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Extended Abstract

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Children's Story Books Based on Van Leeuwen's Socio-Semantic Framework

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Introduction

Children's literature plays an important role in shaping children's characters by means of affecting their values and beliefs. Since every text has its own ideologies, critical analyses of children's literature can provide researchers with an understanding of the ideologies behind the texts and their possible effects on forming children's values. One of the cultural institutes officially in charge of children's literature in Iran is the Iranian Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults (IIDCYA). With over 50 years of professional work, IIDCYA has produced movies, books, films and cartoons for children, many of which have also been translated into the world's major languages. Children's books are among the most accessible products of IIDCYA for children all over Iran which except in a few studies (e.g., Rashno, 2009; Jahangiri et al., 2012; Shamsabadi et al., 2022) have not been critically and linguistically studied.

The present study, based on Van Leeuwen's (2008) socio-semantic framework, has taken a critical approach in analyzing the discourse of children's (age range 7-9 years old) story books published by IIDCYA. The following questions have been addressed in this research: How social actors have been represented in stories? What types of actions have been mostly used in stories? How actions have been legitimized?

Method

In this research, library method was used to acquire data from children's book (age range 7-9 years) published by IIDCYA. Fifteen books were chosen from Urmia's IIDCYA Center No. 1, using convenient sampling method. The titles of the books were: *Amoo-Nowruz*; *Cookies of God*; *Googooli the Hasty Wolf*; *The Squirrel that Grew Up*; *The Playful Mouse*; *A Tear and A Kiss*; *Taghi Becomes Nosy*; *Azadeh*; *The Lazy*; *Thousand Feet and Thousand Works*; *How Many Colors is the Rainbow?*; *The Nosy Ladybug*; *The Silver Fish*; *The Rainbow*; *When the Wind Blew*.

We adopted the socio-semantic framework of Van Leeuwen (2008) to analyze the data. From many features of the framework, those which were related to our research questions were adopted for analysis. The adopted features were, 1) the representation of social actors, 2) the representation of social action, and 3)

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the means of legitimation. The representation of social actors analyzes how social actors are included in the discourse (e.g., by nomination, categorization, etc.). The representation of social action studies the process types (e.g., material, mental, semiotic, etc.) and how they are attributed to social actors. Finally, legitimation analysis studies what major legitimation methods (e.g., authorization, rationalization, etc.) are employed to legitimize the action of social actors in the discourse.

Discussion and Results

The analysis of the data revealed that storybook characters have mainly been represented by nomination (73.5%), followed by categorization (22%), and indetermination (4.5%). Higher rates of nomination of characters in children's stories, which is a kind of informal identification, can be justified by referring to children's narrow social environment which is mainly limited to informal family gatherings and interaction with peers. The nominated characters are also of the age range of the target audience of the books (i.e., 7-9 years). On the other hand, categorization (specifically of "functionalization" type) is mainly seen in interim and passing characters and also in powerful social characters like "secretary", "merchant", etc., which are also stereotypically filled by male characters. The analysis of social action revealed that actions in the stories (from most to least frequent) were: material (62%), semiotic (19%), perceptive (8%), affective (6%), and cognitive (5%). The higher frequency of material actions shows that the storybooks have mainly a dynamic and lively atmosphere. Also, the higher percentage of semiotic actions indicate that characters' interactive and socio-linguistic exchanges are high. The frequencies for perceptive, affective, and cognitive processes are relatively similar and much lower than those of the material and semiotic processes. Perceptive processes have been mainly used when there was a need to direct the reader's attention to the character's mental state (by such verbs as "saw", "heard", etc.). The lowest percentage of cognitive processes may suggest that thinking and cognition do not stereotypically belong to children's realm. Finally, the data analysis showed that actions in the children's stories were legitimized mainly by instrumental rationalization (35%), theoretical rationalization (18%), and personal authority (17%). The higher frequency of instrumental rationalization suggests that authors have tried to legitimize social actions in children's book by mentioning the purpose and consequences of the actions.

Conclusion

This research aimed to critically analyze the discourse of children's (age range 7-9 years) storybooks published by IIDCYA within the framework of Van Leeuwen (2008). The data analysis was performed on three dimensions: representing social actors, social action, and legitimation. Nomination which is mainly realized in the form of using characters' first name was the most frequent strategy for representing social actors. This finding reflects the narrow social environment of children which mainly consists of informal settings of family gatherings and interaction with peers. In addition to nomination, some powerful and passing characters were functionalized by means of referring to their social and occupational roles. Functionalizations in stories were male-biased and no female characters were functionalized. As for social action, material processes followed by semiotic processes were the main strategies for representing social action in the stories. The higher frequencies of these processes were indicative of a lively, dynamic and communicative atmosphere in the stories. Cognitive processes had the least frequencies in the stories which can be a sign of a stereotypical view about children's low capacity for cognition and reasoning. This is, of course, consistent with how children are depicted in the stories: as emotional, error-prone, and irrational creatures. These stereotypes are in contrast with the research findings on children's capabilities of understanding others' mental states (for review see Calero et al., 2013; Flavell, 1999). Finally, legitimation in children's stories is mainly achieved by rationalization and then by personal authority. This means that actions in the stories are mainly justified by referring to their outcomes and purposes. Also, the higher frequency of personal authority, used as legitimation method, would indicate that authority may still be an acceptable strategy for children given that their first social institution of which they become a member is their family under their parents' authority. Given these findings, it is recommended that authors of children's stories pay attention to a balanced representation of male and female characters in occupational

roles. Also, representing children in tasks and events requiring reasoning and cognitive activities would create a more positive and constructive role models for children. In fact, children's literature should be viewed as a means for depicting an empowering image of children rather than as an arena for consolidating stereotypes.

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