RECREATIONAL LINGUISTICS: A PEDAGOGICAL METHOD CREATED BY ANTHONY MOLLICA TO MOTIVATE STUDENTS TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

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Language acquisition for Anthony Mollica, professor emeritus, Faculty of Education at Brock University, in Canada, is a "gioco-serio": a linguistic approach he applies to language teaching. Creator of *ludolinguistica* (Recreational Linguistics) – as a stimulus for motivational activities in language teaching/learning – Mollica proposes a different and an additional pedagogical approach, with teaching methodologies that complement the traditional foreign language teaching: linguistic education via language games and word play serve to motivate language acquisition. As Tullio De Mauro writes in the Preface of *Ludolinguistica e Glottodidattica* (Mollica, 2010: viii), our ability to express ourselves is «un gioco che facciamo attingendo alle risorse della nostra memoria a lungo termine per prelevarne le parole, per incastrarle [...] avvolgerle in altre».

Ludolinguistica – a neologism coined by Giuseppe Aldo Rossi² – explores this concept and fosters the study of language through lexical combinations of puzzles, word searches, and riddles. Mollica devised this methodology following many years of experience in secondary schools and in Canadian universities, an experience which today he shares with the world participating in conferences and workshops: acrostics, anagrams, acronyms, idioms and idiomatic expressions and tongue twisters, all useful stimuli for language acquisition. In the Vocabolario della lingua italiana by Nicola Zingarelli (1998) the term ludolinguistica – registered twenty years ago (1998) for the first time - is defined as a «branca della linguistica che si occupa di giochi di parole e combinazioni lessicali». These "giochi di lingua" were passed down by writers and scholars such as Lewis Carroll, David Crystal, Peter Farb, Alfred Knopf, Ferdinad de Saussurre and Ludwig Wittgenstein, and today have attracted the attention and efforts of Giampaolo Dossena, Giuseppe Aldo Rossi, Ennio Peres, Stefano Bartezzaghi, to mention only a few. Anthony Mollica transformed these linguistic games with a method all his own - to motivate students in Italian language acquisition but his ludolinguistica can also be applied to other foreign languages. On this topic, Mollica published numerous articles and books, including Teaching and Learning Languages (2010). A former Program Consultant for Italian, French and Spanish for the Ontario Ministry of Education, a Coordinator of Languages for the Wentworth County Board of Education, he has taught methodology courses in French, Italian, Spanish, and ESL for 20 years at the Faculty of

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² During a memorable meeting with Giuseppe Aldo Rossi, on January 23, 2013, Rossi stated to Mollica that he coined the term *ludolinguistica* but he doesn't recall the date nor remember where he wrote it for the first time.

Education, Brock University. For two terms he took on the Presidential role in the American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI) and sat on its Executive committee for 19 years as the Canadian Representative, Secretary-Treasurer and Vice-President. His dedication to the teaching of languages has earned him several awards, including the "Florence Steiner Award for Leadership in Foreign Language Education" (1980): he was the first Canadian to be recognized by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). In 1985 the Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT) awarded him the prestigious "Robert Roy Award," followed by numerous other acknowledgements from Brock University ("Excellence in Teaching", 2003) and the University of Venice "Ca' Foscari" (the first recipient of "Una vita per l'italiano", 2003.) In 2006 he was appointed "Commendatore della Stella della Solidarietà" by the Consul General of Italy in Toronto on behalf of the President of Italy, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, in recognition for "his indefatigable promotion for the teaching of Italian"; and in 2011, he was named Honorary member of the "Associazione per la Storia della Lingua Italiana" (ASLI, established in 1992 in Florence with a branch at the Accademia della Crusca) on a motion by Italianists Francesco Sabatini, Vittorio Coletti, Luca Serianni and Francesco Bruni. Since 2008, he has been teaching a summer course on *ludolinguistica* at the Università per Stranieri in Siena and has given lectures in Europe, North America and Australia.

BERNARDINI: When did your interest in *ludolinguistica*, o rather, Recreational Linguistics – as you generally prefer to refer to – in English, – begin?

MOLLICA: My interest in word games began in the early years of my teaching career as a high school teacher. Students would come to class and some of them did not want to do much work. I soon discovered that if I presented some of the learning activities as a "game" they suddenly became motivated. Several years later, in 1979, I published "Games and Language Activities in the Italian High School Classroom" in Foreign Language Annals³ suggesting crossword puzzles, crucipuzzles, idioms, matching questions, logic problems, dialogues and fun activities to teach Italian geography in the Italian high school curriculum but I must admit that the message fell on deaf ears. Today it is being considered a pioneer article on the topic. I expressed a greater deal of interest in a subsequent article on Visual Puzzles in the Language Classroom (1981)⁴. Neither had much impact on the teaching profession until the publication of Ludolinguistica e Glottodidattica in 2010 with a Preface by Tullio De Mauro and Postface by Stefano Bartezzaghi, published simultaneously in Italy by Guerra Edizioni and in Canada by Soleil publishing, at the strong suggestion by Angelo Chiuchiù who, in his travels, had discovered that I was being imitated – without any reference to my publications – by some colleagues. In 1986, an elementary school teacher, Ersilia Zamponi published with Einaudi, I draghi locopei (an anagram for Giochi di parole) which become a best seller thanks also to Umberto Eco whose review in L'Espresso, June 23, 1985, became the Preface in a subsequent edition of the book. The most recent edition (2017) now includes the Eco Preface and a Postface by Stefano Bartezzaghi. I should

³ http://www.ludolinguistica.com/Books/Mollica%20-%20Games%20and%20Language%20Activities.pdf.

⁴ http://www.ludolinguistica.com/Images/007%20%20Visual%20Puzzles.pdf.

mention that, as a child growing up in Italy, and even while living in Canada, I had easy access to the various publications of Corrado Tedeschi and of *La Settimana Enigmistica* which my oldest brother regularly made available to me. I particularly enjoyed the publications by Corrado Tedeschi since many of the magazines were of various language difficulty. I was especially interested in the *vignette* and the verbal humour which each issue had. It's no secret that I often ask the publisher for permission to use some of the *vignette* by the imaginative cartoonist G. Pellegrini which I use as examples in some of my writings (Mollica, 1976: 424-444).

BERNARDINI: In the 18th century Lewis Carroll became interested in language games – and transfer his concepts of logic in *The Game of Logic* (1886) – and, subsequently, so did David Crystal, Peter Farb, Alfred Knopf, Don e Aleen Nilsen – to name some others. In what way do their language games differ from Recreational Linguistics?

MOLLICA: I think we should distinguish word play or word games just as Italian distinguishes between enigmistica and ludolinguistica. The use of word play or word games by the authors you mention tend to be linguistic play, play on words for the sake of language fun (ludus gratia ludi) the same, obviously, applies to both enigmistica and ludolinguistica: enigmistica includes crossword puzzles, rebus, riddles, etc; ludolinguistica includes word games such as acrostics, mesostics, crucipuzzle, etc. There is, therefore, a basic difference. Their puns, their play on words are to elicit humour; I use Recreational Linguistics to teach vocabulary, grammar and culture. In other words, I focus my suggested activities to emphasize a topic which teachers are teaching and try to make that topic more "palatable". To give you an equivalent Latin expression as I did for the play on words of Caroll and others, my purpose is ludus gratia docendi/discendi (playing for the sake of teaching/learning); those are the basic aims and the novelty of my activities.

BERNARDINI: Wittgenstein defined Recreational Linguistics as a simple form of language that does not follow strict rules, and for recreational he intended not only to solve arithmetic problems of language but also to do it through singing, acting, and solving riddles. In his research, Wittgenstein would use games to communicate/examine various uses and functions of language, while refusing to accept its recreational experience/ludic sense. Do you somewhat agree with the Viennese philosopher?

MOLLICA: Wittgenstein and others use puns and riddles to create humour, an inherent element and a characteristic attribute in their words. I use activities from Recreational Linguistics to teach specific points of grammar, vocabulary and cultural aspects for the language being learned. These activities are meant to make the learning of the mother tongue or foreign/second languages more interesting and more motivating and can be used successfully to complement and supplement exercises contained in the manuals which teachers adopt.

BERNARDINI: What definition do you offer for *ludolinguistica*?

MOLLICA: Let me begin with the definition offered by Giuseppe Aldo Rossi. Ludolinguistica defined by Rossi in his publication (2002: 247), «la ludolinguistica abbraccia tutti i giochi di parole in chiaro, contrapponendosi all'enigmistica classica, in cui entrano quei componimenti che propongono ai solutori uno o più soggetti sotto il velame delli versi strani (Dante)». Zingarelli (1988), Devoto - Oli (2017 and previous editions) and other Italian dictionaries define the word as: «branca della linguistica che si occupa di giochi di parole e combinazioni lessicali». The Vocabolario Treccani online goes even further in its definition⁵: «Parte della linguistica che si occupa dei giochi con le parole in chiaro, intesi in particolare come stumento di apprendimento o studio della lingua madre o di una lingua seconda; in senso concreto l'attività consistente nell'inventare o risolvere giochi con le parole».

To my knowledge, the Treccani is the only Italian dictionary that refers to the fact that the *ludolinguistica* can be applied to the process of learning a language – whether that language is a mother tongue or foreign/second language. The definition appeared in the Treccani after an interview I gave to Tamara Baris⁶.

BERNARDINI: Have you, yourself, coined a definition for Recreational Linguistics?

MOLLICA: My definition? I combine both terms *enigmistica* and *ludolinguistica* and suggest: «Any word game which is able to motivate students to learn basic vocabulary, grammar, encourage them to write or acquire knowledge and appreciate the culture of the target language is fair game» (Mollica, 2017). To that purpose, I include: idiomatic expressions, proverbs, tongue twisters, humour, etc. To encourage speaking I also include: impossible interviews, a calendar of historical events as well as using illustrations as stimuli for conversation and discussion.

BERNARDINI: Italy can be justifiably proud of several contributors to Recreational Linguistics: Giampaolo Dossena, Stefano Bartezzaghi, Giuseppe Aldo Rossi, Ennio Peres. Are there common grounds with *ludolinguistica*?

MOLLICA: I admit that these names have had an influence on me as I was writing Ludolinguistica e Glottodidattica and I cited their indelible contribution to the field in my publications. Giampaolo Dossena (1999, 2004a, 2004b) was the first journalist to introduce word games in magazines and Italian dailies. Stefano Bartezzaghi is a prolific (2012, 2016, 2017) and well-known semiotician and enigmista who regularly contributes to la Repubblica. Stefano's brother, Alessandro, is the co-editor of La Settimana Enigmistica. Both come from a family of enigmistic. Their father, Piero, created a crossword puzzle, starting in the Fifties, for La Settimana Enigmistica — published since 1932 — which was so difficult that it became known as "il Bartezzaghi". Today the task is undertaken by Ennio Peres, a former mathematics teachers who annually contributes with his «Most difficult crossword puzzle in the world» (2018) and is an accomplished author of anagrams (2005). Giuseppe Aldo Rossi, also known as "Zoroastro" has contributed significantly to the field with several publications (2001, 2002, 2011). At 105 years "young," Rossi is unstoppable in his writings.

⁵ http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ludolinguistica_%28Neologismi%29/.

⁶ www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/ludolinguistica/Baris.html.

He even "translated" Horace in Roman dialect! I am familiar with their publications and applied some of their ideas to language teaching/learning. There is also Michele Francipane whose contributions should not go unnoticed (1992, 1999). In Italy, some word games became popular in the classroom thanks to the publication of Ersilia Zamponi (1986, 2017). I would be remiss if I did not mention the excellent, practical recent publication by Simone Fornara and Francesco Giudici, *Giocare con le parole* (2015). Fornara and Giudici suggest a series of word games which are bound to motivate students. A great promoter of games in the language classroom was also Giovanni Freddi (1990), but Freddi's suggestion of *didattica ludica* (an impossible term to translate literally into English and hence I suggest "the fun element/activities in language teaching") stresses "physical games" or "games in general," whereas Recreational Linguistics emphasizes pencil and paper activities.

BERNARDINI: Bartezzaghi who wrote the Postface for your book, *Ludolinguistica e Glottodidattica* speaks of "scrittura rebus" from the era of Plato and even quotes Dante to define his activity and offers the anagram "giocattol da dotti" (a toy for erudite people).

MOLLICA: It's an excellent anagram. I suggest that Recreational Linguistics activities are useful for all ages and not simply for erudite people as the anagram implies. Teachers can adopt and/or adapt those activities which they find linguistic appropriate for the language level they are teaching. And let us not forget that Umberto Eco, places *play* after food, sleep, love, and even before asking the question "why?".

BERNARDINI: In your *Ludolinguistica e Glottodidattica*, Tullio De Mauro (Mollica, 2010: viii) wrote: «l'uso ludico e giocoso delle espressioni di una lingua, è il prodotto estremo di alcunché di più profondo e obbligante». Can we say that the famous linguist had anticipated the innovative spark of Recreational Linguistics?

MOLLICA: I wholeheartedly agree with you. When it comes to language, De Mauro was a visionary. I first I met Tullio De Mauro at his home and subsequently during an American Association of Teachers of Italian (AATI) in Erice, Sicily, conference and I expressed my surprise at the fact that Recreational Linguistics was enjoying such a great success, particularly among young teachers. De Mauro pointed out that I shouldn't be surprised and acknowledged that there was a gold mine waiting to be discovered and «it was you who discovered it».

BERNARDINI: Your fun activities are reaching all over the world with your website www.ludolinguistica.com in which you share both activities and articles on the topic. What do you think could be done to increase language interest and acquisition around the world outside of Italy?

MOLLICA: Instil and develop in learners a love for words. For the dissemination of the activities, I owe much of the credit to you who, while you were Editor-in-Chief of the daily *Corriere Canadese*, and the weekly magazine *Tandem*, generously accepted to publish "Giochiamo con le parole" as a weekly column. It is that column that came to the attention

of teachers⁷. I understand that it brought pleasure also to some non-teaching personnel. I am told that at a retirement home, a group of seniors would meet, on the day of the publication, to jointly solve the activity. I was delighted to hear that.

BERNARDINI: You have held many conferences in most major Italian universities: La Sapienza, Roma Tre, Turin, Milan, Bari, Campobasso, Pescara, Siena, Lecce, Verona, Venice, Perugia, Reggio Calabria, Arcavacata, Macerata as well as at the Accademia della Crusca and the Accademia dei Lincei. You also presented seminars and workshops in Greece, Croatia, France, Serbia, Holland, Malta, and were also invited in Australia by Alessandra Bertini, director of the Italian Cultural Institute, to share these ideas with universities and *enti gestori* at Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. What effect did these presentations have on the training of future teachers?

MOLLICA: There are a number of students who decided to write their dissertations and/or graduating theses on some aspects of *ludolinguistica*: Daniela Meringolo⁸, wrote her graduating thesis with Albanian examples, another from Riga, Latvia, in German; and more recently one from a student from Malta and Algeri. All these and others in addition to several Italian graduating students who acknowledge my contribution to the field. There are others who, unfortunately, take suggestions and/or paraphrase them from the book (Mollica, 2010) by just giving passing reference to the publication or modifying the original source giving the impression that it is their own as is the case on article which appeared in the prestigiously well-known journal *Scuola e Didattica*⁹.

BERNARDINI: One of your slogans is "Monolingualism can be cured!" (Mollica, 2009: 11) and students seem to agree with this. How do language teachers, instead, respond to this new discipline, which requires different pedagogical approaches from those used in foreign language teaching (glottodidattica)?

MOLLICA: I am encouraged by the capacity crowds which attend the workshops/seminars, a proof that teachers are always looking for "new" ways of motivating their students. I am equally delighted to receive, after each conference, e-mails from teachers who thank me for the presentation stating that they will introduce these activities in their daily teaching.

BERNARDINI: However, since it is not a systematic branch of linguistics in spite of all the successes you mention, is Recreational Linguistics considered a "second class citizen" when it comes to the field of linguistics?

⁷ The column "Giochiamo con le parole" ran from January 17, 2012 to May 18, 2013.

⁸ Daniela Meringolo, 2010-2011. La ludolinguistica in glottodidattica: una possibile applicazione nella didattica dell'arbërishtja delle comunità della Sila greca, Università degli Studi della Calabria, written under the supervision of Prof. Anna De Marco. Unpublished thesis. See also, her chapter, "La ludolinguistica in glottodidattica nella didattica dell'arbërishtja", in Francesco Altimari, Flora Koleci, Juliana Kume, Maria Caria, Eugenia Mascherpa, Mariagrazia Palumbo, Daniela Meringolo and Luisa Ognoli (eds.), Per una nuova didattica dell'albanese: prove di elearning e di ludolinguistica. Presentazione di Anthony Mollica. Marzi, CS: Comet Editor Press, 2016, pp. 141-249.

⁹ See "Ludolinguistica e l'insegnamento della grammatica", in Scuola e Didattica, 6 febbraio 2017, pp. 41-45.

MOLLICA: It shouldn't be considered as such. Both the Zingarelli and the Devoto - Oli identify the term as being «branca della linguistica». And yet, in spite of this recognition, there are several colleagues who avoid mentioning it in their manuals designed for teacher training or teacher education, as I prefer to say. These same colleagues are well aware that these are the activities that motivate students to learn and appreciate the study of languages. I hasten to say that Italian colleagues are well-known for creating and writing theories but when it comes to classroom teaching, there seems to be quite a gap. Fortunately, this is changing. The activities suggested by Recreational Linguistics are also welcomed in adult classes as Begotti (2008) points out in her book.

BERNARDINI: You are among the first to suggest humour in the classroom. Why do you consider humour important?

MOLLICA: I recently gave a *lectio magistralis* on that topic at the University of Venice. Humour relaxes and therefore the message penetrates more easily. Most North American speakers almost always begin their speeches with an anecdote or some type of humorous story to get the audience to laugh and therefore relax. This not usually acceptable in some cultures, particularly in Italian.

BERNARDINI: Pico della Mirandola could recite Dante's *Divine Comedy* backward. What is your favourite word game?

MOLLICA: I like them all. But one particularly stands out, the "titolo camuffato" (disguised title) where the author could have given another title for his work whether it be a play (Mezza dozzina di interpreti in cerca di uno scrittore = Sei personaggi in cerca di un autore); a movie (Il portalettere = Il postino); an opera (Il parrucchiere di una città meridionale spagnola = Il barbiere di Siviglia) or even Biblical references (La top ten dei sì e dei no = I dieci comandamenti)! The activity allows the student to "create", "to play with the language" using synonyms and definitions.

BERNARDINI: Simone Fornara who with Francesco Giudici is the co-author of *Giocare con le parole* (2015), identifies you as the «massimo esperto internazionale di questa branca della linguistica¹⁰» and in his blog¹¹ refers to you as «il padre della ludolinguistica accademica» as does Margherita Sermonti¹². How do you react?

MOLLICA: I met Fornara and I admire the work he has done in collaboration with Giudici. I must admit that I was amused but delighted with the recognition given to me by Fornara and Sermonti...

BERNARDINI: What are your publication plans for the future?

¹⁰ http://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/speciali/ludolinguistica/Fornara.html.

¹¹ http://www.simonefornara.com/?p=488.

¹² http://www.treccani.it/magazine/lingua_italiana/recensioni/recensione_45.html.

MOLLICA: Ludolinguistica e Glottodidattica was published almost ten years ago. It is obvious that my ideas on the topic have evolved. The original volume is now being published in three separate books with illustrations in full colour by the publishing house ELI (Europan Language Institute) of Recanati. The "new" edition will have a complete revision of the written text, additional new activities and an updated bibliography. The Preface and the Postface, respectively written by Tullio De Mauro and Stefano Bartezzaghi, will remain in each volume. While I will write the Presentation for the first volume, Ludolinguistica. I giochi linguistici e la didattica dell'italiano; the second volume will be presented by Massimo Vedovelli, Ludolinguistica. Imparare una lingua con giochi di parole and the third, Ludolinguistica. Parlare e scrivere con creatività by Luca Serianni. The publisher is also planning a series of Quaderni di ludolinguistica which provide further activities. We also plan to make available a series of ready-made activities in PDF on the internet to which teachers can have access for photocopying.

BERNARDINI: What three words best summarize Recreational Linguistics?

MOLLICA: Motivate, amuse, teach.

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