

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

EXTRA-LINGUISTIC INTERFACE IN SELECTED NIGERIAN CHILDREN'S FICTION

UMOREN, MARIATELLA

Department of General Studies

Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic, Ikot Osurua, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Email address: umorenmariastella@gmail.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.382>



ABSTRACT

Children's literature is written in language and style that impress children and motivate their reading interest. Given the obvious progressive stages in children's development, authors of children's literature consciously make linguistic and stylistic choices to meet the needs of the various developmental stages which are bracketed in specific ages. Again, children's minds are said to be impressionistic, therefore, events characters and important scenes in children's fictions must be impressively illustrated and synergized with the linguistic component. Beyond aesthetic values, this paper, using Pierce's Semantic tradition, takes a look at how the pictorial contents are incorporated in the aesthetic and artistic projections of Ekpa in *Abo and the Crocodile*, Nze's *The Honest Girl* and Ezeigbo's *Snake Child and Star Baby*. The iconic, indexical, symbolic and motivational elements of identified pictorial signs in these works interface with linguistic signs which are skillfully selected to make meaning to children as they read prose fiction. The established nexus foregrounds the effective handling of children's literature which encompasses aesthetic, didactic, moral, cultural and social values.

Introduction

Children's literature in the Nigerian environment has been skillfully and consciously handled to meet the reading interest of children of different ages. Prose fiction particularly dominate the children literary scene since growing children are easily drawn to free-flowing and intelligible narration. Authors of children's prose fiction handle language and style to suit children as the central focus. The developmental and intellectual stages make it imperative for authors to create literature that is appropriate for the varied age brackets. Lantern Books, a major Publisher of Children's books in Nigeria, categorizes literature texts for ages 4-7; 8-12 and 13-16. For any of the ages, literature has

the potentials to provide materials and opportunities for children to develop intellectually.

Meniru, Segun and Tagoe (1992); Hodrmentova (2008); Emenyeonu and Uko (2017) corroborated that children's literature is a special category with features, language and characteristics that are clearly distinctive. This distinctiveness revolves around style. Obi, Alhassan and Osuji (2010) further propose the children's literature must be about children and teenagers ; must describe simple ideas, relationship and language; must teach moral lessons as a means of grounding children in societal values. Striking among these distinctive features also, is the synergy that exists between Saussure's linguistic signs and Pierce's pictorial signs. These two sets of signs are skillfully developed in

such a way that they complement each other. Young children find illustration in books quite fascinating and attractive. According to information from [https:// www.maaillustrations.com](https://www.maaillustrations.com) (2016), illustrations from literary books are to elaborate and clarify meaning of the text. They help to get the message across to the readers or viewers. In children's fiction, illustrations are used to make children sustain interest in reading because they tend to find illustrated stories exciting and fascinating. In mapping their way to meaning as they read words (signifier + signified signs) which represent objects and concepts, illustrations provide images of these abstractions thereby helping children understand and identify things expressed in words which they come across daily in real life.

Furthermore, pictures help children readers understand the context of a story more easily. They find it easy to respond to pictures and colourful illustrations and they remember such stories more than the ones told with just words. In other words, illustration assist children immerse more effectively in the world of words. There is therefore an obvious interface between word and pictures in children's books. <http://www.encyclopedia.com> stresses the inter-dependency of texts and illustrations in children's books opining that both should be given equal emphasis. This obvious interface is perhaps to establish the opinion of Ngwu (1991) that children's literature should be seen as a 'functional-Recreational Continuum' even as it is a source of socialization.

The data for analysis in this paper are sourced from Ekpa's, *Abo and the Crocodile* Ezeigbo's *Snake and the Star Baby* and Nze's *The Honest Girl*. All selected prose fiction are of adventure category and are authored by Nigerians for children between the ages of 8 and 12. This age bracket according to Eccles (1999, p. 52) is middle childhood; a period "which gives children the opportunity to develop competencies, interests and healthy sense of confidence that they can master their world" they are also known to be highly susceptible to peer influence. Apart from the social, cultural religious and peer influence, the development of children at middle childhood are driven by other physiological factors like motivation,

self-concept and readiness to take on challenges. Literature can provide materials and opportunities for children to develop intellectually. To create literature that is useful and meaningful for Nigerian children therefore, the authors of the selected prose-fiction used for analysis in this paper have had to make linguistic and extra-linguistic choices that are most suitable for children in middle childhood. As observed by Tagoe (1992), at ages 8-12, children's psychology understanding and interest become mature and distinctive. Their linguistic skills and conceptual powers become sufficiently developed to enable them derive aesthetic pleasure from. It follows that middle childhood is a period children make cognitive and linguistic progress, consciously showing what they know about language and what they are doing with it. Therefore, in addition to author's attention on story type, the art of narration, the nature of characterization, the quality of dialogue and general language, attention must also be given to the quality of pictorial signs and illustrations. Pictures and illustrations are capable of evoking multiple simultaneous interpretations. These two sets of signs, (linguistic and extra-linguistic) are often in complementary relationship in children's literature. The nexus encourages understanding since pictures and illustrations elucidate meaning filling the gap left off by words.

This study is motivated by the desire to respond to Emenyonu's (2017) call for more researches on Nigerian children's literature. Scholars like Tagoe, Segun, Meniru (1992) and Uko, (2017) have made contributions on children's literature bothering on characteristics, contents, literary devices and psychological implications. Shaffii's (2015) study investigated five selected Nigerian children's texts in order to ascertain their aesthetic values with a cursory look at illustrations and pictorial contents. If more studies are done in this area, assessors and panels in our citadels of learning will begin to consider critical works on children's literature as having fulfilled the criterion of scholarly productivity. Above all, sufficient insights would be given on the composition and state of children's literature in Nigeria as part of the efforts to re-define children's literature the African continent.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the illustrations in the selected Nigerian children's fiction as part of the devices authors use to project and foreground the underlying messages in texts.

Theoretical Orientation

Analyses in this paper are based on insights from the semiotic theory which was propounded in abstractions first, by Ferdinand de Saussure (1851-1913) and expounded by Charles Sanders Pierce (1838-1914). The semiotic theory is an umbrella term for studies on communication by means of signs. Nordquist (2017) described semiotics as the theory and study of signs and symbols especially as element of language or other system of communication. Saussure's notion sees language as a vehicle of communication made up of signs (signifier and signified) without any relationship with form. But Pierce's tradition stretches the notion of signs beyond Saussure's conceptual domain to phenomena where the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified. Examples, portrait, painting, smelling like, taste illustration etc.

The process of signs interpretation, going by Pierce's tradition, involves multiple inferences, an opinion held by Eco (1976, p.193): "the interpretant itself becomes a sign that can generate yet another interpretation that the mediating though might be a schema, mental model, or a collection of prior experience that enable the subject to move towards understanding." In more practical terms, Pierce's (1931, p.58) maintained that a sign is iconic insofar as it resembles the object it represents, although, sometimes the relationship is analogous, and indexical and bears direct relationship with the signified. It invariably means that smoke, a photograph, illustrations, phone ring tone, whistling etc. are signs.

This frame provides a comfortable basis for analysis in this paper as pictures and illustrations in the chosen children's fiction can be described within this notion of semiosis. Some illustrations (pictograms) physically resemble what they connote and others are logically connected to their referents. Signs therefore play mediating roles in the construction of human realities. To reiterate the importance of signs in the quest for meaning,

Jakobson (1966) observed that signs emit meaning on the mode (symbolic, iconic or indexical) which is determined by context and the way they are used. To further strengthen the applicability of the Pierce's semiotic notion, Barthes (1997) in a seminal essay – 'Rhetoric of the image' proposed that semiological analysis should strive to uncover in a text, What important signifiers are contained and what they signify; what system of signs give the text meaning; what sociological and ideological issues are involved in meaning interpretation; what paradigms are employed; what syntagms have been used (implicit and explicit) and what iconographic features elucidate meaning (example, denotation in illustration). Illustrations in the selected children's prose fictions are iconic signifiers of meaning which need to be skillfully interpreted. Semiotics therefore provides the basis for analysis in the subsequent section of this paper.

METHODOLOGY:

All analysis are based on prescriptive perspective of stylistic studies which projects styles as a set of distinctive characteristics that identify objects, persons, periods or place. Relying on Ekqvist's (1964) submission, style focuses on the writer's choice of words, the effect on the reader and the distinguishing features of texts. The multi-dimensional perspectives of stylistic studies provides a comfortable platform and illuminating insights for the selection of data and analysis of patterns of author's choices of extra linguistic features.

Data collection procedures:

Data are selected using the embedding system. Mayring's (2014) maintained that content analytical procedures encourage the embedding of materials within a communicative context. This in turn encourages the interpreter to specify which part of the communication process he wishes to relate his conclusion from the analysed data. The data used in this paper are viewed within stylistic parameters in the selected children's prose fiction. Consequently, pictorial elements as aspect of extra-linguistic features are isolated based on the descriptive stylistic outlines and instantiation using at least two examples from the three selected works.

Data presentation and analysis

Data that best describe the major thematic concerns in the selected works are analysed using the descriptive methodology within the conceptual layer of content analysis method. Content analysis according to Stone, Dunphy, Smith and Ogilvie (1996) is "any research technique used for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics within text." Newman (1997) describes it as a "technique for gathering and analyzing the content of a text. Content, this source maintains, refers to words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes or any message that can be communicated while the text is anything written, visual or spoken that serves as a medium for communication." (pp.272-273). The data are analysed using the provision of semiotics, a structural and contextual theory, which permits pictorial contents as being iconic, symbolic, indexical and motivational signs.



Plate1 from *Abo and the Crocodile*



Plate 2 from *Abo and the Crocodile*

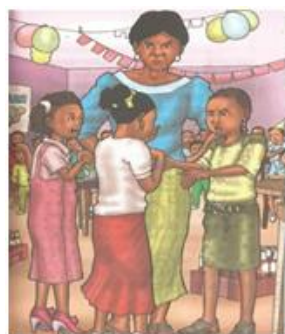


Plate 3 from *The Honest Girl*



Plate 4 from *The Honest Girl*



Plate 5 from *The Honest Girl*



Plate 6 from *The Honest Girl*

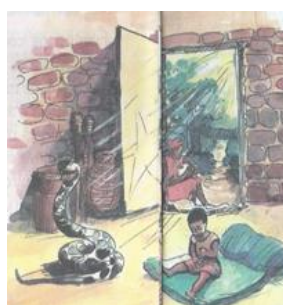


Plate 7 from *Snake Child and Star Baby*



Plate 8 from *Snake Child and Star Baby*



Plate 9 from *Snake Child and*

The thematic concerns of the selected fictions have been skillfully encoded in the linguistic choices these authors have made. To further foreground these themes, scenes and characters are illustrated to complement linguistic codes and deepen understanding as children read these works. The central message in Ekpa's *Abo and the Crocodile* is that "disobedience attracts consequences"; hope and other moral lessons that are built around the dangers of peer influences which children can readily identify with. The protagonist, Abo is

presented as a disobedient child, who goes to bath at the river against the mother's advice and gets bitten by a crocodile. To intensify the message, the picture of crocodile biting a girl's leg is shown as an iconic representation of danger occasioned by disobedience. The sight of a crocodile biting a child evokes fear. The fear of what could happen to a disobedient child is to prosper the didactic component of this text. Picture 1 is a motivational sign utilized by this author as she presents the thematic concern which borders on the consequences of disobedience. Plate 2 illustrates and symbolizes rescue by adults who are ever watchful over their children. This serves as iconic/symbolic sign of hope to build confidence in children when they find themselves in danger. Parental role in the safety of children is built into this pictorial sign. Irrespective of children's disobedience and the danger that may be associated with such acts, this picture provides a soothing impression on children as they read the story.

The prevailing messages in Nze are *The Honest Girlare*: 'it is never too late to change', good virtues are laudable and rewarding', and 'good parenting brings forth good children'. These themes have also been skillfully integrated for children. Plate 3 is an iconic picture of three girls and their teacher. Amongst the three girls is Amara, the dishonest girl wearing a gloomy look and down-cast head in the midst of other girls of her age. Amara is obviously being scolded by her teacher for dishonesty. The gloomy look on her face and the down cast position of her head is a symbolic representation of shame and dishonour. Children in middle childhood developmental stage are said to be very sensitive and following the behaviourist theory of learning which emphasizes reward as one of the motivational principles of learning, it becomes obvious that this author uses this illustration to sensitize children to cultivate the culture of honesty. In between the growth period of dishonesty and the transformation to honesty, Nze establishes in a symbolic manner, the roles of parents in the developing stages of their children. Amara's father tells a scary story of how dishonest rat and cat got chased by their 'once upon a time friends'. The picture of a chased rat and cat is iconic, indexical

and motivational. It is intended to direct children's minds towards repentance. The didactic component is built into this pictorial representation in plates 4 and 5. Amara is symbolically presented in plate 6 as an honest and radiant girl, a direct contrast to the Amara who started out as a glutton and dishonest child. This picture dialogues in contrast with picture 3 where she is being scolded for her dishonesty. In reckoning with Pierce's semiotic tradition, pictures can make meaning in children's literature. The two stages of Amara's growth are clearly illustrated by pictures that are selected from *The Honest Girl* for this analysis

Ezeigbo's thematic projections in *Snake Child and Star Baby* centre on the fact that 'resilience, commitment and hard work always lead to success; events of life are mysterious and unimaginable; and that 'solutions to human problems lie beyond comfort zones'. to foreground these themes, Ezeigbo creates a story within a story to nurture the imagination of children through the activities in the animal world created in the fiction. Picture 6 is both iconic and indexical. The image of a chased rat and cat is motivational. The didactic component of the story is built into pictures. This picture demonstrates what could happen to any creature that is dishonest and greedy. The physiological presentation of animals and activity-based illustration is to expose children to the rich African (Nigerian) heritage, 'folktales', a long standing African cultural literary resource. The story of a mysterious child who often turned into snake and the star baby is shown. Picture 7 is an iconic representation of the unimaginable co-habitation with a snake. It helps reinforce the mythical theme and leave a lasting impression in the minds of the children. The pictorial content in this text is important device as children attempt to make meaning while reading the story.

It is almost impracticable for a human being to give birth to a snake just because she ate an egg. Picture 8 teases the minds of readers as they visualize the possible form of snake child, an unimaginable paradox. The picture of a half- snake and half- human child helps to sustain reading interest. It creates the urge to discover what happens to this strange child at the end. Again, this

picture is capable of evoking multiple interpretations based on the interpreter's previous knowledge of a snake. Reptiles are dangerous and are known to attack their prey with or without provocation. It follows therefore that although Udude and Zobo are supposedly siblings, whenever Udude turns into a snake cordial relationship is impossible.

Again the picture of the family that lived happily ever after is a symbolic representation of the fact that troubles do not last forever. In the face of difficult situation, perseverance and togetherness will always lead to success and happiness in a family. Plate 9 illustrates the happy ending of an anxiety-laden story.

Conclusion

The submissions and analyses in this paper permit the conclusion that even though language is a rich resource any skillful literary artist could exploit to convey layers of meaning to readers, ideas and thoughts can also be communicated without words and sounds. The presentation and analyses of illustrations (plates) from the selected fictions indicate that pictorial contents in children's literature are meaning-making elements which complement linguistic elements and in turn, make effective, the integrated approach adopted by the selected authors in their efforts to communicate values to Nigerian children. Illustrations as elements of style have been found to be productive in the selected fictions as they have contributed to the meaning-making processes in the works. The semiotic theory has also provided adequate illuminating insight for analyses of the pictures. Pictures have been found to be iconic, indexical, symbolic and motivational contents of children's fiction. The colourful presentations are also of aesthetic value capable of providing delight and pleasure. The nexus between linguistic and extra-linguistic signs have been found to be productive in production of Nigerian children's literature.

References

Abrams, D. (2011). *Lantern books: Children's publishing success in Nigeria*. New York: Publishing perspectives

Ashimole, E. O. (1994) 'Beyond Ekwensi: Trends in Nigerian Children's Literature' In: *Current Trends in Literature and Language Studies in West Africa*. Eds. Emeyenu, E.E. and Nnolim, C.E. Ibadan; Kraft Books.

Barthes, R. (1977). *The rhetoric of the image*. In *image, music, text*, trans. Heath, S. London: Wm. Collins, Sons and Co, pp.32 – 51.

Eccles, J. (1999). The development of children Ages 6-14. *The future of children* (9) pp. 30-44. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed>.

Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press; London, Macmillan Educational Books.

Ekpa, A. (1998). *Abo and the crocodile*. Lagos. Lantern Books.

Emenyonu, E. (2017). *Children's literature in Africa: time to rethink attitudes & misconceptions*.

Enkvist, N. (1964). On defining style in applied linguistics. In Spencer, J. (Ed.) *Linguistics and style*. London: Oxford University Press. pp.1 - 56.

Ezeigbo, A. (2005). *Snake child and star baby*. Lagos. Lantern Books.

Hodrmantova, L. (2008). *Style in the literature for children: Stylistic analysis of Joseph Jacob's fairy tales*. Unpublished Thesis. Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

Jakobson, R. (1966). *Quest for essence of language*. In Waugh, J. and Mornville- Burston, N. (Eds.) *On Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mayring, P. (2014). *Qualitative content analysis. theoretical foundations, basic procedures and software solution*. Austria: Klagenfurt.

Meniru, T. (1992). *Children's literature: progress and problems*. In Ikonne, C., Oko, E. Onwudinjo, P. & Emenyonu, E. (Eds.) *Children and Literature in Africa*. Ibadan. Heineman

- Mwanzi, H. (1982). Children's literature in Kenya. An Analysis of Children's Prose Fiction. M.A. Thesis university of Nairobi.
- Neuman, W. (1997). Social research methods: qualitative approaches. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon
- Ngwu, P. (1991). *The development of functional readers for early childhood education*. Zaria: Institute of Education.
- Nordquist, R. (2017). Meaning of semiotics. Retrieved from <http://www.thoughtco.com>semiotics.d>.
- Nze, U. (2010). *The honest girl*. Lagos: Lantern Books.
- Obi C., Alhassan A., and Osugi U. (2010). Children's literature. Lagos: National Open University.
-