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Diary of a wimpy kid: the verb-image text and the formation of critical readers

ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study aims to exam the use of the verb-image text, i.e., the verbal language aligned to the visual, in the children's literary text Diary of a wimpy kid (2008) by Jeff Kinney, and how this application contributes to the reader's understanding and its critical formation. Methodologically, this study with a qualitative approach and bibliographic research according to GII (2021), as of the contributions of Coelho (2000), Zilberman (2015), SIIva (2015), Cossetin Alves, Cossetin e Maiberg (2020), Sozza (2011), Faria (2013) and Vasconcelos (2014). The results shows that the articulations present in Diary of a wimpy kid contributes to the text's understanding from the elements that comprise it's type of language and, thereby, manages to reach children and young people both due to the good use of the verbimage text and for talking about an everyday experienced by individuals of this age group, problematizing their reality.

Keywords: Diary of a wimpy kid. Children's Literature. Verb-Image Text. Critical Reading.

Diário de um banana: o texto verbo-imagético e a formação de leitores críticos

Resumo

Este trabalho objetiva examinar o uso do texto verbo-imagético, isto é, a linguagem verbal alinhada ao visual, no texto literário infantojuvenil Diário de um banana (2008) de Jeff Kinney, e como essa aplicação contribui para a compreensão do leitor e sua formação crítica. Metodologicamente, este trata-se de um estudo qualitativo e de pesquisa bibliográfica conforme Gil (2021), a partir das contribuições de Coelho (2000), Zilberman (2015), SIlva (2015), Cossetin Alves, Cossetin e Maiberg (2020), Sozza (2011), Faria (2013) e Vasconcelos (2014). Os resultados demonstram que as articulações presentes em Diário de um banana contribuem para a compreensão do texto a partir dos elementos que compõem o seu tipo de linguagem e, com isso, consegue alcançar crianças e jovens, tanto devido ao bom uso do texto verbo-imagético quanto por falar de um cotidiano vivenciado por indivíduos dessa faixa etária, problematizando a sua realidade.

Palavras-chave: Diário de um banana. Literatura Infantojuvenil. Texto Verboimagético. Leitura Crítica.

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1 Introduction

Since the dawn of humanity, it has been known that it is human nature to tell stories. Whether it's to explain a natural phenomenon that frightens us or to find possible reasons why the sky is blue, stories are an integral part of who we are and even tell us where we come from. In this respect, their value is clear for those individuals who are still in their formative years: children and teenagers. The adventures that make up a narrative have the power to contribute to the construction of identity and the critical formation of subjects and, based on this, we can understand why children's literature is increasingly gaining ground in discussions that cover issues of teaching and learning.

The aim of this study is to look at the use of the verb-imagetic text, i.e. verbal language aligned with the visual, within a literary text for children and adolescents and how this application contributes to reading comprehension and contributes to the formation of critical readers. In this way, we chose the book *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (2008) by Jeff Kinney, which is a children's fiction of humor and comedy in which the adventures of the protagonist Gregory Heffley in search of fame and popularity in the final years of elementary school are recounted.

To support the proposed discussions, we considered the postulations of Coelho (2000), Zilberman (2015), Silva (2015), Cossetin Alves, Cossetin and Maiberg (2020) and Sozza (2011), researchers who discuss the importance of literary reading in the classroom, as well as Faria (2013) and Vasconcelos (2014) who defend the articulation between the written text and illustrations in children's texts.

2 Methodology

From a methodological-scientific point of view, this study aims to explore the verbovisual text *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* in order to train critical readers. To this end, a qualitative approach to research and analysis was employed, using the technical procedures of bibliographical research in books, articles and scientific journals dealing with children's and

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young adult literature, reading, literary literacy and the relationship between text and image, in accordance with the assumptions of Gil (2021). The research was divided into a few stages: firstly, we chose a literary text in which we could articulate the image-text relationship in the work with literary text and its contributions to young readers, in order to problematize these issues in the article. These issues were raised during the course of the Children's Literature subject on the degree course in Letters - Portuguese at the Federal Rural University of Amazonia (UFRA).

3 Children's literature

Since the 1970s and 80s, the fields of language and literature, especially children's literature, have been gradually gaining ground in educational debates with the new perspectives that began to emerge at the time (Coelho, 2000). This stems from the understanding that "the evolution of a people happens at the mental level, from the gradual awareness that is acquired about the self and the world" and that "the way to do this is the word, or rather literature, especially children's literature, because it is the most responsible for, precisely, forming the world consciousness of children and young people, acting as an agent of transformation" (Coelho, 2000, p. 15).

These considerations highlight the importance of literature and its use in shaping the individuals who make up and transform society, especially in the case of children and adolescents, because through it various aspects of their cognitive development can be worked on, such as criticality, which is addressed in this study. Along these lines, the school plays the role of the privileged space in which literature has this formative function, as both share this nature in common (Coelho, 2000; Zilberman, 2015).

From the school's encounter with Literature, we have the reader's encounter with the text and their consequent interaction, as Zilberman (2015, p. 27) explains:

From the coincidence between the world represented in the text and the context in which its recipient participates emerges the relationship between work and reader. Because the more the reader demands an awareness of reality and a position in relation to it, the greater the support that the fictional book has to offer, if it is able

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to synthesize the whole of society in a virtual way. The child is an individual who resents this opening up of horizons, a consequence of the cloistered situation into which they have been thrown (Zilberman, 2015, p. 27).

In other words, the reader's interaction and reflection on the text will be successful if the context addressed in the literary work speaks to the reader's context, their reality, since, if captivated, there is an urgent need for the reader to understand the reality in which they live and observe it critically, increasing the value of this literary work. For children and young adults, this relationship with the text becomes essential, since, according to the author, they are in a "cloistered situation", restricted and dependent on adults, feeling the urgency to better understand the world around them and all its nuances. In this way, children's literature is able to broaden the view of this audience to different points of view, helping the reader to read, understand and position themselves in the society in which they live, to assume critical thinking and to have subsidies to support their reflection.

In this sense, fiction is concerned with filling in gaps in the subject's view of the world, which is obscured both by their lack of maturity and by the reality in which they live. Hence the term critical reader, because by understanding the book, the reader is able to assume an autonomous position that allows them to look at their inner world and criticize their outer life (Zilberman, 2015). Thus, this interactivity gives rise to the concrete function of literature and children's literature: education, as Coelho (2000, p. 151) explains:

[...] what defines contemporary literature today is its intention to stimulate the reader's critical awareness; to lead them to develop their own verbal expressiveness or latent creativity; to energize their capacity for observation and reflection in relation to the world around them and to make them aware of the complex changing reality that is society, in which they must act when their turn comes to actively participate in the ongoing process (Coelho, 2000, p. 151).

Based on these assumptions about children's literature, the next step will be to see how text and image are articulated in works aimed at this audience of children and adolescents.

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4 The verb-image text

In contemporary times, the value that images have within literature for children and adolescents is undeniable and, in line with this prominence, there is a need to reflect on how to interpret and understand the articulations between them and the written text, in order to achieve a totality in the reader's comprehension.

In literature of this nature, when the functions of each of these languages, verbal and visual, are used appropriately, there is a balance between the articulations that will enable better understanding by the reader (Faria, 2013).

This means that an image is not subservient to the written text, but walks alongside it, saying what the written text is saying, but in a different way, bringing with it different elements and aspects of its own language. What we want, then, is for the two languages to provide a coherent reading, but one that is still open to interpretation based on the reader's knowledge of the world.

In this sense, as Faria (2013) explains, in good children's books, when the written text and the image come together harmoniously, there is a good understanding of what is being narrated. The author suggests that in these picture books there is a "double narration", in which one narrator is responsible for the written text and the other for the images. This cooperative and balanced relationship between text and image, therefore, "comes from the ideal use of the functions of each language; the written and the visual" (Faria, 2013, p. 39). That said, there should not be a hierarchy in which the text is more relevant than the image or vice versa, but rather that both languages are on an equal footing, contributing to a better understanding of the story.

Still on the text-image relationship, Faria (2013) shows that, initially, in children's books, this relationship can be classified into two types: repetition and complementarity, depending on what the book aims to achieve and the illustrator's conception of illustrations in children's books. In this logic, the author argues that unless the use of repetition is justified by a clear pedagogical function, a good illustration is one that falls within the classification of complementarity, in which "one of the two elements can have the faculty

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to say what the other, because of its own constitution, could not say" (Duran; Betrand, 1975 apud Faria, 2013, p. 40-41). Thus, these two languages will make specific contributions to reading, since they have different functions in the work as a whole:

> Reading children's literature therefore requires the ability to construct meaning from the multiple languages that make it up. [...] the meanings are not restricted to what is put into words, but derive from the consideration and integration of the various languages that make up children's literary works. It is, therefore, at the junction of verbal texts and images with the graphic design of the work as a whole that the meaningful universe is realized, which makes it essential, in an effective reading, to highlight this set of elements in their interrelationships (Vasconcelos, 2014, p. 7-

The following is a children's literary work entitled *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, in which it will be analyzed how this narrative presents verb-imagetic articulations and how its use can contribute to the formation of critical readers.

5 The book Diary of a Wimpy Kid

Written by American Jeff Kinney and first published in 2007, Diary of a Wimpy Kid is the first in a series of currently 18 books. Narrated by the main character himself, it recounts the adventures and adventures of this boy's daily life in the final years of elementary school. These are adventures that the author himself says he went through as a child and which inspired the development of his best-seller, which was translated and published in Brazil by Vergara & Riba Editoras, selling around 2 million copies.

The series also has two extra books: Diary of a Wimpy Kid: do it yourself, in which the reader takes part in the construction of the diary, and The Wimpy Kid Movie Diary, which records how the cast was chosen and the creative process for the construction of the film adaptation.

Initially, the book series was intended to be a comic book. However, according to Cohen (2013), the publisher preferred the story to take the form of an illustrated diary, narrated by the character himself. As well as dealing with social conflicts at school, the plot

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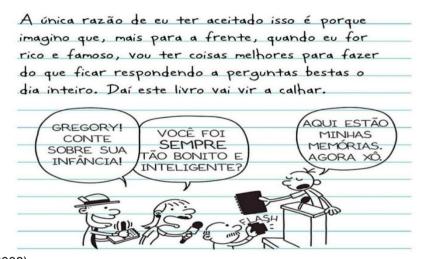
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also involves ethical dilemmas, since the character often lies and manipulates to get what he wants.

The main reason Gregory Heffley wrote his first diary was the encouragement of his mother, Susan Heffley. However, Gregory wanted it to serve him so that in the future he wouldn't have to answer reporters who came to question him about his childhood life. With this in mind, we can see how ambitious the character is in terms of his aspirations, which, although they change constantly, always have the same aim: to be famous and accepted, as shown in the figure below:

Figure 1 - Greg and his ambition



Source: Kinney (2008).

Throughout the narrative, we see Gregory's view of the transformations that affect some of his sixth-grade classmates at an early age. Some pupils grow faster and use this advantage to bully the weaker ones; others gain popularity and visibility in the school corridors. Gregory, on the other hand, together with his friend Rowley, tries to find his place in this competitive scenario — a status ranking created by himself — and figure out how to reach the top. Below is an excerpt that illustrates this idea elaborated by Gregory:

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Figure 2 – The ranking

Como eu falei, Bryce é o garoto mais popular do nosso ano, então isso deixa o resto lutando pelas outras posições.

Pelas minhas estimativas, sou o 52° ou 53° mais popular deste ano. E o melhor é que eu vou subir uma posição porque o Charlie Davies, que está acima de mim, vai pôr aparelho na semana que vem.



Fonte: Kinney (2008)

Even though Rowley is his best friend, Gregory often has issues with him, as he considers him too childish and frequently takes advantage of him to carry out his own schemes. Gregory also gets into various forms of mischief, such as running for school treasurer and spreading rumors about his opponents using derogatory posters. Another example occurs during Halloween, when he tries to organize a "house of horrors" with Rowley to make money from the neighborhood kids. The plan fails after one child gets frightened, which draws the attention of Rowley's father, who then punishes him.

Amid the many ups and downs experienced by the characters, Gregory's selfishness puts their friendship to the test. On the day of an important test for Rowley, Greg decides to take over his friend's duties as a school patrol officer, wearing Rowley's uniform, which has his name printed on the back. While on patrol, a neighbor sees Greg scaring younger children and, unaware of the identity swap, reports Rowley to the principal. Greg allows his friend to face the consequences of his actions: Rowley loses his patrol badge and is forced to apologize to the children for something he did not do. Only after all of this does Gregory finally admit that he was the one responsible, as shown in the image below:

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Figure 3 - Greg telling Rowley the truth



Source: Kinney (2008)

This situation weakens the friendship between the two, and Rowley distances himself from Gregory. Moreover, a comic strip that Gregory and Rowley created together ends up being published solely under Rowley's name, which infuriates Gregory. The climax of the tension between them occurs when they decide to fight on the sports court but are interrupted by older boys, who force Rowley to eat a piece of rotten cheese that had been lying on the ground for months. To protect his friend from humiliation, Gregory takes the blame and claims that he was the one who made the cheese disappear. As a result, he becomes ostracized by the entire school for having contracted the dreaded "Cheese Touch."

To make matters worse, Gregory also loses the title of "Class Clown" in the school yearbook, which is awarded to Rowley instead. Gregory handles exclusion relatively well, as he at least regains his best friend and even gains a few perks, such as not having to participate in the square dance during physical education class. Through Gregory's character and the depiction of his adventures, we find elements that children can easily

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relate to and find entertaining — transforming everyday occurrences into engaging reading and meaningful life lessons.

6 Results and Discussion: critical education in focus

After discussing the conceptions of children's literature, the links between the written text and the illustrative images and the construction of the narrative in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, we will move on to a more in-depth analysis, taking into account the assumptions raised in the study

Although some of Gregory's actions are considered cruel, considering his age group and the school year he is in, we can say that his attitudes and thoughts are part of his cognitive development. According to Schffer (2022), according to the Piagetian theory of the Concrete Operative Stage of Intelligence, children aged between 7 and 11/12 are expected to be able to understand and see the world logically and in categories, something that can be observed when the character in focus often establishes a *ranking* for the school's students to define who would be the most popular.

Prior to the Concrete Operant stage, the child needs to go through the pre-operant and sensorimotor stages respectively, a period in which they refine their notion of representing objects and events through symbolic play, understanding the world around them and the roles that each person around them has. However, even though Gregory Heffley's understanding is more structured and refined, he still has cognitive limitations, typical of this transitional phase between childhood and adolescence, believing that there are inflexible and concrete rules for becoming popular at school and climbing the *rankings* that he himself has created, such as dress or whether his friends are also popular, not taking into account more abstract characteristics such as charisma and friendliness.

According to Santos and Ferreira (2023), in this stage of cognitive development, Greg is expected to lose his self-centeredness, but we see that this is a strong trait of the character, lying so that others take the blame for his mistakes and showing little empathy for the consequences of his actions. Guided by his concrete experiences, Greg uses them

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to his advantage to get what he wants, only learning at the end of the book about the weight of his actions when he loses his friend.

Greg Heffley's logical thinking and reasoning come into play when he needs to impress a girl he likes or prove himself worthy of his schoolmates' validation, a common occurrence during this time of transition, when children begin to realize that their point of view is not the only one and that other people's opinions are different from his. Whether they want to be the "class clown" or join the school patrol, they go to great lengths to be validated. Even if he manages to create these stratagems to get what he wants, he can't identify where he has failed, typical of this stage of development, showing traces of previous stages that have not been overcome (Souza, 2023).

The character's creativity is very strong, both in making jokes and in illustrations. A change in traits can be seen when Gregory draws someone he doesn't like and someone he does like. The drawings he makes for the school newspaper have more exaggerated features than those he makes for the diary. For the most part, the illustrations are used both for humor and to elucidate what is being described in the text, as Fittipaldi (2018) points out:

[...] it does not prevent or restrict the production of mental images, nor does it stifle the reader's imagination, as many still argue today. On the contrary, visual images have an enormous capacity to open up spaces in the imagination, to create sensitive, formal, affective and intellectual experiences that feed the imagination. Unlike verbal images, images have their own syntax and semantics, and unfold on planes of form, content and expression (Fittipaldi, 2008, p. 107).

By understanding this, according to Cossetin Alves, Cossetin and Maiberg (2020), it is possible to establish links with the children's reader, because the reading is closer to the daily life faced, both in what is being read and in the way this book is presented, in a succinct way and with simple language, showing a child's point of view. The characteristics observed in the book's art denote the handwriting used in the writing, which is close to the way a child would write, the lines of a notebook present on every page of the book, strengthening the reader's imagination and familiarizing them mainly with the diary textual genre.

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Considering the importance of art and illustrations in complementing the meaning of the text — elements that bring the reader closer to the narrative and increase its verisimilitude with the target audience — we are led to reflect on how to promote a critical reading of the work. Even though it is a comic book and accessible to children, it addresses relevant issues such as acceptance, family conflicts and ambitions, which can (and should) be worked on in a sensitive and reflective way with readers. For Sozza (2011, p. 13): "Reading implies a searching activity on the part of the reader, in their past of memories and knowledge. The text suggests clues and paths, but it certainly doesn't explain everything that could be explained."

This work would contribute to the formation of a critical reader precisely because it dialogues with the experiences faced by both an elementary school student and a child in the 11-12 age group at the beginning of puberty and how his family faces these discoveries together with him. By having a narrator character as unique as Gregory Heffley - who exposes his thoughts and ideas in such a genuine way in the written text and illustrations - the reader would be able to reach his memory and worldview and understand the text in such a way that it would instigate him, stemming from the extralinguistic knowledge he already has, leading him to reflect on the character's actions by identifying with them, seeing from another point of view. As Silva (1995, p. 20) explains: "Reading constitutes a form of encounter between man and sociocultural reality, the result of which is a constant situating oneself in front of the data of that reality expressed and interpreted through language."

The onset of puberty, often late for some children, generates anxieties about a moment that is unique to everyone. The search for early maturity, the desire to be seen and valued for physical and social changes, makes the affection associated with this phase especially attractive. As a result, activities such as playing with dolls and creating stories are put aside. Added to this is the growing need for independence, which can lead to conflicts with parents, as well as a school environment that often ignores the open *bullying* in the corridors. These are some of the conflicts experienced by this age group and which are well represented in *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*.

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With the teacher's mediation, students — because they are immersed in this reality — can understand these issues more easily. Reading, however, goes beyond identification: it encourages reflection on how to deal with such situations and what to avoid when ethical principles are put to the test. Thus, rather than decoding the text, students construct meanings and establish relationships with the work based on their own experiences.

7 Final considerations

This article seeks to reflect on children's literature, using a contemporary work that is widely popular with its target audience as the corpus of analysis. Reading this work has been shown to contribute to the formation of critical and proficient readers, as well as offering a new perspective on the stage of life these readers are going through. By recognizing themselves in the situations portrayed, they can better understand their experiences and see themselves as active subjects of their own discourse.

In line with this proposal, the aim was to highlight the importance of imagery combined with written text and how this combination can be used effectively in the critical education of readers. The work analyzed stands out precisely because of its proximity to the experiences of its audience, as it dialogues with the dilemmas of childhood and the school environment, including ethical conflicts. It is based on the understanding that literature is an artistic manifestation capable of forming identities and welcoming pluralities — readers who, in the future, may become critical agents and opinion formers.

This work was not chosen at random. Its importance lies not only in its appeal to a young audience, but also in the fact that it is timeless and easily accessible — qualities that often make it a powerful initial push in shaping a consistent and engaged reader. There is particular value, especially within the school environment, in presenting literary classics to young readers. However, to introduce them effectively, it is essential to offer something brief and humorous that also resonates with the child's reality. The book is naturally attractive to children due to its expressive yet simple illustrations and, in its unique diary format, it brings a sense of authenticity to the reading experience.

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This study aims to contribute to the appreciation of the verbo-visual text and its impact on children and adolescents. It highlights the importance of this work as a powerful motivator for reading, encouraging reflection on the themes it presents, which are relevant to the social and educational experiences of students in *Ensino Fundamental* (Elementary and Middle School in Brazil). The research corpus can be applied in school contexts both to stimulate discussions on school environments and the social rules that govern student groups and affect their relationships, and to inspire writing exercises — since the main character writes in a remarkably honest and expressive way.

There is a strong belief in the inspirational power of this work to help children feel confident in writing about their own experiences and to see themselves as subjects of their own discourse — as authors of their own stories, individuals who possess linguistic autonomy and a clear sense of their place in the world.

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