

# Zin in poezie : een interpretatief en empirisch onderzoek naar de pragmatiek van het kinderlied

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## **Summary**

### **Sensing Sound and Subverting Sense in Poetry**

An interpretive and empirical study into the pragmatics of children's verse

Currently little explicit and structural attention is paid to children's literature as a means to introduce children to (trans)culturally valued forms and to specific contents that help develop their emerging cultural literacy in Dutch primary education. Since its introduction, the concept of 'cultural literacy' itself has been subject to international critical debate, chiming in with ongoing debates on 'culture' and 'the canon' within culturally diverse societies and educational contexts. The diminishing influence and diversification of religious institutions, and the increasing volatility and transiency of 'culturally valued' knowledge within globalizing and digitalizing network societies have made cultural transmission less self-evident. Moreover, educational systems focused primarily on developing skills, individual competence and preference, and the growing importance of efficiency and measurable results in education have made the transmission of cultural knowledge increasingly problematic. Yet, these developments also invoke renewed pleas for broad societal, political and educational acknowledgement of the importance of introducing pupils to the different forms of expression and the values, norms, beliefs and practices that underlie the intricate cultural tapestry of the society they grow up in. Recently, the Dutch Council of Education stressed that the one-sided focus on literacy and numeracy has impoverished primary education at the cost of, amongst other things, cultural and civic education: "Measurable results have become the standard for educational quality. The Council calls for discussion about what Dutch education should pass on to pupils." (2013, pp. 4-5). In this discussion, we need to acknowledge that contemporary multicultural society on the one hand and school populations of young children on the other place specific demands on what we understand cultural literacy to be.

The research project 'Sensing Sound and Subverting Sense in Poetry', as part of the larger research program *Emergent Cultural Literacy: Assimilating Children's Literature*<sup>215</sup>, develops evidence-based criteria for the selection of children's poetry that effectively enhances the emergent cultural literacy of children in Kindergarten and Second Grade. These criteria contribute to the development of (trans-)cultural literacy programs as a crucially important supplement to the predominance of (measured results in) literacy and numeracy. With regard to children's literature, paying attention to its contribution to cultural literacy also supplements the scientific and educational focus on 'literary competence' – the skills needed to get access to, read, and appreciate literary texts. Instead of literary skills, we look into what kinds of texts effectively enhance children's emergent *cultural* literacy. 'Canonization' presents itself as a central issue to cultural literacy in education. Yet, deciding top-down what children should read cannot guarantee successful *appropriation* of texts by the intended audience. In order to effectively enhance children's emergent cultural literacy, texts not only need to represent widely acknowledged literary or cultural values; they also need to be attuned to the cultural competence - skills, knowledge, morals and world views, but also preferences - of their juvenile audience. From this perspective, selecting children's literature rooted in folklore presents itself as an obvious choice<sup>216</sup>. Text types such as the fable, the nursery song, the nonsense rhyme, the fairy tale, or trickster tale are deeply rooted in trans-

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<sup>215</sup> This project is part of the program *Emergent Cultural Literacy: Assimilating Children's Literature*, financed by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO).

<sup>216</sup> The *Emergent Cultural Literacy* program contains three projects: Deugden & Dilemma's (Virtues & Dilemma's), Kinderpoëzie (Children's Poetry), and Narratieve Genres (Narrative Genres). Each of these project investigates different genres.

cultural folkloric traditions. They have a proven longevity and vitality ('canonicity'), form important intertexts that are continually adapted, reverberated, and remediated in many different ways, while still speaking to today's children. If we understand what makes these trans-cultural 'classics' tick with young children, we can translate these insights into criteria for selecting works at the intersection between broad cultural value or relevance, and young children's emergent cultural competence. We define 'emergent cultural literacy' as knowledge and understanding of (specific features of) lastingly popular and trans-culturally deeply rooted ('canonical') genres and text types.

Children's poetry takes central stage in this thesis. The genre, however, is not to be taken for granted and poses additional difficulties in figuring out how poetry can effectively enhance young children's emergent cultural literacy. The theoretical question what children's poetry is and does for children leads to the conclusion that a new perspective is needed (Coats, 2013). Studies of how children's poetry is appraised by contemporary literary critics lead to the conclusion that "very many people fundamentally do not believe that children's poetry exists" (Hunt, 2010, p. 17). Commercially, children's poetry can be termed 'an endangered species' (Van Coillie, 2014, p. 247). And the position of children's poetry in education is just as volatile, since the threshold for doing poetry in primary education is high (SLO, online lexicon, 'Kinderpoëzie'). There is very limited understanding and appreciation of what poetry is and does for *children* as they are, in several ways, different from experienced (and trained) readers of poetry. This project aims to identify features that are rooted in transcultural folkloric tradition, and at the same time play a crucial role in the appreciation and appropriation of poetry by young children. To do so, it takes its cues from (studies of) folkloric nursery songs and children's rhymes and argues that for young children poetry and song derive their meaning, their 'sense', from their use, their performance, within specific *pragmatic contexts*. For five- to eight-year-olds, festivities as well as play are the most important contexts from which their primary understanding and appreciation of poetic forms sprouts. In these contexts, songs and rhymes have clearly demarcated uses and functions, like the lullaby, the counting-out rhyme, the birthday song, and the jumprope-rhyme. Looking at the *(inter)textual features* that may further enhance cultural literacy, folkloric nursery songs and children's rhymes are generally characterized as 'nonsensical', or 'meaningless' in the referential sense of the word. Seen within contexts of use, this 'nonsensicality' is divided into two broad categories. First, there is 'musical language play' in which the prosodic features of language are foregrounded for musical effect. Second, there is '(carnavalesque) nonsensicality' which plays with the referential function of language for humorous effect. Both the pragmatic and textual features of folkloric rhymes and songs point out that what makes poetry meaningful for young children, what constitutes a basic sense for poetry, is not its 'Abstract Literary Value' derived from textual analysis and interpretation within literary convention. What makes poetry and song meaningful for young children primarily derives from how it is used, when, where, by whom, and for what purpose. Of course, what children appreciate, want and need will at least partly depend on their *developmental features* and change with age. This thesis suggests that a pragmatic approach to poetry is needed to understand what poetry is and does for young children, and to identify and specify its crucial indicators of canonicity ensuring a close fit between

broad cultural value or relevance of poetic forms and young children's emerging cultural competence.

From this pragmatic approach, expected contextual and textual 'indicators of canonicity' in children's poetry are identified, explored and specified in accordance with children's language and humor development. First, the relation between folkloric children's songs and rhymes and their most vital pragmatic contexts, festivities and play, is explored and analyzed based on folkloric and ethnographic sources, as well as different theories from developmental and evolutionary psychology. This leads to the characterization of that relation as the 'poetic ritualization of recurrent (physical and/or linguistic) behavioral patterns in contexts of ritual and play'. In relation to children's developmental features, it is expected that (i) the poetic ritualization of *physical* behavioral patterns is a crucial feature of poetry for children in Kindergarten, whereas (ii) the poetic ritualization of *linguistic* behavioral patterns is closer related to the preferences and cultural competence of Second Graders. Next, the first (inter)textual category of 'musical language play' is explored and analyzed in both folkloric and literary children's poetry in relation to pragmatic contexts and children's developmental features. This leads to the expectation that (i) forms of musical language play that evoke poetically ritualized *physical* action ensures a close fit between poetry and the skills and preferences of Kindergartners, whereas (ii) forms of musical language play that evoke poetically ritualized *linguistic* action, like tongue twisters, is a crucial indicator of canonicity in poetry for Second Graders. Finally, the second (inter)textual category of '(carnavalesque) nonsensicality' is also explored and analyzed in both folkloric and literary children's poetry in relation to pragmatic contexts and children's developmental features. Three different types are identified: (i) carnivalesque forms of nonsensicality that induce a physical/affective experience of 'incongruency', mediated by subversive *physical* acts related to the social context and the cultural categories (values and norms) that govern it, (ii) carnivalesque forms of nonsensicality that induce a physical/affective experience of 'incongruency', mediated by subversive *linguistic* acts related to the social context and the cultural categories that govern it, and (iii) forms of nonsensicality that induce a more intellectual experience of 'incongruency', mediated by representations of reality that subvert certain 'natural laws' or – on a more abstract level – mediated by a conceptual play with time, logic, numbers, or language itself. It is expected that poetry characterized by type (i) will be most appreciated by Kindergartners while children in Second Grade will especially take to poetry characterized by type (ii).

As the intersection between broad cultural value or relevance of poetic forms and young children's emerging cultural competence is governed by pragmatic, textual and developmental factors, it is not sufficient to only identify 'indicators of canonicity' based on the study of primary and secondary literature. After identifying, and specifying, *expected* 'indicators of canonicity' in children's poetry for Kindergarten and Second Grade, it is crucial to see if poetry with these indicators is indeed appreciated and appropriated by children and thus enhances their emergent cultural literacy. Hence, this program develops an innovative methodology for not only the identification, but also implementation and validation of crucial indicators of canonicity. Theoretical approaches and tools for hermeneutic specification to identify *expected* indicators are supplemented with empirical methods to check if these expectations 'hold up in court'. That is, whether real children and real

teachers working with poetry selected on the basis of these indicators in real classrooms confirm or debunk them. An intervention program was developed and implemented to test the expected features of canonicity that have been identified. This intervention program unites this project on children's poetry with the two other projects in the *Emergent Cultural Literacy* program: Deugden & Dilemma's (Virtues & Dilemma's), and Narrative Genres (Narrative Genres). The projects share the aims and design of the intervention program, called 'Leeskalenderproject' ('Reading Calendar Project'), and closely cooperate in the development of the intervention materials (the Reading Calendar with accompanying teacher-guides), and the different instruments used for data collection. The intervention program implements selections of texts from each of the projects in the classroom in the form of a 'reading calendar', observes how teachers and pupils work with it over a period of thirty weeks and measures the effects of the implementation on children's emergent cultural literacy. A pretest-posttest control group design is used because it offers the best guarantees for the proper attribution of effects on children's emergent cultural literacy to the intervention program. To measure effects of the calendar on children's emergent cultural literacy, the Emergent Cultural Literacy Test is developed for Kindergarten (groep 2) and Second Grade (groep 4). The test is administered before (pre-test) and after (post-test) the implementation of the calendar to children in the experimental (with calendar) and in the control (without calendar) condition. Regular school test results on literacy and numeracy and parental questionnaires on reading in the home environment of the same children are collected to ensure the validity of the interpretation of the test results. Teachers' logs, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and observations in the classroom are used to collect additional data for accurate attribution of the test results and for gaining qualitative insights into how teachers and children work with, react to, appreciate, and appropriate the selected texts, and to see whether or not the expected indicators of canonicity indeed play a crucial role in children's appreciation and appropriation of texts. Schools were recruited and seventeen schools were selected for the experiment. Schools were assigned to the experimental (eleven schools) or control (six schools) condition through cluster-randomization to ensure comparability of the experimental and control groups. Due to the fact that some schools withdrew from participation and had to be substituted, the comparability of the experimental and control condition of Second Grade groups could no longer be guaranteed. This is taken into account in the analyses and interpretation of results. In total, close to seven hundred children took part. The development of the selections of poetry that are implemented in Kindergartens and Second Grades ran through a process of two expert consultation rounds, a pilot study and several internal feedback rounds. The development of the poetry-items within the Emergent Cultural Literacy Test includes two pilot studies in which earlier versions of the test were administered to smaller groups of children at different schools. Several procedures are used to enhance the validity, reliability and objectivity of the analyses and interpretations of the qualitative data, such as 'triangulation' through the comparison of data collected from different sources using different instruments (observations, interviews and teachers' logs), linking insights to different theories that were also used in the identification of the *expected* crucial features of canonicity, comparing localized observations with overall findings from interviews and logs from all groups that worked

with poetry in the Reading Calendar, the recording and archiving of observations, interviews and logs, and the specification of how data are analyzed.

Based on several procedures for testing validity and reliability, the Emergent Cultural Literacy Test as a whole is both a reliable and valid instrument for measuring effects of the Reading Calendar on children's emergent cultural literacy. The results from the Emergent Cultural Literacy Test show that the Reading Calendar has a positive effect on the emergent cultural literacy of Kindergartners (groep 2). After controlling for differences between the control and experimental condition, the results show that the Reading Calendar has also positively enhanced the emergent cultural literacy of the majority of children in Grade 2 (groep 4). However, looking only at the poetry-items in the test and effects from the Reading Calendars including poetry, a different picture emerges. The poetry-items turn out to be too difficult for the Kindergartners, not yielding valid results. Focusing on Grade 2, the items on poetry 'behave' differently towards measures of validity than the test as a whole, sometimes even in complete opposition to our expectations. Only one item shows a positive effect of the Reading Calendar including poetry on Second-Graders' knowledge and understanding of specific features of poetry. Although it is important that educational research objectively measures the effectivity of methods, the discussion of these findings raises questions about the possibility to measure effects of poetry with this type of instrument. Can effects of poetry be operationalized in this type of test if "... poetry bypasses concepts and interpretation and reaches directly into embodied experience to produce its effects, which exceed its linguistic meaning" (Coats, 2013, p. 133)? The qualitative findings reveal that *external factors* that play an important role in how teachers and children work with, react to, appreciate, and appropriate the selected poetry are: differences in the cultural competence of the youngest and oldest Kindergartners, teachers' skills, preferences and attitudes, issues of embedding the calendar in existing programs, and (lack of) time. The qualitative findings mostly confirm the expected crucial indicators of canonicity in poetry, with some specifications. Specifically, Kindergartners most appreciate poetry characterized by musical language play evoking poetically ritualized *physical* action like dancing, jumping and clapping. For them, sensing the patterned sounds of poetry is key to their appreciation. Second Graders most appreciate poetry characterized by carnivalesque nonsensicality inducing a physical/affective experience of 'incongruency', mediated by subversive *performances* (whether physical or linguistic) related to the social context, especially the classroom, and the cultural conventions that govern it. Subverting 'common sense' greatly contributes to seven- and eight-year-olds' appreciation of poetry. In Second Grade, explicit *physical* experience and *physically* mediated understanding of poetry through the performance of it and/or through the reactions it elicits are more crucial to children's appreciation of poetry than expected. Additionally, the findings show that Kindergartners rely on an explicit *external* pragmatic context to understand poetry as ritual form, as 'not real', while Second Graders have largely internalized the pragmatic context and rely on their recognition of formal aspects of poetry to identify it as a type of ritual speech act. This gradual internalization of poetic conventions is a key factor in children's appreciation and appropriation of poetry and clearly indicates the developmental aspect of 'poetic competence'. Moreover, it turns out that both Kindergartners and Second Graders show explicit appreciation of (for them) *innovative* features in poetry related to their specific competence and preferences. This is an

important supplement to the idea that young children especially enjoy familiar features and repetition in texts (Ghesquière, 2009, p. 137).

To conclude, this thesis offers an important contribution to scientific, educational and societal debates on (the importance of) cultural transmission and canon formation in culturally diverse societies and schools. The methodology developed for the selection of children's literature is based on the identification and validation of 'indicators of canonicity' that are rooted in widely acknowledged trans-culturally valued genres while also closely fitting young children's cultural competence. The theoretical framework and methodology align educational approaches based on cultural transmission and approaches based on individual competence and preference, debunking the idea that these approaches are incompatible. It is shown that children's literature selected in this way can effectively enhance children's trans-cultural literacy. Moreover, the methodology developed in this research program contributes to scientific investigations of processes of canonization in children's literature by offering a highly innovative evidence-based bottom-up approach. The findings for children's *poetry* confirm the 'pragmatic approach' as useful for identifying crucial indicators of canonicity. They also raise questions about the usefulness of the standardized test as an instrument for observing effects of poetry on children's emergent cultural literacy. The qualitative insights into how children experience, understand and appreciate poetry in the classroom demand a radical shift in our conception of 'results' that are usually formulated in terms of *intellectual* effects – the gaining of knowledge, understanding, cognitive skills –, even in qualitative instruments for the evaluation of 'effectiveness'. Although instruments for evaluation are needed to ensure the quality of educational methods, further research on and theorization of what poetry is and does for children is needed to ascertain how its effects on children's cultural literacy can be evaluated. For the qualitative findings form a convincing validation of the – up to this point only theoretical – assumption that for children "... poetry bypasses concepts and interpretation and reaches directly into embodied experience to produce its effects, which exceed its linguistic meaning." (Coats, 2013, p. 133)