

EXPLORING VERBAL GIFTEDNESS: LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE OF THE GIFTED ADOLESCENT STUDENT

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Sommario

Quando il talento si intreccia con il fenomeno evolutivo dell'adolescenza, gli insegnanti si trovano ad affrontare sfide molto complesse. Questo articolo esplora le peculiarità degli adolescenti gifted, sottolineando, in particolare, la loro spiccata sensibilità unita ad avanzate capacità verbali. Analizza anche il ruolo dello sviluppo linguistico come tratto chiave di emersione del talento, evidenziando come strategie di insegnamento inclusive, applicate all'inglese come lingua straniera (come la Tassonomia di Bloom, il Circolo Socratico e il Problem Solving creativo), possano promuovere il talento verbale. Attraverso la sperimentazione pratica in classe, lo studio dimostra che alcune metodologie complesse non solo supportano gli studenti plusdotati, ma possono anche migliorare le prestazioni dell'intera classe.

Keywords: verbal giftedness, inclusive teaching methodologies, complex learning.

1. Introduction: The Gifted Adolescent

Giftedness is a complex and manifold construct; starting from the assumption that *to be gifted* is culturally specific (Tannenbaum, 2000; Baldwin, 2005; Leavitt, 2017) and *reflects the value of society* (Sternberg & Davidson, 1985; Subotnik *et al.*, 2011), Western scientists agree that the term *gifted* is perhaps the most used to define people with special attitudes towards an area or more specific areas:

For over a hundred years in Western cultures, gifted children have been given labels that connote 'having great natural ability'. (Leavitt 2017:8)

Overall, the definition of giftedness (and High Ability or High Potential as the most widespread terms to define people with above-average abilities) is still quite limited and leads to a sort of paradox: indeed, as Subotnik *et al.* (2011) point out: "It is ironic that one of the most vexing questions in the field of gifted and talented education is how to define giftedness".

Albeit far from being a complete formulation, in my PhD thesis I defined giftedness as: "Over-sensibility applied to a potentially high cognition. It's the over-sensibility to move logic, to create complexity, to strengthen motivation and not vice-versa" (Azzalini, 2023), where all the cognitive and emotive traits meant to intertwine to form a beautiful web of complexity.

As far as gifted teenagers are concerned, Richard Cash claimed that:

Adolescent gifted learners are some of the most complex students a teacher will encounter in his or her career. Not only they are experiencing adolescent development, which has its own issues, but they are gifted on top of it. (Cash, 2018:337, cited in Danielian *et al.*)

This quotation has two elements which are worthy of being considered: on the one hand adolescence, one of the most complex transitional stages in a person's life; on the other hand, giftedness, a longstanding condition, often overlooked by adults (parents, teachers and educators), that is reaching its peak in this developmental phase characterised by a high neurological plasticity.

Zanetti underlines the essential need for teenagers to give sense and meaning to their lives, explaining that:

This phase/condition assumes even more significance in case of a high potential teen who is, in general, more easily influenced and more sensitive than her/his peers, and so she/he questions her/his status in life more intensively. Furthermore, expectations and pressures from the outer

world – parents, school, friends – expose her/him much more to the risk of having to discover quickly ‘who I am and who I want to become’. (Zanetti 2019:11)¹

At this point of their life, teenagers can be either aware of their giftedness, encountering many difficulties to deal with it, or still being totally unaware of their neurodiversity, encountering even more difficulties as they feel strange and different to the rest of the world.

Before explaining their traits related to language learning and in order to fully understand their peculiarities, it is important to focus on the concept of *over-excitabilities*. Dąbrowski, in his *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (TPD), argued that gifted people are often associated with extraordinary excitement, and defined over-excitabilities as

[...] higher than average responsiveness to stimuli, manifested by either psychomotor, sensual, emotional, imaginational, or intellectual excitability. (Dąbrowski, 1972:303).

Each over-excitability can be related to adolescence and read in light of the following features (retrieved and adapted from Bailey, 2010:5-6):

1. *Psychomotor*: surplus physical energy but also rapid speech and/or compulsive talking.
2. *Sensual*: heightened ability to experience sensory or aesthetic pleasure.
3. *Imaginational*: capacity to visualize events very well.
4. *Intellectual*: intensified activity of the mind.
5. *Emotional*: the way of experiencing emotional relationships.

Each excitability can have positive or negative implications for a gifted teenager, as explained in the table below²:

¹ Questa fase/condizione assume ancora più valenza nel caso del ragazzo ad alto potenziale che, in generale, è più influenzabile e sensibile rispetto agli altri adolescenti, e perciò mette in discussione il suo status nella vita in modo più intenso. Inoltre, aspettative e pressioni dal mondo esterno – genitori, scuola, amici – finiscono per esporlo maggiormente al rischio di dover più in fretta scoprire ‘chi sono e chi voglio diventare’. (Zanetti, 2019:11)

² The table is retrieved from Azzalini, 2024:66-67.

EXCITABILITY	POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS IN ADOLESCENCE
1. <i>Psychomotor</i>	The excess of physical energy can be transformed into positive mental energy through concentration and the acquired ability to focus on intellectual rather than physical issues. Impulsiveness and difficulty in time management requires tasks subdivision from the most to the least demanding activity. Rapid and compulsive talking allows to the possibility of taking pauses reflecting on what is necessary to say and what can be omitted.
2. <i>Sensual</i>	The high sensitivity to textures, lights and smells sometimes requires an adaptation of the environment surrounding a gifted person. On the other hand, high sensory stimuli can lead to a different, deep perception of the Nature, the Arts, of what is beautiful and aesthetically pleasant. In this way, sensitivity can become productive and not limiting.
3. <i>Imaginational</i>	Vivid visualisation of events can lead to creativity and intuitiveness. Gifted teens with imagination over-excitability can use figurative language, create worlds of fantasy and associate events, things, people, objects or procedures to precise images they create in their minds.
4. <i>Intellectual</i>	A gifted mind works relentlessly during the day and, very often, also at night. The avid need of knowledge, of understanding theoretical and complex thinking, the need to be answered to probing questions make a gifted teenager a challenge for many parents

	and teachers. But their positive attitude towards knowledge can be an example to follow for their peers.
5. <i>Emotional</i>	Emotional relationships in adolescence can follow two opposite paths. On the one hand the path of introversion, inhibition, and fear; on the other hand, the path of enthusiasm, concern for others and empathy. For a gifted teen it is important to share her/his emotions and to transform their deep and positive sense of justice into something that can become a real contribution for the whole community.

The table above is just a summary of the complexity in dealing with gifted teenagers and their personality being defined. As Siaud-Facchin (2019:99) asserts: “The gifted adolescent isn’t meant to be taken by the hand, he must be carried along with you”.³

In the second paragraph, the focus on verbal ability is explored, with the objective of reinforcing the knowledge of this peculiar category of learners and to potentiate their school performance.

2. Exploring verbal ability: language performance of a gifted learner

Many gifted children start to speak very early and in a very complex way: “Language precocity is of particular note” (Vaivre-Douret, 2011:5). Indeed, for many authors, language complexity and expertise are some of the first signs through which a parent can recognise a potentially gifted child:

Parents can accurately identify children with precocious language when they are 18-24 months old, because their early language skills are so strikingly ahead of other

³ “L’adolescente plusdotato non si prende per mano: lo si porta con sé”, Siaud-Facchin, 2019:99.

children of that age (Robinson, Dale & Landesman, 1990; Robinson & Robinson, 1992; cited in Robinson, 1993:5).

Together with language precocity, in gifted children and adolescents, other language traits are peculiar (here summarised):

- Use of extensive and accurate vocabulary (Clearinghouse, 1985; Rogers & Silverman, 1998; Clark, 2001; Song & Porath, 2005; Renzulli, 2012; Winebrenner, 2012; Leavitt, 2017; Zanetti, 2019; Novello, 2022; Azzalini, 2023);
- Ability to use questioning and reasoning (Leavitt, 2017; Clark, 2001; Lucangeli, 2019);
- Deep critical thinking and hypercorrection of others' mistakes (Leavitt, 2017; Azzalini, 2023);
- Curiosity (for odd facts), use of invented language and creativity (Morrissey & Brown, 2009; Galbraith 2012; Renzulli 2012; Novello 2018, 2022);
- High phonetics accuracy in both their mother tongue and in foreign languages (Lowe, 2002; Duchovičová, 2007 & 2009), also defined as "*non-perceivable non-nativeness*"⁴ (Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003, cited in Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016);
- Use of Arborescent Thought (Siaud-Facchin, 2019; Azzalini, 2023);
- Difficulties with implicit or double-sense words (Siaud-Facchin, 2019; Azzalini, 2023).

It is worth noting that, as far as *grammar* is concerned, gifted students can easily infer grammar rules from examples (Lowe, 2002; Sousa, 2003; Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016; Novello, 2022), using a deductive reasoning strategy:

Many of them are equipped with analytic abilities since they enjoy discovering grammar rules and 'cracking the code'. (Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016:166)

⁴ Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson "introduced the term non-perceivable non-nativeness to describe (gifted) apparent native-likeness, or a level of proficiency which cannot be distinguished from native in everyday communication and can only be identified through systematic examination". (In: Biedrón & Pawlak, 2016:162)

Many children who are linguistically gifted feel a need for grammatical analysis in addition to rote learning because they are not satisfied with the mere imitative repetition of conventional phrases. (Franklin & Friedl, 1973:5)

This is also linked to the concept of owing deep logical structures of thinking and of making inferences:

We begin to understand why grammar is so appropriate for gifted kids. Grammar gives kids a way to think about language, to see what language reveals about their own minds, to think about how language makes clarity, to think about how different authors use language in their own styles, to think about crafting the language of their own sentences. (Thompson, 2006:7)

For this reason, in the language classroom, it is important to face grammar concepts and exercises in a creative and stimulating way, as Thompson points out:

Grammar [...] has symmetries and mysteries enough to fascinate the dullest mind, and is an introspective and metacognitive way of thinking about our own ideas – perfect for the higher level ruminations advocated for gifted children. (Thompson, 2002:64)

All the traits mentioned above indicate that verbally gifted students can easily reach a proficiency level in both their mother tongue and in foreign languages while they are in their secondary school studies. In addition, they could start to learn and explore languages such as Chinese, Japanese or Ancient Greek which goes beyond mere school subjects and sounds appealing and more challenging in terms of their construction, syntax, history, characters, culture, etc.

Beyond formal language aspects which have already been associated to giftedness, there are also some decisive reasons for connecting verbal abilities to giftedness in adolescence.

In a very interesting contribution, Hanna David (2018) defines some problems which are crucial to gifted adolescents but common to the non-gifted. Indeed, language is the mean for dealing, for example, with *philosophical issues and existential questions* (5). Asking pertinent questions and discussions about God, life after death, the need to obey social or ethical rules is not only a way to elicit verbal ability but to raise personal, critical thinking in order to reinforce one's own personality. The same can be done for issues such as the problem of *parental authority and setting boundaries* or the *inability to accept injustice and inequity* (6).

In matter of justice, if the feeling was already present in childhood, it starts to reach its peak during adolescence, as the awareness and the freedom to decide for themselves make gifted adolescents even more active and informed:

[...] their intensity increases with age and many gifted adolescents become more involved in activities such as joining groups active in equality advancing, getting justice to minorities, fighting for animals' rights, publishing materials about morality, and the like. (David, 2018:7)

In the same way, language is the mean to express *intensity and over-excitability*.

For all the reasons mentioned above, verbal talent has to be constantly nurtured by reading or through meaningful conversations or experiences (and the gifted individual often searches for significant people and books throughout her/his life). On this matter, particularly referring to the child, but true also for adolescents, Thompson explains:

Verbal talent is developed by new verbal experience. It will not develop on its own, and it will not develop if the only experiences a child has are within the child's existing range of verbal experience. [...] Verbal talent will develop when a child is thrown into verbal situations that he or she can't do, doesn't understand, hasn't seen before, forcing the child to stop, think, listen, pay attention, reread, study, change. [...] Only verbal experience that changes a child develops a child. (Thompson, 2006:1)

Indeed, the exposure to a variety of new, complex, and meaningful sources (both written and spoken) is a way to nurture the mind of the verbally gifted without wasting her/his talent as it could happen if in touch with ordinary or mass language contacts.

3. Classroom Inclusive Teaching Strategies to Raise Verbal Ability

In order to enhance and respect all the peculiar cognitive and emotive traits that a verbally gifted learner embodies, a teacher has to adopt some appropriate teaching strategies.

In the following table, retrieved from Azzalini (2024:86), the main aspects to avoid or to enhance in a language classroom with (potentially) gifted students are briefly listed:

TO AVOID	TO ENHANCE
- An exclusive traditional teaching and learning (<i>teacher-centred</i>), where the teacher acts as a unique ‘giver’ of knowledge; - A lesson based and structured only around the textbook, without additional materials or challenging activities; - Superficial or common ‘sources of inspiration’, e.g. the football player, the singer, the influencer, etc.;	- A teaching based on students’ needs and competences (<i>student-centred</i>), and on the cognitive processes involved in language learning;⁵ - Constant meaningful exchanges and feedback between teachers and students; - Cooperative learning and (possibly) co-teaching; - Authentic materials (Santipolo, 2014) and (possibly) authentic contexts;

⁵ For a detailed reading on the cognitive processes involved in language learning, see Novello (2022:70-77).

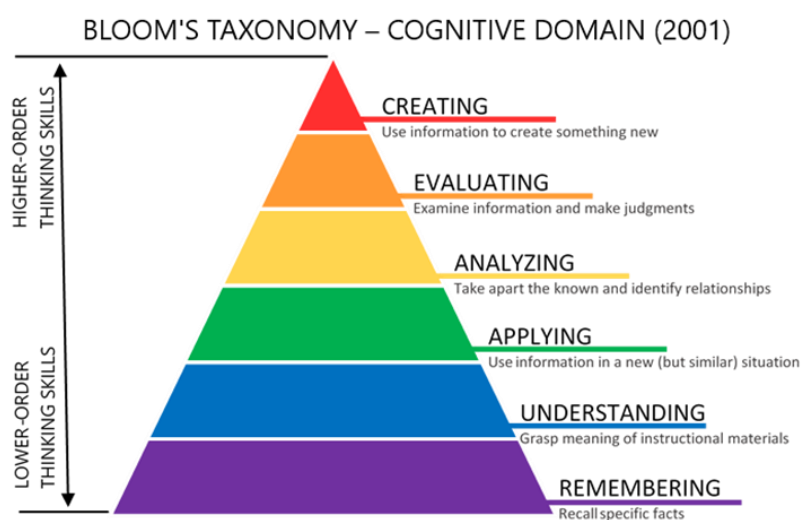
- Strict and structured classroom space.	- Flexible and adaptable classroom space.
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In the following paragraphs, three examples of teaching strategies for gifted (and non-gifted) students are discussed.

3.1 Bloom's Taxonomy

If a teacher has to enhance the ability of QUESTIONING and REASONING, an interesting strategy can be referred to Bloom's taxonomy, here reported for its visual efficacy.

Beyond being divided into lower-order and higher-order thinking skills, Bloom enumerates a list of actions (verbs) which goes from the most superficial to the deepest level of questioning. Each action is here summarised and proposed in the light of giftedness, to be used as samples in a regular language classroom.



It is worth claiming that even the first three levels (lower-order thinking skills) can be applied to giftedness, but in depth. Indeed, a gifted student

is able to recall facts, basic concepts, historical dates or events in a very precise and meticulous way. So, even the basic level of the pyramid can acquire more consistency if read in the light of the Highly Ables.

Level	Action (from the Vanderbilt Center for Teaching) ⁶
1.	To remember = to recall facts or basic concepts. Ability to <i>define, list, memorise, repeat, state, etc.</i>
2.	To understand = to explain ideas and concepts. Ability to <i>classify, describe, discuss, explain, recognise, translate, etc.</i>
3.	To apply = to use information in new situations. Ability to <i>execute, implement, solve, demonstrate, etc.</i>
4.	To analyse = to draw connections among ideas. Ability to <i>differentiate, compare, contrast, examine, distinguish, etc.</i>
5.	To evaluate = to justify a position or a decision Ability to <i>argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, etc.</i>
6.	To create = to produce new or original works Ability to <i>design, construct, develop, formulate, investigate, etc.</i>

3.2 The Socratic Circle

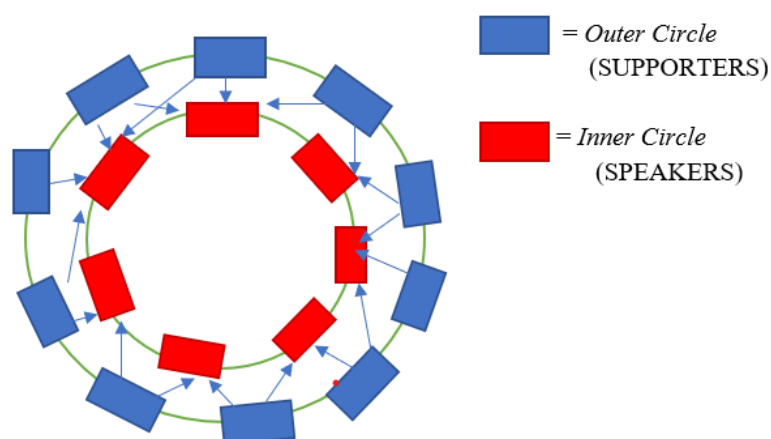
In the collocation 'Socratic Circle', both terms are worth to be briefly defined. 'Socratic' obviously recalls Socrates, the Greek philosopher devoted to the tradition of deep thought; 'circle' refers to the

⁶ Vanderbilt Center for Teaching, 2016, retrieved from: <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/>

geometrical shape where all its points (here the students) have the same distance from the centre. In just two words, the embedded nature of the Socratic Circle is explained: a methodology where all students, sitting on two concentric circles, are of equal importance. In this position, gifted and non-gifted students are asked to discuss and question about important topics.

According to Bovo and Pedron:

The Socratic Seminar can be used as a didactic methodology of cooperative learning which is based on discussion and dialogic exchange, and which allows to 'reason together' on a given topic. It can be used with the whole classroom or with small groups of high potential students as a differentiation strategy.⁷ (Bovo & Pedron, cited in Lucangeli, 2020:10)



⁷ 'Il seminario socratico può essere utilizzato come una metodologia didattica di apprendimento cooperativo che si concentra sul confronto e sullo scambio dialogico e permette di "ragionare insieme" su un determinato argomento. Può essere utilizzato con l'intera classe o con piccoli gruppi di alunni ad alto potenziale cognitivo come strategia di differenziazione'. (Bovo e Pedron, in Lucangeli, 2020:10)

Indeed, the Socratic Circle is based on logic assumptions and questioning, and each topic suggested by the teacher (hence the Moderator) can be further explored and reasoned through meaningful questions. In the Inner Circle (the smallest), students discuss and debate a topic, while in the Outer Circle (the largest), students follow the verbal production of the Inner Circle providing final feedback. The teacher, through her/his role of moderator, can facilitate or intervene during the discussion. Then groups of students are supposed to exchange in order to try both roles. According to LaVonda:

The use of Socratic Circles can help students learn how to think critically, analyze information, and evaluate others' ideas as well as their own. Students also become well versed using conceptual background knowledge to understand a topic, helping them become better problem solvers and evaluators of information. (La Vonda, cited in Danielian *et al.*, 2018:56)

Considering high potential students, such a technique fits perfectly with the nature of the gifted, where questioning, thinking critically, analysing, and evaluating are common strategies used while processing information. In addition, historical, social, and economic facts or events can be read through questions: in this way, the teacher is not a traditional "dispenser" of knowledge but rather a mediator who proposes a thought-provoking question and oversees the discussion of two prepared, autonomous groups of students.

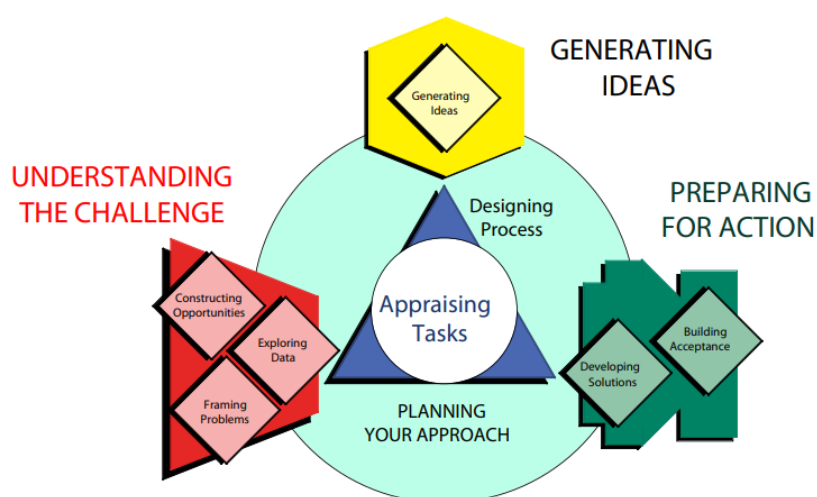
3.3 Creative Problem Solving

Positioned between logic and creativity, the *Creative Problem-Solving* (CPS) ability and methodology will be analysed in this section, starting from the assumption that inventiveness is the first cognitive step to undertake in order to solve a problem. Many aspects relate CPS to giftedness and talent, as it presents a dynamic way or process which can be applied individually or cooperatively in order to solve a real problem through creative thinking.

According to Treffinger and Isaksen (2005),

A contemporary approach to teaching and applying CPS in programming for talent development involves a rich tapestry of cognitive skills and tools, personal characteristics and styles, a supportive environment, attention to outcomes that extend beyond recognition and recall, and opportunities to work on real-life problems and challenges. (Treffinger & Isaksen, 2005:350)

Specifically, a Creative Problem-Solving activity is structured according to three steps which are retrieved and summarised from the complete CPS Version 6.1 TM:



**The Creative Problem Solving Framework
(CPS Version 6.1™)**

© 2010, Center for Creative Learning, Inc. and Creative Problem Solving Group, Inc.

The CPS framework. Retrieved from: [CPSVersion61.pdf](https://creativelarning.com/CPSVersion61.pdf)
(creativelarning.com)

Type of Component	Description
Component 1 UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE	The starting point of a CPS has to be a challenging problem which implies many possible real solutions. This phase can be divided into three subgroups: 1- Constructing opportunities; 2- Exploring data; 3- Framing problems.
Component 2 GENERATING IDEAS	From this perspective, according to Treffinger <i>et al.</i> , this phase corresponds to: An open, exploration or search for ideas, in which you generate many ideas (fluency in thinking), varied ideas and new perspectives (flexibility), and unusual or novel ideas (originality), and then focus your thinking by identifying ideas with interesting or exciting potential to refine, develop, and put to use. (Treffinger <i>et al.</i> , 2003:4)
Component 3 PREPARING FOR ACTION	In this phase, all workable, real, and possible solutions or actions to the previous thinking components have to be taken into account. The action phase must be the most possible plausible.

4. Conclusion

It is important (for both gifted and non-gifted students) that teaching strategies which are innovative and inclusive are implemented, in order

to make lessons more captivating and challenging in comparison to traditional ones.

The previous examples and activities are only three among many that can help students to optimise their intelligence. Researchers on giftedness underline that approximately 5% of the population may be categorised as gifted or highly able. In a study conducted by Azzalini (2023) on 54 upper secondary school students, thanks to these innovative teaching strategies, five of them exceeded the 'normal' level. In percentage, this represents a 9.25% of the total number of students, an outcome that almost doubles the statistics. This means that a high-quality complex teaching can raise the level of the whole class, enhancing verbal talent.⁸

If teaching is viewed as a mission to enhance the potential of and assist every single student to blossom according to her/his abilities, it is worthwhile to conclude with Lucangeli's recommendation⁹:

Every one of us, adults, therefore, have a great task: to be the best possible catalysts of human functions. (2020:44)

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⁸ Complete data analysis and findings are recently published in: Azzalini, A. (2024), *Le lingue e il talento. Un percorso nella plusdotazione verbale con esempi operativi per la scuola secondaria di secondo grado*. Erickson, University and Research, Trento.

⁹ 'Tutti noi adulti abbiamo dunque un grande compito: essere i migliori catalizzatori possibili delle funzioni umane' (Lucangeli 2020:44).

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