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# A STUDY OF LINGUISTIC AND NARRATIVE CHARACTERISTICS IN MODERN PICTUREBOOKS: IRONY AND UNRELIABLE NARRATION IN THE WORKS OF CHRISTIAN VOLTZ AND JON KLASSEN

*Maria Mamuladze (Corresponding Author, Email: mamuladzemaria@gmail.com)*

*Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Batumi, Georgia*

*ORCID ID: 0009-0006-8774-4118*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the techniques of irony and unreliable narration in contemporary illustrated children's books, specifically John Klassen's *The Hat Trilogy* and Christian Voltz's *Toujours rien?*. Through text-oriented analysis, we study how meaning is created against the backdrop of the tension between text and visual material, i.e. illustrations. According to the findings, the authors apply different methods: Klassen mostly uses minimalist, homodiegetic narration, thereby creating narrative unreliability and ethical ambiguity, while Voltz uses different forms of irony, such as situational irony and different linguistic registers, to disrupt pedagogical and general expectations. The study shows that these visual-verbal strategies create a dual addressee structure that questions the age hierarchy in the reading process. Ultimately, the ironic illustrated book becomes a site of epistemological negotiation that fosters the development of critical thinking, interpretive autonomy, and narrative literacy in both children and their adult readers.

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## KEYWORDS

Picture Books, Irony, Unreliable Narration, Verbal-visual Interplay, Jon Klassen, Christian Voltz

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## 1. Introduction

Modern illustrated children's books constitute such a broad, expansive, and complex topic that it is impossible to define them within a single framework; however, they increasingly go beyond a simple entertainment function, offering readers complex narrative and linguistic strategies.

Modern illustrated children's books by Christian Voltz and Jon Klassen use techniques of visual and verbal irony, as well as unreliable narration, to create thought-provoking, multi-level narratives. Picturebooks provide a special opportunity for irony, as the text can tell one story and the illustrations can tell another (Mallan, 1993, p. 33). Irony, as a form of humor, is particularly effective because it requires deeper interpretation and critical thinking from the reader.

Irony, in its classical formulation, involves a discrepancy between what is stated and what is meant (Muecke, 1969, p. 19). In narrative contexts, this discrepancy is frequently achieved through the manipulation of narrative voice — a technique that reaches its most sophisticated expression in the figure of the unreliable narrator. Although unreliable narration has been studied extensively in adult fiction, its operation in children's illustrated literature has received comparatively limited scholarly attention.

Children begin to understand simple forms of irony around the age of 5-6, although this is a complex cognitive process that involves two main stages: recognizing the indirect nature of the statement and then

deciphering the speaker's real intention (Hancock et al., 2000, pp. 3, 18). This is why humorous works entertain children and, at the same time, develop their thinking skills.

In Jon Klassen's work, there are frequent instances when the words and illustrations do not match and, in fact, tell different stories, creating the effect of an unreliable narrator. Such an approach, where the reader has to discover the inconsistency between the text and the image, makes readers active participants and forces them to critically evaluate the information. This method builds "cognitive flexibility" and "interpretive autonomy" in children.

Within this broader scholarly conversation, the present article addresses two phenomena: the deployment of irony and unreliable narration as deliberate linguistic and pictorial strategies in works by Christian Voltz and Jon Klassen. The central argument of this study is threefold: first, that irony and unreliable narration in these works constitute systematic, structurally motivated features; second, that their operation is fundamentally dependent on verbal-visual interplay; and third, that these strategies produce a distinctive double address, simultaneously targeting child readers and adult co-readers with different, though not incompatible, interpretive competencies.

### **Research Objectives**

The study pursues three specific objectives:

**To identify and classify** the linguistic and pictorial mechanisms by which irony and unreliable narration are constructed in the selected texts;

**To analyse** the role of the verbal-visual gap as the primary site of ironic meaning-production;

**To evaluate** the implications of these narrative strategies for our understanding of the picture book as a complex literary genre and for literacy pedagogy.

## **2. Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative, text-oriented methodology that combines structuralist narratology and multimodal semiotics. Rather than considering text and illustration in isolation, the research methodology focuses on the systemic tension between verbal and visual channels.

The analysis involved repeated readings of selected works, with particular attention paid to several aspects: (a) structural inconsistencies and semiotic confrontations between the narrator's verbal narration and the visual information provided by the illustrations; (b) lexical, syntactic, and modal choices that indicated epistemic ambiguity, evasion of responsibility, or self-justification; (c) structural regularities of disclosure, omission, and concealment of information in the development of the narrative; (d) the pragmatic and ethical consequences of ironic distance for audiences in different positions (child readers versus adult co-readers).

The findings from the qualitative analysis were inductively organized and then discussed within the theoretical frameworks of postclassical narratology developed by Booth (1961) and Nünning (1999). In addition, the taxonomy of word-image relations proposed by Nikolaeva and Scott (2001) was also used.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Unreliable Narration: From Booth to Contemporary Narratology**

In literary criticism, an "unreliable narrator" is a narrator whose story is not entirely reliable and trustworthy. Such narrators can usually be divided into two main categories: those who deliberately distort facts for their own benefit and try to mislead the reader, and those who, due to naivety, ignorance, or other circumstances, perceive events inadequately and, therefore, unintentionally convey the story incorrectly. The use of this technique in children's literature is especially interesting because it encourages children to think critically and teaches them that any story can be seen from different angles. In Klassen's books, unreliable narration is often revealed through visual humor and hidden hints in the illustrations, which draw the reader, especially a child, into a kind of "conspiracy" and make them complicit in the story (Klassen, 2016, p. 3).

The unreliable narrator, as formalized by Booth (1961), refers to the narrative agent, events, characters, or characteristics of the narrative, and the norms that are attributed to the implied author. In this unreliability, the narrator's intellectual, moral, or physical condition is often specified by the implied author, as to how the narrator may not have the necessary knowledge, misrepresent facts, or agree with the assumptions. This fundamental taxonomy was further refined by Nünning (1999), who focuses on the cognitive and interpretive dimensions of the phenomenon.

For the purposes of this analysis, it is crucial to distinguish between unreliability as a textual signal and unreliability as an inference drawn by the reader. Nunning sees unreliability as a fixed, inherent property of the narrator and argues that it operates as a cognitive construct conditioned by the reader's contextual and intertextual frames. This perspective model is highly productive for the study of illustrated books; here the visual channel functions as a continuous contextual frame that can systematically destabilize or directly contradict the verbal narrator's narrative.

### **3.2 Irony: Definitions and Typologies**

Irony, as a communicative and artistic phenomenon, is an integral part of everyday life, literature, and political discourse. Its study is a field of interest for several disciplines, including linguistics, philosophy, psycholinguistics, and literary studies (Lozano-Palacio, 2022, pp. 17–19).

A pragmatically formulated ironic statement operates through a two-layered structure, where the direct surface meaning serves as a means of accessing a hidden, figurative interpretation (Lozano-Palacio, 2022, pp. 13–15). If the interlocutor fails to recognize the contextual signals that signal this change, the ironic intention remains inaccessible. Accordingly, any comprehensive analysis of ironic discourse must take into account not only the communicative intention of the speaker, but also the active cognitive role of the perceiver (Lozano-Palacio, 2020, pp. 12–16).

Although irony has been used since ancient times, its systematic study and classification is a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the 1970s, a complete history of irony in European literature was virtually nonexistent (Muecke, 1969, pp. 20–23). While irony is conventionally categorized into verbal, situational, or dramatic modalities, a shared structural core unites them: the tension between what seems to be and what actually is. To explore this dynamic, Linda Hutcheon's (1994) framework is highly valuable; she repositions irony away from being a rigid textual trope and redefines it as an active process of generating meaning, which heavily relies on the reader's interpretive engagement.

Within the domain of children's literature, irony acquires additional complexity due to the divergent interpretive competencies of child and adult readers. Barbara Wall's (1991) typology of narrative address which distinguishes among single, double, and dual address provides a precise framework for examining these shifting ironic structures. As John Stephens (1992) notes, irony functions as a defining mode in crossover or multi-addressed picturebooks, enabling the adult co-reader to access layered meanings that may remain partially or temporarily opaque to the child reader.

### **3.3 Verbal-Visual Interplay and Semiotic Counterpoint**

Maria Nikolaeva and Carol Scott's (2001) taxonomy of word-image relations provides a comprehensive framework for describing the semiotic dynamics at work in selected texts. Of particular relevance is their category of "counterpoint," where words and images provide different, sometimes contradictory, information, forcing the reader to negotiate between two channels for constructing meaning. In ironic picture books, this counterpoint operates not only as a formal device but also as a fundamental mechanism through which narrative unreliability and irony are produced.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Unreliable Narration in Jon Klassen's Hat Trilogy**

#### **4.1.1. I Want My Hat Back: Cognitive Unreliability and the Word-Image Gap**

John Klassen's debut picture book features a bear in repetitive, minimalist dialogues with various forest animals as he searches for his lost hat. The narrative's main irony stems from the stark gap between text and image: although the rabbit categorically denies seeing the hat, the illustration reveals the deception when he was wearing it. This homodiegetic frame, focused on the bear, emphasizes the cognitive unreliability of the protagonist, as he fails to notice what is already visually obvious to the reader.

Jon Klassen's Hat Trilogy, which includes *I Want My Hat*, *That's Not My Hat*, and *We Found The Hat*, has been a hit with readers of all ages since its release (Klassen, 2016, p. 1). The main charm of these books lies in the dry humor and apparent simplicity characteristic of the author, although behind this simplicity the detailed illustrations convey often hidden and deeper meanings (Gallagher & Kelly, 2019, p. 21). Klassen's narrative style is distinctive in that the text and illustration sometimes tell completely different stories, allowing the reader to take part in interpreting events and drawing their own conclusions (Gallagher & Kelly, 2019, p.

21). It is this dual narrative and the discrepancy between text and image that creates fertile ground for analyzing the phenomenon of unreliable narration.

This ironic tension darkens considerably in the book's resolution. After reclaiming his hat, the bear delivers an over-emphatic denial when asked about the rabbit's whereabouts. The final scene depicts the bear alone, leaving the child reader to deduce that he has eaten the thief. Although this act of violence is never explicitly stated in the text, it is powerfully signaled through the rabbit's sudden visual absence, shifting the bear from a naive victim of deception into an unreliable narrator himself.

#### **4.1.2. This Is Not My Hat: The Evasion of Responsibility**

Klassen uses unreliable narration to engage the reader and interrogate the characters' ambiguous motives, transforming abstract notions of self-interest and transgression into immediate narrative dilemmas. (Klassen, 2016, p. 4). Each book in the trilogy provides a compelling narrative that makes children think about the consequences of immoral actions and develops critical thinking in them.

For example, in *This is Not My Hat*, the narrator is the thief himself, which in itself calls into question the traditional understanding of protagonist and antagonist and makes the reader wonder whose side they are on (Klassen, 2016, p. 4). Characters often try to avoid responsibility, which is one of the hallmarks of an unreliable, self-centered narrator. The depth of these books is also confirmed by the fact that they can even be used to discuss economic concepts such as scarcity, choice and cost (Gallagher & Kelly, 2019, pp. 21–22).

#### **4.1.3. We Found a Hat: Irony as Ethical Ambiguity and Omission**

The final volume of the trilogy introduces a layer of moral complexity not present in the earlier works. Here, two turtles discover a hat and, recognizing that it cannot belong to both of them, mutually agree to abandon it. While the verbal text establishes a harmonious ethical solution, the final illustrations visually disrupt this consensus. As one turtle sleeps, the other's gaze remains fixed on the hat, employing visual codes of longing and temptation. Here, irony operates by omission rather than direct opposition: the verbal track closes the narrative on a note of moral resolution, while the visual channel reopens it, suggesting that this harmony may only be temporary. This deliberate withholding of the narrative's closure functions as a subtle form of irony at the level of discourse.

Ultimately, the analysis of Klassen's *Hat Trilogy* reveals the function of irony and unreliable narration and how it affects the reader's process of constructing meaning. The verbal-visual element is not merely decorative, but represents a key structural mechanism for generating irony and unreliable narration. This strategy contributes to the formation of a "double address", which develops critical cognitive and interpretive skills in the child reader.

### **4.2 Ironic Registers in the Work of Christian Voltz**

#### **4.2.1 Generic Subversion and Situational Irony**

The complex and sophisticated use of irony characterizes the work of Christian Voltz, who is an outstanding author in this regard. In order to fully understand his works, it is necessary to analyze the specific "ironic registers" he uses. The "ironic register" refers to the stylistic friction that is created by the collision of two incompatible linguistic levels - for example, high and low style. This can be the use of a sublime, "epic" style to describe ordinary events, or, conversely, the adaptation of derogatory vocabulary to serious and sublime subjects. The effect of irony can also be achieved by a sharp change of registers, for example, when academic discourse suddenly switches to vulgar vocabulary.

Christian Voltz uses ironic registers and the strategy of their confrontation as the main tool for criticizing social norms, hypocrisy and established values, which goes beyond the goal of achieving a comic effect. This method makes the reader an active intellectual participant, who removes and analyzes the hidden thoughts embedded in the text.

Voltz's corpus of illustrated books is characterized by a systematic manipulation of general expectations. His texts often employ the conventions of traditional fairy tales or animal fables in order to subvert them through ironic substitution. Characters behave in ways that violate genre-normative expectations; narrative outcomes differ from the decisions that established formulas would predict; the moral or didactic telos of traditional form is either absent, parodied, or obscured. This general irony operates at a level of literary competence that necessarily encompasses the adult reader more fully than the child.

#### **4.2.2 Linguistic Register Incongruity**

In addition to situational irony, Voltz relies extensively on linguistic register incongruity as a stylistic mechanism to generate humor and distance. This technique manifests when characters adopt a speech register that is structurally mismatched with the mundane or simplistic reality of their immediate situation. In "Toujours rien?", this incongruity is embedded in Mr. Louis's verbal interactions with the buried seed. His interior monologue and spoken commands employ an overly formal, high-stakes register of scientific and existential gravity, treating the planting of a single seed as a monumental, dramatic venture.

This sophisticated, elevated language stands in sharp, ironic contrast to both the minimalist text and the crude materiality of the illustrations. While Mr. Louis uses a grand discourse of anticipation and rigorous cultivation, the visual track undercuts his linguistic pretension by depicting him through Voltz's signature assemblage of bent wire, scrap metal, and domestic detritus. The collision between the high linguistic register of the character and his low, fragmented material composition creates a profound semiotic dissonance. Through this incongruity, Voltz parodies adult self-importance and anthropocentric seriousness, turning a basic gardening task into a comic site of stylistic tension that appeals to the dual sensibilities of child and adult readers.

#### **4.2.3 Dramatic Irony and Character Awareness**

At the level of character and plot, Voltz creates situations of dramatic irony in which the reader has knowledge that is unavailable to the character-narrator. As in Klassen, the visual channel appears as the main means of this higher knowledge. An important difference concerns the affective register: Klassen's irony leans toward the dark and disturbing, creating a constant moral discomfort. Voltz's irony more often uses comedy and absurdity to produce a lighter and more energetic mode of double meaning that may be easier to understand for a child reader while retaining complexity for an adult reader.

### **5. Discussion**

#### **5.1 The Picture Book as Site of Epistemological Negotiation**

The analysis leads to one main conclusion: in Klassen and Voltz's works, irony and unreliable narration are the main structural devices that shape the reading experience. The reader is required to juxtapose different sources of authority, such as verbal narration, visual imagery, and an implied author, and to construct meaning based on the inconsistencies and tensions between them. This cognitive task distinguishes ironic, illustrated books from texts with a straightforward instructional content. Rather than offering a unified and authoritative picture of the world, these books emphasize the instability of perspective and the possible fallibility of narrative transmission, which, in turn, develops what Rabinowitz (1987) calls "narrative literacy."

#### **5.2 Double Address and the Politics of Ironic Meaning**

The strategy of double address used in children's books raises the question of the politics of irony in children's literature. If we rely on the view that irony is mainly encountered by adults (Wall, 1991), then an illustrated book that uses irony seems to further strengthen the gap between the interpretive capacities of adults and children. However, the works of Klassen and Voltz call into question this hierarchical view. In Klassen's "The Hat" trilogy, the illustrations fully allow the child reader to perceive the main ironic inconsistency, so that the observation of the gap is expected and the main question is already about its interpretation. Thus, irony appears as a call to interpretation, which is addressed to both children and adults.

#### **5.3 Linguistic Minimalism as Ironic Resource**

A common characteristic of Klassen and Voltz is their extreme verbal economy, which they use as an ironic strategy. Klassen's texts are characterized by a strict minimalism that creates an effect of apparent clarity, but at the same time contradicts the direct understanding of the text. The simple syntax and limited number of words focus the reader's attention precisely on what is not said – on the gaps that the visual part must fill. In Grice's terminology, this extreme brevity can be interpreted as a violation of the maxim of quantity (Grice, 1975). When the narrator says less than the context requires, he generates implicatures, or hidden hints, the recovery of which requires the active involvement of the reader. It is the process of drawing conclusions from these implicatures that is the mechanism that makes ironic emptiness fertile for interpretation.

### 5.4 Implications for Literacy Pedagogy

The study found that ironic picture books significantly help young readers develop critical reading skills. Specifically, when reading such literature, they learn to recognize the bias of the author's position, assess the credibility of the narrative, and accept the ambiguity necessary for interpretation. From a pedagogical perspective, the dual addresseeship of these texts, which addresses both a child and an adult at the same time, makes them especially valuable for joint reading. It is in this process, when they compare their own, often different, perceptions, that metaliterary skills are developed. These findings are fully consistent with modern approaches that prioritize critical understanding, rather than simply decoding the text, in teaching literacy from an early age.

## 6. Conclusions

This study shows that irony and unreliable narration in the contemporary picture books of John Klassen and Christian Voltz are not simply decorative or humorous devices, but represent fundamental structural principles that actively construct the multimodal reading experience. The analysis of Klassen's "The Hat Trilogy" and Voltz's "Toujours rien?" reveals how the authors deliberately create an epistemological and visual void between the verbal text and the illustrations. Whether through Klassen's minimalist, homodiegetic unreliability or Voltz's sophisticated use of situational and linguistic registers, these works subvert traditional, didactic expectations and place the authority of interpretation squarely with the audience.

Moreover, such structural oppositions of text and illustration create a complex system of dual addressees. By presenting competing sources of narrative authority, these picture books challenge traditional, age-based hierarchies of reading competence. The child reader is not excluded from the process of ironic meaning-making; rather, equipped with visual cues, he or she is invited to engage in a complex process of critical decoding with an adult co-reader. Ultimately, Klassen and Voltz transform the contemporary picture book into a dynamic space for epistemological negotiation. This suggests that early literacy pedagogy should look beyond simple decoding mechanisms and utilize such complex visual-verbal narratives to promote interpretive autonomy, cognitive flexibility, and critical thinking in young readers.

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