

Of Rumbles and Tumbles and Other Kinds of Fun: A Linguistics Approach to Children's Literature

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According to Peter Hunt, "Children's literature, although widely accepted institutionally, has tended to remain uncanonical and culturally marginalized" (2). This marginalization of children's literature may be due to the literary scholars' and critics' lack of appreciation for the language of children's literature. And this lack of appreciation, in turn, may be due to the tools that they often use in analyzing children's literature. For instance, looking at the table of content of criticism books on children's literature (e.g., Peter Hunt's *Literature for Children: Contemporary Criticism and Understanding Children's Literature*, Pat Pinsent's *Children's Literature and the Politics of Equality*, and Sheila Egoff, et al.'s *Only Connect: Readings on Children's Literature*), it is evident that stylistics—the use of linguistics as an approach to a literary text—is seldom, if ever, used as a tool of analysis. John Stephens asserts, "Because the contexts in which children's literature is produced and disseminated are usually dominated by a focus on content and theme, the language of children's literature receives little explicit attention" (56).

This paper is an attempt to give more explicit attention to the language of children's literature. Linguistics will be used in analyzing two examples of children's literature: a poem by Jack Prelutsky, "Alphabet Stew" and a story by Heidi Emily Eusebio-Abad, *Ball of Wax*. The language used in Prelutsky's poem and some passages from Eusebio-Abad's story will be explored and their different linguistic features will be analyzed to show how these contribute to give each text its meaning.

The first text to be analyzed is Jack Prelutsky's poem, "Alphabet Stew." This poem was chosen because of its metalinguistic quality—it uses

language to talk about an aspect of language, i.e., words. It would be interesting to explore how a poem written for children would tackle the topic of words. The complete poem is written below.

ALPHABET STEW

Jack Prelutsky

- 1 *Words can be stuffy, as sticky as glue,*
- 2 *but words can be tutored to tickle you too,*
- 3 *to rumble and tumble and tingle and sing,*
- 4 *to buzz like a bumblebee, coil like a spring.*

- 5 *Juggle their letters and jumble their sounds,*
- 6 *swirl them in circles and stack them in mounds,*
- 7 *twist them and tease them and turn them about,*
- 8 *teach them to dance upside down, inside out.*

- 9 *Make mighty words whisper and tiny words roar*
- 10 *in ways no one ever had thought of before;*
- 11 *cook an improbable alphabet stew,*
- 12 *and words will reveal little secrets to you.*

Reading the poem aloud, one would notice the playfulness of the language. This playfulness is perceived through the rhythm of the poem and the different sound patterns used by the poet. The lines of the poem have either ten or eleven syllables, and the number of syllables seems to determine the metrical pattern of each line. The dominant metrical pattern is that of dactylic trimeter. For lines with ten syllables, there are three consecutive dactylic feet followed by one extra stressed syllable. This is true of lines 1, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 11. For lines with eleven syllables, each line begins with an unstressed syllable, followed by three consecutive dactylic feet, which in turn are followed by one extra stressed syllable—this is true of lines 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, and 12. Thus, regardless of the number of syllables, all lines end with an extra stressed syllable. Ending each line with a stressed syllable seems to invite the reader/listener to join in and say the next line. It has a “teasing” effect. This effect of the stressed final syllable found in each line and the dominance of the dactylic foot give the poem a happy, song-like rhythm—similar to a lively chant children often recite when they play.

The happy, song-like rhythm is further enhanced by the sound patterns used in the poem: rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and repetition. The rhyme scheme, which follows the pattern aabb cddd eeaa, gives the poem a certain kind of predictability and closure—predictability because two consecutive lines always have end rhymes and closure because the rhymes of the first two lines are the same rhymes found in the last two lines. Predictability and closure are two things that also characterize children's language games. It is the predictability that allows a child, for instance, to accept the invitation of another to respond to a chant and it is the closure that allows the children to progress from one level of the game to another.

The poem also makes use of alliteration (e.g., *tutored to tickle, make mighty, words will*), assonance (e.g., *sticky, tickle, tingle, sing, spring, twist; stuff, rumble, tumble, juggle, jumble; sounds, mounds, about*), consonance (e.g., *stuffy, sticky; rumble, tumble, bumblebee, jumble, improbable*), and repetition (e.g., the word *words* was repeated five times). These sound patterns, blended together, highlight the playful mood of the poem. Moreover, the abundance of sibilants [s] and [z] as in the words *stuffy, sticky, words, sing, spring, buzz, letters, sounds, mounds, circles, stack, tease, upside, inside, whisper, stew*, and *secrets* adds a high-pitched auditory quality to the poem that also approximates the voices of children at play. The use of glides [w] and [y] plus the use of lateral liquid [l] and retroflex liquid [r] as in the words *words, glue, tickle, you, rumble, tumble, tingle, bumblebee, coil, like, juggle, letters, jumble, swirl, circles, whisper, roar, ever, before, improbable, alphabet, will, reveal, little*, and *secrets* gives a ticklish feeling to the mouth and tongue as one reads the poem aloud. It likewise allows the reader to experiment and "play" with the sounds, e.g., prolonging the final sounds of words like *rumble, tumble, tingle*.

The playful mood of the poem becomes more evident when one focuses on its diction and use of figurative language. For instance, many of the action verbs signify playing games and having fun: *tickle, rumble, tumble, juggle, jumble, swirl, stack, twist, tease, turn, dance*—actions that children love to do. Words are also personified as the poem invites the reader to make the words *whisper* and *roar*. This is again an invitation to play with the idea of words coming alive and doing different activities. The invitation to play with the persona in the poem becomes more evident when one looks at the kinds of sentences found in it. For instance, the second person

point of view is used, so that the poem addresses the reader directly using the pronoun *you*. This second person point of view makes each of stanzas 2 and 3 an imperative sentence—sounding like a command for the reader to “Juggle the letters . . .” and “Make mighty words whisper . . .” A closer look at the three stanzas would show that they all consist of compound sentences—the first one of which is joined by the conjunction *but*, the second by the conjunction *and*, and the last by a semi-colon—three of the possible ways by which one can construct a compound sentence. The consistent use of the compound sentence gives the idea of plurality of main ideas and highlights the many possibilities that one can do with words.

After analyzing the metrical and sound patterns of the poem, its diction, and sentence structure, one would see how these linguistic features form a unified whole and contribute to the theme *enjoyable learning*. The poem is an invitation to play, to use one’s imagination, to learn by having fun. By playing with words and exploring the things that one can do with words, one is able not only to have fun but also to learn, i.e., one will know the secrets the words will reveal. Because the poem emphasizes how to **joyfully** explore the things that can be done with words, the *alphabet stew* becomes food not only for the mind but also for the heart.

Eusebio-Abad’s story, *Ball of Wax*, is also food for the heart. It tells the story of a little white candle who fulfills his noble purpose—that of providing light to the tomb of a little boy’s departed sister. Unlike Prelutsky’s poem that seems to tumble and rumble about as it invites the reader to juggle letters and make words whisper and roar, this story has a certain serene quality about it. The serenity, however, is not due to lack of activities on the part of the characters or to lack of action in the plot. A closer reading of the story would show that the serenity is due partly to the patterns of the sentences that consist each paragraph, i.e., when the subject of the sentence is animate, the active voice is used while when the subject is inanimate, the passive voice is used. This pattern can be seen in the following passages:

The Cordero family had just said their prayers. Eight-year-old Jason and his family had nothing else to do but wait for the candles to melt down until dawn of the next day. The wait, however, was the most fun part of all.

Jason's dad unloaded the soft drinks cooler from the trunk of the car. His mom brought out the packed sandwiches, cooked rice, and tasty meat dishes like adobo, menudo, and barbecue. The low, dividing wall around the family lot was used as a makeshift bench or as a table. Jason chose the big tin pail of assorted biscuits to sit on.

After eating a picnic-like dinner, Jason's cousins played some board games. But Jason chose to tend the candles they had lit on the tombs. Unknown to him, the candles were having some kind of contest.

Except for the last sentence of the first paragraph and the last sentence of the second paragraph, all the sentences had animate subjects: *the Cordero family, eight-year old Jason, Jason's dad, his mom, Jason's cousins, Jason, the candles* (candles, though inanimate in real life are animate in the story). All these sentences with animate subjects are written in the active voice. The other two sentences, which have inanimate subjects, i.e., *the wait* and the *low dividing, wall*, are written in the passive voice. Moreover, the sentences in the active voice have parallel patterns—the subject always comes before the verb whether the latter is intransitive or transitive. In other words, there is nothing unpredictable nor deviant in the way the sentences are written one after the other—there is no foregrounding to speak of, nothing to surprise the reader. The sentences run smoothly and this may be why the reader tends to perceive some kind of serenity in spite of the actions denoted by both the intransitive (e.g., *had, wait*) and transitive (e.g., *said, unloaded, brought out, chose, played*) verbs.

The perceived serenity may also be due to the author's choice of inanimate subject for one of the sentences. One sentence talks of waiting, and it is here where the reader can sense a "quiet" invitation. One would seldom associate waiting with something fun, but in the first paragraph it is described to be "the most fun part of all." The use of the superlative highlights the implicit invitation to take part in the fun that is about to happen. The paragraphs that follow the superlative description of fun imply that part of the fun is eating the food and playing board games. But later in the story the reader would realize that the fun is not limited to food and board games—there is fun, i.e., enjoyment, at a higher level.

This becomes gradually evident as the story turns to the competition that the different candles are having.

"There's no doubt about it," said the sturdy yellow candle on Lolo Pitong's tomb. "I will be the only one left until dawn."

"Don't be too sure," answered a peach and gold candle on Lola Mameng's tomb. Its floral patterns were like the designs on Lola Mameng's favorite long skirt or *saya*.

Beside Lola Mameng's tomb was a statue of an angel. At its foot was a little white candle. Jason placed it there for his baby sister who had died at birth.

"That boy had better prop you up soon," grunted the sturdy yellow candle. "With the way you lean to one side, you're bound to melt to the ground before this night is over."

"Try to lean nearer that angel, dear. It will protect you from the wind," advised the peach and gold candle. But try as it would, the little white candle couldn't straighten up.

"It doesn't matter," it sighed. "I'm too short and skinny to last that long anyway. At least, Jason thinks I'm enough to light up his baby sister's resting place."

Across the statue of the angel was Tita Elma's grave marked by a gray marble slab. On it was a vigil lamp with a candle protected from the wind by the red-tinted glass. A sudden gust of cold wind made most of the candles flicker unsteadily. "It sure is a windy night," said the vigil lamp. "I think I'm the only one who can stand a night like this."

"Pssst! Can you see me over here?" shouted the candle on Tito Ronald's black stone marker. "Not only am I the tallest of the candles, but I've got the biggest flame," boasted the twisted blue and green candle that looked more like a New Year's Eve firecracker.

The candles on the nearby tombs joined in and tried to guess who would last the longest. As they did so, their wicks shone brighter. On the other hand, a bunch of roses straightened up to see what was going on. A garland of sampaguita hanging on a stone cross tried to swing away from the candles to avoid getting burned. The wreath of chrysanthemums and the heart-shaped anthuriums cheered the candles on.

As the night wore on, other families lighted more and more candles. There were so many candles that the cemetery had turned into a starry wonderland. The mixed scent of melting wax, flowers, and incense filled the air. People were talking, playing the guitar, or singing to the tune of the radio. Indeed, the fiesta atmosphere made it look like it wasn't a holiday named for the dead.

In these passages, the reader perceives the "fun" in the situation and in the atmosphere. The situation pertains to the contest the candles are having—they try to out boast and outdo each other and there is humor in the situation. The atmosphere is literally festive as explicitly stated in the last paragraph cited. Yet, though the candles actively try to outdo each other and the flowers nearby actively cheered them on and though all these happen in a festive atmosphere, the serenity is still perceived by the reader. A closer look at the sentences that make up these passages would reveal that they again follow a pattern. For one, dialogue is interspersed with what Halliday (1996) calls "static expression of place." These static expressions of place all begin with a preposition or a prepositional phrase:

Beside Lola Mameng's tomb was a statue of an angel.

At its foot was a little white candle.

Across the statue of the angel was Tita Elma's grave marked by a gray marble slab.

On it was a vigil lamp with a candle protected from the wind by the red tinted glass.

Such patterns give the passages a kind of predictability that gives no surprises to the reader. This enhances the perception of serenity in spite of

the competition among the candles and the festive atmosphere explicitly described in the story. This serenity takes on a deeper meaning as the "fun" is brought into a higher level at the end of the story:

The enthusiasm for the contest's end was dampened by the vigil lamp's words. One by one, the bright and wild flickers of the other candles became a smaller, steadier glow at the wicks. A few flames quivered nervously. The candles quieted down.

Just then, Jason noticed the white map of wax that had covered his sister's name. Carefully, he peeled it off the marble surface to uncover the silver letters, which spelled out ANGELICA. The wax was still warm. When Jason cupped his hand, the wax was molded into a soft white ball. All at once, Jason had an idea.

For the rest of the still dark and cold early morning, Jason went around the cemetery collecting the melted wax from burnt out candles. By dawn, he had formed a ball of multicolored wax, its size bigger than his fist. Swirls of yellow, red, blue, green, peach, and even gold wax formed into a perfect sphere in Jason's hand.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed a peach and gold swirl of wax. "Why are we stuck together?"

"Ssssh!" hissed the yellow swirl of wax.

Jason pierced the center of the ball of wax with a barbecue stick. Then, he put a piece of string through the hole and lit the end left sticking out of the ball.

"Jason made a new candle out of us." A faint voice came from within the ball of wax. "We are a new candle for his baby sister." The various colors swirled around to have a look at who was speaking. They were surprised to see who it was. At the core of this multicolored ball of wax was the little white candle. It was the heart of Baby Angelica's new candle.

The paragraph that begins with "The enthusiasm for the contest's end was dampened by the vigil lamp's words" signals the turning point in

the story. The main human character, Jason, continues to have his "fun" as he goes around the cemetery collecting melted wax. But the candles seem to have lost their "fun" because they realize that regardless of who is the last to lose his flame will nevertheless have the same fate. As the vigil lamp has explicitly stated, "By morning all of us will be gone anyway."

Unknown to the candles, however, Jason's kind of "fun" will lead to their ultimate "fun." Here is where the reader realizes that the sentence at the beginning of the story that reads, "The wait, however, was the most fun part of all" rings true. Now that he has made a new candle out of the different candles that have melted, Jason sits down to *wait on*, so to speak, his little departed sister, while the candles also wait to be given the chance to fulfill, as part of the ball of wax, what they are meant to be—light that symbolizes the love a boy has for his little sister. At the heart of the ball of wax is the little white candle, its size and color seemingly insignificant among the bigger and colorful candles. But this time, the little white candle will literally outlast all the other candles—a fitting tribute to one who is true to his noble purpose.

The story then has come full circle, which is also signified by the colorful ball of wax. The final sentence, "It was the heart of Baby Angelica's new candle" serves as a "quiet" tribute to the little white candle. There is no fanfare here. No rumble and tumble. The reader realizes that the serene quality of the story is also due to its subject matter, remembering the dead, and its themes—love that transcends death and greatness due to the simple fulfillment of one's purpose.

Works Cited

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