



Vagueness and communication problems in the adult-child relationship as analyzed on the basis of Roald Dahl's selected adolescent fiction

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Abstract

In this paper, language samples taken from dialogues between characters featured in two selected Roald Dahl's books – *James and the Giant Peach* and *Matilda* are analyzed within the cognitive framework determined by the concept of vagueness encompassed in the Radical Vagueness Hypothesis including Sorensen's sorities paradox. Additionally, the analysis of the chosen terms is based on their denotative and connotative meaning found in dictionary entries. The paper aims at proving that vagueness can be considered a literary device, which determines relations between characters in a fictional world. Consequently, it governs the reader's comprehension of concepts and meaning conveyed by the narrator.

Keywords: Vagueness; communication; concept; term; metaphor; meaning.

1. Introduction

The following paper combines the authoress's master's degree thesis interests connected with English children's literature with doctoral research performed in the field of cognitive linguistics. More specifically, it aims at analyzing language and dialogues taken from selected Roald Dahl's adolescent fiction within the cognitive framework set by the concept of vagueness. The authoress's main assumption is to show that vagueness can be regarded as a literary device, which underlies the development of dialogues by the narrator. Consequently, it determines and influences the reader's comprehension of a text including concepts which it conveys, be it directly or indirectly.

2. Brief description of the adult-child relationship in Dahl's fiction

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is one of the most popular children's authors whose books become literally worn out and consequently have to be continually reordered by libraries. Considerable though his success among young readers may be, he is far from being appreciated by critics and parents. His works regarded as "bizarre, unethical, sentimental and nauseating" (Hunt 1995: 307) can be found in publications about children's literature under the heading "Subversion and Juvenile Fiction". The key word "subversion" denotes the act of being dangerous by secretly trying to destroy established ideas so as to take power from those who are currently in control. Following this definition questions that pose themselves are: what and whose ideas is Dahl attempting to eradicate by means of his books? And whose authority does he thus want to undermine?

Judging by his substantial lack of popularity among adults, it must be their views which, considering the young addressee, concern the overall nature of the parent–child relationship and various subcategories into which it can be further divided such as the issues of happiness, control, education, shaping the offspring’s morality and gender roles. When it comes to family, Dahl deconstructs the traditional power relationship between the adult/parent as the controller superior to the child as the controlled. Grown-up figures of authority who are supposed to guard the society and contribute to its stability are either mocked or receive harsh treatment for their misconduct. For instance, in *The BFG (The Big Friendly Giant)* military commanders: the Head of the Air Force and of the Army remain helpless when confronted with the child-eating giants. But for a small girl Sophie who devises a plan to capture the monsters, many children would have been killed. As Sharon E. Royer points out, “by displaying and ridiculing their incompetence, Dahl communicates the message that heads of social institutions cannot be trusted to act intelligently” (ibid. 3). A slightly different case is presented in *Matilda* where a village school headmistress named Trunchbull instead of providing a role model for the community proves to be a terror not only to her niece whom she treats like a personal slave and maid but also to her pupils especially the female ones whom she considers “nasty little worms” and whose “squashing (...) is like trying to squash a bluebottle. You bang down on it and the darn thing isn’t there.” (M 2001: 80). Luckily, the five-year-old girl Matilda administers justice to this violent adult and chases her out of the village. Those in power are usually those responsible for the education of their subordinates. By reversing the power relationship, Dahl also undermines the educator and the educated dichotomy. Adopting John Locke’s terminology, children traditionally constitute the tabula rasa that has to be filled with valuable information provided by the wiser and more accomplished adults. The subversive Dahl books make the situation the other way round, which is why the writer has been accused by critics of “ageism, and of conveying the message that ‘the needs and desires and opinions of old people are totally irrelevant and inconsequential’” (Royer 1998: 5). For example, Grandpa George in *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* depicted as a childish powerless figure lying in bed for twenty four hours is far from being a sage whose advice could be sought by his grandson. Similarly, Charlie’s father is a menial worker unable to change his family’s bad economic situation, who spends hours listlessly adjusting toothpaste caps in a factory and is overexcited when his son first wins in a competition and then is likely to inherit a profitable chocolate company.

All the above instances illustrate Dahl’s negative depiction of adults’ attitude towards children achieved by means of the narrator’s portraying the behavior and appearance of the former. Yet, it should not be forgotten that characters are distinguished by the language or to be more specific by the idiolect that they use. Language, in turn, is the use of words which invariably denote concepts. The concepts emerging from a person’s speech constitute a verbal illustration of his views concerning reality and hierarchy of values. The problem is that as C. B. Grant (2001: 5) puts it “reality is perception-dependent, or in cybernetic terms, observer-dependent and therefore contingent”. Consequently, a linguistic phenomenon called vagueness arises and blurs our language.

3. Review of literature

Regarding the subversive far from mainstream depiction of the adult-child relationship, Dahl’s adolescent fiction with its verbal exchanges seems to be an ideal source of research data for vagueness. Nevertheless, there are bound to be raised some objections as to whether this linguistic term can be applied to fiction. After all, instead of hearing or rather reading a plethora of characters’ individual voices, there is only one voice – the narrator’s. Regardless if he is the triple o type (omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent) or first-person, it is still only a single text construction brought to life by an imaginative author, existing only on the pages of a given book and not in real life. Logically then, talking about vagueness here would be a considerable mistake. Yet, this state of affairs may change if it is assumed that vagueness is treated like a literary device. Obviously, some objections might be made by literary critics or academics stating that vagueness does not equal an anaphora, allegory or even irony. Nevertheless, if texts are analyzed and their interpretation constructed with regard to their rhyming scheme, sounds or metaphors – terms borrowed from cognitive linguistics and phonetics, then what constraints are there to exclude vagueness? Supposing it has finally been accepted as a literary device, questions that readily pose themselves are firstly: which linguistic definition of this phenomenon could be adopted and secondly: what function does it have in selected Dahl’s texts?

As Lozowski puts it (2000: 25) according to the Radical Vagueness Hypothesis, vagueness constitutes the foundation of categorization simultaneously connecting language and cognition. When it comes to words or signifiers as Saussure terms them, it is the factor underlying the semantic instability of a word’s senses (ibid.). In

the light of Sorensen's argument "vague predicates give rise to the sorities paradox" (Varzi 2003, 295). As Varzi (ibid.) observes on the example of the predicate SMALL, there are border cases of a word's meaning since both n+1 and 1-small are SMALL. What follows in communication, as Hawthorne and McGonagall (2008: 437) have rightly noticed, is that when speakers refer to a given proposition they can mean its various senses. To put it differently, while for example discussing the idea of EDUCATION one speaker has in mind something other than his interlocutor. This is illustrated in dictionaries which offer a network of a word's senses. One might ask, then, what governs our choice of meaning? In R.P. Cameron's (2009: 293) (in accordance with Lewis-Sider) view the choice of "(...) meaning is determined by use plus naturalness". Naturalness is understood as a speaker's intuitive or intrinsic preference for a given meaning, which is intertwined with the notion of superordinate and subordinate categories cognitively formed by an individual on the basis of his interaction with the extrinsic world. The process can be contaminated by the fact that the world itself is full of vague entities. An illustration that readily comes to one's mind is the lexeme PEAK as it is difficult to state at which point of a mountain it actually begins. Some academics such as Wright would discard it as vague pointing out that it is an observational term (qtd. in R. Weintraub 2004: 237) – "coarse", applicable by "casual observation", "rough and ready judgment". These views are undermined by Weintraub (ibid.) who highlights the intuitive not supported by any solid evidence nature of observability and claims that these terms are far from being tolerant. Lack of tolerance again points to people's divergent usage of words. If such controversy is caused by observational terms, then what happens when one is confronted with the vagueness of abstract notions like EDUCATION, MORALITY or HONESTY? According to Grant (2001: 2), if a speaker's language deviates from "the common horizon of the acts of all (rational) social actors, he is regarded as offending and is excluded from society by means of a range of pathologies such as: psychosis or schizophrenia. To transport these considerations onto the literary ground, the subversive Dahl intersperses his characters' conversations with such abstract concepts. Consequently, he resorts to vagueness in order to highlight the dysfunctional relationship between adults and children. His children's fiction is thus rendered unique in its aim to prepare child readers psychologically for the eventuality of being surrounded by corrupt adults in reality.

4. Data analysis

The forthcoming parts of the article deal with two selected Dahl's children's books and the issue of vagueness. The fifth part focuses on Dahl's *Matilda* and more specifically on the conversations between the eponymous heroine and her parents. The main topics taken into consideration are books, honesty and its opposite – cheating. The sixth part is devoted to Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach*. The analysis centers on the conversations between orphaned James and his legal guardians – aunts Spiker and Sponge. The lexeme of the main interest here is the adjective LAZY and the verb TO LAZE AROUND as opposed to the concept of work.

5. Discussion of data from Roald Dahl's *Matilda* and results

The focus of this part is on the poor communication between the 10 year-old eponymous heroine – Matilda Wormwood and her father. It also aims at answering the question whether such a state of affairs is caused by the vagueness of terms such as BOOKS, HONESTY contrasted with CHEATING and finally the noun CHEAT adopted as a form of address in their mutual verbal exchanges. At this point, it should be stressed that the heroine's mother is not taken into account due to the very few 'conversations' with her daughter that consequently do not amount to sufficient data for analysis.

5.1. Books

Literature constitutes an important part in Matilda's life. Unable to relate to her TV-loving and practically-oriented parents, the girl becomes a true bookworm who at the same time is a voracious reader, not a book borer. Reading means for her more than just a form of escapism. The activity has been caused by the child's insatiable natural curiosity and propensity for self-study frustrated by the learning deficiency of the immediate "not home" environment.

The concept of "home" as opposed to "not home" settings was developed by J. C. Stott and C. D. Francis. According to them, story settings may be different, yet "(...) they can all be categorized in terms of the relationship of the main character to two places: "home" and "not home" (Stott and Francis 1993: 223).

The former is associated with happiness: “(...) a place of comfort, security and acceptance (...)” (ibid. 223) where a child's rights to proper nutrition, freedom, leisure, education, protection from work and exploitation are not only recognised but also respected. An exemplary child's home should also meet a wide variety of his/her needs which are best classified by an American psychologist— Abraham Maslow.

Eventually, reading has evolved into a way of finding happiness in imaginary worlds far away from the reality represented by her dysfunctional family. In the empty and silent house, in the privacy of her room, with a mug of self-made hot chocolate, “(...) books transported her into new worlds and introduced (...) to amazing people who lived exciting lives” (M 2001: 15). Unfortunately, her father is not in favour of literature. Just as it is in woodworms' nature to destroy wood — the material for books, Mr. Wormwood is trying to dampen his daughter's enthusiasm for self-study. It is exemplified in one of their conversations when Matilda tries to persuade him to purchase her a book:

‘Daddy,’ she said, ‘do you think you could buy me a b o o k ?’

‘A book? he said. ‘What d’you want a f l a m i n g b o o k for?’

‘To read, Daddy.’

‘What’s wrong with the telly for heaven’s sake? We’ve got a lovely telly with a twelve-inch screen and now you come asking for a book! You’re getting s p o i l e d my girl!’ (M 2001: 6) [author’s emphasis].

The heroine’s understanding of the term BOOK clearly accords with the prototypical sense of “ a set of written, printed, or blank pages fastened along on one side and encased between protective covers” listed by the FREEDICTIONARY or “a written work or composition that has been published (printed on pages bound together)” given by WEBSTER. Far from being vague, both entries denote a referent including its physical qualities such as the material it is made from, the shape and method of production, which enables one to think of a ready-made gestalt with its function – reading. Quite surprisingly, the significance seems to elude the father, who instead of giving a short yes/no answer as a responding move triggered by the girl’s polite indirect question, forms another interrogative preceding BOOK with a derogatory attribute ‘flaming’. When the girl answers highlighting the prototypical reading function, he is still far from comprehending the reason underlying her desire. On the contrary, he proposes watching television which traditionally stands in opposition to the concept of BOOK which is one of the ways of acquiring knowledge, projecting the corruptible influence of television onto books whose peripheral senses are positive in nature and include ‘a set of prescribed standard or rules on which decisions are based’ (FREEDICTIONARY) or ‘the sacred writings of the Christian religions’ literature. Thus, from the cognitive standpoint, he reverses the connotations evoked by those (WEBSTER).

Undaunted by her father’s negative attitude towards books, the heroine becomes a member of the local library and continues satisfying her reading needs. Unfortunately, Mr. Wormwood’s hostility does not cease as shown by the following conversation:

‘Don’t you ever stop reading?’ he snapped at her.

‘Oh, hello, Daddy,’ she said pleasantly. ‘Did you have a good day?’

‘What is this t r a s h ?’ he said, snatching the book from her hands.

‘It isn’t trash, Daddy, it’s lovely. It’s called The Red Pony. It’s by John Steinbeck, an American writer. Why don’t you try it? You’ll love it.’

‘F i l t h ,’ Mr. Wormwood said. ‘If it’s by an American it’s certain to be f i l t h . That’s all they write about.’

‘No, Daddy, it’s beautiful, honestly it is. It’s about...’

‘I don’t want to know what’s it about,’ Mr. Wormwood barked. ‘I’m fed up with your reading anyway. Go and find yourself something u s e f u l to do’. With suddenness he now began ripping the pages out of the book’. (M 2001, 33-35) [author’s emphasis]

This exchange emphasises the fact that the father’s concept of BOOK runs counter to its traditional clear-cut definitions. More specifically, instead of regarding books as ‘a source of knowledge and understanding’ (FREEDICTIONARY), he perceives them as useless and corrupt, which is apparent from his usage of highly improbable pejorative synonyms such as ‘trash’ and ‘filth’ (the most prototypical ones listed by OXFORD PAPERBACK THESAURUS_are: volume, publication, novel or paperback). The former denotes either ‘empty

ideas or words' (FREEDITIONARY) or worthless or discarded material or objects; refuse or rubbish' (ibid.) which would both point to the father's belief in the uselessness of literature. The latter means 'anything that sullies or defies the moral character; corruption; pollution.' which undermines the [+ SACRED] characteristic encompassed in the umbrella of BOOK meaning. His usage of pejorative emotive vocabulary is accompanied by a violent act of tearing the book.

From the above analysis, it can be deduced that the misunderstanding between the daughter and father as regards the term BOOK does not stem from its supposed vagueness, but from its subjective or even distorted conceptualization by the parent who simultaneously tries to impose it on the heroine. If he succeeds, Matilda's need for self-actualization — "(...) the desire to become more and more what [she] is, to become everything that [she] is capable of becoming." (Green 2015) is bound to be frustrated. The father firmly declares that "you can't make a living from sitting on your fanny and reading story-books" (M 2001: 90). The quotation proves the man's shallowness and his inability to perceive reading as an activity of imagination. What particularly infuriates him is the idea of his daughter getting "(...) pleasure from something that is beyond his reach" (ibid. 33). On the one hand, he opposes to Matilda's ideological independence and unable to force her to accept his beliefs, wants to exclude her from the family life. On the other hand, he still finds something attractive in her way of thinking, which sadly is beyond his reach. Luckily, the above obstacles posed by the father fail to discourage her from reading.

Additionally, the way he understands and utilizes the word BOOK with the activity of reading unfavourably affects the notion of EDUCATION inextricably intertwined with them. Consequently, the metaphor EDUCATION IS DEVELOPMENT stemming from the prototypical understanding of the concept as 'the process of training and developing the knowledge, skill, mind, character, etc., esp. by formal schooling; teaching; training' provided by YOURDICTIONARY is subject to considerable modification. As a result, Mr. Wormwood's idea of EDUCATION replaces the [+ PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT] component with [+ CORRUPTION] and [+USELESSNESS], which clearly runs counter to the widely established one evoking positive connotations. On the other hand, one can try to justify him by postulating that EDUCATION is after all a vague concept and can mean not only some formal type of schooling (e.g. school or university) but also be limited to the sense of gaining knowledge through life and experience in a specific domain of existence like WORK. Hence, while Mr. Wormwood may think that '(...) All they learn [at universities] is bad habits' (ibid. 94); he is in favour of learning through working at his second-hand car service. In his case the metaphor EDUCATION IS SPECIALIZATION in one's line of work may be adopted. Nevertheless, since he aims at developing new methods of tricking his client, his concept also includes [+DISHONESTY] element.

5.2. Honesty and cheating

The misunderstanding between Matilda and her father results not only from their different concepts of BOOKS and EDUCATION but also from their conflicting views on morality. Such a conclusion can be made from a conversation between Mr. Wormwood and his son, which is witnessed by the girl. More to the point, the proud and conceited adult reveals the secrets of his successful trade to his potential future heir. As he explains it to Michael, the difficulty of selling second-hand cars lies in convincing the prospective buyers of the vehicles' good condition. On the other hand, the garage owner wants to make the biggest possible profit without investing in the repairs too much. One of his successful methods involves mixing a considerable amount of sawdust with oil in order to make the otherwise badly crashed gear-box run without friction and by connecting the cable of a speedometer to an electric drill so that it turns backwards at a tremendous speed. In this way, the mileage can be substantially lowered transforming even an "old dump" into an almost new car that "belonged to an old lady who only used it once a week for shopping" (M 19). Obviously, Mr. Wormwood is not troubled by any "worm of conscience" (YOURDICTIONARY).

While Michael is apparently fascinated by this information, Matilda is appalled:

'But, Daddy, that's even more dishonest than the sawdust. It's disgusting. You're cheating people who trust you' (M 2001: 19) [author's emphasis].

In order to oppose her father, the heroine makes use of the concepts of DISHONESTY and CHEATING, whose already powerful emotive content is strengthened by the adjective 'disgusting'. The former is an antonym to

HONESTY explained by WEBSTER as ‘an upright disposition; moral rectitude of heart; a disposition to conform to justice and correct moral principles, in all social transactions (the father’s second-hand car business is clearly an instance of the buying-selling transaction)’. The latter means ‘to deceive by trickery; swindle’ (FREEDICTIONARY). Undoubtedly, both of the pejorative concepts are characterized by [-MORALITY] and can hardly be labeled as vague. Nevertheless, far from being put to shame, the father retorts with an exclamatory sentence ‘ Who the heck do you think you are, (...) ‘the Archbishop of Canterbury or something, preaching to me about honesty? You’re just an ignorant little squirt who hasn’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about!’ (M 2001: 19), clearly trying to reverse the situation by projecting his lack of conscience onto his daughter. As a result, the ideological gap or rather chasm between Matilda and her father is further widened. To make matters worse, she decides to engage in a cold war, promising herself to inflict punishment on her parent.

5.3. Cheat

It has already been shown above that the heroine applies the term to her father’s business in its prototypical pejorative sense including the [-MORALITY] characteristic. Mr. Wormwood, on the other hand, uses its nominal form to mean ‘someone who is dishonest and cheats’ (LONGMAN 1992: 1218) in reference to the heroine herself. The context can yield here some explanation. Namely, the father asks his son to multiply some complicated sums. Yet, being a child prodigy Matilda proves to be quicker and gives the appropriate sum. The surprised man reacts with verbal abuse:

‘You little cheat!’ (...) ‘You looked at my bit of paper!’

‘Daddy, I’m on the other side of the room,’ Matilda said. ‘How could I possibly see it?’

‘Don’t give me that rubbish!’ the father shouted. ‘Of course you looked. You’re a little cheat, madam, that’s what you are! A cheat and a liar’ (M 2001: 48-49)

Clearly, even in the father’s understanding CHEAT denotes a dishonest person. While, it cannot be said that one of its vague senses has been adopted, it can be pointed out that the purpose of its usage has changed. Namely, Matilda appropriately summarised her father’s business, whereas contrary to the element of truth condition he used it to humiliate her. The fact that he resorts to disparaging terms illustrates his inability to admit that she is intelligent, which stems from his belief in the stereotypical inferiority of women.

6. Discussion of data from Roald Dahl’s *James and the Giant Peach* and results

This part of the paper concentrates on the book’s orphaned main character James Henry Trotter and his communication with aunts Spiker and Sponge who act as his legal guardians. The term under analysis here with regard to its supposed vagueness is the adjective LAZY and its verbal form LAZE.

Firstly, it should be noted that aunts convey their messages to the protagonist mostly in simple short directives in the form of imperatives such as for example: Aunt Spiker: “(...) Get back over there immediately and finish chopping up those logs!” (JGP 2001: 22) or Aunt Sponge: “Come over here at once and climb this tree!” (JGP 2001: 25). According to A. B.M. Tsui (1994: 116), these types of utterances “(...) prospect a non-verbal action from the addressee without giving him/her the option of non-compliance”. That is to say, the protagonist has no choice but to obediently carry out the issued commands, frequently without a single word of comment. Moreover, since James is made to perform numerous actions solely for the two women’s benefit, a more specific term — ‘mandatives’ can be adopted here. “Mandatives are directives by which the speaker attempts to get the addressee to perform, or to refrain from performing, an action for the benefit of the speaker himself.” (Tsui 1994: 127)

The uncomplicated structure of these speech patterns is accompanied by the simplicity of the message that is conveyed, which makes it possible to infer that the aunts regard the boy as their subordinate, useful only for obeying their straightforward uncomplicated commands. What is more, such utterances make the transmission of information one-sided. Spiker and Sponge do not expect any verbal answer as a response but rather silent obedience accompanied by a specific non-verbal action.

6.1. Lazy

In addition to the above remarks it should be pointed out that the women react aggressively when James attempts to initiate a conversation, unwilling even to listen to him. An example that readily comes to mind is the boy’s suggestion of going to the seaside, to which Aunt Spiker responds with verbal abuse: “Why, you l a z y good-for-

nothing brute!” (ibid. 15). She clearly evokes the sense of the word “disinclined to work or exertion” (WEBSTER), which is obviously pejorative and not being a borderline case – far from vague. Understood in this way, the term is highly inappropriate as applied to James who after working for the whole day expresses some desire for entertainment. Its usage would suggest that the aunt equals the need for relaxation that comes naturally after physical effort, with laziness. However, there is also a peripheral sense of LAZY pointing to the quality of “being listless, apathetic, lackadaisical or lifeless” (WEBSTER), which would accord with the boy’s exhausted state after work.

6.2. To Laze

On yet another occasion when the boy is crying due to increased effort after chopping logs, Aunt Sponge reacts with the suggestion of a brutal punishment: “Why don’t we lower the boy down the well in a bucket and leave him there for the night? That ought to teach him not to laze around like this the whole day long” (JGP 2001, 23).

The term here is used in its prototypical context as juxtaposed to the notion of WORK. However, in contrast to the pejorative LAZY, the verb has a positive denotation: “to relax and enjoy yourself in a lazy way” (LONGMAN 1992: 592). This meaning is used by the author, to give the aunt’s words an ironical tinge. Simultaneously, it emphasizes the aunts’ lack of sympathy or understanding towards the orphaned James and his needs.

7. Conclusion

In the light of the above considerations, it can be concluded that vagueness found in Dahl’s books caused by subjective understanding of some concepts poses an obstacle to communication between adults and children. One might attempt to justify the former by quoting Hawthorne and McGonagall (2008: 437-438): “Ignorance due to vagueness is rooted in the phenomenon wherein coincident things have slightly different semantic profiles”, which means that the misunderstanding is caused by the arbitrariness of words created by society, which was paradoxically supposed to contribute to better mutual comprehension. Consequently, adults are viewed as incapable of both instilling an appropriate system of values in children and satisfying their various higher level as well as lower level needs. Such a state of affairs changes the home into a not-home or a dysfunctional environment, which has been illustrated by examples taken from Roald Dahl’s books: *Matilda* and *James and the Giant Peach*.

List of abbreviations

- [1] JGP – *James and the Giant Peach*
- [2] M – *Matilda*

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