

“JACKIE KAY IN CONVERSATION WITH CHILDREN: A DISCURSIVE STUDY  
OF *THE FROG WHO DREAMED SHE WAS AN OPERA SINGER*”

MARTA FALCES SIERRA  
CORAL CALVO MATURANA  
Universidad de Granada

Abstract:

*This essay is part of an on-going discursive project about “The Frog Who Dreamed She Was An Opera Singer”, one of the four collections of poetry for children by the Scottish writer Jackie Kay. In particular, it aims at considering Kay’s type of conversations with the implied reader - the children - through her poetic voices. In this search, the discursive situation in the poems –poetic addressers, messages, and modes of presentation– is considered. As a result, three types of poetic voices have been considered: “I” speaking poetic voice, 3rd person omniscient voice, and “I” centre of consciousness voice. The data will demonstrate how a prominence of “I” children speaking voices allows Kay to merge her adult voice so as to directly address the implied reader. The figure of the addressee is foregrounded through explicit reference to him/her. Finally, other participants’ speech and thought is represented through direct speech enabling the voices to further define themselves through their words.*

INTRODUCTION

In the 2001 interview to Jackie Kay by Jean Sprackland, “The poetry class interview. Jackie Kay”, the Scottish poet puts forward the idea that, in her writing, creating poetic voices ‘go[es] through the same process whether that voice is a child’s or an adult’s’. She also indicates that she ‘like[s] to keep the conversation open between myself [herself] as an adult and myself [herself] as a child’.<sup>1</sup> (*ibid.*)

This explicit awareness of a poem as a *conversation* between implied author and implied reader – as Jackie Kay herself suggests in above mentioned interview – represents the stance for the analysis of discourse situation in her poetry collection for children *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer*.<sup>2</sup> This title is by itself illustrative enough as a point of departure: its discursive structure resembles that of a fairy tale, - a narrative structure with a 3<sup>rd</sup> person female character (*She*); *a frog* readers know about indirectly through an omniscient telling voice.

This paper is organized as follows. The first section includes data from the poems in a table which discriminates between a three fold column organization: a. title in the same order they are collected in the book, b. selected ‘addresser’ with a specific indication of his/her location within the discourse situation framework, and c. un/explicit reference to the addressee. Next section includes data discussion according to three criteria: addressers and modes of speech representation with a note on illocutionary forces in direct speech. The last section includes some final remarks.

## DATA

Table 1: Discourse situation in The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer

TITLE	ADRESSER (MODE)	ADDRESSEE
“The Hole Story”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a hole (character)	“You” explicit-reader
“Duane’s Fillings”	“I” center of consciousness poetic voice/a child (character) –The story of Duane (“he”)	“You” implicit-reader
“Mr and Mrs Lillac”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character) –The story of Mr and Mrs Lillac (“they”)	“You” explicit-reader
“The Christmas Burglar”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a Christmas tree (character) –“how a burglar broke in and stole the presents”	“You” implicit-reader
“What the Dog Did On November the 5 <sup>th</sup> ”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a dog (character)	“You” explicit-reader
“Jimmy Mush”	“I” centre of consciousness poetic voice/ a child (character)–The story of Jimmy Mush, the boy that became an idolatred	“You” explicit-reader
“The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer”	3 <sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voice– About “she”, the frog	.....
“Innit”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)– About “he”, the dad	“You” implicit-reader
“Sulk Pod”	3 <sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voice– About “he”, sulk pod	.....
“The Very Irritating Person”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)	“You” explicit-reader
“Pomegranate”	“I” speaking poetic voice – About “you”	“You” specific
“Black Ann”	“I” speaking poetic voice/an adult (character)	“You” implicit-reader
“At Home, Abroad”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)	“You” implicit-reader
“Ferry Tale”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)	“You” implicit-reader
“The Past”	“I” speaking poetic voice/an adult (character)	“You” implicit-reader
“Summer Romance”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)– About “she”, Sabah	“You” implicit-reader
“Word of a Lie”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)	“You” explicit-reader
“Stressed Out”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)– About “they”, parents	“You” implicit-reader
“Astrorat”	3 <sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voice– About “he”, “Astrorat”	.....
“Barbie for Life”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)–About “she”, Barbie	“You” explicit-reader
“The Sick bed”	3 <sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voice– About “it”, the bed, and “he”, the boy	.....

“Miss Always believes Christopher”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)– About “they”, Miss Always believes Christopher and Christopher	“You” implicit-reader
“Girl Footballer”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)	“You” generic-the girl + implicit reader
“No-Speaks”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)	“You” implicit-reader
“Tommy MacCormack”	“I” speaking poetic voice/ a child (character)– About “he”, Tommy MacCormack	“You” implicit-reader
“Chatterbox”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)	“You” implicit-reader
“The Living photograph”	“I” speaking poetic voice/a child (character)– About “she”, the grandmother	“You” implicit-reader
“Grandpa’s Soup”	“I” speaking poetic voice /a child (character)–About “it”, the grandfather’s soup.	“You” implicit-reader
“Matthew Dreams of Chinchillas”	3 <sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voice– About “he”, Matthew	.....
“Word Perfect”	3 <sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voice– About “they, the fox/the emu/the fish/the spider/the ram/ the mouse/the hen.	.....

## DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Poetic voices are now discussed according to their discourse situation in the telling mode of the poem. Following Leech and Short narrative categories (1982:257), poems have been divided into three groups with the view of differentiating how the poetic persona converses with the reader. a. 1<sup>st</sup> person persona; b. 3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient persona and c. centre of consciousness persona.

### *First person poetic voices*

This is the most representative group of poems. In twenty-two out of thirty poems persona addresses the implied reader directly. The inevitable empathy with the tellers’ perspective is then foregrounded by limiting the perspective to the one of the first person addresser.

The ‘I’ poetic voices in this collection are very varied. Two initial subcategories may be drawn between animate and inanimate addressers. Furthermore, within the animate entities category, human and non-human beings are also to be distinguished. Finally, human voices are associated with either an adult or a child voice. First person telling categories are summarized in table 2:

*Table 2: “I” poetic persona*

“I” POETIC VOICE			
Animate			Inanimate
Human		Non-human	
Adult	Child		
“Black Ann”	“Mr and Mrs Lilac”	“A dog”	“A hole”

“The Past”	“Innit”		“A Christmas tree”
	“The Very Irritating Person”		
	“At Home, Abroad”		
	“Ferry Tale”		
	“Summer Romance”		
	“Word of a lie”		
	“Stressed Out”		
	“Barbie for life”		
	“Miss Always believes Christopher”		
	“Girl Footballer”		
	“No-speaks”		
	“Tommy MacCormack”		
	“Chatterbox”		
	“The Living Photograph”		
	“Grandpa’s Soup”		

As table 2 illustrates children poetic voices are clearly the preferred choice in most poems. However, these first person singular addressers do not usually tell the implied reader about themselves. Two groups of poems can be distinguished according to the content of their messages:

- a) Instances in which the ‘I’ poetic voice tells about the way others see him/her as either an irritating being - “The Very Irritating Person” -, as an over talkative being - “Chatterbox” - or a too quiet person - “No-speaks” - . In all these instances the persona represents him/herself as an affected entity, both grammatically and topically wise.
- b) Other thirteen poems conform a group in which the poetic voice chooses to address the implied reader as a first person narration. His/her own experience is narrated as it is affected by other personal 3<sup>rd</sup> person entities: neighbours - “Mr. and Mrs Lilac”-, mother - “Ferry Tale”-, father “Innit”-parents together -“Stressed Out”-, grandmother -“The Living Photograph” -, grandfather - “Grandpa’s Soup” -, a summer friend, -“Summer Romance” -, a school friend, -“Tommy MacCormack”/ “Miss Always believes Christopher” -, a Barbie doll - “Barbie for life” -, a team of football players together with their fans while playing football -“Girl Footballer”-, honest schoolmates -“Word of a Lie”-, and his/her family -“At Home, Abroad”-. All these former entities constitute the immediate child poetic voice imaginarium - family, school friends and toys – and the ‘persona’ chooses to adopt different attitudes for them in each instance.

In a group of other two poems the perspective of an adult poetic voice addressing the implied reader through a first person teller is exposed – “Black Ann” and “The Past”. Both cases, though, constitute the representation of telling voices directly linked to a child experience. “Black Ann” addresses the implied reader as a mother who misses his son and works hard to get him back. The child here becomes an affected entity deictically indicated: *‘when I think of Missouri, I think of my son/Billy’* (lines 9 and 10); *‘when I get enough money, I’m buying back/my Billy’* (lines 28 and 29; emphasis added). “The Past” represents a self-portrait of a woman who remembers her childhood and imagines herself as the little girl she was: *‘The girl I was is out at sea’* (line 1; emphasis added).

Finally, there is a group of three poems in which the use of ‘extended personification’ allows the poetic persona to identify him/herself with inanimate and non-human entities: “The *Hole* Story”, “A *Christmas tree*” and “What the *Dog* Did on November the 5<sup>th</sup>”. (emphasis added).

### *Centre of consciousness poetic voice*

This group of six poems constitute the most elaborated category in terms of narrative structure, and one may feel it being the reason for its scarce number in a poetic collection written for children. In “Duane’s Fillings” and “Jimmy Mush”, a poetic character converses with the reader through a third person narration. In ‘Jimmy Mush’, the reader knows about his special powers to make people levitate while singing through one of the witnesses: ‘*Never pretended he didn’t see you or run/ away did Jimmy/ MUSH*’ (lines 20-22). “Duane’s Fillings” poetic voice is one of Duane’s classmates narrating the reader about Duane: ‘*Duane is famous in our school*’ (line 1), “*Why did you need so many?*” we say’ (line 17). The 3<sup>rd</sup> person narrative/1<sup>st</sup> person deixis split in these poems contribute to highlight the extraordinary behaviour associated to the child characters described in the text.

### *3<sup>rd</sup> person omniscient poetic voices*

In six out of thirty poems, the poetic persona hidden behind an omniscient poetic voice converses with the implied reader. This omniscient poetic teller establishes a ‘conversation’ with the reader through indirect speech, i.e., the narrative mode associated with fairy tales.<sup>3</sup> “The Frog Who Dreamed She Was An Opera Singer”, the poem which gives the title to the book, is included in this category. This group of poems do not address explicitly to the implied reader. They do also have ‘the teller’s voice’ – the implied writer’s voice– foregrounded in what is being told.

“The Frog Who Dreamed She Was An Opera Singer”, “Sulk Pod”, “Astrorat”, “The Sick Bed”, “Matthew Dreams of Chinchillas”, and “Word Perfect” are the poems in the collection which can be grouped amongst this category.

Third person omniscient voices are clearly different from first person poetic tellers in so far the former cannot be classified in subcategories according to the different voices who act as tellers. The story always reaches the implied reader through an external teller who has full control of the story.

These third person omniscient voices always tell about others, usually non-human characters, i.e., a frog who dreamed she was an opera singer and the audience at Queen Elizabeth Hall; the growth of sulk and the way it reached humans and animals affecting them; an adventurous and ambitious rat who wanted to be an ‘astrorat’; a boy who was sick and seemed to merge with his bed; a boy who dreamt about two chinchillas and, when waking up, realized that he shared features with them; or a hen who was discovering the secret of the universe with a quill pen while the rest of animals were using a computer. All these topics indicate a highlighted use of personification and the prominence of animals as participants – frog, rat, chinchillas, hen, fox, emu, fish, spider, ram, mouse, or foal, among others –. This observation contrasts with the prevalence of children/human voices in poems with a first person poetic persona. Moreover, the omniscient ‘teller’ becomes highlighted when the facts are to be sieved through human eyes. Speech presentation becomes particularly relevant since the presence of indirect/direct speech allows the cognitive and grammatical presence of the teller in

reporting clauses and tense selection. Conversely, the explicit presence of the reader as the addressee in this ‘dialogue’ disappears.

Speech and thought representation should also be considered with a twofold view. The identification of instances of direct speech will reveal how poetic persona lets other’s speech be exactly represented; furthermore, the analysis of illocutionary forces in former cases of direct speech presentation allows better understanding of frequent addressers’ attitudes in this category.

The use of direct speech diminishes the poetic voice’s control of the narration, simplifies the language and highlights the different characters. The poetic voice lets each character utter his or her own words, enabling them to characterise themselves through their speech. A representative selection of instances of use of direct speech is reproduced in table 3 below:

*Table 3: Discourse participants and direct speech*

“Mr. and Mrs. Lilac”	Mr. Lilac says, ‘It’s our land dear’/ Our land. You should be careful (lines 11 and 12)
“What the Dog Did on November the 5 <sup>th</sup> ”	When they barked that’s not fair, /Get us some more, /when I heard her say, /‘explosives are too expensive’. (lines 60-63)
“Jimmy Mush”	Everyone shouted ‘Hush, Hush it’s Jimmy/ MUSH (lines 6-7)
“Ferry Tale”	They cluck and stare and ask my mother, / ‘Does she have the English? Does she have the / English?’ (lines 11-13)
“Summer Romance”	fancy, the way/ she said ‘Fandango’ (lines 13-14)
“The Sick Bed”	<i>Mummy’s here, mummy’s here</i> said the voice in /the room (lines 18-19)
“Chatterbox”	‘When do you NOT talk?’ people ask me... (lines 6 and 7); Somebody once said, <b>THEY SHOULD CUT OUT YOUR TONGUE</b> (lines 29 and 30); <b>SHUT UP</b> , said the coarse voice, /and worse, <b>BUTTON IT</b> (lines 36 and 37)

There are other instances in which poetic voice reproduces the complete conversation; his and the other character’s words interact with other participants through direct speech lightly controlled by the poetic voice. Table 4 below illustrates these instances:

*Table 4: Conversation in the poem*

“Duane’s fillings”	‘Too many apples when I was little’, says Duane, without a smile. ‘That’s not right’, says Dwight ‘Don’t be silly’, says Billy ‘Nah’, says Jah ‘Sweets make your teeth rotten!’ (lines 19-24)
“Stressed Out”	I told my mother: I said ‘I’m totally stressed out’ She said, ‘Don’t be silly Children don’t get stressed’ ‘Like hell they don’t, I said. And she sent me to my room for swearing. (lines 15-20)
“Grandpa’s Soup”	I say, Grandpa, Grandpa your soup is the best soup in the whole world. And Grandpa says, Och, which rhymes with hough and loch, Och, Don’t be daft, (lines 9 and 13)

Finally, it is worth mentioning those cases of characters addressing the implied reader directly. As table 5 illustrates, poetic participants query, command, suggest or even ‘patronize’ the implied reader. The realm of modes of speech representation

expands to speech acts and illocutionary forces attached to these utterances. The degree of complicity with the implied reader increases. Similarly, the initial idea of poetic conversation is equally foregrounded.

Table 5. Poetic voice and illocutionary force

Linguistic tools	Function	Examples
Questions	Asking the reader for permission, for confirmation	You sure you want the whole story? / All right, you got the whole story ("The Hole Story", lines 1 and 2)
	Asking for feedback	You don't believe me, do you? ("Word of a Lie", line 52)
		It's important to grant for forgiveness/now and again, not too often. /Don't you agree? ("Chatterbox", lines 48-50)
Involving the reader emotionally	Involving the reader emotionally	Christmas! Would you believe? Christmas Eve, Eve, Eve ("The Christmas Burglar", line 29)
		Isn't that funny? ... ("The Past", line 2)
Commands	Advising – Threatening	Never go to the Lilac's house/ to fetch back your ball ("Mr. and Mrs. Lilac", lines 1 and 2)
		Next time someone offers you a wee bite of/ fruit/ think seriously for a second, then scoot" ("Pomegranate", lines 19-21)
		I warn you! Neglect her at your peril (" Barbie for Life") (line 10)
Involving the reader emotionally	Involving the reader emotionally	Imagine the day the first tongue crawled/ into the first mouth! ("Chatterbox", lines 14 and 15)
Statements	Asserting	I can calculate the distance between the/ planets before you've had toast ("Word of a Lie", lines 15-16)
Terms of endearment	Involving the reader emotionally	No, no, no my comrades. None of that. ("What the Dog Did on November the 5 <sup>th</sup> ", line 33)
	Involving the reader emotionally + patronising	because my dears, don't you see? [...] there's no contest, my chickadees ("The Very Irritating Person", lines 32 and 44)
Suggestions	Offering the reader the writer's control	PS: / You might suggest another name for Jimmy/ MUSH ("Jimmy Mush", lines 72-74)

## FINAL REMARKS

Having aimed at looking for Jackie Kay's type of conversations through her poetic voices, one may say that the analysis of data above has proved the devices by which that existing *conversation* occurs. Different poetic addressers, and modes of speech representation have also been examined with the view of establishing a discursive pattern in her poetry for children.

Specifically, a significant number of 'I' speaking voices as tellers was found. This prominence can be seen a sign of Jackie Kay's willingness to fuse herself as an adult and herself as a child, as she highlights in the mentioned interview. The author merges her adult voice with that of a child first person poetic voice establishing a direct conversation with the expected reader –the implied reader– children.

It could be argued that omniscient poetic voices are useful to tell about non-human (animals) or fantastic characters like the frog, sulk pod, 'astrorat', the sick bed, or the chinchillas. Jackie Kay does not blend her voice with these characters as it was noticed with 'I' speaking voices. Conversely, she places herself as an omniscient

narrative voice through which she controls the information and tells about these imaginary beings.

Amongst 'I' poems, in contrast to omniscient poetic voices who do not explicitly address the reader, different linguistic tools –questions, imperatives, statements, terms of endearment or suggestions– are used to explicitly address the reader. Here, the relevance of the addressee in children poetic collections is highlighted. Furthermore, all the poems in the collection, except for “Pomegranate”, are addressed in a first place to either an implied or an explicit reader.

Finally, other characters' speech and thought is usually presented through direct speech. Consequently, the poetic voice diminishes the control of his/her narration to reproduce the exact words of each character. This structure enables the characters to be further defined by their own words without losing the narrative control. This emphasis on the characterisation of each person in the story is also perceived through the naming of characters like *Duane*, *Mr. and Mrs. Lilac*, *Mugsy*, *Django*, *Nasreen*, or *Pili*, among many others.



<sup>1</sup> This idea also appears in the 2008 interview to Jackie Kay by Ramona Koval, “Jackie Kay: Scottish poet, novelist and short-story writer”, in which the poet highlights that ‘*I like to write poems that are crossover poems where they could be appreciated by a child or an adult*’.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Kay’s other poetic collections for children are: *Two’s Company* (1992); *Three Has Gone* (1994) and *Red Cherry Red* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> See Fowler, R. (1996: 102): “‘*Literary*’ texts, like all texts, do speak [...] dialogic structures both in the sense of structures through which fictional characters appear to interact, and in the sense of structures which determine the author’s or narrator’s relationship with his readers and his characters”.

#### Bibliographical references:

Fowler, R. (1996) [1986] *Linguistic Criticism*. Oxford: Opus.

Leech and Short (1981) *Style in Fiction: a linguistic introduction to English fictional prose*. London: Longman.

Kay, J. (1992) *Two’s Company*. London: Blackie Children’s Books, out of print.

Kay, J. (1994) *Three Has Gone*. London: Blackie Children’s Books, out of print.

Kay, J. (2007) *Red, Cherry Red*. London: Bloomsbury.

Kay, J. (1998) *The Frog Who Dreamed She Was an Opera Singer*. London: Bloomsbury.

Koval, R. (2008), “Jackie Kay: Scottish poet, novelist and short-story writer”, <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2008/2355124.htm>> (Accessed 21 April 2009)

Sprackland, Jean (2001), “The Poetry Class Interview. Jackie Kay”, in <http://www.poetryclass.net/inter2.htm> (Accessed 3 March 2008)