

Rumpelstiltskin: the magic of the right word

Sjaak van der Geest

The fairy tale Rumpelstiltskin has many variations. The earliest written version can be found in a French collection from 1705 by Mademoiselle L'Héritier. The most famous is the one by the Brothers Grimm, but even in their collection the text changes several times during 'compilation'. I obtained the abridged version below from the internet.

Once upon a time there was a miller, who had a beautiful daughter. One day the king passed and the miller said to the king: "I have a daughter who can spin straw into gold." How interesting, miller", said the king. "Have your daughter come to the castle tomorrow." The next day the daughter went to the castle and the king took her to a room with a spinning wheel and lots of straw. The beautiful miller's daughter had to spin all the straw into gold "before it is morning and if you do not or cannot do it, then your father has lied and you will both die."

When the door closed, she began to cry, because she could not spin straw into gold at all. Suddenly a little man entered and he asked: "Why are you crying?" The miller's daughter told the story. The little man said: "What will you give me if I spin this straw into gold for you?" "I will give you my necklace, which I was given by my grandfather", said the miller's daughter. The little man got to work and all the straw was spun into gold by the next day. The king came and saw the whole room filled with gold thread. He wanted more and took her into a larger room. Again she started to weep and the little man appeared again. "What will you give me this time if I spin this straw into gold as well?" the little man asked. "I will give you my ring which I was given by my grandmother", the girl said. The little man agreed and began spinning again.

When the king came the next day, he took her to an even bigger room. As soon as the king had left, the little man appeared. "What will you give me this time?", he asked. "I have nothing left to give", she said. The little man said: "The king will marry you and you will become queen. Promise me that when you are queen, you will give me your firstborn child." The little girl promised, because she had no other choice: the king would have her killed if the straw had not been spun into gold by the next day.

The next day, the king came and he was delighted. He asked her to marry him and they had a big wedding. A year later, the queen had a child. Suddenly the little man appeared again and said: "Give me what you promised." The queen,

who loved her child dearly, said: "No please, let me keep my baby and I will give you all the treasures of the world but not my baby." The little man took pity on her and said: "I will give you three days to guess my name. If you can guess my name in that time, you can keep your child."

The queen made a list of names and sent a messenger into the land to make another list. When the little man arrived on the first night, the queen said: "Casper, Melchior, Jerome, Mark, David, Jake, Frank, Dennis..." "No, that is not my name", the little man said again and again. The second night she began to reel off unusual names: "Gunpowder, Woolly-head, Pointy-beard, Bandy-legs, Plop, Pointy-feet..." "No, that is not my name", he kept repeating. On the last day, the messenger returned and said: "I have not found any other new names, but on a mountain I saw a little man dancing and singing: "The queen will never win this game, for Rumpelstiltskin is my name!"

That last night the little man appeared again. And the queen asked: "Are you called Rumpelstiltskin perhaps?" The little man got so angry then, that he started to stamp his feet so hard that he disappeared so deep into the ground that he never came back. The queen was so happy that she could keep the child, that she organised a big celebration and she lived long and happily ever after.

Rumpelstiltskin is a well-known fairy tale, judging by the name. Almost everyone knows that there is a fairy tale by that name and many can even remember the famous lines: "The queen will never win this game, for Rumpelstiltskin is my name!" However, only a few know what the fairy tale is all about and who Rumpelstiltskin is. I have conducted some trials in my neighbourhood amongst those who only knew the fairy tale by name. The charming sound of the name misled everyone. They associated it with a fairy, a sweet girl or a princess. Nobody thought that this beautiful name belonged to a nasty little man. Ironic indeed: the 'wrong' name in a fairy tale about the *right* name.

The Rumpelstiltskin principle

In 1972, the American psychiatrist E. Fuller Torrey published *The Mind Game*. The subtitle, 'Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists', not only indicated the essence of his book but also explained why it created enthusiasm as well as irritation. Torrey tried to convince the reader that modern, western psychiatrists do not differ greatly from shamans in all sorts of non-western (but also western) cultures, healers who employed ritual exorcisms and other magical practices. To some, the 'witchdoctor' seemed to be rehabilitated, to others the psychiatrist was being humiliated and ridiculed. Arthur Kleinman, at the time a rising and now an established

authority in medical anthropology and transcultural psychiatry, spoke of 'misuses of cross-cultural comparisons, such as purposely naive raids into ethnography to debunk psychiatrists by equating them with a vulgar, tendentious view of priests, shamans and witch-doctors.'

Personally, I was particularly fascinated by the first part of the book, in which Torrey discusses four elements of psychotherapy which appear in psychiatry as well as in the treatment methods of magical healers. He calls one of those elements 'the principle of Rumpelstiltskin'.

Torrey states that doctors in conventional somatic medicine do not really need to communicate with their patients. The important thing is that the physician prescribes the correct medicine. The effects of the administered penicillin do not depend on a good dialogue between the doctor and the patient. That dialogue might not even be necessary. In many cases (I add), the medicine can replace the dialogue. Some years ago, the Swedish anthropologist, Lisbeth Sachs, suggested that in Sri Lanka the lack of communication between doctor and patient was the source of healing: a medicine is prescribed based on a misunderstanding (the doctor does not understand the patient and makes a wrong diagnosis). The medicine conceals the misunderstanding and both the doctor and the patient are satisfied with the consultation. Generally speaking, it is a crude exaggeration that communication is not really important in the encounter between a doctor and his patient, but it acts as a stepping stone for Torrey's real plea: psychotherapy without communication is unthinkable. The essence of every psychotherapy is words.

The psychiatrist listens to the words of his patient, asks questions and ultimately defines the experiences of the other. According to Torrey, the naming in itself is already a therapeutic act. The patient's anxiety decreases thanks to the fact that a respected and trusted specialist has shown that he understands what is the matter. Torrey calls the effect of this linguistic deed 'the principle of Rumpelstiltskin' and 'the magic of the right word'.

Naming problems is one of the most important principles in all forms of psychotherapy. The identification of the problem is a signal to the patient that he is not alone with his illness, but that there is someone who understands him. Moreover, the name of the psychological problem promises an opportunity of finding a cure because if it has been named, it has usually been brought under control. The complaint is mentioned by its full name and with therapeutic directives in the *DSM*, the reference book of psychiatrists.

The power of the word

In anthropology, there has always been a great interest in language. Language is indeed one of the most important achievements in the development of human culture, but what anthropologists find particularly fascinating is that language is not only a product of culture, but also produces culture. The title of a book by philosopher J.L. Austin expresses concisely what they see in language: *How to Do Things with Words*. It becomes clear with some examples that words not only express or refer to things, but that they also produce things. Declaring two people to be husband and wife in fact makes them partners. Making a promise to someone creates a special bond between two people and guarantees a certain occurrence in the future. Appointing someone gives that person a position with all the associated political, social and financial consequences.

The Dutch philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven, describes the discovery of language by his young daughter Nena and how at the same time this discovery is her attempt to get a grip on reality:

The creation of sequences and contexts in language seems to her like a magical method of getting a grip on the world. The inner meaning of the method, the essence of the words, is not important, but rather the fact that the method has structure and looks like an instrument.

The power of the word also becomes clear – in a very recognisable but simultaneously unlikely way – in an example that has found its way indirectly into my notes. A man enjoying his meal of cauliflower hears, after having finished, that the meal consisted of brains. He runs to the toilet to vomit. What does he throw up? Brains? No, a word, a label, a name, writes André Droogers, from whom I obtained this example. A breeze is pleasant when it is warm, but if you call it a 'draught', it may make you ill. That power of the word is particularly great in the world of illness and healing, as we will see later on.

The power of the name

Names are special words. They give things, plants, animals and people their specific identity. Especially in the case of human names, that effect is spectacular. Names are words raised to the power of two, they surpass themselves, they are the incarnation of language. Without a name a person is not a person. For that reason, in Ghana – as in many other cultures – one does not immediately give a new-born child a name. One

waits a little while to see 'if it will come to something'. Only after seven days, when any danger has passed, the child is given a name and becomes a human being. Having no name is the characteristic of the stranger, the homeless, the 'illegal' asylum seeker. A poem by the Dutch poet, Neeltje Maria Min, succeeds in touchingly portraying her feeling of being lost because of the absence of a name:

*My mother has forgotten my name
My child still does not know my name
How can I feel secure?*

Conversely, knowing the name is her most powerful metonym for security:

for those I love, I want to have a name

Names are on doors, on graves, on books and paintings. My name is at the top of this article. Names can be found in concert programmes, in school timetables and in hospital rotas, in newspapers and history books. They classify and divide reality into possessions, tasks, presentations, events and rights, which can all be linked back to the identity of real people. The power of a name is endlessly described, sung about and performed on stage. From Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* to Johnny Cash's *A Boy Called Sue*. In Sonja Pos' novella about a hospital ward, the main character asks herself why she is unable to remember the name of a young boy who has passed away:

...it must seem strange that you forget the name of a critically ill child who you have seen for more than a year. Now I think it has something to do with my wish for his torment to end...I sometimes see the face of the little boy in my mind. His eyes are closed as if he is asleep... He smiles and I can hear him think: "You are not allowed to know my name anymore, Miss Lisa, because you wanted me to die. I did not want to die."

An anthropologist can conceal his informants, whose lives he describes in detail, by simply changing their names. The reader knows 'everything' about these informants and yet he does not know who they are. Without a name nobody is anybody.

Without names there is nothing. If the mountain has no name, I did not climb it. I have not seen the painting without a name, not read the book without a title. Only the gymnastic skills with a name can be performed: cartwheel, straddle jump, cross split, Suzuki.

That radical dependency on names is expressed in the Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale, at least that is a possible interpretation. If she cannot guess the name, the girl, in the meantime queen, will lose her baby. No wonder, according to Elias, that this theme of guessing names is so popular in legends, fairy tales and riddles.

The word in psychiatry

The word in psychiatry, writes Torrey, has a similar power. It provides trust, 'promises improvement' and is thereby the first step on the road to recovery. He quotes the anthropologist, Carstairs, who writes about a healer in India:

What was expected from the healer was reassurance. As long as the illness was nameless, patients felt desperately afraid, but once its magic origin had been defined and the appropriate measures taken, they could face the outcome calmly.

The healer's word creates 'cognitive congruency' between healer and patient, but that is only the case if there is also 'existential congruency'. Torrey calls his chapter about the Rumpelstiltskin principle 'A shared world-view', but that is too optimistic. The words of the therapist can also come across as alienating, disorientating or threatening. Unrecognisable by the patient, who feels misunderstood or misjudged.

Only if there is a sense of (a beginning of) trust, words can build further on that trust and have a healing impact. In that case, even the content of the words is not so important. They are welcomed and cherished and – like medicines – 'swallowed' even before their exact meaning is known, just like the Latin Gregorian chant can bring about emotion and joy to the faithful who do not understand a word of it.

Torrey points to one of the classic texts in anthropology to support his argument. It concerns Lévi-Strauss' description of the treatment of an Indian woman by a shaman:

The shaman provides the sick woman with a language, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression.... which induces the release of the psychological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favourable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected.

Later commentators have pointed to the fact that Lévi-Strauss was never an eyewitness to the ritual he described and that – above all – the woman

could never have understood the words of the shaman. Assuming that the rest of this apocryphal case is correct, we encounter an example of words here that generate cognitive congruency without necessarily having been understood, paradoxical but not impossible.

Explanatory and hopeful words are especially to be expected from people who not only have medical knowledge but also have an affinity with the experience. 'Wounded healers' speak with more authority and impact than the undamaged medic. That is also why the words of fellow-sufferers are so encouraging and therapeutic.

But we have strayed far from the fairy tale of Rumpelstiltskin, where no form of 'Wahlverwandschaft' whatsoever can be found and where the name giving is little more than cracking the secret code of the enemy. Yet it still 'works' because Torrey has given an important principle in medical science a fancy name (like Freud did with the Oedipus complex), and whether the name is 'correct' or not is of minor importance (Oedipus is after all also incorrect: he had nothing against his father and nothing with his mother; they were simply tragic misunderstandings he encountered). What matters is that the complaint has a name which allows it to 'exist' and receive attention. It is just the same with illness as it is with poetry. Even if the word is not correct, it contains magic. Read Herman de Coninck, the Flemish poet:

Just as you can feel bad for years,
Lifeless, faint, washed out,
So that you're almost glad when the doctor says
"the liver" – because now you've really got something.

That is poetry.
No solution
but having names for the nothingness.

Special thanks to Geertje van der Geest.

References

- Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992.
- Carstairs, G.M. Medicine and faith in rural Rajasthan. In: B.D. Paul (ed). *Health, Culture and Community*. New York: Russell Sage, 1955.
- Coninck, H. de. *De gedichten*. Amsterdam/Antwerpen: De Arbeiderspers, 1998.
- Elias, M. *Rechterraadsel of De twee gezichten van de zondebok*. Maastricht: Shaker, 1998.
- Kleinman, A. *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. The efficacy of symbols. In: *Structural Anthropology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 186-205, 1968.
- Pos, S. *Een paar woorden per dag*. Amsterdam: Contact, 1985.
- Sachs, L. Misunderstanding as therapy: Doctors, patients, and medicines in a rural clinic in Sri Lanka. In: *Culture, Medicine & Psychiatry*, 13: 335-49, 1989.
- Torrey, E.F. *The Mind Game. Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists*. New York: Bantam Books, 1972.
- Verhoeven, C. *Een vogeltje in mijn buik. De taal van Nena*. Baarn: Ambo, 1976.