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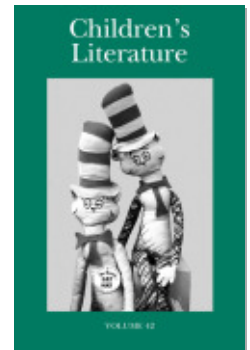
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## Speaking As a Child/Hearing As an Adult

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## *Speaking As a Child/Hearing As an Adult*

Elizabeth N. Goodenough

*The Voice of the Child in American Literature: Linguistic Approaches to Fictional Child Language*, by Mary Jane Hurst. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

A twelve-year-old is awarded a \$5,000 advance for the daily record of her first year at a Bronx junior high school; media hype promotes *The Diary of Latoya Hunter* (1992) with interviews of the seventh-grader on the *Today* show. *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (1993), narrated by a fictional ten-year-old, wins Britain's Booker Prize. The Modern Language Association approves a special session on child authors for the 1993 convention. A story on Zlata Filipovic, "Bosnia's Anne Frank," appears on the cover of *Newsweek* (Feb. 28, 1994). The novelty of a child's vision is compelling in our society, especially if this life force can be captured and recorded in a child's own words.

But what is the language of a child? And why, if children so rarely become authors, have writers over the last two hundred years chosen to include their speech in fiction? What special problems does sounding the voice of a pre-verbal or rhetorically unsophisticated young self present a literary artist? The history of childhood indicates that any simple, uncluttered notion of "the child" is an invention of adults, a social construction of Western educational and ideological systems, or as James R. Kincaid puts it for late twentieth-century readers in *Child-Loving* (1992), a romantic fiction "assembled in reference to desire" (4). The French word *enfant*, and its Latin cognate *infans*, define the essential nature of childhood as unspeaking, reminding us that although actual children are rarely seen but not heard, adults have an inevitable authority in the literary rendering of what children say.

In seeking "to understand the voice of the child and the role of the child in American fiction" (3), Mary Jane Hurst raises two related and significant questions: Why have children been so populous in American fiction over the last two centuries? Why has their presence been largely overlooked in critical scholarship? Although

*Children's Literature* 23, ed. Francelia Butler, R. H. W. Dillard, and Elizabeth Lennox Keyser (Yale University Press, © 1995 Hollins College).

she never fully answers these questions, Hurst draws attention to some of the complex issues raised when adults create or analyze a language for children in literature. Like the burgeoning theories that try to explain how young humans acquire language, this subject is fraught with controversy. For instance, Brian McHale in "Speaking as a Child in U.S.A.: A Problem in the Mimesis of Speech" (*Language and Style* 17.4 (1984): 352–70) has challenged the notion that a simple translation of children's speech ever occurs or that objective descriptions of their language can be usefully correlated to literary representation. Such an enterprise, besides its failure to consider the role of contextualization, only conceals the repertoire-based nature of literary stereotyping on which all writers depend when they devise a dialect or child's language (361).

Hurst's investigation is undeterred by such theoretical nuances, but it rightfully distinguishes its contribution from such previous work in the field as Horace Scudder's *Childhood in Literature and Art* (1895), Peter Coveney's *The Image of Childhood* (1967), Robert Pattison's *The Child Figure in English Literature* (1978), Reinhard Kuhn's *Corruption in Paradise: The Child in Western Literature* (1982), and Richard Coe's *When the Grass Was Taller* (1984). These important works are broadly thematic rather than focused on literary children's language, and they all lack Hurst's exclusively American orientation. Laurie Ricou's *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature* (1987) is Hurst's only real precursor, although his work does not center, like hers, on the direct application of linguistic methodologies to dialogue.

Sorting and assessing the speech patterns of child characters of writers as diverse as J. D. Salinger, Henry Roth, Vladimir Nabokov, Stephen King, Toni Morrison, Richard Brautigan, Betty Smith, and Paule Marshall, as well as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Henry James is an ambitious undertaking. Age-graded talk, intonation patterns, orthographic idiosyncrasies, and speech sounds are given concrete illustration. Hurst also provides samples of dialogue from a wide range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts, rigorously classifying them by categories drawn from speech function analysis, as well as speech act and narrative theory, and related to speech characteristics associated with current notions of gender and class and parent/child discourse analysis. Hurst's concluding chapter is organized to apply

all the linguistic topics introduced in the body of the book to Faulkner's "That Evening Sun."

Although pioneering aspects of this book include the linguistic study of children's gender differences in a literary context, the value of this study as literary criticism seems limited. Comparing the case roles in *What Maisie Knew* and *Lolita* does not yield new insights into the girls' sense of victimization even if it raises a reader's consciousness about characters' verbal self-presentation. The fact that Maisie "places herself in an experiencer role in 50 percent of her self-references, much more often than she places adults in that role" (37) would demonstrate the special value, if not the powerful ambiguity, James ascribes to what the child feels, observes, and knows—only if one had not picked up the idea from the title of the novel.

When carried beyond categorizations and classifications, the book is sometimes unsound in describing historical speech or the ways narrative voice works in literary texts. The discussion of Huck Finn's impersonation of a girl, for example, tells us something about the late nineteenth-century view of female stereotypes but misses the irony that Huck's overly polite and helpless pretenses are unmasked by a shrewd shanty woman: "Don't go about women in that old calico. You do a girl tolerable poor, but you might fool men maybe." Like Aunt Sallie, who asks why Tom Sawyer had to engage in intrigues to free Jim (to which Tom replies "Well, that is a question, I must say; and just like women!"), the tart women who comment on boys' shenanigans in *Huckleberry Finn* are far from helpless petitioners. Hurst has discovered that Twain sees questioning as an aspect of stereotypical female speech (119), but the real target of his humor is the boys' too ready appropriation of gender stereotypes, not the female speech itself.

Other problems arise from blurring the boundaries between literary speech and actual language use. For example, the language of Faulkner's fictional boys and girls is taken as historical evidence of pre-Civil War speech patterns. The use of Pip's utterance at the conclusion of *Moby Dick*'s Doubloon chapter as an example of the poetic speech function seems reductive: asserting that Pip, whose role is analogous to Lear's fool, is too young and psychologically wounded to understand his own words beyond the level of sound play (46) overlooks the mythical implications of this character and his power to speak. Because Hurst does not examine the philo-

sophical dimensions of such child figures, she does not add insight into larger cultural trends, the subtleties of what “voice” can mean, or the fundamental problems a writer faces in gaining access to the consciousness of the relatively inarticulate child. Tony Tanner’s *The Reign of Wonder* (1965), cited in Hurst’s bibliography, is more useful in the first regard, relating “the innocent eye” of child figures to the American search for a new vision. Naomi Sokoloff addresses the latter issues effectively in the opening discussion of *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction* (1992). Although Hurst notes that in 1927, after his third novel was rejected, Faulkner decided to write for himself rather than change careers, and thus created three young Compson characters (137), it would have been interesting to pursue this point with other failed or flagging writers who also unblocked themselves by writing for or about children.

Nevertheless this book is useful for the nonlinguist because it clearly explains basic concepts and technical terms, alludes to controversies, and provides numerous charts illustrating how language can be examined from a variety of approaches. Another asset of the volume is its comprehensive bibliography, which includes unpublished dissertations. One also gains a startling realization of how much fresh child talk is out there—un-cutesy dialogue, exuberant sounds, funny reflections, and inscrutable outbursts waiting to be heard, read aloud, and pondered. As current linguistic theory becomes more accessible through works like Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct* (1994) and adults grow accustomed to Chomsky’s notion of the three-year-old as a “linguistic genius,” the power of children’s literature to model young speech is evident. Coming out of the mouths of adults, fictional child language becomes authorized as it is read aloud. Because Hurst’s book shows some of the potential problems and uses of applying linguistic principles to literary texts, it could serve as a starting point for other scholars who wish to build a bridge between linguistic study and fictional child language. This approach could be used to investigate boys’ and girls’ talk in recent children’s books, for example, as these works have the potential of social engineering and may well affect speech patterns of the young.