

1.7 Skill: thinking with and about a tool

By now you should have read and looked for the meaning of *The Gruffalo*. Armed with this knowledge, I invite you to accompany me on the way I usually approach the text with my students. To do so, try to solve each of the tasks provided before actually comparing them with the answers we usually arrive at in class.

1. Applying the tool



1: What does the story *The Gruffalo* usually mean?

My students (and a couple of lecturers I have asked) usually arrive at the following interpretations. The story is about **survival**, and about the interplay of **size** (and or power) **and intelligence: the littler you are, the more intelligent you have to be, and vice versa**. As the biggest and most powerful animal of the story, the Gruffalo can afford being stupid, while the mouse, being the most helpless animal, has to be very intelligent. Basically, such findings require character analysis. Students [1] identify characteristic traits and [2] compare the different character traits. This is good, since character analysis is a basic skill students should be in command of. Is it enough though?

Want to know more?

In Western society, fox, owl and snake are animals who traditionally symbolize wisdom and/or cunning. It somehow makes sense that the authors of the story (Donaldson and Scheffler) chose these three animals. It also makes sense that they should have some degree of intelligence.



2: What motivates the characters in the story?

My students don't usually try to find out what motivates characters. Their approach is more intuitive. Motivation, however, is fundamental for character analysis (for motivation, see unit X). In this story, **all the characters are similarly motivated**, even the mouse (after its first motivation, which is survival): "**the mouse looked good**", thinks the fox, "You'll taste good", says the Gruffalo, and at the end of the story, "the nut was good" for the mouse. Now "looking good" is just a euphemism for "I am hungry", and **hunger** is a **drive** and drive is **nature**. All the characters in the story thus share a natural motivation, basic instinct (the only difference is that the mouse is a veggie, as she eats a nut, whereas the other animals kill to eat; this is one of the reasons we like the mouse).



3: Why do we say 'the fox is more intelligent than the Gruffalo?'

I usually ask my students why the fox does not kill the mouse straight away; there does not seem to be anything to hinder it from doing so. In fact the fox invites the mouse to his house: "come and have lunch in my underground house". This invitation introduces us to the realm of giving and taking, of **social exchange**. It is a sign of '**politeness**', and politeness belongs to society (check politeness in your keyword list). Whereas the Gruffalo is defined by its nature (hunger) and wants to eat the mouse straight away, the fox is in command of an additional, superior discourse: social discourse. The intelligence of the fox resides in its mastery of the social register. This social dimension is a means to the end of satisfying hunger or nature. **Nature is primary, society secondary**.



4: Why do we say the mouse is more intelligent than the fox?

Once we know why the fox is more intelligent than the Gruffalo, we can ask the same question for the mouse: how is it more intelligent than the fox?

1. To start off with, the mouse is also **in command of the social register**. The fox has done her a 'kindness' ("It's terribly kind of you, fox"), and the rules of society stipulate that you cannot refuse such polite kindness unless you have strong reasons to do so. So the mouse invents a prior social commitment: "I'm going to have lunch with a Gruffalo". The mouse is thus in command of the same discourse as the fox.
2. At the same time, the mouse is in command of another register: by inventing something which does not exist, making of it a monster which is, moreover, so powerful as to approach omnipotence - "it has terrible tusks, and terrible claws, and terrible tooth in his terrible jaws" – the mouse shows that she is **in command of the metaphysical register as well**.

2. Thinking about the tool: limits

From this moment onwards, the tool does not only provide answers, but also questions, and limits.



5: Is it worth thinking about why the Gruffalo starts existing?

Suddenly, a real Gruffalo appears at midpoint in the story. Why?

1. My students sometimes suggest this is to punish the mouse for lying, but surely survival justifies lying.
2. Others talk about the psychic structure of children, which does not distinguish between appearance and reality.

Seen from the point of view of our tool, an inexistent gruffalo is pure metaphysics. As an invention come true, **metaphysics** thus **turns** real, and in doing so it turns **into nature**. What does this change of dimensions yield? It is there, but is it significant? There is a moment when where a limit has been reached and thinking in terms of dimensions may provide no further benefit.

Want to know more?

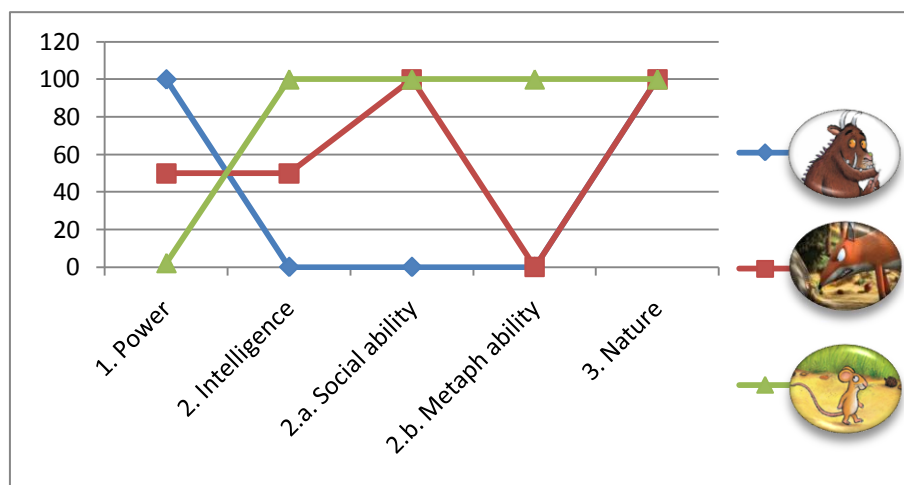
When analyzing children stories, it is not always clear what is more important: the pictures or the text. A student of mine once decided to find out. He got two groups of three-year-olds. He showed the story to the first group and read it out to the other. The 'visual' group thought the mouse and the other animals were friends, while the 'verbal' group knew they were not. Thus in the case of the Gruffalo, it is quite clear that word is more important than sight, although the story would never have been such a sellout without the wonderful pictures.

6 Results

The effect of the tool on the story can be visualized in the graph below: power is inversely proportional to intelligence, and greater intelligence corresponds to proficiency in first the social, then the metaphysical register. This is why

1. the mouse scores highest (it masters both registers)
2. the fox comes next (it masters only the social register)
3. the gruffalo comes last (it scores 100 in power, but 0 in social and metaphysical registers, so he is stupid)

The natural dimension is the only real dimension in the text, and uniformly present in each of the characters. Metaphysics is either fused with nature, or a lie, a register, as is society.



7 Thinking about tools

And now comes the moment of thinking with our tool

1. **The status of the dimensions:** Three of our four dimensions help explain how the text works. However, while nature is a real dimension, society and metaphysics are only registers, means to the end of satisfying hunger.
2. **Where is individuality?** Individuality is missing from our interpretation. Is it in the intelligence of the mouse, in its mastery of the social and metaphysical discourses? We might say so, but in doing this we cannot forget that at its purest individuality means uniqueness. The first concern of *The Gruffalo* is not individuality, but size/power and intelligence, defined in social and metaphysical terms.
3. **Does individuality then fail as a tool?** YES, for it's not present, but NO, for the very act of trying to make the tool work and looking for a while for individuality helps us refine our analysis. Our search makes individuality jar with those other things the text offers, and it is this jarring which leads us to think on. It is only against a horizon of expectations that reality imposes itself. If we had not been looking for individuality, we might not have found alternatives to it.
4. **Standards for cognitive skills:** This is in the end what thinking with a tool means. It is only the good students who are able to do such a thing, find the limits of a tool and take advantage of those limits.