

A Linguistic Assessment of Persian Children's Narrative Literature in Reading Level of 'a'

Farnaz Fakh Fardowsi
Shahla Sharifi
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

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Abstract

The present study linguistically investigates 20 books which have been chosen from among different children books that belong to the reading level of 'a'. First 20 sentences in each book (overall number of sentences were 400) were analyzed. The achieved findings of the article indicated that all children stories linguistically have one thing in common: simple vocabulary and sentences. But gradually, by increasing the reading level of the book and children's linguistic growth, vocabulary and sentences become more compound and structures get less simple. Statistical analysis demonstrated that direct quotations were mostly utilized in the books which can be an indication of their simplicity, since indirect quotations are fairly complicated and incomprehensible for children. Present tense is also another matter of simplification; therefore, present tense is more used in reading level of a. Besides, there is such a rule about applying transitive and intransitive verbs in children stories. Transitive verbs and monomorphemic vocabularies are very often in the books with reading level of a. Collocations and oppositions are respectively of higher frequency among various semantic features. By and large, a conclusion can be drawn that stories for children are written on the basis of specific norms which are correspondent with their understanding, so children's books' writers should consider a child's worldview and attitude towards life when writing a story.

Keywords: 1- Children Narratives' Literature 2- Structural Features 3-Lexis Features 4-Semantic Features

1. Introduction

The importance of children, principal resources of each country, is undeniably accepted by all nations; therefore, governors and politicians have made their attempts to educate and train

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this young generation. The authors who write children's and teenagers' stories should be aware of their accurate and difficult duty. Children's narrative literature is one of the major branches of literature. If literature cannot be thoroughly defined, children's literature cannot be characterized either. Moreover, a clear definition of children's narrative literature is needed to demonstrate the association between children's literature and linguistics.

Various dictionaries have defined literature as a type of science which is associated with literary works. It is alleged that literature designates any product of human thoughts, feelings and emotions which is set down in verbal images and different forms and schemas (Hejazi, 2000, p. 18).

In the *Encyclopaedia of Children and Adolescents*, Mirhadi and Jahan Shahi (1992) defined children and adolescents' literature as all writings and poems which are artistically and literally valuable and specifically written for children and adolescents.

Children's literature must not be qualitatively lower than adults' literature and even, it should pay more attention to the children's capabilities, needs, facilities and period of time in which they are living. Due to the fact that this type of literature is written for young and inexperienced readers, it should be formed more creatively, artistically and constructively.

Considering from the reader-oriented viewpoints, children's literature is distinct from adults' literature due to their age and reading proficiency.

In Persian narrative literature, reading levels are classified under five groups which can be explained in the following manner: reading level of 'a' belongs to the children under the age of 8; reading level of 'b' refers to the children range in age from 8 to 10; reading level of 'c' designates the teenagers' range in age from 10 to 12; reading level of 'd' shows the adolescents from 12 to 15; reading level of 'e' refers to the adolescents from 15 to 19 (Ghafari, 2000, p. 4).

2. Review of Literature

Previously, children's narrative literature was not regarded as a distinct branch of literature. It does not mean, however, that only recently such kind of literature has been created, since it existed far back but was not considered separately.

After Renaissance, the West experienced great advances in scientific and literary fields. They could make a connection between nature and culture. Children's literature was also

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affected and faster propagation of new ideas was seen in this field. In 18th century, philosophers such as Rousseau paid more attention to children and their training. In 19th and 20th century, more need was felt and some scholars decided to create a new branch of literature specifically regarded for children to discover their talents and aptitudes (Hosseinayi, 2002, p. 78).

In developed countries, children's narrative literature has taken up its position among other literary fields. Chukovsky (1963), Chomsky (1972), Cullinan et al. (1974) and Parcell-Gates' (1988) researches demonstrate that children's acquisition of literature – poetry and narrative – at an early age can affect their vocabulary, syntax and semantics in their adulthood. Jean Jacques Rousseau and Hans Christian Andersen are among the scholars who paid much attention to children's literature. Andersen is widely remembered as writer of children's books, encouraging creativity in folk stories. He brought this genre to a new level, as we know it today.

In Iran, children's literature was known after constitutional (Mashrooteh) revolution during the early 1900's. Under the influence of constitutional revolution, not only was literature generally changed, but also children's literature was deeply affected. Some scholars who wrote impressive literary works for children can be named as follows: Abdolrahim Talbouf, Fazlollah Sobhi, Jabbar Asgarzadeh (Baghchehban), Abbas Yamini Sharif, and Samad Behrangi.

In 1962, Children's Book Council of Iran (CBC) was established. One of the most important objectives of this council was assessing and choosing appropriate books for children and adolescents. Special attention was given to children's literature after the revolution.

Many scholars have investigated children's literature from different applied, social, moral and psychological viewpoints, but rarely conducted focused linguistic research. They paid more attention to moral, cultural and narrative features. It should be noticed that the most important element which first affect a child to continue reading or rejecting the book is its language. As a matter of fact, an appropriate language and style of writing is highly influential in meeting moral, religious and cultural objectives. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that recently, scholars have conducted more researches relating to the use of language in children's literature.

3. Research Methodology

Target population of the current study consisted of 20 narrative books from the reading level of a. All of the books are written in Persian, not translated into Persian. First 20 sentences

in each book (overall number of sentences were 400) were analyzed based on structuralism. The obtained data were classified according to structural, lexical and semantic features. Owing to the fact that each country's literature is closely associated with its culture, cultural issues should be also assessed in written and spoken forms of literature.

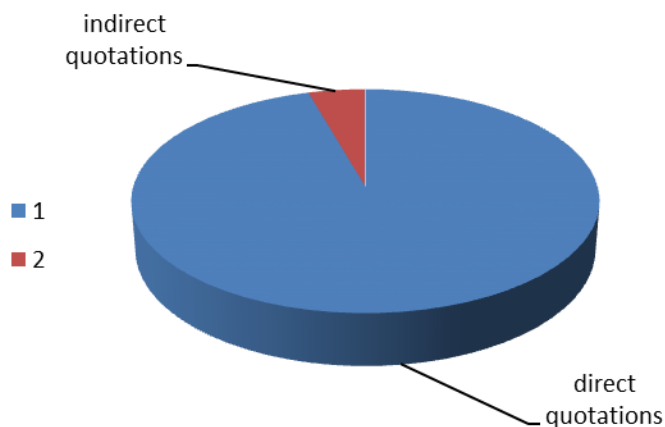
4. Data Analysis

4.1. Structural Features of the Reading Level of 'a'

In this section, structural features of the sentences are analyzed. For instance, the frequency of simple, compound, affirmative, imperative, interrogative, incomplete and unordered sentences was analyzed. Direct and indirect quotations, simple and compound conjunctions are also regarded as structural features.

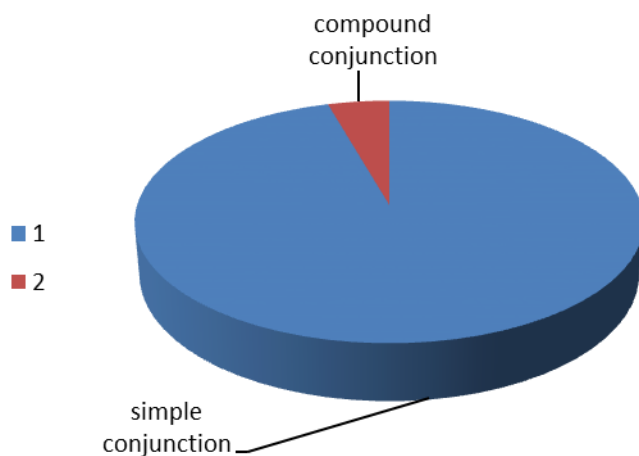
Considering the achieved findings in which 400 sentences were analyzed from the books with reading level of a, statistical results can be explained in the following manner: the frequency of simple, compound, affirmative, imperative, interrogative, incomplete and unordered sentences are respectively about 2.9, 1.9, 4.7, 0, 0.1, 0.1, 0.3. As it can be noticed, affirmative and simple sentences are of higher frequencies among other structural features.

Diagram 4.1 Frequency of direct and indirect quotations among sample sentences in reading level of a



As it is obvious, the frequencies of direct and indirect quotations are respectively about 9.8 and 0.2 which indicate their simplicity, since indirect quotations are fairly complicated and incomprehensible for children; therefore, the authors have used more simple direct quotations.

Diagram 4.2 Frequency of simple and compound conjunctions with reading level of a



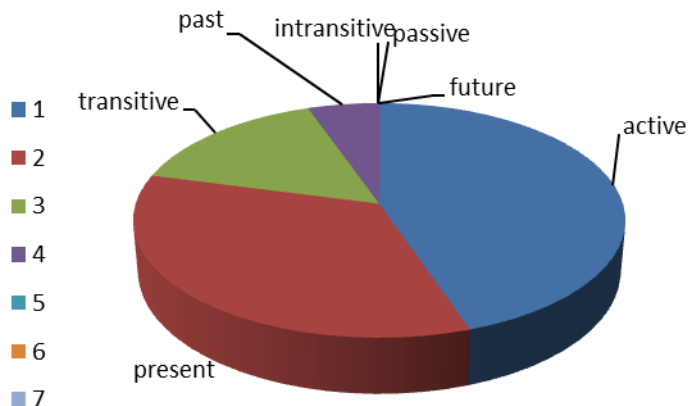
According to the diagram 4.2, frequencies of simple and compound conjunctions are respectively 9.6 and 0.4 which indicates much application of simple conjunctions in the sentences. Due to the fact that readers are young children, the stories should be short, comprehensible and plain in a way that children do not get tired when reading the text. Moreover, sentence structure should be easily understandable for children and should not distract their attention from the story.

According to Hodayi (2002, p. 291), the narratives which are written for children under the age of 8 should include limited vocabularies, short sentences and brief story. Examined books in this study also included short texts and fluent languages.

4.2. Lexical Features of the Reading Level of ‘a’

Lexical features include different types of verbs (intransitive, transitive, active, passive sentences, past, present, future tense, relative clauses), nouns (common, proper, concrete and abstract nouns), and lexicon (adjective and adverb), monomorphemic and multimorphemic (derivative, compound, derivative-compound) vocabulary.

Diagram 4.3 Frequency of different perfect verbs in reading level of ‘a’



Regarding the above diagram, the frequencies of active, present, transitive, past, intransitive, passive and future verbs are respectively about 3.3, 2.1, 1.7, 1.5, 1.4, 0 and 0. The current study proves that books which are written for children under 8 years old are comprehensible and enjoyable for children. Owing to the fact that present tense is more understandable for children, authors have used present tense more than other types in children’s stories. For a child with the reading level of ‘a’, comprehending sentences in which passive and intransitive verbs are used is difficult. They cannot produce statements including passive verbs either. According to available research in first language acquisition, children under 8 learn active structure sooner than other structures. They learn passive and future structures at last levels of language acquisition (Piaget, 1981, p. 37). It is noticed that perfect verbs were used in the stories with the high frequency of 1989 times (9.5) and relative verbs with frequency of 112 times (0.5). It should be pointed out that perfect verbs include various types such as past and present tenses, and high frequency of present tense verbs has caused the aforementioned difference.

In the stories which are appropriate for under 8-year-old children, the frequencies of common, concrete, proper and abstract nouns are respectively about 4.5, 3.4, 0.5 and 1.6. Considering the fact that children’s perception of a story is controlled by their familiarity with the lexicon, choosing the words is of great importance in children’s literature. On the basis of obtained data, perception of common nouns is easier than proper nouns for children. For instance, a child can figure out the word ‘flower’ simpler than ‘jonquil’ which is a proper noun.

Furthermore, since children do not have a thorough perception of abstract ideas, they cannot visualize abstract nouns in their mind.

In children's literature with the reading level of 'a', monomorphemic lexicons' frequency is about 7.5, but multimorphemic lexicons' frequencies such as compound, derivative and derivative-compound nouns are respectively about 2.2, 0.3, and 0; therefore, monomorphemic words are of higher frequency in proportion to multimorphemic ones. And among multimorphemic lexicons, compound nouns are of higher frequency in proportion to derivative and derivative-compound nouns. Besides, derivative nouns' frequency is higher than derivative-compound nouns'.

4.3. Semantic Features of the Reading Level of 'a'

Semantic features are mostly at the level of word and sentence and include collocation, opposition, polysemy, synonymy, homonymy, hyponymy and semantic contrast. Semantic feature of collocation has occurred 47 times in the stories and its frequency is about 5.5; the feature of opposition has also occurred 20 times with the frequency of 2.4. These two features have had higher frequencies in proportion to other semantic features. This result could be predictable due to the very common usage of collocations by language speakers which can reflect a part of their culture. Children should also learn collocations when learning their language to be able to use communication skills, so authors ought to regard the issue of collocations when writing a narrative for children.

5. Conclusion

Considering the achieved results from assessing children's books in reading level of 'a', a conclusion can be drawn that the applied language in children's narrative literature should be similar to the spoken language; therefore, the shorter the sentences are, the easier their comprehension and reading are. Sentences which include more than four or five words are difficult to understand for new learners. Direct quotations are simpler to understand in proportion to indirect quotations, so the frequency of direct quotations is higher. In children's narrative literature, text's simplicity is retained from the beginning to end. Children's stories should be short, simple and understandable. Sentences and structures ought to be easy to comprehend for a child, since complex structures drive children to distraction during the process of reading the

story. So, authors of children's literature should meet the criteria of simplicity and comprehensibility when writing.

Owing to the fact that present tense can be understood simpler than other tenses, authors use it more in the books with reading level of 'a'. Words in children's narrative literature should be simple and easily pronounceable. They should be chosen in accordance with the children's knowledge and range of vocabulary. As it can be noticed, monomorphemic words are utilized much more than multimorphemic ones. Abstract nouns are of low frequency in children's narrative literature. Opposition is the only familiar semantic feature for children from their birth date. For example, 'father' and 'mother' are oppositions which have been unconsciously used by children, although they do not have any perception of this specific semantic feature. It is claimed that the semantic feature of opposition is of the highest frequency, but it has been proved that collocations occur most compared to all other categories in various children's books written for different ages and reading levels. It can be the consequence of existing lexical and cultural interference between children and adults' literature. Regarding the fact that the semantic feature of collocation is culture-based, authors have used it to prevent from boring repetitions and intangible lexicons.

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Farnaz Fakhri (Corresponding author)
M.A. in linguistics
Linguistics Department
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad

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Farnaz Fakhri Ferdowsi and Shahla Sharifi

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PO box 91779-48974, Park Square
Mashhad
Iran
farnaz_f_1365@yahoo.com

Shahla Sharifi
Linguistics Department
Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
PO box 91779-48974
Park Square
Mashhad
Iran
sh-sharifi@um.ac.ir