'GROWN-UP' SYNTAX IN CHILDREN'S STORYBOOKS

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Abstract: The study hopes to challenge the view that syntax in children's storybooks is custom-made to match the general abilities of young listeners and readers. Reading with an adult mind and eyes prompts the question whether at least some children's storybooks make it difficult to draw a line between 'young' and 'grown-up' syntax. The small-scale research was a text-based analysis of three children's stories aimed at pre-teen children aged seven through twelve. With a manually handled corpus kept within manageable limits it was possible to determine the presence or absence of syntactic structures associated with advanced language use, i.e. those believed to require considerable experience, knowledge and skill in language production and reception. The main finding to report is that syntax in children's stories is little different from what may be informally described as 'grown-up' syntax. The paper also invites the reader to acknowledge the difficult task of balancing a downgraded version of syntax against an urge to tell an engaging story that wants to be read.

Key words: syntax, clause, paratactic, hypotactic, embedded, non-finite

Introduction

To say that storytelling lies at the very root of human communication is to say nothing new and startling. To say that storytelling is a practice deeply ingrained in our linguistic and social behaviour may seem all too familiar to deserve yet another echo. Indeed, Bell (1999, p. 147) reminds us that 'much of humanity's most important experience has been embodied in stories.'

It is also a practice we are introduced to very early on in our lives. Very young children who may not even be able to speak properly eagerly await their bedtime story and savour the familiar voice of their reader taking them to a safe haven of imagination.

But beyond the nostalgic reminiscences of a happy childhood loom many unanswered questions puzzling the adult minds of researchers who resort not to imagination but to empirical tests involving texts and subjects. Experts have strived in their many efforts to find out what a children's story does and does not do. The following are some of the frequently asked questions. To what extent is it an aid in enhancing children's reading skills? Does and should it contain language within absolute reach of the target age group? Is and should there be a shift of focus from attaining full comprehension to merely creating imagery as a powerful tool for teaching desired or acceptable forms of social behaviour? Owing to an excess of conflicting evidence, research is still very much ongoing in this field, as the lines below suggest.

In her study of nonfinite clauses in children's literature, Puurtinen (1998) reports that these tightly packed and therefore inevitably less explicit units of meaning affect readability (i.e. ease with which texts are read and understood) more than sentence length does (Role of Children's Literature section, para. 2). However, recent trends in children's literature reveal greater freedom in the choice of complex syntactic structures, which may be a result of a relatively relaxed attitude towards children's literature in general (Conclusion, para. 1).

Some justification for such trends is found in the work of Eisenberg et al. (2008), who report quite encouraging results of a study testing school-aged children's production of noun phrases with pre- and post-modification in fictional narratives. Accordingly, descriptive noun phrases were produced by all children at the age of 8, and noun phrases with post-modification by all children at the age of 11 (Abstract).

More tentative forecasts are reported in Paris, Carpenter, Paris and Hamilton (2005), who claim that syntactically difficult stories or those containing unfamiliar vocabulary may lead to more gap-filling than texts which are less complex and more accessible to younger readers (p. 136).

Verhallen (2009) agrees that the sophisticated language of children's books is often riddled with complex sentences and may thus be out of reach for young children with little previous exposure to storybooks (para. 1).

To fully understand a narrative may not be of primary importance indeed: a simple act of reading or being read to may help a child grow and develop more creatively. With loyalties lying in that camp, the issue of a child's linguistic abilities matching the linguistic complexity of children's literature possibly gives less cause for concern.

The following study hopes to challenge the view, should it still persist amongst linguists, teachers, and story readers and tellers in general, that syntax in children's storybooks is custom-made to match the general abilities of young listeners and readers. Reading with an adult mind and eyes prompts the question whether at least some children's storybooks make it difficult to draw a line between 'young' and 'grown-up' syntax. Sentence and phrase length put aside, what remains is a number of highly sophisticated syntactic structures and strategies expressing some of the most subtle layers of meaning.

This paper is certainly not meant to criticize the syntactic make-up of children's storybooks (nor would it be fair in light of so many opposing views prevailing with language acquisition experts in this line of study); instead, it invites all parties concerned to acknowledge the difficult - if not impossible - task of balancing a downgraded version of syntax against an urge to tell an engaging story that wants to be read. The aim of the research is not to support one view against the other, but merely to report the finding that syntax in children's literature is little different from what may informally be described as 'grown-up' syntax.

Corpus

The corpus underlying the study consists of three children's storybooks[339] online[340] amounting to 3,987 words distributed over 388 lines. The stories are aimed at pre-teen children aged seven through twelve. A total of only three stories points to a small-scale research in which a manually handled corpus had to be kept within manageable limits.

Method

An analysis was performed of syntactic structures associated with advanced language use, especially hypotactic and embedded clauses, each realized by both finite and non-finite varieties. Their occurrences were then compared against those syntactic structures that are intuitively considered less demanding, mainly paratactic clauses.

A selective list was also created reporting additional syntactic features and strategies - some of them with clearly marked discourse functions - believed to require considerable experience, knowledge and skill in language production and reception, i.e. cleft sentences, discontinuous modification, extraposition, fronting, inversion, thematic dislocation, along with ellipsis and substitution at clause level. Each of the categories selected was then defined and exemplified with verbatim corpus material.

Finally, tabular representations of syntactic structures and features containing percentages and numbers of occurrences were provided in order to visualise the findings rather than present the study as essentially quantitative. The aim was to point to a syntactic wealth and diversity in children's stories rather than claim categorical supremacy in numbers.

Findings and discussion

Following a count of 313 sentences and 690 clauses, the latter were grouped and analysed as belonging to paratactic, hypotactic or embedded varieties. Parataxis is a relationship of independence and equality between clauses, with each clause in the complex preserving its self-sustainability. Two or more clauses can be conjoined in this way both with and without the presence of a coordinating conjunction (when there is no coordinator, a comma is used instead). Hypotaxis, on the other hand, signifies a relationship in which one clause assumes the position of subordination to the other clause or clauses (Downing and Locke, 2003, p. 281). We have, however, regarded as hypotactic only those clauses that have adverbial meanings (Carter and McCarthy, 2006, p. 560), along with the odd sentential relative[341]. Such an approach enabled a separate treatment of embedded clauses, those that act as immediate constituents (i.e. subject, object or complement) of a superordinate clause, or even as constituents of phrases (e.g. relative clauses acting as post-modifiers in noun phrases).

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[339] The storybooks selected for analysis are *McFeeglebee's Pond*, an illustrated story, *The Wumpalump*, an illustrated religious parable, and *The Littlest Knight*, an illustrated fairy tale. The names of the authors are acknowledged in the References below.

[340] The reminder that the storybooks appear online is not meant to imply a lower standard of production; on the contrary, www.magickeys.com, the site from which the storybooks were downloaded, is a multiple award-winner, with some of its content distributed to schools all over native Australia.

[341] E.g. *As big as three houses with breath like a gale, it looked rather hungry, which made Georgie pale.* This sentence from *McFeeglebee's Pond* contains a sentential relative, *which made Georgie pale*, which, as the name suggests, harks back to the entire proposition of the preceding sentence rather than the more usual noun antecedent.

On a final note, sentence is here understood as an orthographical unit ending in a full stop or, less frequently, in a question or exclamation mark.

The following are examples of all three types of clauses:

(1a) "I'm gonna lie down with my knees in the air and the pole through my toes and doze like a lazy catfish in summer.["]
(1b) The water, seething and boiling, turned bright red then dark as that grisly catfish became a shark.
(1c) But little Georgie P. Johnson just wiggled his nose and pretended not to hear, as if he had molasses stuck in his ear.

<div align="center">(from McFeeglebee's Pond)</div>

In (1a) the coordinator conjoining the two clauses is the semantically universal 'and', while other coordinators found in the texts include *but*, *so*, *or*, *nor*, *for*, and *then*. (1b) features the subordinator 'as', which has been chosen from a long list of subordinators in the texts, e.g. *before*, *when*, *while*, *until*, *where*, *because*, *as if*, *just as*, *though*, *so that*, *now that*, etc. Example (1c) is interesting because it brings together all three types of clauses: 'stuck in his ear' is embedded, 'as if he had molasses stuck in his ear' hypotactic, and 'but little Georgie P. Johnson just wiggled his nose and pretended not to hear' comprises two paratactic clauses.

The distribution of clauses based on the classification outlined is presented in Table 1 below.

Clause	Percentage
Paratactic	67.5
Hypotactic	14.1
Embedded	18.4

<div align="center">Table 1: The distribution of dependent and
independent clauses in the texts</div>

It is not surprising that parataxis should represent the dominant syntactic relationship in the stories, but the two dependent categories surely manifest a great deal of complexity and thus make up for what they may lack in numbers. Embedding takes place in all permissible constituent positions – that of subject, object and complement. At phrase level, clauses post-modify nouns, complement adjectives and prepositions, and qualify adverbs[342]. Even more strikingly, the corpus abounds in sentences with multiple or recursive embedding, i.e. embedded clauses containing other embedded or hypotactic clauses, for example:

(2a) The King declared whosoever killed the dragon would be granted half his kingdom.
(2b) When he reached the dragon's lair he saw that the cliffs of the ravine were so far across that building a bridge would take a year.

<div align="center">(from The Littlest Knight)</div>

In (2a) the embedded clause 'whosoever killed the dragon would be granted half his kingdom' acting as direct object introduces yet another embedded clause - 'whosoever killed the dragon' - in subject position. Similarly, in (2b) the nominal clause 'that the cliffs of the ravine were so far across that building a bridge would take a year' accommodates the adverb phrase 'so far across that building a bridge would take a year', with the clause 'that building a bridge would take a year' acting as qualifier, which in turn holds the non-finite clause 'building a bridge' in subject position.

As a matter of fact, hypotactic and embedded clauses are realised by a great number of non-finite structures (e.g. infinitival and participial, along with verbless clauses), as displayed in Table 2 below.

Clause	Percentage
Finite	62.5
Non-finite	37.5

<div align="center">Table 2: Finite versus non-finite hypotactic
and embedded clauses</div>

Let us briefly consider the following examples:

(3a) So now whenever a little lump believes on the Word and knows to give of himself is life... so shall he too feel all love, all joy, all peace.

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[342] The terminology used is from Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) and Downing and Locke (2003).

(from *The Wumpalump*)

(3b) Grabbing the pole and holding on tight he used every muscle to fight what was without doubt the biggest of trout.

(from *McFeeglebee's Pond*)

(3a) introduces the infinitival clause 'to give of himself', which functions as the subject of the higher-ranking nominal clause 'to give of himself is life', in turn filling the object slot of the main clause. (3b) accommodates the coordinated V-ing adverbial clauses 'grabbing the pole and holding on tight', as well as the infinitival adverbial clause 'to fight what was without doubt the biggest of trout', which additionally holds the wh-nominal clause 'what was without doubt the biggest of trout' in the object slot.

Adding further to an already complex syntactic make-up are non-finite clauses containing explicit subjects, for example:

(4) It was in misery with its eyes swollen shut and its forked tongue lying on the ground.

(from *The Littlest Knight*)

The coordinated non-finite clauses, the first known as the V-en, and the second as the V-ing type, are introduced by the reinforcing preposition 'with' and accompanied by the subjects 'its eyes' and 'its forked tongue' respectively.

For an overview of syntactic categories analysed see Table 3 below.

Syntactic feature	Occurrences
Clefting	3
Discontinuity	6
Ellipsis	5
Extraposition	4
Fronting	8
Inversion	11
Preposed theme	3
Postposed theme	1
Substitution	2

Table 3: The number of occurrences reported for
advanced syntactic structures and features

Greenbaum and Quirk (1990, p. 407) define fronting as 'the achievement of marked theme by moving into initial position an item which is otherwise unusual there.' In a functional grammar framework (cf. Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p. 73) subject is theme by default, the most usual point of departure that signals what the clause is going to be about, while adverbials, which are frequently found in clause-initial positions in English, represent the least marked thematic choice. Because objects and complements are exceptionally rare in clause-opening positions, they are regarded as highly marked thematic elements in English (Downing and Locke, 2003, p. 42). When fronted, these elements serve specific discourse functions. Baker (2002, p. 134) suggests that their thematic effect is to achieve contrast and highlight the speaker's attitude to the message. As shown in the examples below, instances of fronting identified in the corpus assume some of the most marked forms:

(5a) … and no one there was to save them from the nothingness.
(5b) … for no one there is to share with.

(from *The Wumpalump*)

(5c) Of fishing he was very fond, why should he fear McFeeglebee's pond?

(from *McFeeglebee's Pond*)

Compare the following unmarked versions with no fronting, leading to a more standard word order:

(5d) … and there was no one to save them from the nothingness.
(5e) … for there is no one to share with.
(5f) He was very fond of fishing, why should he fear McFeeglebee's pond?

Examples (5a), (5b) and (5c) exhibit another interesting feature - that of discontinuity or postponement. Namely, post-modifiers in noun phrases and complements in adjective phrases can be separated from their respective heads to enable heavy structures to be placed towards the end of the utterance (Downing and Locke, 2003, p. 263). This communicative strategy in turn reflects the existence of two complementary principles: end-focus and end-weight. The former suggests that new or most informative content is customarily placed towards the end of the clause, whereas the latter claims the end-position preference for weighty structures, usually long and/or complex ones (Leech and Svartvik, 1993, p. 175). Both in their syntactic and communicative aspects, fronting and discontinuity emerge as two fairly sophisticated expressive tools. Of course, writers may resort to advanced syntax to achieve a rhyming effect, as observed in (5c) above and (6a) below, which contains a discontinuous noun phrase, but without the extra fronting:

(6a) And some little lumps arose who were wiser than their fellows.

<div align="center">(from The Wumpalump)</div>

End-weight principle is clearly at work in (6a), and is justified by the awkwardness of having the whole noun phrase placed before the predicate:

(6b) ?And some little lumps who were wiser than their fellows arose.

It has not escaped our attention that discontinuity and fronting are almost exclusively associated with *The Wumpalump* storybook, which may be attributed either to the writer's syntactic preferences or even to her conscious attempt to emulate the style of religious writing.

When the subject of a clause occurs in post-verbal position, the resulting word order is typically described as inversion. (7a) below qualifies for a textbook example:

(7a) Out behind the big red barn at the edge of the walnut grove is a most magnificent pond shaded by an old oak tree.

<div align="center">(from McFeeglebee's Pond)</div>

The inversion found in (7a) is meant to give greater prominence to the subject (Huddleston, 2000, p. 456), which is achieved by placing a scene-setting adverbial at the beginning of the clause. It is generally acknowledged that clause-opening adverbials denoting place reinforced with verbs of position and motion provide two important conditions in order for a successful subject-predicate switch to take place.

As (7b) and (7c) below indicate, there are also adjunctive and conjunctive elements such as 'not only' and 'nor', which typically (or even obligatorily) trigger subject-operator inversion (Huddleston, 2000, p. 456; Thomson and Martinet, 1992, p. 63):

(7b) But when he got back to the dragon he discovered that not only had the cup been chipped but it had a crack he had not seen.
(7c) One man can't carry 1,000 swords, nor can you cross a bridge which isn't there, and if you fill an empty cup it won't be empty any more.

<div align="center">(from The Littlest Knight)</div>

On the whole, inversion seems to be a useful tool in creating relevant discourse features such as scene-setting, focus and emphasis, adding the much-needed dramatic touch to storytelling. Since both types of inversion (i.e. subject-predicate and subject-operator switch) are performed in accordance with clearly defined criteria, the structure suggests a substantial degree of productive skill and receptive knowledge on the part of the speaker/writer and listener/reader, respectively.

Another discourse-oriented syntactic strategy used for roughly the same communicative purposes and involving a rearrangement of clausal elements is known as extraposition. The notional subject, which is typically a long clause, is postponed or extraposed, and its initial position filled by an anticipatory *it* (Downing and Locke, 2003, p. 35-6). The following sentence offers a textbook example of extraposition, which practically has no alternative in this case:

(8) The Princess was the King and Queen's only child and it should come as no surprise that the little blacksmith loved her very much for she was both kind and beautiful.[343]

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[343] The notional subject extraposed is 'that the little blacksmith loved her very much', while the 'it' preceding the operator 'should' is the obligatory slot-filling grammatical subject.

<div align="right">(from *The Littlest Knight*)</div>

Consider the awkwardness of 'that the little blacksmith loved her very much should come as no surprise'. Indeed, some clausal subjects are obligatorily extraposed, e.g. when followed by verbs of seeming and happening or the passive of *say* and *hope*. Generally, the complementary principles of end-weight and end-focus are the main driving force behind this syntactic transformation too, which once again requires a knowledgeable handler to follow it through.

Assigning focus lies at the heart of another syntactic strategy commonly referred to as clefting. Although clefting was extremely rare in the storybooks analysed, both varieties, *wh-* and *it*-structure, were nevertheless documented:

(9a) What *was* left were sacks and sacks and sacks of money piled everywhere.
(9b) It was shortly after that he found the dragon or rather it found him.

<div align="right">(from *The Littlest Knight*)</div>

What may easily escape the attention of an unsuspecting reader is a range of informational and stylistic effects achieved by the two structures. The *wh*-cleft in (9a), also known as pseudo-cleft, first broadly identifies an element as thematic, i.e. 'what was left', and then returns to it in post-verbal position by revealing that it is 'sacks and sacks and sacks of money piled everywhere'. The structure conveys both an idea of implicit contrast as well as a sense of exclusiveness (Baker, 2002, p. 135-6): the finding that what was left were sacks of money is most likely to counter the reader's expectations; moreover, the reader is supposed to infer that the sacks of money were the only thing left and that there was nothing else there.

The cleft in (9b) above places an element following 'it' and the verb 'be', i.e. 'shortly after', in focus, with an idea of implicit contrast wielding the sentence in the desired direction (e.g. it was shortly after rather than years later that he found the dragon). Clefting in general subsumes several layers of meaning that are not exactly self-explanatory, and may take an expert to develop a full and proper understanding of their fine-grained linguistic properties.

Unlike most of the afore-mentioned strategies, pre- and postposed themes are not to be associated with contrast or focus assignment. Instead, what takes place here is essentially thematic dislocation[344] in which pronominal forms serve as repetitions of more substantial nominal or, less frequently, clausal thematic elements, or in which an attenuated pronominal theme is subsequently disambiguated by a fully fledged theme. Non-pronominal themes can occur either in initial or final position in a clause (hence the term dislocation), as illustrated below:

(10a) You must think I'm here to fiddle,1,000 men--that's not the riddle.[345]
<div align="right">(from *The Littlest Knight*)</div>
(10b) For this is the grace of God... that we should know him who in love created us and his son who in love died for us.[346]

<div align="right">(from *The Wumpalump*)</div>

Their appearance in the corpus is significant as dislocated themes are not commonly found in written English. McCarthy (2005, p. 51) cautions that these structures, which regularly emerge in natural spoken data, are nevertheless often 'underplayed in language teaching, probably owing to the continued dominance of standards taken from the written code.' Pre- and postposed themes reflect the 'online' nature of spontaneous speech styles, and the fact that they are documented in the corpus gives the storybooks a certain advantage over other forms of writing that ignore or find fault with these and similar aspects of grammar. They also add variety to an already diverse list of syntactic categories in the children's storybooks.

Although probably a universal feature of language, ellipsis and substitution may be structurally realised in considerably different ways in different languages, presenting great difficulties even to the most proficient of learners (McCarthy, 2005, p. 43-4). (11a) below illustrates the omission of the linking verb 'be' in the clause 'and he but a lowly blacksmith', whereas (11b) is an example of clause-level substitution or replacement facilitated by the complex pro-form 'not to':

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[344] Themes are normally realised by a single notional element occupying the first position in a clause. With preposed themes, however, nominal and pronominal thematic elements with single reference immediately follow each other, e.g. *The Browns, they will know what to do*. When the result is a postposed theme, the opening pronoun develops into a full-fledged coreferential structure at the end of the clause, e.g. *They will know what to do, the Browns*.
[345] '1,000 men' is a preposed nominal theme, and 'that' its pronominal reinforcement.
[346] The pronominal theme 'this' refers to the postposed clausal theme 'that we should know him who in love created us and his son who in love died for us'.

(11a) But, alas, the little blacksmith could admire the Princess only from afar because she was, after all, a princess and he but a lowly blacksmith--not even that tall.

(from *The Littlest Knight*)

(11b) Did you look to the nothingness as I warned you not to?"

(from *The Wumpalump*)

It is with ellipsis and substitution[347] that we bring to a close our discussion of advanced structural devices found in the children's storybooks, posing the question whether there should be any justification for regarding the syntactic make-up of children's stories as essentially different from many other forms of writing that do not specifically target younger audiences.

Conclusion

This small-scale study was designed to challenge the popular belief that syntax in children's narratives must have a childlike quality to it. Quite a long list of syntactic structures and features dealt with in the previous section clearly contradicts this belief. The study casts real doubts over an attempt to make a clear dividing line between 'young' and 'grown-up' syntax. Any expectations of that kind prove unrealistic against the backdrop of highly sophisticated linguistic and expressive tools in the narratives.

(Most of the structures given in Table 3, e.g. clefting and fronting, I teach my 3rd and 4th year students, foreign learners of English who are getting ready to take up teaching positions. My experience tells me that many of them would struggle to derive the right forms and understand their corresponding communicative roles.)

The question arises whether it is at all possible to tell an inspiring story using only the most rudimentary of syntactic devices. Even if the answer is affirmative, the very next dilemma to resolve is whether prioritising comprehension offers compelling enough an argument not to present language at its best.

On the whole, it seems that syntactic simplicity in children's narratives is becoming increasingly rare, but it remains to be seen what results these (un)conscious narrative practises will bring forth and whether they will stand the test of time.

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[347] Only those cases of ellipsis and substitution operating at verb phrase and clause level were taken into account, and precisely so because they are associated with a high degree of complexity, which explains why some simpler forms of ellipsis (e.g. that of subject in coordinated clauses) were completely disregarded.

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