

Language and Ecology in Dr. Elmessiri's and Dr. Seuss's Children's Stories: A post-pandemic Sociocognitive approach

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Abstract:

This paper investigates language and ecology in some Arabic children's stories by Dr. Elmessiri and English children's stories by Dr. Seuss. It shows how Dr. Elmessiri and Dr. Seuss utilise items and animal characters in their stories for kids from the local environment. The use of a language that respects the ecosystem of the surrounding environment helps protecting this environment from destruction. This is the environmentally constructive discourse that Arran Stibbe (2021) mentions in his book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories we live by*. After the coronavirus pandemic, man realized that a search for a different discourse is a must. This study is conducted within the framework of the sociocognitive model of critical discourse analysis by van Dijk (2006, 2008a, 2009). In this model, van Dijk does not only consider the phonological, syntactic, morphological and semantic levels of a discourse, but also he goes beyond to the level of production and perception of a discourse.

Keywords: children's stories, language, ecology, Dr. Elmessiri, Dr. Seuss, sociocognitive

Introduction

This study investigates language and ecology in selected Arabic children's stories by Dr. Elmessiri and English children's stories by Dr. Seuss. It shows how Dr. Elmessiri and Dr. Seuss utilise items and animal characters in their stories for kids from the local environment. The use of a language that respects the ecosystem of the surrounding environment helps protecting this environment from destruction. This is the environmentally constructive discourse that Arran Stibbe (2021) mentions in his book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories we live by*. After the coronavirus pandemic, man realized that a search for a different discourse is a must.

Abdel-Wahab Elmessiri (1983-2008) is an Egyptian thinker, scholar, and author. He wrote a number of children's stories stating that they complete his intellectual project. Dr. Elmessiri's stories for children; "Stories of this era" (as he calls them); include "Cinderella and Lady Zeinab Khatoun" (1999), "Nur and The So-Called Cunning Wolf" (1999), "The Weekly Trip to Noisychaos Island" (2000), "A Big, Little Fight" (2000), "The Story of How the Confused Wolf Disappeared" (2000), "How does it End?" (Co-written with Dr. Jihan Farouk, 2001), "A Very Imaginary Story" (2001), "Very Quick Stories" (2001), "Three Stories with Three Endings" (2004) and "A Little King and a Big Book" (published posthumously).

Theodor Seuss Geisel (1904-1991) is an American author, political cartoonist, poet and animator. He wrote more than 60 books for children under the pen name of Dr. Seuss (Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary). Dr. Seuss's most famous stories for children are "Horton Hears a Who?" (1954), "The Cat in the Hat" (1957), "Fox in Socks" (1965), "The Lorax" (1971), "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" (1990), and "I Had Trouble in Getting to Solla Sollew" (1992).

This study is conducted within the framework of the sociocognitive model of critical discourse analysis by van Dijk (2006, 2008a, 2009). In this model, van Dijk does not only consider the

phonological, syntactic, morphological and semantic levels of a discourse, but also he goes beyond to the level of production and perception of a discourse. In other words, the analysis goes beyond the textual level and extends to include the intertextual level as well. In the theoretical framework section, van Dijk's model of critical discourse analysis is explained in detail. But before delving deeper into van Dijk's sociocognitive approach, a review of literature of critical discourse analysis is discussed in the following section.

Literature Review

The word 'discourse' originated from the Latin word 'discursus' meaning conversation or speech. Hawthorn (1992) defines discourse as a "linguistic communication seen as a transaction between speaker and hearer, as an interpersonal activity whose form is determined by its social purpose. Text is linguistic communication (either spoken or written) seen simply as a message coded in its auditory or visual medium." (p.189). Discourse is a mental representation that depends on the knowledge of the perceiver. "In other words, the personal and the social in discourse processing are inextricably intertwined" (van Dijk, 2014b, p.125).

Tulving (2002) states that "the analysis of mind control presupposes the usual distinction between personal or autobiographical memory on the one hand, and generic, socially shared "semantic" memory on the other". Critical discourse analysis primarily is interested in discourses produced by social actors who control public discourse like political characters, thinkers, and media representatives. Context was considered as objective variable (such as gender or class) (Wodak & Meyer 2015; Van Dijk 2011, 2015). Van Dijk (2008a) developed a model that accounts for the subjective mental constructs that he called "mental models". Mental models "dynamically control how language use and discourse are adapted to their situational environment."

Theoretical Framework

According to van Dijk (2008a) “It is not the social situation that influences (or is influenced by) discourse, but the way the participants *define* such a situation.” (van Dijk, 2008a, p x). Van Dijk’s new theoretical notion accounts for subjective mental/participants constructs of context models that play an essential role in the production and comprehension of a discourse (van Dijk, 2008a). Van Dijk defines contexts as mental contexts that control how participants produce and understand discourse, enable participants to adapt discourse and its interpretations to the communicative situation related to them anytime in an interaction or communication, provide the missing link between the personal and the social or between discourse and society, and allow sociolinguistics to focus more on the social influence on discourse structures. (van Dijk, 2008a, p xi). Van Dijk (2008a) further states that it is essential for discourse studies “. . . to show how exactly our text and talk depends on – and influences – such contexts.” (p. xi)

Van Dijk emphasizes that context models have cognitive features i.e. they reflect knowledge and ideologies shared by a group of people in a community. He does not only consider the social context of a discourse, but also how it is produced and perceived by the participants of a social group. The common ground of the participants controls how they perceive and understand a discourse. Van Dijk further assumes that discourse is controlled by intensions and goals to be attained by such discourse. Speakers use hundreds of context models in every social situation. They construct and apply them routinely. “Thus, we see that context models are a powerful device that links discourse with its communicative and social environment.” (van Dijk, 2008a, p. 220). Context models have some categories such as the setting, i.e. place and time, the participants with different roles and identities, and the social activity they are engaged in. In van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach, the context models have cognitive categories as well. These cognitive categories include knowledge and

ideologies of the participants of a community or a social group. When a speaker speaks about something s/he assumes that recipients have a common knowledge that allows them to understand what s/he says. This knowledge is rooted in the minds of the recipients in epistemic communities. Van Dijk (2008a) calls it a powerful knowledge device or a K-device that calculates all the time what the recipients already know. In other words, there are “culturally shared mental representations about the world” (Dijk, 2014a, p.168)

To conclude, van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach is a dynamic one that depends on the social community and the personal production and perception of a discourse according to knowledge and ideologies of that community.

Analysis of the Stories

In Dr. Elmessiri’s story “Cinderella and Lady Zeinab Khatoun” (1999), he contextualizes the traditional western fairytale of “Cinderella”. In other words, he Egyptianizes it. Cinderella in Dr. Elmessiri’s story lives in a house in Heliopolis. She is a student at Heliopolis Secondary School for Girls. Her friend’s name is Nur (an Arabic name meaning light named after Dr. Elmessiri’s daughter). The prince has just got his PhD in science. Cinderella talks to her friend over the phone. Cinderella’s dress is at the laundry. By doing so, Dr. Elmessiri puts the story in the Egyptian context and brings a traditional fairytale to the present. The illustrations in the story also play an important role in putting the reader in the Egyptian context (but this point is beyond the scope of the study). The animals in Dr. Elmessiri’s stories are the rooster Hassan ‘beautiful’ and the Camel Zareef ‘humourous’. This contextualization and Egyptianization of children’s stories and getting items from the local environment increase the reader’s respect to this environment. This is much better than translating western stories that are exotic to Arab children in general and Egyptian children in particular.

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Introducing the children to faraway places without introducing them to their surrounding environment creates a sense of distancing and neglect to nature around them.

In van Dijk's words, readers perceive these items in Dr. Elmessiri's stories depending on their Egyptian knowledge and ideology. The personification of the rooster Hassan and the camel Zareef foregrounds them in the story. The camel Zareef is Nur's brother in all the collection "Stories of this era". Dr. Elmessiri writes these stories in Arabic asserting the importance of identity, and the danger of globalization and westernization. Dr. Elmessiri embeds in the subconscious of children his cognitive view about western modernization and how it is transmitted to the Arab world through media and culture platforms. By providing children with these Egyptian stories, he protects their identity and language, and hence the environment. If a language dies, many creatures and plants die. Language maintains the habitat for indigenous creatures. Dr. Elmessiri as an Arab Egyptian story teller addresses Arab children in general and Egyptian children in particular. He assumes that they all share a common knowledge of the surrounding environment and culture. He speaks about names of persons, animals, and places that they are familiar with. The effect of this on their minds moulds their cognitive map; it makes them more aware of the environment around them. This is better than introducing them to bizarre exotic names and animals.

Dr. Elmessiri's story "Nur and The So-Called Cunning Wolf" (1999) is a rewriting of the famous European fairy tale of "Little Red Riding Hood". He gives the little red riding hood an Arabic name 'Nur'. The story starts with a pleasant setting in a garden. Nur sits underneath an orange tree. Her mother asks her to go to her grandmother's house where there are high trees. Dr. Elmessiri always mentions items from the local natural environment. He chose orange trees in particular and not apple trees (that are more related to western culture). Orange trees grow in Arab countries a lot and Egypt is on the top of the countries exporting oranges (Global Agricultural Information Network, 2011).

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Oranges are part of the Arabic culture in general and the Egyptian culture in particular. Oranges and orange trees are recurring in the Egyptian folk songs. Mentioning these items in children stories asserts their existence and protects them from neglect. The children perceive these stories depending on their cultural background. They get more connected to the surrounding environment and become able to recognise these natural items around them. Nur rides her bicycle on a road among the mountains, trees, and farms. Nur meets the cunning wolf who is now so old and recognises him because she read about him in fables. Nur arrives at her grandmother's house with her brothers Yasser, Nadeem and the camel Zareef. Again the camel appears as one of Nur's siblings. The kids hide behind the trees to hit the wolf. The wolf surrenders and the grandmother gives him a broom to clean the garden from the falling leaves. Every line of Dr. Elmessiri's story connects the children more with nature. Their grandmother opens her window to let the children watch the sunset. She tells them stories from the Egyptian folklore like "Hassan the clever" and she sings a song about a beautiful vast desert inhabited by kind Bedouins who spend their days sheep herding and singing. This discourse is encouraging children to love and respect nature, the sunset, the trees, the vast desert, and sheep herding. It even introduces them briefly to the life of Bedouins describing them as 'kind' to correct the stereotyped image of Bedouins as savages.

In "The Weekly Trip to Noisychaos Island" (2000), Dr. Elmessiri speaks about a trip the children take to an imaginary island called the 'Noisychaos Island' where there are no rules or duties. The camel Zareef and the rooster Hassan accompany them. The camel Zareef makes a crown for himself from a wicker cage he found on the island. This introduces children to recycling which is an eco-friendly method of reusing old items. Dr. Elmessiri provides through these children's stories an environmentally constructive discourse. All include familiar items, names, and characters that children can relate to depending on their shared knowledge of the society they belong to. In the opening of "A Big, Little Fight" (2000), Dr. Elmessiri describes a beautiful scenery of the sun hiding

behind the mountains among the clouds. The camel Zareef says “Life is beautiful and the sky is wonderful”. The story ends again by describing the scenery where the darkness looms around and the stars appear with their small heads. This personification of the stars along with the meticulous description of the scenery grabs the children’s attention to these items in nature. Thus, this discourse is comprehended and absorbed in their cognitive map. The discourse structures of the stories relate a lot of shared knowledge and local environmental manifestations.

In Dr. Elmessiri’s “A Little King and a Big Book” (2009), again he uses the oranges as an example of fruits. The camel Zareef and the rooster Hassan continue talking and sharing their views of the world. This is the last children story that Dr. Elmessiri wrote and it was published posthumously. In the story, he mentions the traditional Palestinian song “We planted a carrot”:

We planted a carrot in the heart of the field.

My father watered it, in peace it lived.

It grew bigger, its stem got stronger.

He came to uproot it, but he couldn’t.

My mother saw him, so she hurried. (p. 13)

The mother helps him, then the brother, the sister, the dog, the cat, and the rat. They all try to harvest the strong carrot. This is a traditional folk song that used to be sung by Palestinian children. The song includes plants, persons and animals that cooperate in farm works. This is an image of farm works that will remain in children’s memory. Here Dr. Elmessiri introduces the children to the life of farmers. This equality among humans, plants and animals that prevails in Dr. Elmessiri’s stories helps the children to be conscious of the existence of other creatures around them. Talking animals,

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beautiful sunsets, vast deserts, fields, hills and orange and carrot trees are all foregrounded in the collection of Dr. Elmessiri's stories for children. They are all protagonists that are not less important than the human characters in the stories. Cognition is the device that connects discourse to society. Children are able to perceive and comprehend these stories according to their knowledge of the local environment. The stories assert the existence of these animals, trees, and natural environment. The stories are deeply rooted in the Arab culture and cognition. Nothing exotic that demolishes the existence of local creatures. The danger of translating western stories and cartoon dubbing lies in the erasure of the local environment from the minds of children and thus the society. Stibbe (2021) defines erasure as "a story that an area of life is unimportant or unworthy of consideration" (p. 21), and hence the linguistic features of exotic discourse fail to represent this local area of life. On the other hand, the imported translated exotic discourse gives salience/prominence to bizarre parts of western life that have nothing to do with the Arab children's culture and natural environment. Stibbe (2021) defines salience as "a story that an area of life is important and worthy of consideration" (p.21).

In Dr. Seuss's "Horton hears a Who!" (1954), the elephant is the protagonist in the story. The elephant's name is Horton. Horton is an English common name. The story starts with Horton enjoying himself in water in the jungle. Dr. Seuss uses the pronoun 'he' to refer to the elephant. Horton the elephant hears a noise coming from a speck of dust as if a person is calling for help. Horton decides to help that person saying: "A person's a person, no matter how small." (p.89). Here the roles of humans and animals are switched. This role-switching gets the children's attention to the importance of helping and protecting animals no matter how small they are. The choice of the elephant as an enormous animal in the jungle shows that despite being strong and big enough to step on this dust speck ignoring the existence of persons who live on it, he was truly willing to help and save the lives of very tiny creatures. Horton the elephant says: "Some sort of a creature of very small size, / Too small to be seen by an elephant's eyes" (p. 89). Then a kangaroo with a small kangaroo in her pouch

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appears to tell the elephant that it is really strange to have such a small person on a speck that is “as small as the head of a pin.” (p. 91). The animals in this story are the dominant creatures, they speak, they think, and they try to save lives. Elephants and Kangaroos live in sanctuaries and zoos in the United States of America. Thus children are familiar with these animals. Horton the elephant puts the speck gently on a clover and walks in the jungle carrying the flower. Although all the animals in the jungle thought he is crazy, he insists on helping the persons on the speck of dust on the flower. This is the role of man on earth to protect other creatures and empathise with them. Humans are responsible for the natural environment around them including all creatures, big or small. Horton, Dr. Seuss’s elephant, feels for creatures that he even cannot see saying that this person who asked for help can be a member of a family “A family with children just starting to grow.” (p. 92). Dr. Seuss shows the words of these tiny creatures using a smaller font than the rest of the story. This is graphological foregrounding through internal deviation from the system of writing followed in the whole story. At the end of the story, the kangaroo in his mother’s pouch says “From sun in the summer. From rain when it’s fall-ish, / I’m going to protect them. No matter how small-ish!” (p. 116). The children who read this story will recognise this moral of the story depending on their shared knowledge of the natural environment.

In Dr. Seuss’s story “The Cat in the Hat” (1957), the cat wears a top hat which is traditionally associated with western formal dress codes. The cat is also a usual pet in most of the American houses. The name of the girl character is Sally and her brother is Conrad. Both are English names deeply rooted in western culture. Conrad is the narrator in the story. “The Cat in the Hat” story starts with a weather description:

The sun did not shine.

It was too wet to play.

So we sat in the house

All that cold, cold, wet day. (The Cat in the Hat, 1957, p.1)

This is the usual weather in winter in the United States of America. It is a rainy cloudy day, so the children decided to have indoor activities instead. Here Dr. Seuss gives an eco-friendly solution to the wet weather. This is the environmentally constructive discourse that Arran Stibbe (2021) talks about as opposed to the environmentally destructive discourse of advertisements that promote travelling overseas to search for a warmer weather. The story is told in the first person narration as is the case in most of Dr. Seuss's children's stories. The first-person narrator is Conrad. Conrad refers to the cat in the hat as 'him' before mentioning the referent (the cat in the hat). This foregrounds the referent and creates a sense of suspense in the story. The cat as an animal is foregrounded in the story and is given much attention. The cat is always referred to as a person 'he', 'him', 'said', etc. Dr. Seuss gives voice to his animals. The cat in the hat is the one who suggests having fun by playing indoor games and tricks, when he sees the children are bored. This personification of a pet along with foregrounding it connects the children more with their surrounding natural environment. 'The Cat in the Hat' is always written in Dr. Seuss's stories with initial capital letters as a proper noun. The fish in the story also speaks and shouts at the Cat in the Hat saying:

No! No! Make that cat go away!

Tell that Cat in the Hat

You do NOT want to play. (p. 11)

Dr Seuss writes his stories in rhyming short lines like poetry which makes them memorable for children. The word 'NOT' here is capitalised performing the speech act of warning. The fish represents the voice of wisdom in the story. Conrad refers to the fish using the pronoun 'he'. The fish

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keeps warning them throughout the story. This personification of animals again is perceived by children in their cognitive map as important animals that should be respected and cared about.

In Dr. Seuss's "Fox in Socks" (1965), all the characters are personified animals and insects, Mr. Fox in socks, Mr. Knox (an imaginary animal), chicks, a crow, pigs, ducks, and beetles. The only human that appeared on a few pages of the story is a girl called Sue. Again here the animals are given much importance and they are chosen from the local environment in which the American children live. Dr. Seuss's "The Lorax" (1971) is an eco-friendly green sustainable text. In a post pandemic world, this story can be read and comprehended on a deeper level than before. The Lorax is an imaginary creature that speaks for trees. He warned man from cutting trees and exploiting them greedily. The human is represented in the story by the main character the Once-ler. The story starts with a foretold scenario of the world after the death of the last tree on earth. The world becomes more artificial. People have plastic trees and grass around their houses. Nobody knows anything about the real trees. A child starts searching for any information about trees after he sees a picture of Truffula trees. Truffula trees are imaginary colourful trees that are thought to be inspired by the Western Pasque Flowers in California, USA. Dr. Seuss spent the last forty years of his life in northern California. The western Pasque flowers have the same whimsical fluffy heads as Dr. Seuss's Truffula trees (Givens, 2016). The child who searches for information about trees meets the Once-ler who narrates how the story of cutting trees started. The Once-ler says that at the very beginning when everything was green and vivid. Man/the Once-ler started cutting the trees one after another claiming that he invents something new called Thneed "Fine-something- That-All-People-Need!" (p. 8). The Lorax starts warning him "Sir! You are crazy with greed." But he never listens, and continues cutting the trees to knit the thneeds. People started to buy the thneeds. The industry of thneeds becomes vast till the last tree on earth was cut. The Once-ler finishes the story with a sense of regret, but he gives the child the last seed of Truffula trees to plant. This story is a warning to humans that if they continue

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on the same level of growing industry on the expense of nature, they are doomed. This is exactly what happened when the corona virus spread and obliged man to withdraw from the world and stop doing harm to nature. It was a warning for man to stop the daily activities (starting from driving cars to running factories) that destroy the environment. In van Dijk's sociocognitive framework, this text is perceived differently now according to the social situation and the shared knowledge that we have after the shared experience of the pandemic.

As can be noticed in the above analysis of Dr. Elmessiri's and Dr. Seuss's children's stories, language is utilised to protect the local environment, in the Egyptian and American societies, consecutively. Dr. Elmessiri Egyptianises western fairy tales to fit in the Egyptian society in particular and the Arab societies in general. He uses images, animals, names, folk songs, and words that are shared among the Arabs. This is what van Dijk calls a shared knowledge that enables the readers to perceive this discourse properly and easily relate to. Dr. Seuss, on the other hand, writes stories for American children using names, animals, situations and items that are common among children in the West. By doing so, both Dr. Elmessiri and Dr. Seuss succeeded in the domestication of their children's stories. Grabbing the children's attention to the local natural environment around them is essential to increase their environmental awareness. The children need to read a lot of stories of the same kind that tell about familiar domestic animals rather than unfamiliar bizarre ones. Both Dr. Elmessiri and Dr. Seuss give voice to their animals. The camel Zareef and the Cat in the Hat are vivid examples of talking animals that play essential roles in the stories. Children see them talk, play, think, laugh, and sleep. This personification of animals foregrounds them in the texts of the stories, and hence makes the children empathise with them. Dr. Elmessiri and Dr. Seuss use items from the natural environment: trees, animals, sunsets, rain, snow, desert, mountains, lakes, stars, and clouds. This gets the children more connected to nature. They learn meditation and respect for nature.

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To help improve the public attitude towards the natural environment, such discourse should be encouraged. By teaching the children to look around, enjoy nature, and care for animals and trees, a better generation will be raised, a generation that can protect nature and hence the Earth.

Conclusion

In a post-pandemic society there is a dire need of such an environmentally constructive discourse. In both Dr. Elmessiri's and Dr. Seuss's children's stories, animals talk and are main characters throughout the stories. The items (names, animals, trees) in their stories reflect the local environment, namely Egyptian and American environments. Van Dijk's model has three dimensions discussed in this paper; discourse, cognition, and society. The discourse structures here discuss how the stories reflect life in two different worlds; the Arab world and the West. The cognition portrays the shared knowledge among children of the same society. Such stories are understood in their social contexts depending on cultural backgrounds and ideologies. The context models in the stories are controlled by Dr. Elmessiri's and Dr. Seuss's intentions and goals they want to achieve through these stories. A further research on language and ecology in Dr. Elmessiri's and Dr. Seuss stories is encouraged since they are loaded with green texts that cannot be wholly explored in one research paper.

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