On Beyond Nonsense: Analyzing Nonsense As Dialect

In Selected Works Of Dr. Seuss

Since the publication of his first book in 1937, Dr. Seuss (aka Theodor Geisel, 1904-1991) has been celebrated and criticized for his contributions to children’s literature. The majority of criticism surrounding his work concerns its unconventional language. Educators in particular have disliked the fact that Seuss’s nonsense undermines prescriptive approaches to language education. Their objection to his work lies in its deviation from Standard English.¹ Seuss’s nonsense does not conform to ideas of “proper” English, and therefore, is regarded as more of a dialect, an “aberratio[n] of a correct or standard form of language” (Chambers and Trudgill 3). However, it is by deviating from Standard English that Seuss teaches children how language works. Experimenting with words, punctuation, syntax and other grammatical rules, he allows children the opportunity to explore linguistic boundaries. Breaking the conventions of standard language, Seuss helps them learn how to decode the various messages that can be communicated by written signs. Thus, while unconventional, his nonsense dialect invites children to adopt an analytical approach to reading, one that acknowledges their ability to question and create.

¹ In his book, Philip Nel discusses the reasons why educators did not like Seuss’s work. See p. 10.
Seuss’s nonsense can be regarded as an original dialect because it represents a subdivision of English that is uniquely Seussian. His verse, which is primarily spoken, is recognized as being “grammatically (and perhaps lexically) as well as phonologically different from other varieties [of language]” (Chambers and Trudgill 5). Seuss’s unusual turn of phrase has distinguished him from other authors and even inspired imitators. As scholar Philip Nel writes, “[his] particular style of verse is one of the most distinctive things about him” (16). Although distinct, Seuss’s nonsense, like most nonstandard dialects, is associated with a “grou[p] lacking in prestige” (Chambers and Trudgill 3).

Culturally, nonsense language is associated with children, a group that is often considered inferior to adults in both skill and intelligence. Indeed, the similarities between Seuss’s nonsense and children’s speech suggest that the prejudices adults have towards his nonstandard language are partly due to their assumptions regarding children’s limited abilities.

Reacting against this bias towards children, Seuss challenges the linguistic hierarchy that privileges Standard English over other language varieties. His nonsense upsets notions of linguistic superiority because it showcases the arbitrary nature of all linguistic systems. The estranging effects of his work are comparable to those of a foreignizing translation. According to scholar Lawrence Venuti, a foreignizing translation is when a translator of a foreign work purposely includes strange or foreign elements in the text to remind readers that they are reading a translation. The translated text “deviat[es] enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience” (Venuti,

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2 According to the *Oxford Reference*, literary nonsense has its roots in children’s nursery rhymes. See “nonsense.”

3 Linguists Don L.F. Nilsen and Evelyn Schroth both remark on the similarities between Seuss’s nonsense and child language in their articles.
“Invisibility” 11). Like a foreignizing translation, Seuss’s work also creates an alien reading experience because his nonsense departs from conventional semantics and grammar. His deviation from linguistic norms reminds children that the text they are reading has originated from someone else.

Exposing his subjective presence within the text, Seuss’s nonsense highlights the ambivalence of children’s literature. Children’s literature is ambivalent because adults write it for children, and, as a result, it contains a mixture of adult and child qualities. Most children’s literature, however, conceals this ambivalence. Adult writers mask their subjectivity behind child narrators and characters. One reason for this concealment is that adults use books to colonize children; writers “present the images they have constructed in children’s literature to persuade children that their lives are as adults imagine them to be” (Nodelman and Reimer 97). Seuss’s nonsense dialect, on the other hand, disrupts the process of colonization that occurs. Teaching children to read through his foreignization of Standard English, he helps them question the subjectivity underlying all language use, including the adult hegemony governing educational language practices.

**Spelling Out New Ideas For Seussian Studies**

The purpose of this paper is to expand upon existing linguistic analyses of Seuss’s nonsense to consider the ways in which it teaches children to read analytically. As a whole, Seuss scholarship is rather limited due to the fact that it has taken academics a while to consider his nonsense a topic for serious study. As of 2004, there were

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4 For an extended definition of ambivalence see Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult*, p. 249.
approximately seventy pieces of criticism\(^5\) and there has not been a sizable increase in research since. Of the existing scholarship, most concerns “politics, gender, psychology, art, folk and fairy tales, and whether or not Seuss’s books liberate the child reader” (Nel 11-12). There are only several articles and chapters that offer a linguistic analysis of Seuss’s work. Two of these articles, Don L.F. Nilsen’s “Dr. Seuss as Grammar Consultant” and Evelyn Schroth’s “Dr. Seuss and Language Use,” are referenced in this paper. Both linguists provide insights that contribute to an explanation of how Seuss’s nonsense functions as a dialect that foreignizes Standard English.

Three Seuss texts that clearly highlight the ways in which his nonsense dialect deviates from traditional language and literary practices are: *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955), *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* (1963), and *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Unlike conventional children’s books, these texts introduce the written word in a way that acknowledges children’s ability to comprehend difficult linguistic concepts. Helping children question the ideas they are reading, Seuss engages them in the production of meaning. *On Beyond Zebra!* is classified as one of Seuss’s “Big Books” because it is longer in length, whereas *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* and *The Cat in the Hat* are both part of his Beginner Book series, which is designed for children who are starting to read. All three books take an unconventional approach to literacy instruction and adopt a more creative outlook in their explanation of language and the way it works.

\(^5\)Nel gives a critical overview of Seuss scholarship and a detailed annotated bibliography. See p. 11-12.
On Beyond Prescriptive Prejudice

On Beyond Zebra! is a story about two children who are learning the alphabet and have very different perceptions of what it can be used to represent. In their discussion of letters, Seuss uses each character’s view to introduce a different approach to language education. Conrad Cornelius o’Donnel o’Dell represents a prescriptive view of language, one that emphasizes a correct way of speaking and writing. Through Conrad, Seuss introduces the conventional methods of language instruction most often found in schools. Standing at the chalkboard, the little boy demonstrates his knowledge of various letters by drawing them out, explaining as he does that “[t]he M is for Mouse./ And the R is for Rat” (Seuss, Zebra). The narrator, on the other hand, takes a more innovative approach to language education. Instead of limiting himself to the standard alphabet, he constructs his own. He models a descriptive view of language because he does not prescribe one linguistic system above another, but rather, describes the way language works.

Seuss emphasizes the difference between these views through the two characters’ dialogue. Conrad speaks in formal Standard English. His recitation of the alphabet sounds as if it could have come from a grammar book. He states with precision, “[t]he A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear./ The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare” (Zebra). Although accurate in its stated associations, Conrad’s economical listing of letters offers no real insight into the relationship between the symbols and the words they spell. The repetitive syntax gives his statements a prescribed air and makes them appear memorized. This, and the fact that his dialogue sounds familiar to conventional alphabet books, leaves readers with the impression that his ideas are not that original. Conrad’s adherence to a specific
formula reveals a superficial understanding of language. His limited view of the alphabet suggests that he does not fully understand how it works.

Conrad’s view of the alphabet is limited because he only associates letters with concrete concepts. Identifying the alphabet with aspects of the physical world (i.e. animals), he views language as a stable entity. Because Conrad perceives language and reality as stable entities, he believes that to know language is to know everything there is to know about the world. Having learned the alphabet he concludes, “[s]o now I know everything anyone knows/ From beginning to end. From the start to the close./ Because Z is as far as the alphabet goes” (Zebra). Conrad’s conviction that he knows everything illustrates how he unquestioningly takes standard language and the reality it presents for granted. Behind his declaration lies the assumption that there is only one approach to language and it is capable of representing all forms of knowledge. However, what Conrad fails to recognize is that standard language cannot represent everything everyone knows because everyone does not speak, write or think in the same way. There are as many ways of describing reality as there are forms of reality, but this truth is lost on Conrad, who is unable to think beyond the ideas he has been taught to accept.

The narrator, on the other hand, is able to associate written language with abstract concepts. He has a more comprehensive view of the alphabet because he goes beyond standard ideas to acknowledge the perspectives that lie outside of it. The inclusiveness of his attitude is reflected in his speech. Unlike his pretentious friend, the narrator uses contractions and colloquialisms such as, “[y]ou can’t cook’em like steaks,” “Gee-Whizz,” and “Hum-dinger” (Zebra). Sharing his linguistic knowledge with Conrad, he draws a new letter on the board and states, “[i]n the places I go there are things that I see/
[t]hat I never could spell if I stopped with the Z” (Zebra). In this statement, the narrator suggests that language is an imagined reality that is capable of encompassing both tangible and intangible ideas. To prove his claim, he proceeds to describe an alphabet he has concocted for his own amusement. He begins, “[m]y alphabet starts with this letter called Yuzz./ It’s the letter I use to spell Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz” (Zebra).

Fig. 1 “Yuzz,” from Dr. Seuss, On Beyond Zebra!

Seuss’s use of English to describe an alphabet beyond English letters suggests to readers the ways in which language conveys different perspectives, each of which represents a different view of reality. The fact that the narrator has to teach Conrad how to pronounce the new alphabet emphasizes the arbitrary nature of the relationship between linguistic symbols and their sounds. Nonsense words like “Yuzz-a-ma-Tuzz” are as foreign to readers as they are to Conrad, and reveal how words are given meaning.

Using nonsense to highlight the arbitrary nature of language, Seuss draws attention to the subjectivity inherent to all language use, including his. Aligning the perspective of his text with that of his narrator, Seuss’s bias is apparent because it deviates from convention. Words like “Yekko,” “Floob-Boober-Bab-Boober-Bubs,” and “Gargel-orum” foreignize Standard English and reveal the ways in which Seuss has
Tulloch

manipulated the text. His creatures, while somewhat recognizable, are strange enough to remind readers that they are the product of his imagination. The “Umbus,” for example, is a cow. However, unlike an ordinary cow, it has “ninety-eight faucets that give milk quite nicely” (Zebra). The main difference between Seuss’s unconventional cow, and a more conventional representation, is Seuss’s emphasis that his cow is a creation. While authors may use realistic depictions of cows to convince readers of the validity or truth of their texts, Seuss’s aberrant illustration is used to remind readers that language is an act of interpretation. Whether a cow is described as having four udders or ninety-eight, if it is found in a book, it is still the subjective creation of an author’s imagination.

Accentuating the subjectivity of language, Seuss acknowledges the limitations of his text. The standpoint of his book underlines the importance of recognizing the value of different perspectives. If he were simply to prescribe his view as the only correct view of language, he would be guilty of imposing a new standard onto his readers. Avoiding such hypocrisy, his nonsense alphabet does not attempt to confine children to one perspective, but rather, alerts them to the possibility of others they have not yet considered. The purpose of the narrator’s alphabet is not to prescribe new letters for Conrad to memorize, but rather, to show him what language can do. Their exploration ends with Conrad’s realization that, “the old alphabet/ ISN’T enough!” (Zebra). Seuss’s use of the contraction “ISN’T” illustrates the change that has occurred in the boy’s view of language. Unlike the beginning of the book, he now speaks in nonstandard ways. Instead of repeating the letters he has been shown, he starts creating his own. His knowledge of language allows him to use it in any way he pleases.
Like Conrad, children reading Seuss’s text are encouraged to embrace language’s creative potential by developing new ideas. His nonsense invites them to form their own opinions and interpretations. Seuss makes this invitation explicit at the end of his book. He designs an extra letter for the reader to name.

![Fig. 2 from Dr. Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra!*](New York: Random House, 1955)

Underneath the elaborate symbol he writes, “…what do YOU think we should call this one, anyhow?” (*Zebra*). Asking readers to invent meaning for his work, Seuss implies that going on beyond zebra means going beyond the ideas that literature presents. Where his text ends, the reader’s ideas begin.

Asking children for their opinion, Seuss recognizes the significance of their ideas. His nonsense reveals the value of nonstandard speech and perspectives, especially those associated with children. To a certain degree, Seuss’s nonsense actually imitates aspects of child speech. Linguist Evelyn Schroth writes: “Seuss takes a few productive bound morphemes such as un-, -ish, -ly, -ler, -est, and constructs vocabulary which though nonstandard is logical and meaningful, since these morphemes are part of children’s linguistic competence” (749). Examples of this creative vocabulary can be found in *On*
B*eyond Zebra*. Seuss uses the bound morpheme “ish” in his description of the creature known as the Flunnel, “[a] softish nice fellow who hides in a tunnel” (Seuss, *Zebra*). While readers with a prescriptive view of language might view childlike words like “softish” as incorrect, readers like Seuss’s narrator recognize the way in which these words demonstrate children’s ability to comprehend complex linguistic concepts. Understanding the way in which a morpheme modifies the meaning of a word suggests that children realize its grammatical function. Advocating for a descriptive view of language, Seuss’s nonsense encourages adults to look beyond these linguistic prejudices and the misrepresentations of children they create.

Seuss’s unusual alphabet lesson demonstrates how moving beyond these prejudices involves recognizing the value of different approaches to literacy instruction, including the educational value of children’s play. Like children, Seuss experiments with language. His linguistic play allows readers to discover the ways in which language works. When learning to speak, children often test new words in their attempts to make sense of them. Linguist Don L. F. Nilsen notes how Seuss mirrors this creative wordplay through his childlike spelling of different words (569). In *On Beyond Zebra!* words such as “swumpf,” “SeptUmber,” and “mos-keedle” all play on children’s uncertainty regarding pronunciation (Seuss). Hearing Seuss’s misspelled words read aloud, children can begin to question the relation between the sounds and letters that represent them. His nonsense illustrates how changing the letters of a word alters its sound pattern, sometimes changing the way the word and its meaning is perceived. Exploring, rather than prescribing, the connection between spoken language and written language, Seuss’s

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6 Schroth explains how Seuss’s nonsense reflects the way children test out word patterns. See p. 749.
nonsense helps children negotiate ideas of orthography by showing how the substitution of one letter can change the sound of the entire word. Playing with the spelling of different words, he helps them discover and comprehend the rules of language.

Applying the ideas he began in *On Beyond Zebra!*, Seuss created an alphabet book that offers a new approach to language instruction. *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* presents an inspired alternative to boring alphabet primers, the kind of which have been around since the *New England Primer* appeared in 1690. Even today, books like, *Playskool’s Beginning LETTERS*, published in 2010, could easily compare to the book Conrad read back in 1955. With phrases such as “M is for mop” and “O is for oven,” it too, offers readers little insight into the way language works (*Beginning LETTERS*). Avoiding the hackneyed methods of these texts, Seuss’s alphabet book does not follow a conventional pattern. His arrangement of letters and words are as unpredictable as the ideas they communicate to readers. Creating unusual associations, his nonsense invites interpretation and demonstrates to children how language can be used to activate the imagination.

Unlike conventional alphabet books, *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* encourages children to develop a deeper understanding of language. Rather than solely state letter and word associations, Seuss asks readers to form their own. He writes, “BIG A/ little a/ What begins with A?” (*Seuss, ABC 3*). Asking children to create their own associations, Seuss gives them the opportunity to compare their thoughts with his own. His unconventional answers, which include random lists of words such as, “[b]arber/ baby/ bubbles/ and a/ bumblebee” and “[t]he quick/ Queen of Quincy/ and her/ quacking quacker-oo,” offer children a more fluid picture of language because they showcase the variety of concepts
and perspectives it can represent (8, 40). His outrageous answers to his own questions encourage children to be creative in their responses. Instead of having children memorize the relationship between a letter, its sound and a word, Seuss implores them to apply the concept by providing their own examples. Children have to describe the rules of the alphabet as they discover them, not as Seuss prescribes them. His alphabet book encourages greater learning because it allows children to test their knowledge independently.

Helping children develop a more comprehensive view of language, Seuss’s use of alliteration and repetition illustrate the way the alphabet functions as a system of representation. Statements like “[f]our fluffy feathers/ on a/ Fiffer-feffer-feff” and “[t]ired turtles/ on a tuttle-tuttle tree” emphasize the distinct sonances represented by the letters “f” and “t” (46). These phrases also highlight the ridiculousness of language’s sounds. Hearing Seuss’s nonsense read aloud, children gain a sense of the arbitrariness of it. Neologisms such as “Fiffer-feffer-feff” or “tuttle-tuttle” stress that words are given meaning, just as nonsense statements like “[c]amel on the ceiling” and “David Donald Doo dreamed a dozen doughnuts and a duck-dog too” reveal how the arrangement of words creates meaning on a larger scale (10, 12). Exploring the connection between letters, sounds, words and the ideas they can be used to create, Seuss teaches children how the alphabet functions as the building blocks of written language.

Demonstrating how language is used to create ideas, Seuss highlights his own role as the author of the book. When introducing the letter Z, he reveals his narrator to be a nonsense creature. He writes, “Big Z/ little z/ What begins with Z?/ I do./ I am a/ Zizzer-Zazzer-Zuzz/ as you can/ plainly see” (63). Showing the narrator to be a figment of his
own imagination, Seuss draws attention to the ways in which the text itself is a construction that he has made up. He causes children to question the reliability of his book and the ideas it has put forth. After all, as the Zizzer-Zazzer-Zuzz illustrates, sometimes what appears obvious in the text is not obvious to those outside of it.

Readers are not always aware of the ways they are being influenced or who they are being influenced by. Exposing his subjective presence within the text, Seuss helps children think critically about language. His introduction to literacy not only provides them with a foundational understanding of the twenty-six letters and their sounds, it also provides them with a foundational knowledge of the transaction that takes place between reader, text and author.

**On Beyond Boring Books**

*On Beyond Zebra!* and *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* establish Seuss’s view that children are capable of comprehending ideas beyond that of prescribed learning levels. He understood that adult assumptions about children’s abilities often affect children’s desire to read and
reduce the rate at which they learn. For this reason, he particularly detested the *Dick and Jane* readers used in schools. These books represented a movement towards standardized, large-scale curriculum. Marked by basic syntax and boring dialogue, they made reading more of a chore than a joy. Because these primers were designed to ensure that “new readers would progress incrementally, in carefully ordered baby steps,” they often capped children’s potential (Zipes et al. 142). Their ineffectiveness led journalist John Hersey to write an article in a 1954 issue of *Life* magazine, expressing his concern for the future of literacy in America (Pease 103). Responding to Hersey’s article, and a challenge from William Spaulding, the director of Houghton Mifflin’s educational division, Seuss wrote *The Cat in the Hat* (103). Acting on his concern for child literacy, his book was meant to provide children with an alternative primer that would revive their interest in the written word.

Unlike the *Dick and Jane* books, *The Cat in the Hat* was presented from a subjective point of view. Written in first person, Seuss not only made the characters more accessible, he also emphasized the bias inherent within the story. The boy narrator does not appear reliable, and, as a result, readers are not sure whether to accept his interpretation of different events. His story is questionable from the start, beginning with his overstatement of the bad weather. He laments, “[t]he sun did not shine./ It was too wet to play./ So we sat in the house/ All that cold, cold, cold, wet day” (Seuss, Cat 3). Emphasizing the limitations of the inclement weather through his repetition of the words “cold” and “wet,” he continues, “[t]oo wet to go out/ And too cold to play ball/ So we sat in the house./ We did nothing at all./ So all we could do was to/ Sit!/ Sit!/ Sit!/ Sit!” (4-5).

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7 *Dick and Jane* readers were especially popular with teachers at the time Seuss was first writing (1930s-60s).
Although the narrator’s exaggeration is meant to convey the reality of his situation, it actually highlights his dubious logic. While it is true that foul weather might prevent children from playing outdoors, it does not follow that he and his sister must sit inside and stare out the window. Thus, before the text even enters the world of complete fantasy, the narrator already causes readers to question the reality he presents.

Discarding illusions of objectivity, Seuss creates a more dynamic story. The narrator of *The Cat in the Hat* speaks conversationally, whereas the third person narrator in the *Dick and Jane* stories uses formal diction and is detached from the tales. First person perspective allows Seuss to avoid dry descriptions like “Dick and Jane looked this way, and they looked that way” (Lacey 8). As a result, Seuss achieves a sense of immediacy through his narrator. Children are drawn into the story through animated phrases such as, “[w]e looked!/ Then we saw him step in on the mat!/ We looked!/ And we saw him!/ The Cat in the Hat!” (Seuss, *Cat* 8). While both the *Dick and Jane* books and *The Cat in the Hat* are limited in their vocabulary, Seuss’s text makes the most of it through fanciful wordplay. He works within word limitations to push the boundaries of language. Rejecting contrived statements like, “[t]his is fun,” he adopts a more innovative syntax and writes, “[i]t is fun to have fun” (Smith 61; Seuss, *Cat* 20). Seuss’s informal language and playful phraseology exposes his presence within the text. His subjective imprint creates movement in the story and makes it seem less manufactured. The unusual style of his book enables it to appear more personal, and consequently, more inviting to child readers.

Seuss’s subjectivity also resonates through his unconventional syntax. He often inverts sentences to maintain his rhyme scheme. Statements such as “[w]e sat there, we
two,” “her gown with the dots,” and “she said to us two” are slightly reversed, but they match the pace of Seuss’s verse and contribute to the overall sense of anticipation and chaos he builds throughout his book (*Cat* 4, 44, 62). The topsy-turvy nature of Seuss’s syntax mirrors the topsy-turvy mess being created by the cat. Words are repeated and thrown around in a sentence just like the objects in the story. This wordplay not only livens the dialogue, it also teaches children the function of various grammatical forms. For example, statements such as, “I can fan with fan,” “the sun is not sunny,” and “we can have/ Lots of good fun that is funny!” conveys to children that the meaning and function of a word can change depending on where it occurs in a sentence (20, 9).8

Reading Seuss’s book, children can identify the difference between nouns and adjectives such as “sun” and “sunny,” “fun” and “funny,” as well as nouns and verbs, like “fan.” Emphasizing the different ways language can be used to communicate meaning, Seuss draws attention to the ways in which he is using language to create a story.

The *Dick and Jane* stories also make use of repetition; however, their unoriginal arrangement of words and stilted syntax produce a mundane tone that contributes to the overall appearance of objectivity their authors try to create. For example, in the story “Fun in the New House” from *The New Our Friends Reader* (1956), Gertrude Smith describes Dick and Jane’s fun in the rain as follows: “Up the street they walked with a quack, quack, quack and a splash, splash, splash. Up the street they walked to the new house” (61). Like many of the Dick and Jane authors, Smith uses repetition to create a safe world where readers can anticipate the movement of the plot. The predictability of the narrative is meant to provide children with a sense of security. Seuss, on the other

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8 The linguistic term for this type of repetition is polyptoton. For a more extensive definition see Nilsen p. 569.
hand, uses repetition to create suspense. Unlike the safe world of Dick and Jane, the world of the Cat in the Hat thrives on uncertainty. When the cat first appears, the narrator states, “[a]nd then/ Something went BUMP!/ How that bump made us jump!” (Seuss, Cat 7). Choosing to emphasize an onomatopoeic word like “bump,” Seuss re-enacts the mysterious sound for the reader. His association of the sound “bump” to the action “jump” underscores the physical reaction one has to a loud bumping noise and enhances the feeling of surprise.

The unpredictability of Seuss’s text prevents children from having an impassive reading experience because it increases the narrative tension driving the plot. Seuss uses repetition to amplify the conflict that takes place between the characters. Recurring words and sentences do not lose their impact because they represent the escalation of the fish’s temper and the cat’s insolence. In reference to the cat’s presence, the fish complains, “[h]e should not be here./ He should not be about./ He should not be here/ When your mother is out!” (13). The cat returns the fish’s objections with his own. Unwilling to obey the fish, he responds, “I will NOT go away./ I do NOT wish to go!...So/so/so…I will show you/ Another good game that I know” (29). Through this antagonistic banter, Seuss fuels the growing conflict between his characters. He captures children’s attention by highlighting negative phrases like “should not” and “I will NOT.” The cat’s defiance, the increasing threat of the mother’s return, and the desire to witness the resulting trouble, keep the pages turning and children reading.

While engaging, The Cat in the Hat does not try to convince the reader that talking cats and fish do exist. In this respect, Seuss deliberately takes a more surreal approach to writing than most of the Dick and Jane authors. Unlike Seuss, they attempt
to convince children that the reality of their text is an accurate representation of childhood.

Fig. 4 “Who Will Help” from the *New Our Friends Reader*

(Toronto: W. J. Gage and Company, 1956 p. 60).

The problem with these stories, however, is that the life of Dick and Jane does not coincide with most children’s experience:

The world of Dick and Jane was the idealized image of white, middle-class America in the mid-twentieth century: father in a business suit, mother in at home in an apron, children at play in an emotionally empty, shallow, repetitious life (Zipes et al.142).

Presenting children with an idealized understanding of normalcy, the *Dick and Jane* books are a perfect example of the way adults use literature to colonize children. These primers were used not only to instruct children how to speak and write, but also how to think and act. Adults design books like these to “make [children] feel guilty about or downplay the significance of all the aspects of their selves that inevitably don’t fit the adult model” (Nodelman and Reimer 97). Unfortunately, one of the more harmful side effects of children’s literature, and the *Dick and Jane* books, is that they force children to compare their lives to a standard of reality that does not exist.
To avoid projecting his own ideas about childhood onto his readers, Seuss uses language to distinguish between the reality of his book and the reality of the child reading it. His nonsense exaggerates to the point of hyperbole. If children did not already find it difficult to believe that a talking cat could stand on a ball and balance a cake in his hand at the same time, Seuss makes the situation even more absurd by adding more and more objects. The cat boasts, “I can hold up the fish!/ And a little toy ship!/ And some milk on a dish!/ And look!/ I can hop up and down on the ball!/ But that is not all!/ Oh, no./ That is not all…” (Seuss, *Cat* 18). As shown here, Seuss uses conjunctions to make the narrator’s story less believable. The words “and” and “but” are employed to disrupt any illusion of reality. Just as the cat disrupts the quiet afternoon, so does the fish interrupt the cat’s fantasy; it literally “butts” in with a “No! No” (13, 36). In this way, Seuss’s nonsense embellishes to the extent that children begin to question what they are reading.

Unlike most authors of children’s literature, Seuss encourages children to question his text by exposing the ambivalence within it. He creates discrepancies in the text that expose disparities between adult and child perspectives. Linguistically, he switches from adult to child-like forms of speaking. His statements alternate from grammatically correct constructions such as, “Sally and I,” to grammatically deviant constructions, such as “the Cat in the Hat” (10). Content-wise, his characters also emphasize the ambivalence of his work. Together they model what scholar Perry Nodelman identifies as the, “pull between thoughtless, possibly subversive (and therefore childlike), self-satisfaction on the one hand and communally oriented, conservative (and therefore adult), understanding” on the other (*Hidden* 249). While the fish obviously
represents more of an adult figure, and the cat, more of a subversive child, the narrator represents the child reader who is caught between them.

As Nodelman points out in his book, *The Hidden Adult*, this pull between conservative and subversive ideas points to the didacticism present within most children’s literature. In their attempt to guide children in the “right” direction, authors often place moral lessons at the forefront of their texts. The *Dick and Jane* stories are particularly moralizing. The story “Who Will Help?” for example, emphasizes the importance of cleaning up after oneself. Little Tom comes to his sandbox only to find it full of other kids’ toys. Upon finding his play area messy, he exclaims: “Oh, my!...Look at all the things in here. One old umbrella and one ball! Patty’s old white rabbit! Dick’s little pony! Jim’s toy dog and Sally’s Tim! I must take them all out and put them away” (Lockwood 56). Reading the story, children are made to feel guilty about not picking up the messes they make. Even though the toys are not his own, Tom feels that he must put them away before he can play. Tom’s friends, who do not immediately agree to help him pick up the mess that they made, appear selfish. The text resolves with them realizing the importance of helping Tom so that they can all play together.

While *The Cat in the Hat* also deals with the idea of cleaning up a mess, Seuss addresses the issue unconventionally. He deliberately makes his moral more ambiguous. After creating a huge pile of clutter, the cat returns, saying, “I always pick up all my playthings” and then proceeds to “pick up all the things that were down” (Seuss, *Cat* 59). With the mess cleaned up and everyone unharmed, the narrator is left to consider whether or not he should tell his mother the truth of what happened. He reflects, “Should we tell her/ The things that went on there that day?” (62). The narrator’s indecision suggests that
there is more than one obvious answer to his question. In this situation, honesty might not be the best policy. If the boy tells his mother the truth, she might think he is lying and punish him. On the other hand, if he lies to her, she will probably believe him. From this perspective, Seuss’s book could be telling readers that it is okay to disobey their parents as long as they clean up any incriminating evidence.

However, instead of simply stating this idea to the reader, Seuss leaves his text open-ended. Rather than prescribe a moral to children, he asks them to form their own opinion. When the narrator is contemplating whether or not to tell his mother what happened, he asks: “Should we tell her about it?/ Now, what SHOULD we do?/ Well…/ What would YOU do/ If your mother asked YOU?” (63). Creating a moral dilemma for readers to solve, Seuss allows children the opportunity to develop their own ideas of right and wrong. They are left to imagine the narrator’s decision and determine the end of the story. In this respect, Seuss acknowledges that the children reading his book can think for themselves and are capable of providing intelligent insights of their own. He helps children actively question the content of his book by creating opportunities for critical reflection. Questioning the nature of morality, children can begin to understand the way in which it too, is subjective.

**On Beyond Ambivalence**

Creating a nonsense dialect that makes readers reflect on the text they are reading, Seuss teaches children to perform something akin to symptomatic readings. In Translation Studies, symptomatic reading involves locating “discontinuities at the level of diction and syntax, or discourse that reveal the translation to be a violent rewriting of
the foreign text, a strategic intervention into the target language culture” (Venuti, “Invisibility” 13). Foreignizing translations help people perform symptomatic readings through their emphasis of textual inconsistencies. They train readers to recognize that they are reading an interpretation of a foreign work, helping them detect the ways in which the original text has been altered or preserved. Looking for these evidences of translation, readers are aware of the subjectivity of the translator and the fact that their experience is mediated. While Seuss is not translating a foreign work, his nonsense is intended as a strategic intervention into child culture. His foreignization of Standard English not only challenges cultural stereotypes concerning children and their abilities, it also helps children recognize and question his presence. Interpreting his nonsense, they are made aware of the ways in which their experience of the story is shaped by an adult author.

Applying the strategy of symptomatic reading to On Beyond Zebra!, Dr. Seuss’s ABC and The Cat in the Hat, one can see how Seuss’s nonsense teaches children to read for ambivalence. Creating a nonsense dialect that distorts perceptions of Standard English, Seuss helps children learn to recognize the ways in which the subjectivity of a text departs or conforms to their own beliefs and experience. In On Beyond Zebra!, Seuss introduces two different approaches to language education, one that is culturally more acceptable than the other. Exploring these two different approaches, children are able to choose for themselves which view of language they prefer. Looking at the ways in which Seuss’s narrator challenges convention, they can begin to question the conventions that are imposed on them in and outside of school. Similarly, Dr. Seuss’s ABC also provides children with the opportunity to compare adult and child ideas regarding language.
Asking children to form their own associations in addition to his own, Seuss’s nonsense helps them recognize the different perspectives that operate through the act of reading. In the same way, *The Cat in the Hat* provides early readers with further opportunity to not only question the subjectivity of the text and the person who wrote it, but also to reflect on the ways in which they are influenced by the opinion of others, especially adults. Faced with an unusual ethical dilemma, children are able to recognize the ways in which morality is often predetermined by an adult presence.

Helping children read actively, Seuss encourages them to re-interpret the meaning of his work. Embracing the ambivalence of his texts, he welcomes the hybridity it inspires. Post-colonial scholar Homi Bhaba describes hybridity as “the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities” (154). Where children’s literature is concerned, hybridity can be interpreted as the productivity of ideas that arises from the coming together of two different groups, children and adults. *On Beyond Zebra!*, *Dr. Seuss’s ABC* and *The Cat in the Hat* for example, are specifically designed to produce hybrid interpretations that acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of adult and child perspectives. The distinctions Seuss makes between the subjectivity of his text and the subjectivity of his readers allows for a meeting of thoughts. For some adults, however, this hybridity is not a positive effect because it defeats the traditional purpose of children’s literature. If children are encouraged to think in a way that undermines the authority of the text, they will simultaneously undermine the adult hegemony it seeks to impose on them. Alternately, Seuss understood that the ambivalence of children’s literature is its strength, not its weakness. The benefit of having different perspectives...
creates a more dynamic and fruitful learning experience for the children and adults reading his text.

Seuss’s nonsense dialect encourages hybridity because its disjointedness creates illogical gaps that the reader has to fill. Children have to make sense of Seuss’s unusual language in order for his story to have a level of narrative continuity. His dialect often combines familiar words to create unfamiliar ideas that they have to decipher. In *On Beyond Zebra!* for example, when describing the handiness of the Nazzim of Bazzim’s pet beast (i.e. Spazzim), Seuss writes of all the unusual items its horns can carry. The list includes:

- A thread and a needle for mending his socks./ His tooth brush,/ a cup,/ 
- And two three-handed clocks./ And his velvet umbrella,/ His vegetable choppers./ And also his gold-plated popping-corn popper/ And a grasshopper cage for his favorite grass hopper (Seuss, *Zebra*).

In this passage, Seuss uses compound words to an illogical effect. The “gold-plated popping-corn popper,” for instance, is made even more unusual by Seuss’s redundant use of the words “popping” and “popper”. The ridiculous description highlights the object’s impracticality, causing the reader to question why the Nazzim of Bazzim takes it with him when traveling. Other examples of these unusual word combinations include the “Three-Seater Zatz-it Nose-Patting Extension” used to pet the Zatz-it beast (*Zebra*). Seuss’s invention, though foreign to readers, is comprehensible because it can be broken down into smaller concepts. At the same time, decoding and imagining its meaning requires the reader’s active participation.
Another way Seuss creates these narrative gaps is through his haphazard punctuation. His fragmented syntax produces broken thoughts that readers are left to connect. In Dr. Seuss’s ABC for example, when introducing the letter W, Seuss writes: “W...w..W/ Willy Waterloo/ washes Warren Wiggins/ who is washing Waldo Woo” (Seuss, ABC 53). Here, Seuss does not state the association for his readers. Instead, he leaves children to determine the connection between the letter on the page and the words of his sentence. Hearing the “W” sound repeated through alliteration, children begin to identify the relationship between it and the symbol on the page. Seuss’s use of ellipses throughout the book creates pauses that remain open to the interpretation of readers. Statements such as “G...g...G” or “i....i.....i” isolate letters so that children can begin to question the differences between upper and lower case, which, in many instances, sound the same when read aloud.

From a linguistic point of view, Seuss’s nonsense dialect is a hybrid language; it combines standard and nonstandard conventions, adult and childlike ways of speaking. In this sense, Seuss uses nonsense to represent the larger issues at work within children’s literature. Highlighting the ambivalence of children’s books, it simultaneously draws attention to the transmission of ideas that takes place through them. However, because Seuss’s nonsense dialect reveals the disjuncture between adult and child perspectives, children can begin to reflect on the differences that separate them from their elders. They can question why certain ways of speaking are “correct” while others are not. Understanding the difference between adults and themselves, they can start to identify the ways in which they are influenced by the subjective opinions of others. Whether it concerns how they should speak or how they should act, Seuss’s nonsense reminds
children that language plays a major role in their conceptualization of reality and their perceptions of themselves within it.

Raising these questions, Seuss’s nonsense dialect creates opportunities for dialogue between adults and children. His nonsense acts as an equalizer because it undermines the linguistic hierarchy that privileges one group over another. Disturbing the adult presence within his text, Seuss’s nonsense simultaneously disrupts the authority of the adult presence reading over children’s shoulders. In this way, Seuss’s text helps children hold adults accountable for their ideas. While statements like “[m]ost people stop with the Z” accentuate the limitations of standard language and the prescriptive view of language it represents, other phrases such as “[i]t’s high time you were shown/ That you really don’t know all there is to be known” directly address issues of linguistic prejudice and undermine the ideas of those adults who think they know more than others because they speak a certain way (Seuss, Zebra). From this standpoint, Seuss’s nonsense challenges conventional views of childhood and adulthood. His nonstandard dialect better reflects the diversity of his readership and is validating for both adults and children because it upsets reductive cultural labels, allowing for a freer flow of ideas.

Seuss’s celebration of hybridity makes it possible for adults and children to engage in edifying communication. Highlighting the ambivalence of his texts and the opportunities it presents for adult and child collaboration, his books form what Venuti recognizes as “heterogeneous communities” (“Translation” 491). Deconstructing prescriptive notions of language and the stereotypes they promote, Seuss’s texts become “the site of unexpected groupings, fostering communities of readers who would otherwise be separated by cultural differences and social divisions yet are now joined by a common
fascination” (Venuti, “Translation” 491). Here it is important to note that while children’s books are often co-read by children and adults, they are not all the site of heterogeneous communities. Conventional children’s books such as the Dick and Jane stories strengthen cultural divisions through their categorization of adult and child roles. Seuss’s nonsense dialect however, attempts to break down these cultural barriers by undermining stereotypes adults have regarding language and children’s abilities. In its foreignization of Standard English, Seuss’s nonsense is fascinating for both children and adults because it forces them to question the standard of reality they have come to accept.

As noted earlier, the educational value of Seuss’s nonsense has not always been appreciated as it is today. The Cat in the Hat, for example, did not sell well in schools at the time of its publication because many educators found Seuss’s unconventional language distasteful. Eventually, however, the book’s popularity with children forced many adults to reconsider their opinion. In its first year alone, “[t]he book’s average sales were twelve thousand copies a month” (Pease 102). Abandoning earlier prejudices, teachers began to see Seuss’s linguistic play as an interesting and successful method for encouraging children’s interactions with literacy. When reflecting on her experience, children’s educator Rita Roth writes, “[w]ith a less narrow view of what constitutes school language learning and a wider base of experience, I find Dr. Seuss more than a peddler of mere nonsense” (142). Indeed, Roth is one of many adults who now see the value in Seuss’s work. As she comments in her 1989 article, “he has become as common a part of elementary classrooms as crayons” (143). Thus, true to Seuss’s intention, The Cat in the Hat presented an effective alternative to traditional primers and changed the

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9 In his book, Pease describes how Houghton Mifflin lost the trade rights for The Cat in the Hat to Cerf because of its poor sales in schools. See p. 101-102
way many educators approached language instruction. Consequently, the success of *The Cat in the Hat* not only increased the sales of Seuss’s other books,\(^\text{10}\) it also led Random House to create its line of Beginner Books, which, under Seuss’s guidance, became extremely popular.\(^\text{11}\)

Although the *Dick and Jane* primers have now been removed from circulation, this is not to say that similar reading programs do not exist. There are still primers that take a conventional approach towards literacy instruction. For the most part, children literature continues to be marked by ambivalence “that does not celebrate its hybridity but hides it” (Nodelman, *Hidden* 256). In this respect, Seuss’s work continues to distinguish itself from that of other authors. This paper’s intent was not to adopt the same dangerous line of reasoning that prescribes one book as better than another or one language as better than another. Rather, its objective was to recognize the value of different strategies towards language instruction. Teaching children to analyze the language they read, Seuss, unlike other authors, looks beyond his own subjectivity into the mind of the child reading his text, in which he finds his match in creativity and intelligence. The advantage of his approach to literacy is that it develops children’s ability to think critically when reading a text, so that when they do encounter a book in which ambivalence is not overtly displayed they will be able to identify and question the ideas it presents.

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\(^\text{10}\) Pease provides figures for the increased sales of Seuss’s previous books. See p. 112.

\(^\text{11}\) Pease describes Seuss’s role in the creation of Beginner Books and their success. See p. 115.
Works Cited


