached level A2 of CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference for

Languages), whereas the advanced course targets third- and fourth-year students with higher language skills, ranging from B1 to B2. The teaching modules (fifteen 90-minute lessons for each course) cover a great variety of topics and writing styles, from informal letters and short e-mails to diaries, newspaper articles, accounts based on personal experience, business letters, academic essays, critical reviews and creative writing. However, when I started to plan these courses and examined the teaching materials provided by the leading publishing houses that specialise in the field of Italian as a foreign language, it was difficult to find writing manuals that covered exhaustively all the topics I intended to teach. It was even more difficult when I searched among the manuals on Italian writing addressing Japanese learners. Compared to the large existing selection of textbooks focusing on Italian grammar and conversation, the Japanese publications on Italian writing are critically few and deal almost exclusively with correspondence. *Anata no sekai ga hirogaru Itaria go no tegami, e-mēru no kakikata* (How to Write Letters and E-mails in Italian and Broaden your World, 2012) and *Tegami, mēru no Itaria go* (Italian for Mails and Letters, 2015), published by Natsume and Sanshūsha, respectively, exemplify this trend. They are Japanese learner-oriented manuals providing clear and systematic writing examples, but they only focus on correspondence, thus leaving all the other writing styles outside the scope of their analysis.

The origin of this problem lies in the fact that most of the writing manuals published in Japan are not conceived for university students specialising in Italian. Instead, they target a wide variety of readers ranging from self-taught learners to students attending optional classes of Italian in tertiary-level institutions. Unlike English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Italian as a Foreign Language (IFL) can be studied as a major at a limited number of Japanese universities and, therefore, most of the publishing houses that specialise in this field tend to neglect stylistic issues pertaining to writing in Italian at a higher proficiency level. On the other hand, among the writing manuals for IFL learners published in Italy, there are some well-structured texts—*Strategie di scrittura* (Writing Strategies), by Bonacci (2002), *Giocare con la Scrittura* (Playing with Writing), by Alma Edizioni (2004), and *Scriviamo Insieme!* (Let's Write Together!), by Edilingua (2014), among others—that analyse a wider range of writing styles and provide interesting ideas to develop lessons focused on different writing tasks. However, considering the fast-changing backdrop of contemporary society and the specific characteristics of my students in terms of age and culture, some of the materials used as writing models are not updated or address issues that may only be of little interest to Japanese university undergraduates. Consequently, I realised that manuals could only partially fit the teaching curricula of my composition courses and needed to be adapted in order to meet the specific needs and interests of Japanese learners.

Moving from the above considerations, I chose to select some materials from various writing

manuals and combine them with authentic materials from different sources, including websites, social networks, printed books, and newspapers. At the beginning of the course, students usually begin writing informal letters serving different purposes (introducing themselves, making requests, asking for information, reporting past experiences, etc.), then they gradually engage in more complex texts, including formal letters, business correspondence, creative writing, and short academic essays. During each lesson, we usually read a text and analyse its morphosyntactic structures, register and style. As homework, each week students have to write a text (a letter, an essay, or another kind of composition, depending on the topic of the previous lesson) based on a given theme and should try to employ the linguistic structures and the register employed in the text analysed in the classroom. For instance, after reading a letter where a Japanese company requests a quotation from an Italy-based business partner, students could write an e-mail to an Italian firm introducing their company and making specific requests (for samples, invoices, or various pieces of information), thus practicing the business writing style and the syntactical structures associated with polite requests. Each week, I check students' writing assignments and grade them, based on their content, register, communicative efficiency, grammar, vocabulary, and text organization. Usually, I hand them back with my corrections and comments at the beginning of each lesson. Then, I address difficult points and recurring mistakes in the previous week's writing assignments, explain issues related to grammar, language register and syntax, and reply to students' questions, before introducing a new text to read in the classroom. These *read-to-write* activities, where students read as a basis for the text that they write, are grounded on the assumptions that reading and writing are parallel processes and that developing good composition skills is connected to establishing sound reading skills, as research on L2 composition over the last few decades has pointed out (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2014; Hirvela, 2001). The combined reading and writing process—the analysis of a text and the subsequent reproduction of certain formal structures—can be relatively “smooth” for letters, business correspondence and texts for specific purposes, but it becomes more challenging when it comes to creative writing, on which I would like to focus my analysis. As I started to plan this type of writing activity, I faced different questions: what texts should I provide as examples of creative writing, considering the limited amount of time we can devote to reading and text analysis inside the classroom? How can I encourage students to create their own stories, putting aside the anxieties related to making mistakes when writing in a foreign language? Are there effective methods to make students enjoy creative writing in the classroom, in a relaxed atmosphere? In order to tackle these issues effectively, I tried various methods with different outcomes, as reported in the next section.

## 2. Experiments with Creative Writing in Courses of Italian as a Foreign Language

Before asking students to engage in creative writing at home, I wanted to provide them with an opportunity to do some story-building activities inside the classroom, in small groups. I presumed that popular children's tales and fairy tales would be suitable for a warm-up writing activity, because students are usually already familiar with their narrative structure and plot. In the beginning, I tried a method described in several manuals on writing in Italian and English as a second language (Bonacci 2002; Harmer 2004). It is based on the idea that groups of students can create a story starting from a given beginning or from a set of predefined data. For instance, I adapted the "first lines, last lines story cycle" activity (Harmer 2004: 78), where students are given either the first line or the last line of a tale and have to complete it. Second-year students (A2 level), divided into groups of four, developed a story beginning with "C'era una volta una principessa che viveva in un castello su una montagna" (Once upon a time a princess lived in a castle on a mountain) by following a fixed procedure: after transcribing the initial sentence on a blank sheet of paper, in turns, the members of each group wrote the rest of the story. Once the first student had written the second sentence, s/he would pass the sheet to a classmate, who would add another sentence. Then, the paper was passed to the third student, and the members of each group continued this story cycle until they were told to write the conclusion. Finally, students read aloud the stories they had invented and we commented on them. Contrary to my expectations, this group writing experiment did not prove to be very successful for several reasons. First, I noticed that students tended not to cooperate, as each of them had to write his/her own sentence. Moreover, while a student was adding a sentence to the story (a task that can take a considerable amount of time for A2-level learners), the other three members of the group had nothing to do and did not stay focused on the writing activity. Finally, the beginning of the story seemed too conventional to spark the students' imagination and turn the creative writing task into an enjoyable classroom activity.

In light of these considerations, I looked for another method that could capture the students' imagination, encourage their active intellectual engagement, facilitate their writing tasks and create an amusing, relaxed atmosphere in the classroom, thus lowering students' affective filters—the negative emotional factors that may interfere with the acquisition of language (Krashen 1982). In order to achieve these goals, I decided to make use of the powerful imagination of Gianni Rodari (1920-1980) in *The Grammar of Fantasy* (*Grammatica della Fantasia*, 1973), a text that had a profound impact on children's education in contemporary Italian society. It collects Rodari's creative techniques to retell traditional stories, play with language and create new pieces of fiction. Technically speaking, this work is not an academic manual on creative writing addressed to tertiary-level instructors and students. Instead, as its subtitle puts it, it is an "introduction to the art of inventing

stories” based on Rodari’s extensive experience as both a writer and an educator in elementary schools. However, in his foreword to Jack Zipes’ English translation of *Grammatica della Fantasia*, Herbert Kohl explains:

Rodari develops a communal, creative, third way in which teachers and students are engaged in imaginative work and play together. [...] Though Rodari’s work has been primarily with young children, his ideas can be adapted for use with students of all ages. Many of the ideas would work wonderfully in creative writing classes in high school and college (Kohl in Zipes’ translation of Rodari 1996: X).

Rodari, who received the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award in 1970, was internationally acclaimed as “a pied-piper of the imaginative life, an author who introduced children to fantasy with techniques for inventing stories and learning from make-believe” (Miele 2016: 861). With his multi-faceted talent as a children’s writer, teacher, pedagogist, journalist and poet, Rodari inspired future generations of intellectuals and educators to foster children’s creativity, reinvent arbitrary rules, and create communities based on the values of mutual respect and cooperation. After the devastating impact of fascism and war, Rodari became committed to the political stances of Marxist philosophy to address social injustices and contribute to improving his society. Therefore, many of his stories ironically depict problems and contradictions in post-war Italy and employ fantasy to disorient crystallised assumptions on reality and provide alternative solutions. On a deeper level, his tales aim to empower young readers, who realize that their imagination—the ability to think that certain things are possible, beyond the limitations of everyday reality—is a means to change reality, acquire an authorial voice and tell their own stories. As Zipes (1996) points out, Rodari believed in the importance of imagination as a tool to question, deconstruct and re-appropriate arbitrary aspects of institutions and schools, and the creative use of language was part of his deconstructive agenda. In other words, he argued that only by playing with language and reinventing it beyond the limitations of grammar, children could master it and acquire a powerful narrative agency.

Moving in time and space, from the 1960s reform movement in Italian schools to contemporary classrooms, and from post-war Italy to a broader, globalised cultural context, Rodari’s ideas nowadays are inspiring an increasingly large number of instructors of Italian as a second language in both Italian and foreign institutions. In Italy, this phenomenon has sparked academic debate among researchers who specialise in the didactics and promotion of Italian language and culture to foreigners, in articles that have explored the application of Rodari’s ideas in courses on IFL writing for children (Lunati 2008) and German-speaking learners (Sciarrino 2013). In other countries, even when Rodari’s writing techniques are not employed in the field of foreign language didactics, they are used as a springboard for creative storytelling in different educational contexts (Ishii et al. 1997; Zipes 1995

and 2004). Reflecting on the enormous potential of Rodari's creative methods, it is not surprising to know that the ideas leading to *The Grammar of Fantasy* were inspired by his experience as a teacher of Italian as a foreign language. As he explains in the preface of his creative manual (Rodari 1996: 1), he began to reflect on a theory of the fantastic in 1938, under the influence of the French surrealists' creative techniques and Novalis' poetics, while he was teaching Italian language to the children of a German-Jewish family. In addition to being closely connected to Rodari's teaching experience, coincidentally, *The Grammar of Fantasy*—or rather, its foundational methodology explained in the daily *Paese Sera*—is also (fictionally) related to Japan. Before developing this subject exhaustively in *The Grammar of Fantasy*, Rodari first illustrated his methods to produce fiction in an article entitled “Guidelines for Inventing Stories” (*Manuale per inventare favole*), published in two parts in *Paese Sera* (February 9 and 19, 1962). Here, he pretended to have received a manual on inventing stories from a Japanese scholar:

In these articles [published in *Paese Sera*], I kept a respectful distance from the subject matter, pretending to have received it from a young Japanese scholar with whom I had become acquainted during the Olympics. He supposedly gave me a manuscript containing the English translation of a little work that had been published in Stuttgart during 1912 by the Novalis Verlag, which a certain Otto Schlegel-Kamnitzer had allegedly written under the title, *The Fundamentals of the Fantastic: The Art of Writing Fairy Tales* (Rodari 1996: 2).

Interestingly, in the same year that these articles appeared in *Paese Sera*, Rodari published “Gip in the Television” (*Gip nel televisore*, 1962), which also features a Japanese character, Professor Yamanaka. In the introduction to this story, which explores the consequences of excessive dependence on television and new technologies in contemporary times, Rodari explains that he named Professor Yamanaka after a Japanese swimmer (Tsuyoshi Yamanaka) who participated in the Rome Olympic Games in 1960, while he was writing the story of Gip. He argues that he had purposefully chosen a man whose country had been devastated by the atomic bomb to point out that human life is worth much more than machines and electronic devices<sup>1)</sup>.

Intrigued by these interesting circumstances, I examined Rodari's creative techniques and their didactic applications, and finally considered the idea of employing them to develop lessons on IFL creative writing for Japanese learners. Among the methods described in *The Grammar of Fantasy*, I focused especially on the “Creative Error”, the “Fairy Tale Reversed”, the “Fantastic Hypothesis” and the “Fantastic Binomial”. One of my first objectives was to create a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom and encourage students to overcome their fears of making grammar and spelling mistakes when producing creative fiction. In order to achieve this objective, in the advanced writing course, we read “The Letter H Escapes” (*L'acca in fuga*, 1964), a short story where Rodari reflects on how

spelling mistakes can become creative errors and generate a piece of fiction. In this story, included in Rodari's *The Book of Errors* (*Il libro degli errori*, 1964), the letters of the alphabet make fun of the “h” (*acca*) because no one pronounces it in the Italian language. Planning to escape to other countries where the sound “h” is more revered, *acca* tries to enter Austria illegally, thus causing a catastrophic situation in Italy. Without the “h,” all the Italian churches (*chiese*) collapse, cherubs (*cherubini*) are stripped of their wings and fall from the sky, keys (*chiavi*) no longer work, *chianti* wine tastes horrible, and glasses (*bicchieri*) shatter into a thousand pieces. Worst of all, no one can correctly pronounce the name of Dante Alighieri, the revered father of the Italian language. Finally, Italians beg the h's pardon on their knees and the consonant agrees to return home, demanding more respect. In addition to “L'acca in fuga”, Rodari also plays with spelling mistakes in the poem “Thief of ‘r’” (*Ladro di ‘erre’*, 1964), where a man makes money by stealing the consonant “r” from a bridge of *cemento armato* (reinforced concrete), which consequently becomes a bridge of *cemento amato* (beloved concrete). Without the “r,” the reinforced-concrete bridge collapses and the thief (the symbol of Italy's corrupt and reckless entrepreneurs) strolls around the city with all the stolen “r”s jingling like coins in his pocket. In monolingual classes of Japanese speakers, “Thief of ‘r’” is particularly interesting because of students' difficulties in distinguishing between the sounds /r/ and /l/, which often generate spelling mistakes in their written assignments. Just to mention a few examples, *molto* (much, a lot) can easily become *morto* (dead) and *mare* (sea) can change into *male* (evil, bad). From this perspective, Rodari's poem has the effect of minimising students' spelling mistakes and emphasizing their funny, creative aspects. For example, as a follow-up activity, in groups, students can create a short story moving from the question “What would happen if in Italy the letter ‘r’ decided to become ‘l’ (or vice versa)?”

Having established a playful atmosphere in the classroom, in the next few lessons we worked with Rodari's creative techniques of making mistakes in traditional tales and reversing them (they are described in two chapters entitled “Making Mistakes in the Story” and “The Fairy Tale Reversed” in *The Grammar of Fantasy*). First, we read and analysed in class an Italian version of Charles Perrault's “Little Red Riding Hood” in order to familiarize students with the narrative style of fairy tales, the verb tenses frequently employed (Italians tend to use mostly the remote past tense and the imperfect tense for traditional, written narratives, and the present tense for tales having a more colloquial, informal register) and the linguistic formulae often employed in this literary genre—for instance, the opening and closing formulae “c'era una volta” (once upon a time) and “tutti vissero felici e contenti” (they lived happily ever after). Then, we read Rodari's retelling of “Little Red Riding Hood”, a short story entitled “A sbagliare le storie” (Telling Stories Wrong, 1962), where the author plays with the narrative elements of Perrault's classic tale. In order to explain our writing experiment in detail, I



include Rodari's short story followed by Zipes' English translation ("Little Green Riding Hood", 1993).

#### A sbagliare le storie

- C'era una volta una bambina che si chiamava Cappuccetto Giallo.
  - No, Rosso!
  - Ah, sì, Cappuccetto Rosso. La sua mamma la chiamò e le disse: Senti, Cappuccetto Verde...
  - Ma no, Rosso!
  - Ah, sì, Rosso. Vai dalla Zia Diomira a portarle questa buccia di patata.
  - No: vai dalla nonna a portarle questa focaccia.
  - Va bene. La bambina andò nel bosco e incontrò una giraffa.
  - Che confusione! Incontrò un lupo, non una giraffa.
  - E il lupo le domandò: Quanto fa sei per otto?
  - Niente affatto. Il lupo le chiese: Dove vai?
  - Hai ragione. E Cappuccetto Nero rispose...
  - Era Cappuccetto Rosso, Rosso, Rosso!
  - Sì, e rispose: Vado al mercato a comperare la salsa di pomodoro.
  - Neanche per sogno: Vado dalla nonna che è malata, ma non so più la strada.
  - Giusto. E il cavallo disse...
  - Quale cavallo? Era un lupo.
  - Sicuro. E disse così: Prendi il tram numero settantacinque, scendi in Piazza del Duomo, gira a destra, troverai tre scalini e un soldo per terra, lascia stare i tre scalini, raccatta il soldo e comprati una gomma da masticare.
  - Nonno, tu non sai proprio raccontare le storie, le sbagli tutte. Però la gomma da masticare me la comperi lo stesso.
  - Va bene: eccoti il soldo.
- E il nonno tornò a leggere il suo giornale.

#### Little Green Riding Hood

"Once upon a time there was a little girl called Little Yellow Riding Hood."

"No! *Red* Riding Hood!"

"Oh yes, of course, Red Riding Hood. Well, one day her mother called and said: 'Little Green Riding Hood—'"

"Red!"

“Sorry! Red. ‘Now, my child, go to Aunt Mary and take her these potatoes.’”

“No! It doesn’t go like that! ‘Go to Grandma and take her these cakes.’”

“All right. So the little girl went off and in the wood she met a giraffe.”

“What a mess you’re making of it! It was a wolf!”

“And the wolf said: ‘What’s six times eight?’”

“No! No! The wolf asked her where she was going.”

“So he did. And little Black Riding Hood replied—”

“Red! Red! Red!!!”

“She replied: ‘I’m going to the market to buy some tomatoes.’”

“No, she didn’t. She said: ‘I’m going to my grandma who is sick, but I’ve lost my way.’”

“Of course! And the horse said—”

“What horse? It was a wolf.”

“So it was. And this is what it said: ‘Take the 75 bus, get out at the main square, turn right, and at the first doorway you’ll find three steps. Leave the steps where they are, but pick up the dime lying on them, and buy yourself a packet of chewing gum.’”

“Grandpa, you’re terribly bad at telling stories. You get them all wrong. But all the same, I wouldn’t mind some chewing gum.”

“All right. Here’s your dime.” And the old man turned back to his newspaper.

After reading and analysing Rodari’s parody of “Little Red Riding Hood” in class, I invited students to repeat Rodari’s literary experiment and write Perrault’s classic from a different viewpoint, still using the narrative framework of the fairy tale. This experiment helped students to deconstruct traditional fairy tales, appropriate their narrative, grammatical and syntactic elements, and employ them in a creative way to tell their own stories. Mirroring contemporary concern for the representation of gender in classic tales, several students decided to empower the female figure of Little Red Riding Hood in their compositions. Others retold the story from an animal point of view—an experiment that evokes the critical analyses of Ecocritical Studies and Human-Animal Studies, which have recently focused on the non-human aspects of fairy tales. For instance, a third-year student wrote a story entitled “Cappuccetto Rosso e il lupo buono” (Little Red Riding Hood and the Gentle Wolf), where Little Red Riding Hood does not trust a well-meaning, kind wolf.

#### Cappuccetto Rosso e il lupo buono

Un giorno Cappuccetto Rosso si reca alla casa di sua nonna. In cammino, incontra un lupo gentile per la strada. Il lupo saluta Cappuccetto Rosso: “Ciao, dove vai?” Cappuccetto Rosso risponde: “Vado da

mia nonna. È a letto malata”. Il lupo affettuoso, preoccupandosi di sua nonna, dice: “Mi spiace tanto! Anch’io le farò una visita dopo. Ciao!” Il lupo va via con ansia [preoccupato].<sup>2)</sup> Ma Cappuccetto Rosso pensa così: “Quel lupo è cattivo. Ha intenzione di mangiarci!” Cappuccetto Rosso chiama subito sua nonna con lo smartphone: “Nonna, ciao! Attenzione a un lupo cattivo! Lui sta venendo alla tua casa [andando a casa tua] per mangiarci!” “Santo cielo! Devo prepararmi per sconfiggerlo!”, risponde la nonna. La nonna comincia a mettere la [una] pentolona sul fuoco. Cappuccetto Rosso affretta il passo sulla strada. In quel momento, il lupo mite arriva a casa della nonna. “Buongiorno, signora! Si sente bene? Abbia cura della sua salute!”. Il lupo offre alla nonna un cestino di frutta. Però, la nonna rifiuta il dono e dice così: “Lei è un furfante! Quella frutta è assolutamente avvelenata!” Subito dopo, la nonna e Cappuccetto Rosso, che è arrivata allora, accalappiano il lupo insieme e poi lo gettano nella pentolona con l’acqua bollente. Il lupo buonissimo e gentilissimo muore. Poveraccio!

#### Little Red Riding Hood and the Gentle Wolf (English translation)<sup>3)</sup>

One day Little Red Riding Hood goes to her grandmother’s house. On her way, she meets a gentle wolf. The wolf greets her: “Hi! Where are you going?” Little Red Riding Hood replies: “I am going to my grandma’s house. She is sick in bed”. The affectionate wolf, who is worried about grandma’s health, says: “I am really sorry for her! Later on, I am going to visit her too. Bye!” The wolf departs in a state of anxiety, but Little Red Riding Hood thinks: “This wolf is evil. He plans to eat us!” She calls her grandmother with her smartphone. “Hi, grandma! Beware of the evil wolf! He is heading to your house to eat us!” The grandmother replies: “For God’s sake, I have to get prepared to defeat him!” Then she starts putting her big pot on the fire. Little Red Riding Hood quickens her pace. At that moment, the gentle wolf arrives at grandma’s house. “Good morning, madam! Do you feel well? Please take care of yourself!” And he offers her a basket of fruit. However, grandma refuses his gift and says: “You, rascal! This fruit must be poisoned!” Then, grandma and Red Riding Hood, who has just arrived, catch the wolf and throw him in the big pot full of boiling water. The very good and gentle wolf dies. Poor fellow!

Working with monolingual classes of Japanese speakers, I decided to expand Rodari’s creative experiment beyond the narrative and cultural canon of Euro-American fairy tales and drew upon the narrative repertoire of Japanese fairy tales. The rationale behind my choice was twofold. On the one hand, I aimed at decentring the notion of the Euro-American fairy tale as a dominant narrative tradition in a hierarchical mapping of wonder tales that minimises the importance of non-Western tales (Bacchilega 2013). On the other hand, I wanted to increase students’ motivation and involvement by employing Japanese fairy tales they were familiar with. For example, instead of reversing the plot

of “Little Red Riding Hood”, in some courses they retold the story of Momotarō, the protagonist of one of Japan’s most popular tales. In this traditional narrative, a childless old couple find a giant peach, open it and discover a boy inside. The boy is called Momotarō (*momo* means peach, so his name could be roughly translated as “peach boy”). When he grows up, he decides to defeat the demons living in Onigashima (Demon Island) and, on his journey to the island, he brings along his mother’s millet dumplings (*kibi dango*). Along the way, he meets a monkey, a dog and a pheasant who he gives the dumplings to in return for helping him. Finally, he defeats the demons and returns to his village, celebrated as a hero. His story has long been told to Japanese children as an example of male bravery, courage and strength. In stark contrast with this ideal, a fourth-year student wrote the following retelling featuring an idle, good-for-nothing Momotarō.

#### Momotarou

C’era una volta un ragazzo che si chiamava Momotarou, perché i suoi genitori vendevano le pesche e le mangiava sempre. Anzi, non faceva altro che mangiare le pesche. Lui stava sempre a casa mangiandole. Un giorno sua madre gli disse: “Momotarou, sei sempre a casa e non hai mai lavorato nonostante tu abbia 25 anni. Vai a vendere le pesche e guadagna per noi”. Così Momotarou fu scacciato da casa. Pensò: “Adesso dove vado con queste pesche? Come posso fare?” Camminando [si] incontrò un cane, un fagiano [e] una scimmia. “Ciao. Come state? Avete bisogno delle pesche?”, disse Momotarou. “Le pesche? No, non le vogliamo. Ma ho sentito che gli orchi che abitano in Onigashima amano le pesche”, rispose il fagiano. Così Momotarou decise di andarci con loro, perché non sapeva dove si trovava [1<sup>a</sup>] Onigashima. In effetti, [1<sup>a</sup>] Onigashima non era molto lontana dalla casa di Momotarou, ma lui non lo sapeva perché stava sempre a casa. In Onigashima c’era un castello. Lì vivevano gli orchi a cui piacevano le pesche. Momotarou bussò alla porta e uscì un orco grande. “Vuoi una pesca ottima che hanno fatto i miei genitori?”, disse Momotarou. L’orco comprò tutte le pesche che aveva Momotarou pagando tanti soldi. [Momotarou] Tornò a casa e cominciò a dormire.

#### Momotarou (English translation)

Once upon a time, there was a boy who was called Momotarou because his parents sold peaches and he always ate them. Actually, he did nothing else but eat peaches. He always stayed home eating. One day, his mother told him: “Momotarou, you have never worked and are always at home, but you are twenty-five already! Go sell peaches and earn some money for us!” So, Momotarou was kicked out of his house. He thought: “Where should I go with these peaches now? What should I do?” While he was walking, he met a dog, a pheasant and a monkey. “Hi! How are you? Do you fancy some peaches?” asked Momotarou. “Peaches? No, we don’t want them, but I’ve heard that the ogres living

in Onigashima love peaches”, answered the pheasant. Momotarou decided to go there with the animals, because he did not know where Onigashima was. Actually, Onigashima was not far from Momotarou’s home, but he did not know it because he always stayed home. In Onigashima there was a castle. The ogres who liked peaches lived there. Momotarou knocked at the door and a big ogre came out. “Do you fancy a delicious peach grown by my parents?” asked Momotarou. The ogre bought all the peaches that Momotarou had and paid a lot of money. Momotarou returned home with the money and began to sleep.

The “fairy tale reversed” method proved very successful, because it inspired students to engage in creative writing in a relaxed, funny atmosphere, using paradox and irony to create narratives. In addition to this method, in other lessons we employed Rodari’s “fantastical hypothesis”, illustrated in *The Grammar of Fantasy*:

The technique of the “fantastical hypothesis” is extremely simple. It assumes its form precisely from the question: “What if?” In order to form this question, any subject and predicate can be chosen haphazardly. The hypothesis that is to be elaborated is formed by linking the two together. The subject could be “Reggio Emilia” and the predicate “to fly”.

What if the city of Reggio Emilia were suddenly to fly? (Rodari 1996: 18)

Following Rodari’s considerations, in the advanced writing class we read and analysed Rodari’s “The Man who Stole the Coliseum” (*L’uomo che rubava il Colosseo*, 1962), a story stemming from the fantastic hypothesis “What if someone stole the Coliseum?” In this narrative, a man sets out to steal the Coliseum because he wants it all to himself. Day after day, he fills bags with old stones and brings them home. However, as years pass and stones pile up from the cellar to the attic of his house, he notices that the Coliseum is always in its place, as beautiful and admired by tourists as ever. Finally, the thief, aged and tired of dragging stones, realizes that the Coliseum belongs to everybody. In this story Rodari reflects on the value of cultural heritage as a common resource and, at the same time, employs a fantastic question to trigger the plot. After reading and analysing it in class, students wrote a short story moving from a similar fantastic hypothesis: “What would happen if someone tried to steal the Glico Man sign in Dotonbori?” (Alternatively, “What would happen if someone tried to steal a famous Japanese monument of your choice?”). The giant Glico Man signboard, featuring a running man, is a famous landmark located in Dotonbori (Osaka’s South district) to advertise a well-renowned Japanese brand. First installed in 1935, this signboard lacks the historical value of Rome’s Coliseum, but it is a symbol of Japanese industrial design and is enormously popular among both local people and tourists, who line up to take pictures in front of it. By replacing the Coliseum with the Glico Man signboard, I tried to change the symbol of a culturally distant and potentially

intimidating non-Japanese historical heritage into something that was more familiar to my students (the Glico Man sign is also a place for young people's rendezvous), in order to facilitate their creative task. As an alternative to "The Man who Stole the Coliseum", some semesters we read "Off with the Cats" (*Vado via con i gatti*, 1973), the story of a retired old man who decides to become a cat because the members of his family ignore him. I chose this narrative, which stems from the fantastic hypothesis "What would happen if grandfather became a cat?", because it may sound strangely familiar to Japanese readers. In the passages where the protagonist describes the human world from an animal viewpoint, it may evoke *I Am a Cat* (*Wagahai wa neko de aru*, 1905), a literary masterpiece written by Japan's foremost modern novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916). As a follow-up activity, students wrote a short story moving from one of the following questions: "What would happen if you became a cat?" or "What would happen if you were the opposite sex?"

Finally, we concluded the course section focused on creative writing with the "fantastic binominal" technique. In *The Grammar of Fantasy*, Rodari reflects on the fact that human thought is formed in pairs, employing binary structures to juxtapose opposite elements. He argues that only an association of two words (a fantastic binominal) can trigger a story, because concepts do not exist alone in the human mind:

It is necessary to have a certain distance between the two words. One must be sufficiently strange or different from the other, and their coupling must be discreetly unusual, because the imagination is compelled to set itself in motion to establish a relationship between the two and to construct a (fantastic) whole in which the two foreign elements can live together. Therefore, it is best to choose the fantastic binominal with the help of chance (Rodari 1996: 12).

Following Rodari's advice, I grouped students into pairs and instructed them to write their two favorite Italian words on two separate pieces of paper and fold them, covering what they had written. Then, all the pieces of paper were collected in a bag and each pair of students chose two of them randomly. After unfolding them and reading the two words they had selected, students wrote a short story in pairs whose title contained those words linked by a preposition. For example, students picking the words "fratelli" (brothers) and "gelato" (ice cream) could choose between several options—"gelato dei fratelli" (the brothers' ice cream), "fratelli nel gelato" (brothers in the ice cream) "gelato ai fratelli" (ice cream to the brothers), etc.—which offered outlines of different fantastic situations (my students, for example, chose "fratelli di gelato", brothers of ice cream). We performed this activity in class, in the first 40 minutes of the lesson. Because of the amusing, paradoxical implications of coupling the words in different ways, students enjoyed this writing experiment and came up with original ideas. After completing their stories, the members of each group wrote the difficult words in their story (the words that could be difficult to understand for other students) on the

whiteboard, explained them, and then read their story aloud to their classmates. They repeated this experiment at home, with a writing assignment where they had to combine a different set of words. For example, a third-year student combined the words “neve” (snow) and “gatto” (cat) in the following story, which combines the Japanese folkloric (and filmic) motifs of the “Snow Woman” (*yuki-onna*) and the “Gratitude of the Cat” (*neko no ongaeshi*).

### Il gatto di neve

Tanto tempo fa, c’era un vecchio che viveva nella montagna da solo. Negli ultimi quattro giorni, c’era stata una tempesta di neve. Lui non era potuto andare a caccia, e i suoi viveri erano stati [erano] agli sgoccioli. Anche quel giorno, era rimasto a casa. Di notte, quando pensava di dormire, ha sentito bussare. Il vecchio ha aperto la porta lentamente con vigilanza...Allora, un gatto stava in piedi alla porta. Il gatto stava fremendo del [tremando per il] freddo, e ha chiesto: “Può darmi alloggio? Sono smarrito e non posso tornare a casa. Solo oggi, la prego”. Il vecchio si è meravigliato e si è disorientato perché non aveva mai visto un gatto che aveva potuto [poteva] parlare. Tuttavia, il vecchio ha accolto in gatto in casa. La mattina dopo, loro si sono alzati. Il gatto ha detto: “Grazie mille per il soggiorno. Per [per a] dire la verità, sono uno spirito di neve. Le sarò grato per tutta la vita”. Allora, all’improvviso, il gatto è volato ed è uscito dalla finestra. Il vecchio è stato sbalordito. Quando ha visto fuori casa [quando ha guardato fuori], era bel tempo e tutta la neve si era sciolta come la [in] primavera. Era molto felice, ed è andato a caccia.

### The Snow Cat (English translation)

Long ago, there was an old man living alone on the mountain. There had been a snowstorm in the last four days, so he could not go hunting and his food was in short supply. Even that day, he had stayed home. At night, when he thought he was asleep, he heard someone knocking at his door. He opened the door slowly and suspiciously. A cat was standing on his back legs at the door. Shivering, the cat asked: “Can you give me a place to stay? I got lost and can’t find my way home. Please, only for tonight”. The old man was surprised and disoriented, because he had never seen a cat that could speak. Nonetheless, he took him in. The following morning, they woke up. The cat said: “Thank you very much for letting me stay with you. Actually, I am a snow spirit. I shall be grateful to you all my life”. Suddenly, he started flying and went out of the window. The old man was amazed. When he looked out, the weather was fine and all the snow had melted away as in springtime. He was very happy and went hunting.

### 3. Conclusion

Rodari's creative techniques, illustrated in *The Grammar of Fantasy*, provided an effective didactic tool to develop the section of IFL writing courses devoted to creative writing. As students engaged in Rodari's writing methods (reversing the narrative viewpoint, deliberately making mistakes in classic plots, mixing up different tales, imagining what would happen after the traditional happy ending, etc.), they approached fairy tales in a playful, unconventional way and learnt to appropriate their linguistic and narrative structures to create their own stories. They also had the opportunity to reflect on the creative potential of errors, thus overcoming their fears of making grammar and spelling mistakes. In our writing activities, the "fantastic hypothesis" and "fantastic binominal" techniques facilitated students' creative tasks by providing absurd, amusing situations beyond the limitations of reality, and the use of paradox was especially effective in activating their imagination and lowering their affective filter. On a broader level, learners could expand their knowledge of several aspects of contemporary Italian culture and society, often mirrored in Rodari's texts. By analysing, recasting and inventing fairy tales, they had the opportunity not only to master the Italian language, but also to use their creativity as a means to imagine different realities. This ability may seem of secondary importance in contemporary business-oriented societies but, as Rodari explains, it is extremely valuable:

The real reason they [fairy tales] are so useful is because they do not seem so useful, just like poetry and music, like theater and sports. They help the complete human being. If a society based on the myth of productivity (and on the reality of profit) needs only half human beings—loyal executors, busy imitators, and docile instruments without a will of their own—that means that there is something wrong with this society and it needs to be changed. To change it, creative human beings are needed, people who know how to use their imagination (Rodari 1996: 113).

From this perspective, the twofold activity of reading and producing creative fiction in a foreign language can help students to encounter different cultural values, reflect critically on both language and society, and creatively envision reality beyond crystallized narratives and dominant cultural paradigms.

### Notes

- 1) In 1980, the year of his death, Rodari refers to Japan once again in the article "On Goldrake's Side" (Dalla parte di Goldrake), published in the Communist magazine *Rinascita*. Here, he defends Japanese *anime*—in particular the series *Ufo Robot Grandizer*, which became enormously popular in Italy under the name *Ufo Robot Goldrake*—from the criticism of those who believed that *anime* contributed to the corruption of Italy's



youth. Rodari draws a parallel between the half-man, half-machine Goldrake and the half-man, half-god Heracles, and explains that, like a modern Heracles, the Japanese robot hero faces difficult challenges, engages with them, and succeeds each time.

- 2) My corrections are included between square brackets.
- 3) Unless otherwise indicated, translations into English are mine.

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