



Language and Rhetoric in Turkish Children's Books

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ferdi Bozkurt¹, Burcu Büyükkal²

¹Anadolu University, Türkiye

²Ministry of National Education, Türkiye

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the linguistic structures in Turkish children's literature texts through the lens of a discourse-based theoretical framework. In the Turkish education system, fostering early reading habits and helping children understand the functioning of language are essential goals. Therefore, it is crucial to examine not only the thematic content but also the linguistic features of texts used in children's books. However, existing research often focuses on didactic content and moral education, largely overlooking linguistic analysis. To address this gap, this study analyzes 8 selected children's literature texts, focusing on rhetorical relations between sentences as defined by the Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) developed by Mann and Thompson. The sample includes books recommended by the Turkish Ministry of National Education and works featured in the "I Read, Istanbul Reads" reading initiative. The findings reveal that in texts targeting elementary school children, rhetorical structures based on chronological sequencing of events are predominant. In contrast, texts for middle school students exhibit more diverse and complex rhetorical structures. These findings suggest that children's literature is shaped by distinct rhetorical strategies depending on the target age group. By highlighting the discourse-structural aspects of children's literature, the study offers both theoretical insights and pedagogical contributions, encouraging a more nuanced understanding of how language operates in texts intended for young readers.

Keywords: children's literature, rhetorical structure theory, discourse analysis, rhetorical relations, language development

1. Introduction

Children's literature is not only the entirety of written works aimed at children; it is also a multidimensional literary field that plays an important role in the linguistic, cognitive and emotional development of the individual. These texts serve to shape children's thought processes, provide them with values and develop their aesthetic sensibilities; at the same time, they are used as a fundamental tool for improving their linguistic competence [1]. The literary content children encounter at an early age not only provides them with vocabulary, but also directly influences their ability to produce meaning through sentences, paragraphs and text integrity.

Recent studies in the field of text linguistics have revealed that understanding how children process a text requires not only content analysis but also examining the formal structure of the text. In this context, inter-sentential meaning relationships—in other words, rhetorical structures—play a decisive role in constructing the overall meaning of the text. According to Mann & Thompson, the comprehensibility of relationships such as cause-effect, explanation, contrast, condition and exemplification by the child reader should be considered as a critical criterion in terms of the age-appropriateness and pedagogical functionality of the text [2].

Academic production on children's literature in Turkey is mostly limited to content-focused approaches such as value transfer, thematic analysis, character education, or social messages. The linguistic and formal organization of texts is largely overlooked. However, children's ability to understand, interpret, and reproduce a text is directly related to processes of recognizing relationships established not only at the word level but also at the text level and incorporating them into their mental schemas [3]. In this sense, analyses that goes beyond the surface structure of texts and focus on structural integrity can more accurately reveal the educational power of children's literature.

This study, prepared in response to this need, aims to examine children's literature texts based on the *Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST)*. Developed by Mann and Thompson [2], this theory is a powerful theoretical framework that allows for the analysis of meaning relationships between sentences in a text through nucleus and satellite structures. The analytical tools offered by RST reveal the hierarchical structure within the text, the types of relationships and how communicative intent is



structured, providing a scientific basis for measuring the structural adequacy of pedagogically-oriented texts.

The main problem of this research is that, despite the importance of rhetorical relationships between sentences in children's literature texts for children's linguistic and cognitive development, they have not been systematically examined in academic writing in Turkey. Furthermore, the need for comparative text-linguistic research explaining how these structures differ according to age groups points to a significant gap in the field.

The study aims not only to contribute to academic knowledge production but also to provide concrete data on the need to consider structural criteria in the selection of books recommended in educational programs, the preparation of textbooks and the writing of pedagogical texts. This will enable the aesthetic and educational functions of children's literature texts to be evaluated on a scientific basis.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 The Multilayered Nature of Children's Literature

Children's literature is not only considered as a collection of written works aimed at children, but also as a branch of literature designed to suit children's age, development and perception levels, serving aesthetic, educational and cultural functions. Such texts are an effective tool both in the individual's personal development process and in the transmission of social codes [1]. Şirin [4] defines children's literature as products that are suitable for the child's world, simple, sincere and at the same time of high artistic value; he emphasizes that this genre creates a sensitive transition area between childhood and adulthood.

At a theoretical level, children's literature lies at the intersection of different disciplines such as literary theory, developmental psychology, pedagogical formation and linguistics. Eagleton [5] defines literature not as a fixed genre but as a form of reading shaped by historical and cultural context. From this perspective, children's literature is not merely a collection of written works; it is a multi-layered discursive field that shapes children's processes of reception, understanding and meaning production. In this context, children's literature texts must be analyzed not only in terms of content and theme, but also at the formal, structural and functional levels. This is because children's literature products directly influence not only what children learn, but also how they structure knowledge and how they use language in this structuring process.

2.2 Text-Linguistic Approach and Rhetorical Structures

Textual linguistics is a linguistic approach that treats a text not merely as a collection of sentences, but as a structured whole within the framework of context, coherence and functionality. Halliday and Hasan [6] argue that cohesion and coherence are the fundamental elements that make a text a meaningful whole. In this context, how inter-sentential relationships are established plays a decisive role in both the meaning level and the communicative effect of the text.

Functional relationships between sentences organize the internal structure of the text while guiding the reader's meaning-making process. In particular, relationships such as cause-effect, contrast, exemplification and explanation facilitate children's understanding of the information in the text and its placement in their mental schemas [7]. Therefore, the rhetorical structure of children's literature texts is not merely an aesthetic choice; it also serves a pedagogical function.

Research on children's literature in Turkey is mostly content-based, with linguistic and structural analyses being quite limited. However, children's ability to understand and interpret a text is directly related not only to their vocabulary but also to their ability to analyze such structural contexts.

2.3 Rhetorical Structure Theory and Its Application Area

RST is an approach frequently used in text-linguistic analyses, developed to identify the functional relationships established between sentences and paragraphs in texts. This theory, proposed by Mann and Thompson [2], structures the organization of the text through the relationship between core (nucleus) and satellite units. This dual structure expresses the rhetorical context established by the meaning-bearing main sentence (core) and the complementary units (satellite) that support or explain it.



One of the basic assumptions of RST is that text is constructed not only by grammatical rules but also by functional and communicative goals. In other words, the writer makes structural choices to create a specific effect on the reader. The systematic analysis of these structures allows us to understand both the discursive logic and the pedagogical impact of the text [2], [8].

RST is an effective tool for analyzing the functionality of pedagogical texts, especially children's literature. This is because the comprehensibility and age-appropriateness of the linguistic structures used in texts aimed at children are directly related to the nature of rhetorical relationships. Through this theory, the relationships used in texts can be identified and the diversity, frequency and contribution of these relationships to the integrity of the text can be measured.

2.4 The Applicability of Rhetorical Structure Theory to Children's Literature

Since children's literature is a field shaped by the cognitive and linguistic development level of children, linguistic structures are also expected to be compatible with this developmental level. Comparative studies conducted within this framework show that preschool texts predominantly feature simple sequencing and cause-and-effect relationships, while elementary school texts favor more complex structures such as elaboration, explanation and contrast. This reveals that texts also differ structurally according to age groups [9].

RST not only reveals the relationships within the text; it also makes the author's communicative intent, the narrative strategies of the text and the effects the author wants to create in the reader visible. In this context, the theoretical tools offered by RST are of great importance for evaluating the functional adequacy of texts aimed at children.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study was conducted using the document analysis method, one of the qualitative research approaches. The aim is to systematically examine the rhetorical structures in children's literature texts.

3.2 Sample and Data Sources

The data set consists of 8 children's literature works selected from the Ministry of National Education's recommended "The MEB's 100 Fundamental Works" and the "I Read, Istanbul Reads" project. The following criteria were considered in the works selected by purposive sampling:

1. Approval by the Ministry of National Education
2. Balanced distribution across age groups
3. Inclusion of different genres (short stories, fairy tales, novels)

The works were divided into two categories: elementary school and middle school level.

3.3 Data Analysis

The relationships between sentences in the texts were classified in terms of core-satellite pairs; the frequency, variety and functions of relationship types within the context were evaluated separately. The analysis process consisted of the following stages:

1. Text Segmentation: Each work was divided into meaningful sections to determine the minimum units of analysis.
2. Relationship Identification: Linguistic connections between sentences and clauses were coded according to RST criteria.
3. Frequency Analysis: The frequency of use of relationship types was calculated.
4. Comparative Analysis: Differences between age groups were evaluated.

3.4 Limitations of The Research

The study is limited to written texts only and visual elements were not included in the analysis. The sample is limited to 8 works selected from specific lists and does not represent all children's literature

works. The analysis process was limited to two age groups. The study is limited to Turkish works and no comparative language study was conducted.

4. Findings

The analysis reveals the most common types of relationships in each group and the differences between the groups. Detailed findings are presented below. Looking at the overall frequencies, the most common type of relationship in both groups was identified as “elaboration”:

- In elementary school books: 19,11%
- Middle school textbooks: 25,84%

“This is a code we use when requesting our favorite songs on the radio's social media account. This way, others cannot decipher our identity and we are able to message each other secretly.” [10]

“There is also a grave in that garden. I buried its owner there with my own hands. The owner was a little finch that I had kept in a cage for a while. It was very cute. One day, I saw it fluffing its feathers inside the cage. The next morning, I found the poor thing lifeless.” [11].

The other two common types of relationships are:

- “Sequence”: Elementary school 9,56%, Middle school 13,14

“He thought long and hard on the way. He went home and thought, morning came and he thought... For days and nights, he searched for a formula...” [12] (Harizmi ve Uçmaktan Korkan Tırtıl [Al-Khwarizmi and the Caterpillar Afraid of Flying], 31)

“He would get up from his bed before dawn, before it was light, and go out to the mountains with a few women to gather firewood. He would return home as the sun rose, place the firewood he had brought on his back and light the stove.” [13].

- “Contrast”: Elementary school 11,78%, Middle school 5,12

“This family was poor, but they lived happily in their shack.” [14].

“Many other things had been taken from the shops. But what they gave to Temel Reis was tea and coffee. Even bread had been taken from the bakeries. It was given with a ration card. There were no ration cards in the village [15].

Differences Between Groups

Table 1. Percentages and differences of relationship types

Type of Relationship	Elementary school (%)	Middle School (%)	Difference (Middle - Elementary %)
Elaboration	19,11	25,84	+6,73
Circumstance	5,78	4,68	-1,10
Solutionhood	0,22	0,22	0,00
Volitional Cause	3,11	2,45	-0,66
Volitional Result	4,67	8,24	+3,57
Non-Volitional Cause	1,78	3,79	+2,01
Non-Volitional Result	4,67	6,46	+1,79
Purpose	6,00	3,79	-2,21
Condition	7,78	2,90	-4,88
Otherwise	0,89	0,89	0,00
Interpretation	1,56	2,00	+0,44
Evaluation	5,56	2,67	-2,8
Restatement	0,22	1,11	+0,89
Summary	0,00	0,45	+0,45
Sequence	9,56	13,14	+3,58
Contrast	11,78	5,12	-6,66
Motivation	2,89	1,56	-1,33
Antithesis	0,89	0,45	-0,44

Type of Relationship	Elementary school (%)	Middle School (%)	Difference (Middle - Elementary %)
Background	4,00	3,79	-0,21
Aneblement	0,00	0,22	+0,22
Evidence	2,67	3,79	+1,12
Justify	1,56	3,34	+1,78
Concession	5,11	3,12	-1,99
Joint	0,22	0,00	-0,22

Key Observations

- Contrast and Condition: “Contrast” (11,78%) and “condition” (7,78%) are more common in elementary school books, which may indicate that simpler comparisons and conditional expressions are preferred for young readers.
- Elaboration and Sequencing: “Elaboration” (25,84%) and “sequencing” (13,14%) are more frequent in middle school textbooks, which may indicate a more detailed and chronological narrative structure.
- Rarely Used Relationships: Types such as “summary,” “sufficiency,” and “irrelevance” were rarely used in both groups, indicating that these structures are less preferred in these types of books.

5. Result

This comparative analysis reveals that Turkish children's literature possesses a unique linguistic identity. This study, conducted within the framework of Rhetorical Structure Theory, shows that the rhetorical structure of Turkish children's books both preserves the principles of universal children's literature and reflects cultural and linguistic characteristics.

The prevalence of elaboration in both age groups reflects the descriptive richness of the Turkish narrative tradition. This feature allows young readers to develop their mental imagery skills while also experiencing the aesthetic dimension of language. Similarly, the high use of the sequence relationship reveals the chronological structure of the Turkish storytelling tradition; this supports children's plot-following skills while also strengthening their ability to understand cause-and-effect relationships. The dominance of this structure, especially in fairy tales and memoirs, demonstrates the successful transfer of the Turkish oral culture tradition to written texts.

In line with these findings, various recommendations are made to maximize the educational potential of Turkish children's literature. Educators should consider the level of linguistic complexity when selecting texts and evaluate the distribution of relationship types appropriate for the age group. Writers, on the other hand, should develop writing strategies specific to age groups, maintain the Elaboration–Sequence balance and systematically use cultural transmission mechanisms.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis demonstrates that Rhetorical Structure Theory can be successfully applied to Turkish children's literature. The 24 different types of rhetorical relationships identified reveal the rhetorical richness of children's books. This richness plays a critical role in children's language development, cognitive development and cultural identity formation processes. The linguistic identity of Turkish children's literature is characterized by the dominance of Elaboration and Sequence relations, the systematic use of emotional interaction strategies and the presence of cultural transmission mechanisms. The linguistic structure analysis presented in this study provides a scientific foundation for Turkish children's literature, offering significant contributions across a wide range of areas, from educational policies to writing strategies, text selection to cultural transmission processes.

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