
Death in words and pictures in Latin American picturebooks

Elizabeth Guzzo de Almeida

Celia Abicalil Belmiro

Luíza Santana Chaves

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brasil)

Abstract

This article addresses the theme of death in three Latin American picturebooks, exploring aspects of the cultural context of each country. *Es así* [It is like this] (2010), by Paloma Valdivia (Chile), *Camino a casa* [On the way home] (2008), by Jairo Buitrago (Colombia) and Rafael Yockteng (Peru), and *Just a minute* (2006), by Yuyi Morales (Mexico). The theoretical basis comprises the following concepts: picturebook and its categorizations, in Belmiro (2008), Nikolajeva, and Scott (2011); multimodality, in Kress (2010), Kress and van Leeuwen (2001); and different approaches to death, in Kovács (2003); Paiva (2008). The analyses are based on the contrastive method, that highlights different narrative strategies. The data reveals that the word-image relationship in the books analyzed articulate ethics and aesthetics, producing language events that highlight the importance of the historical and cultural context in understanding the works mentioned.

Keywords: Death. Picturebook. Multimodality. Latin America.

A morte em palavras e imagens em livros ilustrados latino-americanos

Resumo

Este artigo aborda o tema da morte em três livros ilustrados latino-americanos, explorando aspectos do contexto cultural de cada país. *Es así* (2010), de Paloma Valdivia (Chile), *Camino a casa* (2010), de Jairo Buitrago (Colômbia) e Rafael Yockteng (Peru) e *Só um minutinho* (2006), de Yuyi Morales (México). A fundamentação teórica se sustenta nos seguintes conceitos: livro ilustrado contemporâneo e suas categorizações, em Belmiro (2008), Nikolajeva e Scott

(2011); multimodalidade, em Kress (2010), Kress e van Leuween (2001); e diferentes abordagens sobre a morte, em Kovács (2003); Paiva (2008). As análises se baseiam no método contrastivo que ressalta diferentes estratégias narrativas. Os dados revelam que a relação palavra-imagem nos livros analisados articula ética e estética, produzindo eventos de linguagem que evidenciam a importância do contexto histórico e cultural na compreensão das obras mencionadas.

Palavras-chave: Morte. Livro ilustrado. Multimodalidade. América Latina.

La muerte en palabras e imágenes en los libros álbumes latinoamericanos

Resumen

Este artículo aborda el tema de la muerte en tres libros álbumes latinoamericanos, explorando aspectos del contexto cultural de cada país. *Es así* (2010), de Paloma Valdivia (Chile), *Camino a casa* (2008), de Jairo Buitrago (Colombia) y Rafael Yockteng (Perú) y *Just a minute* [Un minuto] (2006), de Yuyi Morales (México). La fundamentación teórica se sustenta en los siguientes conceptos: libro álbum contemporáneo y sus categorizaciones, en Belmiro (2008), Nikolajeva y Scott (2011); multimodalidad, en Kress (2010), Kress y van Leuween (2001); y diferentes abordajes sobre la muerte, en Kovács (2003); Paiva (2008). Los análisis se basan en el método contrastivo que pone de relieve diferentes estrategias narrativas. Los datos revelan que la relación palabra-imagen en los libros álbumes analizados articula ética y estética, produciendo eventos de lenguaje que ponen de relieve la importancia del contexto histórico y cultural en la comprensión de las obras mencionadas.

Palabras-clave: Muerte. Libro Álbum. Multimodalidad. América Latina.

Introduction

The perspective of contemporary education and its interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary character enable innovative discussions on the relationship of children's literature and its forms of knowledge production that respond to current epistemological demands.

Children's literature has been dealing with complex themes, involving, for example, existential issues explored by different cultures, with modalizations that reverberate the subjectivity of each people. However, productions for children have historically generated fluctuating movements of advances and setbacks in relation to the treatment of these contents. It is observed that different disciplines are dedicated to exploring the universe of children's literature, whether from the point of view of Sociology, History, Psychoanalysis, Pedagogy, or of language, reflecting on difficult subjects or delicate themes (Paiva, 2008) that involve children, families, and society.

On the other hand, influences from other languages reveal the invention of literary genres. Belmiro and Maciel (2014) present this context in a genre of children's literature. Belmiro and Maciel (2014) present this context in a genre of children's literature.

An important case is that of picturebooks, which show themselves, every day, more vigorous in the search for languages that intertextualize, hybridize, and whose product disconcerts any attempt to frame by canonical definitions (Belmiro; Maciel, 2014, p. 67).

Thus, it is possible to point out some concepts that explain the timeliness of contemporary picturebook formats. One of them is the crossover¹, developed by Beckett (2009). The author proposes the idea of crossing over by including readers of different ages for the interpretation of the literary phenomenon. In this way, each one assumes the freedom to position themselves in front of the discourse that promotes metaphors, intertextualities, among so many experiences with language. The books that are our object of analysis fall within the following framework: picturebooks that, although classified as children's, go beyond ageism and open space for complex and multiple interactions.

Another concept that refers to representations in various semiotic modes socially and culturally configured to produce meanings is that of *multimodality*, conceived by Kress (2010). All texts are multimodal, composed in more than one way. For Gualberto and Kress:

Writing, speech, gesture, music, dance, *layout* are examples of modes, the material resources to make meaning evident. Modes are the material resources for the production and materialization of signs. (Gualberto; Kress, 2019. p. 2).

The authors intend not only to emphasize writing and speech, but to recognize and incorporate new modes in communication, such as visual, gestural and synesthetics. Another aspect of the conception of multimodality is the description of these communicative modes that offer different potentials to produce meanings and the choice of each mode promotes specific instances of representation and communication. Writing is organized from lexicon, syntax, and spelling, these are aspects of the physiology of seeing. The image, which also shares this physiology, however, is entirely unique, as it structures its composition with specific procedures of the look, such as shape, the use of colors, texture, among others. The picturebook makes it possible to point out how these modes interact with each other, showing their characteristics, which gather to compose the whole.

The *corpus* of analysis of this article, therefore, proposes a paradigm shift in the literary treatment of the theme of death. There are three picturebooks of children's literature, published in Latin America: *Es así* (2010), by Paloma Valdivia (Chile), approaches death with lightness and with a philosophical perspective; *Camino a casa* (2008), by Jairo Buitrago and Rafael Yockteng (Colombia), deals with death from a socio-historical perspective; *Just a minute! a trickster tale and counting book* (2006), by Yuyi Morales (Mexico) explores the theme in a burlesque way, proposing humor as a language resource.

The theme of death, like so many others left out of children's literature books, was investigated by Paulino (2008, p. 803) when he noted "[...] the presence of tragic poems in Brazilian schools in the 1950s with their relative abandonment in later years, especially due to the country's insertion in cultural consumption societies." The author recalls the removal of such texts from schools as protection for children's sensitivity and warns about the confusion between "[...] tragic art and media approaches to violence, associated with the free spectacle, in a process of trivialization of the tragic, pointed out by Adorno, in his denunciation of the cultural industry" (Paulino, 2008, p. 803). In a similar perspective, Paiva (2008), among others, discusses delicate themes in children's literature, erased or silenced content, such as death and school resistance to address them, even though they are experiences lived by every human being. From the same point of view, Kovács (2003, p. 3) analyzes the silencing and the weight of the taboo of these themes, signaling that "[...]

paradoxically, in this same century, death was and continues to be, at the beginning of the 21st century, increasingly close to people, mainly due to the development of telecommunications, the internet and social networks”.

The contrastive method is used in this text at some levels of approach, both within each book and by the relationship between the books. First, we compare three books dealing with the theme of death and, at the same time, views on this human inevitability are broadened. Second, we compare narrative procedures, since each of the works proposes specific solutions, which will be detailed throughout the analyzes; finally, we highlight the language-culture that, in the picturebooks, is translated by different languages, specifically in the cases of verbal and visual language. Colombia, Chile, and Mexico have exposed their histories and subjectivities.

The analyzed books carry with them the importance of this debate and emphasize the literary bias of the use of the language, exploring its aesthetic quality. With this, it is possible and desirable to offer the reader themes that contribute positively to the formation of their emotional body.

The lightness and weight of living

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Es así, by Chilean Paloma Valdivia, stands out for the light way in which it approaches a complex theme for the human being, especially when it involves children: the cycle of life.

The book is structured on double pages, revealing one of the characteristics of the contemporary picturebook. The narrative begins on the left page with the phrase “Some have already left...”², and “The neighbor’s cat, Aunt Margarida, the fish in yesterday’s soup,” to the right, leaving it marked right away that its theme is death. The characters appear, on the left, with wings, in a metaphorical indication that they are going to heaven and, on the right, the fish with closed eyes lies under a bowl. Although the combination of a pet, a human being and a fish prepared as food, listed in the same sentence, may seem insensitive at first glance, *Es así* deals with the theme of death, without trivializing it. The rescue of lightness would be a way of reacting to the “weight of living” (Calvino, 2002, p. 22). Calvino (2002) expands the question and evokes the writing style: “[...] lightness is something that is created in the

writing process, with the poet's own linguistic means". However, it distinguishes "lightness of thought" from "lightness of frivolity," with the first idea chosen by the text, which can be light, without being empty.

Valdivia's lightness is in her style of language, since every detail adds up to the understanding of the ephemerality of life. A good example starts with the cover of the book: in the foreground, a cat stalking a little bird that, in turn, is taking care of its nest; in the background, the same cat sleeps covered in feathers. At the same time, the grandmother reads the book *Es así* to the granddaughter on her lap on the initial sheets and the girl reads the book alone (grandmother floats with wings around her) on the final sheets. Life and death are themes that spread equally through the paratexts that also participate in the narrative, with information both in the verbal text and in the visual text.

The sequence continues, indicating that "Others will arrive. Some were desired, others came without asking"³ (figure 1). On the left, a fair bag with fish, desired by an adult cat, and two kitten kittens. The hand that holds the bag is that of a pregnant woman, whose belly houses an egg, a boy, a dog and other animals, showing the universality of procreation. The yellow background makes the belly with the red dress even more evident. This and several other passages in the book involve different modes of reading, which contributes to the formation of reading competence, since the book opens to different *modes* (Kress, 2010) of representation, in which the image goes beyond the meanings of the written text.

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Figure 1 – The pregnant woman



Source: *Es así* (2010).

As you turn the page, we see those who have left. On the left, a girl cries and, on the right, hugs her grandmother with wings, in the shadow of a postcard (figure 2). The contrastive feature is also among the colors: the gray marking the sadness (the dark background is identical to the grandmother's dress, showing to whom this feeling of mourning is dedicated) and the pink background showing the joy of the moment of remembrance on the page on the right.

Figure 2 – The girl and the grandmother



Source: *Es así* (2010).

The back-and-forth movement shows that life is made of departures and arrivals, which alternate until “there is a moment when those who leave and those who come cross each other in the air. Say hello to each other.”⁴ At that moment, those who go are represented by the figure of a man holding a rabbit, in an upward movement on the page, and those who arrive, represented by a boy holding a dog in a downward movement. This arrangement on the page creates a sense of movement of ascending to the heavens. For Calvin, lightness “[...] is associated with precision and determination, never to what is vague or random” and, to justify himself, he quotes the famous phrase of Paul Valéry (1990 apud Calvino, 2002. p. 28): “It is necessary to be light as the bird, and not as the feather”. The bird is light because it goes in an exact direction, while the plume wanders in the air randomly. On the one hand, the precision given to the movement of the bird; on the other, the due weight that the bird carries.

The book emphasizes the ignorance of what can be found on the other side and the ignorance of those who arrive. Both for those who arrive and for those who go: "Where you come from and where you go is a mystery"⁵ Therefore, the book warns that: "We, who are here, are. You'd better enjoy it."⁶

The book invites the reader to a look of strange closeness, a bitter-sweet taste (seasoned with the sweetness of acceptance of what cannot be explained) that can only be summarized in the title "It is like this." In this regard, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) associate the concept of multimodality with the production of socially constructed discourses on aspects of life: the layers of meaning of death in the book are thickening with each page, crowned by the light overflight of an airplane forming, with smoke, the phrase "*Es así*."

Lightness refers to everything that is aerial (the image of the bird, the plane, those who go), floating, ascending, refers to the signs that symbolize an aspiration of "[...] redemption of anguish already in the process of being realized" (Chevalier; Gheerbrant, 2007. p. 547). This overcoming or liberation "[...] can be sought either through evasion – it would be a misleading lightness – or through overcoming – it would be true lightness." *Es así* poses itself as existentialist literature, in the Calvinist way, transporting the reader to a true lightness, perceptible to readers of all ages, giving them a philosophical sense.

The vivid colors of the illustrations sometimes refer to spring/summer (the arrivals), sometimes approaching autumn/winter (the departures). The double page that ends the story (figure 3) presents the girl (who was crying previously), the pregnant woman (now full body) and the grandmother (who was once in the girl's memories).

Figure 3 – The girl, the mother, and the grandmother



Source: *Es así* (2010).

ÉIt is the transience of life expressed in these three generations of women holding hands. The author manages, with an elaborate poetic synthesis, to treat the theme with all the complexity it has, pointing to the insurmountable character of this condition.

The hard way back home

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Camino a casa, by Colombian writer Jairo Buitrago and Peruvian illustrator Rafael Yockteng, from 2008, was published in Brazil in 2010 and approved in the National School Library Program (PNBE, the acronym in Portuguese) of 2012 for students from the 1st to the 5th year of Elementary School.

The narrative is built on the forms of representation of childhood, the fantastic, the violence and the death in a historical context of dictatorship and guerrilla warfare in Colombia. The book presents death by disappearance, a taboo theme still little addressed in children's literature. Paiva (2008) signals the importance of treating delicate themes in the literature as a possibility of expanding children's aesthetic, cultural and ethical references.

The composition of the elements proposes a discussion of how visual and verbal modes communicate. The narrative is made in the first-person, from the voice of a girl aged between 9 or 10 years old. The images, on the other

hand, do not reveal a first-person narration, since the girl appears in all the illustrations. In the first pages of the story, she comes across the lion (figure 4).

Figure 4 – The girl and the lion



Source: *Camino a casa* (2008).

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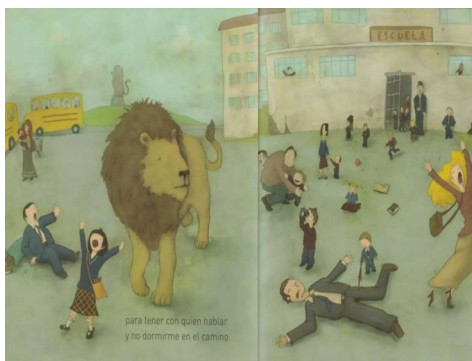
In the first-person visual narrative, it is not common to see the character in any image because of the point of view. However, in general, “[...] the convention of visual communication – painting, movie or picturebook – also creates the perspective of seeing the protagonist in the image. This convention is valid even if the author has chosen to tell the story from the perspective of the first person” (Nikolajeva; Scott, 2011, p. 164). This was the option of the illustrator, so that the reader shares the girl’s point of view (figure 4) when she goes towards the lion with a flower, inviting him to walk back home together.

On this double page, the headstone with the inscription of the year 1948 may not draw attention at first sight to a child, however, it will have a key meaning for reading the book for an adult reader who knows the historical aspects of Colombia. The stone with the year 1948 in close-up is in the shape of a tomb. This visual clue is an indication for *Bogotazo*, marked by the assassination of liberal leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitán in downtown Bogotá. This fact is considered as an antecedent to the armed conflict in the country, called “*La violencia*” (Grimaldo, 2022). By becoming aware of this event from the reading of *Camino a casa*, the possibility opens for the knowledge of historical and cultural elements of Colombia as a Latin American country that experiences political and social issues like Brazil. There

is a historical, geographical, social, and dramatic knowledge, all in the tangle of layers of the narrative in which the visual and the verbal overlap to make references to a period of political violence in Latin America. As Barthes states, in *Aula*, literature assumes several knowledge in a book.

The narrator's voice in: "On the way home, come with me..."⁷ evokes the company of this unusual character. Although the girl uses the imperative in Spanish *acompañame*, her communicative intention is an invitation to the lion. It is the graphic contextual elements such as the girl's smile, the flower in her hand, which seems addressed to the lion, that contribute to highlight the intention to attract the animal to go with her. The lion accepts the invitation and participates in the entire plot, from the cover to the fourth cover, towards the girl's house. The company of this ferocious animal draws the attention of the other children and their parents (figure 5): mothers and fathers are frightened by the unexpected presence of this animal; a woman screams and a man falls to the ground. The presence of the lion results in what Todorov (1975) characterizes as the fantastic in literature: "[...] there is always the 'mystery', the 'inexplicable', the 'inadmissible', which is introduced into 'real life', or in the 'real world', or even in the 'unalterable everyday legality'" (Todorov, 1975, p. 32).

Figure 5 – Leaving school



Source: *Camino a casa* (2008).

The children smile, take pictures of the animal and the girl walks side by side with it, feeling calm, protected. The strong, dark tones of people's

illustrations contrast with the walls of the school. The background of the sky and the floor in pastel, gray, turquoise and light green reveal this game of perceptions of children and adults, signaling a sense of surprise and even some chaos in the environment.

The conversation between animals and humans is common in fables and, often, in children's literature, animals have been popular characters, such as rats and rabbits (Nikolajeva; Scott, 2011, p. 173), and this does not cause any strangeness in the reader. The child mixes two worlds: that of reality and that of fantasy, through the presence of the lion as an imaginary friend to help her deal with his difficult daily experiences. In *Camino a casa*, although adults are part of the narrator's story, they have no voice to oppose childhood, they are references of absences.

The visual narrative differs from the perspective adopted in the verbal text, called as contradictory in the categorization of Nikolajeva and Scott (2011). In an interview with the agency EFE, published online in 2013, the writer Jairo Buitrago states that "[...] although the theme is complex, the story of the girl and the lion is quite fun". The fun proposed in the visual text contradicts the verbal text, which portrays the girl's daily life and the harsh reality of many children in Latin America. For the girl "[...] the path is not boring, but hostile" (García-González, 2017, p. 95).

In the difficulties of returning to the house, the lion always helps and protects her: carrying her on the back, waiting for her to pick up her little brother at nursery, waiting for her on the corner with other felines, or scaring the merchant of the sale with his roar so that she could take the groceries, even without credit. In other situations, the lion sits in the kitchen waiting for the girl to prepare the food for it and his brother and is by his side in solitude waiting for her mother to return late from the factory, very thin, head down, with a hood and expressionless face. It is a difficult and distressing path for her to go alone. The symbology of this animal refers to the idea of power, wisdom, justice, the king of the jungle and symbolizes the father, the master, and the sovereign (Chevalier; Gheerbrant, 2007). And, in the end, the visual narrative offers us a clue that transforms and redefines the entire story that led the reader (figure 6):

Figure 6 – Double page with family photo and stack of newspapers



Source: *Camino a casa* (2008).

The page has no verbal text, only a picture frame with a photo of the family on the beach: the mother, father, girl, and younger brother, all very smiling with a flower, like the one that the girl offers to the lion. The figure of the father with the large hair resembles the feline that accompanies the girl on her way home. Next to the photo, there is a stack of newspapers with the title “Families of the missing in 1985” (figure 7). The title of the news is an “intraiconic” text, which are “words [or phrases] that appear within the illustrations in some way commenting or contradicting the basic verbal narrative” (Nikolajeva; Scott, 2011. p. 156). This element of the report condenses the central information of the book. In this case, death is marked by disappearance, by images that are not explained by the verbal text, but by the intraiconic relationship of the page that signals the emotional tone of the father’s absence.

As García-González (2017) points out, the girl learns to live in an oppressive environment, a place where one cannot say, nor expect justice or reparation, a harsh reality of political violence and abuses of power experienced by several Latin American countries, in this case, Colombia. Therefore, the girl’s form of resistance is the way out by the invention. In *Imagination and creativity in childhood*, Vygotsky (2014) reinforces this procedure.

From this first form of union of fantasy with reality, it is easy to deduce why the opposition of one in relation to the other is wrong. [...] [...] Fantasy is not opposed to memory, but relies on it and disposes its data in new and novel combinations (Vygotsky, 2014. p. 13).

Through fantasy, the father's memory is rescued, bringing new arrangements and ways of perceiving the world, resisting, and living, despite the pain of loss.

"A trickster tale and counting book"

Humor, cleverness and irony are ingredients that circumvent thorny and difficult situations to face. That's how it goes in *Just a minute!: a trickster tale and counting book* by Mexican-American children's writer and illustrator Yuyi Morales. Originally published in English in 2003, it explores a theme that recognizes the typical context of Mexican culture.

The work wisely signals the quality of language in expressing feelings, emotions, thoughts, and rhetorical strategies of conviction, thus showing that the theme of death can be explored by different fields of knowledge.

Why the humor? When does tragedy approach comedy? And what distinguishes them? Transforming a possible tragedy, such as the inevitable presence of death, into a comedy is the oldest means of circumventing pain. As Jerónimo (2015, p. 69) says, "[...] comedy exalts critical thinking, cleverness, adaptability and an appreciation of physical pleasures such as food, drink and sex" (apud Pincelli; Américo, 2019, p. 4219). Classic examples are the plays of Ariano Suassuna, a writer representing northeastern popular culture, in whose book the protagonists usually beat the antagonists for their cleverness, adapting to situations, no matter how unforeseen they may be. The protagonist Granny Beetle proves to be a battle-hardened person with enough experience to circumvent the presence of the unwanted people in the kitchen and asks for "just a minute" to prepare delights for her grandchildren. In the end, she will be ready to leave.

The story begins by taking us immediately to an imaginative but very rational dimension. As Fernando Pessoa says, "the world is not true, but it is real." And this is interesting for young readers, because, instead of concealing the tension inherent in the theme of death itself, the plot proposes to face the situation, leading the reader to an awareness of the subject.

This is how Grandma Beetle invites the skeleton in and begins her speech that will be repeated in each new situation. "Just a minute, Mister Skeleton!" Grandma Beetle said. "I'll be right with you, but first I just have to sweep A house." On the other hand, the skeleton repeats the same sentence as Grandma, taking the verb to the past, ending the action and, therefore, ready for the definitive trip. "– A swept house, Mr. Skeleton said, rising from his chair." This dialogue will be repeated with each mockery that Grandma will invent to deceive the skeleton.

The linguistic resource that makes up the accumulative texts proposes a discursive structure characteristic of literary writing for childhood whose recursion adds new possibilities to each movement, keeping readers connected to the protagonist through language. Evangelista (1996) explores textual strategies that establish the fictional world in books of children's literature, confirming the importance of the situated use of language. In the case of the book under analysis, some examples can be highlighted: the sequence of actions numbered in large bold letters indicates passages of scenes as in a cinematographic script; the repetition of the expression "just a minute," after the skeleton's request to leave, creates an expectation about the solutions that Grandma will propose; she continues to dissuade death not to pressure her with the repetition of the phrase "I'm already going with you, but before..." The reiteration of these elements of textual cohesion promotes an interlocutory game that incites the reader's curiosity and warns him of his entry into a world of fiction.

Grandma Beetle begins to elaborate artifices that undermine the firm decision of death to take her, reversing the initial positions of power between the human being and death.

The delicacy of the elderly woman in her connection with death and the happy ending recall Pincelli's; Américo's statement (2019, p. 4.219): "From the Renaissance on there is a mutation in comedy, which approaches the romantic genre". The humor impregnated through linguistic and visual resources structures the comic perspective of the book. And literary discourse uses the exchange of scripts, which are cognitive schemes that allow us to recognize social patterns and ensure our mutual coexistence.

The progressive exchange of scripts gives rise to a slight smile in the reader, since he better understands the attitude of the old woman, to the final

laugh, demonstrating recognition of the ingenuity of the protagonist in overcoming death by food, by the affection that involves this doing in her production, by the woman who welcomes. Thus, the human in us overcomes the finitude that death represents.

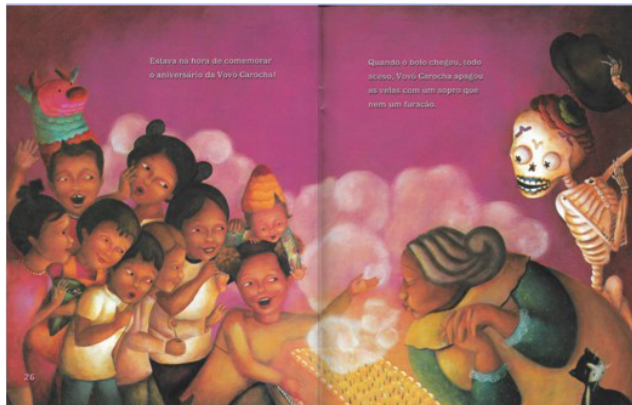
The actions and dialogues between the two characters define the genre of this tale, already in the subtitle of the book: "A Trickster Tale and Counting Book."

The exploration of allegory, by which words participate in the denotative game of the utterance, is an important discursive mark of the plot. And the relaxed conversation between the skeleton and the grandmother reveals a meaning that will only be realized at the end of the narrative.

The exaggeration that takes over the actions of the protagonist, when raising the numbers of elements in cleaning a house, two teapots, three stacks of tortillas and so on, culminates in the ingredients of a cake, the nine invited grandchildren and, finally, the table set for ten guests, which includes the skeleton. Faced with such joy and affection, and Grandma's power to blow out the candles on the cake (figure 7), death gives up on taking the old woman and surrenders to life.

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Figure 7 – Grandma Beetle, her grandchildren, and Mr. Skeleton



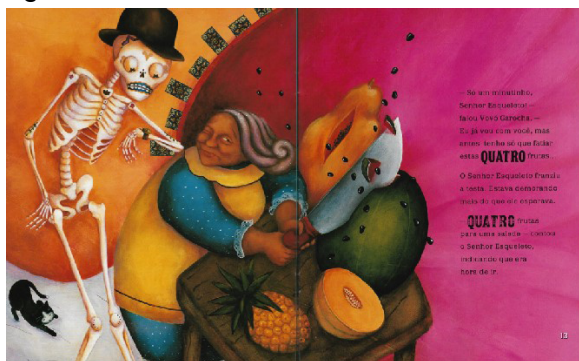
Source: Just a minutel!: a trickster tale and counting book (2006).

External reference is a key factor to understand this book. Mexican Yuyi Morales reveals how her country's culture manifests the feeling of death. As in the Walt Disney's animated movie "Coco" (2017), the social construction of the Mexican context in this book exposes a society that has no problem suffering, but also knows how to keep alive the representations of death with which it lives in the world of the living. It is a tradition of the country's popular culture that blends pre-Hispanic with Catholic culture, producing a religious syncretism that simultaneously experiences the sacred and the profane. Originally associated with the indigenous agricultural calendar, during the harvest, food and drink go hand in hand with the religious act, in a demonstration that the celebration of death is a way of being alive. The tourism economy explores a thousand types of skulls, *La Catrina*, beautiful in their clothing, sold as an icon of Mexican culture throughout the year.

Progressively, the text presents linguistic and visual resources that should be read as small signs of Grandma's and the skeleton's behavior. The protagonist only finds Mr. Skeleton very thin, on the other hand, the skeleton gradually becomes nervous, as he begins to perceive the survival strategy of the old woman (figure 8).

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Figure 8 – Grandma Beetle blinks to the reader



Source: Just a minute!: a trickster tale and counting book (2006).

Then, a tension arises that will intensify in all of Grandma's actions. "Mr. Skeleton rolled his eyes. He sometimes really needed a lot of patience" or, further on, "Mr. Skeleton would tap his fingers on the table. This was already

crossing the line!” In contrast to the skeleton’s impatience, the pace of the narrative is slow, conducting the reading in the same movement that the grandmother uses to calmly control the skeleton, unhurriedly. Time goes by and we are surprised to realize that we are more interested in the movements of the grandmother than in the initial objective of the story – which has the skeleton as its focus – and which transfers, also slowly, to the grandmother the relevance of the actions.

An important narrative procedure in this book is the relationship between verbal and visual discourse, since the opposition between them is what makes us laugh. Bergson (1983) warns about the importance of recognizing where to look for the comic:

[...] there is no comedy outside of what is properly human. A landscape can be beautiful, graceful, sublime, insignificant, or ugly; it will never be laughable. We laugh at an animal, but because we have surprised in it a human activity or a human expression. We will laugh at a hat, but in this case the comic will not be a piece of felt or straw, but the shape that someone gave it, the mold of human fantasy that it assumed (Bergson, 1983, p. 7).

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While the skeleton begins to get impatient with the FOUR ingredients of the preparations, the fruits, or when Grandma needs to melt FIVE cheeses, the verbal text says: “running to get Grandma Beetle’s coat.” However, the visual text contradicts the irritation of death expressed in the verbal text, by showing her holding a wooden spoon, in support of the cook. Gradually, the skeleton offers Grandma his arm and help with the mixer to cook SIX pans of food. The candies and sweets need to be placed on the SEVEN piñatas, while the verbal text signals: “SEVEN piñatas full of candies,” Mr. Skeleton said, and opened the door for Grandma Beetle to leave. “However, the image shows the skeleton, taken by pleasure, exercising its palate, and enjoying the sweets.

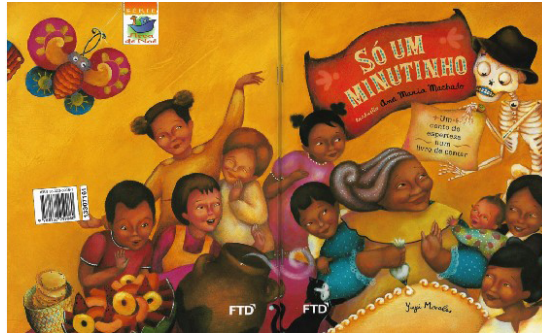
Almeida’s (2016, p. 101) analysis of the presence of humor in children’s literature books points out the dimension of ridicule through flashy fantasies, “[...] proposing extravagant and unreasonable situations that stimulate debauched laughter”. This game of contrast between languages is one of the characteristics of contemporary children’s picturebooks and, increasingly, the exploration of these procedures creates empathy with children and inserts

them into a world in which words enchant and images play with reality. It is the experimentation of languages.

Thus, death gradually humanizes itself until, finally, it sits at the table with everyone to celebrate the old woman's birthday. The presence of comedy is understood, not by the verbal text, which remains tied to the dialogue of the characters, but by the presence of the visual text, which is freed from a canonical view of the symbolic function of the presence of death and proposes other meanings. Therefore, the importance of the visual text in the composition of the narrative of this picturebook is highlighted. While the verbal text suggests a reading direction, the visual text often walks in the opposite direction, which leads to laughter. Throughout the narrative, we are taken by the ambiguity of the looks that Grandma casts at the skeleton, sometimes with small smiles, sometimes blinking at the reader, but always controlling the scene. They are torn eyes, of indigenous origin, which comes to be most of the Mexican population or, at least, present in the formation of the people.

Another aspect inherent to the visuality, much explored in the book, is the freedom of composition in each double page, always highlighting a significant element in the foreground. They can be the cheeses, the fruits, or the mixer in use in the skeleton's hand, the variety from the point of view, from top to bottom, from bottom to top, very first angle or a more open angle to cover all the elements in the scene. The composition is designed to highlight the potential of food for the integration of the characters.

On the other hand, the house and food become striking presences as forms of aesthetic and identity appreciation: in addition to tea, corn flour to make tortillas, salad fruits, melted cheeses, many pans with varied foods and *piñatas* with candies and sweets (Figure 9). It is a welcoming context, which also feeds the imagination and establishes a relationship of affections.

Figure 9 – Cover and fourth cover of *Just a minute!*

Source: *Just a minute!: a trickster tale and counting book* (2006).

Mexican culture blossoms on every page. Those that open and close the book are decorated by a garland of red peppers, the cover sheet, in ochre color, approaches the tone of the earth, the ground of the people. The grandchildren's eyes also shine when they see the treats made by Grandma. It is there that death, personified by the skeleton, sits at the table to share life and enjoy its pleasures.

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Final considerations

This article highlighted the theme of death, with books belonging to the context of Latin America: Chile, Colombia, and a translation into Portuguese by a Mexican author. The theoretical foundation that supported the approaches of the three books illuminated different trends in the treatment of the theme of death. This diversity indicated that the contemporary context of the literary field opens to non-canonical perspectives of understanding human finitude. The subtle distinction between the "lightness of thought" and the "lightness of frivolity" of Calvin's philosophical thought in *Es así*; the importance of the resources of narratology when using the first person to recover historical, geographical, social and dramatic knowledge in *Camino a casa*; or, finally, in *Just a Minute!*, whose theoretical basis on humor as a solution to coping with death results in a fine comedy.

The contrastive method explained some aspects common to the books, such as the use of the double page, the strong presence of the relationship between verbal and visual languages in the construction of the narrative, the variety of communicative modes, the delicacy in approaching the common theme and the representation of their cultures as a distinction of peoples. On the other hand, he suggested different solutions, which highlighted different narrative strategies: either spatially with the use of color in *Es Así*, from the perspective in *Just a Minute!*, of composition in *Camino a casa* or verbally, the use of linguistic resources in favor of literary reading: the first person singular in *Camino a casa*, recursion in *Just a Minute!* and verbal tenses, indicating past, present, future in *Es Así*.

The analysis also revealed that the language practices allowed different perspectives on life and death to be established, from a philosophical, political, or humorous point of view. In *Es así*, we are invited to discuss the cycle of birth-growth-dying. In *Camino a casa*, there are elements for a socio-historical and, at the same time, political debate of death. Finally, in *Just a Minute!*, it is death that, humorously, is invited to enjoy the pleasures of life. All three books present identity aspects of these peoples, in the indigenous-Mexican gastronomic culture, in the role of resistance of the Colombian girl through fantasy and invention or in the transience of time due to the presence of generations of Chilean women. All this reveals the vitality of this literary genre – the picturebook –, which surpasses traditional formats in the structuring of the narrative. Some of the concepts dealt with in this article, such as crossover and multimodality, are examples of how languages and the variety of modes of communication interfere in the composition of the plot.

The consideration of this knowledge for professional practice emphasizes multimodal aspects of the picturebook and goes beyond thematic clichés – such as moral teachings – or a utilitarian view of literature in the choice of books for the class. In addition, they provide teachers with elements to establish intercultural mediation with students, since multicultural, historical, and political voices and images, based on Latin American roots, addressed to Brazilian readers, must echo and not be silenced.

Notes

1. Crossover literature “[...] refers to fiction that crosses from child to adult or adult to child audiences [...] Both adults and children are able to share more or less equally, albeit in different ways, in the reading experience (Beckett, 2009. p. 3-4).
2. Translation by Graziela Costa Pinto (2012) Original: “Algunos ya partieron. El gato del vecino, la tía Margarita, el pescado de la sopa de ayer” (Valdivia, 2010, without page).
3. “Otros llegarán. Unos han sido pedidos, otros vienen sin preguntar.” (Valdivia, 2010, without page).
4. “Hay un instante en que los que se van y los que vienen se cruzan en el aire. Se desean felicidad.” (Valdivia, 2010, without page).
5. “Es un misterio de dónde vienen y adónde van.” (Valdivia, 2010, without page).
6. “Los que estamos, aquí estamos. Es mejor disfrutar.” (Valdivia, 2010, without page).
7. Translation by Fabio Weintraub (2017, p. 8). Original: “Acompáñame de vuelta a casa” (Buitrago; Yockteng, 2008, without page).

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Prof.ª Dr.ª Elizabeth Guzzo de Almeida
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brasil)
Faculdade de Educação
Grupo de Pesquisa do Letramento Literário (Gpell-Ceale)
Grupo de Estudo e Pesquisa em Literatura Infantil (Gepli-Ceale)
Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2569-5550>
E-mail: eguzzoalmeida@gmail.com

Prof.ª Dr.ª Celia Abicalil Belmiro
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brasil)
Faculdade de Educação
Grupo de Pesquisa do Letramento Literário (GPELL-Ceale)
Coordenadora do Grupo de Estudo e Pesquisa em Literatura Infantil (Gepli-Ceale)
Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9895-7550>
E-mail: celiaabicalil@gmail.com

Prof.ª Dr.ª Luíza Santana Chaves
Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Brasil)
Programa de Mestrado Profissional em Letras (PROFLETRAS)
Grupo de Pesquisa do Letramento Literário (GPELL-Ceale)
Grupo de Estudo e Pesquisa em Literatura Infantil (Gepli-Ceale)
Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5557-0463>
E-mail: luizasch2704@gmail.com

Name and E-mail of the Translator
Affonso Henriques Nunes
affonsohnunes@gmail.com

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