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A Linguistic Cage? Ideology, Positionality, and Multiperspectivity

Michael C. Prusse

Among many other things, literature for children and young adults occasionally contemplates the nature and the power of language. In *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance, the March Hare prompts Alice to 'say what you mean' (Carroll, 1991, p. 61). When Alice replies, 'at least I mean what I say – that's the same thing, you know' (Carroll, 1991, p. 61), she is immediately rebuked by the Mad Hatter, who disputes that these two statements express the same message. This reference to the effect that a sequence of words may have on a reader or listener, is extended when all the members of the mad tea party rush in to supply further examples to illustrate the Mad Hatter's point. The essence of this classic scene is echoed in academic discussions, as in the following example, which focuses on how people make use of language: 'It has always been the case that people don't necessarily mean what they say nor say what they mean, but with social media today's uncertainties of meaning have grown exponentially' (Kramsch, 2021, p. 196).

Language is the most essential human instrument. With every word we say we create and define our world, and by doing so, we maintain the dominion of language. Consequently, it is no coincidence that the Gospel according to St. John opens with the sentence, 'In the beginning, there was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (*King James Bible*, 1769/1984, John 1:1). Regardless of any religious faith (or the absence of it), the ability to communicate by linguistic means distinguishes the human species from the other creatures that roam planet Earth. No other organism, irrespective of its intelligence, can configure, shape, and transmit realities in verbal form. By invoking a biblical passage, the author of this editorial immediately positions himself as someone who has been raised in a region of the world where this canonical text exerted a great influence in communal institutions such as churches and schools. Furthermore, if he respects the precepts of this tradition and acts according to the norms of the Swiss Protestant culture that stems from this background, he is automatically imbued with its ideology and sits in a linguistic cage that defines his perception of the world around him. '[T]he language we speak not only guides, but determines the way we think, indeed makes us prisoners of the concepts it evokes in the mind' (Kramsch, 2021, p. 24). It is only by means of exploring alternative perspectives that one might

develop a metacognitive awareness of how much one's outlook on everything is shaped by the background one comes from and by the language one speaks. This step of assuming a different point of view (and learning a foreign language arguably provides an opportunity to do so), is essential for anyone who believes in the values of a democratic society where contrary opinions and thought constructs contribute to constant and essential debates.

Most of the ideological underpinnings that sustain the way of life of distinct human societies rely on language as its essential conduit. And yet, according to Barkhuizen (2016, p. 26), 'languages and people cannot in themselves have power'. It is only when language is understood as a social practice 'that relations of power become evident and the negotiation of identities takes place' (Barkhuizen, 2016, p. 26). His conception thus delegates the authority of language to its discursive manifestations and, by doing so, somewhat downgrades several of the significant effects of this social practice, which results, for instance, in educational textbooks that crystallize into 'ideological artefacts, sedimenting assumptions about who we are, how we should speak, and who belongs' (Kostoulas, 2025, 1 July). A journal such as *Children's Literature in English Language Education* must be aware of its position in this context: simply by existing, it contributes to the dominance of the globally dominant lingua franca (you need to be able to speak it to be heard). Still, the editorial team is highly aware of this and is consciously striving to be inclusive, which means to incorporate alternative perspectives, respect diverse positions, and to acknowledge and value the expressive capabilities and powers of other languages.

Linguistic communities generally feature both exclusive and inclusive functions. Every user of a (national) language inadvertently contributes to maintaining its sway over future generations, frequently at the expense of minority languages or local variations and dialects (see Kostoulas, 2025, 1 July). 'Speakers are complicit in the power relations constructed and perpetuated by language and upheld by the institutions of a given speech community' (Kramsch, 2021, p. 197). The fact remains that languages, essentially, provide the vehicle not just for ideologies but also for the diverse cultures and subcultures that make use of them, and while many English language teachers, for instance, tend to focus on the four skills plus grammar and vocabulary, they frequently tend to forget to what extent they also teach aspects of culture (Kramsch, 1993). In every human society, mainstream education is regulated by certain principles that develop and refine this conglomerate of language and culture to support children in their

process of socialization and acculturation. Ultimately, such a grammar of schooling (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) endeavours to instill in children the customs and values of their respective communities. Like culture and ideology, these deep-level structures remain mostly invisible to their proponents. Furthermore, the literature given to schoolchildren can be understood as playing an instrumental part in this process.

In an ideal world, education would succeed in raising awareness of the various ideologies that shape a society. Moreover, it would make individual learners take notice of their positionality, in other words of their potential biases, latent power dynamics, and the subjective nature of their grasp of the world and, last but not least, encourage students to discover multiple perspectives in order to gain a broader picture of human lives. The reality, unfortunately, can look very different. The process of standardization that occurs in national languages is mirrored by a similar tendency towards hegemony in education by setting standards and defining competencies. The effect of this is also felt in the teaching of children's and young adult literature. Striving for comprehensive and testable competencies and standards prevents teachers in many education systems from arranging fresh encounters with literary texts from the canon or even outside the canon to create a 'space for a respite from the read and quiz hustle of canonical literature' (Stearns-Pfeiffer et al., 2025, p. 50).

Compulsory education, where learners from a wide range of backgrounds mingle and are educated together, provides the ideal forum for respectful dialogue, and it is in this space that they could, step by step, acquire the necessary competencies that permit them to understand diversity intellectually. ELT classrooms must therefore strive to be safe communicative spaces, not because of methods or methodologies, but because it is only by means of dialogue that learners of any age group can come to understand diverse perspectives, alternative realities, and contrary points of view. Children's literature affords the ideal starting point for this necessary step 'to ensure that our children become enthusiastic and savvy readers, thinkers, and doers. To accomplish this goal, we argue for a new educational mantra that shifts the focus from raising test scores to raising readers' (Leland et al., 2023, p. xii). Teachers can work towards this, according to Delanoy (2024, p. 12), when they allow their students to discover that their 'cognitive tools need continuous revision since dialogue is conceived of as an open-ended and creative process, where new problem-, people-, situation-, and context-specific solutions need to be found in the light of changing demand'. By assuming multiple perspectives, learners can become acquainted with discrepant points of view

that challenge the preeminent perceptions, the epistemology, and the ideology of the discourse around them. Thus, dialogue necessitates an openness towards analytical scrutiny and mental readjustment.

Speaking of dialogue, the last instalment of Philip Pullman's *Book of Dust* trilogy, *The Rose Field*, features a conversation between Lyra and her guide that resonates with the significance of the relationship between the world and the language in which we conceive it. Lyra asks: 'You mean, if it's imagined, it can't be real? What about the other way round: if it's real, it can't be imagined?' (Pullman, 2025, p. 55). Almost all the contributions to this issue relate, in one way or another, to this multifaceted entanglement of language, power and reality. Arguably, they also succeed in questioning positions and providing alternative perspectives while simultaneously testing the limits of our linguistic cages and imaginations.

In the first contribution, "It seems like everyone wants to learn Ukrainian": Exploring Children's Responses to a Translingual Picturebook', Erin Becht investigates the potential benefits of bringing a translingual picturebook into a multicultural and multilingual ELT classroom setting. Her view of teaching in such a context seeks to keep the needs of all her students in mind, the newly migrated, those with migrant roots, and those with local roots. Referring to Bishop's well-established metaphor that children's literature ought to offer mirrors, windows, and sliding doors to its readers (Bishop, 1990), she demonstrates how children may indeed experience all three aspects when discussing a translingual picturebook. She reviews several studies that assert the valorization that such texts offer for learners with a different linguistic background, because the local learners begin to empathize with refugees and migrants. At the same time, such lessons may help all the learners to grasp how language and power are interwoven. While empirical evidence of positive effects remains scarce, the impact of the translingual picturebook on individual students is beautifully described in her text.

New technologies provide challenges and, at the same time, opportunities to experiment with innovative tools in the ELT classroom. By expanding traditional picturebooks with VR technology and involving teachers and learners in creating additional tasks and activities, Theresa Summers and Rebecca Flämig explore the potential of digital developments to enhance the reading experience for young learners. Their research project is part of specific research initiatives launched in Germany and in Europe. In their contribution, they demonstrate how *If Sharks Disappeared* by

Lily Williams may be employed to engage students at primary level both with digital literacy as well as with more traditional classroom approaches to reading by means of a picturebook. Thus, the two authors provide an insight into the benefits, but also the pitfalls that pioneering teachers might encounter if they intend to pursue such a path.

Focusing on creativity, Max von Blanckenburg, Elisa Aschauer and Jessica Helget describe the potential of using literary scenarios to support creative writing activities with young learners in the early stages of German secondary school (ages 11–12). In their article, ‘Imaginative Thinking and Problem-Solving through Literary Learning’, they present a project that involved student teachers at university. The latter prepared a creative writing task in groups, taught it in classrooms at various partner schools, and finally reported back on their teaching experience in the university classroom. The given setting of the assignment, a school for young superheroes, stimulated the imagination of the young learners and helped to school their counter-factual reasoning skills, which are essential to practise coping with difficult mental tasks. Furthermore, by confronting them with life-threatening fictional developments, the project engaged the young superheroes in problem-solving activities, which could only be resolved if they joined forces and collaborated. In a second step, the authors reflect on the benefits and potentials of using such classroom arrangements by considering aspects such as the openness of the task (scale of scaffolding), process-orientation, and the degree to which literary learning can be stimulated.

The contribution that follows, ‘Addressing Racism with Young Language Learners through Picturebooks’, is based on a paper that was originally presented at the RidEL Conference in Bodø, Norway, in 2024. Julia Reckermann and Frauke Matz consider the manifold challenges of teaching young children from a German perspective and insist that teachers ought not to shy away from contested topics such as racism. They encourage their readers to implement teaching about this issue already in the primary school and, moreover, provide a framework based on criteria that is intended to support teachers who want to select a relevant picturebook on racism for their ELT classroom. Next, the two authors suggest a range of suitable publications that can serve as a springboard to consider the limits of the young learners’ view of the world while also raising their awareness towards inequality, notions of fairness and perceptions of difference. Ultimately, they argue for classrooms to become a forum for serious discussions.

Beth Lewis Samuelson's article, 'Exploring Identity and Belonging with Frank Tashlin's *The Bear that Wasn't*', analyses the classroom potential of this short graphic novel, with a particular focus on teacher education. By means of several practical activities, she unveils how the text can be used to address issues of language, culture, race and gender. The protagonist's identity crisis, which is due to being mistaken by humans for an unshaved man in a fur coat, permits assuming an alternative perspective on the lifestyle of industrialized nations, on the exploitation of nature, and on the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, who are frequently subjected to linguistic dominance and monocultural discourses. Lewis Samuelson criticizes how education's hidden agenda sustains inequalities and foregrounds specific world views while suggesting that reading this graphic novel may counteract this to some extent by having the pre-service teachers develop empathy, an awareness of multiple identities, and by fostering their critical thinking skills.

While national languages tend to dominate curricula and syllabi unchallenged in some nations, there are, of course, constellations in several countries where bilingual or multilingual approaches to literacy are beginning to gain increasingly more ground. In some cases, there is a historical disbalance between a dominating language of the colonizers and a marginalized local language that is now being revitalized. The article by Siwan Rosser, Nicola Daly, and Ilid Haf, 'Dwy Iaith, Reo Rua: An Exploration of Dual Language Picturebooks in Aotearoa New Zealand and Cymru Wales' reflects on how bilingual picturebooks in the two countries may support or challenge the hierarchy between languages. In addition, they offer a thorough and exhaustive comparison of the various types of dual language picturebooks and list the distinct possibilities to combine the two languages. Their analysis demonstrates how privileging one language over the other may shed a light on linguistic attitudes and policies. Moreover, their results pinpoint how the majority language (English) is still favoured if publishers opt for dual text because monolingual English speakers are not forced to accept the challenge of dealing with the minority language. While the situation in the two countries differs for mostly historical reasons, their findings elucidate how picturebooks can serve as evidence of linguistic power relations.

In our Recommended Reads section, Alyssa Magee Lowery has gathered a panorama of wordless picturebooks. The rich variety that is on display does not only convey respect for visual representations but also supports the insight that wordless picturebooks may foster literacy and critical thinking skills just as much as picturebooks with verbal elements. They are presented by

Fuling Den (Suzy Lee, 2002, *Alice in Wonderland*), Artemis Papailia (Jeannie Baker, 2010, *Mirror*), Marthe Celine Johansen (Pete Oswald, 2020, *Hike*), and also by Alyssa Magee Lowery (David Wiesner, 2006, *Flotsam*). The book review in this edition features Raúl Alberto Mora's discussion of *Graphic Refuge: Visuality and Mobility in Refugee Comics*, a critical volume that theorizes migrants and readers of graphic refugee novels as political subjects.

Finally, there are three welcomes to be announced: First, David Valente, who has joined the editorial team and who does not really need an introduction since he is already well-known to the readers of this journal. For many years he has been responsible both for the academic book reviews and the Recommended Reads. At the same time, we are very grateful to Alyssa Magee Lowery, who in addition to the Recommended Reads, is now also in charge of reviews. Second, we are extremely pleased that Eivind Nessa Torgersen has agreed to support the editors in the new role of editorial consultant. Third, we would like to welcome Eilish Buisset, who has become the new member of the copyediting team.

Last but definitely not least, I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to everybody who contributed to making this issue possible.

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