

FOCUSING AND FOREGROUNDING IN PICTUREBOOKS: DIRECTING READERS' ATTENTION AND FOSTERING VISUAL AND LITERARY COMPETENCE

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Abstract: *Children can start engaging with picturebooks from a very young age, and it is reasonable to assume that this early reading practices influence their emergent visual, linguistic and literary competences. This paper explores how this occurs in relation to attention, a key cognitive ability that plays a significant role in information processing and aesthetic experience as well. The first part of the study establishes a link between attentional development and picturebook reception among the youngest. It argues that the primary objective of the first picturebooks is to engage readers' attention skills and make them receptive for culturally relevant information. My point is that the creation of cognitive emphases in picturebooks is a coordinated process emerging from the interplay between discursive and narrative strategies, and the cognitive abilities and preferences of the reader who is supported by adults. Thus, shared reading must also be included in the investigation. Building on these insights, I will then analyse the specific procedures for directing attention in other types of picturebooks in relation to their storytelling. As children develop, their reading behaviours evolve and picturebooks follow the changes – also in terms of attention direction and foregrounding mechanism. Examples studied here demonstrate that picturebooks for children generally direct the attention quite explicitly. However, some books attempt to challenge expectations and routines by using more unconventional techniques and allowing more scope for reader interaction. Therefore, these books can even help young readers experience foregrounding, which distinguishes literary or aesthetic reading/viewing from non-literary meaning-making.*

Keywords: *children's literature; picturebook; infant attention; high contrast baby book; nonfiction picturebook; literary*

literacy; literature acquisition; visual literacy; foregrounding; emergent literacy.

Early attention skills and high-contrast picturebooks for infants under nine months

In recent decades, not only has scholarly interest in picturebooks grown markedly, but their commercial selection has also expanded, with new types appearing on the shelves. In addition, the target audience is also growing larger. There are even picturebooks aimed at infants just a few months old. Questions may arise – and certainly do for many – as to whether these books serve any purpose beyond their economic impact, and what kind of responses they might elicit from ‘readers’ who lack the basic abilities for comprehension: they cannot pay attention for any length of time and their vision and intellect are also quite limited. To answer these questions, we follow a cognitive approach (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2011, Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2013, Nikolajeva, 2014) and link the reading of picture books to the maturing cognitive abilities of children, that includes attentional development as well.

Although current views in developmental psychology hold that infants are born with fairly well-developed sensory and behavioural abilities – for example, from the moment of birth they are uniquely sensitive to the fundamental speech sound categories of human language and perceive sounds in the same frequency ranges as older children – yet they still exhibit fundamental deficits in visual perception: in the first few months, they see only blurrily and are also severely near sighted. At the same time, even this limited perceptual capacity allows them to perceive and enjoy a significant portion of the visual stimuli of the outside world. We know that even very young infants are interested in strong light-dark contrasts and are capable of ‘systematically scanning’ the shapes in their environment with their gaze. Experiments have repeatedly shown that newborns follow moving, face-like shapes with their eyes just minutes after birth, that is, they show a special curiosity toward the human face, and within a few days they are able to distinguish their mother’s face from other faces, from which we can conclude that they perceive the boundary between hair and face and the more important human-specific patterns of the face (Cole & Cole & Lightfoot, 2012).

Although eye movements and visual attention are reflexive in early infancy, the voluntary orienting network becomes functionally mature between three and six months of age. Certain features of attention dynamics can be observed at this stage that will prove fundamental to attention processes and aesthetic perception in general. The regularity

of stimuli is a key factor in arousing and sustaining interest from the very beginning: infants just a few months old initially direct their attention reflexively toward moving objects, sounds, and lights, but they quickly become accustomed to them when they are repeated (habituation), which leads to a decline in interest. They perceive and are even specifically interested when a stimulus that differs from the familiar new stimulus arrives (dishabituation), and even three-and-a-half-month-old infants are capable of forming expectations regarding events that are highly likely to occur (Reynolds and Richards, 2019). They focus their attention in accordance with these expectations, meaning that attention control is already conscious here, as it correlates with the probability attributed to the event.

However, most literary research about picturebooks tends to overlook this very early period and the reception of picturebooks for infants under nine months, despite their growing presence. Generally, non-narrative picturebooks receive less attention in children's literature studies. Although we can find some research about concept books (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2011), and about baby books treating reading as an auditory (Boulaire, 2023) or linguistic (Torr 2023) experience, there are hardly any studies about the visual reception of high-contrast baby books, which target younger infants.¹ Therefore, this paper considers these books to be particularly worthy of inclusion in a study investigating their potential role in early literacy processes. My main interest lies here in exploring how these early reading practices can engage readers and contribute to literary and artistic experiences through attention training.

To better understand how young children engage with visual images, we need to examine not only their cognitive abilities, but also the texts they typically encounter. In the Hungarian book market, we find aesthetically and thoughtfully crafted examples of baby books, such as the *Babageometria* series by Diána Nagy. In *Forms* (2018), *Lines* (2018), *Rhythms* (2019) and *Patterns* (2019). In these board books the static, two-dimensional images radiate rhythm and dynamism. A common feature of these baby books is that they contain simple yet varied high-contrast shapes. To an experienced reader, these shapes can convey even meaning and symbolise the theme of birth, since the geometric forms transform to organic ones. However, to an inexperienced reader, these black-and-white shapes remain meaningless. The act of visual reception in this case unfolds from the combination of lines, shapes, and rhythms along with the sensory elements of the adult's commentary. Thus, even infants of few months

¹ Some research in the field of developmental psychology can be found, for example in Newman et al., (2026).

old can respond aesthetically to these picturebooks on an elementary² level, producing a pure sensory response. Their response becomes evident in the act of fixating at the images or in their manifest desire to physically interact with the viewed object (Danko-McGhee, 2010).

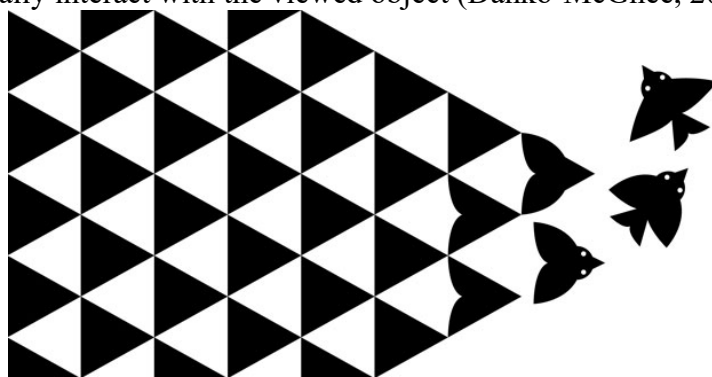


Figure I. : Babageometria: Formák (2018) – with the permission of the author
 Diána Nagy and the Publisher Móra

From a semiotic perspective, the message of these books remains confined to the visual-acoustic level of expression. The visual patterns are not genuine signs and do not acquire ‘meaning’ during the process of perception. In other words, since vision is not merely a sensory activity but the result of a complex processing mechanism, although infants can see and visually follow the changing shapes with their attention for a while, they do not see birds or stories because they do not yet possess the cognitive schemas necessary for understanding concepts or narrative. Nevertheless, this knowledge deficit does not prevent them from enjoying sensory input or from exercising their abilities in the same way as during later cognitive processes and the appreciation of art. Here, infants practise and develop their visual and attentional competencies, such as eye focusing, eye coordination, sustaining attention and gaze following of the supporting reader.³ all of these skills will be essential for further cognitive development. Attention is a fundamental condition of social existence and every kind

² Danko-McGhee (2010) uses the term ‘visceral’ to describe this early aesthetic activity. However, I would use the term ‘elementary’ instead, as I previously suggested that attentional processes are not purely instinctive or reflexive, since culturally acquired schemas begin to form expectations after the age of three and a half months.

³ Research on infants’ gaze following reports more robust effects from around five-six months of age, and describes gaze following as a foundational social-attentional skill. (Cfr. Brooks & Meltzoff, 2005).

of meaning-making. As Umberto Eco explains, a state of attention must be established before meaning making can take place:

This fixing of my own or someone else's attention on something is the condition of every semiosis to come; it even precedes that act of attention (already semiotic, already an effect of thought) by which I decide that something is pertinent, curious, or intriguing, and must be explained by a hypothesis. This fixing comes before curiosity itself, before the perception of the object as an object. It is the as yet blind decision whereby I identify something amid the magma of experience that I have to reckon with (Eco, 2000, 15).

Early reading activities and attention direction in the context of social learning

These early picturebooks are created with the purpose to enrich children's everyday environment with an entertaining, aesthetically pleasing object that stimulates their perception skills and not to teach them geometric concepts or their names. However, the attentional abilities they help to develop make it possible to learn all this a few months later. By capturing their attention, they introduce infants to the world of books and visual signs. With the support of adults, they begin to perform the action of 'reading', which they will later learn to carry out independently (Vygotsky, 1978). It is important to note here that a picturebook, as one of the first cultural artefacts in children's life, is a radically new element for babies of this age and its reception is not an isolated act. From the outset, picturebook reading situated within the context of social learning, through which **human culture is created and transmitted**. In other words, it's not just the books that attract babies' attention and influence their aesthetic experience here; it includes the reading process, too.

Early reading situations motivate infants for both immediate and future reading experiences. They involve positive emotions stemming from the close and emotion-loaded interpersonal relationship with the adult. Another motivating factor is the way adults communicate while reading, i. e. adding the auditory component of reception. When reading to a child, an adult speaks, points and uses facial expressions and body language. This dynamic performance naturally captures the infant's attention because our interest in the movements of living beings is part of our evolutionary heritage (Rakoczy, 2022, citing Simion et al.). The earliest picturebooks, therefore, draw on these aesthetical and social circumstances. They can effectively support learning by providing sensory content tailored to the needs of their audience.

Regarding the issue of attention, I assume that adult-child interactions help attention development significantly and the adult's activity – while conveying the meaning of the illustrations verbally and through pointing – constitutes an extratextual process of attention guidance accompanying the intratextual guidance coming from the visual and verbal text. When adults point to a specific detail in a picturebook while looking at it, they are using an ancient and universal attention-guiding technique. By highlighting a detail that is essential to the given discourse, they 'pre-interpret' the picture-text for the child. Pointing is also an ostensive communicative signal aimed at maintaining a shared focus of attention and reinforcing the relevance of the information (Ivaskó and Papp 2017). An adult who is already familiar with the codes of visual language can use pointing not only to convey to the child what is most important in a given image, but also to demonstrate the rules of selection that are culturally relevant for constructing meaning generally.

Attention direction by the text and by the supporting reader in shared reading

Book reading behaviours and its founding abilities develop continuously and gradually. Torr (2023) refers to the experiment by Lamme and Packer who identified different phases of this development observing infants' engagement in book reading situations. During the first three months of life, in the receptive book reading phase, babies listen to their mother's voice while briefly looking at a picture (for about three minutes). In the next phase, between three and six months of age, a random book awareness was identified: mothers would notice what their child was looking at in an illustration and point to and name it. Sometimes, infants would touch or pat their mother's arm while she was reading to them. From six to nine months, during the considered book involvement phase, infants actively engage with book reading by vocalising, pointing, touching and grabbing the picture book. Finally, the next phase, from nine to twelve months, is referred to as active book reading, when babies can orient a book correctly, right way up, and turn the pages.

Around this time a significant phase in attention development begins which is of fundamental importance for language acquisition, as it enables the child to enter the intersubjective world of meaning. It is at this age that infants become more clearly sensitive to the intentional aspects of others' attention and they are able to understand other people's mind, what they perceive and what goals they pursue. Infants need to combine here two types of behaviour that previously existed separately: social interaction with others and action directed towards

objects and events. In terms of attention that means that they need to attend to the speaker and to what the speaker is attending. Therefore, during engaging with picturebooks children are involved in a joint attention scene since joint attention is created when the child and the adult both focus on a third object for a relatively long time, as well as on each other's attention directed towards that object (Tomasello, 2002).

By entering a joint attentional scene with an adult who is pointing, looking, or otherwise directing his or her attention, the child becomes aware of words and their referents – in the actual world and in picturebooks as well. Furthermore, the interaction between child, adult and book provides the framework for the acquisition of behaviour patterns related to reading. Through this activity, children can acquire a wide range of specific knowledge and skills relating to signs generally and to visual and literary communication particularly. They gradually come to understand the symbolic nature of the images they see and the words they hear, and they realize that a sign refers to something outside itself, and the expressions heard while looking at the pictures can be related not only to the image but also to a corresponding real-world object. They can even learn the basic rules of how specific discourses function, what is important and what is less so in visual and verbal texts, and what they should generally pay attention to when engaging with them (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014).

For this complex mental process to be successful, it is essential that the other two participants in the triadic joint attention scene direct and sustain the child's attention appropriately. Children can essentially rely on the other two parties as authorities. On the one hand, on the 'implied author' (Iser, 1978), embodied by the text and conveying traditions of both visual and literary representation. On the other hand, there is the more experienced supporting reader, who acts as a mediator reading the picturebook and adding her own interpretation.

Focusing, foreground and background when reading picturebooks

From a cognitive psychological perspective, attention is an essential cognitive ability that fundamentally influences information processing in a selective manner. It selects certain events or objects in the environment on which to focus on and maintains this focus while information provided by that object of interest is processed. In other words, our attention admits into the mind for further processing only those stimuli that are relevant to a given piece of information at a given moment. In this selection process, both bottom-up (sensory) information and top-down (cognitive) schemas (i.e. expectations) play a role in forming an integrated salience map.

This selection process is also involved in the processing of verbal information, because our assessment of which elements of the discourse are important for forming a coherent reading changes constantly during perception. In cognitive semantics, this is referred to as focusing which includes the selection and the arrangement of content elements into foreground and background relation, meaning these terms metaphorically (Langacker, 2008). Put simply, important or salient elements come to the foreground and form 'figures', while less important, less salient ones remain in the background forming the 'ground' of perception.

In the context of the present topic, it is significant that the relationship between the foreground and the background is such a general feature of cognition that it permeates both perceptual and conceptual classification processes. Thus, the selection and distinction between foreground and background involves various levels and forms of communication. For example, we can distinguish between more important and less important units in a visual or linguistic expression, at the syntactic or semantic level, and on both sides of text production or reception. Furthermore, this distinction is evident in various uses of language, in everyday speech as well as in poetic texts.

Literary texts and multimodal discourses, such as picturebooks, are tailored to an idealised audience, (or implied reader) providing with cues to help them interpret the text (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021). In the case of artistic or literary works, however, readers' focusing is not limited to the literal, denotative level of meaning because the purpose of these works is not merely to convey information, but also to create connotative meaning through complex sensory-emotional-cognitive effects. In fact, the aesthetic value of art works is often connected to that potential and becomes apparent in contrast to the everyday or familiar literary linguistic background. The concept of 'foregrounding' is similar to focusing, but in an artistic, stylistic sense. It is mostly associated with the ideas of 'alienation,' as formulated by the Russian Formalists or 'literariness', as defined by Roman Jakobson. Drawing on these theories, the proponents of cognitive poetics generally understand it to refer to literary innovations and creative modes of expression (Stockwell, 2002).

But how can we apply these insights in the practice of visual and multimodal communication in picturebooks? Günther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2021) describe the key principles that visual expressions use to communicate a message successfully. They state the following: we see representation as a process in which the makers of signs, whether child or adult, seek to make a representation of some object or entity, whether material or non-material, in which their interest in the

object, at the point of making the representation, is a complex one, arising out of the cultural, social and psychological history of the sign-maker, and framed and focused by the specific environment in which the sign-maker produces the sign. That 'interest' is the source of the selection of what is seen as the criterial aspect of the object, and this criterial aspect is then regarded as adequately representative of the object in a given context. In other words, it is never the 'whole object', but only ever its criterial aspects which are represented.⁴

Thus, the creator of a visual representation employs stylistic techniques to direct the viewer's attention to certain aspects of the expression and to spark in the viewer the same curiosity that drove the creative process. Countless tools are at their disposal for this purpose, some of which correspond to general principles for effectively directing attention. According to Stockwell (2002), the part of the visual field that is most likely to become the focus of attention is a figure that possesses one or more of the following characteristics:

it will be regarded as a self-contained object or feature in its own right, with well-defined edges separating it from the ground; it will be moving in relation to the static ground; it will precede the ground in time or space; it will be a part of the ground that has broken away, or emerges to become the figure; it will be more detailed, better focused, brighter, or more attractive than the rest of the field; it will be on top of, or in front of, or above, or larger than the rest of the field that is then the ground (Stockwell, 2002, 15).

Of course, the reader will not necessarily draw conclusions that correspond exactly to the text intentions because focusing depends on the reader's individual preferences and cognitive disposition as well. However, the details highlighted by the text are certainly more likely to capture the reader's attention than those that remain in the background, as confirmed by empirical research (Miall and Kuiken 1999).

Attention direction is a highly complex process also in picturebooks. To gain an overview of this, let's start with the generally accepted definitions of picturebooks, which typically emphasise two criteria. Firstly, a picturebook is a medium that relies on the complex interplay of images and text to represent meaning. Secondly, verbal communication must not dominate over the visual – the text is either on equal footing with the images or remains in the background (Nodelman 1988, Nikolajeva and Scott 2006, Thiele 2000). Accordingly, both the visual and verbal levels play a role in directing the reader's attention. On the one hand, separately, through their own signifying and attention-directing mechanisms, on the other hand,

⁴ Digital edition without page number.

together, by referring to one another. The reader must fundamentally understand what the text says and what is depicted in the image, but can only grasp what the whole multimodal text communicates by relating the two levels of meaning to one another (Sipe, 2012). Their attention is therefore constantly shifting between the text and the image. In most cases it is not the text that poses a challenge, but rather the visual content, which they understand with the help of the text's statements. In this regard, the written text often functions as a background for understanding. Partly because the verbal sign system is less ambiguous and polysemic than the visual one, and partly because in a picturebook the young reader generally encounters simple, short texts and does not have to search for meanings. In terms of Barthes' conception 'in every society various techniques are developed to fix the floating chain of signifieds in such a way as to counter the terror of uncertain signs; the linguistic message is one of these techniques' (Barthes, 1977, 39).

Generally, in picturebooks for young/preschool children the text helps readers to determine what is important in a picture and what is less so. Therefore, in most of the cases, the semantic relationship between the picture and the text is parallel. That is to say, the picture depicts the object or sequence of events that the text explicitly describes, often highlighting and bringing to the foreground the same detail, even if there is never complete redundancy between them. Examples of this congruent interaction between image and text can be found in all picturebooks. Of course, nonfiction picturebooks clearly prevail in this regard, but the same is true of narrative books such as Eric Carle's classic, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1970). (I chose Carle's picturebook because it is an appreciated and well-known piece with an uncomplicated, single-protagonist story. It will also be useful for demonstrating that alongside parallel storytelling, there are other narrative forms, even in such simple picturebooks.) In the opening illustration, there is a little egg that meets several criteria that can make a detail prominent: it is clearly distinguishable from the background and brighter than the rest of the visual field. However, other elements also attract the viewer's gaze due to their central position, their bigger size or anthropomorphic nature. Therefore, recognising prominence may take longer and require more careful observation for a less experienced reader. The meaning of the accompanying text has the most significant influence on determining the semantic focus of the visual representation: 'In the light of the moon, a little egg lay on a leaf' (Carle, 1970, 2). Here, the word 'egg' is the grammatical subject and primary figure, and we perceive it as standing out from the rest of the sentence. After a quick assessment of the image as a whole, we

therefore focus on the small, shiny shape while viewing the other details merely as part of the setting. Similar image-text relationships are common in picturebooks because this parallel interaction between image and text is a highly efficient narrative technique from a cognitive standpoint, requiring less effort from the reader.⁵

Since the narrative in a picturebook is built from a series of static images, one of the greatest challenge for the reader lies in understanding the relationship between two consecutive pictures.⁶ Generally, the double-page spreads form an organic unit; turning the page represents a break in the flow, much like a cut in a film. On the second double-page spread of Carle's book, the egg is no longer present; instead, we see the caterpillar mentioned in the title. There is no temporal or spatial continuity to the opening image, and the figures are also different. Since it is now daytime, it is obvious that some time has passed, but it is only through the verbal discourse that we learn that in the meantime the caterpillar hatched from the egg, presumably due to the warmth of the sunlight. The text does not establish an explicit causal relationship; it merely sets up a temporal sequence between the warmth of the sun and the hatching, thereby, so to speak, implying the conclusion. This narrative gap can be easily filled if children already have some knowledge about biological reproduction. Moreover, they are introduced to a narrative convention which is to imply that something that follows is the consequence of that something (Kovács, 2023). It is important to note, however, that the image does not depict the dramatic moment of birth; it is not synchronous or parallel with the text, but shows a caterpillar figure moving from left to right. The image adds some more elements to the meaning of the scene suggesting that the figure has set out on a journey. In this case, the text advances the plot; its function is similar to that of dialogue in films, which Barthes (1977) refers to as the 'relay function'. Visual text doesn't merely mirror verbal information but rather takes over the narration of the plot in the same way that participants in a relay race pass the baton to one another.

As has already been widely discussed by several scholars in the field of picturebook research, there are other possible relationships between images and text. Here, I would like to refer only to the works of Nikolajeva and Scott (2000, 2006), who, in describing the variations of this interaction, essentially break down the 'relay function' introduced

⁵ Empirical studies about attention and multimodal stimuli states that multisensory and dynamic events elicit more attention and produce greater sustained attention in infants than auditory or visual events alone (Curtindale et. al., 2019).

⁶ Barbara Bader (1976) pointed out "the drama of the turning page" as one of the most important aspects of picturebooks.

by Barthes into even more distinct units. These categories are also useful concepts for taking into account the foregrounding effects, as their classification emphasises the degree of deviation from what is perceived as a parallel and neutral/normal picturebook narrative. (In these sense parallel narration functions as background and deviations become foregrounded.) In ascending order of deviation, they distinguish between the *complementary*, and *enhancing* dynamics, in which images or words mutually complement or enhance each other's meaning; and, when the interaction results in an even more radical relationship between image and text, they speak of *counterpointing*, or even *contradictory* or negating dynamics. Since the two authors focus on the structural relationships between signifiers when approaching the issue here, they speak of reciprocity. Yet, from a pragmatic perspective of the production and reception of children's picturebooks, we find more examples where the visual text prevails in the creation of the creative interaction. It is the images that reinforce, reinterpret or challenge the textual message, rather than the other way around. Thus, in children's picturebooks usually the image represents the more active element, while the verbal text is familiar or conventional. This is understandable, as picturebook creators are mostly visual artists first and foremost, and only secondarily writers. While they often deliberately use simple verbal texts as a background to highlight the creative aspect of the image, it is the interplay between the two that creates the meaning and the artistic value of the picture book as a whole.

Further theory and examples: foregrounding through perspectivisation in picturebook for preschool children

Overall, a division of tasks emerges between the images and text in picturebooks. Basically, the verbal communication is essential for arranging the logical aspects of statements and establishing the temporal sequence of events. The visual part, as already Lessing (2004/1766) pointed out, is most appropriate for representing spatial aspects and nonlinear relationships. This division of tasks aims to ensure that the narrative mechanism functions effectively. The artistic techniques of picturebooks have essentially developed for this purpose. As previously mentioned, the most widespread and stylistically neutral form is parallel narration. By contrast, different stylistic variations may be accompanied by varying degrees of foregrounding. These variations essentially present a greater cognitive challenge and simultaneously increase reader engagement. Moreover, the increasing emphasis on stylistic markers means that the interaction between image and text serves not only to fulfil the narrative's function, but also to emphasise

its form. According to Miall and Kuiken (1999), when narrative or stylistic variations alienate the reader from familiar interpretive practices, and prompt an interpretive reworking of a conventional feeling or concept, a distinctly literary mode of reading emerges. The concept of 'literariness' is therefore not merely a textual element, but rather the result of a reception process in which, according to the authors, three factors must be present simultaneously: stylistic variations that appear as foregrounding, the alienating effect arising from these that confronts the reader with new perspectives, and the updating of schemas that takes place within the reader. Miall and Kuiken also point out that their findings apply not only to verbal texts, but also to works of visual art or film.

In terms of creative solutions in picture books, research typically highlights intertextual, interpicture and metarepresentational aspects; uncertain causal relationships; and non-linear or multiperspectival storytelling. These are referred to as 'crossover' (Beckett, 2017); 'postmodern' (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2010); or 'challenging' (Evans, 2015; Ommundsen et al., 2021). Of these, the 'challenging picture book' concept is the one that is closest to our topic, as it is interpreted in cognitive terms and linked to the role of intellectual challenge in literary literacy, as Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer also demonstrate: „A picturebook is challenging for a child at a certain developmental stage if it contains marked structures, the detection of which may foster interpretative skills'. The authors also state that, in order to succeed, „the input should be fine-tuned to the developmental stages and age-specific interests of children' (2021, 36).

This definition essentially aligns with the aforementioned definition of literary reading (Miall & Kuiken, 1999), which emphasises the impact of foregrounding. However, the term 'foregrounding' does not seem to be used in these picturebook studies. Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2021) use a similar concept, that of 'markedness,' drawn from linguistic pragmatics, and apply it to verbal text, image, and their interaction, offering several examples. Nevertheless, I prefer the term 'foregrounding' because it is less restrictive. It is not limited to textual levels or top-down cognitive mechanisms, but takes into account aspects of the reception and bottom-up processes. Clearly, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive list of foregrounding phenomena in this study either. I only address the question of perspectivisation because it is a complex and important narrative issue that determines how the events in a story are represented with respect to viewpoint. As different perspectives challenge or compromise one another, the reader is confronted with heterogeneous subjectivities in the narrative, which often highlights for them interpersonal meanings in a given text. I

attempt to show through a few examples how these functions as foregrounding when supported by other salient formal devices that direct the reader's attention. My point is that the creation of cognitive emphases in picturebooks is a coordinated process emerging from the interplay between discursive and narrative strategies, and the cognitive abilities and preferences of the reader. As children develop, their reading behaviours evolve and picturebooks follow the changes – also in terms of foregrounding mechanism.

As I mentioned earlier, a more detailed, better-focused element that stands out from the background gains prominence. In terms of perspectivisation, this means that the closer the narrative brings the reader to a character's sensory focus or mental processes, the more it can capture the reader's attention. Thus, the approach to the character's point of view can produce a foregrounding effect. Miall and Kuiken (1999) define the degrees of the relationship between the reader and the character on a four-point scale in the context of literary narratives without images: 1 – the reader has no connection to the character; 2 – the reader has access only to the character's actions from an external perspective; 3 – the reader becomes mentally closer to the character, gaining access to the character's thoughts or feelings; 4 – through free indirect speech, the reader forms an intense connection to the character's consciousness.

Readers, who gain insight into the characters' thoughts and feelings, can engage empathetically with the characters, facilitating a reflective encounter between their own perspectives and those of others, even in picturebooks intended for children. Jauss (1982, 681) describes this as 'experiencing oneself in the experience of the other' or 'enjoying oneself in the enjoyment of the other', considering it a defining characteristic of aesthetic experience. The following three picturebooks use a variety of narrative techniques to offer such an experience, even to preschoolers.

In Antoinette Portis's (2011) picturebook *Not a Box*, two voices engage in dialogue across consecutive double-page spreads. On the first spread, we see a rabbit sitting in a cardboard box with the question coming from somebody else, 'Why are you sitting in a box?'. The next page shows the rabbit's answer, 'It's not a box', and reveals the little rabbit sitting in a racing car, with the original box still visible. In the following we find a sequence of scenes repeating the same structure. Readers can infer that these voices belong to two fictional characters, one of whom (presumably an adult who has lost the ability to think creatively) remains off-screen throughout the book. As the illustration show the rabbit's point of view of the box, gives readers access to his thoughts by explicitly depicting his beliefs. This is a form of free

indirect discourse achieved by artistically fine-tuned multimodal representation. The foregrounding is achieved by various narrative techniques and visual tools, such as repetition and variation (while the title phrase is repeated in the same form verbally, visually, it is emphasised through the variations with the box's creative transformation). Further, vivid colours, colour contrasts, more detailed and dynamic images enhance the childlike perspective. Whole in whole, a controversial structure is foregrounded by the question-answer structure. In this way, Portis's book demonstrates the power of creative imagination to renew interpretive frameworks, in contrast to an unimaginative, everyday mindset. This idea can be even transferred from the plot level to a metatextual one, referring to the artistic creative process. Thus, this picturebook caters for the interests and imagination of child readers, taking them on a creative journey.

Another well-crafted example is Jacqueline Molnár's *Robotok* (Robots) which is based on a similar concept. This book does not offer a coherent narrative either, it is a sequence of short texts and pictures showing robots in various strange situations. A key feature of this work is its focus on the childlike perspective, while also opening up a different field of experience by introducing an incongruent element that disrupts cognitive patterns and anticipations of the child reader. The book humorously subverts children's expectations of a book about robots. According to these expectations, robots are symbols of the 'stranger' and of the 'other'; they are also associated with the image of a tireless working machine and are perceived as masculine rather than feminine. The author, however, portrays the robots as mothers or other humanised characters and, with gentle irony, grounds this in the childlike belief that takes parental care for granted and views the parent as an automatically functioning, reliable companion. The author humorously jokes with the child's expectations and beliefs about robots and parents, combining the two elements into the conceptual metaphor 'mother as robot'. In other words, the humorous and original central idea – brought to life through vivid imagery and witty text – brings perspectives into conflict, simultaneously confronting the child reader with their own anticipations.



Figure II. *Robotok* (2017) – with the permission of the Publisher Móra

The third example is Chris Raschka's wordless picture book *A Ball for Daisy* (2011), which, compared to traditional picturebooks, is an unconventional variation that strives for formal innovations and reduces the meaning-conveying function of language to a minimum. The Caldecott Medal-winning work tells the story of a puppy named Daisy and her ball, and it makes a clear effort to help the reader follow the sequence of events and understand the character's emotions and motivations, which constitute the essential elements of cause-and-effect relationships in the plot. This approach is particularly noteworthy because wordless picture books often present the narrative with significant cognitive gaps, evoking associative chains in the reader rather than creating coherence in the story. Here, however, the illustrator takes care to establish narrative coherence and emphasis: the main character and the ball introduced in the title are easily identifiable, their presence is consistent, and the reader's gaze is reflexively drawn to ball by its red colour. The attention-grabbing effect of the colour red is universal and widely used in wordless picture books. What is unusual, however, is how the book uses so many small-format images to depict the joy brought by the new ball. The main character thus never becomes static, not even when sleeping, just as the viewer's gaze remains in constant motion: through the 'slow-motion' sequences – more cinematic than typical of a picture book – we can observe, first in wide shots and then in closer close-ups, various moments of the puppy's play and its intimate relationship with the ball, as if we were right there in the scene ourselves. The narrative time slows down so much that it approaches the time being narrated, thereby prompting the reader to engage in a slow and 'intimate' reading, as they can lose themselves in looking at the illustrations and form a sensory image of the character's emotional and mental processes. This

stylistically striking approach helps readers who are less experienced in social relationships to focus their attention on the character's feelings and relate to them empathetically. According to Mellmann (2017), empathy cannot arise without a clear mental image of the character's feelings, and since forming such images takes time, the intensity of the reader's emotions depends heavily on how much detail the text provides and how much time the reader spends processing that information.

By choosing this theme, Chris Raschka evokes a life situation familiar even to preschool-aged readers and draws upon the emotional experiences associated with it. He rightly assumes that his readers have already received a similar gift and possess memories of the feelings that typically accompany the possession or loss of a favourite object. The strong subjective engagement resulting from the activation of personal memories is an essential component of the foregrounding effect and the aesthetic-emotional experience in this picturebook. It is also the distinguishing feature of texts with aesthetic-emotional aims as opposed to expository texts aimed at conveying information.

Conclusion

In this study, I sought to present several aspects of the relationship between attentional functioning and picturebook reception. This was based on the premise that picturebooks must trigger the reader's concentration of attention, which can even result in a distinctive literary reading experience. Well-crafted picturebooks can provide early and formative experiences related to these phenomena. They can excellently develop attention skills in both visual and verbal communication by requiring the reader to interpret the details of the text and images on their own to represent meanings, as well as to relate them to one another. The two levels often direct attention in a given direction in parallel, but at other times they may significantly modify or even contradict each other.

Picturebooks provide a training ground for both beginning and more advanced readers, where they can practice the specific skills. They guide the reader by highlighting details worth learning; they leave clues, mark, and bring to the foreground the important information that can serve for the literary reading of a given text (Nikolajeva 2014). Picturebooks that present a greater challenge offer even broader opportunities for this, as their unconventional visual or narrative solutions and unusual text-image relationships require heightened concentration, greater creativity, and more active cognitive engagement. They confront the reader with the constructed nature of literary text, revealing, for example, that texts are multilayered or they

erect barriers along the path to understanding the story. Ideally, through the right amount and quality of input, a beginning reader can become a professional reader distinguished from a less creative interpreter precisely by ‘a special quality of attention’ (Molnár 2015, 7). The specific engagement of attentional processes is therefore an indispensable element of literary literacy, which is also closely linked to other areas of a child’s development.

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