

Research Article

Forum

Telling Phaedrus' fables to children. A cruel language? A linguistic analysis in Italian books

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Abstract

Teaching classical culture to children can be done through literature and Phaedrus' fables. There are several books on the market that can be used to introduce Phaedrus' fables to children. However, in order to be suitable, the books should follow some requirements of appropriateness related to the use of the language and the values to be shared, among others. In this study, through the analysis of 12 Italian books on Phaedrus' fables for children, it will be analysed how the death of an animal is described through the use of verbs and structures. The research aims at making observations on how some books for children represent cruelty and the adoption of certain linguistic structures. The analysis shows, in the first place, that the authors never eliminate the death/killing of the animal; secondly, the verbs and expressions used are varied but, in most cases, cruel, and direct without making the death softer.

Keywords: fables, Phaedrus, children's literature, violence in children's literature

Introduction

Bringing children closer to the classical world is a wonderful experience that enriches the little ones, offering them valid tools to be able to understand more closely a past that is inevitably always present. Getting to know another world and/or past civilisations first-hand helps to understand our daily life and to be more open to interculturality. Children, as well as adults, can approach this world in various ways: through observation (think of the different school visits to archaeological sites, videos, documentaries), production and manipulation, through the use of materials that allow to build and modify objects (such as, for example, the creation of a wax tablet using learning by doing), and with understanding and listening (such as, for example, listening to a myth or a story from the literature).

Phaedrus and Aesop are still relevant authors today but, more than before, they have come to be part of children's literature. With a simple search, both on the internet and in any bookshop, one will immediately notice that ancient fables are repurposed nowadays with volumes of various formats, sometimes with the help of illustrations and with different types, proposing them as inviting reading for the child audience. However, offering readings that focus on the classical world for children is not always an easy task.

To introduce a classical word to children, for obvious reasons, the material should be adapted in order to enable the children to

understand the text and the meaning. This research seeks to understand how Phaedrus' fables in contemporary Italian commercial literature are adapted and suitable for children. More specifically, this study aims at understanding whether some commercial books fit their target (children) regarding the linguistic use (verb choice and expressions) and how they present the non-happy ending.

The pedagogical value of the fable

Freire emphasizes the importance of reading as a means to understand the world, linking his literacy experiences to a deep interpretation of reality (Freire, 1981). The family environment is a stimulus to reading, especially when the child is still small, but it is well known that the habit of reading must not become an obligation, but must be seen as a pleasure, otherwise the child will not benefit from it. Therefore, it is useful to make the child also approach the reading in a playful way, so that it is seen as fun (Wohlwend, 2007).

The fable is a literary genre that takes the form of a short allegorical tale and aims to express a moral lesson. In this way, 'the main function of different species of animals in fables seems to be to mirror fixed human character types' (Korhonen, 2017, 2). Anthropomorphism, in fact, is a feature of Phaedrus' (and also Aesop's) fables, in which animals show attributes and traits typical of the human being, creating a hidden satire of the surrounding world (Rodríguez Adrados, 1999, 121).

Already in ancient times, the fable had an educational and pedagogical purpose, and some information can be found in Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*. Although neither he nor Seneca

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mentioned the fabulist Phaedrus, the references linked to Aesop and his fables had some relevance in the education of children (Rodríguez Adrados, 1999, 124). Roman children became acquainted with Aesop's fables and, at school, the fables were also studied by carrying out various exercises, including composition, dictation and paraphrasing.

Fables, after all, have a fundamental didactic value. According to Laes (2006), the fables of the past introduced children to a recognisable world in Greco-Roman antiquity and presented recognisable situations and moral lessons in which ethical values were internalised; moreover, they introduced the children into a 'harsh' world (Laes, 2006, 913), that of adults, made up of difficulties but also of social stability. With the use of fables, therefore, the child was educated through an adult's point of view. But the moralistic, pedagogical and educational aspect is not only present in fables, but in children's literature generally, at least until 1900.

Today, fables still have great social relevance. They are part of their own literary genre and the enormous importance they have on childhood education in particular and on the entire process of the formation of the individual in general is widely recognised. Fables help learning and reading by facilitating literacy, but also improving writing, communication and understanding (Pelletier and Beatty, 2015). Short stories promote reading habits (Rahma, 2019), but also the memorisation of new words, as well as the learning not only of the first but also of a second language (Balla, 2000; Goldman *et al.*, 1984).

Fables are also useful for morally educating children (Mukhlash, 2016), to encourage change and to develop character (Stanbrough, 2014) as well as critical thinking (Marton, 2004; Nippold, 2020). Furthermore, fables are also used in lifelong learning and vocational training (Kollias, 2015), as well as in science labs (Kayhan *et al.*, 2017) and in strategic management (Short and Ketchen, 2005).

Fables have a significant psychological role in the child's growth process because, through the sensation of disappointment, they stimulate the development of creativity and imagination, as well as being an aid to understanding emotions, to overcome difficulties and for resolution of problems (Gloder, 2013, 32).

Some problems to understand in presenting fables for children

It is confirmed that the use of fables is important for children nowadays. But many factors are involved in reading and choosing a book. In the school environment, this is a task performed by the teacher or librarian, while, if it is a non-scholastic book, an adult, for the child, can follow the suggestions of a bookseller or librarian, his/her own experiences as a reader, the opinions of other readers, or word of mouth among friends. On the other hand, the choice is also made directly by the child, but usually from already selected books. However, there are criteria for the appropriateness of a children's book.

Ellis and Brewster (2014) propose some important points among which are the level; the literary devices; the content/the subject matter; the illustrations/the layout; the educational potential; the motivation; the values; the global issues; the language content; and the potential for follow-up work. It might seem obvious, in fact, that a children's book must be accompanied by captivating illustrations, must have a large enough font and present understandable language, as well as offering positive values: 'Do we agree with the values and attitudes projected in the story?' (Ellis and Brewster, 2014, 19).

Presenting a fable to children requires, for obvious reasons, an adaptation on several levels. Daloiso (2009) details two important parts: the narrative simplification and the linguistic simplification. For the linguistic part, among the various points, he underlines the need to:

- 1) present a simple and linear structure;
- 2) reformulate idiomatic expressions with clearer language;
- 3) use a concrete and less abstract lexicon;
- 4) not use infrequent vocabulary if it is not essential.

A detailed scheme is also proposed by Ellis and Brewster (2014, 17) which present four sections:

- 1) vocabulary and general meaning where it is necessary to check unfamiliar content or words; check idioms; check clarity;
- 2) grammar in order to check tenses; check use of structures; check word order;
- 3) organisation of ideas, so it is important to check sentence length and complexity; check time references; check the way ideas are linked; check the way ideas are explained;
- 4) story length should be checked by the number of ideas in the story.

Connected to the adaptation, in fables, cruelty is another element which needs attention. Cruelty as a component in children's literature is not new in the modern literature and in the contemporary world (Nimon, 1993), but has deep roots, going back to ancient production. Greek tragedy – as well as epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – which were used to teach the Greek language in school – already had elements full of violence at that time. Just think of the Trojan War, or about Astyanax launched from the tower. The main objective of the epics, in reality, was precisely to 'provide a comprehensive ethical reference-work for the young' (Griffith, 2001, 33).

Cruelty is an aspect present in fables, both from the very ancient ones and also the first we know as part of Greek literature, such as *The hawk and the nightingale* by Hesiod, or *The fox and the eagle* by Archilocus. And, as a consequence, they are found also in the Aesop's corpus and in Phaedrus. These are highlighted in several ways, such as through delusion, greed, mockery, reproach, insult, shame, flattery, loss, deception, or revenge. Here are some examples extracted from Phaedrus:

Illusion: A crane helps to remove a bone from the wolf's mouth to receive a reward that it will not have (*lupus et gruis* [The wolf and the crane] I, 9).

Greed: The dog, out of greed in trying to catch the reflection of his piece of meat, loses the piece it has in its mouth (*canis per fluvium carnem ferens* [The dog carrying the meat across the river] I, 4).

Make fun of somebody, reproaches, insults: A crow prides itself on wearing peacock feathers, but then is teased because it loses them and is mocked (*graculus superbus et pavo* [The proud crow and the peacock] I, 3). The fly reproaches the mule for being slow (*musca et mula* [The fly and the mule] III, 6).

Regret, shame, flattery: The crow drops the cheese to show how beautiful its voice is (*vulpus et corvus* [The fox and the crow] I, 12).

Loss: A mule, carrying a basket full of money, is injured and robbed (*muli duo et vectores* [The two mules and the passengers] II, 7).

Deceit: A sheep is forced to give back to the dog something it did not own (*ovis, canis et lupus* [The sheep, the dog and the wolf]

I, 17). A fox tricks a billy goat to get out of a deep well (in *periculum simul ac venit callidus vulpes et caper* [The clever fox and the goat come into danger together] IV, 9).

Revenge: The fox, to take revenge on the eagle that had stolen its cubs, threatens to set fire to the tree where it is perching (*vulpes et aquila* [The fox and the eagle] I, 28).

As we can see, in Phaedrus, the different forms of cruelty are very present and this cruelty is not hidden or masked through any softening.

In addition to cruelty, seen in its various forms, **death** also appears several times in Phaedrus's fables. All animals, in nature, have innate behaviours learnt through experience and can denote both aggression and submission; a not negligible aspect is their need to feed themselves in order to survive. In addition to herbivores, both carnivores and omnivores feed on the meat of other animals. Basically, feeding animals is part of their survival and physiological need; this aspect, of course, is not shocking, but in Phaedrus' fables the animals have an allegorical meaning, and represent human disposition and peculiarities. Analysing the fables, excluding the *Perrottina Appendix*,

in 23 there is the presence of death of an animal, in the majority of the cases killed by another animal. Here is a summary (Figure 1).

Several authors have raised the topic of violence in children's literature (Guliz, 2012; Nimon, 1993; Yakar, 2018). The question is not just whether some books for children may contain some elements of violence or not, but also what kind of violence. In fact, according to Galtung (2003), violence can consist of three dimensions: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. Çer, though, stated that

'Emotional, physical and psychological violence may be included in children's books; however, the child should be able to sense how to cope with violence through these books' (Çer, 2016, 95)

In fact, in Phaedrus's fables, in addition to linguistic and cultural adaptation, an adaptation or 'softening' may be required especially when the story is presented to younger children. A study by Bertolini and Del Carlo (2008) highlights the sadness and anguish

Fable	Death
lupus et agnus [The wolf and the lamb] (I, I)	The lamb is eaten in pieces
ranae regem petierunt [The frogs make a king] (I, II)	The snake devours the frogs
vacca et capella, ovis et leo [The cow and the deer, the sheep and the lion] (I, V)	A deer is caught and divided into pieces
passer ad leporem conciliator [The sparrow wins against the hare] (I, IX)	A sparrow eats the hare
asinus et leo venantes [Donkey and lion go hunting] (I, XI)	A lion tears apart several animals
cervus ad fontem [The deer at the spring] (I, XII)	Dogs tear to pieces a deer
canes familiae [The dog family] (I, XX)	Dogs die from drinking too much water
leo senex, aper, taurus et asinus [The old lion, boar, bull and donkey] (I, XXI)	A bull, a donkey and a wild boar kill a lion
mustela et homo [The weasel and the man] (I, XXII)	The weasel is killed by a man
rana rupta et bos [The bursting frog and the ox] (I, XXIV)	The frog explodes from too much swelling
canis et thesaurus et vulturius [The dog, the treasure and the vulture] (I, XXVII)	A dog dies of starvation
milvus et columbae [The kite and the doves] (I, XXXI)	The kite eats doves
aquila, feles et aper [The eagle, the cat and the boar] (II, IV)	The eagle and the boar are dying of hunger and their puppies are eaten by kittens
aquila et cornex [The eagle and the crow] (II, VI)	The tortoise is killed by the eagle and the crow
cervus ad boves [The deer against the cattle] (II, VIII)	The deer is killed by some servants
panthera et pastores [The panther and the shepherds] (III, II)	The flock and the shepherds are torn to pieces by a panther
lanius et simius [The man and the monkey] (III, IV)	A monkey is killed and made ready for sale
cicada et noctua [The cicada and the owl] (III, XVI)	The cicada is killed by the owl
asinus et Galli [The donkey and the Galli] (IV, I)	A donkey is murdered by priests
poeta [The poet] (IV, II)	A weasel eats the mice
equus et aper [The horse and the boar] (IV, IV)	A knight kills a wild boar
pugna murium et mustelarum [The battle of the mice and the weasels] (IV, VI)	The weasels eat mice
asinus et porcellus [The donkey and the little pig] (V, IV)	A man sacrifices a little pig

Figure 1. List of Phaedrus' fables in which there is the death of an animal or animals.

	Mastropaolo (2003)	Casali, Masi and Valmaggi (2013) ¹	Montanari (2013)	Giunti (2015)	Marescotti (2015)	<i>Vestita, White Star Kids</i> (2015)	Ricciardi (2017)	Cassinelli and Marconi (2020)	De Falco and Princivalle (2020)	Mazzocato (2020)	Zima (2020)	Siciliano (2021)
Format (cm)	14.5x21	-	13x19	20x24	-	27.5x31	20x24	20x26.5	-	10.5x20	-	14x21
Number of fables	18	19	65	31	124	12	4	71	4	124	98	11
Illustrations	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-	✓
Format of the illustrations	small / medium	small	small / medium	large	-	extra-large	large	medium	medium	medium	-	medium
Activities	✓	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Colour / b&w	b&w	colour	b&w	colour	b&w	colour	colour	colour	colour	colour	b&w	colour
Book/ ebook	book	ebook	book	book	ebook	book	book	book	ebook	book	ebook	book
Style	prose / poetry	rhyme	prose	prose	prose	prose	prose	prose	prose	prose	prose	prose
Age advertised	Not specified. Comments, but on Amazon.it refers to 9 years old	For children and adults	From 9 years old	From 3 years old	Specified: 'if you prefer a good fable before going to sleep, if you like to read one to your children in the evening' [author's translation]	'Small children and those already able to read' [author's translation]	From 3 years old	From 6 years old	From 3 years old	From 6 years old	'Dedicated to the readers of all ages, but mainly to children' ²	From 7 years old

Figure 2. Books in chronological order.

of some children while reading Aesop's fable, *The Wolf and the Lamb* (I, 1):

A five-year-old girl a little distressed by the story of The Wolf and the Lamb, commented at the end 'it's a sad and ugly story and it makes you cry!'

Making explicit the feelings of many of her peers [author's translation] (Bertolini and Del Carlo, 2008, 181).

Methodology

For this study, I chose to consider 12 books on Phaedrus. To make the choice clearer, a summary of the main characteristics of the texts taken into consideration is presented below (Figure 2). The books are non-school books, so these usually are commercial resources. The reason why I chose to study some commercial books is due to their specific orientation, that usually proposes some valuable resources for a wider public, while those books prepared especially to be used in schools have a specific aim. Secondly, books used in primary schools are usually resources-controlled and selected for their adaptability for the target and for the language, while commercial books can present a variety and a different resource not connected to the programme of the educational system.

The first element I will analyse here is whether, in these 12 books, the authors keep the element of death. To do this, I will present all the Phaedrus fables that contain a death and compare with the fables of the 12 books chosen. Secondly, I will analyse which verbs and expressions are used to describe the death, in the selected books, presenting some examples.

Phaedrus' fables for children in the Italian language

The first part will include the presentation of the books taken into consideration. In the second part, the analysis will focus on how many fables present a death and, in the third part, I will present the linguistic content of the verbs and expressions used to define the death.

Presentations of the books

After some research in the market, I decided to analyse these 12 books. From a thorough research, it is possible to see that there are fewer books for children on the fabulist Phaedrus than the Greek Aesop. The books are presented in order according to their date of publishing. Here, I highlight the format, the number of the fables present in the books, whether they have illustrations, if they contain any activities, if it is in colour or in black and white, the support (physical or digital), the style (prose or poetry) and the age advertised.

From Figure 2, we can see that the format³ is varied and only one volume is distinguished by a very large format (*Vestita, White Stars Kids*). Only two books include all the fables and most of them feature medium or large illustrations. There are two books that offer some activities inside. Most of the printed volumes are in colour and, in general, prose is the style most used; only two are written in a different style. As can be seen, the books exhibit several characteristics. In fact, initially one might think that all children's books are large and in colour, but it is observed that there are different products. If you take a closer look, you can also see that the age advertised is starting from three years old. So, in the majority of cases, the books are aimed at very small children.

The presence of death

Figure 2 presents some very interesting elements that show how some books look like with some information about the material itself. However, for this study, I am only going to focus on some linguistic elements related to the death and the cruelty present, especially at the end of the fables. For this purpose, I analysed all the contents and here below I include for each book all the fables that include a death. The books have different fables, but here only those related with a death have been included. It means, for example, that in Mastropaolo (2003) there are also other fables but these originally from Phaedrus do not have the presence of any deaths.

The scheme (Figure 3) shows Phaedrus's fables which include a death on the left part and above are each of all the books taken

		Mastropaeo (2003)	Casali, Maasi & Valmaggì (2013)	Montanari (2013)	Giunti (2015)	Marescotti (2015)	Vestita, White Star Kids (2015)	Riccardi (2017)	Cassinelli & Marconi (2020)	De Falco & Princivalle (2020)	Mazzocato (2020)	Zina (2020)	Siciliano (2021)
1	Lupus et agnus (I, I)	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	☒
2	Ranae regem petierun (I, II)	☒	☒	☒		☒	☒		☒		☒	☒	
3	Vacca et capella, ovis et leo (I, V)					☒	☒		☒		☒	☒	
4	Passer ad leporem conciliator (I, IX)			☒	☒	☒					☒	☒	
5	Asinus et leo venantes (I, XI)				☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	
6	Cervus ad fontem (I, XII)	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒	☒		☒		☒	☒	
7	Canes famulici (I, XX)			☒		☒					☒	☒	
8	Leo senex, aper, taurus et asinus (I, XXI)	☒		☒	☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	
9	Mustela et homo (I, XXII)					☒					☒	☒	
10	Rana rupta et bos (I, XXIV)		☒	☒	☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	
11	Canis et thesaurus et vulturius (I, XXVII)					☒					☒	☒	
12	Milvus et columbae (I, XXXI)			☒		☒		☒			☒	☒	
13	Aquila, feles et aper (II, IV)			☒	☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	☒
14	Aquila et cornex (II, VI)			☒	☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	
15	Cervus ad boves (II, VIII)					☒					☒	☒	
16	Panthera et pastores (III, II)			☒	☒	☒			☒		☒	☒	
17	Lanius et simius (III, IV)					☒					☒	☒	
18	Cicada et noctua (III, XVI)			☒	☒	☒				☒	☒	☒	☒
19	Asinus et Galli (IV, I)			☒		☒					☒		
20	Poeta (IV, II)					☒		☒			☒	☒	
21	Equus et aper (IV, IV)				☒	☒					☒	☒	
22	Pugna murium et mustelarum (IV, VI)					☒			☒		☒	☒	
23	Asinus et porcellus (V, IV)					☒					☒	☒	

Figure 3. Death in commercial books.

into consideration for this study. The symbol (☒) means that a death is present.

Observing the table, one can immediately notice that the element of death, whether implicit or explicit, has remained unchanged. No author has decided to modify the fable by changing the ending and making it less atrocious.

Death vs atrociously killing: elements to be highlighted

As we have seen, death remains present in the fables of the selected books. But what I want to emphasise is the difference between death (which can include a natural death, death by accident, disease, etc.) and killing. But not just killing, but precisely a particular type of killing, as we will see in the next table.

The question I would like to pose here is that, although the non-happy ending has not been changed, it is necessary to dwell on the verbs and structures used by the different authors in the description of death. This helps us to understand what is the level of atrocity – cruelty present in children’s literature. For this analysis (see appendix) the verbs – expressions used to define the final death of the animal are highlighted. And here, at least in Italian, it is surprising to see the diversity and richness of the vocabulary used, but, on the other hand, it is also surprising to see the sharp meaning of most of these lexical choices included in the fables. The elements found are presented here (Figure 4) divided into 12 categories as follows: to make a sacrifice; to take – to reach; to split – to divide; to fall; to dismember; to starve; to hit with violence; to eat; to die; to kill; to kill violently and to kill with something. In each category there are different verbs and it is also included how many times the verbs occur in the fables.

The total verbs taken into consideration here are 139. It is obvious from the presentation of the books that some of them, including more fables, have more structures and verbs included. However, it is still interesting and valuable to see the frequency of these verbs (Figure 5).

The graph (Figure 5) shows that the most used category is that of eating, killing, dismembering and dying. It is evident that the relation of the categories is closely connected to the fables told; however, it should be noted that the author can always choose a different verb. For example, instead of inserting in the text: *lo sbrana ferocemente e lo uccide senza poter aver tregua* [he eats him ferociously and kills him without being able to have a break] (invented example), one can choose a different verb, such as *papparsi* and, therefore, insert: *e se lo pappa riempiendosi la pancia* [and he gobbles up him filling his belly].

Following the graph below (Figure 6), the most commonly used verbs are presented.

From the graph (Figure 6) it is clear that the verbs *sbranare* (to tear apart) and *uccidere* (to kill) are more frequent, followed by *scoppiare* (to explode), *morire di fame* (die of starvation), *mangiare* (to eat) and *divorare* (to devour).

As we can see, the death of the animals in Phaedrus’ fables is also present in the commercial edition for young readers. It should be noted that the fables do not present a softening in terms of actions and cruelty. On the contrary, death and cruelty are very well spelt out and very direct. A variety of verbs and expressions are used but it is probably surprising to see some of them, such as ‘to slaughter’, ‘to massacre’, ‘to make a bloodbath’... and while some of these do have not a very high frequency, they are still used.

TO MAKE A SACRIFICE	4	TO TAKE – TO REACH	6	TO SPLIT / DIVIDE	4
Sacrificare [to sacrifice]	3	Afferrare [to grab]	3	Fare a parti [to do in parts]	3
Immolare [to sacrifice]	1	Raggiungere [to reach]	2	Dividere in parti [to divide into parts]	1
		Acchiappare [to nab]	1		
TO FALL	3	TO DISMEMBER	16	TO STARVE	8
Far cadere [to let fall]	1	Scoppiare [to explode]	11	Morire di fame / <u>patire</u> la fame [To die of hunger]	8
Cadere [to fall]	1	Fare a pezzi [to chop]	2		
Cadere nelle <u>grinfie</u> mortali [To fall into mortal clutches]	1	<u>Fracassare</u> [to smash]	1		
		<u>Squarciare</u> [to tear]	1		
		<u>Lacerare</u> [to lacerate]	1		
TO HIT WITH VIOLENCE	9	TO EAT	34	TO DIE	13
Attaccare [to attach]	3	<u>Sbranare</u> [to tear to pieces]	13	Morire [to die]	6
Assalire [to assail]	2	Mangiare [to eat]	8	<u>Spirare</u> [to breath your last]	2
<u>Piombare</u> addosso [to fall upon]	2	<u>Divorare</u> [to devour]	7	Appeso morto [to hung up dead]	2
Saltare addosso [to jump on]	1	Cibarsi [to nourish oneself]	1	<u>Crepare</u> [to kick the bucket]	1
<u>Azzannare</u> [to maul]	1	<u>Papparsi</u> [to gobble up]	1	Incontrare la morte [to meet the death]	1
		Portare in bocca [to bring in the mouth]	1	Fine ingiusta [unjust end]	1
		Ingoiare [to swallow]	1		
		Fare una <u>scorpacciata</u> [to do a feast]	1		
		<u>Inghiottire</u> [to swallow]	1		
TO KILL	20	TO KILL VIOLENTLY	12	TO KILL WITH SOMETHING	10
Uccidere [to kill]	13	Ammazzare [to murder]	4	Sfondare a calci [to kick]	2
Abbatere [to kill]	2	Fare una <u>carneficina</u> [to do a carnage]	2	<u>Trapassare</u> il corpo (corni) [To pierce the body with the horns]	1
Finire [to end]	1	Massacrare [to massacre]	1	Sfondare la fronte a calci [To kick in the forehead]	1
Dare la morte [to give death]	1	<u>Trucidare</u> [to slaughter]	1	Morire di botte / fatica [To die of exhaustion and of a beating]	1
Mandare all'altro mondo [send to tell]	1	Fare una strage [to massacre]	1	Dare calci [to kick]	1
Non lasciare <u>tregua</u> [to do not leave truce / peace]	1	<u>Trafiggere</u> [to pierce]	1	<u>Scaraventare</u> calci [to hurl]	1
Condannare [to condemn]	1	<u>Infliggere</u> piaghe [to inflict scourges]	1	Prendere a botte [to beat]	1
		Morire di morte terribile [to die of a terrible death]	1	Colpire con le corni [to hit with the horns]	1
				Prendere a morsi [to chomp down]	1

Figure 4. List of verbs/expressions.

Secondly, it should be noticed also the use of these elements. Some of these terms, in fact, are not included in *Il Nuovo vocabolario di base della lingua italiana*⁴ by De Mauro (2016), a vocabulary of the most 7,500 most-used Italian words. So, for example, the verbs *scaraventare*, *trafiggere*, *trapassare*, *squarciare*, *lacerare*, among others, will be difficult for a child to know, as they are less used. On the other side, proposing a rich vocabulary is also seen as a positive part of the learning, so that students and children will be stimulated. It is important, though, to take into account the percentage number of the

new words. In fact, new words should not be too many because it will be very difficult to understand the meaning (Cameron, 2005, 92).

Some reflections

Through the analysis it is clear that verbs and expressions used in the books vary and some of these are not very common for children. Here, it is interesting to see some examples extracted from the 12 books so as to have a closer look at the linguistic choices presented in the Italian literature.

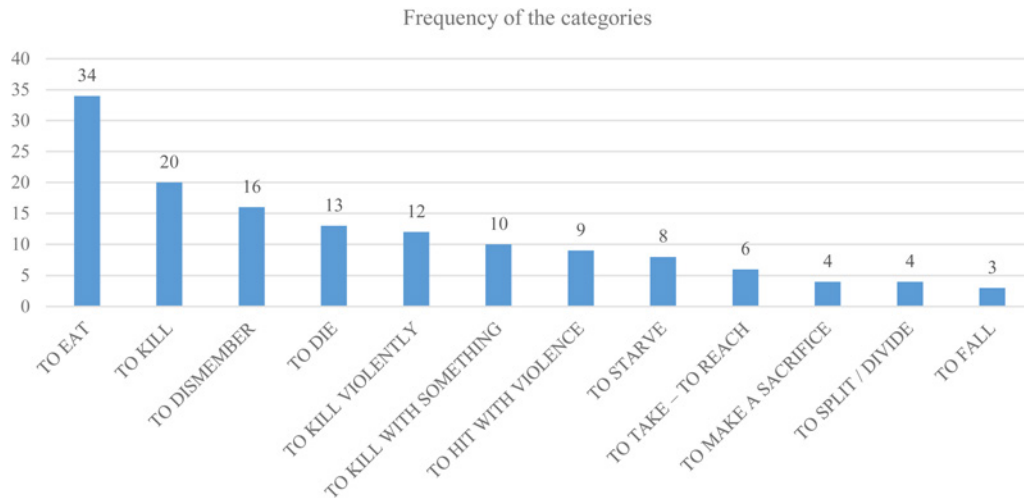


Figure 5. Frequency of the categories.

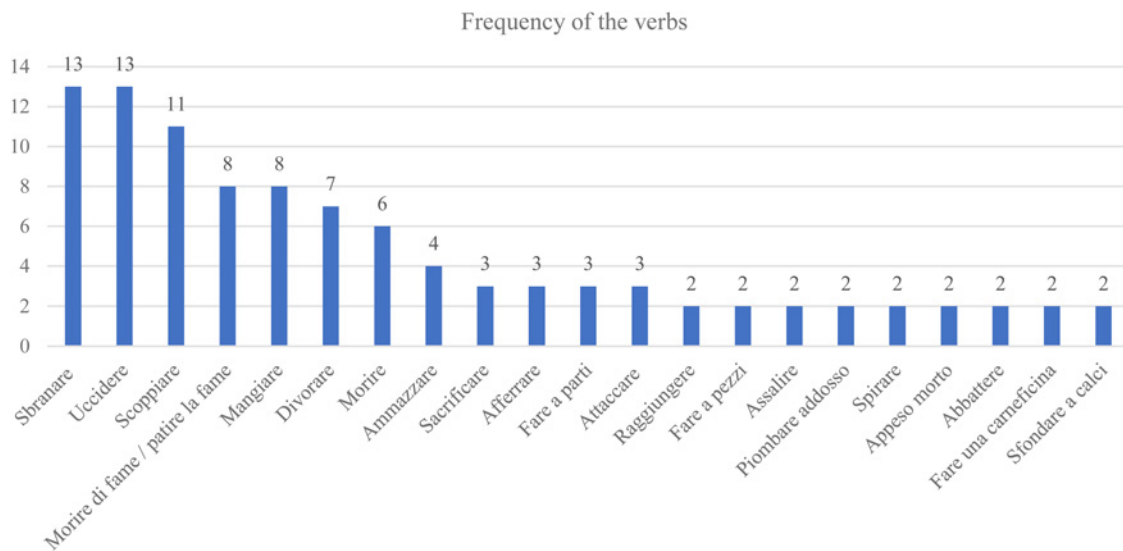


Figure 6. Frequency of the verbs.

Mastropaolo (2003) presents death in four fables. In *Il vecchio leone, il cinghiale, il toro e l'asino*, the lion dies from the strong blows from other animals. Mastropaolo uses the aulic word *spirare* [to breathe your last]. In *Il lupo e l'agnello* the lamb dies attacked by the wolf, 'e lo attaccò e lo finì in pochi istanti', using the verb *attaccare* [to attack] and *finire* [to finish]. Or in *Il cervo alla fonte*, the deer has been captured and killed by the dogs. In the fable, the death is implicit. In fact, the dogs 'lo raggiunsero' [they reached it], making the reader understand that the deer is going to die. A death is also present in *Le rane vogliono il re* where the frogs are eaten by the snake that 'fece una carneficina' [making a bloodbath].

In Casali et al. (2013) it is possible to find some deaths too. In *Il lupo e l'agnello*, the lamb dies, 'È caduta la pioggia sulla valle fiorita che morire l'agnello guardò inorridita'. Here the common verb *morire* [to die] is used and followed by the adjective *inorridita* [horrified]. The death is also included in *Il cervo alla fonte*, where the deer will be killed by dogs. Here the death is created by using the expression 'non le lasciarono tregua' [they did not leave any truce of it]. In *La rana e il bue*, the frog explodes, and the author uses the verb 'è scoppiata' [has exploded].

In Montanari (2013), deaths are present in many of the fables. In *Il lupo e l'agnello*, as usual, and as seen in the other versions,

the lamb dies eaten by the wolf. The wolf *fa a pezzi* [tears apart] the lamb. Or in *Le rane chiedono di essere governate da un re*, the frogs are killed always by the snake devouring them. The author, in fact, uses the verb *divorare* [devour]. In *Il passero che dà consigli alla lepre*, the sparrow is eaten by a sparrowhawk. Again, the verb used is *divorare*, but there also a climax as he includes 'tra urla di dolore e fiumi di lacrime' [between screams of pain and rivers of tears]. In *Il cervo alla fonte*, the deer pronounced some sad words as it is going to be killed by the dogs: 'Si racconta che, in punto di morte, il cervo abbia pronunciato queste parole...' [It is said that, on the verge of death, the deer uttered these words].

Giunti (2015) also proposes fables with some death elements. Starting from the *Il lupo e l'agnello*, the lamb, as previously seen, is killed by the wolf. The verb used is *uccidere* [to kill]: 'lo uccide ingiustamente' [unjustly]. In *Il passero consigliere e la lepre*, a sparrow is talking, and it is killed by a hawk. Here, the author decides to use the verb *lo sbranò* [chew up], 'mentre chiedeva inutilmente aiuto' [while it was asking for help in vain]. Another tragic ending, as in Phaedrus, is in the fable, *Laquila, la gatta e la cinghiale*, where the eagle and the boar starve to death 'morire di fame assieme ai loro figli' with their offspring.

In Marescotti (2015) it is possible to find some further examples of deaths. For example, in the fable *Il cervo alla fonte*, the deer is 'sul punto di morire' [about to die], also, in *Cani famelici* where the dogs die of drinking water, they die exploding [*morirono scoppiati*]. In *Il vecchio leone, il cinghiale, il toro e lasino* the lion dies. The author uses the verb *spirare*, as seen before, [breathe your last], or in *La donnola e l'uomo*, where the man killed the weasel: '*diede la morte a quella disonesta*' [he killed that dishonest creature]; as well as in *La rana scoppiata e il bue* where, as usual, the frog explodes [*scoppiò*].

In *Vestita, White Star Kids* (2015) even though the book is well-adapted for little children, it still contains elements of death. In *Il cervo alla fonte* and *La volpe e il caprone* the death is explicit. The same, and unchanged, is the death in *Le rane chiesero un re*, where the frogs are eaten by a snake. The author uses the verb *divorare* [devour]: '*divorò tutte le rane*' [devoured all the frogs].

In Ricciardi (2017), only two fables contain a death element, because the others do not originally include this. In *Il nibbio e le colombe* the kite eats the doves one by one. Again, the verb *divorare* is used [devour]: '*e se le divora una a una*' [and he devoured them one by one]. In *La faina*, the weasel that eats several mice, but not the last one.

In Cassinelli and Marconi (2020) it is not possible to separate Phaedrus' fables from those of Aesop (at least for most of them). And as we know some are very similar.

In *La rana e il bue*, as usual, the frog explodes (the verb used is *scoppiare*); in *Il lupo e l'agnello*, the lamb is going to be eaten [being hit] by the other animals. Its death is implicit, using '*mi fa male*' [it hurts]. In *Laquila e la cornacchia*, the turtle is eaten by the two birds. Here, the verb used is *mangiare*: '*poterono mangiare tutte e due*' [they both could eat...].

Again, in *Le rane chiedono un re*, the frogs are not explicitly going to die. In fact, it uses the verb *sopportare* [to bear] *il vostro male* [your damage/harm]. The same happens in *Il cervo alla fonte*, where it is implicit that the deer is going to die, killed by the dogs '*le corna che mi hanno condannato*' [the horns that condemned me]. The author uses the verb *condannare* [condemn] to make explicit a final sentence.

With De Falco and Princivalle (2020) there is the fable *La civetta e la cicala* in which the owl eats the cicada (using the verb *mangiare*): '*lo mangiò in un boccone*' [it ate it in a bite].

Mazzocato (2020) presents death in several fables, like Phaedrus. As usual, the lamb in the *Il lupo e l'agnello* is eaten by the wolf, but the verb is *sbranare* [chew up]. In *Il cervo alla sorgente* the deer dies and includes the verb *morire*: '*E le corna tanto belle mi hanno portato a morire*' [And my very beautiful horns led me to die]. In *La pecora, il cane e il lupo*, the wolf is found dead in a moat, but we do not have any more information about it. In *Il vecchio leone, il cinghiale il toro e lasino*, here the lion explicitly is going to die. The author uses the present participle *morente*, from *morire* [to die]: '*e il leone, ormai morente*' [and the lion, now dying]. Or the frog explodes in *La rana che voleva diventare bue* in which, as usual, the verb is *scoppiare* [to explode]. In *La gatta, laquila e la scrofa*, the eagle and the sow die of starvation [*morire di fame*].

In Zirna (2020), it is possible to find some deaths and cruelty. In the fable of *Il lupo e l'agnello* the lamb dies. Again, the verb used is *sbranare* [chew up]. In *Le rane vogliono un re* the frogs will be eaten [*divorare* – devour] by the snake: *La biscia le mise a divorare*. Again, in *Il cervo assetato*, the deer will be killed. The verb used here is *spirare*. In *La pecora, il cane e il lupo*, again the wolf is found dead. Again, there is no information about the death. The dogs in *I cani affamati*, die exploding [*scoppiare*] drinking the water.

In Siciliano (2021), it is possible to find three deaths. As common with the other fables, in *Il lupo e l'agnello*, the lamb is eaten by the

wolf with the verb *mangiare* [to eat]. But also, in *Laquila, la gatta e la cinghiale*, where the two animals die of starvation [*morire di fame*]; and in *La cicala e la civetta*, where the cicada is killed [*uccidere*] by the owl: '*atterrita e tremante; fu uccisa*' [terrified and trembling was killed].

From a detailed analysis of Phaedrus' fables in the 12 books analysed, death, and, therefore, cruelty, almost never turn into something else. In fact, it remains unchanged in the books analysed. Consequently, it is clear that the authors did not consider a specific adaptation of the plot and of the presentation modalities of the actions necessary. In part it is evident that they prefer not to modify the fables as they consider the death an important part not to be eliminated. In fact, death plays a relevant part in the narrative, being indispensable for understanding the life of a human being, for dealing with emotions and for the elaboration of mourning (Regagliolo, 2020, 348). Still, though, here it is not only about death, which is a fact, but these deaths are not by natural causes but through the cruelty of others. For this reason, some questions arise regarding the language used and its appropriateness for the age and, therefore, children's literature as some verbs and expressions are, in fact, very direct and strong for very small children (as well as very difficult to understand, at least some of them).

Final remarks

Phaedrus' fables have become part of children's literature in Italian literature and in other languages. Phaedrus was already studied and read in ancient Rome and was used above all to practise compositions in the Latin language as well. Today, however, the reception of Phaedrus' fables can be divided into two large groups: the one dedicated to classical philologists who, therefore, deal with the texts, transmission, translations, codices, and secondly the part relating to the reception of Phaedrus in children's literature. Here the objectives for approaching the Latin fabulist are different, for obvious reasons, but the fact remains that there should be some precautions in presenting a fable to a child.

In recent decades, children's literature has also embraced the fable but in a less pedagogical light than it was in the past, although, as we know, the fable includes a moral – a teaching that could be implicit or explicit.

Phaedrus in Italy is also included in school programmes. In fact, in elementary school one can find various didactic manuals in which the differences between the various types of text are explained: it can be informative, descriptive, fairy tale, fable, or poetry, just to name a few. Through these manuals, guided by teachers, children understand the characteristics of the different texts, thanks also to the in-depth study of the various readings present in each book.

Phaedrus, however, is also present outside the formal education. In fact, it is possible to find some books published by various publishing houses that reproduce the fables with some adaptations and changes.

In this study, I have tried to analyse precisely those commercial materials to understand how they present the death and the cruelty; in fact, in Phaedrus, the presence of death and cruelty is very clear to the reader and the killing of an animal is not sweetened or decorated. From the analysis of the fables written in Italian, it is clear that the authors and the different editions for the most part do not change the actions and they keep the death without including a happy ending. The death, on the contrary, is represented and never modified. If the lamb in Phaedrus dies, it also dies in the adapted Italian translations. On the other side, though, in general, we can

say that there is no research of a softening ending, and terms and expressions which lead to understand a certain vocabulary and expressions might be used without problem.

After this research, I believe that it is important to raise some reflections on Phaedrus' fables which can be valid tools and referents for children's literature. Bringing children closer to the classical culture through literature can be an enriching experience that helps the child to be open interculturally and to understand differences and more about our past and who we are now. The text, consequently, is crucial to deliver the message, the idea, the values, and the morals of the author.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631024000291>.

Notes

1 Casali, Masi e Valmaggì (2013) are the authors of three volumes: the first one is Valmaggì M., Casali A., and Vignazia F. (Illustrator) (2013). *Le favole di Esopo e Fedro in versi - Volume 1*, Rodaviva Edizioni. The second one is: Casali A., Valmaggì M., and Martellini M. (Illustrator) (2013): *Le favole di Esopo e Fedro in versi - Vol. 2*, Rodaviva Edizioni; the third one is: Masi A., Martellini M and Vignazia F (illustrators). *Le favole di Esopo e Fedro in versi - Volume 3*, Rodaviva Edizioni.

2 Translated by the author, as cited in Zirna, M. (2020). *Tutte le favole di Fedro*. Armenio & Partners. <https://www.armenio.it/editoria/prodotto/tutte-le-favole-di-fedro/>. Retrieved 26 March 2023.

3 With the e-book is not possible to define the format.

4 It 'brings together two categories of words in a unitary whole: (1) the most used words in the texts of a language at a given historical moment and (2) words which, even if in reality little used when speaking or writing, are perceived and felt by those who use a language as having an availability equal to or even superior to the most commonly used words' (De Mauro, 2016) [Translated by the author].

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