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This is a contribution from *Emergent Literacy. Children's books from 0 to 3.*

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CHAPTER 1

Emergent literacy and children's literature

Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer

This volume touches upon issues at the heart of emergent literacy studies: how do we know what very young children aged from 10 months to three years – at least in Western countries – learn by joint looking at pictures in picturebooks or by intensively listening to a children's book story? What are the mental prerequisites that enable such learning processes? The process usually starts when children aged 10 to 12 months first encounter picturebooks. Since young children at this age do not know what to do with a picturebook, they first have to learn the "rules of book-behaviour" (Lewis 2001:78) in interaction with an adult mediator. This includes sitting still, turning the pages, holding the book in the correct position, and looking carefully at the pictures. In fact, young children's first actions might consist in scratching at the paper and pointing at the pictures, and their first utterances might be gurgles and sounds of joy and surprise before they start to name the depicted objects. However, involvement with picturebooks at this early age is mainly determined by joint looking at the images, usually with parents and other carers. These first encounters with picturebooks exert a great influence on the child's developing sense of literacy, as has been demonstrated by scholars such as Jones (1996), Kress & van Leeuwen (1996), Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer (2005), Lowe (2007), Nikolajeva (2003), Ninio (1983), Snow & Goldfield (1983) and Whitehead (2004).

Despite this, studies in emergent literacy research dealing with the impact of picturebooks on children under three are extremely rare – White (1954), Butler (1979; 1980) and Crago & Crago (1983) were among the first academics to take book sharing with infants and toddlers seriously. Indeed, the majority of early literacy projects and studies refer to the cognitive, emotional and aesthetic input of picturebooks and other children's books on kindergarten children and preschool children, i.e. children aged four to six (Braun 1995; Dickinson & Neuman 2007; Goswami 1998; Hall et al. 2003; McCartney & Philips 2006; Marsh & Hallet 2008; Tucker 1990).

There are various reasons for neglecting the study of emergent literacy in the first two to three years of life. Firstly, picturebooks published for this target

group are deceptively simple: they do not contain any text, or include only short texts denoting the depicted objects or describing the scenes in the pictures. They lack the complex text-picture relationship typical of picturebooks for older children. Secondly, it is exceptionally difficult to work with children under three and with books addressed to this audience, since an empirical researcher has limited possibilities of eliciting and interpreting reader responses to books because of young children's restricted vocabulary and general knowledge. This means it is not easy to design questionnaires for investigating young children's understanding of picturebooks. They have not yet fully acquired the ability to communicate their feelings, impressions and comprehension problems verbally, let alone to answer complex questions. Thirdly, the neglect of children's books for very young children in the academic world subtly influences the situation – even today, the majority of scholars, educationalists and other caretakers underestimate the fundamental impact of these first picturebooks on the young child's emerging sense of literacy. Academics working in the realm of children's literature research do not consider these first picturebooks as an essential part of their field of study, since these books usually lack written text. This has led to the assumption that the books are not basic contributions to literature in a general sense, but are seen rather as “learning toys,” as Apseloff (1987) has suggested. Although picturebooks for children under three years of age introduce children to the book format and a variety of topics and illustrations, stimulate their imagination, initiate verbalization and create intimacy between adult mediator and child, they are still underrated and their investigation is not regarded as a serious enterprise.

Given this, the following essay will discuss the actual nature of books for children under three, why they are so important for research in the realm of language acquisition, literacy studies and cognitive studies, and how they might contribute fresh insights into young children's cognitive, linguistic, and aesthetic development.

Children's books from 0 to 3

There is no consensus on how to classify books for children aged under three. These types of book are generally subsumed under the heading of “baby books”; yet this term is far too broad as it covers all the books written and published for children aged from approximately 10 months to two or three years. Moreover, this label applies to a whole range of both fictional and nonfictional works, including early-concept books, picture dictionaries, movable books, pop-up books, toy books, song books, coloring books and books to read aloud. These books always have illustrations to catch the eye of the small child, while many

have only a short text or no text at all. There is still no concise classification of these books and their different functions (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2006b and Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer in the present volume). It is clear, however, that the books appear to encourage language acquisition, visual literacy, and acquisition of general knowledge on topics such as food, hygiene, nature, animals, colors, etc. (Ganea et al. 2008; Ganea et al. 2011; Siegal 2008).

To appeal to very young children, picturebooks are often disguised as play-things. Some offer the possibility of lifting up flaps on the pages; others combine picturebook and stuffed animal or puzzle, stimulating the child to use the picturebook as a tool. Other kinds of picturebook contain inserts of fluffy clothes and sparkling surfaces that invite the child to touch the pages and clothes. There are also picturebooks that make animal noises when the child turns the pages or pushes buttons. Some picturebooks are shaped like a car, a ball, a cube or an animal, previewing the book's general content. These types stress the picturebook's materiality on the one hand, and its synesthetic quality on the other. They encourage the young child to make use of different senses in looking at the pictures, listening to the sounds, and touching the different materials. The variety of forms and materials mean that people are sometimes puzzled as to how to classify these products. Are they still books, or are they toys? Or a hybrid of book and toy? The impact of these picturebook-objects on the young child's book concept has not been investigated yet, and remains a desirable topic for future study.

Children typically encounter the first wordless picturebooks when they are about one year old. One reason for the dawning interest in picturebooks is that children start to master their first words at this age. This is the beginning of the acquisition of the early lexicon consisting of approx. 50 words (Clark 2003). The first picturebooks depict objects from the young child's surroundings, which have been coined "early-concept books" (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer 2005). It is clear that many picturebooks are arranged according to conceptual classes or domains, i.e. toys, animals, vehicles, food, and even abstract conceptual classes, such as letters, numbers, and sizes. All this supports the young child's acquisition of concepts (Murphy 2002). Another type of book depicts scenes and locations such as shopping at the market, eating breakfast in the kitchen, or life and work on a farm, stimulating the acquisition of cognitive scripts and schemata. One specific type of wordless picturebook is the "wimmelbook" ("busy book"), a neologism coined by German publishers to describe the fact that the images are crammed with figures and scenes. Wimmelbooks stimulate the young child to look carefully at the pictures and to narrate the events depicted in the images (see the chapter by Remí in the present volume). The wimmelbook demands high standards of visual literacy, and presents a kind of threshold to picturebooks containing a story or narrative (with or without text). Even the

“I Spy” books share some elements with the wimmelbook, since they encourage the child to look for objects on the pictures, which may be hidden behind flaps that have to be lifted.

Although books for very young children rarely feature a progressive narrative, short, simple texts are found in illustrated books that either contain rhymes and poems for children or tell a short story. These books with traditional jingles, finger plays, lullabies, riddles or nursery rhymes, often supplemented by musical scores, form the young child’s first poetry experience and give her aesthetic pleasure (Foy 2003; Scott in the present volume). Their brevity and strongly accentuated rhymes and rhythm foster memorability. Such verses can also be regarded as concise narratives of four to six lines that prepare the listening child for longer, more complex texts (see Ahrens in the present volume). At about three years of age children are normally accustomed to a simple concept of story such as Eric Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969), which has an episodic structure centered on one main figure.

These picturebook narratives presuppose that the child has already acquired the ability to understand a simple story, either told orally or read aloud by an adult mediator. Moreover, as several scholars have demonstrated, children aged three are usually able to tell a short, simple story, building a bridge between the child’s ability to understand a story and the child’s capacity to narrate a story herself (Bamberg 1997; Boueke et al. 1995). However, while picturebook narratives are considered a seminal step towards the acquisition of literacy, we are still in the fledgling stage as regards analysis of the impact of images in general on the young child’s developing concepts of “literature” and “story,” and particularly of the effect of wordless picturebooks for young children such as early-concept books or wimmelbooks.

Research on emergent literacy

In an ever increasing range of cultural settings, current research reveals the variety and importance of the pre-school experiences and knowledge that children gain from early acquaintance with stories and books. The more we have learned about children’s first approaches to literacy, the more we have been confronted with evidence of the topic’s historical, social, linguistic and psychological complexities (Kümmerling-Meibauer 2006a; Snow 2006). Nevertheless, studies in early literacy usually focus on children over three years old and neglect the impact of children’s books on small children, even infants and toddlers. Although children’s literature research is a rapidly expanding field and picturebook research is especially prominent and dynamic, scholars working in these research areas are

usually not involved in investigating children's books targeted at children under three years of age.

There are a fair number of seminal studies on young children's language acquisition (for example, Bloom 2000; Clark 2003; Tracy 2007), their color preferences (Koerber 2007; Werner in the present volume) and the impact of young children's drawings on their conceptual knowledge about pictures (Golomb 2011; Lancaster 2003; Lancaster 2007). However, there are hardly any investigations on the mutual relationship between language acquisition, emergent literacy, cognitive development and children's literature, especially in relation to picturebooks for the very young. Moreover, a thorough analysis of young children's developing understanding of forms, colors, schemata, and artistic styles – features that determine picturebooks for young children – and the analysis of the influence of wordless picturebooks on the young child's increasing narrative competence would certainly cross-fertilize child psychology, cognitive linguistics, pedagogy, and children's literature research.

While detailed study of children's development dates back to the end of the 18th century, some of the most interesting studies were carried out in the 19th and 20th century. The discovery of small children as a serious audience goes back to Romanticism, especially to Johann Gottfried Herder's concept of early childhood as a lifespan that reflects earlier stages of human development. Interest in the earliest years of the child's development increased during the first half of the 19th century. The educationalists Friedrich Fröbel and Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi claimed that books played a crucial role in early learning by providing accessible images of the world (see the chapter by Deppner in the present volume). In order to spread his newly developed educational theory, Fröbel edited the volume *Mutter und Koselieder* (Mother's Songs, Games, and Stories, 1844), which demonstrates the connection between play and language acquisition and the affection between mother and young child. At the same time, the first picturebooks and movable books for very young children were published (see Kümmerling-Meibauer & Linsmann 2009). Growing interest in the cognitive and psychological development of the young child led to the establishment of child psychology as a new area of research in the 1880s. The German researcher Friedrich Dietrich Tiedemann, who kept a diary about his newborn son at the end of the 18th century, is regarded as a pioneer. The book based on this diary, entitled *Beobachtung über die Entwicklung der Sehfähigkeiten bei Kindern* (Observation on the Development of Children's Visual Faculties), was posthumously published in 1895 and greatly influenced scholars such as Berthold Sigismund, James Sully and W.B. Drummond, who pointed to the remarkable interest of one-year-old children in pictures. Anticipating recent research in child psychology, they discovered that young children prefer pictures with primary colors

that depict single objects from the child's surroundings. Sully also observed that children try to grasp the pictured object from the book page and concluded that they are not yet able to distinguish between real objects and their illustration. The research results were published in newly founded scholarly journals, such as *Babyland* (1876ff.) and *Babyhood* (1883ff.), in order to alert academics and carers to the astonishing cognitive, emotional and aesthetic development of infants and toddlers (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Linsmann 2009). Further research was undertaken during the first half of the 20th century, and gradually accumulated after 1945. By now the distribution of picturebooks for children aged 1 to 3 on the international book market has rapidly increased. A remarkable range of book types for small children has been established. It emphasizes the importance of the preschool years for learning and stimulates the child's knowledge of words, images and concepts. These trends coincide with the growing interest in emergent literacy since the 1980s. Studies in linguistics, cognitive psychology, educational theory and children's literature showed that children's books are fundamental to language acquisition, visual literacy and literary literacy. For example, analysis of joint picturebook reading of parents and small children has demonstrated that it encourages verbal interaction. It also stresses the connection between early book usage and later skills in reading and writing (Hall 1987; Newman & Dickinson 2003; Whitehead 2002).

Since the mid-1980s there has been a revolution in our knowledge of infant cognition: new techniques for exploring what young children know within the first three years of life have revealed striking early abilities in the understanding of both the physical world and abstract concepts like number or sizes, as well as in the development of an awareness of self (Blatt 2007; Nodelman 2010). Over a similar period there have been parallel changes in the study of language acquisition. Both areas – the study of cognitive development and the study of language acquisition – are rich in innovative ideas about what might constitute adequate new theories to cover the fresh ground. For historical reasons these strands of investigations have often grown apart. One reason, perhaps, is that methods of investigation sometimes diverge. Another reason is that, despite many attempts to relate significant stages, there is still a lack of interdisciplinary projects that coordinate these different strands, including literacy studies.

The importance of emergent literacy has also been stressed by the Bookstart Project, initiated in 1993 at the University of Birmingham and designed to investigate book sharing among families with small children. Many similar projects have since been set up throughout the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Belgium, Japan, and other countries.

Since these mechanisms seem far from being properly understood, new interdisciplinary approaches that attempted to link up linguistics, narratology,

semiotics, cognitive psychology and picture theory were established in the 1990s. They demonstrate the close relation between language acquisition, child psychology, visual perception and education. For instance, some studies revealed the impact of theory of mind (TOM) and relative cognitive concepts, such as second order belief, on young children's emotional development (Astington 1994; Wellman 1990). To grasp the multi-dimensional character of this approach, a new theoretical framework was established that attempts to connect the different strands of literacy studies: multimodality or multimodal literacy (Jewitt & Kress 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Kress 1997). Multimodality starts from the theoretical position that treats all modes as equally significant for meaning and communication, although societies and specific communities may prefer certain modes to others. However, multimodality refers to complex relationships such as those between image and text, image and writing, and image and oral storytelling. This is based on the assumption that different modes have potentials that make them better for certain tasks than others. The shift between different modes (for example the interplay between image and sound) might stimulate the ability to develop narratives. While multimodality was applied to case studies dealing with literacy acquisition of children aged three to four and older, there are hardly any investigations that take the multimodal aspects of emergent literacy into consideration.

To demonstrate that a multimodal approach is relevant for the analysis of young children's understanding and reception of books, pictures, and stories, I shall now highlight some aspects of processes that create underlying meaning.

To begin with, the assumption that visual images are easier to interpret than verbal texts has been contradicted by Goldsmith (1984), Kiefer (1995), Kress & van Leeuwen (1996), Nikolajeva & Scott (2001) and Nodelman (1988). Their seminal studies indicate that children have to learn to understand pictures just as they learn to read written texts (Arizpe & Styles 2003; Stewig 1975). Looking closer, we can see that even pictures such as those in early-concept books that show objects from the child's surroundings are quite challenging, since they require the young child to acquire rather complex strategies such as the distinction between figure and ground, the recognition of a three-dimensional object on a two-dimensional surface, and awareness that colors, shapes, and lines are essential parts of illustrated objects. These "picture book conventions" (Nodelman 1988: 35) are not innate, but have to be learned in a lengthy process. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) have shown that even the seemingly plain images in picturebooks for small children disclose "visual codes." Children generally acquire these codes through concentrated looking at pictures in picturebooks. This is ideally supported by adults encouraging the child to focus on the images and verbalize her experiences, which fosters a process of "dialogic reading." This concept emphasizes that visual literacy is strongly connected with

language acquisition, since picturebooks for young children obviously contribute to enlarging the child's early lexicon; but it is also linked to syntactic and pragmatic knowledge (Hofbauer-Horn 2008; Klein & Meibauer 2011; Meibauer 2006; Rhyner 2009). Case studies by Fletcher & Reese (2005), Ezell & Justice (2005), Ninio (1983), Snow & Goldfield (1983), Valdez-Menchaca & Whitehurst (1992) and Whitehurst et al. (1988) have demonstrated that the "dialogic reading" of picturebooks has a question-answer-structure. The adult asks a question, such as, "What is this?" (pointing to a pictured object) or "Where is the ball?" (prompting the child to point at the respective object in the picturebook). Besides the pointing game, the child is encouraged to answer the question by naming the object. If the answer is correct, the adult may confirm this by repeating the child's answer. If the answer is wrong, the adult will certainly correct the child and get her to repeat the right answer (Bloom 2000:67). It is possible to vary and extend this schema, for instance by imitating noises typical of the pictured object. Patterns of this kind have been consistently investigated (Bus 2003; De Temple & Snow 2003; Galda & Liang 2007; Jones 1996; Ninio & Bruner 1978; Moerk 1985; Smiley & Huttenlocher 1995). For example, when pictures display actions done with objects, the question-answer procedure might lead to simple sentences composed of a combination of nouns and verbs (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer in this volume). As the child grows older, the syntactic structure of the utterances may become more complex, supporting the young child's acquisition of sentence structures, such as the structure of "wh" – questions (Blewitt et al. 2009). Moreover, the interaction between adults and children while looking at picturebooks together facilitates the young child's acquisition of pragmatic capacities, for example the ability to understand that a question elicits an answer, and that gestures and questions are clues to starting a communication process (Nachtigäller & Rohlfing 2011; Nachtigäller & Rohlfing in this volume). Children then practice taking their turn in a typical question-answer-format.

The appreciation of rhymes is somewhat different, being overtly connected with the development of phonological awareness (Casalis 2000; Foy 2003). The exploration of rhymes supports young children's developing sense of metalinguistic awareness, i.e. the ability to reflect upon language (Gombert 1992). Some scholars even stress that children benefit from early advancement of phonological awareness, since this capacity facilitates the acquisition of functional literacy, i.e. the ability to read and write. As for other metalinguistic devices, such as metaphor and irony, it is evident that they are fully acquired by the time children are over three years old (Kümmerling-Meibauer 1999; Winner 1988). Some academic specialists claim that metaphors already occur in picturebooks for young children, and that one may distinguish between visual and linguistic metaphors (Rau 2007; see the chapter by Rau in the present volume).

Given these facts, we may assume that any scholar interested in the impact of picturebooks and children's story books on very young children should certainly be keen to know how these books and the related child-adult discussions have the potential to enhance children's understanding of how visual images and the accompanying text manifest meaning. Moreover, for anyone dealing with young children, parents, educationalists, kindergarten teachers, parents and preschool teachers, being able to comprehend the codes and conventions of visual images and narrative strategies will assist understanding of the actual developmental stages of young children, enabling adults to provide learning experiences that can build upon young children's current knowledge and skills.

Consequently, we need many different lines of inquiry to comprehend the relevant processes and investigate how young children come to terms with the great variety of different pursuits.

Main topics in this volume

The chapters in the present collection are revised versions of papers presented at an international conference held at the Picturebook Museum "Burg Wissem" in Troisdorf nearby Cologne, Germany, in March 2009. The conference was funded by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung (Cologne). This offered the rare opportunity to bring together scholars from different countries and different fields, i.e. children's literature research, picturebook theory, art history, linguistics, cognitive psychology and pedagogy; all the participants are pursuing different lines of investigation in this field. This was also the first conference to focus on multidisciplinary approaches, stressing the strong relationship between early literacy and children's books for young readers under three years of age. While there are a number of works on educational and pragmatic aspects of emergent literacy and early literacy, including the use of books, the specific focus of this collection with its mix of approaches and disciplines is intended to fill a gap. We hope it will make a significant contribution to the field and prove useful for scholars as well as practitioners. What is unusual about the present volume is that it constitutes the first serious, sustained examination of the study of children's books for children aged from 0 to 3 with contributions by scholars working in different domains and attempting to assess the recognition of the role and influence of children's literature on the cognitive, linguistic and aesthetic development of young children.

One aim of the collection is to achieve a balance between theoretical, empirical, historical and cross-cultural approaches. The chapters in this volume are linked by many intersecting themes. While a linear structure cannot do justice to this, the chapters are organized into three sections.

Part One addresses fundamental issues about the premises of early literacy, such as the impact of children's drawings on their developing sense of fictionality, the development of color perception in young children and its significance for the recognition and appreciation of colors in picturebooks, and the mutual influence of pedagogical theory, picturebook art and basic design in modern art forms, for example, minimal art and concept art.

Part Two examines the broad range of picturebooks for children under three years of age, ranging from early-concept books through wimmelbooks and ABC books for small children to picturebooks that support the young child's acquisition of behavioral norms. Aspects covered in this section include the use of visual and verbal metaphors in picturebooks for young children, the cognitive challenges of concept acquisition in relation to language acquisition, visual literacy and literary literacy, and the consideration of the aesthetic qualities of picturebooks targeted at this age group. These chapters also acknowledge the interaction between the child and the adult mediator during the process of joint reading.

This provides a natural transition to the third part, which examines questions about the child-book interaction based on meticulous case studies, covering the impact of picturebooks on the emotional and linguistic development of monolingual and bilingual children, the importance of children's play and talk in understanding and developing creative acquaintance with stories, and the influence of the way mothers talk about objects and actions on the young child's awareness of picturebooks displaying objects from the child's surroundings.

Although many of the chapters are closely interconnected, they may be read independently. The reader is invited to follow the trail according to her interests. The principal aim of this collection is to offer fresh insights into the mutual relationship between emergent literacy and children's books targeted at children under three, and to explore what this relationship reveals about young children's developing sense of books, stories, pictures, and their understanding of the world. The contributors to this volume draw on detailed analysis, observations and case studies of children in the age range from ten months to three years to develop theoretical insights that challenge traditional accounts of emergent literacy. A key theme of the collection is that concise understanding of emergent literacy has to be an interdisciplinary endeavor if it is to do justice to the complex, multi-modal and essential nature of the developing ability of young children to grasp pictures and stories in children's books.

A second thread running through the collection is the argument that it is important to study the cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, and linguistic processes that occur when children are immersed in the activity of joint picturebook reading. Many of the contributors to the present volume offer detailed and careful interpretive analyses of these processes, drawing on recent research in this area. Some

contributors adopt a case study approach to back up this argument, drawing on observation of individual children, or pairs and groups of children.

To sum up, the present volume offers the reader a range of new approaches to the epistemological question that opened this introduction, and new perspectives on this question. What we are presenting here is a relatively new field of investigation that is rapidly evolving. It is a subject worth watching for every linguist, cognitive scientist and scholar working in the field of children's studies and children's literature.

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