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Examination of facial expressions in illustrated pre-school children books in relation to “Signifier and Signified”

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Abstract

Semiotic analysis is a study of sign processes and communication. Facial expressions and the body language in the illustrations are important signs to emphasize the desired idea. Illustrated pre-school children books are very effective in shaping the mind and imaginations of the children. In this article the relations of signifier and signified at facial expressions in illustrations of children books are analyzed.

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Keywords: Semiotics; facial expressions; body language; illustration; pre-school children books.

1. Introduction

Illustrated children books are very efficient in shaping the mind and imaginations of the children. They introduce the daily life to them. While parents are reading the book, children correlate the text to the illustrations on it. It is commonly agreed that aesthetics and suitability of illustrations of pre-school children books are as important as the text. Pre-school children look over the illustrations both while parents are reading the book and while being alone as well. Hence a separate message from the illustrations is received by the child.

An illustrator is not only responsible to picture the scenery. The main idea of the text and the emotions of characters should be implemented in the illustration. An illustrator has to understand the main idea correctly, and then use the correct tools to include it in the illustration. Body language and especially facial expressions are main tools for this. The visual communications as facial expressions are much more important for pre-school children who can not read and still learning their mother language. “Seeing comes before words” says Berger. Using the correct facial expressions in the illustration affects the understanding. An illustrator should be a good observer to illustrate correct facial expressions.

Facial Expressions are a way of using body language. As Darwin stated in his book “The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals” emotions of all mammals can be seen in their faces (Gladwell, 2002). After his studies since 1960s, Paul Ekman from California University has concluded that facial expressions are universal. It has been observed that, villagers who are living in the woods of Papua New Gine can understand the emotional situation of people who are living in industrialized countries from their facial expressions and using them as new

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communication tools. (Zülal,2004). Tuğrul states that babies can understand the facial expressions of happiness, sadness and anger of their mothers faces at early ages. However they have a difficulty in understanding fear and surprise. This research shows that the facial expressions are important in communication and the understanding of pre-school children that is sometimes different from adults; they should be used properly in the illustrations of pre-school children books.



Figure 1 A few facial expressions; happy, confused, afraid and sad (illustrator: YoungSun Kim, <http://creamiyaki.blogspot.com/2008/05/10-face-expression-study.html>)

2. Method / Signifier-Signified Relation

In this article, facial expressions in pre-school children books are examined by semiotic analysis. To look over the illustrations is being evaluated by means of visual semiotics which is one of the branches of semiotics. Illustrations in this article are examined according to the concepts of visual semiotics. Any information that is perceived from the visuals is considered as in the fields of semiotics.

2.1 Semiotics as a Method

Semiotics is briefly described as the study of sign processes and communication. A sign points something different than its actual meaning. “Semiotics is the science which examines signs and relation of signs between the other signs” (Sayın,2001).

Semiotics has started to be considered as a science after Swiss philologist Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure has started his work by analyzing the language and separating language and words. At the beginning, semiotics was related to linguistics and it was used to analyze texts (Özsan, 2005). After modern semiotics evolved from these roots, American philosopher Pierce has developed the fields of semiotics outside of the literature and linguistics. As the application subjects have been broadened, semiotics is started being used in analysis of everything that is symbolic and meaningful (Guiraud, 1994).

In this article illustrations are analyzed by “signifier and signified” relations in semiotics. Facial expressions are the signifiers while the emotions that are being pointed by them are the signified.

3. Results (Findings)

3.1. Sample Analysis – Pride / Self Confidence

The story of the first example is about a little girl who thinks she is in her elder sister’s shadow. The illustration analyzed below is one of the last illustrations in that book. In the scenery parrot of the elder sister has escaped and perched on a tree. Elder sister is afraid of climbing to the tree, however the little sister bravely climbs the tree and saves the parrot. This is the first chance for her not to be in the shadow of her elder sister and the illustration is describing this moment (Fig2).

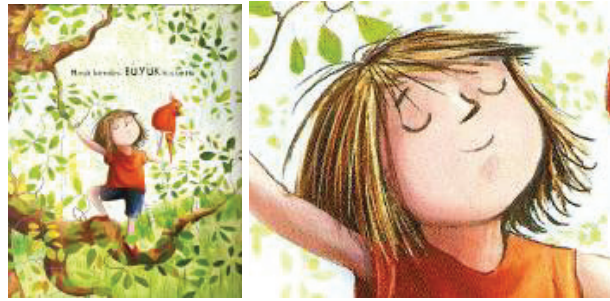


Figure 2 Proud / Self Confidence (Little, Jessica Meserve, Türkiye İş Bankası Publications, 2006)

Primary appearance of the illustration is a girl who stands on a tree branch. In this illustration, the girl is shown with closed eyes, holding a bird on a single hand. According to common body language analyses, putting the arms or legs crossed, is the sign of being insecure and self defense. In the illustration an opposite posture has been observed for the contrary meanings of the emotions that is said before. Legs and arms are away from each other and the body. So this posture may be considered as a sign of confidence and a relaxed body. Eyes are closed and eyebrows are raised. The chin has a clear angle to upwards; the mouth has a smile on it. The angle of the chin shows proud and self confident expression as Izgoren emphasized (Izgoren, 1999). In addition, in the illustration, the signifier is the facial expression and the body language while the signified is pride and self confidence.

3.2. Sample Analysis – Fear

In the book that includes the example illustration (Fig.3) was chosen, the story is about a kid who hears weird sounds while he was in his bed at night and investigates to these sounds is coming from the house.



Figure 3 Fear (On a Dark, Dark Night, Jean M. Cochran, Illustrated by Jennifer E. Morris, Pleasant St. Press)

A boy in his pajamas has been described in the sample illustration. The figure is illustrated in front of an empty wall, walking in his fingertips. His arms are twisted from elbows, next to his body. His eyes are drawn wide open and his mouth is round. Usually the fear and distress expressions of people includes these facial signs. He looks to a point in backwards, not to the way that he walks. This is the emphasizes of the fear of being followed. The same expression on the face of his dog makes that meaning stronger. The empty wall strengths the uncertainty, the shadow of the kid which is bigger from the boy himself increases the tension. According to these analyses, the message of the illustration and the story, can be considered as right signs has been used by the illustrator.

3.3. Sample Analysis – Shame-Regret

Camille book series are printed by Hemma Publications. In each book of the series, an issue related to children education is addressed. In this book, Camille tells a bad word and the story goes by.



Figure 4 Utanç-Pişmanlık (Camille Tells a Bad Word, Aline de Pétigny. Illustrator: Nancy Delvaux, Hemma, 2003)

In the example illustration (Fig.4) it has been shown that a girl closes her mouth with her hands and rises her head up and back with a sudden move. To put hands on the mouth while speaking is known as the sign of regret (Izgoren, 1999). In this illustration, the eyes of the girl pictured wide open, her mouth is closed by hands and her eyebrows are raised. Also the body has a move to backwards suddenly. Because of these expressions, the figure looks very regretful. Hence, it can be said that regret and shame is described by correct facial expressions and gestures in this illustration.

3.4. Sample Analysis – Happiness

In the book that includes the last sample illustration, a little octopus helps to another fish and this makes him very happy. It's reviewed in this analysis that if right signifiers has been used to indicate the feeling of happiness or not.



Figure 5 Happiness (It is Hard to be a Little Octopus), Sara Şahinkanat, Illustrated by Feridun Oral, Yapı Kredi Publications, 2008)

In figure 5 there are two octopuses. The bigger one is the mother octopus and the small one is the child. The small octopus is illustrated with closed eyes, raised eyebrows and smiling mouth. Eyes of the mother are illustrated half open and it is smiling. She is holding the child octopus. The signifiers of happiness are used correctly. The child octopus hugs the mother with almost all of its arms. Both of their facial expressions and body language expresses a pure feeling of happiness.

4. Discussion / Conclusion and Recommendation

In order to make correct illustrations, the illustrator has to understand the idea and the emotions that are expressed in the text clearly. The illustrator also needs to use correct tools to emphasis these ideas and emotions in

the illustration. Using appropriate signifiers of facial expression and body language in the illustrations is a key tool of emphasizing them. As a result of using appropriate signifiers, pre-school children can understand the emotions of the characters in the books more easily.

Hence an illustrator should firstly observe facial expressions, the body languages and the emotions related to them. Secondly the anatomy the human or the animal should be analyzed. Finally the differences of face expression and body language cognition of pre-school children from the adults should be considered.

Special care should be taken into account in preparation of pre-school children books to use correct facial expressions and body language.

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