Challenging Masculine Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books: A Social Semiotic and Multimodal Analysis

Arsenio Jesús Moya-Guijarro and Roberto Martínez Mateo
Universidad de Castilla La Mancha
arsenio.mguijarro@uclm.es, roberto.martinez@uclm.es

The main aim of this article is to identify the visual and verbal strategies that authors and illustrators display in five picture books featuring children who do not conform to traditional masculine gender stereotypes. The theoretical framework adopted for the multimodal analysis is Systemic-Functional Social Semiotics. After identifying the verbal and visual transitivity/transactional options that are actualised in the sample texts, we determine whether the semantic load that each mode contributes to the construction of gender is convergent or divergent. The findings show that the meaning load carried by embedded images (action plus reaction), together with verbal and mental processes of perception, provides essential cues for fostering progressive gender discourses.

Keywords: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL); social semiotics; multimodality; gender stereotypes; representational metafunction; picture books

. . .

El cuestionamiento de los estereotipos de género masculinos en libros álbum infantiles. Un análisis semiótico social y multimodal

El objetivo principal de este artículo es identificar las estrategias visuales y verbales que autores e ilustradores utilizan en cinco libros álbum protagonizados por niños que no se ajustan a los estereotipos en torno al género masculino. El marco teórico adoptado para realizar el análisis multimodal es la Semiótica Social de tinte Sistémico-Funcional. Tras identificar las opciones de transitividad/transacción—a nivel verbal y visual—que se actualizan en las narrativas, se determina si la carga semántica que aporta cada modo semiótico a la construcción del género

es convergente o divergente. Los resultados revelan que la carga de significado que aportan las imágenes incrustadas (acción más reacción), junto con los procesos verbales y mentales de percepción, proporciona claves esenciales para fomentar los discursos de género progresistas.

Palabras clave: Lingüística Sistémico Funcional (LSF); semiótica social; multimodalidad; estereotipos de género; metafunción representacional; álbumes ilustrados

1. Aims and Scope of the Study

Among the various themes that are dealt with in picture books are those related to gender issues, as shown by the studies carried out by Mills (1995), Sunderland (2012), Evans (2015) and Moya-Guijarro and Cañamares (2020), among others. Sunderland (2012), for example, analyses how gender aspects are constructed in picture books. Her research, which is essentially anchored in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough 2003) and Content Analysis (Cohen et al. 2007), demonstrates that characters have traditionally been constructed through a language based on established and predetermined stereotypes. Thus, the male characters take on more active roles and their actions affect other actants. The female characters, however, appear to be more focused on pleasing or liking the other participants that surround them. Having said that, the majority of the research carried out in this sense is essentially focused on content issues, on the number of male and female characters that appear in the stories or on the frequency with which these characters take on a leading or secondary role depending on their sex, but without exploring the visual and verbal strategies that authors and illustrators use to represent characters who do not necessarily conform to macho and female stereotypes.

In this study we identify the visual and verbal strategies that authors and illustrators can be seen to use in five picture books featuring children who do not necessarily conform to the macho stereotypes typically associated with male characters in traditional narratives. It is also our aim to analyse the meaning that springs from the word-image interaction on a representational level (Halliday 2004; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) and to determine whether the semantic contribution of each mode helps to enrich the overall message that the words and images convey separately.

The five picture books that comprise the sample texts are: *10,000 Dresses* written by Marcus Ewert and illustrated by Rex Ray (2008), *The Purim Superhero* written by Elisabeth Kushner and illustrated by Mike Byrne (2013), *Willy the Champ* written and illustrated by Anthony Brown (1985), *Ballerino Nate* written by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley and illustrated by Robert Alley (2006) and *Tough Boris* written by Mem Fox and illustrated by Kathryn Brown (1998). The five picture books analysed in this paper were selected because of the large number of commonalities they share.

The sample texts were selected in accordance with the three parameters considered as characterising a corpus (Sinclair 1991, 7): a) authenticity; b) representativeness and c) specificity. The picture books are authentic texts (Bowker and Pearson 2002, 9) since they were written in English, by native English-speaking authors (three American, one British and one Australian) and were not created for experimental purposes. Despite the books' various countries of origin, their respective publishers enjoy worldwide distribution making the books easily accessible across the globe. The selection includes some books which are regarded as contemporary classics due to their literary quality and as such may be considered worthy of emulating. *Willy the Champ* by Anthony Brown, for example, published in 1985, remains popular with children today, so it could be said to have stood the test of time (Moya-Guijarro 2014).

Regarding the books' representativeness, length (Varantola 2002, 174) is no longer the determining factor, whilst the notion of fitness for purpose has become very important. Moreover, the two key factors pertaining to fitness are the audience and the topic. The intended target audience of the selected books is children aged approximately from four to seven years old. Regarding specificity, the question of gender identities is tackled and depicted as a social construct and is consequently challenged in various ways (Armengol 2014). Regrettably, even though the time span of the books covers almost three decades (1985-2013), the topicality of the issue has not diminished, and it is significant that the issues of gender stereotyping and gender roles are apparent in all of the plots. On the whole, the ultimate way out offered by all the works is, one way or another, an open perspective.

The article is structured in four parts, this being the first. The theoretical framework adopted, multimodal social semiotics, is described in section 2. In section 3 the sample texts chosen for analysis, the methodology and the analysis carried out are presented. We identify the prevailing patterns of transitivity (Halliday 2004; Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) used by writers and illustrators to challenge gender stereotypes in the picture books studied, both visually and verbally. Section 4 is devoted to the conclusions and shows how the visual and verbal modes work together to foster progressive gender discourses.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Visual Social Semiotics and Multimodality

The theoretical frameworks adopted here to carry out the multimodal analysis of picture books that challenge gender stereotypes are Halliday's (2004) Systemic-Functional Approach and Kress and van Leeuwen's Social Semiotics (2006), later developed by Painter et al. (2013) for the analysis of children's picture books. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a useful tool to explore what is represented, to whom and with what means, at the linguistic level of analysis. In addition, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Social Semiotics, extrapolated from the SFL account, provides an appropriate framework to interpret multimodal texts and aims to describe the meaning-making resources of visual language. In this theoretical framework, *multimodal texts* are conceptualised as choices of semiotic systems which are beyond language itself.
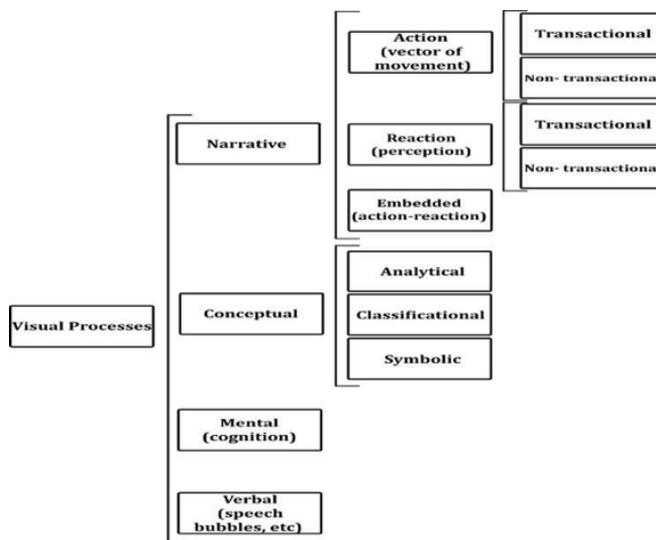
Although SFL focuses essentially on verbal language, Halliday (1978) assumes that language is just one of the many semiotic systems, along with images, sound, music, etc., that can be used to express meaning (Unsworth 2006; Pinar 2015; Stoian 2015). Besides, Halliday asserts that all texts, whether verbal or visual, independently or in combination with other semiotic modalities, simultaneously entail ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. This idea led Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) to develop a grammar of visual design to describe the meaning-making resources of images in a specific social context. They propose that images are capable of simultaneously

realising three types of meaning: a) *representational*, which is related to Halliday's Ideational Metafunction; b) *interactive*, which corresponds to Halliday's Interpersonal Metafunction and c) *compositional* meaning, which is associated with Halliday's Textual Metafunction. Both SFL and Visual Social Semiotics approach language as a social semiotic system where the options available to its users to achieve their communicative goals and make meanings are determined by the social context or the culture in which language is used (Halliday 1978, 2004; Unsworth 2006; Painter et al. 2013; Moya-Guijarro 2014; Santamaría-García 2020; Moya-Guijarro and Ventola 2021). In the following paragraphs, the main features of the representational metafunction, the one that is of interest to us here, are focused on.

The representational metafunction is concerned with the representation of participants, processes and circumstances in the text or image. This involves making choices in the system of transitivity which explores who is doing what to whom and in what circumstances. Within the system of transitivity Halliday distinguishes between different types of processes, typically carried out by a verb, and also the number and type of participants involved in them, the attributes ascribed to them and, lastly, the circumstances of place, time and manner, etc., related to the processes themselves. Halliday (2004) makes a basic distinction between three main types of processes: a) material; b) mental; and c) relational. While *material processes* are typically processes of doing, happening, causing and transferring that reflect external aspects of our reality, *mental processes* are internal processes of consciousness and express perception, cognition, desideration, emotion and affection. Added to material and mental processes are the *relational processes* of classifying and identifying, which are those of having, being or becoming, where a participant is identified or situated circumstantially (Halliday 2004). Finally, although not clearly set apart, further categories located at the three boundaries can be distinguished, namely: a) behavioural; b) verbal; and c) existential processes (Halliday 2004, 251).

In turn, visual structures are also assigned visual processes. When analysing representational meaning in images, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) distinguish between: a) narrative and b) conceptual processes (see figure 1). Narrative processes contain vectors of motion that allow viewers to create a story about the Represented Participants (RPs). There are two types of narrative images: a) action and b) reaction. While the former depicts actions, either concrete or abstract, and shows an actor doing something in a transactional or non-transactional situation, the latter builds the narrative through eye-lines that act as vectors between the RPs. A further aspect that should be noted is that action and reaction processes can be combined and thus give rise to the category of embedded processes. Finally, narrative processes may also have a transactional or a non-transactional character, similar to the transitive and intransitive features of processes in language. In transactional processes there is a goal or phenomenon represented at the end of the vector that shows directionality from an actor to a goal (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Moya-Guijarro 2014; Moya-Guijarro and Cañamares 2020).

FIGURE 1. Visual processes
(adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen 2006 and Painter et al. 2013)

Unlike narrative images, conceptual images, which are not frequently used in picture books, do not include vectors, but rather represent participants in their more generalised and timeless essence (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 79). Conceptual images (analytical, classificational and symbolic) lack the setting, which is typically associated with action images, and define a participant as a member of a class explaining what it looks like. This means that conceptual images are entity-oriented, as participants are seen as carriers that possess attributes. Added to these conceptual images are mental processes of cognition, typically realised by vectors leading to thought bubbles, and also verbal processes, realised by vectors leading to speech bubbles (see figure 1). However, as Painter et al. (2013, 68) state, the depiction of verbal and mental action does not necessarily involve vectors. If we see a picture of a character with their mouth open and in front of an audience, our general knowledge will probably lead us to infer that they are speaking, even though there are no vectors provided by speech bubbles. Along with visual processes, the representational meaning in images is also concerned with participant roles and specific circumstances.

2.2. The Interplay of Images and Words

In the last few decades, the analysis of text-image interaction has gained momentum, as demonstrated by the numerous studies on the subject, for example, Moebius (1986), Nodelman (1988), Lewis (2001), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), Unsworth (2006), Serafini

(2010) and Moya-Guijarro and Cañamares (2020). Nonetheless, the taxonomies proposed for defining a text-image interface tend to put forward a continuum of relationships between the visual and the textual modes in terms of equivalence, expansion, complementarity and divergence. However, sometimes the boundaries between different categories are too fuzzy or not clearly defined. The key issue is, according to Painter et al. (2013, 6), that most of the proposed taxonomies for analysing image and text synergy only allow for establishing one type of relationship between text and image in a visual composition or even just one interrelation type throughout the story.

For this reason, Painter et al. (2013, 3) consider that, although Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar is an invaluable framework for the study of images, their account is not sufficiently developed to study some aspects of picture books, essentially those concerning intermodal relations. Aware of this fact, they extend Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar and develop further systems at the representational, interpersonal and textual level of analysis to deal with image realisations in picture books. Some aspects of the model they propose for analysing the verbal and visual intersemiosis in picture books are referred to in the methodological section of this article (section 3.1). Their model is based on the concepts of commitment and coupling (Painter et al. 2013, 134, 143). *Commitment* refers to the amount of meaning potential that is involved in the process of instantiation, that is, the particular selections actualised from the whole meaning potential of a system in a specific text; in our case, the meaning potential of the verbal and visual systems of transitivity described in this section. *Coupling*, on the other hand, involves the repeated co-patterning of realisations from two or more systems within a text. This will enable us to determine if there are co-patterns of realisations from the verbal and visual systems at the representational level in the picture books selected for analysis.

3. The Analysis of the Sample Texts

Following on the literature review, this section introduces the analysis of the five picture books that form the sample texts. The methodology adopted and brief descriptions of the plots of the five stories are introduced before dealing with the analysis itself.

3.1. Methodology

To perform the analysis, we will apply a quantitative and qualitative methodology through which we will identify, quantify and interpret the verbal and visual resources available to authors and illustrators of the selected picture books. This being a systematic and multimodal study, we will implement the systems of transitivity developed within SFL (Halliday 2004) and Visual Social Semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; Painter et al. 2013) to determine the ideational strategies used by writers and illustrators to convey meaning in picture books which challenge gender stereotypes. First, the

types of processes the male characters are involved in will be identified and counted in the verbal mode. Then the visual processes depicted in the illustrations will be analysed considering their communicative functions in the contexts where they are used. Simultaneously, taking the intersemiotic model for the verbal and visual modes put forward by Painter et al. (2013), we will analyse the synergy (Sipe 2012) that is established between text and image in these picture books.

In this way, we will be able to verify whether the semantic load that each mode contributes to the construction of the stories is convergent or divergent. For this purpose, we have aligned the meaning potential of verbal systems with the meanings of the visual systems at the representational level, especially in those areas where correspondences can be established (Painter et al. 2013). Consequently, comparisons are made between the semantic load provided by each semiotic mode and the way in which words and images converge or diverge from each other to represent reality (see table 1).

TABLE 1. Complementary systems of ideational meaning between image and language

Representational metafunction		
Potential meaning	**Visual realisation**	**Verbal realisation**
Action (material and behavioural processes)	Action narrative images with vectors	Material and behavioural processes, transitive/intransitive structures
Mental: perception and affection	Narrative images of reaction with gaze vectors	Mental perception processes
Mental: cognition	Thought bubbles, facial expression, hand gestures, etc.	Mental cognition processes
Verbal: communication	Speech bubbles, facial expressions, etc.	Verbal and behavioural processes
Relational: being and having	Conceptual images with carrier and attribute	Processes of having, being or becoming
Existential	Conceptual images (existing)	Processes of existing

3.2 Sample Texts

Overall, the five picture books that comprise the sample texts share a scathing review of gender stereotypes and identities. To this end, in *10,000 Dresses* we witness how Bailey, who feels like a girl inside, finds his family very unsupportive in dealing with his inner struggle: to wear a dress. Similarly, *Ballerino Nate* tackles the issue of gender stereotypes from the viewpoint of a bold male protagonist who loves

ballet and is determined to become a *ballerino*. His sheer perseverance, against his brother's reluctance, allows Nate to make his dream come true. Another example of introspection in the search for the true self is to be found in *The Purim Superhero*. This Jewish-themed picture book tells the story of Nate, a boy who wants to dress up as an alien for Purim, the Jewish holiday that celebrates the deliverance of the Jewish people by Queen Esther, while all his classmates are dressing up as superheroes.[1] His supportive dads, a fact that is not treated as an issue in the picture book, contribute to him achieving a happy conclusion at the close of the book, when Nate ends up with an unusual outfit and his friends approve of his uniqueness. *Willy the Champ* features an anthropomorphic ape, half the size of his peers, who is tirelessly trying to join in with his peers in sports events, though in vain. Nonetheless, he boasts of a fierce determination to persevere, up to the point of being the only one in facing up to, and beating quite by chance, Buster Nose, a behemoth almost the size of King Kong. As a result, he is finally cheered and acclaimed as the Champ. The last picture book in this sample text is *Tough Boris*. Appearances are deceiving in this beautiful pirate book. Boris is the ship's captain and, although his outer shell makes him and his peers look tough as old boots, by the end of the picture book it will be unveiled that they are not. A sweet picture book that deconstructs the preconceived idea that pirates (and by extension boys) cannot be humane and tender.

3.3 The Representation of Participants and Processes in the Verbal Mode
To start with and bearing Halliday's taxonomy for process types in mind, in this section we analyse the processes associated with the male protagonists of the five stories in the verbal mode. As shown in table 2, the representation of the narrated events in language is conveyed mainly through material and mental processes. In fact, 36.67% of the tokens identified in the sample texts are material and 36.09% are mental. The picture book *10,000 Dresses* can be used to exemplify this fact. Through transitive mental processes Bailey's feelings and true desires are made explicit: "With all her heart, Bailey loved the dress made of crystals that flashed rainbows in the sun" (double spread 3). In addition, through material processes, used both transitively and intransitively, Bailey, who usually plays the role of actor, gets his true desires come true and finally meets a female friend, Laurel, who accepts him without imposing any restriction on his inner self: "Bailey ran and ran. She ran all the way to the end of the block, until she came to a house with a big blue porch […]. Together the girls made two new dresses" (double spreads 12-13).

---

[1] Although The *Purim Superhero* is a picture book that deals with the Jewish community, ethnicity is not considered a relevant cultural factor in the analysis carried out in this study. Note that the actions carried out by the main character in this picture book take place on the Jewish holiday.

TABLE 2. Process types in the verbal mode: absolute and relative values

	Material	Mental	Verbal	Relational	Behavioural	TOTALS
Transitive	28	42	16	0	7	93 (53.45%)
Intransitive	36	21	1	19	4	81 (46.55%)
TOTALS	64 (36.67%)	63 (36.09%)	18 (10.23%)	19 (10.80%)	11 (6.21%)	174

The prevalence of material and mental processes allows the transgender boy's tenacious personality to be portrayed in her quest to achieve his real dream. Bailey never gives up in his attempt to slip into a dress despite the rejection of this notion by the three other family members: his father, mother and brother. Thus, as the story develops we see how Bailey keeps on repeating, first with his mum, then his dad and, finally, his brother, his dreams about dresses. In return, all he gets is sheer indifference by his parents ("Uh-huh") and scorn from his brother: "That's gross" (double spread 11). Nonetheless, as the protagonist does not give up trying, he finally meets a neighbour, Laurel, with whom he finds mutual understanding and together they succeed in making and wearing two new dresses covered with mirrors of different shapes and sizes. It is also noticeable that from the very first time that Bailey is referred to by pronominalization, the character turns into a "she" ("<u>She</u> would never have a dress"), and when the third person singular possessive pronoun is required, "her" is employed ("She went to find <u>her</u> brother"). These language choices are anything but unintentional and they contribute to anticipating the tale's resolution.

The analysis of transitivity in *Willy the Champ* reveals that process distribution is also predominantly material, although mental and relational processes are noticeably present in the story too. Most of the material processes in which Willy is involved are intransitive, which suggests that the character has to face his lack of ability in sports and the bullying and mockery of the other gorillas on his own, almost in isolation. Even when Willy is bullied by Buster Nose he has to face the situation alone: "Buster threw a vicious punch. Willy ducked…. Then he stood up… " (double spreads 16-18). As shown in this example, it is also through intransitive material processes that the story twists at the end to show a completely different Willy who stands up to his bully (both literally and figuratively—figure 3) and is pronounced champion on his defeat of Buster Nose. The only transitive behavioural process identified in this story, "laugh", reflects Willy as a bullied victim when other gorillas laugh at him at the cinema as he cries while watching the film, *Lassie Gets Lost*: "But it was always the same. Nearly everyone laughed at him—no matter what he did" (double spread 13).

In turn, mental processes qualify Willy as a peaceful and sensitive character, rather than employing attributes traditionally associated with macho characterization. Willy

is also linguistically associated with non-macho traditional activities such as reading and listening to music: "He *liked to read…*, to *listen to music… and walk in the park with his friend Millie*" (double spreads 2-3; italics added). Finally, relational processes are mainly used in this story to describe Willy as a rather emotional, weak and non-sporty little ape ("[he] wasn't good at soccer"). Willy is mainly construed as a wimp and a meek gorilla that does not seem to be good at anything. No matter how hard he tries to join in with his peer group in sporty activities, the male apes continuously look down on him due to his athletic incompetence. Although relational processes describe Willy's lack of ability to do sports, it is through a relational process that he is finally defined as a hero in the penultimate illustration, and when he defeats Buster Nose: "Willy was the Champ."

There is also a predominance of material and mental processes over the other types in *The Purim Superhero* and *Ballerino Nate*. In the former, for example, material and mental processes contribute to shaping the main character, regarding his dilemma in terms of his participation in the costume for the Purim celebration. Transitive material processes essentially transmit a sense of movement, action and sequential events carried out by the main character (*pick up*, *scrunched up*, *put on*, etc.) until Nate finally, following the advice of his dads, remains faithful to his inner feelings and decides to put on the alien costume he really likes: "He put on the alien suit that Abba [Nate's sister] had sewed, and the antenna and mask Daddy had bought" (double spread 15). In turn, mental processes also play a key role in the construction of the story and are mainly composed of volitional verbs (*love*, *miss*, *want*, *wish*) that allow Nate to express his desire to dress up as an alien: "Nate loved aliens, he loved to read about them" (second illustration). Finally, verbal processes also contribute to voicing Nate's inner dilemma: "Abba? Nate asked, Do you ever just to want to be like everybody else?" (seventh illustration). Through them Nate wonders about his quandary: fitting in or being true to himself and wearing an alien costume to celebrate the Purim festival.

The transitivity patterns adopted in the other picture books analysed so far are not, however, maintained in the last story, *Tough Boris*. Unlike the other stories, the transitivity analysis carried out reveals a preponderance of relational processes, which is logical since the scant text of this picture book refers to the personal attributes of pirate Boris (the carrier). Through relational processes Brown describes the qualities that are traditionally associated with pirates: strong ("He was tough"), huge ("He was massive"), untidy ("He was scruffy"), avaricious ("He was greedy"), brave ("He was fearless") and frightening ("He was scary"). However, this serial description of the fierceness of pirates through relational processes ends up with the death of Boris's parrot, which breaks his heart. The behavioural process, *cry*, reveals the tenderest feature of pirate Boris's personality: "But when his parrot died, then he cried and cried. All pirates cry" (double spreads 14-18).

3.4. The Representation of Reality in the Visual Mode

As reflected in table 3, there is a predominance of embedded images over the other types (68.23% of the tokens identified), as most of the illustrations combine both action and reaction processes. In turn, as will be shown later, verbal and mental processes, although smaller in number (7.48% of the token analysed for each category), also play a key role in the representation of the main characters in three of the picture books: *Ballerino Nate*, *The Purim Superhero* and *Tough Boris*. Finally, conceptual images account for only 1.86% of the tokens identified in the illustrations of the five picture books. We will come back to this aspect later.
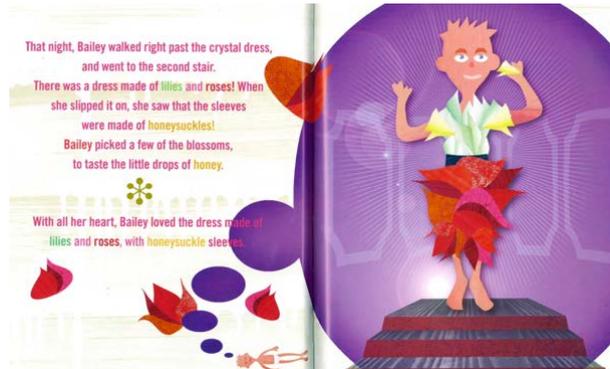
TABLE 3. Analysis of visual patterns in the sample texts

		Transitivity Patterns		Absolute values	Relative values
VISUAL PROCESSES	**Narrative**	**Action** (vector)	Transactional		
			Non transactional	10	9.35%
		Reaction (perception)	Transactional	6	5.60%
			Non transactional		
		Embedded (action plus reaction)	Transactional	73	68.23%
			Non transactional		
	Mental (cognition)			8	7.48%
	Verbal			8	7.48%
	Conceptual			2	1.86%

Let us analyse now how the choice of these specific visual transitivity patterns affects the representation of the fictional world in the picture books which portray boys who do not necessarily conform to macho stereotypes. In *10,000 Dresses*, the RPs are four members of a family (Bailey, his parents and brother) and a girl neighbour. Although there is a preponderance of embedded images involving action and reaction processes in the story, mental processes, through which the illustrator shows Bailey's dreams projected in thought bubbles, also play a crucial role in the representation of the main character's desire to wear dresses (double spreads 2, 3, 6 and 9). These pictures show several, increasingly larger balloons, emerging from Bailey's head to visually symbolise how he expresses his inner feelings. Figure 2 provides an example. Bailey's dream is projected in a mental process of cognition through a dream bubble. The bubble is also an analytical image, as it shows Bailey, the transgender boy, wearing an outrageous colourful dress. He stands on top of the stairs in the middle foreground of the picture. Besides, in the background, what appears to be a spotlight is emitting bright beams as if Bailey

were a supermodel on a catwalk. His face is happy and smiley. The central foreground position, the background beaming rays and the striking colourfulness of the dress make up the prominence that is intended to be given to Bailey's representation in this mental analytical-conceptual image. This array of features (mental plus analytical) contributes to fulfilling the illustrator's purpose of highlighting Bailey's transgenderism.

FIGURE 2. Bailey's dream about a dress made of flowers (Illustration from *10,000 Dresses* by Marcus Ewert and Rex Ray. Copyright © Seven Stories Press 2008)

In this story the use of scale is essential to express both the physical and emotional distance between Bailey and his relatives. Every time Bailey appears with any of them (mother, father or brother) he always occupies a distant position in the background and is represented on a diminished scale, while his relatives, standing in the foreground with their backs towards the reader, are represented as faceless giants. Ray's illustrations feature Bailey as significantly smaller than his relatives to visually convey his family's reluctance to admit his transgenderization. Indeed, he always receives the same negative answer to his requests: "Boys don't wear dresses!" (double spread 5). The lack of eye contact between Bailey and his mother (or his father or brother) emphasises his isolation and distance. Therefore, these transactional, but unidirectional, reaction pictures reinforce the idea that Bailey, and therefore transgenders, are alone and outcast. Finally, conceptual images are also used in the last double spreads of *10,000 Dresses*. In them, several windows and mirrors reflect Bailey and Laurel's faces. They appear smiling and happy. Eventually, outside the home, Bailey finds the long-sought acceptance and approval of his true self thanks to Laurel, an older girl who helps him to promote his creative visions.

Following the general transitive pattern of the other picture books, *Willy the Champ* exhibits several types of visual processes, embedded images being the most predominant. The climax of the plot comes when Buster Nose, the biggest bully,

appears on the scene, terrifying all the boys, all except Willy quickly fleeing. Action and reaction processes show how the story develops. Unexpectedly, Willy gets trapped between a wall and Buster Nose. When the latter attempts to punch Willy, he ducks and quite unintentionally, on standing up again, knocks Buster out. Short repeated motion horizontal or diagonal lines masterfully represent the movements of Buster's punch and Willy's body movements in these embedded action plus reaction images (see figure 3). So, words and images combine together in perfect synergy to emphasise that bullying can be defeated since Willy, extremely scared by Buster's appearance, becomes the champ without using violence, simply by avoiding the bully's attack. Willy, despite being terrified of Buster, becomes the champion through his avoidance of violence. Finally, the second-to-last image portrays Willy on the shoulders of his giant peers who are joyfully looking up at him, establishing eye contact vectors to show their admiration through a transactional embedded narrative process.
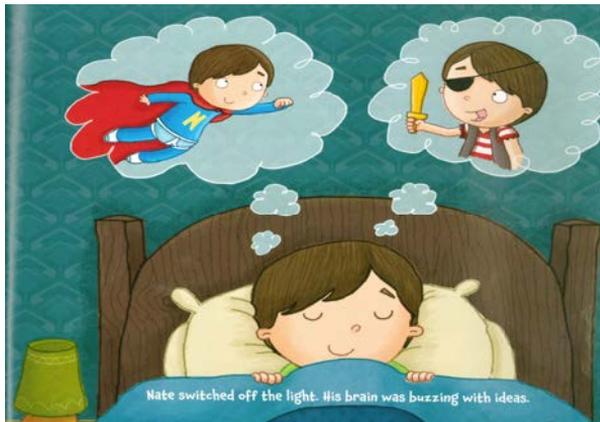
FIGURE 3. Buster Nose attacking Willy (Illustration from *Willy The Champ* by Anthony Browne. Copyright © Walker Books 2008)

As seems to be the transitive pattern in the picture books analysed so far, in *The Purim Superhero*, most of the double spreads are also transactional embedded images, combined in this case with verbal or communication processes, as the participants are usually depicted with their mouths open. This highlights the interaction that is established between Nate and his dads and his friends. In double spread 1, for example, Nate and Max, one of his mates at school, establish eye-line vectors in a transactional embedded image while they paint a mask and chat in a gesture of mutual understanding. In double spread 4, we observe Nate having dinner and commenting to one of his dads his dilemma between following his preference for dressing up as an alien or fitting in with the rest of the group and dressing up as a superhero. It is precisely when Nate interacts with his parents that

his dad acts as a supportive father, a fact that is shown through a transactional embedded narrative image. Daddy reinforces Nate's inner self but leaves the final decision up to him. In the ninth and tenth illustrations, Nate and Daddy are connected through eye vectors while Daddy is caressing his son's hair. Transactional embedded and verbal processes illustrate the good relationship that exists between Nate and one of his parents (left-hand side of double spread). That night, Nate goes to sleep still hesitating about his decision. In this scene, a visual mental process of cognition allows the reader to see the four-year-old boy dreaming about his dilemma, represented by two cloud-shaped balloons coming from his head (right-hand side of the double spread). One balloon depicts him dressed as a superhero, and the other, him dressed as a pirate.

FIGURE 4. Nate's inner dilemma represented in his dream (Illustration from *The Purim Superhero* by Elisabeth Kushner and Mike Byrne. Copyright © Kar-Ben Publishing 2013)

Similarly, double spread 16 of *Ballerino Nate* provides another example of an embedded process which combines reaction images with verbal and mental processes of cognition. In this case, Nate is crying while his father and brother are looking at him. Thought balloons emerge from his dad's head while he is talking to the little boy. Nate's father tries to comfort his crying son and make him see that, as in ballet, his brother Ben's league team has both boys and girls. This idea is projected through a thought bubble which shows Ben's team formed by two girls and six boys. The combination of reaction (eye-contact between Nate and his father), verbal (mouths open suggesting communication) and mental processes of cognition (the thought bubbles) highlight the interaction that is established between Nate and his supportive dad in the visual mode.

    In *Tough Boris*, most of the illustrations are also embedded as they involve action and reaction processes. Indeed, while the verbal text limits itself to describing the qualities that are traditionally associated with pirates (bravery, selfishness, greediness, etc.), the

images progressively offer visual clues that make the reader wonder about a softer side to Boris. Most of these features are presented in transactional embedded processes where actions take place. The last few pictures, sometimes with no verbal text, show Boris and his crew crying over the parrot's death. It seems, after all, that all pirates cry and can show their feelings, a feature which is not traditionally associated with masculinity. Overall, the visual narrative contributes, along with the verbal mode, to developing the plot by showing the classical attributes of pirates, save the unexpected sentimental ending.

3.5. The Synergy between Images and Words to Construct Reality

Up to this point, we have spotlighted the separate strategies employed by two diverse and rich semiotic modes, the visual and the verbal, to construe meaning. Now, in order to see the interrelation between the visual and the verbal in the sample texts, we will follow Painter et al.'s intersemiotic approach (2013) to decipher whether the semantic contribution of each mode helps to strengthen the overall message and the character representations that each of the verbal and visual components convey on their own. Based on table 1, we will make comparisons between the commitment and couplings established between each mode to construe meaning.

The complementarity between images and words is constant throughout the five picture books. Sometimes, images and verbiage tend to commit similar meanings, as the meaning potential actualised by the verbal and visual systems of transitivity is similar across semiotic modes. As stated before, in *10,000 Dresses*, for example, both material and mental processes are used to represent the narrated events and Bailey's struggle to find support for his desire to wear dresses. In turn, in correspondence with the types of processes identified in the verbiage, there is a preponderance of embedded images that combine action and reaction processes in the visual mode, as when Bailey tells his mother about his dreams in the kitchen while she is cutting out coupons. Through them, the illustrator depicts Bailey's determination to have his heart's desire come true.

However, this repeated co-patterning of realisations from the verbal and visual systems of transitivity across the two modalities within the text is sometimes rather altered in the visual mode. This is due to the added conceptual analytical nature of the illustrations which depict Bailey's dreams projected in bubbles (double spreads 2, 3, 6 and 9). As stated in section 3.4, these illustrations show several balloons emerging from Bailey's head to visually show him wearing the outrageous dresses of his dreams. In this imaginative mind, Bailey dreams of three dresses that are visually depicted in a prominent central position and emitting sparkling colourful rays. The first dress appears in the third illustration and the subsequent textual description faithfully matches its image. In Ewert's own words: "When Bailey slipped the dress on, the crystals clinked against each other like millions of tiny bells." Although through this concurrent coupling image and text work collaboratively and commit very similar meanings, the conceptual analytical nature of the illustration adds

meaning to the message transmitted by the text alone, letting the viewer appreciate Bailey's beauty and happiness when he wears the dress. Is there anything wrong with Bailey's true desires and real nature? Definitely not.

Overall, the analysis of the verbal and visual modes in *The Purim Superhero* and *Ballerino Nate* shows a balanced contribution of both modalities in meaning making. Thus, we witness a convergence of commitment and coupling across both modes. In *The Purim Superhero*, for example, the most common action and reaction images, sometimes combined with verbal processes (mouths of RPs open), are aligned with the majority of material, mental and verbal transitivity processes identified in the verbiage. An example of this convergence is to be found in the second illustration of the picture book where Nate is holding a crayon in front of a picture of an alien and the accompanying text reads: "Nate loved aliens. Nate loved to draw them." This representation clearly shows a similar degree of commitment of the options actualised from the verbal and visual transitivity systems across both modes. Despite this convergence in ideational meaning, on occasions text and images diverge to construct the story and the characters. While the verbal mode makes explicit Nate's dilemma (to dress up as an alien or as a superhero) in terms of his participation in the Purim celebration, it is through action and eye-contact narrative images that the illustrator evidences the backing and support of Nate's dads to their son and daughter, Nate and Abba. Although this aspect is not explicitly referred to in the verbal mode, the verbal processes of communication (most of the illustrations depict the characters with their mouths open) show the interactions established between Nate and his parents and also between him and his friends at school. Following his parents' advice, Nate finally decides to go as an alien and be faithful to his real desire. This engagement between the characters in the story is made more evident in the visual than in the verbal mode.

Another example of divergence is provided in double spread 17 of *Ballerino Nate*. In this illustration the text announces that "on Monday they went to the ballet school," but without specifying who went. The reader has to look at the illustration to find out that Nate's mum took him and his brother, Ben, to the ballet school, thus making the protagonist's dream come true (eighteenth illustration). In this instance, neither modality on its own is able to carry the complete representational meaning of the picture book. Readers need to draw their own conclusions and make their own ethical judgements about what they are witnessing and reading.

In *Willy the Champ* the overall meaning is intricately woven with varying degrees of the visual and verbal in this intersemiosis. Evidence of divergence between images and words in this picture book is the surrealism represented in some of the illustrations, which is not at all reflected in the linguistic component. The fourth illustration presents a transactional embedded narrative process in which Willy is depicted peacefully walking in the park and holding hands with his friend Millie. Meanwhile, in the background, there is a macho gorilla swinging from a tree rope, a gorilla dressed up as Santa who kicks a ball across the grass and another wearing a tuxedo who tows a banana as if walking a

dog. The verbal mode limits itself to this information: "and walk in the park with his friend, Millie." Through a hyper-realistic pictorial style, Browne creates a weird mixture of fiction and reality that gives the reader room for various personal interpretations.

Finally, in *Tough Boris* the relationship between the verbal and visual modes is more uneven than in the previous picture books. The visual clearly outweighs the verbal since just a few words are combined with many colourful images that speak volumes. Certainly, the relational processes that prevail in the verbal mode to describe the hard qualities that are traditionally attached to pirates (greedy, scruffy, fearless, etc.), have a reflection in the visual mode in terms of the transactional embedded action-reaction images, which also illustrate the fierceness of pirates. However, images gradually provide the reader with another kind of information, such as Boris's special sensitivity for music and pets (he plays the violin and loves his parrot). The death of Boris's parrot breaks his heart and the visual reader witnesses Boris and other pirates crying for their beloved bird. The visual mode anticipates Boris's sensitivity, reflected in wordless pictures (double spreads 15 and 17), before the verbal text announces that pirates also cry. The divergent complementarity between images and words highlights the message transmitted in the story: men do cry, including pirates, thus breaking with stereotypes traditionally associated with masculinity.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of this study was to identify the verbal and visual strategies available to writers and illustrators at the representational level with which to challenge gender stereotypes in a sample of five picture books. The stories are remarkable instantiations of bi-modal works that offer a particular vision of masculinity and subvert stereotyped social constructs. So, we find a boy who longs to wear dresses, a primate with sensitive tastes, a boy who likes dancing, a Jewish boy who breaks with tradition and, finally, a fierce pirate who weeps. All our male protagonists challenge the traditionally assigned gender roles in these picture books, where the verbal and the visual modes complement each other to generate progressive discourses in favour of gender equality and social acceptance.

The transitivity analysis of the verbal mode reveals that process distributions are predominantly material or mental in all of the picture books except one, *Tough Boris*, in which relational processes prevail. Certainly, relational processes commit more than the other process types in this picture book and they are used to describe the attributes traditionally assigned to pirates. However, the illustrations in this story are essentially embedded (action plus reaction processes), and therefore follow the co-patterning most commonly identified in the other picture books. Relational processes also play a key function in *Willy the Champ*; they portray Willy as a tender and non-sporty character throughout the book, although an unexpected twist at the end turns him into the cheered champ.

Coming back to material processes, the most predominant of all types, through them the male characters of the stories face bullying (*Willy the Champ*) and the lack of understanding and support by their own family members (*10,000 Dresses*). Material processes also show the characters' struggle to make their dreams come true (*Ballerino Nate*) or the quandary of either being true to themselves or fitting in with their peer group (*The Purim Superhero*). The occurrence of mental processes is also notable in the sample texts. Through them the male characters express their inner wishes. In *10,000 Dresses*, for example, mental processes reflect the main character Bailey's determination to achieve his goal of wearing a dress. This display of being strong-willed enough to fulfil a dream is also shown by Nate in *Ballerino Nate*; in his case that of becoming a ballet dancer.

The transitivity analysis of the visual mode shows that transactional embedded images involving action and reaction are the most common options actualised from the system of visual processes in the five picture books. This seems to be in consonance with the material and mental process types identified in the verbal mode of the stories. However, the transactional nature of reaction and mental processes of cognition evidence the interaction (or the lack of it) that is established between the male characters and their families more clearly than the verbal mode in stories such as *The Purim Superhero* and *Ballerino Nate*. Through reaction and mental processes, we see the male characters, both named Nate, establishing eye-contact vectors with their relatives in a sign of mutual understanding. Similarly, transactional reaction processes clearly evidence the eye-contact that is established between Boris and his parrot in *Tough Boris* and even in the bullying situation the protagonist in *Willy the Champ* has to face when he is attacked by Buster Nose or laughed at by other male characters. In contrast, in *10,000 Dresses*, we observe transactional, but non-directional, reaction narrative images that symbolise the lack of family support of the main character, Bailey, who finally dares to venture outside his home to find understanding and support. None of the members of his family, represented metonymically and faceless, make eye-contact with him. It is essentially through mental processes of perception and cognition, combined with analytical images, that the transgenderism of the male character is made salient. Finally, in *Tough Boris*, although on occasions the verbal and the visual commit similar meanings, the visually transmitted content is, by far, much richer than the verbal, revealing that pirate Boris is not as fierce and tough as he initially seems.

All in all, the meaning load carried by illustrations provides essential cues for the reader to construct the personality and desires of the male characters and contributes, to a greater extent than the verbal mode, to encouraging progressive gender discourses in favour of diversity and social acceptance. This may be due to the complexity of the visual processes used in the stories. These involve both action (vectors of movement) and reaction (eye-contact vectors) processes, combined with mental processes of cognition (dream and thought bubbles) and verbal processes, which help to intensify the meaning transmitted by the verbal mode. It seems that the concept of embedded processes

(Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) needs to be extended to other groupings, including action and reaction processes blended with verbal and mental processes of cognition, to understand the meaning potential of the images in children's picture books.[2]

Works Cited

Armengol, Josep María. 2014. "Alternative Masculinities in Richard Ford's Fiction and / versus Susanne Bier's in a Better World." In Carabí and Armengol 2014, 131-44.

Bowker, Lynne and Jennifer Pearson. 2002. *Working with Specialized Language. A Practical Guide to Using Corpora*. London and New York: Routledge.

Carabí, Àngels and José M. Armengol, eds. 2014. *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion and Keith Morrison, eds. 2007. *Research Methods in Education*. London and New York: Routledge.

Evans, Janet, ed. 2015. *Challenging and Controversial Picture books. Creative and Critical Responses to Visual Texts*. London and New York: Routledge.

Fairclough, Norman. 2003. *Analysing Discourse: Text Analysis for Social Research*. London and New York: Routledge.

Halliday, Michael Alexander Kirkwood. 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold.

—. 2004. *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 3rd ed. London: Edward Arnold.

Kress, Gunther and Theo van Leeuwen. (1996) 2006. *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*. London and New York: Routledge.

Lewis, David. 2001. *Reading Contemporary Picture books: Picturing Text*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mills, Sara. 1995. *Feminist Stylistics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Moebius, William. 1986. "Introduction to Picture Book Codes." *Word and Image* 2: 141-58.

Moya-Guijarro, Arsenio Jesús. 2014. *A Multimodal Analysis of Picture Books for Children: A Systemic Functional Approach*. London: Equinox.

Moya-Guijarro, Arsenio Jesús and Cristina Cañamares Torrijos, eds. 2020. *Libros álbum que desafían los estereotipos de género y el concepto de familia tradicional. Análisis semiótico y multimodal*. Cuenca: Arcadia.

Moya-Guijarro, Arsenio Jesús and Eija Ventola, eds. 2022. *Challenging Gender Stereotypes and the Traditional Family Unit. Analysing Children's Picture Books Multimodally*. London and New York: Routledge.

Nikolajeva, Maria and Carole Scott. 2001. *How Picturebooks Work*. New York: Garland Publishing.

Nodelman, Perry. 1988. *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books*. Athens: U of Georgia P.

Painter, Clare, Jim Martin and Len Unsworth. 2013. *Reading Visual Narratives: Image Analysis of Children's Picture Books*. Sheffield: Equinox.

Pinar, María Jesús, ed. 2015. *Multimodality and Cognitive Linguistics*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Santamaría-García, Carmen. 2020. "Un análisis semiótico y multimodal de relaciones de interacción en libros álbum que desafían los estereotipos de género femeninos." In Moya-Guijarro and Cañamares Torrijos 2020, 49-76.

Serafini, Frank. 2010. "Reading Multimodal Texts: Perceptual, Structural and Ideological Perspectives." *Children's Literature in Education* 41: 85-104.

Sinclair, John 1991. *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Sipe, Lawrence. 2012. "Revisiting the Relationship between Text and Pictures." *Children's Literature in Education* 43 (1): 4-21.

Starc, Sonja, Carys Jones and Ariannna Maiorani, eds. 2015. *Meaning Making in Text: Multimodal and Multilingual Functional Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stoian, Claudia. 2015. "Meaning in Images: Complexity and Variation across Cultures." In Starc, Jones and Maiorani 2015, 152-69.

Sunderland, Jane. 2012. *Language, Gender and Children's Fiction*. London: Continuum.

Unsworth, Len. 2006. "Towards a Metalanguage for Multiliteracies Education: Describing the Meaning-Making Resources of Language-Image Interaction." *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* 5 (1): 55-76.

Varantola, Krista. 2002. "Disposable Corpora as Intelligent Tools in Translation." *Cuadernos de Tradução* 9: 171-89.

Sources Used (Picture Books)

Bradley, Kimberly Brubaker and Ray Alley. 2006. *Ballerino Nate*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers.

Brown, Anthony. (1985) 2008. *Willy the Champ*. London: Walker Books.

Ewert, Marcus and Rex Ray. 2008. *10,000 Dresses*. New York: Seven Stories Press.

Fox, Mem and Kathryn Brown. (1994) 1998. *Tough Boris*. Orlando: Voyager Books.

Kushner, Elisabeth and Mike Byrne. 2013. *The Purim Superhero*. Minneapolis: Kar-Ben Publishers.

Jesús Moya-Guijarro is a Professor at the University of Castilla-La Mancha. He has published several articles on multimodal discourses in international journals such as *Atlantis*, *Review of Cognitive Linguistics*, *Word*, *Functions of Language*, *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Text and Talk*. Among other books, he is co-editor of *A Multimodal Approach to Challenging Gender Stereotypes in Children's Picture Books* (Routledge, 2022).

Roberto Martínez Mateo is a Lecturer at the Faculty of Education in the University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain. He has published research papers in renowned national and international journals (*Miscelanea*, *Ocnos*, *Perspectives: Studies in Translatology*, *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, etc.) and contributed to a number of edited volumes (*Translating Picturebooks* - Routledge, *Taboo in Discourse* - Peter Lang).