CONSTRUCTING A HERO: Stylistic features of main characters *Charlie Bucket* and *Harry Potter*

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Abstract

Children's literature has been considered a means of entertainment and well as a resource for children's sociolinguistic development. Children are expected to learn and behave according to the examples provided by the behaviour of the heroes presented. This paper attempts to stylistically unveil those discursive features that support the construction of heroes in children's literature. I have chosen the famous Charlie Bucket (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*) and Harry Potter (*Harry and the Philosopher's Stone*), based on the great popularity reached by both characters after their version in film narrative in the early XXI century. Created with a difference of more than thirty years, these characters exhibit similarities, as well as differences. Both are presented as good and successful children, but do they react and act the same in the circumstances that surround them? This question has led my study, which, in the light of M.A.K. Halliday's statements on transitivity and P. Simpson's proposals, centres on the transitivity profiles embodied in the texts. For the delineation of such transitivity profiles, a selection of most relevant passages of each text was made: introduction of the character, key events in the development of the story, and character's final performance. The passages were analysed with special attention to the processes performed by the central characters. The findings allow me to conclude that both heroes are developed through different strategies: Charlie, the mostly passive and perceptive character, strongly contrasts with Harry, more active and influencing on his environment and on other characters. Their success seems to be based on their behaviour, which, by the time they were created, should respond to the social norms that prevailed in their time.

Key words: Children's literature, narrative, characterisation, transitivity.

1. **Introduction**

Children's literature is usually perceived as a means of entertainment. In academic contexts, the scope of this field expands beyond mere entertainment. Generally speaking, children's stories are understood to enhance the child's learning about the world of imagination as they also develop their comprehension of moral values as well as an awareness of language itself. In Venezuelan school programmes children's literature is acknowledged such roles and benefits, and certain amount of research is being carried out from the perspectives of moral formation, psychology and pedagogy. Studies supported on linguistic bases are nevertheless scarce. This panorama is even more disheartening in the field of English as a Foreign Language. Secondary school students are taught some English (some grammar and some vocabulary). In private schools this "teaching about English" begins at earlier stages. Literary texts, however, are rarely included. At universities, teacher training always include the area of culture and literature. But two things are to be foregrounded in this respect: 1. As in literature teaching in the mother tongue, little or no attention is paid to linguistic construction: no real integration occurs between linguistic studies and literary studies; 2. there are no courses devoted exclusively to children's literature.

Thus, considering the importance of literature in the child's socialisation process, as acknowledged by Stephen (1992), and given the fact that our ministry of education is proposing a reform that incorporates English in primary school, it seems clear that some efforts should be made in order to a) enhance teacher's literary competence; and b) promote the study of children's literature in English at both

undergraduate and graduate programmes leading to the formation of teachers of English.

This paper represents one of those efforts. In general terms, I attempt to show that literary texts (as sociolinguistic products) convey messages which in turn emerge from the social context where these texts are produced. And more specifically, I aim at unveiling those discursive features that support the construction of characters that catch children's attention and sympathy. The appealing heroes of British Children's books Charlie Bucket (<u>Charlie and the chocolate factory</u>) and Harry Potter (<u>Harry Potter and the philosopher's stone</u>) have been chosen on the basis of their world popularity and as examples of two different times: mid XXth century and end of XXth century.

2. <u>Some theoretical assumptions</u>

On the basis of Stephen's (1992: 1) thoughts that "ideology appears as an overt or explicit element in the text, disclosing the writer's social, political or moral beliefs", as well as Knowles and Malmkjaer's (1996: 1) consideration that "an understanding of the linguistic patterning's in texts will help in taking account not only of the child reader but the (usually) adult author who produces the text", I have designed this exploratory study of the above mentioned heroes. It is also worth considering Phelan's (1989) statements on characterization. For this author, characters are a construct of three dimensions: a) synthetic (physical features); b) mimetic (features that depict the characters as *persons*); and c) thematic (features that depict the characters as *members of a social group* and emerge from generalisation of thematic proposals in the text). The mimetic dimension of Charlie Bucket and Harry Potter will be the focus of my attention in this paper.

In order to explore the mimetic dimension and the way it is constructed in the texts, I will make use of the characters' transitivity profiles, following Simpson's statement that "the transitivity profile embodied by a text is generally a useful indicator of character in prose fiction" (2004: 119). Transitivity, as conceived of by M.A.K. Halliday (1985), is one of the systems available within the ideational component of language and it serves the purpose of accounting for human experience. An analysis of transitivity would provide answers to the general question "*Who does what to whom, how, where, when, etc.?*" Three basic elements build up the transitivity model: **participants** (*who, whom*), **processes** (the verbs, *does what*) and **circumstances** (*how, when, where, etc*). Certainly, there is more to transitivity than the above formulations indicate. However, given the fact that my interest is addressed to find out how certain types of process may function to cast the central characters of my study, I will here outline only the aspects associated with the processes. In this respect, it is worth pointing out that the processes (represented by the verb in the clause) can be classified as **material** (action, event), **mental** (cognition, perception, reaction, affection), **verbalisation**, **behavioural**, **relational**, and **existence**. Detailed analyses and exemplification of these categories are presented by Eggins (1994), Thompson (1996), and Martin *et al* (1997). Also, significant contributions have been made by Simpson (2004) in his analysis of characters in narrative texts. A final comment is needed on transitivity before proceeding with the analysis itself. As a system, all its elements, or terms, are closely related. Thus, the interpretation of certain processes might, in some cases, be affected by the other elements such as other participants (Is the process goal-directed?) or the circumstances attending on the process.

With respect to the methodology followed for this exploration, a selection of the most relevant passages of each text was made: introduction of the character, key events in the development of the story, and character's final performance. Characters were first studied separately in order to delineate their transitivity profile. Then comparisons were made between the characters' behaviour in each of the passages selected. Finally, relations were established between character's configuration and depiction and the social contexts in which these texts seem to have been produced.

3. Charlie Bucket's Character

Charlie is introduced as the child of a very poor family. Because of their economical difficulties, Charlie is not well fed and they all live

> *with a horrible empty feeling in their tummies* […] *Charlie felt it worst of all.* […] *He desperately wanted something more filling and satisfying than cabbage and cabbage soup. The one thing he longed for more than anything else was . . . CHOCOLATE.* (p. 2)

Charlie conforms to his life and goes on dreaming of going inside the chocolate factory. He is not the kind of child who would complain about his poverty. He treasures his birthday present (a bar of chocolate). In his interaction with his grandparents, his questions are addressed to find out about the factory, never about his own existence or the circumstances that surround him. His interest in the factory remains throughout the story. He does not intervene in the development of events. It is by a lucky chance that he comes to get one of the golden tickets. His behaviour is contrasted with the other children's actions. Charlie's virtues are rather foregrounded by the others' behaviour: a greedy boy, a girl spoiled by her parents, a girl who chews gum all the time and a boy who is always watching television. So, Charlie's poverty, obedience and good manners are rewarded at the end of the story. But although an important change in his status

occurs as he is appointed future owner of the factory, his character is not modified by such change and his relationships with and feelings for others remain untouched.

The configuration of Charlie's transitivity profile portrays this character mainly as the senser of the events that occur around him. The majority of the processes performed by Charlie are mental process, and of these, most correspond to the category of perception processes: *look* and *stare* seem to be Dahl's favourite verbs. Quantitatively speaking, the type of process that predominates over perception is the verbalisation type, being *said*, *cried* and *whispered*, the most repeated verbs. It is also important to focus some attention to the verbalisation performed by Charlie. Surprisingly, for a boy, the verb *ask* is rather scarce, and when it is used, most of the questions are addressed to Grandpa Joe. His verbal acts are usually employed to give some insight of Charlie's mind or feelings. During his stay in the factory, he shows concern about the other children:

> *'But Mr Wonka,' said Charlie Bucket anxiously, 'will Violet Beauregarde ever be all right again or will she always be a blueberry?'* (p. 50)

and sometimes the verb co-occurs with some adverb that conveys his feeling:

> *Charlie said sadly.* (p. 76)

With regards to his actions, it must be remarked that most of the material processes performed by Charlie are non-goal-directed. This is important, as the character is depicted as one whose actions have little influence on his environment or on the events that take place in the story. Along the eighteen chapters that show his stay in the factory, only seven goal-directed actions are performed. Of these, two occur as the result of his obedience (he has been asked by Willy Wonka to drink a cup of hot chocolate and, later, to touch the TV screen), Charlie obeys all the rules and never overlooks an instruction; other two instances present Charlie in a collective subject *they*

(Willy Wonka, Garandpa Joe and him). The other three processes just show a child in need for protection:

gave Grandpa Joe's hand a squeeze; (p. 27)

put his arms around Grandpa Joe's legs; (p. 61)

caught Grandpa Joe's hand. (p. 69)

What follows is a summary of the occurrence of the main types of processes mental, verbalization and material action. Though other types (behavioural and relational) were also present in the text, their occurrence was very low as compared to the frequency of the first three types. On this basis, these processes were considered of little importance for analysis and, therefore, are not included.

Process Type	Sub-type	Frequency
Mental (93 processes)	Perception	56
	Cognition	20
	Reaction	10
	Affection	08
Verbalisation		69
Material action (88 processes)	Non-goal-directed	56
	Goal-directed	32

TABLE 1. Frequency of processes performed by Charlie Bucket.

Supported on the numeric information above, the following figure presents these findings graphically.
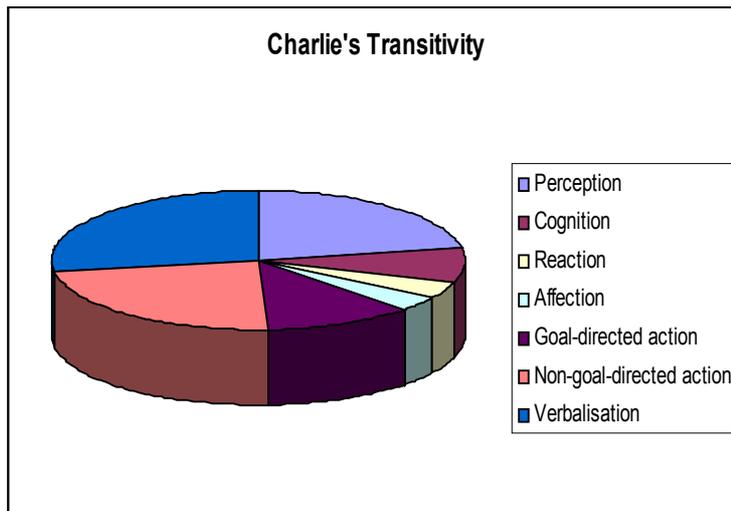
FIGURE 1. An illustration of Charlie Bucket's processes

In summary, Charlie's mimetic dimension (the character like a *person*) corresponds to what Dahl, on Willy Wonka's words, would call ***a good sensible loving child*** (**p. 75**).

4. Harry Potter's Character

Harry is introduced as the orphan nephew of the Dursley's. Though the family lives in good economical conditions, Harry's aspect is one of a poor child: he sleeps in a cupboard, wears his cousin's old clothes.

> *Harry had always been small and skinny for his age. He looked even smaller and skinnier than he really was*. (p. 12)

In his interaction with his family he takes the role of the deferent party, and a strong difference is marked between him and his cousin in terms of affection received, possessions, psychical superiority and behaviour. Harry's behaviour is contrasted with Dudley's (his cousin) attitude. Harry's mind style is one of a reflective child who wonders about his life and the events that occur around him. Not understanding certain events, he tries to find answers from his perceptions of the world. As a perceptive mind,

he makes use of all the clues to solve mysteries (and satisfy his curiosity) and act upon them. At Hogwarts, he usually intervenes in the course of events even though that might mean breaking rules and even getting expelled from school. At Hogwarts, too, he gets involved in a relationship of power with his antagonist Dacro Malfoy, who makes use of his wizard's status to provoke Harry into fighting. His new friends (Hagrid, Hermione and Ron) are of great relevance, since many of Harry's actions find support and help in their companionship. It is also worth mentioning Harry's deference to Dumbledore, which is supported on his respect and admiration for his authority and expertise, and to Professor Snape, supported on his authority as a school teacher. Even though Harry is a wizard, he seldom uses this power, and when he does at the beginning of the book, he is unaware of such power. In the end, it is Harry's wisdom, bravery and perseverance (all ordinary human virtues) what makes him a winner. One last thing needs to be mentioned here: the development of events change Harry's behaviour and attitude as a result of his understanding of a reality which was previously unknown to him.

Harry's transitivity profile constructs the mimetic dimension of a character that is both reflective and active. He is both a senser and an actor. An interesting combination of perception, cognition and action occurs throughout the text and makes Harry a *person*, like any other child of our times, who makes sense of his world and uses this experience actively. But it is also important to focus on verbalisation processes, since these outnumber the other types. Verbalisation process, together with cognition processes are the most frequent types in the text. It needs to be mentioned, too, that some of the verbalisations themselves carry the implication of mental processing as in

"Right, here's what we've got to do," he whispered urgently. *"One of us has got to keep an eye on Snape — wait outside the staff room and follow him if he leaves it. Hermione, you'd better do that."* (p. 177)

or in

"The keys in the lock," Harry muttered. *"We could lock it in."*
"Good idea," said Ron nervously. (p. 115)

One final comment on verbalisation is that I am reporting here only the clauses whose main verb represents this type, and this excludes instances of free direct speech.

Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of the main processes in the novel with Harry as the actor/senser. As in Charlie's case, and for the same reasons, behavioural and relational processes have not been included.

Process Type	Sub-type	Frequency
Mental (462 processes)	Perception	186
	Cognition	234
	Reaction	13
	Affection	31
Verbalisation		261
Material action (88 processes)	Non-goal-directed	211
	Goal-directed	172

TABLE 2. Frequency of processes performed by Harry Potter.

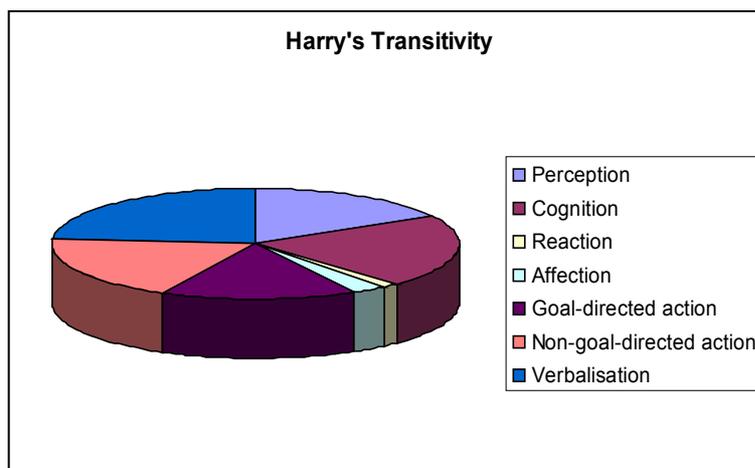These findings are better visualised in figure 2 below.

FIGURE 2. An illustration of Harry Potter's processes

In summary, Harry is portrayed like a child who is able to control himself on the basis of his mental processing. He makes sense of reality (no matter how weird it could seem), gains experience and skill and dares to act upon others (both with speech and with action). These virtues are finally rewarded as he represents what Rawling (in Dumbledore's voice) ***pure nerve and outstanding courage*** (p. 204).

For the purpose of comparing the discursive construction of both characters, it is worth examining both graphics together:
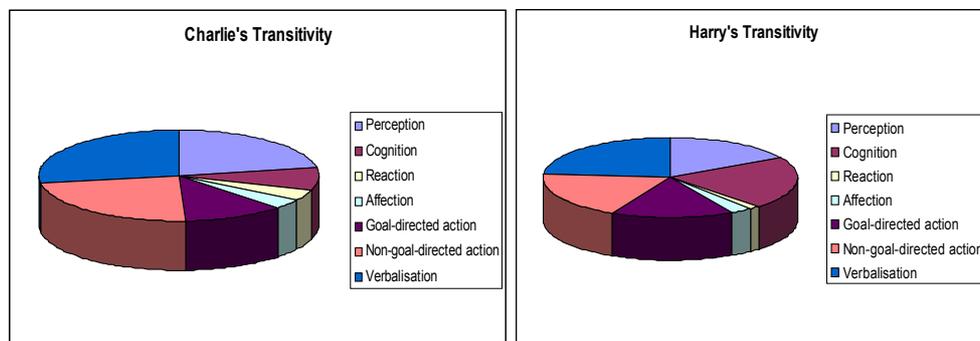

FIGURE 3. Charlie's and Harry's profiles compared

The transitivity frameworks derived from the analysis unveil certain similarities and differences between Charlie Bucket and Harry Potter. As can be noticed, verbalisation processes seem to be predominant for both characters. However, qualitatively speaking, I must mention the fact that most of Charlie's speaking is addressed to his grandfather. Harry on the other hand, establishes contact with many other characters in the story, which makes him really more talkative and even more influential on other characters. Then, there are material actions, and in this sense, also, both characters seem similar. However, an important difference is to be foregrounded if we further classify these material processes as goal-directed or non-goal directed. In this respect, I may say, Charlie's non-goal-directed actions are twice as many as his goal-directed actions. This difference in Harry's actions does not seem of much significance. That is to say, while most of Charlie's actions do not have effects on his environment,

Harry's actions show a balance between ineffectual actions and those actions that imply certain control on Harry's scenes. But the most striking difference between these two characters lies on the authors' representations of their heroes' mental processes. The contrast is conveyed specifically by the categories of perception and cognition. There is much more mental processing by Harry than there is by Charlie. In turn, Charlie's mind is strongly supported on his perception.

Charlie, *a good sensible loving child*, represents what many adult people of mid XXth century would have considered a model child: a quiet, obedient and considerate boy who didn't get into trouble, and who deserves to be rewarded because of his good bahviour. Harry, on the other hand, seems to represent the end of century's child: hyperactive, always asking questions, usually getting involved in power relationships, always trying to understand reality even though that might mean disobeying rules and being punished. In the end, his steady efforts to achieve his aims, his *pure nerve and outstanding courage* will be rewarded, and such rewards far overcome the difficult experiences lived.

5. Conclusions

Dahl and Rawling make use of different discursive strategies in order to depict their heroes, probably because model children were conceived of differently by the times these authors wrote their books. Even though society has changed since 1964, both authors coincide to present characters that were poor and unhappy at the beginning of the story and ended up happy with a different status (in the case of Charlie) and a different perspective of life as a result of experience (in the case of Harry). Framed within this structure of transformation, the characters develop differently as they behave differently. The discursive features found here by means of a delineation of transitivity

profiles, reveal verbalisation, non-goal-directed actions and perception as the salient traits of a hero of mid XXth century. On the other hand, the construction of the end of century's hero seems to be supported on verbalisation, cognition and a balanced action as the most relevant traits.

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