

## Imaging Words: Visual and Textual Literacy Combined

Dimitrios Politis and Petros Panaou

### (i) The Alphabet and Western Civilization

Robert Logan reflects on the influence of the alphabet on Western Civilization:

A medium of communication is not merely a passive conduit for the transmission of information but rather an active force in creating new social patterns and new perceptual realities. A person who is literate has a different world view than one who receives information exclusively through oral communication. The alphabet, independent of the spoken languages it transcribes or the information it makes available, has its own intrinsic impacts.<sup>1</sup>

Television or computers are two other examples of communication media affecting 'social patterns' and 'perceptual realities'. The only difference is that their influence on our perception of reality is obvious to us, because we can easily compare our worldview with the one of our recent ancestors that did not use these media.

Leonard Shlain explains how a child is affected by her/his introduction to the alphabet. He purports that a child's family and a child's culture are the two most important influences on her/him. He adds that the medium through which the child perceives the culture's information is the third most important influence.<sup>2</sup> In order to use the alphabet effectively, we are trained to put letters 'in regular, linear, consensually agreed upon arrangements' and form words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, texts.<sup>3</sup> Shlain - who, in addition to being an author, is also the chief of laparoscopic surgery at California Medical Center in San Francisco - convincingly supports that,

The induction of any member of society (usually a young child) into alphabet arcana numbs her to the fact that she supplants all-at-once gestalt perception with a new, unnatural, highly abstract one-at-a-time cognition. In this fashion, alphabets subliminally elevated, within each alphabet user, the influence of the left hemisphere [of the brain] at the expense of the right.<sup>4</sup>

Shlain argues that the alphabet directed the human brain - and culture - toward left-brain functions: '*linear, sequential, reductionist, and abstract* thinking' and contributed to the neglecting of right-brain functions: '*a holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete* view of the world'.<sup>5</sup> Taking his theory one step further, he attributes left-brain dominance to men and right-brain dominance to women. His purpose is to show that Western Civilization has been characterized by an unbalanced masculine worldview that led to the suppression of women and caused various other negative effects, like the abuse of nature, the glorification of war, and the perfection of imperialism.

## (ii) Language and Alphabet Books

Karen Coats examines Shlain's argument in relation to alphabet books, a genre that introduces children simultaneously to the written word and the world that surrounds them. Basing her arguments mostly on psychoanalytical theory, she draws parallels between Shlain and Lacan to describe language as 'the site of a death'. Jacques Lacan suggests that the child experiences a profound loss as s/he enters spoken language and moves from the immediate bodily pains and pleasures of being into the alienated space of representation. Coats explains: 'The word kills the thing, as I mentioned earlier, meaning that once there is a sign for something, the referent for that sign is forever lost in its essential being, and transmuted to the imaginary world of signification'.<sup>6</sup> She identifies three views of language and the world in alphabet books:

1. A constative view, according to which language is merely referential, it describes the real world.
2. A transitional view, according to which language has a role in creating things, but only imaginary things.
3. A performative view, according to which 'not only is language itself material, but also the things in the world are dependent for their existence on the language we use to talk about them'.<sup>7</sup>

Coats then turns to postmodern alphabet books that adhere to the latter, performative view, combining textual and visual signs to present a more 'embodied,' playful, and performative alphabet:

Today's alphabet books openly acknowledge that language is or becomes part of the reality it describes. Instead of moving the child from the concrete to the abstract, from the body to the eye, they force language to bear the body as the condition of its coherence.<sup>8</sup>

Anno was perhaps the first illustrator to achieve this fusion of language and reality in an alphabet book (*Anno's Alphabet*, 1974).<sup>9</sup> He comments on his alphabet book:

As a Japanese I have never felt very close to the alphabet, and it is therefore possible for me to regard the letters of the alphabet quite objectively as materials with which to design freely. I think that Europeans have a deep culture relationship with the alphabet, and as a result find it difficult to achieve the sense of detachment from it that is so easy for me.<sup>10</sup>

Anno could easily distance himself from the alphabet, depict it as material, and demonstrate the fact that it is a social construction, simply because it is not *his society's* construction.

The alphabet is exposed as 'a constructed thing' right from the very first pages. Even before the reader gets to the title page, he/she is exposed to a series of pictures that depict the material (tree, wood), the tools (axe, chisel, etc.) and the procedure (cutting the tree, shaping the wood, etc.) that made this alphabet possible (figures 1-3). Even more interestingly, in figure 4, the axe (the tool) almost becomes one with the tree (the material), a possible interpretation being that the alphabet is

both material and tool. One interpretation is certain though; the wooden alphabet is the result of a constructing procedure (figure 5).

Exactly half (thirteen) of the major images presented in the book depict objects that are, exclusively or partially, made of the same material that the alphabet is made of: wood (figure 6). Letters and objects are made of the same material. The alphabet is an object too. In addition to this, many of the objects Anno pairs with his letters are objects that one most probably will never find in the real world (e.g., a wooden French horn or a wooden typewriter that types only 'Ts'). This could imply that the alphabet or language in general, can never represent reality adequately; the signifier can never completely signify the signified.

Other alphabet books that followed the publication of *Anno's Alphabet* also foreground the material nature of letters, depicting them as *objects* for representation rather than transparent instruments for representing: 'Letters become performers in and of reality rather than simply pointers to something outside themselves'.<sup>11</sup> *The Z was Zapped* (1987) features letters that literary perform on stage (figure 7).<sup>12</sup> *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (1989) depicts letters as human-like creatures that act, climb on trees, and even fall down and hurt their knees (figure 8).<sup>13</sup> Finally, *Alphabet City* (1995) identifies real-world objects that resemble the shape of letters (figure 9).<sup>14</sup>

### (iii) Words, Images and Picture Books

But what is the mechanism that transforms these letters into performing objects? According to Mitchell, words and images are 'opposite kinds of creatures' who lay claim to the same territory (reference, representation, denotation, meaning). This inevitably leads to a constant war between the two: 'Words and images seem inevitably to become implicated in a "war of signs" (what Leonardo called a *paragone*) in which the stakes are things like nature, truth, reality, and the human spirit'.<sup>15</sup> In this constant fighting, each 'creature' lays claim to what *it* can do best, defining itself as the opposite of the other 'creature'. Literature - the written word in general - is based on arbitrary and 'unnatural' signs, painting or imagery uses 'natural' signs. Image is uniquely fitted to represent the visible word; written expression is fitted to represent the invisible realm of ideas and feelings. Literature is an art of time, motion, and action; painting is an art of space, stasis, and arrested action.

The boundaries between texts and images, however, may not be as cleanly cut as they may appear. Martin Heusser suggests that much energy has been wasted on demarcating the word from the image. He claims that in fact 'the two are, despite their apparent disparity, at heart one and the same thing'.<sup>16</sup> Image, Heusser claims, is never pure image. Paintings in a museum, for example, depend on their labels/titles to acquire meaning. Word is never pure word either. Erhart Kästner writes: '[The word] wants to be pictorial, that is its desire; the metaphor, the parable is the hand it stretches out towards the image'.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, in many contemporary alphabet *and* picture books, letters and words *become* images or images *become* words; it is via this fusion that language is revealed as a 'performer in and of reality'. J. Hillis Miller introduces the concept of a spectrum, along which we can place each work of art - whether it is officially categorized as 'literary' or 'graphic' or a combination of the two - depending on the results of its internal battle between word and image. At one end of the spectrum he places 'pure image' and at the other 'pure text'; at the same moment challenging the existence of either 'pure image' or 'pure text'.<sup>18</sup> We purport that the above-mentioned alphabet and picture books are positioned exactly at the middle of Miller's image-text

spectrum; they are literary/graphic - or graphic/literary - works of art that fuse image and word in an inseparable one. The following are only a few indicative examples, chosen in an eclectic manner from the English, Greek, and international bibliography.

*Voices in the park* (1998) is a good example of the growing number of picture books that 'dress up' words with visual qualities previously reserved for images only. In Anthony Browne's picture book, a different font is used to depict and set apart the thoughts of each character (figures 10-13).<sup>19</sup> Many of the books we refer to experiment with font, colour, shape, size, position, etc., manipulating text in a fashion that until recently seemed only fit for pictures.

In *The Monster Diaries* (2005) and *17 Things I'm not allowed to do anymore* (2007) (figures 14-15) texts are imaged as 'material documents'; visualized texts within the larger body of text and image.<sup>20-21</sup> Similarly, *Written anything good lately* (2006) presents different kinds of texts (genres) as objects in the hands of children and adults.<sup>22</sup> This is a hybrid alphabet/picture book, which lists texts instead of things that begin with each letter of the alphabet; from 'a' for 'autobiography' to 'z' for 'zigzags and zeros' (figures 16-17). Visualised texts bring about material effects in *The Stinky Cheese Man* (1992), where a table of contents falls down squashing the animals in one of the stories (figure 18).<sup>23</sup>

In some picture books, the text - meaningful or not - becomes part of the scenery. Quite often, the world/scenery in these books is literally *constructed* by text. Two examples are: *Ο Βασιλιάς των Λουλουδιών* [*The Little Flower King*] (2006) and *Το Παραμύθι με τα Χρώματα* [*The Fairytale of Colours*] (2003) (figures 19-20).<sup>24-25</sup> Other picture books, like *Τρίχες* [*Hair*] (2007), present some of the characters as being *constructed* by text, while Alessandro Sanna's illustration of Rodari's *Εφευρέτες Αριθμών* [*Inventing Numbers*] (2006) depicts humans, animals and objects that are made of numbers (figures 21-23).<sup>26-27</sup>

Taking the performative view of language yet a step further, some picture books adopt this view as their central theme. *The boy who loved words* (2006) and *Max's words* (2006) feature young protagonists who collect words just like other collectors might gather coins or stumps.<sup>28-29</sup> Their entire world seems to be made of words and the characters use words to control their surroundings and even change their worlds (figures 24-27). The blurring of word-image boundaries reaches its zenith in such picture books: there are pictures in *Max's words* where it is impossible to distinguish between the word and the image of the object it refers to (figure 28). Words in *Do not open this book* (2006) also transmute into the object they represent; the signifier takes the visual form of the signified (figure 29).<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, every time the reader turns the page, words bring about disastrous results (figure 30). The main character warns the reader: 'I warned you about what might happen if you turned the pages. Now you see how careful you have to be with words!'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, one needs to be very careful with words, since they are shown to be much more than a mere transparent medium through which one describes reality.

#### (iv) Conclusion

To summarize, while 'the invention of the alphabet reconfigured the world', contemporary alphabet and picture books are 're-reconfiguring' the world of children through a blurring of the boundaries between text and image.<sup>32</sup> To begin with, through their fusion of image and text, these books seem to argue that we need to pay more attention to right-brain functions: 'a *holistic, simultaneous, synthetic, and concrete* view of the world'. These books also seem to employ the image-text fusion to expose language as a material social construct that shapes our understanding of the world and

can have serious effects on ourselves and our surroundings. Coats analyzes a performative view in postmodern alphabet books, according to which ‘not only is language itself material, but also the things in the world are dependent for their existence on the language we use to talk about them’.<sup>33</sup>

Extending Coats’ argument, we have examined the manners in which contemporary alphabet and picture books literary *embody* the written word by ‘visualizing’ or ‘imaging’ their texts. Words ‘dress up’ with visual qualities previously reserved for images; sentences acquire colour, shape, and motion; paragraphs have a ‘sense of space’ that a few years back was simply unimaginable. Texts materialize as documents within documents and bring about material effects. The written word becomes part of the scenery or mutates into objects, animals, even people. The boundaries between visual and textual signs are vanishing; negotiation between the image and the alphabet is at its peak. Language *constructs* and *is constructed by* ‘reality’. We would like to conclude with the following quotation from Karen Coats:

Our children, more than any other children in human history, are surrounded by images that engage their senses, encourage synthesis, and invite participation. The goal, of course, is not to replace alphabetic literacy with image consciousness, but instead to keep in mind that true literacy is a negotiation between the image and the alphabet.<sup>34</sup>

### End Notes

1. R Logan, *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization*, St Martins, New York, 1997, p. 24.
2. L Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*, Viking, New York, 1998, p. 3.
3. *ibid.*, p. 67.
4. *ibid.*, p. 67.
5. *ibid.*, p. 1.
6. K Coats, ‘P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet’, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 25.2, 2000, p. 91.
7. *ibid.*, p. 95.
8. *ibid.*, p. 96.
9. A Mitsumasa, *Anno’s Alphabet Book: An Adventure in Imagination*, Fukuinkan-Shoten, Japan, 1975.
10. G Senick (ed), *Children’s Literature Review*, vol. 14, Gale Research, Kansas City, 1988, p.27.
11. Coats, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
12. C Van Allsburg, *The Z was Zapped*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1987.
13. B Martin & J Archambault, *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*, Lois Ehlert (illus), Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989.
14. S T Johnson, *Alphabet City*, Viking, New York, 1995.
15. W J T Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*, Princeton UP, Princeton, 1978, p. 47.
16. M Heusser, ‘“The Ear of the Eye, the Eye of the Ear”’: On the relation Between Words and Images’, *Word and Image Interactions*. Martin Heusser (ed), Wiese, Basel, Switzerland, 1993. p. 13.
17. *ibid.*, p. 13.

18. J H Miller, *Illustration*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992, p. 73.
19. A Browne, *Voices in the park*, Doubleday, London, 1998.
20. P Bernatene, *The Monster Diaries*, Meadowside Children's Books London, 2005.
21. J Offill & N Carpenter, *17 Things I'm not allowed to do anymore*, Schwartz and Wade, New York, 2007.
22. S Allen, et al., *Written anything good lately?*, Millbrook, Minneapolis, 2006.
23. J Scieszka & L Smith, *The Stinky Cheese Man*, Viking, New York, 1992.
24. K Pacovská, *Ο μικρός βασιλιάς των λουλουδιών [The Little Flower King]*, Καλειδοσκόπιο, Αθήνα, 2006.
25. Α Κυριτσόπουλος, *Το Παραμύθι με τα Χρώματα [The Fairytale of Colours]*, Κέδρος, Αθήνα, 2003.
26. Ν Νέζη, *Τρίχες [Hair]*, Καλειδοσκόπιο, Αθήνα, 2007.
27. G Rodari & A Sanna, *Εφευρέτες Αριθμών [Inventing Numbers]*, Μεταίχμιο, Αθήνα, 2006.
28. R Schotter & G Potter, *The boy who loved words*, Schwartz, New York, 2006.
29. K Banks & B Kulikov, *Max's words*, Phoenix Color, Phoenix, 2006.
30. M Muntean & P Lemaitre, *Do not open this book*, Scholastic, New York, 2006.
31. *ibid.*, n.p.
32. Shlain, *op. cit.*, p. 66.
33. Coats, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
34. *ibid.*, p. 96.

### **Bibliography**

- Allen, S., et al., *Written anything good lately?* Millbrook, Minneapolis, 2006.
- Banks, K., & Kulikov, B., *Max's words*. Phoenix Color, Phoenix, 2006.
- Bernatene, P., *The Monster Diaries*. Meadowside Children's Books London, 2005.
- Browne, A., *Voices in the park*. Doubleday, London, 1998.
- Coats, K., 'P is for Patriarchy: Re-Imaging the Alphabet'. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 25.2, 2000, pp. 88-97.
- Heusser, M., '“The Ear of the Eye, the Eye of the Ear”': On the relation Between Words and Images'. *Word and Image Interactions*. Martin Heusser (ed), Wiese, Basel, Switzerland, 1993.
- Johnson, S.T., *Alphabet City*. Viking, New York, 1995.
- Κυριτσόπουλος, Α., *Το Παραμύθι με τα Χρώματα [The Fairytale of Colours]*. Κέδρος, Αθήνα, 2003.
- Logan, R., *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization*. St Martins, New York, 1997.
- Martin, B., & Archambault, J., *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. Lois Ehlert (illus), Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989.
- Miller, J.H., *Illustration*. Harvard UP, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992.
- Mitchell, W.J.T., *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*. Princeton UP, Princeton, 1978.
- Mitsumasa, A., *Anno's Alphabet Book: An Adventure in Imagination*. Fukuinkan-Shoten, Japan, 1975.
- Muntean, M., & Lemaitre, P., *Do not open this book*. Scholastic, New York, 2006.
- Νέζη, Ν., *Τρίχες [Hair]*. Καλειδοσκόπιο, Αθήνα, 2007.

- Offill, J., & Carpenter, N., *17 Things I'm not allowed to do anymore*. Schwartz and Wade, New York, 2007.
- Pacovská, K., *Ο μικρός βασιλιάς των λουλουδιών [The Little Flower King]*. Καλειδοσκόπιο, Αθήνα, 2006.
- Rodari, G., & Sanna, A., *Εφευρέτες Αριθμών [Inventing Numbers]*. Μεταίχμιο, Αθήνα, 2006.
- Senick, G. (ed), *Children's Literature Review*, vol. 14. Gale Research, Kansas City, 1988.
- Schotter, R., & Potter, G., *The boy who loved words*. Schwartz, New York, 2006.
- Scieszka, J., & Smith, L., *The Stinky Cheese Man*. Viking, New York, 1992.
- Shlain, L., *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image*. Viking, New York, 1998.
- Van Allsburg, C., *The Z was Zapped*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1987.

### Figures



Figure 1



Figure 2

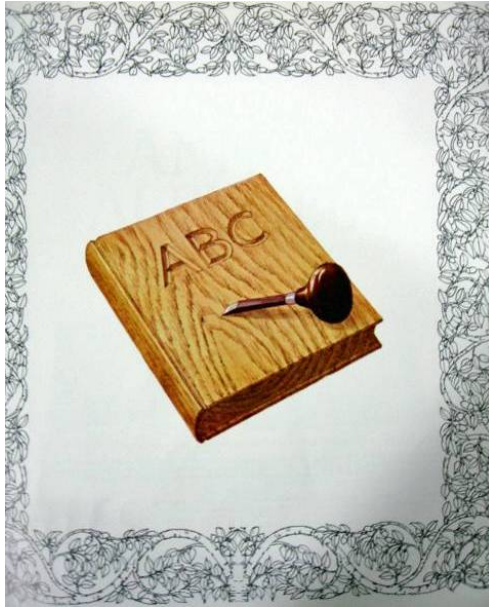


Figure 3



Figure 4





Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

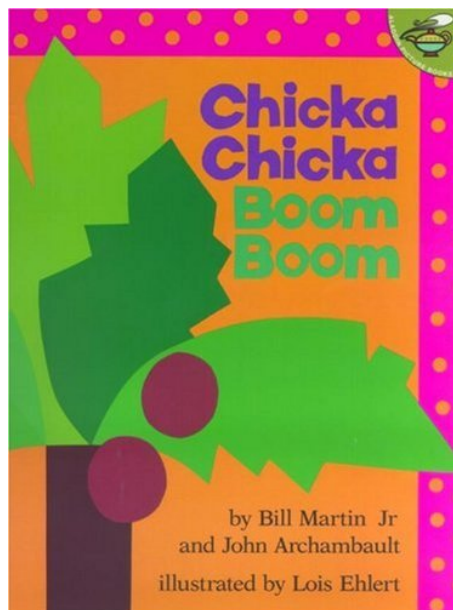


Figure 8

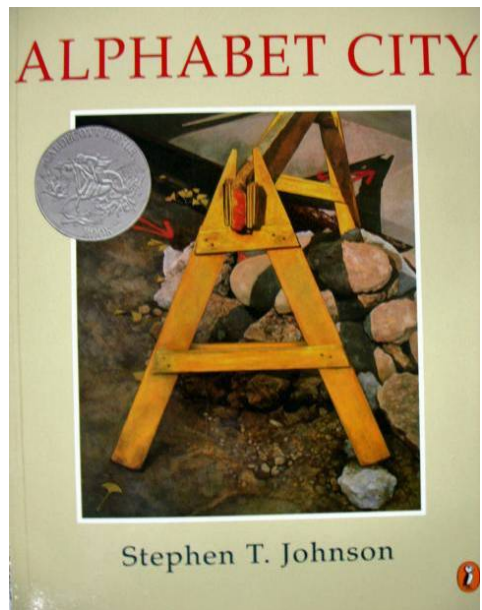


Figure 9

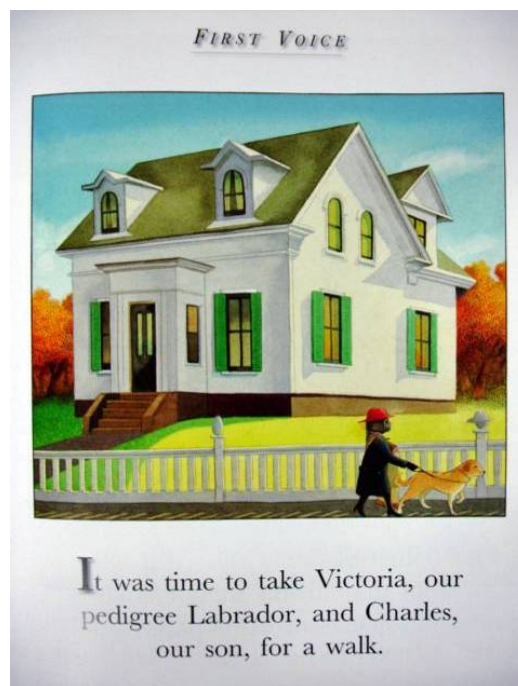


Figure 10

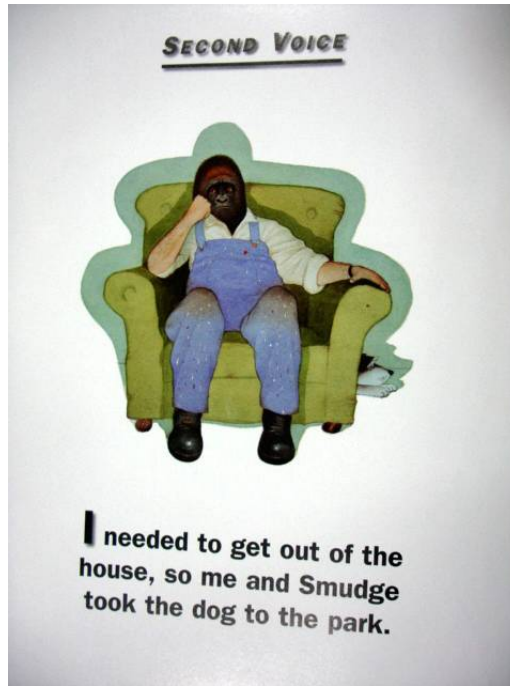


Figure 11

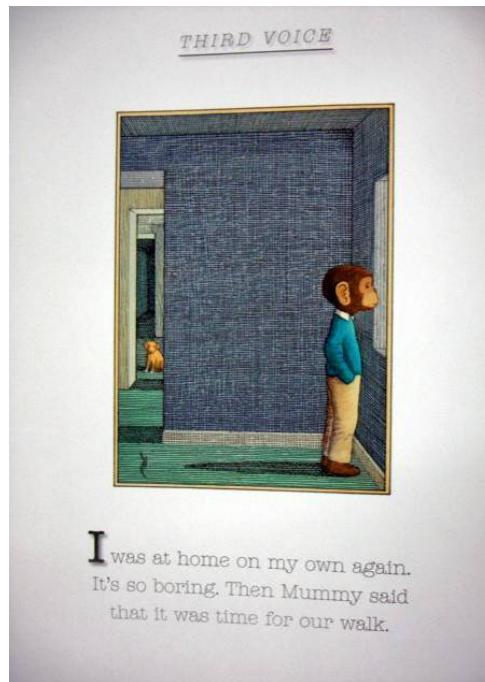


Figure 12

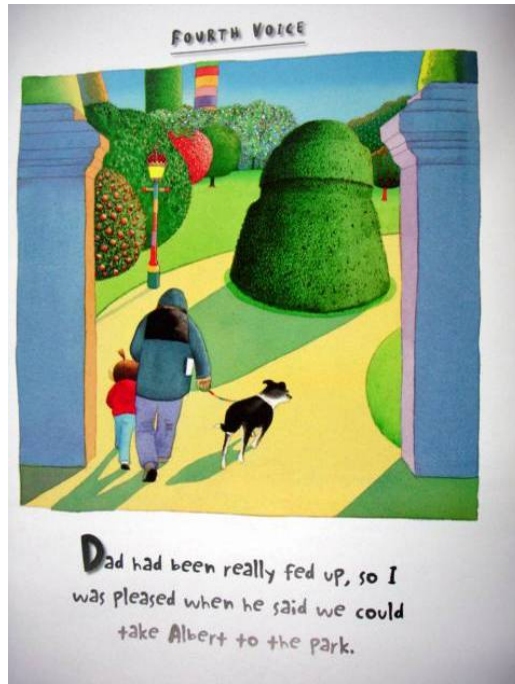


Figure 13



Figure 14

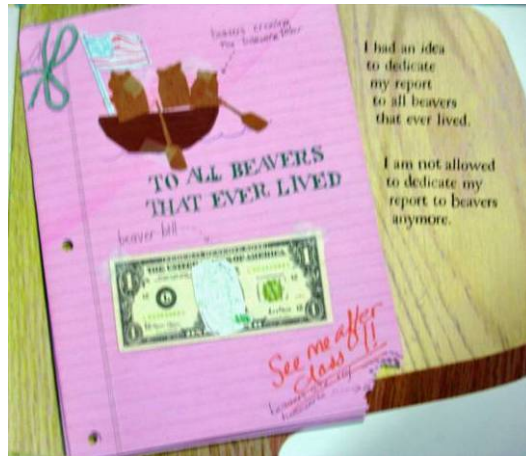


Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

Images taken from the Greek translation, which is cited in the bibliography.



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

Italian title of Rodari's book: *A Inventare i Numeri*. Trieste: Emme Edizioni, 2006, illustrated by Alessandro Sanna. Images are taken from the Greek edition, which is cited in the bibliography.





Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28

