

CANADIAN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE CHILDREN'S SONGS IN TORONTO SCHOOLS:

A Comparison of 1959-64 and 1988 Collections

VIRGINIA CAPUTO

Expressive forms of culture provide a glimpse into the complexities of various social phenomena. Within children's culture, expressive forms such as music, art, and play afford researchers insights important in acquiring a deeper understanding of this social group. In this study, I use music and play as a means of examining the mechanisms involved in the oral transmission of a musical repertoire over time.

Singing games of various kinds have been played and practised by children for centuries. Scholars have taken much interest in examining various aspects of English-language children's song. Some previous studies have focused on certain restricted aspects of this tradition.¹ Texts have been compiled, games and dances have been described, variants have been compared, and geographical distributions have been determined. From all of this material, one can conclude that there has been both stability and change over time in this tradition. However, the underlying patterns of such stability and change seem never to have been studied in their own right.

At present, despite the belief held by many adults in contact with children, along with the grim forecast of some researchers of children's lore in the past (see Newell), that the tradition is slowly and inevitably dying away, we find evidence that the tradition is alive and flourishing in various Toronto neighborhoods. Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to focus on what has happened to the tradition over time. My investigation here is unique in that a) it traces a specific local branch of the song tradition of English-speaking children over a relatively long time (approximately twenty-five years), b) it analyzes in detail the repertoire for evidence of stability and change, and c) it seeks to uncover the underlying patterns of such stability and change. Further, a major aim of the present work is to discern, in particular, the views of members of the culture involved in this transmission to gain a deeper insight into the processes that have contributed to either stability or change of the repertoire over time. A secondary concern is with the impact of the surrounding adult culture. Two collections of songs recorded in the same six neighborhoods in Toronto approximately twenty-five years apart are the primary data for the study. Representative songs of three categories - songs that persisted over the twenty-five year period, songs that appear in the earlier collection only, and new songs collected in 1988 - will be presented and discussed.

The initial collection, used as a baseline for the recent study, was carried out by Canadian folklorist Edith Fowke between 1959 and 1964. Her collection is comprised of recordings with children from eight Toronto-area neighborhoods. Although there have been other collections of English-Canadian children's songs, Fowke's collection is the only one of its kind for English-Canadian children in Ontario. Further, of modern collections of English-language children's songs, Fowke's is one of the most comprehensive and best documented.²

As part of a larger folksong collecting project, Fowke visited eight different schools in the Toronto area and recorded children over a period of approximately five years. The present study began with an attempt to replicate Fowke's earlier study as closely as possible in order to generate a data group comparable

to her original collection. The present study focuses on what has been referred to as "childlore." "Childlore is usually passed on from one child to another, without the mediation or even the knowledge of adults" (Knapp, 9).³ For this study, items of musical childlore will be referred to as "children's songs."

Methodology

In analyzing the data, six key sets of variables, gleaned primarily from the literature on children's games and songs, were investigated. The key variables used included: demographic data (i.e., socio-economic backgrounds), uses, structural types, functions and meanings, literary themes, gender, and age. Each song, in both collections, was coded for its "use" according to categories established by Fowke in her publications of children's songs which were based on material from her 1960s field collection. Specifically, these "use" categories are: skipping, clapping, ball-bouncing, songs with action, songs without action, counting-out, and teases and taunts. Here, I consulted in particular Sally Go Round the Sun. Next, I compiled, from the relevant 1961 and 1981 censuses (and from the relevant 1986 census data), demographic information for each of the neighborhoods where the schools are located. My intention was to determine the extent to which the samples (i.e., Fowke's and mine) were comparable. Each sample turned out to be representative of a cross-section of the city.⁴ Economic indicators for the neighborhoods in both collections were fairly constant.

To compare the songs common to both repertoires, individual items in each collection were analyzed. The collections were coded not only according to use but also according to structural types as described in Jay Rahn's article (1981) "Stereotyped Forms in English-Canadian Children's Songs: Historical and Pedagogical Aspects." All items were cross-checked to determine which songs a) had persisted over the approximately twenty-five year period, b) were found only in the 1959-64 collection, and c) were peculiar to the 1988 collection. Once this was completed, I looked for evidence of stability and change in the repertoire and formulated possible hypotheses for these occurrences.

Stability of the Repertoire

To assess stability of the repertoire over a period of twenty-four to twenty-nine years, the songs common to both collections were isolated. Twenty-nine songs, about one-quarter of each repertoire, have persisted. This group constitutes the clearest case for continuity. About two-fifths of these songs (12) are skipping rhymes that have a strong association with chanting, the largest structural category. Viewed as a whole, there is not a great shift in the central repertoire for specific uses. The uses remain stable over time; that is, no new uses have arisen. Where a shift is noted, the song circulates among the other traditional uses such as clapping, games with actions, and counting-out rhymes. Similarly, when the central repertoire is analyzed song by song, there is not a great shift in the specific uses connected with individual items. In the central repertoire, the data show that the most stable items tend to involve action of some kind. This finding runs counter to a hypothesis advanced by some adults and teachers that children have become more passive, turning to television viewing in place of playing traditional games. There seems to be great concern over the homogenizing effect of the media on children's culture. The central repertoire demonstrates that this assumption is not the case or at least this hypothesis is an over-simplification. Similarly, one finds more evidence against this notion of passivity if the function of the group is considered.

Each of the three categories (i.e., the central repertoire, consisting of

songs common to both collections, songs found in the sixties only, and songs found only in 1988), has been evaluated analytically in to understand more about the function of the performing group. The three categories were divided into songs that may be performed alone, songs that require two or more people, and songs that may be performed either in a group or alone. In general, the tendency for children to play more in a group than alone remains stable over time. The repertoire shows a slight increase in the proportion of songs performed by two or more people during the period between the sixties and the 1988 collections, but overall, the difference for each of the three categories is not significant. Nevertheless, ball-bouncing, the only activity that can be strictly said to be performed always alone in the tradition, has all but disappeared in 1988. Again, in contrast to the hypothesis that television has replaced those activities in which children used to engage on their own, the present study shows that children have sustained and perpetuated a group of traditional songs that involve their active, physical, large-motor participation as a group.

The appearance of a large number of chants in the repertoire (cf. Ex. 1, below) points to a stylistic differentiation between the repertoire of adults and children. In turn, this finding lends support to the notion that social organization, that is, how children perceive their place in the social structure, is directly reflected in the musical organization of these songs. Additionally, the persistence of a specific structural type, namely chanting, in this repertoire and over the twenty-five year period is important considering the strength of this "music sound" peculiar to children.

Apart from chants, which comprise the most frequently encountered structural type in the central repertoire, a large number of parodies are found. Many of these indicate that some of the children's repertoire might have originated a century or more ago and has continued to persist during the last three decades.

Finally, a number of interesting gender-related issues arise. There is an important distinction between songs associated with girls and girls' groups, on the one hand, and with both boys and girls, on the other, in the songs that persist over time. The appearance of a separate repertoire for girls only remains constant over time. Conversely, a similar separate repertoire specifically for boys is absent from the two periods.

In sum, the most constant aspects of the children's repertoire over time in this study are: a) chanting, b) skipping, and c) the appearance of a repertoire specifically for girls and girls' groups.

The designation of a specific location within the social structure in children's culture that is reserved for boys and girls is important. Within children's culture, there is a distinct tendency to claim ownership of part or all of the repertoire by girls and girls' groups. In turn, many responses expressed by the children themselves demonstrate gender-related concepts held with regard to their music.

When speaking with the children about the sources of their music, composition, and so on, they responded that the repertoire could be found "all over the world." That is, the music is the domain of children everywhere. Further, with songs that should be sung only by girls and girls' groups, performance practices, and so on, the children's actions were found to be governed by many unwritten, but strictly adhered to, rules. For example, girls and girls' groups often overpowered the boys both physically and verbally during performances of

skipping songs. However, similar behavior was not demonstrated by the boys. Although there might be a distinct boys' repertoire, none of the children acknowledged the existence of this repertoire during my fieldwork. Finally, apart from ideas that the children had regarding who created the songs they sang, they did not express a consciously held set of values regarding change, novelty, and so on.

The disappearance of ball-bouncing songs presents an interesting and clear case of change. Ball-bouncing songs were not found in any of the six schools in the follow-up study. The reasons for their disappearance were not articulated by the children. Throughout the 1988 collection, however, the song "Hello, Sir," a ball-bouncing song in the sixties (Ex. 2), is performed without the accompanying ball-bouncing choreography in 1988. This choreography has been replaced by different accompanying actions and the song persists. In this case, the ritualized manner in which the song was originally performed is taken up by another type of accompanying action. Music's traditional uses, in turn, function to ensure the continuity of the song, even if the original use ceases. Therefore, an integration of choreography and musical structure is found as is a strong association between gender and use.

The present study presents an instance of a repertoire in which both cultural variability and stability are at work concurrently without one or the other dominating. The existence of a central stable repertoire is clear. The principal changes that occur seem merely to involve adjuncts to the central, stable group.

Example 1. "Twenty-four Robbers"

Not last night but the night be fore. twen-ty four ro-bbers
came to my door and this is what they said to me:

"Lady turn around, turn around, turn around.
Lady touch the ground, touch the ground, touch the ground
Lady show your shoes, show your shoes, show your shoes.
Lady that will do, that will do, that will do."

Caputo Collection, Selwyn School, May 6, 1988

Change in the Repertoire

Change in the repertoire is indicated by the appearance of two groups of songs: a) songs that do not reappear in the 1988 collection, and b) songs that are unique to the 1988 collection. Eighty-eight songs in Fowke's collection do not reappear, which is close to three-quarters of the original collection.

With regard to the most frequent use, structural type, and the number of action versus non-action songs, the findings for this group are consistent with the findings for the central repertoire. The most frequent use categories in what might be called the "sixties-only" group are skipping songs, songs with actions, and clapping songs. The high number of skipping songs is similar to the finding for the central repertoire. The number accompanied by action, fifty-four, is much greater than the number of songs without accompanying action, sixteen. Similar to the finding for the central repertoire, the largest category of structural type in

this group consists of chants. Again this observation is important because it points to a distinct musical organization in children's culture.

Seventy-nine songs are found only in the 1988 collection. The most frequent use category consists of songs without actions. This finding is different from what is found in both the central repertoire and the songs peculiar to the sixties sample. One hypothesis, mentioned earlier, is that children are spending less and less time at activities which require their active participation. The large number of songs performed without action that are new in 1988 seems to support this argument. Indeed, teachers remarked that they do not see as much active play taking place. Nevertheless, my overall findings show that for the core songs that persist over time, children are actively involved. Nevertheless, on a continuum that extends from the 1960s to 1988, the tradition, as a whole, seems to have become less tied to action.

In structural types of the songs new to the 1988 collection, another change modifies the conclusion drawn from the central repertoire and the sixties-only group. Chants are no longer the largest structural type, superceded by songs that fall into a residual category of songs that cannot be confidently placed in any of the other defined classes. More importantly, a large number of songs directly from adult repertoires appear in this group.

There are a number of possible reasons why the proportion of songs in the residual-adult category is larger in the 1988 collection. Fowke was primarily interested in the children's own songs. Secondly, children in 1988 are the target market for an intensified music industry which introduces some traditional material but also utilizes material from adult repertoires. Finally, adult repertoires have penetrated the group of songs new to 1988 but not the songs of the core, although just when this penetration took place is difficult to determine. Overall, a central portion of the tradition is sustained by the children themselves, independent of the surrounding adult culture. The adult influences that permeate the boundaries of children's musical culture have existed apart from, not instead of, the stable portion of the repertoire.

Changes in adult culture, with regard to issues of equality between men and women, the re-evaluation of patriarchal attitudes, new ideas about methods of teaching that have developed over the last twenty or more years, and so on, do not seem to be reflected in children's musical culture as much as one might expect. This culture, as a whole, has remained conservative. One of the most important findings of the present research is the seeming impermeability of the culture's boundaries by adult culture in the repertoire that persists. This finding runs contrary to opinions often held by many adults regarding the intervention of adults in the culture of children.

One such opinion is that much of what goes on in children's culture is a result of what is passed down from adult culture. In this research, girls and girls' groups are identified as the main carriers of the tradition in both the Fowke and Caputo collections and similarly in the secondary literature consulted (e.g., especially, Cosby's study of jump-rope rhymes). In light of all that has taken place in adult culture over the twenty-five to twenty-nine years that have passed between my collection and that of Fowke, one would expect that the girls' attitudes, practices, and ideals would change and affect the repertoire that persists. With the occurrence of a central repertoire largely intact over time, my findings point to the very opposite conclusion. Gender differentiation is evident in the core group of songs. It is seen in the roles that children play, in the kinds of

songs the children sing, and in the traditional ideas about women and men that are expressed in the themes of these songs.

The group of songs new to the 1988 collection present a different view. When this repertoire is scrutinized for evidence of gender differentiation, one does not find the same division as in the central repertoire that persists. It seems that the songs new to the 1988 collection do not tend to be as strongly associated with girls. They seem to be much more "gender-free" (cf., by contrast, Ex. 3, below).

In sum, changes that are demonstrated in the songs new to the 1988 collection are that: a) the songs do not involve action and in turn, are not highly ritualized, b) the songs are "gender-free" as opposed to the "gender-specific" songs in the central repertoire and the sixties-only collection, and c) a greater proportion of songs stem directly from adult repertoires.

When viewed in context, the process of change demonstrated in this repertoire might be assessed in terms of what some writers call the "human factor" inherent in music. The changes stem from some kind of human action. In each of the three changes outlined, one sees this human action, first, in the adaptation of the children's culture to the surrounding adult culture and, secondly, in the persistence of a central repertoire apart from this new group of songs. These changes are ultimately brought about by decisions made within the culture. Finally, there seems to be a connection with deeper cultural processes at work. One sees, in fact, that the changes that have been discussed in the present study with regard to musical structure, are not merely musical.

Example 2. "Hello Sir."

He. llo sir. Are you coming out sir? No, sir why sir? Be
 cause I got a cold sir. Where'd you get the cold sir? From the North
 Pole sir. What were you do'ing there sir? Ca-tching po-lar bears sir.
 How many did you catch sir? one sir, two sir, three sir, And
 that was e-nough for me sir.

Fowke Collection, Second School: May 8, 1960

Example 3. "Miss Sue."

miss Sue, miss Sue, miss Sue from A-la-ba-ma, Si-ttin' in a ro-cker.
 En-tin' Be-ethy (re-cker, wa-teeny the cack yo, tick, tick, tick-tick-stroo-ka-wa-ka
 A. B. C. D. E. F. G wish those boy germs off of me

(spoken): The moonshine, the moonshine, the moonshine freeze. Double moonshine.

The children's repertoire assessed shows differences in the functions of music for boys' and girls' groups. The songs that girls sing promote co-operation and, according to examples from this collection, involve accompanying actions that may be labelled as highly developed routines, i.e., repetitions of a single elaborate choreographic sequence. This leads one to speculate that this type of activity prepares girls for proficiency in work involving routine movements, e.g., assembly-line work and stenography. Conversely, the repertoire most often sung by boys fosters competition rather than co-operation. This competitive orientation for boys' involvement is recognized by girls, as evident in quotes such as "Boys just mess it up," and "Boys just like to chase girls." Boys are more likely to become involved in non-routine traditional activities such as taunting and teasing. In the children's musical tradition, boys act more aggressively than girls. Further this difference seems to be accepted by both groups. Girls acknowledge the more aggressive behaviour of boys and accept it. In fact, statements like, "Boys just like to chase girls...But we like it," indicate apparent approval of such behaviour. These distinctions between concepts of co-operation and competition and between routine and non-routine activities, highlight the functional aspects of this repertoire. Co-operation and competition, routine and non-routine activities, and group versus individualistic orientation would seem to be important aspects of socialization.

Some studies of children's play (i.e., Richer; Merrill-Mirsky) have attempted to explicate the "cooperation versus competition" element and, in turn, raised other issues related to gender. Richer, for example, traces children's tendencies to depict competitive and co-operative activities in their drawings between 1979 and 1986 to show that boys depicted competitive activities in their pictures almost 40 percent more than girls in the 1986 sample. In fact, the 1986 girls dropped significantly in their tendency to depict competitive activities.⁵ Merrill-Mirsky cites the comment of Lever, that "boys' games are more complex than girls'." According to Lever, boys' games are appropriate preparation for successful performance in a wide range of work settings in modern complex societies. However, Merrill-Mirsky says that "given that women also perform successfully in a wide range of work settings in modern complex societies, I would suggest that it is not the 'complexity' of a boys' or girls' game but the qualities [competitive versus co-operative] inherent in its text and prescribed behaviour which differentiate sex roles and define its use."⁶ Merrill-Mirsky raises the connection between sex-role conditioning and economic forces that seem to be at work in children's play. As Merrill-Mirsky found in Los Angeles, I found in Toronto that boys, for the most part, are conditioned through singing to behave competitively as opposed to co-operatively. They are not encouraged to take part in songs that require co-operation such as group skipping songs. The boys become less involved in this portion of the repertoire and, according to the present sample, become involved in songs that require less physical co-ordination, i.e., the more verbally-oriented taunts and teases.

An analysis of my findings suggest a link to larger economic forces, specifically the division of labour in the adult world. Demographic data for both samples show that women in the neighborhoods sampled by both Fowke and me,

have tended to work in the clerical field which requires capability in routine and co-operative activity. Men in both samples, for the most part, worked in other, contrasting fields (e.g., sales and crafts) which require higher levels of spontaneity and individualism. However, there has also been a shift of men into service occupations. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the way the music functions to elicit co-operative versus aggressive behaviour constitutes a stabilizing force in the repertoire. This is shown most dramatically by the persistence of an important portion associated specifically with girls and girls' groups.

In both collections, the manner in which social structure is perceived and organized by children is evident. Their songs contain references to adults, teenagers, other children their own age and older, and babies. These various age groups are depicted in generally the same way over the twenty-five year period that separates the two collections. Although one might expect that children's attitudes regarding adults in positions of power, e.g., policemen, would change over time because of efforts to present such people in a favorable light through media campaigns and community awareness programs (e.g., friendship instead of fear), one finds that the children's view of adult authority has remained fairly stable. In sum, the concepts held about music in children's culture involve gender, age, and economic divisions in the social structure, the individual versus the group, and issues of socialization (e.g., co-operation versus competition).

Final Considerations

In replicating Fowke's sixties study, I have been able to trace this local branch of the children's song tradition over approximately twenty-five years to look particularly at questions of stability and change. Some of the mechanisms involved in the transmission process have been uncovered. Although it is difficult to determine precisely why some songs persist while others die away in an oral tradition, from the present analysis one can determine some of the particular traits of songs that may stand the test of time.

As one can see, the role that music plays in children's culture is complex. Perhaps, it is even more complex than many believe. It has been my experience in the past and throughout this research to encounter adults who are puzzled over the fact that they have never heard many of the songs the children sing. In fact, they sometimes express their relative unawareness of what goes on in children's musical culture. From this short survey, we see that English-language children's songs express very important ideas regarding children's awareness of a number of issues including class, gender, power, and race, to name a few. The music is part of the mechanism that is instrumental in the socialization of the child into adult culture. The implications of this statement, it seems to me, are quite powerful. For through an understanding of music in children's culture, we may sensitize ourselves to the kinds of ways we may effectively communicate with children on the one hand, and what is being communicated to the surrounding adult culture on the other. Although this may appear obvious, it is usually that which is obvious that goes on relatively unnoticed.

Many questions pertaining to this musical culture still need to be addressed. My hope is that the present research has demonstrated the complexity of the music in children's culture and the importance of pursuing future studies of this oral tradition so that the triviality barrier surrounding children's musical culture may be broken down. This study shows that in the neighborhoods and schoolyards in various areas of Toronto, the tradition of English-language children's song is alive and continues to flourish.

*York University,
North York, Ontario*

Notes

1. Geographical distribution of this repertoire is dealt with by writers such as Henry Bolton and W.W. Newell. Alice B. Gomme deals with the origins of the songs and games.
2. A copy of Fowke's collection of traditional songs is in the Listening Room, Scott Library, York University. Children's songs are on tapes 81-85. Some of these are in *Sally Go Round the Sun* and *Ring Around the Moon*.
3. See Iona and Peter Opie: 1 and 7.
4. Except for lower income areas, such as government housing projects.
5. See Richer.
6. See Merrill-Mirsky, 48.

REFERENCES CITED

Bolton, Henry Carrington. *The Counting-Out Rhymes of Children; Their Antiquity, Origin and Wide Distribution. A Study in Folklore*, 1888; repr., Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1969.

Cosbey, Robert C. *All in Together Girls: Skipping Songs from Regina, Saskatchewan*, Regina: U of Regina, 1980.

Fowke, Edith. *Sally Go Round the Sun*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1969.
Ring Around the Moon, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977.

Gomme, Alice Bertha. *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 2 vols., 1894; repr., New York: Dover, 1964.

Knapp, Mary, and Herbert Knapp. *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children*, New York: Norton, 1976.

Merrill-Mirsky, Carol. "Girls' Handclapping Games in Three Los Angeles Schools," *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 18 (1986), 47-58.

Newell, William Wells. *Games and Songs of American Children*, New York: Harper, 1883; repr., New York: Dover, 1963.

Opie, Iona and Peter Opie. *The Lore and Language of School Children*, London: Oxford U.P., 1959.

Children's Games in Street and Playground, Oxford: Clarendon, 1969.

Rahn, Jay. "Stereotyped Forms in English-Canadian Children's Songs: Historical and Pedagogical Aspects," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 9 (1981), 34-53.

Richer, Stephen. *Boys and Girls Apart: Children's Play in Canada and Poland*, Ottawa: Carleton U.P., 1990.