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Focusing on the “other” picturebooks for preschoolers

Abstract

This paper will focus on picturebooks that present the ‘Outsider’. Preschoolers come into contact with the Outsider, even when their picturebooks are not dealing with her. Children become familiarize with the ‘Outsider’ through: Folktales from other countries, Translations, Books in more than one language, and Books by authors/ illustrators from different origins. In addition to these books there are others, which as ‘issue’ books present the ‘Outsider’. In most cases the ‘Outsider’ takes the form of: a) an extraterrestrial creature, b) a person with special needs and c) someone from a different origin and culture. Since focalization is a powerful ideological mechanism, different focalizations lead in different ideological messages. If the point is the criticism of our culture, the focalization is through the eyes of the ‘Outsider’ who sees our own world and questions our deep-rooted assumptions. If the ‘Outsider’ has to be accepted by us, the focaliser is someone from a different culture and the selection of a theatrical perspective encourages the reader to realize her situation and be aware of her problems. And if the ‘Outsider’ is someone with special needs, then external focalization (where the characters know more than the narrator) permits the verbal and the visual text to stress the similarities, and not the differences, between her and the reader-viewer.

1. The ‘Outsider’ in children’s picturebooks

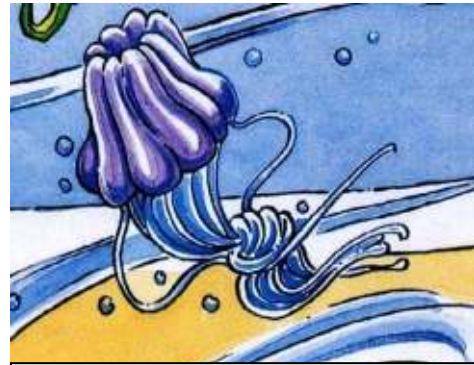
If the literary universe of children’s literature does not only create imaginative galaxies, but also mirrors the real world, it is obvious why today’s picturebooks for preschoolers do not ignore the ‘Outsider’. As contemporary societies have become multicultural and people from different origins or with different needs populate the same country, books that focus on the ‘Outsider’ are published. In today’s world the ‘Outsider’, either as a (new)comer or a permanent resident, finds her place in young children’s picturebooks and even preschoolers are familiar with someone from a different origin or a person with different needs.

Since literature that “transcends national boundaries, because of the commitment and openness of individuals who have crossed borders in body or spirit throughout history,” already exists (Lathey, 2001: 9), preschoolers become familiar with the ‘Outsider’ even through books that do not present her as a distinct and recognizable story agent. Children come into contact with the ‘Outsider’ also through:

- Folktales from other countries. In Greek publishing market collections of folktales from other nations are currently published (e.g *Japanese fairytales*). These books not only familiarize Greek children with people from other countries (Galda & Cotter, 1992), but also result in making the immigrant feel more content with herself (Doige, 1999).

- Translations. As far as Greece is concerned a great number of picturebooks from other countries are translated into Greek. Since translated books inevitably describe other cultures, both in word and picture, children come to know them, even when they (are) read in the Greek language.

Moreover, it is worth noting that, since pictures are the same in both versions, i.e. the original script and the translated book, their decoding has often proved rather hard. Let's take for example the picture of a blue jellyfish designed as a delicious jelly-sweet in the humorous picturebook *Don't eat the teacher!*. The viewer of the book, in order to get the visual joke, must translate the Greek word "tsouhtra" into English (Picture 1).



Picture 18: The jellyfish (*Don't eat the teacher!*)

- Books in more than one language. Bilingual or tri-lingual books are currently published in the Greek publishing market. It happens that books which deal with multicultural themes are often written in more than one language. This is an implicit way of underlining their multicultural message as well as reinforcing their openness towards other cultures. The bilingual (Greek and Albanian) book *Καλημέρα, φίλε! Mirëmëngjes, mik!*, for example, that recounts the story of two personified quantities of milk that live together, functions as a clear metaphor of today's Greek society, where Greeks and Albanians (have to) live together (Picture 2).

Ένα πρωινό είχα ξυπνήσει πολύ νωρίς,
 πριν βγει ο ήλιος
 και άκουσα ομάδες στην κουζίνα.

Një mëngjes, u zgjova herët,
 pa dalë dielli nëqoma
 dhe në kuzhinë dëgjova
 bisëda.



Picture 19: Bilingual text in Greek and Albanian (*Καλημέρα, φίλε! Mirëmëngjes, mik!*)

However, a literary technique (bilingual text), that at first sight seems apparently multi-voiced, at a deeper level, communicates an unambiguous bias in favor of the first language and the 'first' (=the best) national group. In bilingual books a hidden racism lurks, visualized through the arrangement of the texts on the page. Our language is recorded first, while the language of the 'Outsider' comes after. Thus, the paratextual element of the form of the written page acquires, though between the lines, a sneaking ideological implication functioning as an implicit axiological notice for two national groups that one ranks higher than the other (Nathenson-Mejia & Escamilla, 2003).

- Books by authors/ illustrators from different origins. The stories of migrating authors reflect their own crossing of boundaries and stem from two or more sets of literary traditions and national histories. The illustration of *Dear Mili* by Maurice

Sendak, for example, owes itself to his Jewish origin, especially in the pictures depicting the valley of death, where whitened bones are scattered beneath an outline reminiscent of buildings at Auschwitz (Picture 3).

In addition foreign authors/illustrators impose in their works the spirit of their countries. Children's books constructed by creators, who do not live in the country, inevitably reflect their own unique experiences. Let's take the example of Triviza's book, *The three little wolves and the big bad pig*, a modern transformation of *The Three Little Pigs* folktale. The tale is illustrated by Helen



Picture 20: The valley of death (*Dear Mili*)

Oxenbery with attractive watercolours that capture the story's broad humour and add a wealth of supplementary details. Among them the black-roofed houses, the flowery curtain, the kind of fauna and the wolves' games (e.g. croquet, battledore, shuttlecock and hopscotch), which reflect English countryside and customs, are due to the illustrator's British origin. But the most striking indication of English tradition is the abundant presence of the china teapot, both on the endpapers and the inside pictures of the book. The teapot, as a British symbol of peaceful home life, is the only item that the three little wolves save, every time they abandon their ruined houses. It is obvious that this particular symbol is quite inconceivable by the Greek readers-viewers, for whom a teapot is a worthless piece of pottery deprived of any emotional connotation.

2. Picturebooks focusing on the 'Outsider'

It becomes apparent that a great number of picturebooks speak about/ depict the 'Outsider' even when they do not clearly refer to her. On the other hand, there are plenty of books that, as *issue books*, place the 'Outsider' on the kernel of their interest and aim at 'teaching' preschoolers how to feel about her. As Stephens (1992: 8) suggests, children's fiction "belongs firmly within the domain of cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience". Many books focus on social issues communicating explicit ideological messages to their readers. And some of them, according to Rochman (1993: 19), are good books, because they upset our neat categories, unsettle us and make us ask questions about what we had thought as certain and unquestionable.

Moreover, a close examination of picturebooks focusing on the 'Outsider' reveals the role the point of view plays in the depiction of the (narrated) events. In the contemporary so-called era of image, it is absolutely essential to know who sees, and through whose eyes the world is presented either in reality or in fiction. "Seeing has, in our culture, become synonymous to understanding. We 'look' at a problem. We 'see' the point. We adopt a 'viewpoint'. We 'focus' on an issue. We 'see things in perspective'. The word 'as we see it' (rather than 'as we know it' and certainly not 'as



we hear it' or 'as we feel it') has become the measure for what is 'real' and 'true'. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996: 168). More than the narrator (the voice of the text), the focalizer (the viewpoint, the eyes that see the related facts) seems to be the crucial factor that determines the form and the values of the fictional universe. Thus, focalization-options bear major ideological implications which influence not only the construction of the textual reality but also the perception of the extra-narrative, real world.

Even when the theme of picturebooks is the 'Outsider', different focalizations lead to different ideological messages. If the point is the criticism of our culture, the focalization is through the eyes of the 'Outsider' who sees our own world and questions our deep-rooted assumptions. On the contrary, if the 'Outsider' has to be accepted by us, then the gap between her and the reader is bridged by diminishing the distance between them. In that case the focaliser is someone from a different culture, but the selection of a theatrical perspective encourages the reader to realize her situation and be aware of her problems. On the other hand, if the 'Outsider' is someone with special needs (Prater & Dyches, 2008), then *external focalization* (where the characters know more than the narrator) permits the verbal and the visual text to stress the similarities, and not the differences, between her and the reader-viewer.

2. 1. The person from a different culture or a Dramatic perspective

In the case of books describing persons from other countries, children's literature meets multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a trendy word for describing societies, either fictitious or real, where people from different origins live together (Kanatsouli, 2002: Cai, 1998). And it is politically correct in multicultural books to present every ethnic character as strong, dignified, courageous, loving, sensitive and wise (Taxel, 1994). Multicultural literature, as important channel for transmitting societal values and beliefs, portrays racial and ethnic groups aside from the majority group and helps to enhance cross-cultural understanding and respect for individuals.

As Greece becomes multicultural, foreigners populate not only the country but also the fictitious worlds of Greek picturebooks. The 'Outsider', as someone from a different origin who comes to live in a foreign country, is a much-discussed issue. In multicultural books the person from a different culture is presented as someone both different (in some ways) and similar to us (in others). The Greek children-readers, on the other hand, are mainly encouraged to welcome her in their groups and live happily together. The ideological message of those books is nearly the same for all of them: Since people from other countries have come to live with us and foreign children are enrolled in our schools, we should try not to be nasty to them.

The vast majority of Greek picturebooks, that describe the life of the "Outsider", relate their stories adopting a theatrical perspective. An almost godlike narrator, without participating in the story, knows facts, events, thoughts and words, and relates them in a rather authoritarian and objective tone. A heterodiegetic (= one that does not participate as an agent in the plotline) verbal narrator describes in the third person the words and deeds of others and a heterodiegetic visual narrator delineates the same events, while observing them from a distance, positioning herself at the place where the reader-viewer is supposed to stand. As external observers, the verbal and the visual narrators, have access to the life of the focalized characters and acquire total knowledge of heroes, scenes and objects.

Picturebooks dealing with the 'Outsider' imbue the book with a theatrical aura, placing the reader at the place of the audience who attends a dramatic performance.

Reading multicultural books is not only like opening a window to the real world but also like standing in front of a mirror in order to find out how you look (Sims-Bishop, 1997). Reading picturebooks about the ‘Outsider’, preschoolers have the opportunity to observe from a distance how children like them behave towards a child from a different country who came to their school, how they disliked her in the beginning and how they came to terms with her later on (e.g. *White and Black Chocolate*, *The Joyful Meadow*, *The Foreign Flower*). They sympathize with those fictitious schoolmates and learn how to live in a multicultural society. In all those multicultural stories there are goodies and baddies. And the good guys are always among those who accept the ‘Outsider’, while the baddies, either fellow children or adults (see *Rico Cocorico*), are always among the racists.

Multicultural Greek picturebooks adopt a rather didactic tone in order to convince Greek schoolchildren to accept the immigrant in their schools and in their homes. The message is straightforward and explicit. As today’s children’s literature abandons the old didacticism of the ultimate values of ‘Religion, Nation and Family’, the ideology of anti-racism, anti-sexism, and environmentalism gains ground. Multicultural picturebooks have become the most prominent example of the new didacticism.

Nevertheless, it is surprising that in the so-called multicultural books the focalizer, the one who observes the fictional universe, is not the ‘Outsider’, but ... ourselves. We are the ones who see the world which the ‘Outsider’ lives in. In the multicultural picturebooks that are published in Greece, the reader obtains access into an objective standpoint and observes the words and deeds of the ‘Outsider’, in a manner similar to that of the viewer of a theatrical performance. Thus, the immigrant is always the object of the speculation (the one who is seen), and not the subject (the one who sees). The ‘Outsider’ is discussed as far as she is related to us. Thus we primarily are the centre of the fictional universe.

On the contrary, at least concerning the Greek publishing market, the delineation of the world from many perspectives, including that of the ‘Outsider’, is not the case of the so called *intercultural* picturebook. When different story agents view the story events from different, even contradictory, viewpoints, the biased image of a one-dimensional reality is replaced by a new panoramic view of it. This is the case of Anthony’s Browne *Voices in the Park*. The outstanding picturebook repeats the same scenario through the eyes of a bossy woman in the autumn, her lonely son in spring, a sad, unemployed man in winter and his young daughter in summer. In this picturebook not only the story changes according to the different viewpoints but also the way the park looks depends on the perspective of the person speaking. Four different voices tell their own version of the same walk in a city park which reflects the characters’ moods and perspectives. In a multicultural world, where many different people have many different perspectives, multi-focused picturebooks teach that there is a plethora of different viewpoints and none of them



Picture 21: Multifocused text (*Voices in the Park*)

gains unquestionable predominance over the others. And this is the cornerstone of antiracism.

Moreover, it would have been desirable if multicultural books had managed to construct a multi-voiced text, which would convey, on the same page, different standpoints. Although such an effort sounds extremely ambitious, Goble in the books of Plains Indians trickster, Iktomi (1988, 1989, 1990, 1991) has managed to narrate these boisterous trickster tales with multi voices. In the Iktomi's books, where the tale unfolds in the traditional call-and-response pattern of oral storytellers, many tellers retell multilayered stories on wonderfully designed pages: the author who not only relates the story but also speaks directly to his audience, the protagonist who checks his writing, and finally the illustrator who records in colour his own version of the events. Three distinctive voices become noticeable due to varied typography: a) bold-face, large, formal lettering presents the fictional events related by the author in his traditional role b) grey print is used when the narrative voice is informal and, questioning his own role, he undertakes the direct communication with his audience with ongoing comments that are meant to elicit responses from the listeners; c) small fonts, usually in italics (or handwritten scrawls) are scattered across the pictures, when the story agent commends on the narrative (Picture 5).



Picture 22: A multi-voiced text (Iktomi books)

2.2. The Extraterrestrial Creature or Focalization through the Outsider

The extraterrestrial creature of children's picturebooks is drawn as an outsider of our culture. Her overstressed dissimilarity describes her as being absolutely different in appearance, views and behaviour. Since she comes just for a visit and does not intend to stay permanently, she not only is but will also remain an outsider for ever. The alien comments on our culture, expresses her feelings about it and tries to understand and evaluate it. However, being someone totally different from us, she can observe our world with pure and unspoiled eyes. This ensures a genuine and unconventional vision. In the eyes of the extraterrestrial creature the well-known world becomes unknown, the familiar unfamiliar, the usual questionable and the accepted disputable. Thus, the outsider of our civilization becomes the onlooker, and consequently the judge of it.

In the case of the extraterrestrial creature, the text does not aim at the identification of the reader with the story-character. On the contrary, the book tries to keep a safe distance between the reader and the character from outer space. The 'Outsider' does not build any bridges to meet the reader, but she creates gaps in order to keep her apart. Even if the narrator narrates the fictional events in first person (homodiagetic narrator), the distance between her and the reader remains, because focalization ensures a great degree of defamiliarization.

There are many ways to block reader's identification with the story character from outer space:

- The settings.



If the story is located somewhere in outer space (e.g. the planet of Dr Xargle and his green pupils), the readers are very unfamiliar with this remote scenery and feel very different from these weird inhabitants.

- The author.

In some cases paratextual elements (e.g. the creators' names, or at least pseudonyms, on the book's cover) do not serve their informational role in order to support the literary conventions of the text. Although the function of the creators' names is to reveal who the author, the illustrator and the translator are, some books, blurring the gap between the author (a real, out-text person) and the narrator (the in-text voice), argue that they are written by the latter. Thus the narrator is simultaneously endowed with double, mutually-excluded hypostases: out-text and in-text, real and fictitious, creator and creation. The books of Dr. Xargle, for example, written by Jeanne Willis and illustrated by Tony Ross are presented as Dr Xargle's Books, while Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross are presented as the persons who translated them into the language of the Earth.

- The language.

Concerning the alien's language, it is also noticeable that the extraterrestrial creature speaks in the reader's language. The reader just pretends that she does not notice that the creature from a distant planet is different from the human beings in every aspect except their own language. But, although the residents of Earth and those from the outer space speak in the same language, it is most probable that they still cannot communicate properly, because they are so different that it is impossible for them to understand one another. As Wittgenstein argues people are able to communicate, not because they use the same code, but because they share common forms of life that permit them to understand each other. Thus, even if a lion could speak, it is certain that we would not have been able to understand it, due to our absolutely different lives (Wittgenstein, 1968: 223).

Although aliens-characters-focalizers speak in Greek language, in books about extraterrestrial creatures a linguistic defamiliarization is taking place. The language often becomes unfamiliar and the reader is confronted with linguistic utterances, which, although they sound known and ordinary, they are unknown and weird. This happens because:

- The conventional bond between signifier and signified is fractured. In picturebooks about aliens, such as *A Shovel on Planet Mars*, the signifier is still searching for its signified. Martians look at the real thing, the shovel, but nobody knows what it is called. Is it a sponge, a pillow, a lamp or something else?

On the other hand, in another book, *Dr. X.*, the extraterrestrial professor refers to the signified but he ignores the signifier. Thus common things become ... unfamiliar and usual actions seem odd and funny (e.g. They (Babies) drink milk from a hole on their face).

- Things are stated literally. People from outer space speak literally and are very precise when they describe the Earth-people and ordinary things. The green multi-eyed teacher for example, Dr Xargle, lecturing on the eating habits of the babies says that the Earth mother makes an omelet and puts it into their mouth, nose and ears.

- The humour.

Humour is inevitable in narratives where non human beings describe the man's world. The text becomes absolutely hilarious when the alien reports and explains everything from a different standpoint. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and the



common extraordinary. When, for example, Dr Xargles refers to human babies he informs his pupils that they come in four colours: white, black, red and yellow, but never in green. Also, ordinary things have to be explained by the outsider. And it happens that their explanations are the most obvious ones. If, for example, the extraterrestrial teacher sees men laying newspapers for their pet dogs, he thinks that they do so because the animals are avid newspaper readers. Similarly, when he sees the cats digging the backyard's soil with their rear paws in order to place something into it, he thinks that cats are obsessed with planting ill-shaped, smelly seeds that, fortunately, never grow.

It is obvious that the amusing effects of those books become more intense, due to the contradiction between the verbal and the visual text. The words adopt the alien's zany alternative perspective, while the pictures present our familiar world that strikes a chord with any human reader. The green alien schoolteacher expresses in words his refreshing, idiosyncratic and remarkable views, while the pictures present an ordinary world. Thus, at the same time that the illustrations stress the ordinariness of the scenes, the words contrast them vividly with an unexpected interpretation of standard human behaviour. The difference between the verbal text that results in defamiliarization of the known and the visual which stresses the familiarization sets the humorous tone of the book as a whole.

- The metafiction.

Metafiction is a literary term describing fictional writing that systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in reminding reader-viewers that they read words and see drawings on pages. Metafiction, as self-conscious fiction and "a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction" (Waugh, 1993: 2), belongs to the general culture of metamodernism and results in an interesting interplay between reality and fantasy.

In Serefa's book *Half a kilo of a Planet*, for example, the little alien Vour, comes to visit the planet Earth and, as he sees different places, he writes a report. According to this report, the actual book the reader has in her hands is at the same time the completed report itself and also the included ongoing story of himself recounted by a mother he met on his trip. Thus the story is at the same time his (Vour's) and hers (the mother's), while each of them is at the same time inside the story as a story agent and outside of it as a storyteller (Vour is a fictitious character in the mother's story, while the mother and her babies are the protagonists of Vour's story).

While reading a book, that objects and persons can be simultaneously inside and outside the fictional universe and the same things are at the same time creating and created, no reader can keep her unquestionable certainties any more. *Half a kilo of a Planet* forces the reader to reconsider whatever she has always thought as 'natural'.

In metafictional books, where the focal character is a cultural outsider "the 'automatic' view of culture and history becomes decentered, its hegemonic perspective called into question and ultimately undermined and substantially altered" (Fisher, 2002: 164). And if the main ideological implication of focalization through the alien is the renegotiation of every certainty, it is obvious that this tendency reaches its higher limits in metafictional books where the Outsider is the focalizer. In those books not only the conventions of our civilization, but also the literary conventions of storytelling are questioned. The readers start to ask about everything both in literature and in life.

2.3. The person with special needs or External focalization



It has been said: “The best books break down borders. They surprise us –whether they are set close to home or abroad. They change our view of ourselves; they extend that phrase ‘like me’ to include what we thought was foreign and strange” (Rochman, 1993: 9). Picturebooks about someone with special needs stress exactly that point: these children are exactly like us; the limits of ourselves are extended.

It seems that the hidden message beneath the books that focus on persons with special needs is their similarity with us. This kind of picturebook wants to stress the message that these children, are like all the other children and, though they possibly find more difficulties, they can do those things that all kids do. So these books emphasize whatever kids with special needs can accomplish (things that have in common with us), not whatever they cannot do (something that differentiates them from us). Both pictorially and verbally picturebooks reduce the distance between a person with special needs and us and draw a picture of her as someone who belongs to us.

In those texts, where persons with special needs are presented, external focalization (according to the schema of G. Genette) is preferred. In narratives with external focalization, where the narrator knows less than the central hero, a riddle-like book is constructed and a twist at the end of the narrative normally occurs. In contrary to the longstanding, general assumptions which consider the narrator as the provider of information and the one who knows the story facts better than anybody else, a series of purposely misleading elements, both verbal and visual, escape the attention of the reader-viewer who becomes unable to evaluate them correctly and judge their full implications.

In books with external focalization, the reading route takes the form of a round trip; as soon as the reader-viewer reaches the last page and discovers its surprising end, she feels compelled to backtrack through the book searching for clues revealing/concealing the main character’s secret, which had remained unnoticed until the end. The reader-viewer attempts repeated scanning of both text and illustrations, and, by scrutinizing and re-evaluating the story elements, reconstruct a new fictional universe. As the reader of the *Who Killed Roger Achroyd*, the most striking example of external focalization, –in spite of the fact that Agatha Christie has been accused of ‘deception’ (Bayard, 2000)- re-reads the book with the suspicion that the homodiegetic narrator lied about the facts of the killing, the reader-viewer of externally focalized picturebooks re-examines the text and the pictures thoroughly with the certainty that she will reveal inconsistencies and innocent deceptions, responsible for her inability to foresee the unexpected ending. However, in similar innovative picturebooks it is obvious that neither the text nor the pictures had lied. The clues, mainly visual, were always there, but the reader-viewer neither understood them sufficiently, nor deciphered them correctly.

In Willis’ and Ross’ brilliant book *Susan Laughs*, both the heterodiegetic verbal and visual narrators seem not to know a fact shared by all the story-agents, around which the whole narrative is built. As the text denotes and the pictures show, young, redheaded Susan participates in a series of familiar activities, like any other child of her age; she dances, plays, visits museums, goes to school or even rides a horse. And it is the final image that reveals what all the characters know and only the reader-viewer is unaware of; Susan is in a wheelchair.

3. Conclusions



It becomes obvious that different focalization options lead to different ideological messages, while the 'Outsider' in picturebooks takes different forms according to the attitude the books intend to convey to their reader-viewers.

If the Outsider is a foreigner that comes and lives in our country, a theatrical perspective is adopted and the events are presented from a safe distance. The children readers attend the behaviour of fictitious kid-agents, observe their mistakes and are tactfully encouraged to correct their own behaviour.

If the 'Outsider' is an alien, who is and will remain an outsider, she becomes an onlooker of our civilization. She observes our civilization and describes it from the viewpoint of somebody who does not accept everything as natural and unquestionable. Thus focalization through the eyes of the 'Outsider' becomes an ideological device that allows us to speculate and question our own certainties.

On the other hand, if the 'Outsider' is someone with special needs, she is presented as someone like us. In that case, external focalization seems to be the best choice. A child with special mental or physical needs acts as we do throughout the story. And it is not until the end of the story that it is revealed that she is, in a way, special.

Since it is always important to know who the observer is, focalization seems to be a powerful ideological device. And as the picturebook *The eyes of the monkey are different from the eyes of the owl* argues: It is the observing subject, not the observed object, who makes the difference. Different eyes see the same world differently.

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