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THE FREEDOM OF LANGUAGE:
WHEN YOU CAN BREAK GRAMMAR RULES

In 1964, the Italian writer and pedagogist Gianni Rodari published *Il libro degli errori* (*The Book of Mistakes*) which contains stories and poems dedicated to nice characters but, in many cases, they are not accustomed to "correct" spelling and grammar. Among the characters tasked with rectifying these mistakes, Professor Grammaticus embodies the jaunty and cheerfully transgressive spirit of Rodari, for whom

> "mistakes are not in the words, but in things; we must correct dictations but, above all, we must correct the world" [1] .

Professor Grammaticus corrects a young lady who puts the «s» instead of the «z» in the word *benzina* (petrol), then he reprimands a sailor-ticket collector who asks him for his *bilieto* (ticket) in the *vaporeto* (waterbus). In the Venetian dialect, double consonants are often not pronounced: the corresponding words, in standard Italian, are *biglietto* and *vaporetto*. He also corrects a man, probably from Rome, who talks about the *bomba all'idroggeno* (hydrogen bomb): this mistake is due to an excess of consonants compared to the standard Italian *idrogeno*. Grammaticus also invents an error-killing machine which violently attacks all Italian people who do not speak the standard language with the officially accepted pronunciation. The result is a hilarious series of surreal situations between Milan, Bologna and Rome where this machine also hits the police before being destroyed:

> „[…] at the police station, among the officers, there were people from Turin, Sicily, Naples, Genoa, Veneto and Tuscany regions. Every Italian region was represented[…]: also, of course, by all the possible and imaginable pronunciation defects. The machine was unleashed, crazy. It was silenced with hammer blows; it did not remain one healthy piece of it [2]″.

Perhaps the most significant story with respect to Gianni Rodari's attitude towards grammar mistakes is entitled *Essere e avere (Being and Having)*[3]: it concerns the habit of Southern Italians – who emigrated to Northern Europe in search of work after the Second World War – of

conjugating movement verbs with the auxiliary *avere* (to have; *ho andato*) instead of the correct form with the auxiliary *essere* (to be; *sono andato*). Professor Grammaticus finds himself on a train with emigrants who speak incorrectly and he tries to explain the nature of their mistakes. The verb *andare* (to go), however, for the emigrants, is not so much an intransitive verb which, in compound forms, requires the auxiliary *essere*. For them – one of the emigrants explains to Professor Grammaticus – it is a sad, very sad verb, which means leaving the family and the children, looking for work in a foreign and perhaps hostile environment.

The error-killing machine is destroyed, in the end, because

> "if you had to cut off the heads of all those who make mistakes, you would only see necks around"[4];

Professor Grammaticus also gives up his attempt to rectify the emigrants' incorrect verbs, concluding that the biggest mistakes are in the things and we need to work, above all, to change the latter, before fixing the use of language in those who speak it (badly).

But what does "speaking badly" mean?

In the Italian language, this expression (*parlar male*) has more than one nuance. *Speaking badly*, or even bad-mouthing someone, means denigrating, slandering someone. But it can also mean using inappropriate words or vulgar expressions [5]. Or – this is the case of the aforementioned adventures of Professor Grammaticus – it means expressing oneself orally in contravention of the rules established by grammar, with particular reference to phonetics and morphology. Therefore, "speaking badly" presupposes that there is the antonym "speaking well": of someone (to praise) but also in the sense of using appropriate expressions and, in general, expressing oneself orally with the standard Italian language, respecting the rules of the grammar code in force.

The codification of the standard Italian language

The oldest Italian grammar book is considered to be the so-called *Grammatichetta vaticana* which is attributed today to Leon Battista Alberti (1434-1438). It was based on the live-use of the Florentine dialect, while the first printed Italian grammars, at the beginning of the 16th century, were based on the literary language. Alberti's intent was not normative: he did not want to impose rules, but to recognize and promote the dignity of the

spoken-dialect in Florence, showing that dialects were also regulated in themselves, just like the Latin language.

Among the texts printed at the beginning of the 16th century in Italy, Pietro Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) had great resonance. It was not exclusively a grammar treatise: it consists of three books and only the third one is a grammar. The first two books talk about the history, formation, merits and characteristics of the "vulgar" language (the language used in everyday life, in its form predominantly oral, in distinction from the Latin literary tradition). They define the stylistic level to be achieved through the imitation of some 14th century-Tuscany literary models.

Prose della volgar lingua is a treatise in dialogic form, according to the taste of the time. Even the strictly grammar part, in the third book, is carried out in a dialogic form, with almost no use of grammar technicalities. Bembo offers a book of prescriptive grammar but exposed in a discursive and never schematic form; many norms which have established themselves in modern Italian, have their first codifier in him. Pietro Bembo's normative model then imposed itself during the 16th century and it was disseminated, in a more schematic form, by subsequent authors.

In the debate of the following centuries, non-Bembian grammarians remained in a subordinate position and they were not decisive for the stabilization of the Italian linguistic norm. Interesting but non-systematic observations were contained in *Il torto e'l diritto del Non si può* (1655) by Father Daniello Bartoli, an example of an elegant polemic against the arbitrary and capricious prohibitions of the authoritarian grammarians. The grammar matter, with special attention to spelling and punctuation, was then summarized in a synthetic form by Bartoli in the treatise *Dell'ortografia italiana* (1670).

In the 18th century, new conditions arose: the teaching of Italian entered school teaching, although still in a marginal and subordinate position compared to Latin. In the 19th century, the idea of a living language-grammar – "spoken language" or "modern use" – took hold in more or less eclectic forms. Several authors explicitly referred to examples taken from the writer and poet Alessandro Manzoni (the author of the famous novel *I promessi sposi*, in English *The Betrothed*). Commercial production of grammars was encouraged by the new education system in the newly formed Kingdom of Italy (1861) and therefore by the national book market.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce argued that expression is an individual, univocal, unrepeatable and untranslatable *continuum.* Therefore, language is an individual creation and the rules have no scientific basis. Grammar, lexicons, rhetoric, normative and comparative linguistics texts were considered by Croce to be devoid of theoretical and scientific value, being only pedagogical tools or arbitrary aids of didactic nature. *Storia della grammatica italiana* (*The History of Italian Grammar*) by Ciro Trabalza (1908) came out at the height of Crocean thought's affirmation and it sparked a lively debate on the function of grammar and the meaning of its history[6]. However, this grammar book was recognized as having an important documentary value, thanks to the wealth of data which still makes it a fundamental study tool today, also giving space to the history of the transition from Latin to Italian.

The most successful grammar-books, capable of speaking to an audience of beginners and still used today, were created in 1941 by two great linguists, Bruno Migliorini and Giacomo Devoto. Migliorini's book had a very rich and modern apparatus of application exercises and a modern linguistic model lightening the obsolete normative parts. Devoto introduced notions of stylistics into grammar. In the mid-twentieth century, however, normative and descriptive Italian grammar, understood as an overall book and as a scientific reference manual, practically no longer existed, but only its didactic use survived. In the second half of the 20th century, however, there was a certain recovery of the value of normative and descriptive grammar while seeking, in school grammars, a form suitable for new users and changed times. In many cases, forms of hybrid eclecticism have occurred in Italian schools, mixing the ancient pedantry (against which Gianni Rodari wrote his cheerfully provocative stories) with some tendencies derived from generative and textual linguistics.

In recent decades, the Italian grammar has detached itself from the purely pedagogical and didactic dimension. This grammar faces today the dimension of research, and many variables of a historical, geographical, textual and linguistic-register nature, detaching itself in whole or in part from the normative intent of the ancient tradition. Luca Serianni with the collaboration of Alberto Castelvecchi (1998), and Renzi, Salvi and Cardinaletti (1988-1995) are the authors of the two most well-known grammars today. The first one still responds, in part, to a normative intent (despite the substantial enrichment of perspective) and it also offers

indications of historical grammar. The second grammar book proposes a clearer methodological renewal for its adherence to current and real language use.

The grammar of Renzi, Salvi and Cardinaletti replaces the distinction between "right" and "wrong" with the distinction, typical of modern linguistics, between "acceptable" and "not acceptable". "Not acceptable" is equivalent to "agrammatical", reported with an asterisk marking what is impossible in the reality of Italian, for example: *sé stesso ha lodato Mario** (*himself praised Mario**): a reflexive pronoun like *sé stesso* (*himself*) cannot be in the subject position of the sentence. Agrammatical forms are, therefore, different from those that traditional grammar defined as incorrect. Many incorrect (but not agrammatical) forms are examined, discussed and explained, for example the so-called redundancy or pronominal recovery *a me mi piace* (untranslatable literally in English, something similar to: *me, I like*). Forms like this one are actually used in Italian, albeit at a colloquial level in spontaneous speech. Renzi, Salvi and Cardinaletti 's grammar records these forms for descriptive and documentary purposes, sometimes also with the explanation of the reasons for their success, and with the comparison (if necessary) with dialect usage. Conceived in this way, grammar no longer aims to teach the beautiful language or the model language, but it wants to describe reality and to explain the functioning of linguistic mechanisms.

An example of incorrect – but not agrammatical – form for the traditional Italian grammar is the case of *periodo ipotetico della irrealtà* (hypothetical period of unreality) constructed with the *imperfetto* (imperfect tense) of the *indicativo* (indicative mood).

Se lo sapevo, non venivo!

This title (*if I had known, I wouldn't have come*) would be incorrect in the traditional Italian grammar. Yet, even well-educated speakers, even those writing now, have used this phrase more than once. The "correct" sentence should be: *se lo avessi saputo, non sarei venuta* (subjunctive mood, "trapassato" past tense in the first sentence; conditional mood, past tense in the second). Why doesn't the Italian title sound incorrect if traditional normative grammar still recognizes it as such?

The Accademia della Crusca (one of the main points of reference for researching on the Italian language), through the discussion by Angelo Stella (1992)[7], states that the two hypothetical modules mentioned above can coexist peacefully today. It is true that the formula in the title belongs to a

rather oral and spontaneous linguistic register, while the "correct" structure is used in a more formal and sustained context. But today both ways are used (even in the past they were, although some modules did not have official recognition):

> [...] the use and non-use of the conditional mood – like the subjunctive – mark the revenge of the fact, and of the will, on the syntactic relationship, the revenge of the chronological and factual sequence on the *consecutio temporum*. It is not a question of distinguishing standard usage from its colloquial variants and substandard usage, but of recognizing the expressive richness of the language which is, to grammar, what life is to physiology[8].

In addition, the daily imagination of speakers has created a large family of possibilities in the field of hypothetical structures, even asymmetrical intersections, not only in the field of more prosaic languages such as that of football. In this context, we can say, for example: *se il terzino destro non lo falciava, era goal!,* literally: if the right-back didn't mow him down, it was goal!, but also: *se il terzino destro non l'avesse falciato, era goal!,* which is equal to: if the right-back hadn't mowed him down, it was goal!

But it is not a "modern vice", that of neglecting the rules established in this field. It is enough to read *The Divine Comedy* (1306-1321) by Dante Alighieri: *che l'ubidir, se già fosse, m'è tardi* (Inferno, II, 80, 1307 circa) or: *ché se potuto aveste veder tutto, / mestier non era parturir Maria»* (Purgatorio, III, 38-39, 1313-14) and other examples of "impure" hypothetical grammar. However, the Supreme Italian Poet was (more) free in the use of grammar structures because he lived before the establishment of grammar rules in the Renaissance period.

Speaking of rules and errors, the most modern material and infrastructures, including online, tend to underline that language is not, *tout court*, a set of words and grammar rules for assembling these words. The "traditional" conception considers grammar as something that prescribes, orders, establishes what is right and what is wrong when using a language. Grammar should be, rather, the description of a language and its behaviors:

> "Therefore, the rules are first and foremost[...] a tool for describing the regularities which can be observed in the use of the language by speakers"[9].

From this perspective, a mistake does not appear as a simple violation of a rule: instead, it represents a different way to achieve a communication goal, that is, a modality deviating from the strategies and structures most commonly used in a specific social context. This context perceives as "wrong"

those linguistic behaviors which do not conform to the above regularities of use:

> The only rules which do not depend on the context are those of orthography, i.e. the rules on graphic signs (letters) and punctuation (full stop, comma). Writing [in Italian] *habbiamo* with «h» is wrong, writing *ciesa* without «h» is wrong. The spelling rules, in a language, are the only ones that prescribe, because writing is artificial, created by human beings, while spoken language is natural. Therefore, artificial things have rules to respect, natural things have regularities to observe and describe [10].

In the communicative linguistic approach, generally used today in teaching the Italian language to foreigners, the purpose of making oneself understood is a priority and therefore, every strategy to achieve this goal is considered adequate. When someone points out the presence of a linguistic error, the most immediate advice to the learner is to ask why it is an error:

> "when you make a mistake and someone tells you that you made a mistake, always ask why: the error is not absolute. The thing you said may be wrong in that context but right in another" [11].

According to this idea, *Se lo sapevo, non venivo!,* the phrase in our title, is not a mistake but an easier strategy to reach the goal. Moreover, it is a historically attested use in Italian: some grammarians tried to define it as an *unreal indicative mood* [12]. Generally, today it is agreed that this is a more suitable modality for the informal and colloquial style, while the language of greater formality continues to prefer the subjunctive mood, "trapassato" past tense, plus the conditional mood, past tense (*se lo avessi saputo, non sarei venuta*). The imperfect tense of the *indicativo* (indicative mood), as explained by today's grammarians, in addition to temporal (past) and aspectual values (quality of the action such as its repetition or duration) can also serve to express a certain margin of doubt, of hypotheses, or probability of an action. It is precisely from this point of view that it is frequently used in sentences similar to that of our title.

Conclusion

There is an eternal dilemma in languages between the conservatism of the purists-fundamentalists who would like to crystallize the ancient rules, and the extreme progressivism of those who adopt, in the blink of an eye, imported words and grammar structures (mainly from English, in the case of the Italian language). Both approaches may be inadequate:

[…]while progressivism can cause a loss of control over the language by its community, being a purist can become a useless waste of time and energy, as it is completely useless to oppose changes in a language, even when change arises from an error[13].

How should we proceed then? And how to deal with systematic and occasional grammatical errors? A suggestion can come, once again, from the pages of Gianni Rodari:

"Mistakes are necessary, useful like bread and often they are even beautiful",

he wrote in the Italian magazine *Noi donne* in 1964. The most serious mistakes, which certainly need to be corrected, are those of a social and political nature, such as the unequal distribution of wealth, and war. Crossing the boundaries between politics and philosophy, up to the linguistic and didactic fields, Gianni Rodari underlines the importance of errors and their analysis to trigger processes of reality's knowledge. But errors' value does not stop here: the spelling-grammatical error could be the origin of a creative process. An "incorrect" modification can bring to light a new and unexpected meaning. It must be said that, in this case, there is no discussion about the relativity of the error's concept:

In order to start Rodarian's creative process, the mistake must be recognized and recognizable by everyone, like a prototypical character of *commedia dell'arte*, so that it can thus be placed at the centre of a narrative, in prose or in verses [14].

Errors thus recognized always produce consequences. There are negative and positive consequences, highlighted by the two covers illustrated respectively by Bruno Munari (1964) and Francesco Altan (1993). The sad cat shows the mistake caused by the lack of something necessary (the whiskers on one side of the muzzle). For the Italian word *acqua*, for example, the incorrect spelling *acua* produces the story-rhyme of a non-drinkable liquid, paradoxically dry, completely unusable[15].

On the other hand, the cover designed by Altan reflects a kaleidoscope of "errors" which can give life to new fantastic stories. Clocks with interchanged numbers, a dolphin with a long and striped tail, the fish-bird, the square sun: they are "positive" mistakes which can break the immutable order of things and re-form reality in a creative way. An error can give rise to a linguistic game in which the error itself is interpreted as a new possibility and not as a lack.
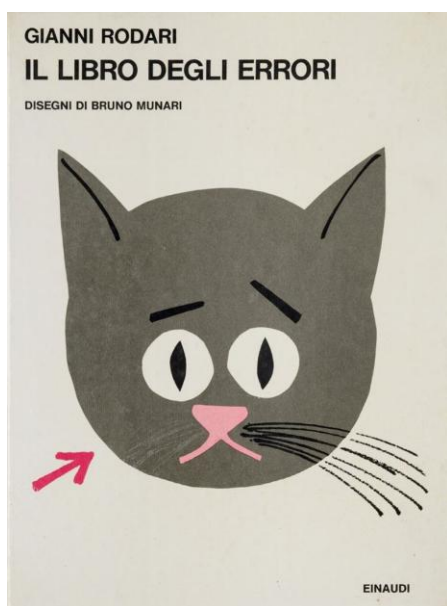
Giocondo Corcontento always *s'arabia* (gets angry) but with only one «b» (the correct term is *s'arrabbia*), so his anger has no force, no one gets offended and everyone lives in peace[16]. In this regard, we can quote an Italian proverb deliberately "mistaken" by Gianni Rodari: *sbagliando s'inventa* (by making mistakes, you invent) [17]. The original proverb is *sbagliando s'impara*, that is: by making mistakes, you learn.

Could we thus arrive at the paradoxical attitude of saving or even encouraging grammatical errors?

Gianni Rodari's idea is more complex. It is not a question of a prescriptive grammar promoting conformist adherence to a norm, but neither is it the imagination in power which allows the language to be recreated to the individual's liking. Rather, that is a plurality of grammars and an education giving space to a choice among multiple expressive languages and different systems of rules. These grammars are open to creative uses and to a heuristic valorization of the error:

There is no intention, in Rodari, to deny the rules, but the desire to find a new, more democratic key to master them, a key usable by all and everyone, also by playing and having fun, experimenting with the different expressive possibilities and manipulating the linguistic structures[18].

In short, Professor Grammaticus is still a positive character. He tries to correct the mistaken grammar but he realizes the limits of his intervention. Correcting grammatical errors is therefore necessary, but it must be done with all the sympathy – or empathy – which comes from realizing that the biggest errors, the ones that should absolutely be corrected, are in the political-social distortions of the world. So, it is not a censorious position towards the grammatical error, but it is the error's use as an opportunity to observe the reality highlighted by the error itself (e.g. writing *italy* with a lowercase letter evokes a small, minor country which is forgotten by all)[19]. And besides, it is the willingness to recognize that certain grammatical errors are beautiful, they improve the prosaic reality of the world and they open new perspectives of hope.

NOTE:

[1].Gianni Rodari (1964), *Il libro degli errori*, Torino, Einaudi, 7. https://classeinblogcom.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/il-libro-degli-errori.pdf

[2]. *Ibidem*, p.42.

[3]. *Ibidem*, p.16.

[4]. *Ibidem*, p.42.

[5]. www.treccani.it/vocabolario/sparlare

[6]. www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/grammatica_(Enciclopedia-dell'Italiano)

[7]. https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/consulenza/periodo-ipotetico/66

[8]. *Ibidem*

[9].https://lernilango.com/ep-6-b1-b2-imparare-ad-imparare-errori-regole-ed-eccezioni

[10]. *Ibidem*

[11]. *Ibidem*

[12]. Fabio Rossi, in https://portale2.unime.it/dico/2018/12/21/tante-ipotesi-e-qualche-certezza-sul-periodo-ipotetico

[13]. Patrizia Zapparoli (2016), in https://eurologos-milano.com/chi-decide-le-regole-grammaticali-chi-inventa-le-parole

[14]. Veronica Ujcich (2023), 'A lezione dal prof. Grammaticus. L'errore in Rodari', 50-51. In Piras, T. (ed.) *Effetto Rodari*, Bologna, Patron.

www.academia.edu/105813835/A_lezione_dal_prof_Grammaticus_Lerror e_in_Rodari

[15]. Gianni Rodari, *Il libro degli errori*, *cit.*, p.14.

[16]. *Ibidem*, p.15.

[17]. Gianni Rodari (2001) [1973], *Grammatica della fantasia. Introduzione all'arte di inventare storie*, Torino, Einaudi, p.36.

[18]. Cristiana De Santis (2021), 'Le grammatiche, reali e fantastiche, di Gianni Rodari'. In *Griseldaonline, il portale della letteratura*. https://site.unibo.it/griseldaonline/it/letture

[19]. Gianni Rodari, *Il libro degli errori*, *cit.*, p. 47-48.

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LA LIBERTÉ DE LA LANGUE :
QUAND ON PEUT BRISER LES RÈGLES DE GRAMMAIRE

Résumé: En partant de l'approche de l'écrivain italien Gianni Rodari (1920-1980), cet article discute de la nature des erreurs grammaticales et de la manière de les traiter. Les étapes historiques qui ont conduit à la codification de la langue italienne standard sont présentées depuis la Renaissance, avec le texte fondamental Prose della volgar lingua (1525) de Pietro Bembo, en passant par la perspective du philosophe Benedetto Croce au début du XXe siècle, aux grammaires les plus modernes des dernières décennies. L'approche diachronique montre les changements dans la conception de la grammaire italienne et dans son enseignement jusqu'à nos jours.

Dans la deuxième partie de l'article, l'utilisation de structures hypothétiques en italien et leurs modifications sont analysées, avec une référence particulière au temps imparfait du mode indicatif, utilisé pour exprimer une certaine marge de doute ou de probabilité, mais pas encore pleinement considéré comme une structure correcte dans toutes les situations de communication. Le dilemme entre conservatisme et progressisme dans l'utilisation des structures grammaticales est discuté et abordé à travers la perspective ironique et ludique de Gianni Rodari. Son idée souligne la naissance d'une pluralité de grammaires qui acceptent les erreurs grammaticales comme moyen de connaître la réalité et source de processus créatifs.

Mots-clés: *erreurs de grammaire, grammaire diachronique, structures hypothétiques, Gianni Rodari, linguistique créative.*

Abstract: Starting from the approach of the Italian writer Gianni Rodari (1920-1980), this paper discusses the nature of grammar mistakes and the way to deal with them. The historical stages leading to the codification of the standard Italian language are retraced, from the Renaissance period with the fundamental text *Prose della volgar lingua* (1525) by Pietro Bembo, going through the perspective of the philosopher Benedetto Croce at the beginning of the 20th century, up to the most modern grammars of recent decades. The diachronic approach shows the changes in the conception of the Italian grammar and its teaching up to now.

In the second part of the paper, the Italian use of hypothetical structures and their changes are analyzed, with special reference to the imperfect tense of the *indicativo* (indicative mood) used to express a certain margin of doubt or probability, but not yet fully considered as a correct structure in all communication situations. The dilemma between conservatism and progressivism in using grammar structures is discussed and addressed through the ironic and playful perspective of Gianni Rodari. His idea underlines the birth of a plurality of grammars embracing grammar mistakes as a way of reality's knowledge and a source of creative processes.

Keywords: *grammar mistakes, diachronic grammar, hypothetical structures, Gianni Rodari, creative linguistics.*