
Playing with Words

Dav Pilkey's Literary Success in Humorous Language

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Language play is a key component of many children's popular graphic novels. The authors analyze the sound and word play in Dav Pilkey's illustrated Captain Underpants series. They argue that Pilkey's literary devices fall into two main areas of hyperbole and linguistic creativity and that Pilkey's language shifts the reader into a carnivalesque play frame. In Pilkey's work, the use of language contributes to a humorous disconnect between a real word and its distorted counterpart and between real worlds and a parallel sphere of hyperbolic pretend play. **Key words:** language play, literary devices, graphic novels, Captain Underpants, Dav Pilkey

CRITICS SELDOM ADDRESS language play in literature for American children, especially junior fiction for seven- to eleven-year-olds. But such linguistic manipulation adds humor to the literature that often engages reluctant readers, especially boys. Sini Nieminen defines language play as “the play of or with language” and notes that language play, including word play, forms “a deliberate communication strategy used with a specific or pragmatic effect in mind.” According to Anne Plummer, language play manipulates the rules of discourse to create “a metalinguistic game that everyone plays.” Humorous language play often involves deviations from conventional language, such as breaking the rules of politeness. Just as with jokes, to understand and appreciate language play, readers need some knowledge of the culture, subject matter, and the authors' and characters' attitudes; they need to recognize the intent and context of what is communicated; and they need to understand the vocabulary, phrases, and underlying meanings. School age children fall into categories Paul McGhee calls the fourth and fifth stages in the development of humor. By age seven, children begin to appreciate language play such as riddles, puns, and jokes as they develop the ability to restructure mentally events and objects in novel ways

and begin to understand reversals, double entendre, and the different perspectives of characters.^{1,2}

Language play exists in children's poems, skipping rhymes, oral stories, and written literature, but most historical and educational literary reviews and critiques of graphic novels in children's literature emphasize the content of themes, characters, type of humor, satire, irony, and the audience. Rarely do critics provide a detailed linguistic breakdown of the microelements used to create the playful and humorous manipulation of written language. David Rudd does offer some insightful analyses of works by Roald Dahl (best known as the author of *Charley and the Chocolate Factory*) at phonological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic levels but includes only a few literary devices used both in Dahl's work and other junior fiction.³

Current popular junior literature, especially illustrated storybooks, contain the playful manipulation of sounds and letters, the novel and creative use of words and meanings, unusual choices in word order and sentence structure, and variation in the presentation of the written form. Such language use has a major role in creating the humor and fictional story themes, especially when themes include colorful characters, scatology, and preposterous events in several graphic novel series published since 1997 and aimed at audiences from grades three to seven. These include *Timmy Failure* (Stephan Pastis), *Big Nate* (Lincoln Pierce), *Captain Underpants* (Dav Pilkey), *Middle School, the Worst Years of My Life* (James Patterson), *The Odd Squad* (Michael Fry), *The Wayside School* (Louis Sachar), *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Jeff Kinney), *Stink* (Megan McDonald, Peter H. Reynolds, and Nancy Cartwright) and *Dork Diaries* (Rachel Renee Russell). Some language play characterizes the *Amelia Bedelia* series for grades one to five written by Peggy Parish and Herman Parish and illustrated by Fritz Siebel, Lynn Sweat, and Wallace Tripp and the humorous and nonsensical poetry books of Shel Silverstein, John Ciardi, and Steve Attewell.⁴

Captain Underpants as a Case Study

In this article, we offer an in-depth case study of the playful and humorous manipulation of elements of sounds, words, and word combinations and meanings that could be applicable to a range of authors and their junior graphic novels. We use an analysis of Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants* series to illustrate this author's techniques of language play in his writing, such as breaking the rules of

written language through intentional misspellings and grammatical and punctuation errors. In addition, we consider how Pilkey uses conversational language, which when converted into text can sometimes lose many of the vocal features that enhance meaning, such as tone of voice, loudness, the pauses between phrases, and audible stresses on spoken words. In short, we examine the language strategies and literary devices that Pilkey uses to reach his readers, conveying his full communicative repertoire.⁵

Pilkey's series of twelve books, which he refers to as novels, are not only so-called masculine humorous fiction for boys, but they are also characterized by antiauthoritarianism, "gross-out" humor, intentionally poor spelling, visual slapstick, emotional detachment, and cruel humor. In addition to the narrative, each novel contains extensive illustrations, one or more comic-strip sections, and a flip-o-rama for the reader to flip pages quickly to animate the drawings. These illustrated novels, published from 1997 to 2015, are unquestionably popular—the Captain Underpants series has sold more than fifty million copies in the United States and more than seventy million worldwide. The books have been translated into more than twenty languages. The twelve titles range from the first novel called simply the *Adventures of Captain Underpants* to the third novel with the longest title: *Captain Underpants and the Invasion of the Incredibly Naughty Cafeteria Ladies from Outer Space (and the Subsequent Assault of the Equally Evil Lunchroom Zombie Nerds)*. The eighth novel, *Captain Underpants and the Preposterous Plight of the Purple Potty People*, reached number two on some best-seller lists in 2006.⁶

The series spotlights the adventures of two mischievous fourth grade boys who appear ethnically diverse. Extroverted George Beard and introverted Harold Hutchins hypnotize their cranky, and sometimes cruel, school principal, Mr. Krupp, with a device called a 3-D Hypno-Ring. When anyone snaps his or her fingers, Mr. Krupp transforms into Captain Underpants, stripping down to tight white underwear and donning a red cape made from a drape. A humorous super hero, he flies off to save the day, and he turns back into Mr. Krupp only when someone pours water on his head.

Previous analyses and critiques of Pilkey's Captain Underpants series include Joseph Sommer's use of examples of language to explore the phenomena that contribute to the novels' success including heroism and the perspective of the novels as comics. Jackie Stallcup also uses the language content of the Captain Underpants novels to explore Pilkey's subversive and scatological satire, especially its ridicule of adult behavior, its deployment of disgust and

contempt, and its appeal both to adults and children. Roderick McGillis considers the language content in the Captain Underpants series from the perspectives of its intended audience, its narrative voice, its multiculturalism, and its socialization. Like Stallcup, he recognizes that the language content aims at two audiences, especially in its use of puns for names like Mr. Meaner (misdemeanor), Mr. Rected (misdirected) and Miss Labeler (mislabeler). Annette Wannamaker, in her study of pleasure and abjection in the novels, notes that Pilkey uses wordplay “in sophisticated ways” and creates a “verbal playfulness” in his writing, both evidenced by the boys’ switching the letters in signs to give a provocative alternative statement. But she also considers the content and writing to be “childish, lowbrow humor.” She thinks the series’ use of language mainly appeals to children, whom Pilkey treats as an intelligent reader, even if the content occasionally includes references that would be familiar only to adults. In an article on food, language, and power that analyzes food play and linguistic play, Wannamaker mentions a few literary devices such as alliteration, rhyme, and puns, but she primarily focuses on the vocabulary related to food and its context. Finally, Julie Cross looks at the language of the Captain Underpants series from the perspective of humor, considering parody and satire as a way of coping with adult taboos and discomfort. She provides an in-depth analysis of the language in Captain Underpants novels related to types of humor, humor theories, satire, slapstick, and scatology. She discusses humorous properties that include wordplay and puns as part of what she calls “high” rather than “low” levels of humor. She links her description of literary forms primarily to a contemporary subgenre of nonsense that combines the high humor requiring more cognitive processing with low humor such as slapstick, scatology, grotesquery, and verbosity. Although Cross includes examples of neologisms, sounds and rhythms of nonsense, novel verbal combinations, and some forms of wordplay, she does not analyze all types of language play. In all, the previous literature on the subject rarely addresses the use of language play in a detailed microanalysis that explores literary devices and writing style.⁷

Sound Play, Wordplay, and Play with Meaning

Language play can occur at a phonetic and phonological—or sound—level. David Rudd states that “it is at the phonological level that the language can most readily be disrupted, which will then impact on other areas.” Rhyming

words—such as those describing Roald Dahl’s tiny men as “Oompa Loompas” in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* or Carol Weston’s use of the phrase “a duck out of luck” in *Ava and Taco Cat*—are examples. Language play at a syntactic—or grammatical—level can be found in Roald Dahl’s statement “I is not wishing to know anything” in *The BFG* (for the Big Friendly Giant). And language play at a semantic—or meaning—level may include the use of an idiom such as “it’s time to hit the road” used by Mr. Rogers in *Amelia Bedelia Goes Camping*: Amelia hears Mr. Rogers say it, and she literally hits the road with a stick. Or consider the novel word creation such as the use of “clean-a-rella” for the name of a housekeeping robot in *2030: A Day in the Life of Tomorrow’s Kids*, playing off Cinderella who also did all the housework in a well-known fairy tale. Sometimes language play occurs at multiple levels simultaneously. For example, sound substitutions at a phonological level can change meaning at the semantic level, as in Peter Bently and Deborah Melmon’s portmanteau word “pantachute” (word parts from underpants combined with parachute) in *Underpants, Wonderpants*. Other examples include use of puns, as when Lewis Carroll in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* explains that the turtle was called a tortoise because “he taught us,” and as when the Mock Turtle describes “seaography” school, saying there they study “reeling and writhing.” The phonological and semantic levels of word play most frequently occur in children’s literature, and Alleen and Don Nilsen use these as their two main categories of language play techniques or devices when describing the features in Roald Dahl’s *The BFG* that contribute to the humor. They call their first category “schemes,” which are superficial changes that play with sound and spelling, like the initial sound repetition (alliteration) in *childchewer*. The Nilsens call their second category “tropes,” which play with meaning, as does the BFG’s diet of a foul-tasting vegetable known as a “snozz-cumber” and his drink of “froboscottle” with bubbles that go downward and cause flatulence rather than burping.^{8,9}

For examples of sound and wordplay in other junior literature, consider Stephan Pastis’s use in his Timmy Failure book series of creative humorous acronyms like YIP YAP for a charity called Yergi Isaavitch Plimkin, You Are Poor or the nonsense language of Molly’s little brother called Snot when he leaps off an ironing board uttering baby talk “Ino wood dado innses.” Lincoln Pierce in his Big Nate series uses environmental sounds in words such as “GLUG GLUG GLUG” when pouring liquid, different fonts and sized letters to emphasize stressed meaning and loudness, and creative compounding of words such as the “you’re-as-dumb-as-a-sock-puppet headshake.” Similarly, in Jeff Kinney’s

Diary of a Wimpy Kid series, the author uses words for environmental sounds such as “FWOOM FWOOM.” Kinney also combines existing words to describe items in an imaginary movie as “man-eating night crawlers” that come out of the shower head, and he refers to a fictive “Spineticklers” book series.¹⁰

Each of the Captain Underpants novels offers instances of a unique type of language play in which George and Harold rearrange the letters on public or school notice boards. For instance, they rearrange “People-Please wear your socks on the gym floor” to “Please go pee-pee on your socks for warmth” and “Please wash your hands after using the toilet” to “Please wash your hands in the toilet,” isolating “in” from the word “using” and discarding other letters.¹¹ In another unusual format for language play, each novel includes at least one comic strip supposedly drawn and written by George and Harold. The writing in these comics involves multiple misspellings and other common errors made by children who are about George and Harold’s age. They mix lowercase and uppercase letters, overgeneralize endings like –ed in “arosed,” and many words are misspelled in the exact way they are pronounced.¹²

Pilkey uses many other techniques to create and support language play in the series. He keeps chapters short, uses large type, and incorporates many illustrations. He keeps the narrative structure simple yet holds the reader in suspense about the characters’ actions. Locating the humor within ridiculous themes that frequently resemble science fiction, he triggers the use of taboo, gross, silly, and exaggerated sounds, words, and expressions—many of them completely novel. We find that his most common literary devices fall into two categories of language play—hyperbole and linguistic creativity.

Literary Language Play Techniques

Hyperbole

Hyperbole constitutes a common element of everyday conversations and humorous play because, as Claudia Claridge points out, humans have a natural tendency to magnify information. She defines hyperbole as words or expressions that exceed “the limits of fact in a given context” and argues that hyperbole is an underresearched device compared to metaphor and irony. Claridge regards all hyperbole as intentional and part of a larger phenomenon of intensification. Hyperbolic intensifiers can either amplify or quiet down, increase or decrease, the force of a proposition. The degree of intensification highly depends on con-

Figure 1. Hyperbole and contributing literary techniques

Type	Example	Meaning & Context	Source (Novel, page)
Exclamations[†]	Yoreeka Oh the horror! Oopsy Daisys		7:11 5:22 3:41
Sound play including onomatopoeia & assonance	PHOOOP Five hundred frosted fudgy fruitcakes flogged the fourth graders Tiny Tippy watched as the boys tiptoed towards the tall, time-traveling toilet Poop		3:111 5:65 10:51
Palindromes	Bub	Author refers to words adults discourage in older children	8:21
Word redundancy	A new improved extra-strength super hero	Informal term meaning "pal" used by George to address his principal	3:131
Word repetition	The cheerleaders sneezed and sneezed and sneezed some more A really mean teacher named Mrs Ribble who was very mean	Exaggeration of power They were affected by pepper on their pom-poms and could not stop sneezing	1:10 1:23 5:22
Synathroesmus	terrible, deafening, tumultuous footsteps that shook the earth	Steps of gigantic Supa Mega Tippy	10:76
Capitalization	big, BIG trouble	Size of letters adds to meaning	1:4
Italicization	Their silly streak was a <i>mile long</i>	You cannot measure a tendency	1:4
Idioms	I thought we were dead meat We're skating on <i>thin ice</i> as it is	Narrowly missed death Deciding they can't use The Urinator as a character in a children's book	5:70 2:106
Similes	Stopped.... catch their breath like a couple of rag dolls	Escaped and needed to rest The Dandelion swung the boys around	1:67 3:114

	like a bean bag	Slightly Younger Tippy Tippy was knocking the headmaster around	10:173
Metaphors	rained down on the wedding guests a thunderous cloud of agonizing defeat If you don't want to be <i>dead as long as you live</i> With big underwear comes big responsibility (The robots) "bellowed out terrifying, ear-piercing screams of unstoppable fury" "I'M GONNA GRIND THOSE KIDS INTO HEAD CHEESE"	The punch sprayed over the children Tippy Tippy's robot collapsed It means killed at a young age Chapter title Robots do not scream Cannot make cheese out of humans	5:67 10:198 1:37 7:155 7:20 5:61
Grandiosity Exaggeration			
Logical impossibilities			

Note: *Grammar, spelling and punctuation used in the novels is retained in the examples

text and therefore occurs at the interface of semantics and pragmatics—between the meaning and use of language. She notes that hyperbole has a significant affective component that involves subjectivity—based on what the writer or speaker views as important—in addition to a description of a person or event. As a literary device, hyperbole might be a single word, a phrase, a clause, or a number.¹³

We found fifteen ways Pilkey used hyperbole linguistically or graphically. These are his creation of sounds in exclamations; general sound play, including onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance; palindromes; increased stress on words and meanings through word redundancy and word repetition; figurative language using idioms, similes, and metaphors; synathroesmus; written emphasis through capitalization and italicization; and exuberant expressions through grandiosity, exaggeration, and logical impossibilities (see examples in figure 1).

We include exclamations and sound play under hyperbole as they are typically disproportionate to the degree of shock, dismay, or surprise expected from a reaction to an event. For example, “OH, the horror” related to the behavior of Ms. Ribble, a mean teacher who transforms into Wedgie Woman.¹⁴ Pilkey’s “PHOOOOP” for the opening of a cape like a parachute and “zong,” for a bench falling backwards as people fall off, are onomatopoeic because they sound like the actions he describes.¹⁵ Pilkey includes some well-known exclamations like “SPLAT” for hitting the ground and “KA-BOOM” for an explosion, but often in extra-large font to accompany illustrations.¹⁶ Exclamations include repetitive phrases associated with characters such as Captain Underpants and “TRA-LA-LAAAA” when he is off on another adventure. Some sound play involves the use of nonwords that break the rules for sound combinations in English, such as the sound of Shrinky-Pig 2000 blasting a beam of energy to shrink a foe, “BLLLLLLZZZZRRRRK.”¹⁷ Additional hyperbole instructs the reader to shake the book when saying the word “KA-BLOOOOOSH” and shout the word loudly, reassuring the reader he or she will not be in trouble for doing so (but, at the end of the book, comes the apology that “[we’re sorry] if you got in trouble for shouting” that word). Exclamations presented in large capital letters involve a similar technique used by Michael Fry in *The Odd Squad* when he employed “RIP” and “YANK” as two children struggle over a stuffed pig.¹⁸

Pilkey not only creates sound effects with capital letters, he also uses alliteration, that is, duplicating a single sound at the beginning of a string of words to give a tongue-twist to the language. He often combines alliteration with assonance (using similar vowels) and consonance (using similar consonants). In the second example of alliteration in figure 1, “Tippy” and “tiptoed” have the same

vowel sound as do “Tiny” and “time” and all words repeat the “t” sound. Pilkey uses alliteration for names such Chim-Chim Diaperbrains, Pippy Poopypants, and Tiny Tippy, a humorous strategy employed by other authors such as Stephan Pastis with his Molly Moskins, Dr. Dundeldorf, and Minnie the Magnificent in *Timmy Failure*. Pilkey also deploys a few palindromes—words that read the same forwards or backwards, such as “poop” in “Professor Poopypants” —and these add to the sound play especially when combined with other alliteration.¹⁹

Word duplication and redundancy consist of using two or more words of similar meaning to emphasize the intended meaning and to contribute to the hyperbolic effect. Repeated phrases act as the literary device known as an extended or running gag. In each novel, Captain Underpants must fight valiantly for “Truth and Justice and *all* that is Preshrunk and Cottony!” and at the end of the novels the same phrase “TRA-LA-LAAAAA” occurs as Captain Underpants flies off, indicating that the characters will be off on another adventure.²⁰ Word redundancy and repetition are closely related to Pilkey’s use of synathroesmus, a rhetorical term for the piling up of words, especially adjectives, as when he describes the monster who holds on to Captain Underpants with his “gigantic, gooey, robotic fingers”, and when he asks readers to “feel free to make the noisy, wet, disgusting sound” of their choice.²¹ Pilkey’s excessive use of multiple descriptors (adjectives) before a noun contributes to the hyperbole. In the teacher who becomes Wedgie Woman and appears as “an evil-looking woman dressed in tight purple vinyl and a mangy-looking fake-fur boa” and in a hamster robot described as the “first self-contained, warm-blooded, fuzzy, bionic cyborg” there are five adjectives to describe one character or object’s appearance. This synathroesmus does not bore the reader or unnecessarily prolong the story line. Instead, it adds to the humor of the language by expanding the reader’s images of individuals and events. Additionally, the use of synathroesmus increases the impact of two literary devices—euphony, referring to pleasant meanings, and cacophony, referring to unpleasant meanings. The use of italics and capital letters occur with a variety of pleasant and unpleasant meanings and sometimes both features are combined as in George’s question, “Oh, *HOW* are we going to conquer the evil Zombie nerds?” Their use can imply a warning or degree of intensity (such as the example in figure 1 when the boys are in “BIG trouble”), a louder voice (such as when the evil Zorx yells “You FOOLS”), or a complex concept that Pilkey explains to the reader (like “*misdirection*”).²²

The use of idioms, similes, and metaphors as figurative language adds another layer to the effect of hyperbole because they introduce ambiguity and

Figure 2. Linguistic creativity

Type	Example	Meaning, Context and Possible Origin	Source (Novel, Pg.)
Puns⁺	I am the INEDIBLE HULK	From Incredible Hulk	1:12
	The Drapes of Wrath	Drape is used as a cape, term from Grapes of Wrath	7:158
	Mission Improbable	From Mission Impossible	10: 68
	Home again, home again jiggedy jig	From the nursery rhyme 'To market, to market...'	11:18
	Heeeeeeeer's Johnny	From Late Night Show of Johnny Carson	11:163
	Make Poo not War	Make peace not war	8:19
	Miss Singerbrains	School Librarian-a pun on the phrase 'missing her brains'	7:50
	You can't have your cape and Edith too	You can't have your cake and eat it too	6:130
	Captain Blunderpants	A pun on the author's name creation Cpt. Underpants	8:55
	Tears of a Commode	From the song Tears of a Clown	11:188
	GOP (grouchy old people)	Acronym that typically refers to a political party	12:16
	DandyLion	Sounds same as dandelion but spelt differently and created as a deadly plant with teeth like a lion that catches people	7:9
Homophones			
Parody	Dog Man had a little itch, his flease were white as snow, and everywhere the robo-baby went, the flease were shure to go	Parody of Mary had a little Lamb with 'fleece' written as 'flease'	11:139
	Tabloid Times	Low key newspapers are called tabloids & newspapers called the Times are serious so a contradiction-parody of e.g. New York Times	1:71
Nonce formations	Boomer the Purple Dragon Sing-a-Long Friends	Refers to a Video, based on Puff the Magic Dragon and used for the name of the school football team	1:50
	Sub-omnivating ultra-zinticular bio-nanzoflanamarzipan	Something scary behind a screen door	8:14
	Booger Stinkersquirt	Creating proper names through compounding	5:78
	Super Power Juice	Gives power to people	5:8
Frankenbooger	A robot booger (Booger turned into robot)		

Portmanteau words	Krupcakes	Frankenstein combined with booger	7:19
	Bramiac	A combination of the Principal's name Mr Krupp and cupcakes	3:31
Placeholders⁺⁺	Combine-o-thingy	The school nerd, combining brainy and maniac	6:25
	Whichamajiggy	atypical language register for a teacher	7:11
	Forgetchamacallit 2000	Instrument to zap evil robots	7:78
Baby talk	Rubber doggy doo-doo	Used to zap people	7:84
	Pee-pee	New invention	1:75
		Used in a slingshot to fool Dr Diaper he had an accident	5:14
Solecisms	Me no like tissues	On a notice asking students to urinate	6:109
		Melvin, the Nerd who is always grammatically correct, when changed to Bionic Booger Boy, regresses in his language	
Slangisms & Colloquialisms	I will chill out, I will get a life	Lines the teachers must write out multiple times as punishment	2:134
Rhyming	Quit your whining, buster	Miss Anthrope, teacher addressing boys	5:32
	Director Schmector	Head of juvenile detention center	9:53
	Easy, squeezey, mac-n-cheezy	The ease of setting a time machine to work	10:45
Adjectivization	phlegmish	Changing a noun into an adjective to describe monsters	7:20
	demisey	Likely to meet his demise	7:22
Nominalization	Mr Meaner	Using an adjective meaner/meaner as a proper noun	12:50
Ungrammaticality	Im the worlds most famoset clown	In cartoon written by Harold and George	11:130
	He never had to be scared of starch no more	double negative	5:132
Metathesis (spoonerisms)	Eloheyy	Trying to speak in a foreign language	10:95
	Eacepay	= sounds in reverse order (hello-elloh+ay) (peace+ay)	10:95

Notes: + Grammar, spelling and punctuation used in the novels is retained in the examples; ++ Informally known as tongue-tippers.

contrast in meaning that can be ridiculous and exaggerated. Martin Davies defines an idiom as “a phrase (or sentence) which is conveniently used with a meaning different from its constructed literal meaning (if it has one). It is therefore considered ambiguous if there is a literal meaning.” An idiom also is usually a popular stereotyped phrase in which the meaning can rarely be deduced from the individual words. It is often language and culture specific, such as in figure 1, where to be “skating on thin ice” means to do something risky or to be in a dangerous or precarious situation. In contrast, a simile is a “figure of speech that equates two elements from different domains of experience,” uses “like,” and can more easily be understood than an idiom. Pilkey uses idioms at least six or seven times in each novel and only a few metaphors (see figure 1).²³

Grandiosity, exaggeration, and logical impossibilities can be grouped under absurdity, silliness, and comedy of chaos—all of which increase the hyperbolic effect. Absurdity is humor that lacks reason, is ridiculous, and often includes nonsensical language. It affords an opportunity to engage in imaginative imagery and fantasy. For example, grandiose titles and language typical of royalty, upper social class, or powerful groups attributed to persons of lower social status or insignificant and inanimate items produce humorous incongruity. The UNDERPANTYWORLD (in capital letters) is so powerful it can save people. Similarly, the huge Turbo Toilet 2000 shouts, “I will take over the world,” and is portrayed as a “powerful porcelain predator.” In contrast, absurdity occurs when Pilkey uses an understatement, or what Claridge terms a type of hyperbolic downturner such as a “diminisher,” and provides the humorous opposite of an expected response. For example, Melvin says to Captain Underpants, “Bow down to me and I shall spare your life” and the super hero’s flippant response to his life being in danger is “Ah, go jump off a duck.”²⁴

Linguistic Creativity

Much of the humor in the Captain Underpants series also comes from linguistic creativity or wordplay through the use of many linguistic and literary devices. We identified fourteen types used by Pilkey—puns, homophones, parody, nonce formations, portmanteau words, placeholders, baby talk, solecisms, slang and colloquialisms, nominalization, adjectivization, rhyming, ungrammaticality, and metathesis (see figure 2).

Puns appear frequently in all the novels. Therefore, we include multiple examples in figure 2 to illustrate that most consist of one-line puns and are created by changing a single sound and sometimes one word. Some puns like the

“Drapes of Wrath” could also be considered intentional malapropisms.²⁵ A few puns such as Miss Singerbrains (missing her brains) and “Alls swell that ends swell” are also mondegreens because they include incorrect word or phrase breaking. A homophone is a specific type of pun in which (in this case) two words sound the same but have different meanings and are spelled differently, so the Dandylion, listed in figure 2, is a humorous but rather frightening combination of a flower and lion. Pilkey also uses homographic puns in the text, in which he uses the same words with different meanings, such as the prank where George announces the audience will be “glued to their seats,” meaning paying full attention, but also referring to glue because literally the audience has been glued to their chairs. In another example, George and Harold say they have to roll, meaning go quickly, but they also are rolling on roller skates.²⁶

Although most of the puns are chapter titles, names, page titles in the flip-o-rama in the sixth novel, or chapter headings in the twelfth novel, the novels contain multiple examples of musical puns based on well-known songs from the late 1960s and 1970s. For example, “CANE TOPS KEEP FALLING ON MY HEAD” is from Hal Davis and Burt Bacharach’s “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head;” “A HARD DAY’S BITE” is from the Beatle’s “A Hard Day’s Night;” “The night the lights went out in Piqua” from “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia;” “I’m sending out good vibrations” is from the Beach Boys’ “Good Vibrations;” “Somebody’s done somebody’s kong wrong” is from Larry Butler and Chips Moman’s “Hey Won’t You Play Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song;” and “Killing me softly with his kong” is from Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly with His Song.”²⁷

An adult reading these song titles might find the connection amusing, and the phrases in the novels may trigger nostalgic feelings and memories of the song’s lyrics and tune. Child readers will not likely recognize the dual meanings because these are songs from Dav Pilkey’s teenage years. So it could be argued that the puns are for the author’s own amusement or for a dual audience of adult and child. Similarly, to understand implied meaning, Pilkey’s occasional use of parody requires prior knowledge of the subject being parodied. In the examples in figure 2, child readers could recognize “Mary had a little lamb” but might not see the parody in the newspaper title “Tabloid Times.” Not all names were puns, but the origin of some names were personal to Pilkey and adaptations of his favorite characters. For example, George was borrowed from *Curious George* or, according to Abrams, *Georgie the Ghost* and Harold from *Harold and the Purple Crayon*. The principal, Mr. Krupp, was Pilkey’s high school principal for

several years, a man the author disliked. And he named the school after Jerome Horwitz, who played Curly Howard in the “Three Stooges”, one of his favorite film characters from his own childhood.²⁸

Another common strategy in the series presents the creation of what Judith Monat terms nonce formations and David Crystal calls nonce-words. Nonce formations are coinages that serve a passing need and are not likely to enter mainstream vocabulary, but they are common in humorous language play in children and adults.²⁹ Pilkey uses compound words to create proper names such as “Chim-chim Diaperbrains” but also for machines, places, and institutions like “Chunky Q. Boogernose University.”³⁰ Although the compound words contain common words, the made-up word is novel. He combines nonce formations with technical or chemical words that do exist such as “klystron” but might be less familiar to the child reader. In the fourth novel, for example, he devotes a section to changing proper names. The evil Professor Pippy P. Poopypants threatens the principal and children to change their names, and the Principal becomes Lumpy Pottybiscuits, while one of the girls’ names becomes Poopsie Chucklebutt.³¹ Although nonce formations require greater concentration when reading, especially multisyllabic words like “sub-paradoxical, dimensionalistic alternicon-shift”, they also add to the humor.³² Some word combinations include portmanteau words—parts of existing words combined to create one word. For example, a robo-plunger is a combination of robot and toilet plunger. Pilkey also occasionally uses adaptations of placeholders that would typically refer to an item or person when we cannot recall the name. For example, “Whatchamacallit” becomes “Forgetchamacallit” for a new invention.³³

In addition to naming his characters creatively, Pilkey varies how different characters speak and communicate with each other to include baby talk, solecisms, slang, and colloquialisms, all of which can be considered different language registers. Baby talk involves a regression in language by characters, especially when they are fearful, as in the school principal cries and babbles like a baby.³⁴ The use of solecisms, a group of ungrammatical words typical in the language of young children, employs an intentional strategy similar to that described in figure 2. Pilkey uses slang and colloquialisms in his conversations, such as “a buncha bunk” to refer to nonsense, “let’s boogie” to mean “let’s go,” and “two little twerps” to designate “small insignificant persons.”³⁵ These are in contrast to less common words characteristic of a formal register of American English like “comeuppance” and “morphed.” Unusual combinations of words also occur in rhyming such as the school’s “Invention Convention.” Like the

examples in figure 2, such as “Director Schmector,” Pilkey usually makes the last two syllables of the words rhyme, and their silliness and nonsensical characteristics add to the humor.³⁶

Pilkey adapts grammatical rules of standard English in other ways, through adjectivization, nominalization, and ungrammatical words and phrases. By adapting a word to make it an adjective, he expands the possible repertoire of descriptive words, a key feature of these novels, as we have mentioned. Similarly, he converts adjectives to nouns, as shown in figure 2. The grammatical errors that pepper the cartoons George and Harold write reflect child writing skills at their age. Occasionally, Pilkey uses metathesis, as when George and Harold try to communicate with people who speak another language by reversing the order of sounds within words.³⁷ These extensive playful manipulations of language contribute to the humor in the text.

Playful Pretense

According to Anne Plummer, “To be considered playful, a text must play on words and/or images in the same way that children play in games of make-believe.” A playful text is transformational. It shifts an everyday world into a play world and uses a variety of devices to challenge the reader’s expectations. Hyperbole and linguistic creativity include such devices that convey to the reader “this is play.” Hyperbole in literature is more than mild exaggeration. It is a form of language play that introduces the ridiculous descriptions of comic features and physical appearances, characters’ behaviors and reactions, and what the characters say. The exaggerated violence, ridiculous threats, and silly and preposterous dangers are expressed verbally, but this type of hyperbolic speech is not typical of everyday conversations, especially in a school setting. Jackie Stallcup uses the term “exuberance” as one of the four main characteristics of Pilkey’s Captain Underpants series (“anarchic, disrespectful, subversive, exuberant”). Exuberance is defined by Chantel Charis as “energy, excitement, and cheerfulness” that, according to Kay Redfield Jamison, consists of “a mood or temperament of joyfulness, ebullience and high spirits, a state of overflowing energy and delight.” She argues that the exuberance of play in childhood becomes gradually muted as the child grows older, but “when writers draw up imaginary worlds for children” they are focused on trying to recapture that exuberance, sometimes through the creation of particular characters such as Tigger in *The House at Pooh Corner*

and Toad in *Wind in the Willows*. Hyperbole is found in many graphic novels such as Lincoln Peirce's *Big Nate in the Zone*, in which Big Nate reacts to a pop quiz by asking, "Isn't this illegal? Or unconstitutional? Or SOMETHING?" Certainly, hyperbole is an intensification of information and how the information is conveyed, and this does contribute to the exuberance, just as Brian Sutton-Smith's play framework of "frivolity"—one of his seven play rhetorics—suggests a shift into a lighthearted or nonserious level of engagement. Similarly, Willibald Ruch's behavioral construct of "exhilaration" represents a temporary increase in cheerfulness. We consider linguistic hyperbole to be only one set of strategies that contribute to the overall effect of the passion of exuberance.³⁸

Linguistic creativity also involves a playful manipulation of language such as making words, phrases, and sentences sound funny; creating new words; using double entendres; or giving new meanings to existing words. The manipulation of language to produce humorous words and phrases, with irreverent content, has a history in children's oral folklore especially in childhood conversations, skipping rhymes, and games—as any adult knows who has ever spent time with children on playgrounds, in classrooms, at home, or in a car. The linguistic creativity prominent in Pilkey's language play and similar texts, both David Rudd and Julie Cross suggest, is closely linked to a tradition of nonsense verse, jokes, rhymes, and poetry—or what Cross refers to as Classic Nonsense. However, Cross calls the humorous writing of Pilkey and other graphic novels New Wave Nonsense because it includes a modernist preoccupation with wordplay such as split meanings and neologisms incorporated into settings and events that are humorously absurd and preposterous. Anne Plummer emphasizes that nonsense is the most radical form of linguistic play and creates a multiplicity of meanings within a strictly defined play frame. And Matthew Zbaracki states that nonsense is a major component of the humor in children's literature and key to the popularity of absurd characters like Dr. Seuss's Lorax and Tweedledum and Tweedledee in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*. However, Adam Rose suggests that the traditional view of nonsense emerges from the notion that all words must have meaning, and if any words seem to lack meaning, the whole text is nonsense. The challenge comes when readers do not recognize real words that are obtuse and archaic so consider them nonwords. He argues that most nonsense literature is never pure nonsense because language play always retains some element of logic and some meaning in its absurdity, and he goes further to suggest that there is a distinction between nonsense and non-sense. Whether we use the term nonsensical, nonsense, or non-sense, many manipula-

tions of sounds and words like those employed by Pilkey are not conventional uses of language. They can create what Josie Torres Barth suggests is a “linguistic instability.” So for Pilkey, meanings can fluctuate and defy conventional systems of linguistic logic but make sense in the pretend world he creates. And, as we have illustrated, they can be derived in numerous ways and from many sources.³⁹

As we mentioned, these atypical uses of language involving hyperbole and linguistic creativity shift the reader into a playful frame of mind. The risqué combination of taboo language and topics takes the reader into a play world of carnivalesque pretense, such as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Any vulgarity or other unconstrained language becomes acceptable in such a play context because the play is free from the daily constraints and expectations of others (such as parents and teachers). Lynn Cohen argues that the features of play proposed by Brian Sutton-Smith, including spontaneity, unpredictability, flexibility, imagination, and powerfulness, are also those of Bakhtin’s concept of carnival. And Thomas Henricks reminds us that indulgence, excess, and monstrosity, including the mocking of authority, are key themes in Bakhtin’s writing. David Rudd suggests the language choices and style in such junior fiction are part of “a carnivalesque way of viewing the world.”⁴⁰ Several other authors including Julie Cross, Jackie Stallcup, and Annette Wannamaker refer to Pilkey’s writing and similar genres as carnivalesque. They appeal to children because the readers can shift in and out of this carnivalesque language play— a satirical fiction world that openly addresses and provides comic relief for children’s taboo thoughts, fears, and feelings about some adults that children may rarely verbalize. The humor emerges from the use of language play to show a greater disconnect between a real word and its distorted counterpart and between real worlds and a parallel sphere of hyperbolic pretend play.⁴¹

Although there may be no systematic rules or conventions for language play, as we have shown, there are numerous strategies or devices that Pilkey commonly uses, devices also used by other authors of such graphic novels. These language strategies contribute significantly to the fantasy and metafiction playfulness in the Captain Underpants novels. The constant shifts between reality and fiction—such as childish pranks versus characters who fly—and the vocabulary and expressions used to convey such information create a close relationship and proximity between the reader and the story. As Margaret Mackey explains, the reader can simultaneously become caught up in the story but also stand back and watch how it works. The language play provides an element of surprise with unexpected, shocking, silly, and ambiguous character names, conversation, and

descriptions that are a crucial component of the humor and keep the reader engaged.⁴²

Summary

Pilkey challenges the boundaries of childhood mischief, using practical jokes, outrageous themes, bathroom humor, and ridicule of those who hold power in children's lives. He then combines these elements with supernatural impossibilities and the actions of heroes and evil characters. He expands on the plots of the Captain Underpants series through language play, using a wide range of language strategies and literary devices. These include linguistic manipulations, extensive hyperbole, and intentional misspellings. Adults may dislike the content, but extensive use of figurative language, such as alliteration, slang, puns, metaphors, and onomatopoeias, contributes to children's language learning and literacy especially in unmotivated or slow readers. Future studies might explore children's perceptions of the most humorous language play in Pilkey's series, carry-over in child readers' facility for linguistic creativity and their ability to produce coinages and word combinations, and the precise impact on the literacy skills of reluctant readers. Given that the hyperbole in the accompanying pictures enhances the humor and the narrative, exploring the interaction of language and illustrations in this series might provide additional insight, but it was beyond the scope of this article.⁴³ There is a market for children's literature with scatological content linked to language play and Dav Pilkey's Captain Underpants series illustrates how Pilkey as an author has successfully and humorously played with words.

NOTES

1. Thomas Newkirk, *Misreading Masculinity: Boys, Literacy, and Popular Culture* (2002); Denise Davila and Lisa Patrick, "Asking the Experts: What Children Have to Say about Their Reading Preferences," *Language Arts* 87 (2010): 199–210; Janell Kleisius, Kathryn L. Laframboise, and Mary Gaier, "Humorous Literature: Motivation for Reluctant Readers," *Reading Research and Instruction* 37 (1998): 253–61; Sini Nieminen, "Sgt. Pompous and the Fancy Pants Club Band: Comparing and Contrasting the Translations of Verbal Humor in Screen Translations of *Shrek*" (masters thesis, University of Jyväskylä, 2007), 10; Anne Plummer, *Playful Texts and the Emergent Reader: Developing Metalinguistic Awareness* (2016), 27.

2. Amelia J. Klein, "Children's Humor: A Cognitive-Developmental Perspective," in *Current Topics in Early Childhood Education*, Vol. 7, ed. Lilian Katz (1987), 126–49; Paul E. McGhee, *Understanding and Promoting the Development of Children's Humor: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (2002); Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child* (2002/1926).

3. Julie Cross, *Humor in Contemporary Junior Literature* (2011); Roderick McGillis, "Captain Underpants Is My Hero: Things Have Changed—or Have They?" *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 27 (2002): 62–70; Roderick McGillis, "Coprophilia for Kids: The Culture of Grossness," in *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images, and Identities*, edited by Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce (2003), 188–96; David Rudd, "Don't Gobbelfunk Around with Words: Roald Dahl and Language," in *Roald Dahl*, eds. Ann Alston and Catherine Butler (2012), 51–69; Annette Wannamaker, "The Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Bodily Borders, and B.A.D. boys. Pleasure and Abjection in the Captain Underpants Series," in *Boys in Children's Literature and Popular Culture: Masculinity, Abjection, and the Fictional Child* (2009), 85–102.

4. Shel Silverstein is known for many books of prose and poetry with illustrations that contain humorous content and language play such as the short and long rhyming poems in *Where the Sidewalk Ends: The Poems & Drawings of Shel Silverstein* (1974); the late John Ciardi's books include *Doodle Soup: Poems* (1985); Steve Attewell's first book was *Once, I Laughed My Socks Off: Poems for Kids (and Those Adults That Still Behave Like Kids)* (2012).

5. More information on language play and literary devices is provided in David Crystal, *Language Play* (2001).

6. Cross, *Humor*, 154–56; Dav Pilkey, *The Adventures of Captain Underpants* (1997); Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Attack of the Talking Toilets: The Second Epic Novel* (1999); Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Invasion of the Incredibly Naughty Cafeteria Ladies from Outer Space (And the Subsequent Assault of the Equally Evil Lunch-room Zombie Nerds): The Third Epic Novel* (1999); Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Tyrannical Retaliation of the Turbo Toilet 2000: The Eleventh Epic Novel* (2014); Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Sensational Saga of Sir Stinks-A-Lot: The Twelfth Epic Novel* (2015); For information on awards for the series and the author's personal history, see Dennis Abrams, *David "Dav" Pilkey*, (2010).

7. Joseph Michael Sommers, "Parodic Potty Humor and Superheroic Potentiality in Dav Pilkey's *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*," in *Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Michelle Ann Abate and Gwen Athene Tarbox (2017), 93–111; Jackie E. Stallcup, "The Feast of Misrule": Captain Underpants, Satire, and the Literary Establishment," *Genre* 41 (2008): 171–202; McGillis, "Captain Underpants Is My Hero"; Wannamaker, "Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy"; Annette Wannamaker "The Attack of the Inedible Hunk!: Food, Language, and Power in Captain Underpants," in *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature*, eds. Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard (2009), 243–56; Cross, *Humor*, 95–131.

8. Rudd, "Don't Gobbelfunk," 53.

9. Peggy Parish, *Amelia Bedelia Goes Camping* (1985), 6; Amy Zuckerman and James

Daly, 2030: *A Day in the Life of Tomorrow's Kids* (2009); Peter Bently, *Underpants Wonderpants* (2013); Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), 98–101, (Note, this title is usually abbreviated to *Alice in Wonderland*, as described in https://kids.kiddle.co/Alice%27s_Adventures_in_Wonderland; Roald Dahl, *The BFG* (2007); Don and Alleen Nilsen, "Word Play in Roald Dahl's *The BFG*: A Study in Schemes and Tropes," 2016. Available online: <https://www.slideshare.net/majorfun/word-play-in-roald-dahls-the-bfg-a-study-in-schemes-and-tropes>.

10. Stephan Pastis, *Timmy Failure: Sanitized for Your Protection* (2015), 6, 85; Lincoln Peirce, *Big Nate in the Zone* (2014), 156–57, 178; Jeff Kinney, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid: Double Down* (2016), 87, 200.

11. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 2 (1999), 87. Deliberately moving letters in notices to create ridiculous and often scatological statements is a strategy common in the Pilkey books and not found in other graphic novels like those of Stephan Pastis or Rachel Russell.

12. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 3 (1999), 42.

13. Claudia Claridge, *Hyperbole in English: A Corpus-Based Study of Exaggeration* (2011); Donna Varga, "Hyperbole and Humor in Children's Language Play," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education* 14 (2000): 142–51; Hyperbole is listed as one of many literary devices by Susan Hall, *Using Picture Storybooks to Teach Literary Devices: Recommended Books for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 3 (2002), 1.

14. Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Wrath of the Wicked Wedgie Woman: The Fifth Epic Novel* (2001), 20.

15. *Ibid.*; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants* 12 (2015), 106.

16. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 1 (1997), 105.

17. Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopypants: The Fourth Epic Novel* (2000), 153, 10, 32.

18. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 3 (1999), 33; Michael Fry, *The Odd Squad: Bully Bait* (2013).

19. Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Big, Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Part 2: The Revenge of the Ridiculous Robo-Boogers: The Seventh Epic Novel* (2003), 151; Claridge, *Hyperbole*, 11; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants* 4 (2000), 92, 51; Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Revolting Revenge of the Radioactive Robo-Boxers: The Tenth Epic Novel* (2013), 49; Stephan Pastis, *Timmy Failure: Now Look What You've Done* (2014), 107, 210, 273.

20. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 2 (1999), 87, 139.

21. Dav Pilkey, *Captain Underpants and the Big Bad Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy, Part 1: The Night of the Nasty Nostril Nuggets: The Sixth Epic Novel* (2003), 129, 128.

22. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 5 (2001), 86; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 6 (2003), 86.

23. Martin Davies, "Idiom and Metaphor," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society New Series* 83 (1982): 67–85; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 1 (1997), 66; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 3 (1999), 130, 71; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 10 (2013), 17.

24. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 5 (2001), 131; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 2 (2001), 105; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 7 (2003), 151; Claridge, *Hyperbole*, 11. Variations in

spelling, capitalization, hyphenation, italicization and paragraphing are known as graphological variations as described by Trisnowati Tanto, “Roald Dahl’s Use of Language Play in *Charlie and The Great Glass Elevator*,” *Sosiohumaniora* 10 (2008): 73–80.

25. Malapropisms are defined as “a word or phrase that has been mistaken for another usually because of its sound rather than its meaning” by Robert A. Rubin, *Going to Hell in a Hen Basket. An Illustrated Dictionary of Modern Malapropisms* (2015), 4. Malapropisms are also called malaprops and can be intentional or unintentional. For a discussion on the analysis of malapropisms see Marga Reima, “What Malapropisms Mean: A Reply to Donald Davidson,” *Erkenntnis* 60 (2004): 317–34.

26. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 11 (2014), 75. For a brief discussion and examples of mondegreens see Jeff Aronson, “When I Use a Word... Words Misheard: Medical Mondegreens,” *QJM An International Journal of Medicine* 102 (2009): 301–302; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 2 (1999), 22; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 1 (1997), 66.

27. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants* 6 (2003), 145, 157; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants* 12 (2015), 75; “(Hey Won’t You Play) Another Somebody Done Somebody Wrong Song” was written by Larry Butler and Chips Moman and won the 1976 Grammy Award for Best Country Song; “Killing Me Softly with His Song” became a top hit in 1973; “Good Vibrations” was a song composed and produced by Brian Wilson with words by Mike Love for the American rock band, the Beach Boys, in 1966 and recognized as one of the best pieces of rock music; “The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia” is a Southern Gothic song, written in 1972 by Bobby Russell and became a number one hit then and again in 1991 when Reba McEntire recorded it for her album *For My Broken Heart*. “Raindrops Keep Fallin’ on My Head” is a song written by Hal David and Burt Bacharach for the 1969 film *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. It topped the *Billboard* Hot 100 for four weeks in the 1970s; Lorenzo Candelaria, *American Music: A Panorama, Concise* (2014). A detailed discussion of the characters in the series and how their names originated can be found in Abrams, *David “Dav” Pilkey*.

28. Eve V. Clark, “Lexical Innovations: How Children Learn to Create New Words,” in *The Child’s Construction of Language*, ed. Werner Deutsch (1981), 299–328; For an extensive discussion on how new words or nonce formations can be created, with examples from Roald Dahl’s *BFG*, see Judith Munat, “Lexical Creativity as a Marker of Style in Science Fiction and Children’s Literature,” in *Lexical Creativity, Texts and Contexts*, ed. Judith Munat (2007), 169–82; Nonce words is a term whose history dates back to the thirteenth century and nonce refers to occurring for “a particular occasion” according to Crystal, *Language Play*, 30.

29. While Pilkey’s writings do not appear to have the goal of adult and child audiences, there are many examples of classical and modern dual audience appeal from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* to the Harry Potter novels as discussed in *Transcending Boundaries: Writing for a Dual Audience of Children and Adults*, ed. Sandra L. Beckett, (1999); *Crossover Fiction: Global and Historical Perspectives*, Sandra L. Beckett, (2009). Some children’s writers include a double address, that is, they occasionally digress as if to wink sideways at adults about something the children would not understand as noted by Barbara Wall and Yvel Crevecoeur, *Narrator’s Voice: The Dilemma of Children’s*

Fiction (2016), 21–22.

30. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 5 (2001), 78; Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 4 (2000), 19.

31. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 4 (2000), 92.

32. Dav Pilkey *Captain Underpants and the Preposterous Plight of the Purple Potty People: The Eighth Epic Novel* (2006), 14.

33. Placeholders are also called vague reference nouns, dummy nouns. They convey minimal meaning, are multifunctional, and have an inferred meaning, as explained by Ignacio M. Palacios & Paloma N. Pertejos, “‘Go Up to Miss Thingy.’ ‘He’s Probably Like a Whatsit or Something.’ Placeholders in Focus. The Differences in Use between Teenagers and Adults in Spoken English,” *Pragmatics*, 25 (2015): 425–51.

34. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 5 (2001), 49.

35. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 7 (2003), 35; Pilkey *Captain Underpants*, 10 (2013), 45, 63.

36. Pilkey, *Captain Underpants*, 7 (2003), 165, 35; The use of pompous or pretentious jargon can trigger humor, as can using an informal style in formal situations or, as in Pilkey’s books, a formal style in informal situations, according to Alison Ross, *The Language of Humor*, (1998), 47.

37. Metathesis is informally known as spoonerisms, where sounds are transposed and, like malapropisms, are a type of a verbal slip in conversational speech but may be created intentionally as witty phrases, as described in Delia Chiaro, *The Language of Jokes: Analyzing Verbal Play* (1992), 18–20.

38. Plummer, *Playful Texts*, 65; Stallcup, “The Feast of Misrule,” 174; A definition of exuberance can be found at <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/exuberance>; Chantel Charis (2016), 30; https://books.google.com/books?id=D2UuDwAAQBAJ&lpg=PA3&ots=HyvpFWY_Yp&dq=Chantel%20Charis&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=Chantel%20Charis&f=false; Kay Redfield Jamison, *Exuberance: The Passion for Life* (2005), 25, 68; Claudia Claridge in her discussion of the literary uses of hyperbole notes that not only can hyperbole be used to create a setting that is a different and unique world but also to tell a “tall tale” especially as comic fiction. See *Hyperbole in English: A Corpus-Based Study of Exaggeration* (2011), 252–56; A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner* (1928); Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908); Peirce, *Big Nate in the Zone*, 125; Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (1997); Willibald Ruch “Exhilaration and Humor,” in *The Handbook of Emotion*, eds. Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland, (1993), 605–16;

39. For information and examples on the history of children’s language play, useful sources include Mary and Herbert Knapp, *One Potato, Two Potato: The Folklore of American Children* (1976); June Factor, *Captain Cook Chased a Chook: Children’s Folklore in Australia* (1988); Iona and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959); Iona and Peter Opie, *Children’s Games in Street and Playground: Chasing, Catching, Seeking, Hunting, Racing, Duelling, Exerting, Daring, Guessing, Acting, Pretending* (1969); and Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Folkgames of Children* (1972). How children create their own language play is discussed in Donna J. Grace and Joseph Tobin, “Pleasure, Creativity, and the Carnavalesque in Children’s Video Production” in *The Arts in Children’s Lives:*

Context, Culture, and Curriculum, ed. Liora Bresler and Christine M. Thompson (2002), 195–214, and in Evangeline Nwokah and Kelly Graves, “Word Play: The Creation and Function of Novel Words in the Pretend Play of Two Siblings,” *American Journal of Play* 1, (2009): 429–50; Rudd, “Don’t Gobbelfunk,” 54; Cross, *Humor*, 95–131; Plummer, *Playful Texts*, 26–46; Matthew Zbaracki, “A Descriptive Study of How Humor in Literature Serves to Engage Children in Their Reading.” PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2003, 26–27; Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (1971); Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There* (1872); Adam Rose, “Lewis Carroll’s ‘Jabberwocky’: Non-sense Not Nonsense,” *Language and Literature* (1995) 4, 1–15; Josie Torres Barth, “Uncommon Nonsense’: Comic Nonsense and Absurdity as the Destabilization of Linguistic Logic,” (blog), January 5 2011. Available online: <https://blogs.commons.georgetown.edu/jtb63/2011/01/05/uncommon-nonsense-comic-nonsense-and-absurdity-as-the-destabilization-of-linguistic-logic/>; Margaret H. Freeman also states that nonsense is not synonymous with meaningless and also contributes to the aesthetic effect of verse and literature, in her chapter, “Making Sense of (Non)sense: Why Literature Counts,” in *In Search of (Non)sense*, eds. Elżbieta Chrzanowska-Kluczevska and Grzegorz Szpila (2009), 4, 13. Lynn Cohen, “Bakhtin’s Carnival and Pretend Role Play: A Comparison of Social Contexts,” *American Journal of Play*, 4 (2011): 176–203; Sutton-Smith, *Ambiguity of Play*; Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (2009), translated by Helene Iswolsky; Laura Tallant, “Framing Young Children’s Humour and Practitioner Responses to It: Using a Bakhtinian Carnavalesque Lens,” *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 47 (2015): 47 251–66; Thomas Henricks, *Play and the Human Condition* (2015), 197–98; Cross, *Humor*, 4–5; Stallcup, “Feast of Misrule,” 188–89; Wannamaker, “Battle of the Bionic Booger Boy,” 246–47. A detailed discussion of application of Bakhtin’s carnival to Captain Underpants series can be found in Teresa Asiain, “The Translation of Children’s Literature: Ideology and Cultural Adaptations: *Captain Underpants* as a Case Study.” PhD thesis, University of the West of England, 2016. Available online: <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/27117/>.

40. Mark West, in his critique of Roald Dahl’s writing, cites Paul McGhee’s discussion of children using humor to manage tension, conflict, and anxiety related to bodily functions in children and adult expectations; Mark I. West, “The Grotesque and the Taboo in Roald Dahl’s Humorous Writings for Children” in *Psychoanalytic Responses to Children’s Literature*, eds. Lucy Rollin and Mark I. West (1999), 91–96; Paul E. McGhee. *Humor, Its Origin and Development* (1979). In Rod A. Martin and Thomas E. Ford, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, 2nd ed. (2018). They discuss how humor, as a form of mental play can be an emotional coping strategy and function to make fun of emotional vulnerabilities.

41. Margaret Mackey, “Metafiction for Beginners: Allan Ahlberg’s *Ten in a Bed*,” *Children’s Literature in Education* 21 (1990): 179–87; Amie Doughty, “*Throw the Book Away*”: *Reading Versus Experience in Children’s Fantasy* (2013) describes how fantasy fiction and metafiction can occur together and the relationship between reader and story; Michael Cart, *What’s So Funny? Wit and Humor in American Children’s Literature* (1995); Perry Nodelman explores the ways in which the interplay of the verbal and visual aspects of

picture books conveys more narrative information and stimulation than either medium could achieve alone in *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children's Picture Books* (1990). Additional information on the connection between text and illustrations is examined in *More Words about Pictures: Current Research on Picturebooks and Visual/Verbal Texts for Young People*, eds. Perry Nodelman, Naomi Hamer, and Mavis Reimer (2017), and Arsenio Jesús Moya Guijarro, *A Multimodal Analysis of Picture Books for Children: A Systemic Functional Approach* (2014).