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ROALD DAHL'S INGENIOUS LANGUAGE PLAY IN THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Trisnowati Tanto
Universitas Kristen Maranatha
trisnowati.tanto@gmail.com
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Abstract
Roald Dahl is widely known for being one of the most creative writers, both in the ideas of the stories and the language use. His use of language is exceptional and tends to show some playfulness which makes the writing even more attractive. This play on language is in fact considered his writing style. What is worth noticing further is that playfulness can also be seen in the use of figurative language. This paper specifically focuses on the figurative language such as similes, metaphors, and personification in Dahl's novels for children: *The BFG*, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, and *The Witches*. Since this paper reveals Dahl's use of language play as his writing style, it belongs to Stylistics, the study of style. The paper uses a descriptive qualitative method. The data of similes and personification are collected and then analysed in terms of how they show the ingenious side of the writer in using language. The findings show that the figurative language used in the novels indeed makes optimal use of sound play and word play. Besides, the figurative language is also closely associated with the fact that the novels are intended for children.

Keywords: language play, figurative language, style

Introduction

Playing with language is something common for people to do on daily basis, and it is possibly done unintentionally. In daily life, everyone plays with language or at least gives responses to the use of language play. This can be so because, as in Crystal's (1998, p. 1; Playing with Words/Language, n.d.) opinion, language play is an activity that becomes a source of enjoyment. People definitely enjoy playing, including playing with language.

Playing with language involves language manipulation, by bending as well as breaking the language rules. By language, what is referred to here is all features that exist in language, such as "… a word, a phrase, a sentence, a part of a word, a group of sounds, a series of letters…" (Crystal, 1998, p. 1). Someone is said to break or bend the language rule when he or she takes a language feature and makes it do things which are not in accordance with what the rules say. However, since this is a play, the only reason for doing this is basically for fun.

There are various texts in which language play can be found, for example in daily conversation, campaigns and advertisement slogans or taglines, newspaper articles, comics, literary works such as poems, drama, and novels. Language play forms are even often found in second language teaching materials as well as in supposedly serious texts like sermons and speeches.

Language play is often used in newspaper article headlines, most probably with the intention of attracting readers, as shown in the following *The Jakarta Post* headline, "Pakistan's free lampoons "Mush and Bush*"".* The last two words in the headline, *Mush* and *Bush*, will most likely attract readers' attention since they are a form of minimal pairs which creates a pleasant sound effect. The word *Mush* refers to the former Pakistan President, Pervez Musharraf. It is not the normal short name of the former president's name obviously, but morphologically speaking, it follows the rule of forming a word, that is through the clipping process. This is cleverly intended to sound similar to the name *Bush*, which refers to the former US President, George Bush.

Language play forms have actually been detected since a long time ago. Julius Caesar's victory slogan, *veni vidi vici* ("I came, I saw, I conquered") for instance, is undoubtedly easy to remember and attractive, not only because it is short, but also because the three words have the same number of syllables with the same initial consonant sound /v/ and the same final vowel sound /ɪ/ so that when the slogan is read aloud, the rhyme and rhythm are beautiful.

Another example is Dwight D. Eisenhower's well known presidential campaign slogan, *I like Ike.* This slogan is a very effective form of language play as it contains the same diphthong sound [aɪ] in each of the three words. Besides, they are all one-syllable words with the last two words perfectly rhyming (*like ~ Ike*). In this case, there is a form of exploitation of a particular thing, which is in this case a sound repetition.

All the examples above show how language play is used in everyday life. If connected with the purpose of making the messages appear more beautiful and attractive, an advertisement or a campaign slogan containing language play is expected to make people who receive the messages attracted and hopefully persuaded more to agree with the idea or the service or product sold. If the text containing language play is a newspaper headline, it is expected that many people will be interested in reading the article. Thus, roughly concluded, it can be said that the functions of language play found in texts in everyday life are those related to aesthetics and persuasion.

Besides in everyday life, language play forms can also be found in literary texts, such as novels or poems. This means that the writer has to be able to manipulate the language in such a way that the writing can be creatively interesting. To be able to achieve this, Leech (1991, p. 23) mentions that a writer has to "escape from banality". In this case, a writer needs to exploit language in an outstanding way, by using it in ways that are different from how other people use it so much so that readers will be able to detect that there is something "wrong" with it, or what is known in Stylistics as "foregrounding" (Wales, 2001, pp. 181–182).

This shows that language play demands a high language competence level from a writer; a writer is required to have a good level of creativity. The use of language play shows creativity, which then proves a higher competence level than

just using the language accurately according to the rules. They have to first fully understand how the linguistic features work or what the linguistic rules are before trying to exploit the rules in terms of breaking or bending them in order to make them look more interesting. This is for sure not a simple thing to do; that's why writers with this skill deserve high appreciation (Wijana, 2004; Tanto, 2010).

Roald Dahl (1916-1990) is a British writer is one of the few writers who are witty with the language use, in which he often deviates from the norms. This makes his works unique, attractive and liked by many people. Another reason for his popularity is because his works are indeed good and able to explore children's imagination and creativity (Nodelman & Reimer, 2003, p. 124). This paper will focus more on Dahl's use of figurative language in his three children's novels, *The BFG*, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, and *The Witches* which can also be regarded as Dahl's style of writing.

The analysis belongs to Stylistics, which is "the study of style … defined as the analysis of distinctive expressions in language and the description of its purpose and effect" (Verdonk, 2002, p. 4; McArthur, 1996, p. 914; Chapman in Fakuade, 1998; Turner, 1988; Widdowson, 2000, p. 4). Style is further defined as "linguistic characteristics of a particular text" (Leech, 1981, p. 12; Crystal & Davy, 1980, p. 54). In analyzing a text, what needs to be paid attention to are the type, the way in which language is used in the text, and the writer's intention or reason for choosing a certain style. Moreover, Stylistics deals with literary appreciation and linguistic description in order to get the aesthetic function as well as linguistic evidence (Leech, 1981, p. 13).

Verdonk (2002, p. 6) comments that in making a stylistic analysis, the focus will not be on every form and structure in the text, but more on those elements which stand out in it. This is due to the fact that those elements "hold a promise of stylistic relevance with the reader's or listener's interest or emotions" (Verdonk, 2002, p. 6).

In Stylistics the psychological effect is called foregrounding, a term which is borrowed from the visual arts. Foregrounded elements often include "a patterning of parallelism in a text's typography, sounds, word choices, and grammar or sentence structure" (Verdonk, 2002, p. 6). Other potential markers are repetitions of "some linguistic element, and deviations from the rules of language in general or from the style we expect in a particular text type or content" (Verdonk, 2002, p. 6).

The research is significant as it can elevate the value of language play, which at the moment is probably not considered serious enough to deserve people's attention. It can also encourage people to appreciate the writers more as language play requires an ingenious and creative skill. Besides, the research will describe another function of language which many people are not aware of yet; it is not only a communication function, but language also has a ludic or playful function (Crystal, 1998, p. 1).

The research has some limitations as it only analyses the use of language play in Roald Dahl's three novels for children, *The BFG*, *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*, and *The Witches*. It will be better if the research can be extended and have more data sources so as to get Dahl's writing style more accurately. It will even be much better if the research is expanded to more various writers who use

language play in the writings so that the ludic function originating from the use of language play can be elaborated more thoroughly as well.

Language Play

Play is generally understood to be a very broad subject and there are so many kinds of play spanning over time and place. Play can be rule-free, but it can also be governed by complicated rules. There are five basic criteria of play: purposeless, voluntary, outside the ordinary, fun, and focused by rules (Eberle, 2013, p. 214; Warner, 2004).

Interestingly, these criteria can be applied in language play as well, confirming the notion that language play is indeed a kind of play in the normal sense. Crystal (1998, p. 1) straightforwardly states that the only purpose of doing language play is for fun. As for the rules of doing language play, he describes it in his definition of language play, that playing with language should involve manipulation of the language rules by bending and breaking them. The definition also informs us that all features of language – from letters, sounds, words, phrases, sentences, parts of words – can be the source of the language manipulation (Crystal, 1998, p. 1). Furthermore, despite its chief goal of enjoyment, language play can actually be applied to something as serious as language learning for children, which is said to be a kind of applied ludic linguistics (Crystal, 1998, p. 218).

Another linguist, Cook (2000, p. 5) complements Crystal's definition of language play by stating that playing with language can also mean exploiting the language and that language play is to be exploited to our advantage in many areas of human activity, including language learning. This particular opinion is in line with Crystal's that language play is effective for children in learning a language. Besides, both linguists agree that language play equals to linguistic creativity.

A writer can be said to use language creatively if all possibilities existing in language are used in an original way and if all other possibilities in language which do not exist before are invented (Leech, 1991, p. 24). These two types of creativity are called originality and inventiveness. This kind of creativity makes it possible for writers to have everything a language has, whether it is connected with Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics, Graphology, and also Typography (Crystal, 1998, p. 1).

A similar topic on the use of figures of speech is done by Suarez-Toste in his article "A Slightly Obscene Wine: Premodification and Personification in Roald Dahl's *Taste*". This article discusses the style of character portrayal in Dahl's story, *Taste*. He puts his focus on the style of personification of the object that is the central of the story—a bottle of wine—and the portrayal of the human characters. Suarez-Toste asserts that the process of personification of the wine has a reversal effect on the portrayal of the human characters, which he describes as being objectified throughout the story.

Since the focus is the description of both the wine and the characters, Suarez-Toste observes the use of adjectives and adverbs in the story, which he describes as having been used "mischievously" by Dahl. According to Suarez-Toste, it is common for a real wine-taster to use personification when describing the wine that they taste; therefore, what Dahl does in his story reflects real life. In addition to this, Suarez-Toste mentions that the personification of the wine follows a general metaphorical schema that treats wine as a living creature. From his

analysis, it is found that when describing the wine, Dahl uses various adjectives that have positive meaning.

A different tone is used in Dahl's description of the human character. Suarez-Toste points out that while Dahl keeps the wine in a positive light by using adjectives with positive meaning, his depiction of the human characters, especially the character named Richard Pratt, is quite the opposite. The character is portrayed through his physical appearance as well as gestures, from which it can be drawn that the character is not a nice person. Suarez-Toste asserts that Dahl manages to create a vivid image of the character without having to use many adjectives.

The conclusion part of this analysis aims to make a connection between the portrayal of the wine and that of the characters. Suarez-Toste also draws a connection from the story to real life and culture by mentioning that the narrator of the story helps to make the act of wine-tasting more acceptable for people in general instead of something that can only be enjoyed by affluent people.

Even though Suarez-Toste manages to describe the different portrayals by analyzing the diction of the story, he does not utilize other stylistic devices that may help deepen his analysis. The article is a very good read for people who want to understand more about how different choices of words affect the portrayal of something or someone in the readers' minds; however, for those who are looking for a deeper understanding on how linguistic aspects bring forth the style of the writer this article may not satisfy their curiosity. The strongest part of the analysis is the examination of the wine portrayal as Suarez-Toste is very thorough in describing everything; meanwhile, the weakest part of the analysis is actually the conclusion, since until the end there is no clear statement on the style of Dahl's writing.

While Suarez-Toste's paper discusses how some linguistic aspects of the story support the portrayal of the important points of the story, this paper focuses more on the use of language play in the figurative language found in Dahl's novels, which leads to Dahl's signature as a writer. Figurative language itself is interesting to analyze as it is an indirect way of communicating something which might have been communicated directly. Consequently, according to Sadock (1993, p. 47), there must be something more in the effect that the writer intends to convey through this nonliteral form.

Figurative Language

Figurative language is language in which figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, and personification occur (Figurative Language, n.d.). Furthermore, figurative language contains figurative meaning, which is the extension of the meaning of a word, or sometimes called metaphorical meaning (Wales, 2001, p. 175). In language play, the words used in the phrase can be replaced so as to produce something creatively uncommon. For example, in *The BFG*, the idiom *disappearing into thin air*, which figuratively means disappearing mysteriously, is changed into *disappearing into thick ear*, making it have a literal meaning as it refers to the Big Friendly Giant's gigantic ear.

A simile is a figure of speech in which "… two concepts are imaginatively and descriptively compared: e.g. as white as a sheet" (Wales, 2001, p. 421). The definition is made more complete by Harris (2013), who states that a simile is a form of comparison between two things that are not the same but similar. In the

construction a simile is usually introduced by such conjunctions as *like*, *as*, *as though*, *as if*, *as … as*, *so … as*. Besides, a simile can also use words like *resembling* and *suggesting* (Leech & Short, 1994, p. 88). For example, in the simile *the lamb is as white as snow*, there are two concepts involved: a lamb and snow, which are connected with the conjunction *as … as*.

A simile which is a form of language play can be seen for example in the sermon titled *God is Beautiful, Man*, written by Carl Burke, when it compares two unusual things like man and hamburger filling. According to Burke, if the filling already gets rotten, it cannot be made to taste good again: *You are like the stuff you put on hamburgers. If it tastes rotten, you can't make it taste good again. So it's no good and gets thrown in the junk bucket and the city dump guys haul it away* (Crystal, 1998, p. 155). Another example is when a writer, in describing the moustache of a man, says: *The driver was an oldish man with a thick black drooping moustache. The moustache hung over his mouth like the roots of some plant* (Dahl, 2007, p. 182).

Another figure of speech found in the novels is personification, which is also a comparison form between two things, in which "...an inanimate object, animate non-human, or abstract quality is given human attributes (Wales, 2001, p. 349), for example *I can't get the fuel pump back on because this bolt is being uncooperative* (Harris, 2013). When uncommon things are used in the personification, language play occurs, for example the whiskers of a mouse are described to be *jumping up and down like crazy* as the mouse speaks (Dahl, 2007, p. 52).

Method

This paper will focus on Dahl's use of figurative language in his three novels for children, *The BFG, Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator,* and *The Witches*. It particularly done to show how unique and special it is, which later also forms Dahl's style of writing and at the same time proves Dahl's being an outstanding writer.

The research uses a qualitative descriptive method. It starts with collecting and selecting the data of figurative language containing language play which are found in the novels. Then they are analyzed in terms of the linguistic processes involved in the forms of language play. The data are then connected with the context of the story in order to interpret their purposes and functions, especially their connection with children as the target readers.

Findings and Discussion

In the three novels that are analysed, Dahl's similes obviously deserve much attention. They are unique, funny as well as attractive. Dahl obviously chooses to use uncommon words in the comparisons, as seen in the following table:

Table 1. Similes with sound play

Data Number	Utterances
(1)	…the President turned **white as the White House.**
(2)	"He's **cracked as a crab**!"
(3)	You're **dotty as a doughnut**!

(4)	"We're **safe as sausages** in here!" shouted Mr. Wonka.
(5)	"He's **batty as a bullfrog**!" cried Grandma Georgina.
(6)	"He's **cracked as a crayfish**!" cried Grandma Georgina.
(7)	"He's **bogged as a beetle**!"
(8)	"He's **dotty as a dingbat**!"
(9)	"**Bald as a boiled egg**," my grandmother said.
(10)	"**Frrrizzled like a frrritter**," said the Grand High Witch.
(11)	'Nothing **hots** a cold giant up **like a hot Hottentot**,' the BFG said.
(12)	'Dreams,' he said, 'is very mysterious things. They is floating around in the air like **wispy-misty** bubbles. All the time they is searching for sleeping people.'
(13)	'You mean you can hear things I can't hear?' Sophie asked. 'You is **deaf as a dumpling** compared with me!' cried the BFG.
(14)	'And you is **dotty as a dogswoggler**!' cried the Bloodbottler.
(15)	'Please be **still as a starfish** now.'
(16)	'We is **helpless as horsefeathers**.'

It is interesting to notice that all the similes in Table 1 use uncommon words as comparisons. Similes like (2) *cracked as a crab* or (6) *cracked as a crayfish*, for example, are uncommon as what is usually more familiar are expressions like "as crazy as a loon" or "as crazy as a coot". The use of uncommon words in the similes is already considered a form of language play as there is a manipulation of language. In Table 1 above it can be observed that all the similes use uncommon words, which definitely contributes a lot to the big attraction of the novels.

In addition, this uncommon choice of words is intentionally done so that Dahl can also play with sounds. Many of the similes play with the sounds as they contain words having repetitive sounds. In data (2) *cracked as a crab* and (6) *cracked as a crayfish* above, the sound /kr/ is repeated in the words ***cr****acked*, ***cr****ab*, and ***cr****ayfish* and thus, it can be said that the similes also have an alliteration.

This is the same in the other data in Table 1 that they all contain repetitions, whether it is a word repetition or sound repetition. Data (1) ***white*** *as the* ***White*** *House* shows a word repetition in the word *white*. Other data show repetition of consonant sounds in the initial position of the words or alliteration: (3) ***d****otty as a* ***d****oughnut* (/d/), (4) ***s****afe as a* ***s****ausage* (/s/), (5) ***b****atty as a* ***b****ullfrog* (/b/), (7) ***b****ogged as a* ***b****eetle* (/b/), (8) ***d****otty as a* ***d****ingbat* (/d/), (9) ***b****ald as a* ***b****oiled egg*, (10) ***fr****izzled as a* ***fr****itter* (/fr/), (13) ***d****eaf as a* ***d****umpling* (/d/), (14) ***d****otty as a* ***d****ogswoggler* (/d/), (15) ***st****ill as a* ***st****arfish* (/st/), (16) ***h****elpless as* ***h****orsefeathers* (/h/). As a whole, these similes are funny and at the same time pleasant to the ears.

Moreover, in data (12) *…like wispy-misty bubbles*, the reduplication ***wi****spy-****mi****s****ty*** is also uncommon to describe bubbles. Furthermore, these two words are pleasant in the ears as they repeat the vowel sound /ɪ/ four times and make it a great assonance. The same thing can be seen in data (11) *Nothing hots a cold giant up like a hot Hottentot …*, in which an assonance /ɒ/ is created through the words *h****o****ts*, *h****o****t*, and *H****o****ttent****o****t*. Playing with word choice and sounds at the same time clearly uncovers Dahl's wittiness as a novelist.

In Table 1 it is clear that quite a lot of the similes describe the condition of losing sanity or not being normal. Dahl uses various words to refer to this condition: *cracked* (used twice), *dotty* (used twice), *batty*, and *bogged*. Considering the target readers, which are children, this use of synonymous words

definitely is good for children as they can have richer vocabulary. This also means that Dahl concerns a lot about who his target readers are and this, once again, proves Dahl's smartness as a novelist.

The similes in Table 2 below still show the novelist's choice of uncommon words in the comparisons. Unlike the similes in Table 1, these words are chosen not for the purpose of creating a sound play. However, these similes are also special and funny because there is an exaggerated or hyperbolic sense. In describing the hoarse voice of the witch, it is compared to a throat full of drawing-pins; the condition when a giant drops a small girl is depicted as a rasher of bacon in some gigantic frying-pan sizzling with fat. Furthermore, the giant's teeth are described to be like huge slice of white bread and his ear to be as big as the wheel of a truck. When a little girl is frightened, she is illustrated to be trembling just like a leaf in the wind. The humorous effect is definitely something that can be resulted from these similes, which shows Dahl's outstanding resourcefulness.

Table 2. Similes with uncommon comparisons

Data Number	Utterances
(1)	Her voice had a curious rasping quality. It made a sort of metallic sound, **as though her throat was full of drawing-pins**.
(2)	He will drop me **like a rasher of bacon into some gigantic frying-pan sizzling with fat**.
(3)	The **teeth** were very white and very square and they **sat in his mouth like huge slice of white bread**.
(4)	He had truly enormous **ears**. Each one was **as big as the wheel of a truck** …
(5)	She was **trembling like a leaf in the wind**, …

Another ingenious point from Roald Dahl in the use of similes in the three novels is that, despite the uncommon comparisons, Dahl actually chooses the words wisely by considering children as the target readers of the novels. Words like *crab, doughnut, sausages, boiled eggs, fritter, bullfrog, white bread, bacon, frying pan, bubbles, starfish, truck wheel, leaf, wind* etc. are familiar for children. This is essential because in using similes, a writer in a way is asking the readers to imagine something that is similar to the thing he or she is trying to describe to the readers. Hence, when children as the target readers know the things used in the similes quite well, it is indeed very helpful.

The following table contains data of personification found in the three novels:

Table 3. Personification

Data Number	Utterances
(1)	His black **moustache** was **jumping up and down** like crazy as he spoke.
(2)	His **whiskers twitch with excitement**.

The two data of personification show how someone's moustache and whiskers are described in a funny way. Readers are asked to imagine how the moustache is jumping up and down and how the whiskers twitch or give a sudden jerking movement. When children as the target readers can imagine this

condition, they will find these two data of personification very funny and they will most probably be amused.

Conclusion

All in all, it can be said that Roald Dahl is proven to be very witty in playing with words, especially in the use of figures of speech, such as similes and personification. These figures are not only unusual, but also funny and beautiful at the same time. In addition, the findings also show that Dahl consistently plays with language in his novels, which confirms that this can be regarded as one of his signatures in writing children's novels. This is definitely not a simple thing to do and thus, Dahl does deserve more acclaim. Another point that is worth noticing is Dahl's smartness in always connecting himself a writer with the target readers of the three novels discussed, who are children. This, together with the language play in the use of similes and personification, undoubtedly adds to Dahl's ingenuity. For these reasons, readers should also be demanded to appreciate writers of this great quality. When this quality level fails to be detected by readers, it will be a great loss both for the writers and readers. Simply put, writers' ingenuity should be balanced with readers' sensitivity in detecting that ingenuity.

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