

Studies on Elaborate Visual Approaches Consolidating a Story in Wordless Picturebooks

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of the present study is to dissect the advantages and effectiveness of wordless picturebooks and to provide a mechanistic basis underlying the expression. Despite the fact that there are many significant wordless picturebooks in our society, very few studies have been conducted. One of the reasons is that so far, picturebooks have been treated as an art form that is composed of an interdependence of pictures and words, and this interdependence has been considered as a unique point of the picturebook approach. It acts as the most significant barrier of research on wordless picturebooks, however it may be the time to revisit and examine the approach in detail. This study offers an overview and reassessment of previous studies, and also analyzes representative examples of wordless picturebooks, such as *Un jour, un chien* (1982), *L'œuf* (1983), *The Arrival* (2006) and 13 other books retelling one famous story.

While many researchers have shown the interdependence of pictures and words is strong and dominating, the present study shows that practically the relationship between pictures and words in regular picturebooks is not fixed but the balance fluctuates. For instance, ordinary picturebooks sometimes reduce the number of words in some parts, and a group called “almost wordless picturebooks” uses only a few words per book, leaving most of the roles to express and transmit the stories to pictures. From these examinations, it seems reasonable that wordless picturebooks have been extended or evolved from the wordless parts of ordinary picturebooks. This must be considered as emergence of the style in which every role to express the story lies on pictures.

This study further investigated drawing materials, composition, colors, viewpoint position, story structure and story content in concrete examples. As a result, it appears that these books have common characteristics: ingenuity to manifest the protagonist, have many pictures per scene, have sequences of repetition and contrast, make full use of symbolic things and rely on readers' knowledge as a precondition. Furthermore, the books have other significant features, such as to express existence or situations that are unable to be expressed in words, to pursue symbolical and metaphorical expression, to leave various interpretations to readers' imagination, and to challenge new expressions.

This study thus establishes a basis for the research of wordless picturebooks and clarifies mechanistic insights. Whereas this work does not cover all the characteristics inherent to wordless picturebooks' expression, it delineates representative points of mechanism, meaning and significance.

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of the present study is to dissect the advantages and effectiveness of wordless picture books and to provide a mechanistic basis underlying the unique expression. In her book *Crossover Picturebooks*, Sandra Beckett, one of the few researchers of wordless picturebooks, wrote:

Over the past thirty years, wordless picturebooks have gradually established themselves as a distinct genre of sub-genre within the realm of children’s books. Since the late 1990s, there has been a marked surge in the number of wordless picturebooks being produced; they seem to have become a contemporary publishing trend in many countries. (Beckett, 2012)¹

Two lists of wordless picturebooks have been published. *Wordless/Almost Wordless Picture Books: A Guide* lists 685 titles, and *Wonderfully Wordless: The 500 Most Recommended Graphic Novels and Picturebooks*, lists 500 titles. Despite the fact that there are many significant wordless picturebooks in our society, very few studies have been conducted for theoretical dissections of the approach. However, as the number of, and people’s interest in, wordless picturebooks has been increasing, it may be time to revisit and examine the advantages and effectiveness of the approach in detail. This study offers an overview and reassessment of previous studies.

2. METHOD

To re-examine the position of wordless picturebooks, this study uses two approaches. One is reassessment of previous studies, and the other is investigation of parts with no words in ordinary picturebooks. The wordless parts of ordinary picturebooks are a similar representation to wholly wordless books.

To explore the uniqueness of the expression, this study analyzes representative examples of picturebooks. The first samples to examine are 26 books in the series of *Ernest et Célestine* (1981-2000), these books have both parts with words and no words. Through analyzing these 26 books, a connection between ordinary picturebooks and wordless picturebooks appears. Wordless picturebooks which are analyzed in detail in this paper are leading examples, such as *Un jour, un chien* (A Day, a Dog, 1982), *L’œuf* (The Egg, 1983), *The Arrival* (2006). These were selected because these books have difficult content which seems hard to express without words, and include many devices to solve the problem. In addition, this paper picks up 13 other books retelling a famous story “Little Red Riding Hood”. The 13 books represent international authors. Five are Hungarian, three are Spanish, two are English, and the other authors are Belgian, Swiss and German. In addition, the styles vary greatly (Figure 1).

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| 1. Warja Lavater, <i>Le Petit Chaperon Rouge</i> , Adrien Maeght Editeur, 1965 | 8. Rutkai Bori, <i>PIROSKA ÉS A FARKAS</i> , Csimota Könyvkiadó, 2007, n.d. |
| 2. John S. Goodall, <i>LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD</i> , Margaret K. McElderry Books, 1988 | 9. Juanjo G. Oller, <i>y recuerda...</i> , millimbo, 2011 |
| 3. Rascal, <i>Le petit chaperon ROUGE</i> , PASTEL, 2002 | 10. Katharine McEwen, <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> , Collins, 2010 |
| 4. Baranyai András, <i>Rotkäppchen</i> , Csimota Könyvkiadó, n.d. | 11. Pedro Perles, <i>Caperucita Roja</i> , MilyunCuentos, 2010 |
| 5. Balogh Andrea, <i>Caperucita Roja</i> , Csimota Könyvkiadó, 2007 | 12. Adolfo Serra, <i>Caperucita Roja</i> , Narval Editores, 2011 |
| 6. Kárpáti Tibor, <i>PIROSKA ÉS A FARKAS</i> , Csimota Könyvkiadó, 2006 | 13. Frank Flöthmann, “Rotkäppchen”, <i>Grimms Märchen ohne Worte</i> , DuMont Buchverlag, 2013 |
| 7. Takács Mari, <i>Le petit chaperon rouge</i> , Csimota Könyvkiadó, n.d. | |

Figure 1. List of 13 books retelling a story “Little Red Riding Hood”

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Pictures and Words as Two Components of Picturebooks and Wordless Expression

¹ Sandra Beckett, 2012, *Crossover Picturebooks*, New York: Routledge, 83

While many researchers have shown the interdependence of pictures and words is strong and dominating², the present study shows that practically the relationship between pictures and words in regular picturebooks is not fixed but the balance fluctuates. For instance, ordinary picturebooks sometimes reduce the number of words in some parts, and a group called “almost wordless picturebooks” uses only a few words per page or per book, leaving most of the roles to express and transmit the stories to pictures. From these examinations, it seems reasonable that wordless picturebooks have been extended or evolved from the wordless parts of ordinary picturebooks. This must be considered as an emergence of the style in which every role to express the story is on pictures (Figure 2).

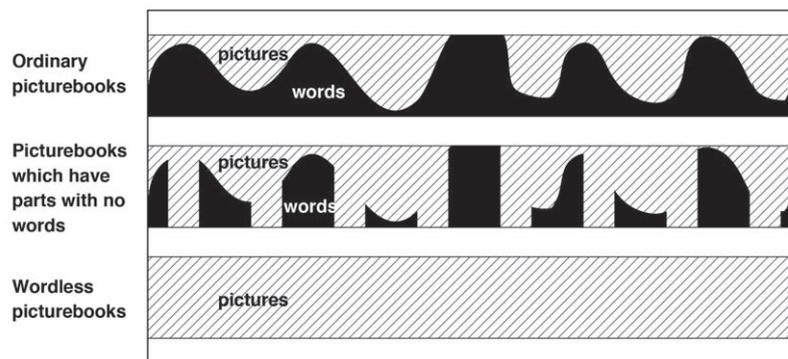


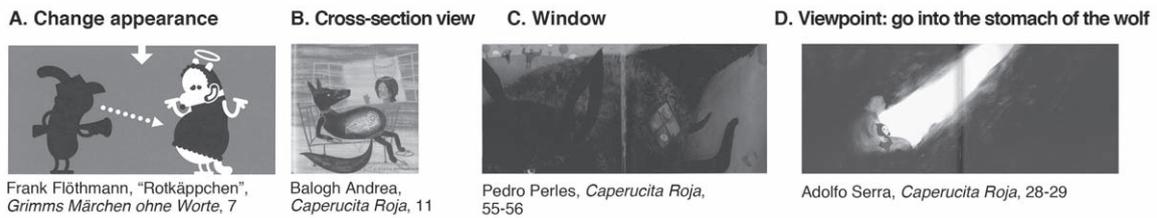
Figure 2. Various balances of words and pictures.

The 26 books in the series of *Ernest et Célestine*, have both parts with words and no words, and it appears that the wordless parts are closely connected to the content. Some wordless parts are used because they express character’s hearts, when the characters don’t want to reply or are at a loss for words: hesitation, dissatisfaction, despair, sleepiness, etc. Wordless representation is one of the ways to express the story well, and wholly wordless picturebooks are an extension of these attempts.

3.2 Uniqueness of the Expression of Wordless Picturebooks

This study further investigated the drawing materials, composition, colors, viewpoint position, story structure and story content in the concrete examples. For example, In *Un jour, un chien*, there are zigzag lines showing the sound of a car horn. The shape of line has symbolic meaning. Furthermore, the last scene has 6 pages and they portray progress in detail, step by step. A scene with a lot of pictures is an effective device to tell the content without words. Another example, *Little Red Riding Hood* is originally told by words, therefore in the 13 wordless books words need to be converted into pictures. In the conversion, some problems come to the fore: meaning and history of a thing, the inside of one’s heart such as emotions and thoughts, the things hidden from view, speech and sounds like voices or noises. Each of the 13 wordless books solve these problems with different devices. For instance, to express Riding Hood and her grandmother in the stomach of the wolf, one book shows an inflated stomach, another uses a cross-section view, a third has a window which can look inside of the stomach, and yet another is a viewpoint which goes into the stomach of the wolf (Figures 3).

² In her influential study, American researcher Barbara Bader defined picturebooks “As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words…” Barbara Bader, 1976, *American Picturebooks from Noah’s ark to the beast within*, Macmillan publishing Co., foreword



Figures 3: Various approaches to express things hidden from view.

These devices are a solution to the problems as well as reflections of the originality and creativity of each artist because each one is trying to convert the story to only pictures with their unique creative style. *The Arrival* is one of the most successful wordless picturebooks and there are remarkably delicate considerations to tell a long and complicated story: the use of different size vignettes, management of color tone, a comparison of the first chapter and last chapter, and design of city monuments.

As a result, it appears that these books have common notable characteristics: ingenuity to manifest the protagonist, have many pictures per scene, exquisite placement of pictures, sequences of repetition and contrast, make full use of symbolic items, and rely on readers' knowledge as a precondition. Furthermore, the books have other significant features such as to express existence or situations that are unable to be expressed in words, to pursue symbolical and metaphysical expression, to leave various interpretations to readers' imagination, and to challenge the establishment of new expressions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study thus establishes a solid basis for the research of wordless picturebooks and clarifies their mechanistic insights. Whereas this work does not cover all the characteristics inherent to the expression, it addresses and delineates representative points of mechanism, meaning and significance of wordless picturebooks. These are promising results to improve expressions of ordinary picturebooks, comics and silent comics. In addition, an understanding of the advantages and effectiveness of wordless expressions can aid in the creation of educational or instructional materials for the very young, the elderly, or non-native speakers, and pictures have many applications such as for international tourism or other vital communication where words cannot be used or understood.

REFERENCES

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