



A semiotic perspective on reading picture books: The case of *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse*

Bobbie Kabuto*

Elementary and Early Childhood Department, Queens College, CUNY, 65–30 Kissena Boulevard, Flushing, NY 11367, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 12 December 2013

Keywords:

Semiotic
Oral reading
Reading comprehension

ABSTRACT

This article integrates semiotic and socio-psycholinguistic theories to problematize the definition of reading as the conscious or unconscious recall of words as a prerequisite for comprehension. Through an examination of the repeated miscue of the verb *wind* and the adjective *wind-up* in Lionni's picture book *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse*, this article will address (1) how some readers, although they may read with accuracy, can lack a satisfactory understanding of what they have read, and (2) how some readers who do *not* read accurately are nevertheless able to demonstrate story comprehension. The article next compares two readers to contend that reading involves semiotic work as readers select from the semiotic resources available to them in the process of constructing meaning. In addition, this article will explore the implications of this study for educators.

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1. Introduction

The ability to read requires situated, cognitive work, as readers use their knowledge of language and their experiences of the world to negotiate and construct meaning from texts, both written and visual. While the current research on reading does not argue this point, it does present it from multiple, and sometimes competing, fields of thought ranging from behaviorism to sociolinguistics, cognitive science, and linguistic anthropology leaving both researchers and teachers with a need to deconstruct the meta-theories related to various research paradigms (Figueroa, 1994; Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Because of the growing interdisciplinary nature that undergirds the study of reading, researchers have called for more comprehensive studies that integrate multiple theoretical stances to better understand how readers transact and construct meaning with texts, particularly picture books (Crawford & Hade, 2000; Serafini, 2010). Special attention has been paid to the area of reading picture books because of their multimodal nature and the demands they place on readers due to the use of two sign systems, written language and images, and their common presence in elementary school classrooms (Serafini, 2010). In particular, researchers (e.g. Maderazo et al., 2010; Martens, Martens, Croce, & Maderazo, 2010) acknowledge the complementary nature of socio-psycholinguistic theory with semiotic theory to highlight how readers not only read words but also images in the construction of meaning.

Socio-psycholinguistic perspectives originate from a constructivist view of reading in which readers' miscues are windows into the linguistic cues and cognitive strategies that they employ to construct meaning from written text (Goodman, 1996). The study of reading from this perspective illuminates the complex ways in which readers problem solve as they sample written text, predict upcoming text, and either confirm or disconfirm their predictions in the process of developing comprehension. While socio-psycholinguistic perspectives to reading underscore the importance of readers reading

* Tel.: +1 718 997 5307.

E-mail address: Bobbie.Kabuto@qc.cuny.edu

cohesive, authentic texts, such as picture books, they emphasize the linguistic processes of reading and, consequently, lack a detailed methodology to study readers' transactions with both words and images (Tracey & Morrow, 2012).

To address this void, the research presented in this paper builds on the semiotic theory developed by Charles Sanders Peirce. As a counterpart to Saussurian semiotics, which defines a sign in terms of a dyadic relationship between the "signifier" and the "signified," Peircian semiotics proposes that a sign is developed through a triadic relationship that consists of three elements: the Sign (as defined as iconic, indexical, and symbolic), the Object and the Interpretant. Recently, researchers (e.g., Crawford & Hade, 2000; Preucel, 2010) have taken an interest in Peircian semiotics, as it provides more flexibility in understanding how cognition is accomplished in signs, in particular in a continuous process of producing interconnected signs.

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to highlight the complementary nature of these two theoretical frameworks to problematize the definition of reading as the conscious or unconscious recall of words as a prerequisite for comprehension and to contend that reading involves semiotic work as readers select from the semiotic resources available to them in the process of constructing meaning. Using a Peircian semiotic perspective with socio-psycholinguistic theory, this article will compare how two readers orally read the word *wind* and *wind-up* and retold the picture book *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse* (Lionni, 1969).

The research questions that guided this study are as follows: How do readers' retellings and repeated miscues illustrate how they integrate iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs? How does this integration influence their comprehension as explained through Sign–Interpretant–Object interactions? In the process of constructing meaning, what available signs do readers engage in, and how does their engagement influence their development of story concepts?

1.1. Rationale

The analysis presented in this article is the result of a semiotic, textual analysis of *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse* and the collection and analysis of 20 oral readings and retellings of the book. Based on the initial examination of the oral reading and retelling data, *Alexander and the Wind-Up Mouse* appeared to provide two particular challenges to young readers. First, understanding the concepts of *wind* and *wind-up* was critical for readers to understand the story. Alexander, a real mouse, meets Willy, a wind-up toy and initially wants to be a wind-up toy like Willy. As the story progress, Alexander changes his mind and makes a wish for Willy to be a real mouse.

Second, the word *wind* challenged readers due in part to the different ways readers could pronounce the word. *Wind* can either be pronounced /wɪnd/, as in *Gone with the Wind*, or /waɪnd/, as in "a wind-up toy" (henceforth, I will use these pronunciation markers when necessary to avoid confusion). According to the results of this study, readers may have read the verb /waɪnd/ and the adjective /waɪnd/-up throughout the story, but they may have had a difficult time retelling the major plot and events related to the concept. There were also readers, on the other hand, who read *wind* as /wɪnd/ and *wind-up* as /wɪnd/-up throughout the story but who called Willy a /waɪnd/-up mouse in the retelling.

These investigations are particularly important because educators draw conclusions about children's reading abilities by documenting how accurately children orally read picture books (Jenkins, Fuchs, van den Broek, Espin, & Deno, 2003; Roehrig, Petscher, Nettles, Hudson & Torgesen, 2008; Savage, 2006). When readers produce accurate pronunciations with few to no miscues, it is assumed that they understand what they are reading. The converse of this statement may also seem obvious: If readers struggle with pronouncing words, create a large amount of miscues, or do not demonstrate oral reading fluency, it is assumed that they do *not* understand what they are reading. Researchers contend that these assumptions are not always warranted and call for a view of reading that examines it as a constructive process (Flurkey, 2008; Goodman, Flurkey, & Goodman, 2007).

2. Theoretical framework

Socio-psycholinguistic theory purports that readers actively engage and problem solve with written texts and outlines how reading is the result of social, cognitive and linguistic processes. Goodman (1996) argues that readers use their socio-cultural knowledge and experiences of language when employing the linguistic cuing systems (semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic) with cognitive strategies (sampling, predicting, and confirming or disconfirming), and readers' miscues are thus seen as windows into these processes. This idea challenges other theoretical frameworks that view miscues as errors and accuracy as a precursor to comprehension (Adams, 2002; Samuels, 1994). Through the examination of various types of miscues, researchers have come to better understand how readers engage with the surface features of written text to construct a deeper meaning. Smith (1997), who distinguishes between surface and deep structures of written language, writes:

Put into technical terms, *there is no one-to-one correspondence between the surface structure of language and meaning. Meaning lies beyond the mere sounds or printed marks of language and cannot be derived from the surface structure by any simple or mechanistic process.* (p. 27; italics in original)

The surface structure consists of the observable characteristics of written language—the physical and measurable aspects (Smith, 1997). The deep structure, on the other hand, is the meaning that readers construct that cannot be directly measured or observed. Smith (1997) explains: "Meanings do not lie at the surface of language but far more profoundly in the users

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