Analysis of Humor Elements in Illustrated Story Books for Children[*]

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Abstract

One of the resources that make children happy are illustrated story books, which should be a part of their life in all stages of childhood. In addition to many other benefits, illustrated story books provide children with the opportunity to have fun and start integrating humor into their lives. That is why the inclusion of humor elements in children's books are important in that they make children happy and contribute to the development of skill of humor use. The aim of this study is to identify and examine humor elements in internal and external structure of illustrated story books for children aged between three to six. For this purpose, it's investigated in selected story books whether humor elements were used in book cover, pictures, texts-dialogues and characters. Data were collected using a form that was developed by the researcher. Humor literature was reviewed while preparing this form. The form was evaluated by three academics whom were experts in early childhood education and child literature. A total of 80 illustrated story books were examined. Books were analyzed by the content analysis technique. Results indicates that the most common humor element in story books as a whole was absurdity (f=228). This element was followed by incongruity (f=136), exaggeration (f=128) and surprise (f=66). Parents and teachers are required to examine closely any external and internal information about the book. They have to read the whole story and decide whether the themes are suitable for children and whether illustrations support these themes. Making children have fun and laugh, humor is a tool that has a great place in children's lives and contribute to the development of their mind, although the content of humor for children and adults may be different. Supporting these natural tendencies of children – namely, having fun and laughing – by stories and illustrations in books and plays will allow them to acquire a lot of information and develop various life skills.

Keywords: preschool, humor, children, illustrated story books

Çocuklar için Yazılmış Resimli Öykü Kitaplarında Yer Alan Mizahi Ögelerin İncelenmesi

Öz

Çocukların mutlu olmasını sağlayan kaynaklardan biri, yaşamlarında her yaş döneminde yer alması gereken resimli öykü kitaplarıdır. Resimli öykü kitapları sayısız yararlarının yanı sıra, çocukların eğlenmesi ve yaşamlarına mizahı katmaya başlamalarını sağlamak için de pek çok fırsat sunmaktadır. Bu nedenle çocuk kitaplarının mizahi ögeleri kapsama durumu çocukların hem mutlu olmaları hem de mizahı kullanma becerilerinin gelişimi açısından önemli görülmektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, üç-altı yaş çocuklar için yazılmış olan resimli öykü kitaplarının iç ve dış yapı özelliklerinde yer alan mizahi ögelerin belirlenmesi ve incelenmesidir. İnceleme kapsamına alınan öykü kitapları; kapak, görseller, öykü, metin-diyaloglar ve kahramanların özellikleri gibi başlıklarda mizahi ögeleri içermesi bakımından değerlendirilmiştir. Veriler araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilen bir form kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Bu form geliştirilirken mizah alanyazını gözden geçirilmiştir. Geliştirilen form, erken çocukluk gelişimi ve çocuk edebiyatı alanlarında uzman olan üç akademisyen tarafından değerlendirilmiştir. Araştırma kapsamında 80 resimli öykü kitabı içerik analizi tekniği ile değerlendirilmiştir. Sonuçlar incelendiğinde, en sık karşılaşılan mizahi öge olasılık dışı (f=228) olma durumudur. Bu ögeyi uyumsuzluk (f=136), abartma (f=128) ve sürpriz (f=66) olma durumu izlemektedir. Ebeveynler ve öğretmenlerin yapması gereken, kitapların iç ve dış özelliklerini dikkatlice incelemektir. Öyküler baştan sona okunmalı, temaların çocuklar için doğru seviyede aktarılıp aktarılmadığı ve görsellerin bu temaları destekleyici olup olmadığı gözden geçirilmelidir. Gülmek ve eğlenmek, dolayısıyla yetişkinlerin anlayışından farklı içerikte de olsa mizah, çocukların yaşamında oldukça yer kaplayan ve zihinlerini geliştiren bir araçtır. Çocuklarda doğal olarak var olan bu unsurları gerek kitaplardaki öykü ve görsellerle gerekse de oyunlarla desteklemek, pek çok bilgiyi çocuklara kazandırmanın yanı sıra çeşitli yaşamsal becerilerin edinilmesi için de gerekli görülmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: okulöncesi, mizah, çocuklar, resimli öykü kitapları

Introduction

The understanding of humor involves cognitive processes and problem-solving skills, and even reveals the progression from the implicit to the explicit, which illustrates transitional states of mental activity (Puche-Navarro, 2009). Humour is a blend of imagination, creativity, and play (Loizou, 2005).

Humor appreciation recruits a wide range of brain areas, which differentially activate as a function of distinct humor-inducing stimulus modalities and task requirements. Nonetheless, all of these auxiliary mechanisms seem to converge towards two core processes of humor appreciation: incongruity detection and resolution (the cognitive component); and a feeling of mirth or reward (the emotional component). None of the regions or networks underlying human humor appreciation evolved individually or in concert with another expressly for that function. Rather, the combination of several of these regions and/or networks in the service of humor appreciation became increasingly prominent in human society because of its importance in processing social information (Vrticka, Black & Reiss, 2013).

Having a good sense of humor is often considered to be an important component of social adjustment, coping to adversities and psychological well-being (Ho, Chik & Chan, 2012). Being happy and laughing are indispensable elements of human life even under the hardest conditions. These actions occur in children spontaneously and smoothly – unlike the case in adults. Children get happy and laugh owing to many details that adults sometimes hardly understand.

Over time, children develop a repertoire that includes a number of different types of humor. During the prekindergarten years, children experiment with understanding and producing nonlinguistic and linguistic humor (Fitzgerald & Craig-Unkefer, 2008). During their daily lives, children encounter many forms of humor in a variety of settings. They hear jokes and riddles, have funny stories read aloud to them, watch cartoons on television, and read books that contain humorous events and situations (Serafini & Coles, 2015).

Once children understand objects can be used in multiple ways, they can misuse objects as a joke. Similarly, once children understand the conventional nature of labels, they can mislabel objects as a joke. Finally, once children have a deeper understanding of concepts, they can make conceptual jokes. For example, they can play with various aspects of the concept 'cat': what it says, (cats say ruff), number (cats have five legs), or colour (cats are purple) (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012).

The types of humor most often observed include the performance of incongruous actions, humorous responses to incongruous actions and objects, the expression of joy during times of play, and the use of nonsense words. Other types of observed humor involve clowning, verbal or behavioral teasing, riddling, joking or playing jokes, and self-disparagement (Dowling, 2014).

It is necessary for children to be aware of the context of one idea and how that context changes, in order to be able to enjoy the funniness of the situation. Moreover, it is argued that in order for children to consider something as funny, or understand an incongruity, they have to be able to find a resolution to the specific incongruity and problem solve it. In other words, the incongruity creates a "problem" in the mind of children and when they are capable of solving that problem, thus using cognitive mental processes, they can enjoy the humor created in the situation (Loizou, 2005).

Emergence of humor perception and creation begins at very early months. According to Mireault, Poutre, Sargent-Hier, Dias, Perdue & Myrick (2012), infants' ability to create humor via clowning also increased with age, starting with simple shrieks at three months to imitating absurd actions by five months. These increases are partly potentially explained by accompanying increases in parental smiling, laughing and clowning in response to infant clowning. There are lots of studies which mention about parental affect on infant humor and it has implications for some of the major social–emotional milestones of infancy, including attachment (Mireault, Sparrow et al., 2012), social referencing (Mireault et al., 2014).

In a study that systematically examined the production of novel humorous acts, 30-month-olds intentionally mislabeled objects and produced made-up labels (e.g., 'goojooboojoo') to be funny. Also 36-month-olds were significantly more likely to laugh when producing incongruous versus congruous acts and when mislabeling versus correctly labeling objects (Hoicka & Akhtar, 2011).

Humor development in children is inextricably linked to their cognitive, perceptual, and linguistic development. Humor appreciation and engagement develop over time in the child. Initially, humor is seen when an infant elicits laughter from caregivers and then repeats that action to generate the same type of attention. In children aged 18 months to 3 years, appreciation of cartoons is present as well as enjoyment of slapstick and using objects in an unusual manner. Humor then generally moves into puns and riddles and then, as the child ages, into more subtle and complex forms. One aspect in humor development is in the growth of cognitive abilities with age. McGhee proposed a 4-stage theory for the development of appreciation of humor in children. These stages are based on the child's developing ability to recognize and produce cognitive incongruity. The use of humor has been found to relate to popularity, physical health, and adaptive well-being. It has been linked to strong pro-social skills as well as group cohesion. Temperament and communication competence has also been linked to humor and peer status (Semrud-Clikeman and Glass, 2010).

McGhee states that children progress sequentially through these stages of humor development, but the ages of the children may vary due to the uniqueness of individual development (Southam, 2005). Children's humor, from a simple mode (e.g., clowning, teasing) to an increasingly sophisticated mode (e.g., appreciating cartoons, funny pictures, and funny stories, telling riddles and jokes) demonstrates their increasing knowledge about the world. For example, when children tell riddles

or jokes and can explain why they are funny, it implies that they have concept of the funny things in their mind, evidence of their knowledge in the area (Guo, Zhang, Wang & Xeromeritou, 2011).

Humor, a method that enables minds to cope with life, develops in children thanks to good practices and experiences they have in early ages. According to Dowling (2014) as in all development, individual differences in humor skills differ based on cognitive and social development as well as personal preferences and the influences of family, peers, other significant adults, and the media.

Humor is a vehicle to establish and maintain a therapeutic alliance with children. When used positively and thoughtfully, it improves the counseling relationship and environment, helps the counselor assess the client's cognitive abilities and mental health, and teaches young clients new skills they can use in their everyday lives. Humor is a valuable therapeutic adjunct in making assessments, forming a therapeutic bond, helping children develop social skills, encouraging catharsis, addressing resistance, reframing maladaptive beliefs, and replacing rigid, self-absorbed perspectives (Berg, Parr, Bradley & Berry, 2009; Digney, 2013).

In a study, four–six-year-old children described their coping strategies for hospital-related fears. Positive images and humor is one of the most frequent strategies (Salmela, Salanterä, Ruotsalainen and Aronen, 2010). Therefore many resources about clowns (Tener, Lev-Wiesel, Franco & Ofir, 2010; Dionigi & Canestrari, 2016) and clown doctors (Ford, Courtney-Pratt, Tesch & Johnson, 2013; Arriaga & Pacheco, 2016) presents importance and positive effects of humor especially in hospitals for helping children.

As known, there are four types of humor style. Self-enhancing humor is the ability to maintain a humorous perspective in the face of stress and adversity; it is closely aligned to coping humor. Aggressive humor also enhances the self, at least in the short-term, but is done at the expense of others. Affiliative humor enhances one's relationships with others and reduces interpersonal tensions. Finally, self-defeating humor to enhance one's relationships with others, but at the expense of the self. Distinguishing between different components of humor has brought with it a clearer picture of the relationships between humor and adjustment (Fox, Hunter & Jones, 2016).

As found by Kuiper and Leite (2010), self-enhancing humor was associated with higher ratings for socially desirable personality attributes compared to the maladaptive humor styles. Self-defeating humor can have serious detrimental effects on the impressions formed by others.

By practicing humor, children can explore different avenues to connect with their peers. Their innate desire to laugh encourages children to choose funny books, which supports their development of the written word. As facilitators of children's development, educators need to prepare the environment and model humor to

support humor development in the prekindergarten years (Fitzgerald & Craig-Unkefer, 2008).

One of the resources that make children happy is illustrated story books, which should be a part of their life in all stages of childhood. Research indicates that there are many different positive effects of illustrated story books. Books can serve as an important vehicle for developing vocabulary and the word gap (Snell, Hindman & Wasik, 2015; Wasik & Hindman, 2014; Spencer, Goldstein & Kaminski, 2012).

The routine of reading and discussing books at home and school provides many benefits for young children such as establishing partnerships with families, developing early literacy and vocabulary skills, providing opportunities to learn and hone communication skills, and positively impacting personal, social, and intellectual development, supporting acceptance of children with disabilities (Ostrosky, Mouzourou, Dorsey, Favazz, & Leboeuf, 2015) and also problem solving skills (Fettig, Schultz & Ostrosky, 2015).

In addition to many other benefits, illustrated story books provide children with the opportunity to have fun and start integrating humor into their lives. That is why the inclusion of humor elements in children's books are important in that they make children happy and contribute to the development of skill of humor use.

The Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to identify and examine humor elements in internal and external structure of illustrated story books for children aged between three to six. To achieve this aim, answers to the following questions were sought:

1. Which humor elements were used in book cover, pictures, texts-dialogues and characters?

2. What are the most commonly used humor elements and examples?

Method

Model of the Research

This research is a descriptive study in the screening model using qualitative data collection techniques. Books were analyzed by the content analysis technique. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) put forth that qualitative content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.

Büyüköztürk et al. (2013), considered the content analysis a systematic, repeatable technique summarizing certain words of a text with smaller content categories using codes based on some certain rules. Çalık and Sözbilir (2014), defines the content-analysis under three sub-headings "meta-analysis, meta-synthesis

(thematic content analysis) and descriptive content analysis". Meta-synthesis synthesizes and criticises the results of studies conducted in a specific content area by creating themes or matrixes. Therefore, current research can be defined as a thematic content analysis study.

A total of 80 illustrated story books – 40 originally written in Turkish and 40 translated into Turkish – were examined for the purpose of this study. The books were published between 1993 and 2015. The illustrated story books of 80 writers from 47 different publishing houses were randomly included in the study. When selecting the books, it was paid particular attention to the fact that they weren't world fairytales or local folk stories.

The page numbers of books ranged between 13 and 47. With regard to paper quality, 65 books (81,25%) were printed on high-grade paper while 15 books (18,75%) were printed on second quality paper. There was a complete harmony between illustrations and the story in 79 books whereas such a harmony was missing in some cases in one book. There was no information on the age of target readership in 61 books (76,25%) whereas 19 books (23,75%) included information about it.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a form that was developed by the researcher. The humor literature was reviewed while preparing this form. The form was evaluated by three academics whom were experts in early childhood education and child literature. The humor elements specified after a review of literature were incongruity, exaggeration, surprise and absurdity.

Results

With regard to characters in books, it was found that the most frequently preferred figures were animals (giraffe, bear, turtle and so on) and human beings (parents, grandfather, friend and so on). These were followed, in the order of frequency, by imaginary beings (alien, witch, bugaboo, etc.), things (brush, toy, etc.), plants (daisy, tree, etc.), objects (stone, etc.) and others (vehicles).

The most common themes were differences and the beauty of differences (f=14), sharing-solidarity-collaboration (f=11), love for sibling/grandfather/mother/family (f=9), hard work-determination-struggling (f=8), protection of health/nourishing well (f=6), friendship (f=5), and protection of nature (f=4).

It was examined under the heading of plan whether the events in the books followed a rational storyline. With regard to the occurrence of events, it was found that 73 books (91,25%) had a rational storyline, four books (8,75%) had an irrational storyline in some cases, and one book had a completely irrational storyline.

Language and expression are vital for children to understand the story told. In this respect, 50 books (62,5%) were clear, explicit and easily understandable, 22

(27,5%) were not easily understandable in some cases, and eight (10%) were hardly understandable.

The letters in illustrated story books are important for the development of literacy skills of all children, regardless of whether they are literate. The font size was medium in 37 books (46,25%), between small and medium in 16 (20%), small in 13 (16,25%), between medium and large in 10 (12,5%) and large in four books (5%).

With regard to page design, it was found that text and illustration were on the same page in 63 books (78,75%) and on separate pages in 10 books (12,5%), and that mixed page design (i.e. text and illustration on same/different pages) was adopted in seven (8,75%) books.

It was examined the following book components to see whether they involved humor elements: book cover, pictures, the story as a whole, text-dialogues, and characters. The most common humor elements on book covers were, in the order of frequency, incongruity (f=38), exaggeration (f=35), absurdity (f=31) and surprise (f=2). The humor elements in pictures were exaggeration (f=48), incongruity (f=47), absurdity (f=45) and surprise (f=26). The humor elements in the story itself were, in the order of frequency, absurdity (f=56), surprise (f=17), incongruity (f=7) and exaggeration (f=1).

The most frequent humor element in text-dialogues was absurdity (f=48). This was followed by incongruity (f=16), surprise (f=15) and exaggeration (f=13). The most frequent humor elements related to story characters were absurdity (f=48), exaggeration (f=31), incongruity (f=28) and surprise (f=6).

Results indicates that the most common humor element in story books as a whole was absurdity (f=228). This element was followed by incongruity (f=136), exaggeration (f=128) and surprise (f=66). Below are some examples of humor elements selected from the books.

The examples that represent absurdity are laughing bees, talking animals, dragons, walking mummies, going to space from the rainbow, a hat with feelings and talking rocks.

Under the category of incongruity, there are animals dressed like human beings, a parrot perching on a child's head, a baby coloring itself, a child wearing her/his mother's shoes, clothes in wrong sizes or the presence of a turtle in the toilet.

The examples of exaggeration particularly in pictures were human beings and children with huge heads, emphasis on eyes in human beings and animals and a large spacecraft, and in texts were prolonged words with addition of letters such as "helloooooo" and expressions such as "the closet was so messy that one could think it was struck by storm" or "its tail was so long that one could forget its existence".

The final category – surprise – was exemplified by fish jumping like an arrow, finding five kittens in a box, a rabbit toy whose ears break apart suddenly or a crocodile swallowing a dentist. When all books are considered together, it is seen that surprises are less frequently encountered elements of humor, but that all examples under this category are supported by both illustrations and textual expressions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Humor elements may take place in many events in children's lives. Furthermore, many events, situations or themes may be presented to children with a humoristic approach. The most frequent themes in books were differences and the beauty of differences (f=14), sharing-solidarity-collaboration (f=11), love for siblings/grandfather/mother/family (f=9), hard work-determination-struggling (f=8), protection of health/nourishing well (f=6), friendship (f=5), and protection of nature (f=4). Children can become happy easily. They prefer spending more time with any objects, cases or people that draw their attention and make them happy. From this perspective, the presence of elements that have a humoristic nature and make them happy in books is important for enhancing what they gain from books.

Supporting other studies in the literature, the results indicate that the most frequent humor elements in books were absurdity (f=228), incongruity (f=136), exaggeration (f=128) and surprise (f=66). While some books involved more than one of these elements, some more didactic books or books focusing on providing information involved only one or maximum two humor elements. Although the illustrations were appropriate in these books, it is still thought that children are less likely to find these books attractive and thus to make use of information provided in such books. Many authors agree that at the core of humour lies incongruity, that is, a simultaneous concurrence of elements that either contradict each other or are surprising or shocking (Šeďová, 2013).

The enjoyable feelings associated with funny texts and surprising events provide a powerful motivation for children to seek out humor in their daily lives. It is important to remember that humorous texts often contain sophisticated elements of satire, irony, and parody and require readers to think and use their imaginations to associate one event or character with another. What may first look like a simple, funny book may in fact require readers to think in more complex and sophisticated ways (Serafini & Coles, 2015).

However, on the other hand, stories that include only elements of fun and attractiveness and written for the mere purpose of consumption are also less likely to be beneficial for children. It was noted that some books included wrong information about life. The most obvious example was the story of a turtle that got bored of its shell and got rid of it to take a tour. Such things that never happen in real life do not have positive impacts on development of imagination and may cause children to acquire wrong information about life.

Although the difference is not so great, it can be said that the humor elements are more often found in translated books as both number and type. Especially in the Turkish books published in the last five years, the humorous approach was found to be more preferred.

Information on the age of target readership is not provided in only 19 books (23,75%). From the perspective of publishing houses that market and sell books, information on age of target readership may be a factor restricting target audience. However, such information plays a guiding role for educators and particularly parents to make rights choices.

It is a positive aspect that the characters in books are mostly human beings and animals, since they make it easier for children to establish connections between stories and their own lives. This enables children to see and consider these beings – a part of their lives – from a different perspective.

The fact that most of the books are printed on high-grade paper and that there is a total harmony between illustrations and stories in all books excluding one of them point out the importance given to children's books.

Any information on the age of target readership is of primary importance when adults are selecting books for children. With regard to the books examined in this study, it was noted that the information on the age of readership was in some cases misguiding. Therefore, adults (i.e. parents and teachers) are required to examine closely any external and internal information about the book. They have to read the whole story and decide whether the themes are suitable for children and whether illustrations support these themes.

Not only selecting books for children but also selecting books with children become important as they grow. Children may tend to choose books with colorful and glittering covers, produced only for the purpose of consumption. At this point, adults are required to offer right alternatives for children and enable them to make a choice among these alternatives. It is suggested that parents and educators consider whether the books include humor elements when they are selecting books for children.

Ownership of books can be a powerful motivator to children. Children showed increased interest in reading and improved some of their literacy skills (e.g., asking questions, pretend reading, predicting happenings in the story, answering comprehension questions, drawing pictures, writing sentences, and looking at the pictures and making their own meaning). Ownership of a storybook by young children seemed to have had an influence on family involvement and child-parent/s interactions (Tadesse & Washington, 2013).

Making children have fun and laugh, humor is a tool that has a great place in children's lives and contribute to the development of their mind, although the content of humor for children and adults may be different. Supporting these natural

tendencies of children – namely, having fun and laughing – by stories and illustrations in books and plays will allow them to acquire a lot of information and develop various life skills.

It is believed that life skills such as finding various alternatives for problem solving, coping with unfavorable experiences, systemizing feelings in an appropriate way and communicating with living and nonliving things in the environment are inevitable for individual and social development. That is why all people, primarily children, need humor as well as resources that involve humor (for example story books, novels, toys, drama and films) in life.

Children should be encouraged to use humor elements in the stories they create and the pictures they make. Positive feedback should be given when they use the right humor elements in educational activities or daily life. Children may also encounter examples of correct and developing humor elements in theater plays.

Book authors and illustrators should improve their knowledge of child development and better understand children's world of emotion and thought. Be aware of the importance of humor for children and be able to create products for children's literature. Book reading activities can be arranged so that authors and illustrators can share their works directly with children in order to provide this.

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