Oh, the Places You'll Go With Grammar

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Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak are two prolific children's writers whose post–World War II era writing has spanned generations. Through a close reading of each author, this article explores key technical differences and similarities in their writing that led to their popularity. This article conducts an examination of the grammar tools, including verb valency, rhyming, musicality, and word coinage, across six of Seuss's and Sendak's books with similar publication dates to discover what makes the two authors' language usage so persuasive and pervasive. This analysis also shows why their usage provides a roadmap for other children's authors.

When it comes to children's literature, few authors are as prolific and influential as Theodor Seuss Geisel. His work is known by children across the globe and across generations, as most of his work was written in the 1960s and 1970s. Seuss's beloved sketches and word coinages keep children coming back to the stories of *The Lorax*, *Green Eggs and Ham*, and *Oh, the Places You'll Go*. But he is not the only great children's author of his time. A contemporary of his, Maurice Sendak, also found a place in children's literature, drawing in readers of all ages with his chimerical worlds in *Where the Wild Things Are* and *In the Night Kitchen*. One of the things that makes both these writers so fantastic at what they do is their wielding of the English language. Maurice Sendak and Dr. Seuss are very different writers, yet they both have a pervasiveness in children's fiction that remains to this day. As contemporaries in the post–World War II era, you might expect them to have similar styles or subject matters. Instead, we find the English language shaped in two completely different ways (though I am sure Max would have been delighted to spend a day with the Once-ler). Analysis of each author and their use of grammar—specifically valency and adverbs, rhyming schemes, and word coinage—will provide greater understanding into the technical aspects of persuasive children's literature.

Overview of Grammar

There are several differences on a grammatical level between these two writers. The first is the way they construct their sentences. Seuss prefers to use intransitive and copular verb structures, which conveys a simplicity to the story that is enticing to young readers. Sendak, on the other hand, uses these structures as well as monotransitive and ditransitive structures, with the significant addition of adverbials. Secondly, Sendak does not consistently subscribe to a rhyming scheme, but those same adverbials have a musical effect similar to Seuss's renowned rhymes. Seuss's books are all in rhyme, which means that his sentence structures are often tweaked to achieve this rhyme. These tweaks often come in the form of made-up words, which leads to my third and final point. In the last section, I will describe how Seuss coins all sorts of fake adjectives and verbs. Adjectives are a vital part to any children's story, as children are learning to describe the world around them. His coinage is one of the reasons children and adults keep coming back to his silly old stories. Although Sendak

does not coin words nearly to the same extent, he is consistent in the simplicity of nouns and adjectives he uses. Through examining these points of grammar, we will see how knowing the tools of language aids good children's writing.

Valiant Valences and Additional Adverbials

Sentence structure is a vital consideration for children's books. Length and complexity of sentences will determine whether children can follow the story or if they will get tripped up by phrases referring to other phrases, prepositions without nouns attached, and verbs with no clear actors. Seuss and Sendak tackle this problem from different angles.

Seuss focuses his sentences on intransitive and copular verb valences, nearly avoiding ditransitive and complex transitive valences altogether. Intransitive valences have no object, taking the form of a subject plus a verb phrase. For example, *The Lorax* is filled with intransitive verbs, occasionally coupled with adverbials to tell us how, where, or why each action occurred. "'I am the Lorax,' he coughed and he whiffed. He sneezed and he snuffed. He snarggled. He sniffed" (Seuss, *The Lorax*, p. 42). All of these verbs (even the made-up one) quickly convey to a child reader exactly how the Lorax is feeling. Seuss also rewrites sentences that could easily have been written as complex transitive valences, which take the form of a subject plus verb phrase plus a direct object plus object complement. This multilayered form forces a young reader to puzzle out who is the actor and who is receiving the action. Seuss writes them as monotransitives. "I proved he was wrong" (Seuss, *The Lorax*, p. 28) could have been written as "I proved him wrong." But the monotransitive version is simpler. It points to the actor and the receiver. Seuss frequently does this in his writing, as well as taking the direct object of a monotransitive valency and having it do an intransitive action, which pulls the story along in a clear order.

Seuss also uses copular valences to achieve similar results. In *The Sneetches*, he creatively uses a copular valency with only determiners: "Whether this one was that one . . . or that one was this one or which one was what one . . . or what one was who" (Seuss, *The Sneetches and Other Stories*, p. 25). Now, this sentence is very confusing. It is hard to tell where the subject complements

are. But that is precisely the point. This genius work of grammar conveys to a child reader a sense of confusion—the same sense of confusion that the Sneetches felt. Seuss is using language here to show a child a story, rather than simply telling it. In this way, this confusing sentence is actually simpler and more easily understood for a child than one might think.

Maurice Sendak takes a different approach to helping a child through the plot of his stories. He actually uses quite a few complex transitive valences in his work. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, we find a complex transitive (S + VP + DO + OC) within three pages of the book. "His mother called him 'WILD THING!'" (Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, p. 6). But Sendak doesn't use valency to make his stories understandable for young readers. Instead, he uses long sentences with easily identifiable adverbials to take the main character through the plot without stopping to create another sentence. His sentences run on for pages and pages, with clauses strung together by conjunctions and action defined through adverbials. For example, take this paragraph-length sentence from *Where the Wild Things Are*:

> That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew until his ceiling hung with vines and the walls became the world all around and an ocean tumbled by [[with a private boat] for Max] and he sailed off [through night and day] and [in and out [of weeks]] and almost over a year [to where the wild things are.] (Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, pp. 8–16, original punctuation, brackets added.)

The brackets indicate adverbials. These adverbials enable Sendak to create a rolling tone across his pages. It brings the reader through the story without pause for breath. These adverbials make the story easily understood as to the where, when, and how of Max's adventures. Although the sentence is complex because of the many clauses and adverbials, Sendak clearly understood the grammar rules when he was writing it. Every adverbial, every clause, has a purpose here. His writing and tone is different from Seuss, but it is no less clear.

The "Nimbly" and "Chimbley" of Rhyming

A second consideration for good children's literature is the musicality of the words. Most picture books are meant to be read aloud, so the way the words sound is important. In fact, Robin

Heald says the sound is an important cognitive aid: "Because a picture book with musical-sounding language stimulates a part of the brain centered on music, it can be an extraordinary aid in the nurturing and development of the young child's intellect, emotional life, and social skills" (Heald, 2008, p. 228). The lilt of the sentences creates that important persuasive nature needed in good children's writing. There are multiple ways to achieve this: Sendak uses postmodifiers, while Seuss uses rhymes.

Sendak's added adverbials and consistent post-modifiers make his work roll off the tongue. You can't help but feel the bobbing of Max's boat when Sendak writes with such weaving skills. His lack of punctuation due to the long sentences rolls the story forward like the waves and wind push the sail. Sendak doesn't typically subscribe to a rhyming scheme. In *Chicken Soup With Rice,* he makes an effort to rhyme 'rice' with 'twice' on all of the pages. But his truly magnificent work has no specific rhyming scheme in sight. "So he skipped from the oven and into bread dough all ready to rise in the night kitchen" (Sendak, *In the Night Kitchen*, p. 17). The way he uses his grammatical knowledge of post-modifiers in this sentence creates that weaving tone in *In the Night Kitchen* that enables him to work without rhymes.

Seuss, on the other hand, is a master of rhyming. His rhyming schemes, although achieved in unconventional ways, work to pull the reader in, especially when read aloud. Writing in rhyme necessitates extra thought, as you can't just put any sentence on the page next to the last one. Seuss often ends lines on adjectives or adverbs instead of nouns in order to rhyme. "Every *Who* down in *Who*-ville, the tall and the small, was singing! Without any presents at all!" (Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* p. 48). The words chime when said aloud, creating a musicality that aids in cognition. While Sendak and Seuss differ in their approach, both use language conventions to create that musical lilt we look for in children's books.

But Seuss doesn't let the English language constrain him in what he can and cannot rhyme. He often makes up words altogether in order to achieve a rhyme. "And he stuffed them in bags. Then the Grinch, very nimbly, stuffed all the bags, one by one, up the chimbley!" (Seuss, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas,* p. 24) This last word is an example of Seuss's ever-famous word coinage.

Coinage is Quite "Quimney"

Seuss often creates words, either to make a rhyme or a rhythm or simply to pull a reader in. Who doesn't love and recognize words like "grickle-grass," "gliuppity-glupp," and "miff-muffered moof"? But there is another reason Seuss excels at word coinage: he knows the rules. Because Seuss understands parts of speech, morphology, and phonology, his coinages follow the rules and, therefore, teach them. Young readers are still learning how language works. It is vital to their education that the books they read reflect the principles they are learning about, including how words are strung together, how to conjugate a verb, or how to use adjectives of comparison. Understanding the constraints of language helps kids use it better. Sendak understands this when he writes in his alphabet book, "Z – zippity zound" (Sendak, *Alligators All Around*, p. 26). "Zippity" here is clearly an adjective for "zound." Although neither word is real, the statement works because he's teaching language through word and sound association.

Similarly, when kids see Seuss's made-up words, they can see what is different, how the verbs and adjectives are created, and where those words are placed in a sentence. "There is no one alive who is you-er than you" (Seuss, *Happy Birthday to You*, p. 41). An article by Don Nilsen analyzes how Seuss teaches the rules by breaking them. He argues that Seuss's word play teaches children about repetition and morphology in the English language (Nilsen, 1977, p. 569). So when he breaks the rules, when the Once-ler is "glumping the pond" or "bigger[ing] his factory," Seuss knows what he is doing. His knowledge of grammar shapes his coinage, and his coinage is one of the reasons he is such a good children's author.

Although Sendak does not coin as prolifically as Seuss does, he still takes language into account when writing for children. He uses simple but real verbs to ensure understanding in his books. "That very night in Max's room a forest grew and grew and grew . . ." (Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*, p. 8). While Nilsen explains how Seuss teaches repetition, this sentence illustrates how Sendak does the same. He simply approaches the topic differently through literal repetition of a verb. The word "grew" repeated three times implies something continuously getting bigger and wider, though traditional English usage would just use the word once. This repetition makes the meaning clearer for a child who is still learning. Whether coining new words or

repeating the foundational ones, both authors bend language to teach it.

Conclusion

It takes many different things to make a good children's author. Despite (and maybe because of) children's books' low word counts, authors have to be persuasive to and readily understood by kids of all ages. Both Dr. Seuss and Maurice Sendak excel in their literature for children because they understand how language works and how they can use it. The differences in execution only make them more unique. Hundreds of authors can all use the same exact language, employ the same exact verbs and dependent clauses, and create something completely different every time. Grammar is a tool in the kit of a great writer. And like a tool, it is up to the individual to decide how to utilize it. But understanding how these two incredible authors do so provides a roadmap to other children's authors. With grammar tools in their kit, they can keep 'biggering and biggering and biggering' their language use and unique writing style just as the greats did.

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