



Analysis of Children's Language in Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*

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Abstract

Maurice Sendak, a famous children's literature writer, his work deserves analysis from many aspects. In this article, the target literature is Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. At the very beginning, the author will first analyze the target audience. Next, from the angle of the children's audience, the sentence structure, the use of the conjunction "and", and the repetition will be analyzed, and a comparison between children's language and adult language. Then, some special children's features like time concept and picture language will be analyzed and connected to children's inner world. Last but not least, a conclusion will be given according to the features summarized in the above aspects. To be more specific, the results are, firstly, children prefer to use the conjunction "and" to connect many words, phrases, and sentences, which may help create a vivid picture. Besides, repetition is another feature of child language, which adults seldom do.

Keywords

Children's Literature; Language; Child Language

Introduction

Maurice Sendak is a famous children's book writer, who has been studied for their influence on children's literature for many years. His *Where the Wild Things Are* is one of his representative works. It narrates a magic story of a little boy named Max. The story begins with Max wearing a wolf suit, and running around in his house, which causes him to be punished by his mom. Then his room becomes a real forest. Wondering what is in the forest, Max gets his own ship, travels overseas, and meets the wild things. They roar and threaten Max. He commands them to be still, and he thus becomes the king of the wild things. Max punishes the disobedient wild things by sending them to bed without supper, thus disciplining them in the same way his mother had disciplined him. Finally, Max feels hungry and goes back home where he finds his supper waiting still hot. In this essay, I will mainly focus on children's language. Sendak uses a lot of age-appropriate language to portray the image of children and his imaginative world in this book. I will analyze the children's language from discussing the book's audience to simple sentence structures, its frequent use of the word "and" to connect several words and sentences, its use of repetitions, and its description of time in terms that a child could readily understand.

1. The Audience of *Where the Wild Things Are*

This book surely has more than one audience. Children like reading this book because it has a lot of pictures and it is very interesting for children because kids could be the king of the wild things. While audience, especially the parents of the children readers of the book, is the other group of audience. To satisfy different audiences, the purpose of a child book should focus on different needs. According to Delenko, et al., children's literature is a good way to cultivate children's moral principles and cognition (Valentyna Delenko et al., 2024). For example, in *Where the Wild*

Things Are, in the forest, it seems that it is the wild things did something wrong. To be more specific, they roar and threaten Max. Actually, it reflects Max's inner world that it is Max who played a wild thing and threatened his mom. Therefore, Max punished the wild things for threatening him, which reflects Max already knows that he did wrong to threaten his mom, which definitely causes that he has been punished by his mom. While reading these few pictures, children audience could pick up the discipline that if they threaten their mom, they might be punished. Besides children's audience, adults are another group of audience. Similarly, Balog et al narrate that family reading is a good way to support children's language development (Livia Gabriela Campos Balog et al., 2024). Therefore, choosing good children's literature is meaningful for developing children's language expression and understanding. Since little children don't know how to read, parents and other caregivers spend a lot of time reading children's books to children. Adults may prefer books with colorful pictures which can draw children's attention, and with educational meaning which can let children learn certain social rules. Therefore, good children's literature would satisfy both target groups of audiences.

2. The Language Features

After analyzing the target audience, the major audience should be the children group. In this paragraph, I am going to analyze the sentence structure in children's literature from the linguistics field. Even there are not many sentences in *Where the Wild Things Are*. However, the readers could tell that the language is different from adults' literature books. In order to make the literature more academic or advanced, the authors of adults' books may prefer to use more complex sentence structures and more academic language, which is unfamiliar to children and could cause difficulties in understanding the content of the book for children. Therefore, Children's languages have their own features. According to Vida, children's language has features like creativity, for example, they prefer to use language while playing and imagination (Otouji, 2024). Sentence structures in *Where the Wild Things Are* are always in an imaginative situation. Therefore, they are easy for children to read and understand. Children don't have much knowledge about this world, so they can accept better if the book is simple and accords with children's inner world. If a mother reads some academic books like linguistic theory and calculus, children may feel very bored, confused, and thus unable to pay attention. If things go on like this, children may lose their interest in books. It is harmful to children's language and cognition development, for example, because of losing interest in reading books, these children may have a lower reading ability than other children. Maxim Gorky states that "Books are the ladder of human progress", which points out the importance of reading books. For one thing, parents could read out loud for their kids from which children could gain listening, critical thinking, and comprehension ability (Jennet Senawati et al., 2021). Most parents would like to let their children read more books rather than lose interest in reading books. Thus, simple sentence structure is more suitable for children. Most children are more willing to accept something easy to understand.

Simple sentence structure could raise children's attention and attract their interest in reading. To be more specific, if the sentence structure is similar to their daily conversation, it will be better for children to build his or her imaginative world and connect the imagination with reality through "daily conversation-like" sentences. The sentence structure in *Where the Wild Things Are* is like what a child says in his or her daily life. For example, the author uses a lot of "and" to connect some words, for example, "a forest grew and grew and grew" (7-11). Two "and" and three "grew" seem like a forest is growing, which describes a very vivid picture for young children. Adults seldom speak like the above sentence. Instead, they may describe the same thing as "the forest grew to great heights". Or if they use the word "and" to describe something, it may go like "I went to the office, submitted my reports, and had a rest." The difference is obvious that adults use some commas and only one "and" at the end of the sentence. We cannot say that adults never use "and" to connect several words. According to English grammar, "and" is a conjunction that is used to connect two parallel words, phrases, or sentences. If there are more than two words or phrases that need to be connected, the punctuation comma is used rather than use more than one "and". In formal English writing, the comma splice is a common mistake for non-native speakers (Fransiska Dewi Hastuti, 2023). Adults who use "and" to connect several words or phrases may seem too oral or not being well-educated. However, sometimes especially when an adult is talking to children or writing a children's storybook, they may also use this kind of sentence structure, whose purpose is to create a children familiar atmosphere and make children willing to read. Usually, using several "and" in the same sentences is mainly mentioned by children. Thus, many children talk by using a lot of "and" to connect the same words or phrases. Frequently using the same word in an adult's writing may seem as lack of vocabulary quantity.

What is more, Sendak also uses a lot of “and” to connect many sentences which describe one action after another, so several complete sentences become one long sentence, for example, on pages 11-13 of *Where the Wild Things Are*, “...until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max and.....” (pp. 11-13). In this long sentence, it has three “and” and the function of these “and” is similar to the “and” which connects several words. It shows several vivid pictures in readers’ minds of what happens next. For children, it may show like an interesting cartoon with pictures by pictures. In adults’ world, they always separate sentences by using a period or other complex conjunctions such as adverbial clauses, presentation participles, and many other grammar methods. Adults might describe the same things like “...until his ceiling with vine while the walls became the world all around. Suddenly, there is an ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max.” No matter use several “and” to connect words or sentences, they describe one of the features of how children talk. Similar to adults not using the conjunction “and” to connect more than two words and phrases, adults won’t use “and” to connect two independent sentences, which may cause the sentence to be the running sentences and show that the writer’s writing skill is not well-developed.

By mentioning the two features of using the conjunction “and” in child language, one is using and connecting more than two words and phrases to create a vivid picture, another is to use and connect two independent sentences to create a cartoon in front of the readers, the difference between adults’ language and children language is obvious. To analyze it deeper, it shows the feature of repetition in children’s language.

In *Where the Wild Things Are*, there are a lot of repetitions of language, for example, the beginning part of the adventure and the ending have similar sentences, “sailed back a year and in and out of weeks and through a day” (Sendak, 1963). Children like to repeat once and once again. Also, in the front part, Sendak uses “and” to connect the three same words “grew.” It also shows language repetition. On the one hand, children might not have many vocabulary to describe the same things. They have less knowledge than teenagers and adults, for example, they have fewer vocabularies and they never learn to change another word to describe the same thing. Instead, some teenagers may take writing classes and be told by their teachers that they should reduce duplication in their articles; also they can change some alternatives to make their article more colorful. On the other hand, children used to repeat. They repeat one word several times when they learn it the first time. Or they just think this word has an interesting pronunciation or an interesting meaning, so they are glad to repeat it. In the country, adults have already accumulated a certain amount of vocabulary. They have more possibility to change words according to different situations and environments. Thus, repetition is another feature of children’s language.

3. Children’s Time Concept

Time concept is another interesting thing that reflects children’s world. When Max begins to travel, it describes the time from a day to a year. But when Max sailed back, it described the time from a year to a day. Some children, especially younger children have no concept of time. They think that the time is like a road. It starts in a day and ends in a year. If children want to go back, they will start from the endpoint a year to the start point a day. They think that time goes back and has its own direction. Therefore, it shows the children’s world vividly and subtly. However, an adult knows clearly that time will never go back. If the same sentence were in an adult’s mind, it would be described as “it spends several days/weeks/years.” Therefore, this is a feature of children because adults can know clearly what the time is.

4. Picture Language

Last but not least, as a children’s book, pictures are also important languages. In a child’s world, there may be fewer words but more pictures since pictures are easier to understand for children. As we all know, pictogram, which is one of the ancient characters, originates from pictures. Therefore, it is obvious that pictures can convey thoughts, descriptions, and narrations. For analyzing pictures in *Where the Wild Things Are* when the forest grows, it does not grow in Max’s room but in Max’s imaginative world. From this picture, what the author describes happens in the imagination rather than in reality. However, readers may pay less attention to this starting point. Most adult readers may follow the author and enter into the children’s imagination. While children readers may not totally distinguish imagination and reality, it is not important for them. Children just focus on the fascinating plots in the story. In another picture, when Max is sailing, there is his name “Max” on the boat, which means he is the master of the boat. Even though the author does not mention by world, readers can see that wild things have some human features like human-

like hair, human-like eyes, clothes, and human-like standing. The picture language shows that in Max's heart, the wild things are some features of human beings that children are afraid of. Max may want to be against certain rules between adults and children like he is punished by her mom because of threatening her. However, he can resist those rules and feature in his own imagination. Therefore, the pictures in *Where the Wild Things Are* clearly show the hidden information which does not show by the words.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, starting with an analysis of the target audience of the readers, followed by analyzing children's language features, and the analysis of pictures, *Where the Wild Things Are* uses children's language to portray children. Sendak uses simple sentence structure which is friendly to children to read and understand. He uses some repetitions to imitate children's language. He also captures the time concept in children's world and describes it in children's language. He uses the word "and" to connect many words and many complete sentences. Not only in his *Where the Wild Things Are* but also in his *In the Night Kitchen*, Sendak uses "and" to connect several words, for example, "But right in the middle of the steaming and the making and the smelling and the baking" (Sendak, 1970). In this sentence, he uses three "and." In the future, people can find more children's picture books to see whether other authors also use "and" to connect words or sentences, whether it is a common feature of children's books, and how the audience's feedback of authors express children's language by using "and" to connect words and sentences.

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