

Analyzing the Children's Book *The Journey* Using Greimas' Semiotic Analysis

Kübra Güran Yiğitbaşı¹

Abstract

Groups defined as refugees, asylum seekers, or immigrants have faced us in recent years through aid campaigns in the media or news programs framed in negative contexts like tragic life struggles, judicial cases, violence, and abuse. The political, humane, and social dimensions of the topic, being different from the world media, have taken place on Turkey's agenda because of both its geographical and historical proximity. The way that refugees are discussed in various media circles shows that humanity in our era is still passing a serious and nasty test in terms of many concepts like freedom, human rights, equality, coexistent culture, and beyond. Being enriched from many factors experienced in real life, meanwhile, children's books and literature on the issue of refugees' condition carry particular importance in terms of children who read being able to show empathy while gaining an awareness of this reality in the proper direction. The illustrated children's book *The Journey* is worth investigating in terms of being a literary work that takes children as the target audience; includes violence, conflict, and death; and at the same time narrates a traumatic subject drawn from real life, such as being a refugee. In the study, this children's book was chosen because of targeting small children from within similar books functioning on the same topic and, by being translated into 12 languages, for its ability to reach worldwide readership. The aim of the research is to scrutinize a realistic topic in a children's book by arriving at the various layers forming the literary meaning of the text with the help of semiotics through the example of agents using Greimas' semiotic method and exposing the agents, the functions they explain, and the relationships among them. Greimas' semiotic method, which describes the people located in the narrative according to their function, appears to have limited use in analyses related to children's content in the literature. No Turkish analyses are encountered that have been performed with this method on realistic constructs referring to traumatic issues in particular or that need to be told using highly attentive language for children. In the analysis, the use of combining contrasts like war-peace, fear-hope, and separation-union, in spite of the uneasy atmosphere of the literary text, was dominantly seen as an optimistic and hopeful language of expression in the story. This preferred perspective provides an appropriate expression for children to read that is far from the topic of violence.

Keywords

Children's books • Illustrated stories • Semiotics • Refugees • War

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Received: October 13, 2017

Accepted: February 12, 2018

OnlineFirst: February 20, 2018

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ISSN 2149-4398 • eISSN 2458-8962

DOI 10.12738/mejrs.2018.3.1.0005 • Winter 2018 • 3(1) • 53–79

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Besides children's books giving children literary pleasure, having them gain reading habits, and enriching their imagination, these books have the reader who has yet to gain life experience also live an experience related to real life. The children of today are exposed at an early age to countless events and news through the media. In this context, instead of ignoring the expression of negative situations through an overprotective approach, some unwanted events that can be encountered in real life need to be addressed as appropriate to the perception and age of the child. Similarly,

how traumatic issues will be explained to the child target audience is a matter that needs to be taken seriously. One of the most important concepts featured in children's publications is the appropriateness to the child on this point. Before understanding the concept of child appropriate, one must understand the literature on appropriate sensitivity to a child's growth and development age, psychology, word and concept knowledge, and level of perception (Şirin, 2000, p. 19).

Realistic messages appropriate to children's perceptions and elements relative to children in children's books will compare these messages with life's difficulties accurately and balanced. As such, empathy directed at people exposed to traumatic events as well as awareness of related topics will be gained by those reading children's content.

The facts are that many children these days can easily access and are exposed as much as adults to news images of refugee conditions, war, and the inhumane reasons for these. Children are often informed of these facts through adult broadcasts. Therefore, content prepared at a level the child can perceive as well as prepared appropriately for children is of great importance.

The children's book *The Journey* cultivates the topic of being a refugee, a reality witnessed close to Turkish society. Francesca Sanna, the author and illustrator of the book, connects her reason for writing this story to the tale of two little girls that she had met at a refugee camp in Italy. One important finding in terms of the study is that the narrative is of a topic that contains violence, war, and death, as the situation is that of being a refugee, and at the same time in a way gives hope in accordance with the target audience of children.

The study aims to arrive at the meanings, aside from those that have been mentioned, that can be extracted from the deep structure of the narrative in three levels of Greimas' analysis method by forming a semiotic square in the literary text of the child's book through a sampling of its agents. In choosing to analyze the story using Greimas' sampling of agents and semiotic square, processing the reader's thoughts can be effective by starting from these schemes and introducing the functions and relationships in the many realistic issues of these schemes, which require careful language in the narrative to generate meaning to the child reader.

Works that show similarities with actual events, locales, and people in the world we live and that convincingly have the reader feel the possibility that the events characters face can happen are called realistic works. In realistic fiction, the plot of the text is based on the character struggle, through the character's self or another character, with society or nature. Children's literature and content directed at children have included topics that can be encountered in real life, especially in the last fifty years, and which can sometimes be called traumatic and saddening, too. While the

thought of protecting children from bad things was common especially from the 18th to the mid-20th century, since the middle of the 20th century, this idea has been almost entirely done away with. Also, the reflection of concepts in the literature like pluralistic societies, democracy, and putting yourself in the place of another with the success of movements like human rights and workers, women, and minority rights that were impactful all over the world in the 1960s and 70s are seen as the reasons for this. According to this new understanding, instead of keeping children away from bad things, this issue became having the child be confronted with bad events and situations (Tüfekci Can, 2014a, p. 120). In this context, topics and characters in children's content show continuous change in parallel with the reality of social life.

Addressing the issues in children's books that focus on problems like war, death, immigration, and being a refugee can be found alarming by parents. On the other hand, texts that completely edit out negative events that children can face, these days being consciously and unconsciously exposed almost as much as adults to all kinds of content, may not be found realistic or convincing. In contrast, books that can offer solutions to the basic issues children face every day, that touch upon the realities of life, and that aim to raise awareness on specific issues will be able to address children's real needs.

Semiotics was developed in the early 20th century through studies performed by Swiss linguist Saussure and American philosopher Peirce. The method continued to develop as a top science, also including linguistics after Saussure and Peirce. Greimas brought it to a different location through comparison to other theorists performing studies related to semiotics.

Greimas semiotics aims to explain significant integral semantic differences, semantic articulations, and the production of meaning (signification) by reproducing through meta-language. For this purpose, it does not handle pure information strings or displays but rather meaningful totals (meaningful sequences; Rifat, 1990, p. 122). According to A. J. Greimas, a discourse is formed in three main layers, uniting surface structures by starting from deep structures by reintegrating the meaning of the different elements of the discourse (Kıran & Kıran, 2011, p. 183).

The three main layers emphasized in the concept of discourse that Greimas revealed in his formation can be explained briefly as (Sivri & Örkün, 2014, pp. 19–20):

The Figurative (Discursive) Level. By questioning what the basic components that can be recognized in the first reading are discoursing, the people in the narrative are revealed through the basic functions of time and space.

Narrative Level. This level focuses on the agents and what they bring, rather than what they narrate. Even though Propp had reached the result that there are seven types of agents in his book *Morphology of the Folktale*, Greimas reduced it to six agents:

1. Sender: The agent, by directing the subject straight to the object, gives rise to its actions.
2. The receiver: This agent can be called the addressee of the sender to what is being sent.
3. Subject: The most important agent of the narrative, it occurs at the center of the narrative.
4. Object: The agent is what the subject seeks or tries to reach.
5. Helper: The agent that helps the subject in its effort to reach the object.
6. Opponent: The agent that blocks the subject from reaching the object.

Mentioning the narrative schedule is necessary at this level of the narrative (Günay, 2002, p. 126). The narrative schedule is used in literary semiotics to describe the agents according to their action by revealing the general thread of the narrative.

A narrative schedule consists of four phases: manipulation, acquirement, deed, and imposition. In the phase of manipulation, the instigator wants or orders the possible subject to perform an action through the modal of “making” the subject. At the stage of acquirement, the subject provides the necessary conditions for the deed or obtains the necessary materials. The modals of “having power,” “knowing,” and “being able to do” are in this stage. The stage of deed is where the modal of “doing” is dominant and the subject realizes the action. The phase of imposition is where the sender evaluates the action of the subject and the narrative concludes with the punishment or prize accordingly (Uçan, 2016, pp. 115–116).

The final stage of the analysis is the Deep level of logical-semantic analysis.

In the children's book *The Journey*, the child subject, together with the mother and sibling, is transformed from a state of well-being directly to a state of discomfort by remaining apart from the object with the start of the war from the story's second section. Throughout the story, the journey is explained as what the child subject and those accompanying do to find a home where they can live in safety for themselves again without fear. The war is narrated through uncertainty, unknowingness, irregularity, fearfulness, and darkness with the expressions “something terrible happened last year,” “horrible things happened around us,” “we cannot see anything around us but turbulence,” and “it's as if they are turning off all the lights in the world.” In this context, darkness and the lack of the father are at the same time like news of insecurity, danger, and other bad things. Where the two children and mothers, who the story is based on, will be able to begin from, namely, “very high mountains,” and “a country with interesting forests and animals,” in other words, the start in their stories, is established over the journey they make in their hope of finding a safe home by escaping from the guards, enemy, the powerful, and the war that took their

fathers from them. Throughout the journey, which the mother describes as “a dreadful adventure” made while concealed in various vehicles, the reader is intimidated with the concern and fear of being blocked or killed like the fathers because of the heroes being captured by guards and not being able to get to another country. The emotions the refugees and asylum seekers most often experienced and felt, such as loneliness, powerlessness, impotence, homelessness and landlessness, are conveyed to the reader realistically in the narrative through indicators formed from the unsounded values as in the expressions, “‘You are not allowed to cross the border. Turn back!’ yelled the angry guard. We had no place to go. We were very, very tired. I was quite scared of the sounds coming from within the darkness in the depths of the forest.” Obstacles that were necessary to overcome throughout the journey were constantly encountered, like sometimes a wall, a border, or the sea, and laid the groundwork for the dangers they would be able to live with: “There was a great sea. A huge sea stretching as far as the eye could see. Along the way we told each other stories with those that were in the ship’s hull. It wasn’t a fairy princess tale, but...there were terrible and dangerous monsters in the tales hiding under the sea and waiting to feed on us when our boat turned over.” The heroes’ movement and continuity are provided by constantly changing the location, continuing from one vehicle to the next. At the end of the story, the heroes leave their land travels for journey on the sea, which many refugees have actually experienced, in fact. “As the waves grew, our boat shook more and more, it never stopped swaying. As if the sea would never end.” The narrative includes as many indicators of the lack of well-being as much as positive ones that give hope. The language and style of this narrative in the story does not show a pessimistic point of view; it shows the hopeful and optimistic viewpoint is dominant:

This time we began to tell each other another story. There were dancing fairies of goodness in the green forests of the country we were trying to get to. These beautiful fairies would give us charms to end the war in our country.

The indicator of the sunrise, the revival of the whole world and life again after the end of a day, hints at finding life and symbolizes the end of the dangerous sea journey emphasizing, “We saw the shore for the first time in days as the sun rose,” and “Swaying to and fro our ship approached the shore,” and the hopeful end of the story with “My mother said we were lucky to still be together.” Despite all the experienced fear, anxiety, and unknowns, the mother and children still being together represents there is hope for beginning a new life again. “I looked at the birds flying as if they were stretching out from the train and following us in the sky. The birds were migrating just like us. Their journey too was very long, but they didn’t have to cross any border. Maybe one day, we too will find a new home just like these birds. A safe home where we can start all over...”

At the end of the story, by the child subject not belonging to an identified place with lives of its own, the similarity established among the birds migrating for staying alive

and being able to continue living symbolizes the millions of people today on migration paths who have been forced to leave their countries. The single hope of these people, who have been labeled as migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, is to be able to begin anew their lives anywhere in the world and their stories “in a safe home.”

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