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Nonliteral Language in Polish Children's Literature: Cognitive and Linguistic Implications

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Abstract
This article explores the role of children's literature as a significant source for understanding nonliteral language comprehension among Polish-speaking children in Poland. It highlights how books, including comics and graphic novels, expose young readers to figurative expressions and facilitate inference-making, essential for grasping the intentions and emotions conveyed in narratives. Despite the well-documented benefits of early exposure to nonliteral language, research exploring its prevalence and types in children's literature remains limited. This study investigates the implications of nonliteral language for cognitive development and social interaction, addressing the conflicting attitudes that parents and caregivers hold toward its use. Furthermore, it examines the inconsistencies in existing literature regarding the age at which children begin to understand nonliteral forms of communication, such as irony and sarcasm. Focusing on children's literature as a critical factor in language acquisition, this article aims to provide insights into the developmental pathways through which children learn to navigate the complexities of figurative language, ultimately contributing to ongoing discussions in media studies concerning children's interactions with text.

1. INTRODUCTION

Books for children are considered an essential source of material that enables them to learn inference-making and speculate about people's intentions. This process is fostered by exposure to literary events in which characters' thoughts and intentions are described using specific terms related to various mental states (Miller, 2006; Symons et al., 2005; Tamoepeau & Ruffman, 2008; Tomasello, 1995). In particular, books—including comic books and graphic novels (Banasik-Jemielniak, 2022)—offer children repeated encounters with nonliteral expressions, or figurative language, which require inferential thinking and contextual awareness (Colston & Kuiper, 2002). Despite this, little research has systematically analyzed

the types and frequency of nonliteral language in children's books. This gap limits our understanding of how figurative exposure through literature contributes to developmental trajectories. Addressing this issue may help explain the inconsistencies found in prior studies regarding the age at which children begin to comprehend nonliteral speech.

Studying nonliteral expressions in children's literature is important for at least three reasons.

First, figurative speech is a ubiquitous component of social interaction (Capelli et al., 1990; Gibbs, 2000), and literal language alone cannot capture the full range of human communication. The ability to comprehend nonliteral language contributes significantly to successful interpersonal exchanges. This communicative skill is fundamental—not only for social functioning but also for academic and professional development. While more recent studies suggest children can grasp figurative speech earlier than previously thought (Recchia et al., 2010; Banasik-Jemielniak & Bokus, 2019), the developmental origins and mechanisms of this ability remain unclear. It is plausible that both caregivers and cultural artifacts, such as books and cartoons, play critical roles in shaping children's capacity to interpret nonliteral comments. However, research has not sufficiently explored these potential influences.

Second, the use of nonliteral language with children remains a topic of controversy. Some caregivers perceive it as inappropriate or potentially confusing, adhering to a belief that children's communication should be clear, concrete, and devoid of ambiguity. Others see it as enriching, a means to stimulate imagination, cognitive flexibility, and emotional expression. Evidence even suggests that nonliteral language can serve specific social functions, such as emotion regulation by parents (Banasik-Jemielniak & Bokus, 2019). This variation in attitudes may be culturally grounded and reflected in children's literature across different countries.

Third, examining the presence of nonliteral expressions in children's literature may offer insights into the persistent discrepancies in findings regarding the age of comprehension. For example, while some studies claim children cannot fully understand irony until the ages of 8 to 10, others have found evidence of comprehension as early as age four (Banasik-Jemielniak & Bokus, 2019). These differences raise questions about the role of environmental exposure in shaping human health. It becomes essential to distinguish between real-life discourse and fictional discourse as potentially distinct sources of nonliteral language (Kapogianni, 2014).

The ability to infer others' intentions is closely tied to nonliteral language comprehension. Interpreting an ironic or figurative comment requires more than recognizing a deviation from literal meaning. It requires the child to identify the speaker's underlying intent and acknowledge the expectation that the listener will infer this intent through contextual cues (Banasik, 2013). This complex interplay between language and cognition underscores the importance of examining figurative language in media that young children frequently encounter.

From a developmental perspective, this exposure aligns with Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, which suggests that adults and texts aid children in transitioning from a concrete to an abstract understanding by providing support tailored to their zone of proximal development

(Vygotsky, 1978; van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). Furthermore, repeated engagement with characters' mental states and motivations enhances children's Theory of Mind, bolstering their capacity to understand perspectives, intentions, and emotions that may differ from their own (Miller, 2006; Symons et al., 2005; Dunn et al., 1991).

This article aims to examine nonliteral expressions in popular narrative picture books for children in Poland. We investigate the presence, types, and communicative functions of figurative language in these texts, with a focus on how young readers comprehend and interpret such expressions. This inquiry is timely and important given the lack of systematic studies on this subject in Polish children's literature. By mapping the prevalence and function of nonliteral expressions, we aim to shed light on how they support children's linguistic, cognitive, and emotional development.

Accordingly, our guiding questions are: What types of nonliteral expressions appear in children's books? Which types are most common? In what forms do they manifest, and how do authors creatively organize them within narratives?

The first part of this article presents a conceptual framework for understanding figurative language, clarifies terminology, and examines its cognitive significance. The second part presents our empirical findings on the prevalence and distribution of nonliteral expressions across a corpus of popular Polish picture books for children aged 4–8. Together, these sections illuminate the interplay between literature and language development in early childhood.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before diving into the search for an answer, it is essential to clarify the concepts we are analyzing. Commonly, the term 'nonliteral language' is used interchangeably with 'figurative language.' However, we assume that terminological precision is necessary in this case. Figurative language is generally defined as imaginative language (Merriam-Webster, 1995; Harya, 2017) used to convey meaning and emphasize its effect by comparing one phenomenon to another (Merriam-Webster, 1995). This type of expression employs combinations of nonliteral words to suggest extraordinary comparisons and resemblances (Crystal, 2008), differing from the usual denotations (Kennedy, 1983). Fontanier indicates that a core aspect of figuration is "an apparent illusory meaning to allow you better to find or grasp the real and true meaning" (1827: 453). From this perspective, figurative language does not require nonliterality since it is based on transforming ideas into images (Preminger et al., 1993).

Certainly, figurative language is often used in its nonliteral form in literature. This arises because creating meanings through figurative expressions has many advantages (Perrine, 1982). Above all, figurative language aids in translating textual information into a 'mental construct.' Mieke Bal (1999) defines the concept of a mental construct as an automatic interpretation achieved by assimilating and integrating received communication. Messages that consist of nonliteral expressions may enhance involvement in decoding their meanings. In practice, the author's primary goal is to engage the reader intellectually and emotionally while narrating. This process stimulates the reader's imagination, as nonliteral, figurative utterances

are not typically conventionalized. Thus, to properly grasp the intended meaning of the sentences, readers must exert more significant mental effort due to the need to detect two different meanings simultaneously – the literal and the nonliteral. The intellectual commitment to making the abstract aspects of expression concrete results in an intensified experience of the narration, thereby holding the reader's attention.

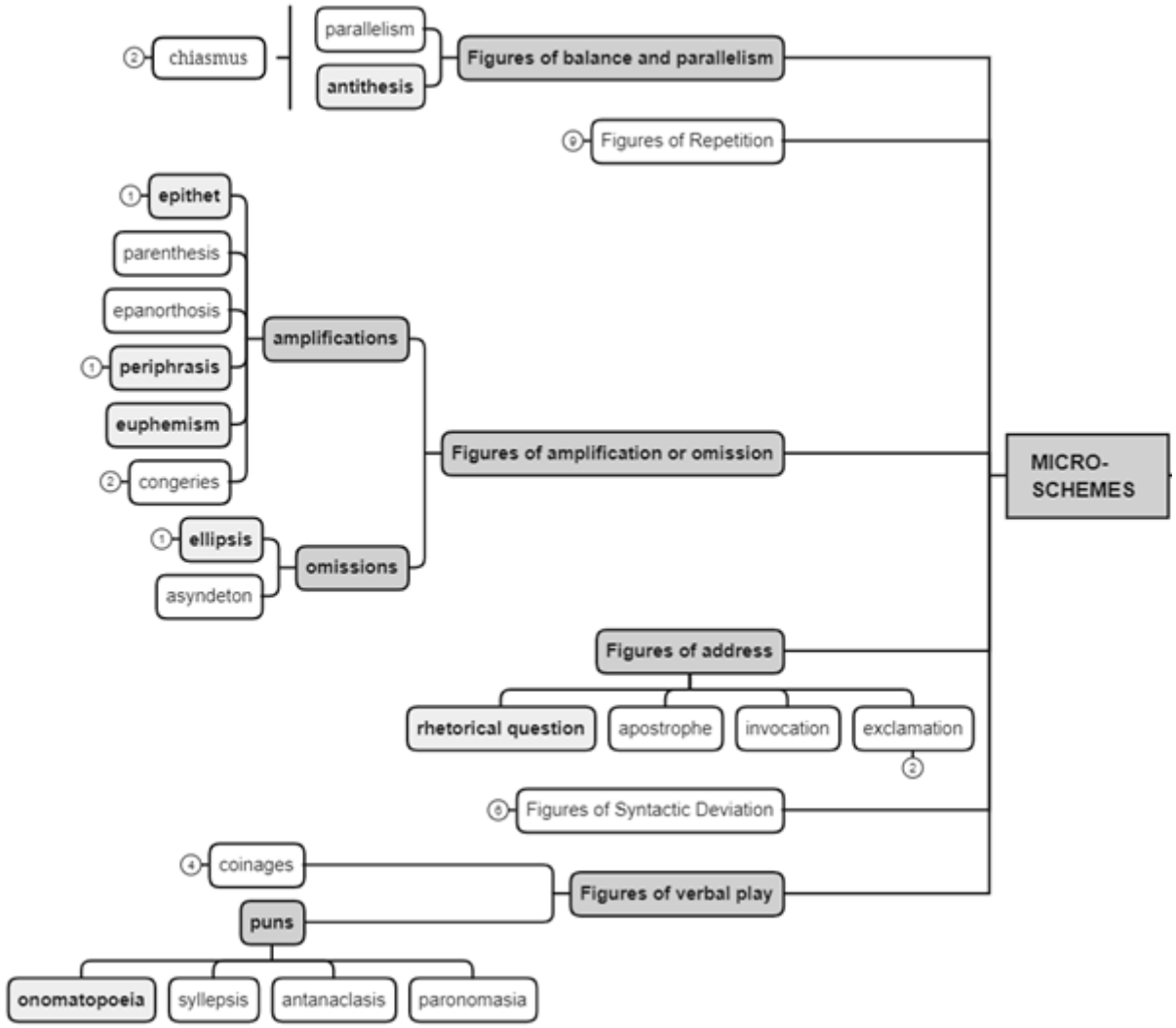
In light of this, we decided to examine all nonliteral expressions in children's literature, focusing not only on specific categories, such as figurative language. Due to the length of the selected books, our analysis is conducted on a micro-scale. More precisely, we focused on semantic and rhetorical figures that appear in individual phrases rather than in longer passages. This approach is motivated by the fact that reading children's books is often interrupted (Tsur, 2009; see also Bosmajian, 2018). Numerous classifications of figures have been established throughout the history of rhetoric. However, only a few offer a systematic typology. Thus, the classification provided by Stephen Adams (1997) includes all recognized figures concerning the distinction between "schemes" and "tropes."

Brian Vicker clearly explains this essential distinction. In his own words, a scheme is a category of speech figures that "essentially operates on the physical level of the shape or structure of language" (1989, p. 86). In contrast, a trope pertains to the semantic aspect of utterance as it "affects the meaning of words" (1989, p. 86). Therefore, Stephen Adams' classification, which combines schemes and tropes, serves as an effective tool for our study, as it connects both linguistic and semantic assumptions. Given the specificity of our research, the prefix "micro" is added to the classification of figures of speech proposed by Stephen Adams (1997), which is briefly described below.

2.1. Types of micro-schemes

Stephen Adams distinguishes five significant types of schemes: (1) figures of balance and parallelism, (2) figures of repetition, (3) figures of amplification and omission, (4) figures of address, and (5) figures of verbal play. The typology of micro-schemes is displayed below in Figure 1. The main criterion was the non-literality of the words or phrases in children's literature. Terms presented in a bold and filled frame (e.g., antithesis; see Figure 1 and Figure 2) meet the eligibility criterion. In contrast, terms not in a bold and filled frame (e.g., parenthesis) have been excluded from further analysis due to their non-compliance with the criterion or absence in selected books. This exclusion applies to specific figures or entire types of schemes, specifically figures of repetition and figures of syntactic deviation. In the first instance, the absence of each figure will be explained when discussing the included ones. However, the following lines will only address some of the excluded categories of micro-schemes. Figures of repetition, defined as simple repetitions of a word or phrase to emphasize emotional expressions (see Adams, 1997), have not been thoroughly analyzed since they were primarily used for hyperbolic purposes. Therefore, we have not found non-literality in them. Likewise, figures of syntactic deviation, which indicate modifications in grammatical structure, were excluded. The number of subtypes for each category is indicated in the circles. For consistency, we will focus only on these categories of micro-schemes that appear in the chosen books.

Figure 1.
Classification of micro-schemes



Note. The figure was prepared by the authors.

1. Figures of balance and parallelism

Within figures of balance and parallelism, two subtypes of schemes can be distinguished: parallelism and antithesis. Indeed, syntactic parallelism has not yet been employed in a nonliteral manner in select literature. This may be because parallelism is a purely structural device that typically occurs in poetry for metrical purposes and does not have an a priori semantic description. Therefore, it will not be considered in further detail. However, in the selected books, we have identified another scheme related to parallelism, called antithesis. In contrast, antithesis has a clearly defined semantic function in addition to its syntactic one. It is generally described as a scheme of oppositeness (Chrzanowska-Kulczewska, 2010), involving contiguous or parallel phrases that contrast ideas created by using words with unconventional meanings (Adams, 1997). For instance, “I would and would not, I am on fire yet dare not” (Corneille, 2013, p. 122) is a prototypical example of an antithesis phrase.

2. Figures of amplification and omission

Among figures of amplification and omission, two significant subtypes can be distinguished: figures of amplification and figures of omission. The first subtype, figures of amplification, extends the meanings of otherwise straightforward statements, creating a sense of magnitude and even generating further levels of figuration or, as we found, non-literality—the second subtype. Figures of omission are employed for condensation and emphasis. These figures are standard in poetry, as they require more condensation than prose (see Adams, 1997).

Going beyond the figures of amplification, six prominent figures can be distinguished: epithet, parenthesis, epanorthosis, periphrasis (circumlocution), euphemism, and congeries (an extended list of anything). In our books, three figures of amplification appear: epithet, periphrasis, and euphemism, which are bolded in Figure 1. An epithet is generally defined as an adjective or adjectival phrase attached to a proper name (Preminger et al., 1993) that suggests a reader's connotations, for instance: "multitudinous laughter" (Aeschylus, 1992, p. 166). Periphrasis, also known as circumlocution, indicates something without using its direct term by describing it in a roundabout way (Preminger et al., 1993), which may imply nonliteral meanings. A prototypical example of periphrasis is: "Aurora gives mortals Daylight's blessing," which conveys the meaning of "day broke" (Virgil, 2007, p. 102).

Furthermore, micro-scheme is not a term distinguished in Stephen Adams' classification, but it is necessary due to the specificity of children's literature. We classify euphemism as a type of periphrasis since it uses a similar mechanism of circumlocution. However, unlike a paraphrase, this mechanism aims to mitigate unpleasant impacts of the information (e.g., euphemism: "boyish highjinks?" for vandalism, Corbett, 1990, p. 488). The other three figures of amplification, which are not in bold, have not been observed. Note that parenthesis is a device used for commenting or explaining a statement clearly, thus excluding non-literality. The figure of epanorthosis ("setting straight," Adams 1997, p. 11) is related to literality, as it is used to correct a word or phrase immediately. The last absent figure of amplification is congeries, described by Adams (1997) as a heap or accumulation of words and phrases related to denoted phenomena. Unlike parenthesis and epanorthosis, congeries may indicate nonliteral meaning; however, we did not find them in our book sample. One possible explanation is that congeries are more prominent in poetry than in prose, but this topic requires further investigation.

As previously stated, figures of omission are more common in poetry than in prose. In Figure 1, two figures of omission are identified: ellipsis and asyndeton (the omission of connectives). Ellipsis, the most frequent figure of omission, is understood as a figure of omission (Adams, 1997) in which whole words or phrases are omitted (Preminger et al., 1993) in such a way as to provide the necessary context to understand the overall meaning. We hypothesized that ellipsis, especially its subtype called zeugma ("yoking"), might imply nonliteral meaning as it is closely related to a kind of pun or wit (Adams, 1997). The following example illustrates this effect, resulting from a single verb governing more than one object:

S*ince saucy jacks are so happy in this,*
Give them thy fingers, me thy lips, to kiss. (Shakespeare CXXVIIIl, p. 637)

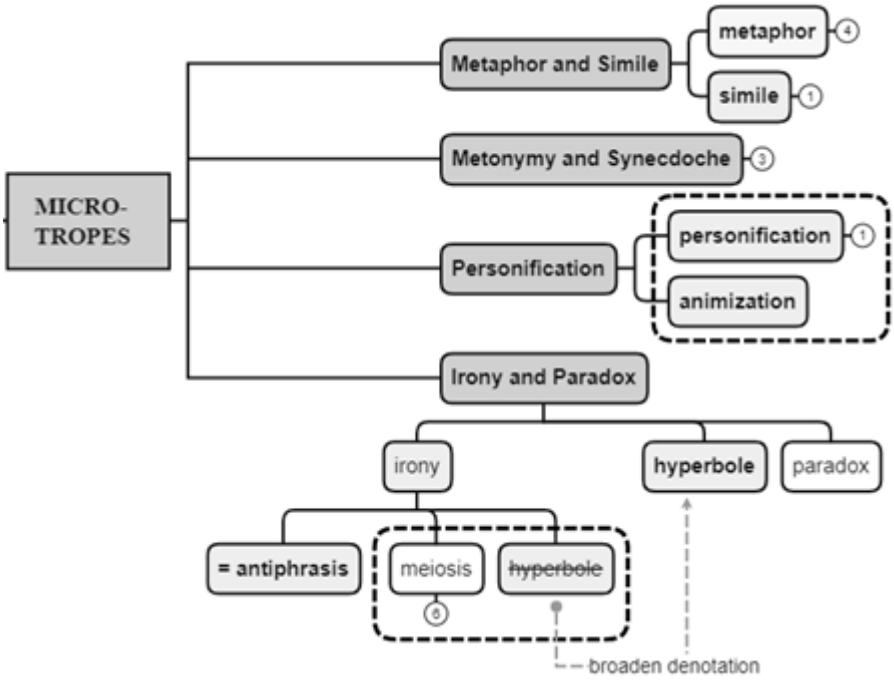
3. Figures of address

Out of the figures in the address, only rhetorical questions (in bold, see Figure 1) were considered. These figures do not imply non-literal denotation because there is a specific and explicitly established reference point in apostrophe, invocation, and exclamation (not in bold). This is not the case with the rhetorical question. A rhetorical question is a scheme described by the terms “erotesis” or “interrogation.” The rhetorical question is embodied in the entire question phrase, to which no answer is expected, as it serves an immersive function. For instance, saying, “How come nobody wants to be Polish?” (Bukowski, 2007, p. 57) can be understood literally and non-literally, indicating various potential answers. Hence, interrogation places the reader in a position of question (Preminger et al., 1993) to confront them directly with the intended issue.

2.2.Types of micro-tropes

Figure 2.

Classification of micro-tropes



Note. The figure was prepared by the authors.

Metaphor is a trope referred to as a “transference,” commonly used as a general term for describing various figures of speech. For our study, we will define the term 'metaphor' more precisely. Therefore, a metaphor is considered an expression in which a word or phrase is shifted from its conventional use to a different context to evoke new meanings. From this perspective, metaphor is a “double-layered conceptualization” (Werth, 1994, p. 79).

Simile is understood as a trope of direct comparison and similarity. Unlike a metaphor, a simile clearly indicates the differences between the words or phrases being compared, using markers such as “like” or “as.”

Personification is categorized into two subtypes: (1) proper personification and (2) animization. The first type, personification, is also referred to as “prosopopeia.” It extends human characteristics to nonhuman objects or abstractions. Animization, the second type, is not clearly distinguished by Stephen Adams but frequently appears in children’s literature, thus warranting its inclusion for operational purposes. Animization is closely related to personification, and the terms are often used interchangeably. However, it is essential to differentiate them, as personification is defined solely in terms of human characteristics.

In contrast, animization characterizes nonliving objects or abstractions with animal characteristics, noting that humans are also animals. Therefore, the main distinction between animization and personification lies in their scope of reference. More specifically, personification is recognized when a nonhuman object is described with traits typically associated with humans. From this perspective, the phrase “the black stone is singing” is categorized as personification (noting that the phrase “the birds are singing” is a dead metaphor), whereas “the black stone is breathing” is classified as animization since breathing is not a trait exclusive to humans.

Irony (including hyperbole and understatement) and paradox are the final branches of micro-tropes. Irony is labeled a dissimulation, defined by the author of the current classification as a trope of debasement in its, as he claims, broadest sense (Adams, 1997, p. 141). However, ironic statements are not necessarily depreciative, and the so-called “broadest sense” is actually the “narrowest sense.” Thus, we will define irony within Grice’s framework (Grice, 1975; Garmendia, 2018) as a figure with a discrepancy between the intended and literal meanings. Sarcasm is a trope based on a double meaning, similar to irony, and is often used interchangeably with the term irony in psycholinguistics. In fact, sarcasm must be differentiated as a specific type, as it represents irony in its broadest sense. Specifically, sarcasm entails negative evaluation or, as described above, depreciation.

Hyperbole is characterized by blatant exaggeration of a relevant scalar property to assess a state of affairs. It typically co-occurs with other tropes, particularly sarcasm and irony, but should be distinguished as a distinct figure of speech (see Carston & Wearing, 2015).

3. METHODOLOGY

To find an answer to our framing questions, we first collected data on the most popular narrative picture books in Poland for children aged 4-8. We analyzed available rankings published by bookstores in the country, both in physical stores and online, and consulted with librarians about the books that are most frequently borrowed. We then compiled a list of the top 11 books. For the final analysis, we included eight books, excluding those with an explicit speech-therapy function and a book that was another part of a book series already included in our set.

Since the shortest book chosen for analysis consisted of 226 words, we analyzed extracts of the same length in each book, selecting a portion from the beginning, the middle, and the end. When it comes to nonliteral language, we first decided that the unit of analysis will be either a clause or an utterance if there are expressions that form an independent message and occupy a line in a book but lack a verb, so they cannot be classified as clauses. Next, we specified the operationalization of a nonliteral utterance. We described it as a type of expression that does not literally mean what it says; it provides a connotative rather than a denotative meaning and decides that we will code each unit in a two-step process: first, by giving it a binary score of 0 or 1, where 1 indicates the presence of nonliteral language and 0 the lack thereof, and second, for units which received score 1, we identified the type of micro- and macro-schemas according to described classification.

All authors were involved in the initial coding, after which a collaborative discussion followed, based on which we identified the types of figurative language to be coded. Annotators were familiar with the abovementioned classification of micro- and macro-schemas and developed exact guidelines for classifying nonliteral figures. Two annotators completed a training set of 100 sentences. We further assessed inter-rater reliability (IRR) using the κ statistic. On the classification of literal vs. nonliteral elements, k = .683, p = .00, whereas for detailed classification of nonliteral figures, it was slightly lower, k = .671, p = .00. Then, we decided to divide the rest of the corpus into two parts and each part was coded by one coder. To improve the quality of our analysis, after the corpus was encoded, coders simultaneously reviewed the entire corpus, analyzed the confusion matrix, and established the final coding through mutual agreement.

We detected 1,008 instances of micro-schemes. The most frequently occurring epithets (N = 689) and onomatopoeia (N = 200) accounted for 88% of all micro-schemes. Less represented were periphrasis (N = 56), euphemism (N = 28), and rhetorical questions (N = 35). For a detailed description, see Table 2.

Table 2.
Statistical distribution of micro-schemes and micro-tropes in children's books corpora

		N	**%**
micro-schemes	epithet	689	68
	periphrasis	56	6
	euphemism	28	3
	rhetorical question	35	3
	onomatopoeia	200	20
		1,008	**100%**
micro-tropes	metaphor	343	34
	simile	69	7
	personification	309	30
	animization	63	6
	irony	62*	6

hyperbole	171	17
	1,017	**100%**

Note. We detected 62 ironic statements, of which 16 were sarcastic.

On the other hand, the most frequently occurring micro-tropes were metaphor (*N* = 343), personification (*N* = 309), and hyperbole (*N* = 171). These micro-tropes accounted for 81% of all instances in this category. Significantly less represented were simile (*N* = 69), animization (*N* = 63), and irony (*N* = 62).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We have found that nearly all types of nonliteral language forms we identified are present in children's books, but some are more prevalent than others. Additionally, we discovered that the books vary in the proportion of literal to nonliteral language forms. For instance, a book that is one of a series of over 40 parts describing the everyday life of a kitty named Kitty who is depicted as a preschool-aged girl, *Kicia Kocia* [*Kitty Kitty*] by Głowińska (2019) is characterized by an overwhelming lack of non-literariness. The events and narrative landscape are recounted through direct, simple sentences. The story opens in the following way:

Dziś od rana pada śnieg. Kicia Kocia wygląda przez okno. Ach, jaki świat jest piękny! Kicia Kocia woła do mamy:
– Wszędzie biało! Wyjdziemy na sanki?
Mama się godzi.

[It has been snowing since morning. Kitty Kitty looks out the window. Ah, what a beautiful world! Kitty Kitty calls out to her mother:
– It's so white everywhere! Shall we go on a sled?
Mom agrees.]

(Głowińska, 2019, p. 1)

The main and only non-literariness in the book is the concept of personification used in the story: a cat family is depicted as a human family, that has predominantly human features and only a few feline features. The story then continues:

Kiedy jest zima, trzeba się ciepło ubrać.
Kicia Kocia samodzielnie wkłada sweterek i puchową kurtkę.
Trzeba jeszcze włożyć: czapkę, szalik, rękawiczki, i zimowe buty.
Na dworze jest dużo dzieci.
Kicia Kocia spotyka Packa.
– Chodźmy na górkę! – woła Pacek.

[When it is winter, you need to dress up warmly.
Kitty Kitty puts on a sweater and a jacket on her own.
She must wear a hat, a scarf, gloves, and winter boots.
There are many children outside. Kitty Kitty meets Pacek.
– Let's go up the hill! – Pacek exclaims.]

(Głowińska 2019, p. 4-6)

Nonliteral elements in the book include the main character saying “I'm coming” with the verb ‘fly’ instead of ‘come,’ which is a conventionalized way in Polish to imply that the speaker is trying to come quickly. Conventionality in nonliteral language has been an essential factor since then. However, in the trajectory of language development, these elements tend to be more difficult for children to understand than literal utterances; conventional nonliteral remarks are easier for them than novel or situation-specific ones (Burnett, 2015).

In the whole sample from the *Kitty Kitty* book, we identified 15 instances of nonliteral language. Most were micro-schemes (N = 11), more precisely, nine epithets and two onomatopoeias. We also identified three micro-tropes, two metaphors, one hyperbole, and one animation.

This data may be interpreted from the perspective of cognitive psychology. *Kitty Kitty* is targeted at children up to 3 years old. Children are in the early stages of cognitive development at this stage, tending to think more concretely than abstractly. Their comprehension of language tends to be literal rather than figurative. Children are still expanding their vocabulary and grasping the mechanics of language. Books for this age group typically use simple, straightforward language to aid comprehension and introduce new words. Children's literature often incorporates descriptive phrases and words that mimic sounds to appeal to their understanding and enjoyment. For instance, onomatopoeic words like “dzyń, dzyń, dzyń!” [ding-dong, ding-dong] (Głowińska, 2019, p. 20) in the sentence “Hej, do domu, dzyń, dzyń, dzyń! The use of onomatopoeic words like “dzyń, dzyń, dzyń!” [ding-dong, ding-dong, 2019, p. 20) in the sentence “Hej, do domu, dzyń, dzyń, dzyń! [Hello, let us go home, ding-dong, ding-dong] (2019, p. 20) is not just entertaining, but also a creative technique that directly engages young readers. Descriptive phrases provide clear and direct descriptions that help children visualize and engage with the story. For instance, sentences in *Kitty Kitty*, such as “Śnieg jest zimny i miękki” [The snow is cold and soft, 2019, p. 16]. Moreover, “Macie przemoczone buciki” [You have drenched booties, 2019, p. 19] fulfill this descriptive function.

In the other book, *Pucio na wakacjach* [*Pucio On Holidays*], written by Galewska-Kustra (2020), which is dedicated to children aged 3 to 6 years old, we identified significantly more instances of nonliteral speech. Galewska-Kustra’s book included 89 instances of figurative speech, 65 micro-schemes (43 epithets, 11 periphrases, ten onomatopoeias, and one rhetorical question), and 18 micro-tropes (five personifications, two animizations, five metaphors, four hyperboles, and two ironic statements).

Children undergo significant cognitive, linguistic, and emotional advancements as they grow. This growth enables them to understand and appreciate more nuanced figures of speech, such as periphrasis, rhetorical questions, personification, and irony. These elements were absent in *Kitty Kitty*, which is aimed at children under 3 years old. Children aged 3-6 begin to develop a deeper understanding of language, including the ability to recognize words with multiple meanings and their creative applications. This understanding allows them to grasp periphrasis and personification. Periphrasis introduces children to a variety of expressions and language patterns. It is often used playfully or descriptively, enhancing their vocabulary and comprehension of various expressive methods. *Pucio On Holidays* is frequently utilized to

introduce a new word linked to an expression familiar to the child. For instance, "To niespodzianka, więc nie mogę powiedzieć" [It is a surprise so I cannot say, 2020, p. 3]. Below are more elaborate instances:

– Tak, to specjalne auto.
Można nim jeździć,
można w nim spać,
a nawet ugotować obiad –
tłumaczy ciocia.
– To taki domek na kółkach!
– Ciociu, zabierzesz nas ma wycieczkę tym jeżdżącym domkiem?

[– Yes, it is a special car.
you can drive it,
you can sleep in it,
and you can even cook lunch in it –
explains aunt.
– It is a tiny little house on wheels.
– Auntie, will you take us on a trip in that house on wheels?]

(Galewska-Kustra, 2020, p. 5)

and

– Tato, zobacz, jaka duża łódka!
Większa od naszej!
– woła Pucio i pokazuje palcem.
– To żaglówka.
Jest dużo większa, a w środku ma miejsca do spania
– mówi tata.

[– Dad, see, it's such a big boat!
Bigger than ours!
– shouts Pucio and points with his finger.
– It is a sailboat.
It's much bigger than ours and inside it has a sleeping place
– says Dad.]

(Galewska-Kustra, 2020, p. 12)

As children age, they begin to think more abstractly, enabling them to appreciate rhetorical questions and irony. Rhetorical questions in *Pucio On Holidays* are a way to engage children in the narrative, encouraging them to connect emotionally with the characters and the story.

Nagle Misia głośno krzyczy:
– Aaaa! Ta gęś mnie szczypie, chce mi zjeść ubranie!
Misia zaczyna płakać.
Mama szybko odgania gęś i przytula Misię.
– Gęsi czasem tak robią.
Sama zobacz, czy coś ci się stało?
– Nie, tylko się wystraszyłam
– przyznaje Misia i zaczyna się śmiać.

[Suddenly, Misia loudly yells:
– Aah! This goose pinches me; it wants to eat my clothes!
Misia starts crying.
Mom quickly chases away the goose and hugs Misia.
– Gooses sometimes do things like that.
See for yourself: Did anything happen to you?
– No, I only felt scared
– admits Misia and starts to laugh.]

(Galewska-Kustra, 2020, p. 21)

The following question, "See for yourself, did anything happen to you?" emphasizes a key point in the story, making the narrative more engaging, as a child might identify with one of the characters, Misia.

As children grow up and get ready for school, they start to understand the nuances of communication that can express various meanings. They begin to recognize simple forms of irony present in literature and other forms of communication, such as when someone says one thing but means the opposite. That is why the absence of irony in *Kitty Kitty* becomes noticeable in books designed for children aged 3-6, such as *Pucio on Holidays*. Here, Pucio implements an ironic statement about his emotional disposition during a storm ([I am not scared at all! Not at all!] 2020, p. 20) to suppress his fear and present himself as a brave boy. However, this declaration stands in opposition to his behavior when he hears thunder:

– Boisz się Misiu?	– Are you scared, Misia?
– pyta tata.	– asks dad.
– Tak	– Yes
– odpowiada spod koca Misia.	– answers from under the blanket Misia.
– A ja się wcale nie boję!	– I am not scared at all! Not at all!
Wcale!	– braggs Pucio.
– przechwala się Pucio.	WHAM!
TRRRACH!	A thunder interrupts Pucio.
Głośny grzmot przerywa Puciowi.	– Move over!
– Posuń się!	– shouts Pucio and hides next to Misia.
– krzyczy Pucio i chowa się obok Misi.	(Galewska-Kustra, 2020, p. 20)

While the whole sample from the Kitty Kitty book identified only 15 instances of nonliteral language, we found over 103 in the sample from another book, *Zaczarowana Zagroda* [*Enchanted Farm*] by Alina and Czesław Centkiewicz (2016). This book is dedicated to children aged 6 to 8 years old, and beyond, we identified a more significant number of nonliteral speech instances (see Table 1).

Table 1

Statistical Distribution of Micro-schemes and Micro-tropes in *Kitty Kitty*, *Pucio on Holidays*, and *Enchanted Farm*

	Kitty Kitty up to 3 years old	*Pucio On Holidays* 3-6 years old	*Enchanted Farm* 6-8 years old
epithet	9	43	55
periphrasis	–	11	2
onomatopoeia	2	10	8
rhetorical question	–	1	1
metaphor	2	8	21
animization	1	2	5
personification	–	6	11
irony	–	2	1
hyperbole	1	5	14
simile	–	–	13
	15	**89**	**131**

The story takes place on the east coast of Antarctica, where a group of Polish polar explorers study the life of penguins. After the scientists herded the penguins into a pen, the professor, who is the principal investigator, "nie zmrużył oka" [did not sleep a wink] (Centkiewicz & Centkiewicz, 2016, p. 17), a conventional way in Polish to express that he could not sleep. When the character comes to the pen the following day, his reaction to an empty space (the penguins had escaped) is worded in a conventional, nonliteral way to say that he was dumbfounded. When the professor again discovered that the birds were not in the pen, "nogi ugięły się pod nim" [his legs went numb] (2016, p. 17), what is a conventional way of emphasizing that the character feels strong emotions. The narrator uses the word "zdębieć" (2016, p. 17), which literally means 'become an oak'. His colleague's researchers were "rebuked" ([zgromieni], which literally means 'treated by a thunder'), and they "rzucili się" [threw themselves] (2016, p. 17) to work. By midnight, they were "ledwie żywi" [barely alive] (2016, p. 20), which is a metaphorical way of saying "very tired." See Table 2 for translations and glosses of Polish idiomatic expressions grouped by literary source.

While trying to pin down the role of nonliteral expressions in children's literature directed to young children, it might be helpful to consider the possible functions of those books, as perceived by the educators, and compare instances of works that are predominantly literary or direct with books that are rich in non-literariness. While books are considered ''stepping-stones'' for various educational and pedagogical activities (Van de Pol & Beishuizen, 2010), they also serve specific functions such as familiarizing children with new, potentially stressful situations. Such seems to be the mission of the book *Kitty Katty*, which might serve as a showcase for common everyday activities that children encounter, making it easier for their parents to prepare them, i.a., for the first visit to a dentist's office, teaching them the dressing routine related to particular seasons, etc. The book is intended for parents to help familiarize their children with practical situations.

It is clear that each book aids in language development by introducing or repeating labels for objects and concepts, and that the complexity of language increases with the target audience's age. Therefore, it would be mistaken to judge the degree of literariness of specific children's books without considering the developmental stage of the intended audience. *Kitty Kitty* is aimed at children up to 3 years old. At this stage, children do not fully comprehend complex forms of nonliteral language, according to research in psycholinguistics. However, there is developing comprehension; thus, greater exposure to children's books may enhance this emerging skill.

In contrast, the book *Niesamowite przygody dziesięciu skarpetek (czterech prawych i sześciu lewych)* [*The Amazing Adventures of Ten Socks (Four Right and Six Left*] by Bednarek (2015) is directed to older children, and its aim seems to be predominantly entertainment. With a witty concept for the book's main storyline, which revolves around the journeys of socks that decide to escape the laundry room to discover the world, the idea itself is nonliteral, with socks serving as the main protagonists through personification. Here, we can find several non-conventional instances of linguistic coinage, such as "W koszu utarło się nawet powiedzenie, że ktoś upadł nisko jak wełniana skarpetka" [There was even a saying in the basket that someone fell low like a wool sock] (Bednarek, 2015, p. 70). While there is a saying in Polish,

[to fall low,] denoting the change of somebody's social or moral position, there is no conventional comparison such as given in the text, as well as conventional utterances such as "było, ale się zmyło." [It was here, but it got washed off] (Bednarek, 2015, p. 154) – about a lost item that was misplaced.

Compared to *Pucio On Holidays*, apart from a child-sensitive storyline and rich illustrations, which include pronunciation exercises written to support language and speech development, several instances of nonliteral language can be found, primarily hyperbole and metaphor. However, if we look more closely, we might discover that these elements are coded as nonliteral by linguists but might be explained as literal by developmental psychologists by referring to actual children's behaviors or a pretend-play convention. For instance, we have hyperboles such as: "podskakiwał z radości" [he was jumping for joy,] (Krüger, 2017, p. 4) from *Karolcia* [*Carrie*] or a metaphor "[na plaży] szukają skarbów ukrytych w piasku" ["[on the beach,] they were looking for treasures hidden in the sand,] (Galewska-Kustra, 2020, p. 27). This is an example of how the distinction between what is literal and what is not might be blurred.

In another popular book, *Detektyw Pozytywka* [*Music Box Detective*] by Kasdepke (2023), whose readers are a couple of years older, we can encounter mostly conventional figurativeness, consisting of set phrases used in Polish, such as 'to enter into sb's word' (2023, p. 6) for 'interrupt when sb is speaking,' 'pull one's nose' (2023, p. 16) for sniffing, 'to choke out' (2023, p. 20) for 'utter with difficulty' or 'sink with tears' (2023, p. 7) for 'excessive crying' (full sentence: "Zuzia zaleje łzami całą kamienicę" [Zuzia will sink with tears the whole townhouse,] 2023, p. 7). Additionally, apart from relatively common metaphors and hyperboles, in the book we can find euphemism: "perspektywa trzymania przez parę godzin czajnika pod pachą nie wydała się detektywowi Pozytywce najatrakcyjniejsza" [the prospect of holding the kettle under his arm for a few hours did not seem the most attractive to the detective] (2023, p. 33) and verbal irony "Brawo, gorączka, i to całkiem silna!" [Bravo, the fever is quite strong!] (2023, p. 37).

Table 2

Polish Idiomatic Expressions in Children's Books: English Translations, Literal Glosses, and Idiomatic Meanings

	Polish Phrase	Translation	Literal Gloss	Idiomatic Meaning
Zaczarowana zagroda [Enchanted Farm] (Centkiewicz & Centkiewicz, 2016)	nie zmrużył oka	didn't sleep a wink	didn't blink an eye	couldn't sleep at all
	nogi mu się pod nim ugięły	his legs gave way under him	his legs bent beneath him	overwhelmed or shocked
	zdębiał jak dąb	stood stock-still like an oak	became an oak	dumbfounded

	Polish Phrase	Translation	Literal Gloss	Idiomatic Meaning
	zgromieni piorunem	struck by thunder	gathered by thunder	harshly rebuked
	rzucili się (do pracy)	threw themselves (into the work)	threw themselves	rushed eagerly into action
	ledwie żywi	barely alive	scarcely living	exhausted to collapse
Niesamowite przygody dziesięciu skarpetek [The Amazing Adventures of Ten Socks (Four Right and Six Left] (Bednarek, 2015)	upadł nisko jak wełniana skarpetka	fell as low as a wool sock	fell low like a wool sock	humorous twist on "hit rock bottom"
	było, ale się zmyło	it was here but got washed away	it was but it washed off	disappeared without a trace
	podskakiwał z radości	was jumping for joy	jumped from joy	very happy
	szukają skarbów w piasku	looking for treasures in the sand	searching for buried treasures	pretend play; imagination metaphor
Detektyw Pozytywka [Music Box Detective] (Kasdepke, 2023)	wejść komuś w słowo	cut someone off mid-sentence	enter into someone's word	interrupt someone
	ciągnąć nosem	sniff repeatedly	pull with the nose	sniffling
	to choke out	utter with difficulty	—	speech broken by emotion
	zalać łzami całą kamienicę	flood the whole building with tears	flood with tears	cry excessively
	czajnik pod pachą	kettle under the arm	kettle under the armpit	humorous image of a tedious burden
	Brawo, gorączka, i to całkiem silna!	Bravo, a strong fever indeed!	Bravo, fever, and quite strong!	Sarcastic praise, frustration

The empirical patterns observed align closely with Vygotsky's concept of scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through the use of metaphor, irony, and other nonliteral devices in children's literature, guided by adults, young readers receive assistance in moving from concrete to abstract reasoning. At the same time, interpreting characters' mental states and intentions (such as differentiating literal meanings from intended meanings in irony) activates crucial perspective-taking processes essential to the Theory of Mind (ToM). From a

Gricean viewpoint, children begin to move beyond the literal maxim and infer the concealed intentions of speakers, thereby improving their inhibitory control and empathetic understanding (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008; Symons et al., 2005).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of our study may offer insights into the presence and significance of nonliteral language in children's literature, particularly among Polish-speaking children. Through an in-depth analysis of popular narrative picture books, we have identified various forms of nonliteral expressions and examined their prevalence and functions within the sampled texts.

Our investigation revealed a range of nonliteral language forms in children's books, including metaphors, personification, hyperbole, similes, irony, euphemisms, and rhetorical questions. Among these, metaphor emerged as the most frequently occurring type, suggesting its prominent role in enhancing the imaginative and conceptual dimensions of children's literary experiences. Moreover, our study sheds light on the differential usage of nonliteral language across different genres and target age groups in children's literature. While some books predominantly employed literal language, focusing on pragmatic and educational objectives aimed at younger audiences, others adopted a more figurative and whimsical approach, catering to the entertainment and imaginative needs of older children.

Interestingly, we observed variations in the interpretation of nonliteral language, with instances where linguistic expressions coded as nonliteral by linguists could be interpreted as literal within the context of children's behaviors or pretend-play conventions. This underscores the nuanced nature of language comprehension and highlights the need to contextualize such expressions within developmental frameworks. Considering insights from developmental psychology alongside linguistic analyses enhances our ability to evaluate how children understand and engage with figurative language.

Our study highlights the potential implications of nonliteral language comprehension for children's cognitive and linguistic development. Exposure to diverse forms of nonliteral expressions in children's literature may play a crucial role in fostering young readers' critical thinking skills, imaginative capacity, and socio-emotional understanding. Such exposure can contribute to the development of abstract reasoning, narrative competence, and empathy.

Children’s encounters with nonliteral language serve as scaffolds within their Zone of Proximal Development, presenting appropriately challenging tasks that aid the shift from concrete to abstract reasoning (Turner et al., 2024). Through guided discussions about metaphors and similes—where a “more knowledgeable other” demonstrates inferential strategies—children internalize these reasoning methods, allowing them to gradually apply these strategies independently (Bodrova & Leong, 2017). Vygotsky’s notion of self-guiding inner speech illustrates how frequent exposure to figurative expressions nurtures an internal “dialogue partner,” enhancing higher-order functions such as abstract thinking (Luria, 1978). Additionally, the dynamic interaction between adult guidance and literary texts fosters

children's ability to transcend literal meanings, transforming linguistic input into mental frameworks that support broad problem-solving skills (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2001).

Interpreting irony, personification, and metaphor in literature requires children to infer the beliefs, desires, and emotions of characters, which directly engages their Theory of Mind abilities (Peterson et al., 2005). Research suggests that joint book-reading interactions that are rich in mental-state vocabulary can predict children's performance on false-belief tasks, indicating that practice with nonliteral language translates into real-world perspective-taking skills (Taumoepeau & Ruffman, 2008). Moreover, discussions regarding characters' hidden intentions or ironic elements, particularly when guided by adults, act as micro-tutorials that help children recognize that others' expressions may conceal deeper meanings (Symons et al., 2005; Astington & Baird, 2005). Experimental studies have further demonstrated that toddlers who engage in mental-state discussions during storytelling exhibit enhanced Theory of Mind development compared to those who do not engage in such discussions (Miller & Astington, 2008).

Beyond cognitive reasoning, narrative fiction serves as a simulation space, allowing children to experience characters' emotional states and thereby fine-tune their empathic responses (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2006). Meta-analyses find that frequent fiction readers consistently outperform nonfiction readers on standardized empathy measures, suggesting a robust link between narrative engagement and prosocial understanding (Mar et al., 2009). Moreover, experimental evidence suggests that emotional transportation into fictional worlds enhances empathic growth, particularly when texts are rich in nonliteral language that prompts affective simulation (Bal & Vandaele, 2009). Longitudinal research indicates that children with sustained exposure to metaphor-laden stories develop more complex emotion-recognition skills, reinforcing the notion that figurative language fosters both abstract reasoning and socio-emotional competence (Adrian et al., 2005; Aram & Aviram, 2009).

The findings may inform educators, caregivers, and authors involved in the creation and pedagogy of children's literature. Understanding the prevalence and functions of nonliteral language in children's books can guide curriculum development, literacy interventions, and storytelling practices designed to enrich children's language environments and support deeper cognitive growth.

In conclusion, our study underscores the significance of nonliteral language in children's literature and its potential impact on children's cognitive, linguistic, and socioemotional development. By elucidating the role of nonliteral expressions in literary narratives, we explore a vital source of language acquisition and literacy processes in early childhood contexts. Future research could explore the longitudinal effects of sustained exposure to nonliteral language and its relationship to language development trajectories over time. Our findings may also contribute to broader discussions regarding the quantity and quality of nonliteral language input children receive and the developmental timeline for acquiring figurative language competence.

To illustrate how ongoing interaction with nonliteral language influences development, we suggest conducting longitudinal and intervention studies that monitor children at critical

milestones, such as ages 3–4, 5–6, and 7–8. For instance, diary-based techniques can document daily shared reading sessions that are rich in metaphor and irony. Meanwhile, standardized assessments—such as false-belief tasks, metaphor comprehension evaluations, and empathy scales—can measure the subsequent impacts on abstract reasoning, Theory of Mind, and prosocial behavior. School-based interventions, where educators systematically incorporate figurative texts alongside support prompts, may uncover how classroom discussions facilitate language development and social-cognitive skills over extended periods. This research would identify sensitive phases when exposure to nonliteral language most effectively enhances abstract thinking and empathetic comprehension.

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