

Beyond Expectation: Two Texts from Different Times

David Kinder shows how rooting your systematic analysis of texts in their contexts, and reading with a curiosity that overrides routine expectations, can allow you to write successfully about significant similarities and differences between texts.

'Use the linguistic frameworks' is the standard advice you get when met with the task of comparing texts from different times. Also called linguistic 'methods' or 'levels', these umbrella terms call up a familiar list of analytical tools: **lexis, semantics, grammar, orthography, pragmatics and discourse structure**.

While you should definitely use these frameworks, comparing texts in a mechanical way will only take you so far. Your analysis needs to be accompanied by a consideration of the context of the texts in front of you, where you explore the values that produced them as well as their purpose and their intended readers. And in this process, a healthy dose of curiosity is useful. This will allow you to make the most of a systematic approach, help you to select which levels to use, and make you more open to having your expectations challenged as well as confirmed.

Two Texts to Compare

Let's look at this in practice. On page 38 are two texts that have an audience and purpose in common. The first ('Text A') is an extract from John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* (1744) and the second

('Text B') is part of a blog on the website '*Lucyathome*' (2019). Both are advising parents about how to discipline children.

Straightaway we can see some intriguing complexities in terms of context and mode. Separated by more than 250 years, the two texts seem at first sight to be equally far apart in terms of their attitude to parenting. The point of view expressed in Text A, that you should suppress the 'Passions' of a child, appears to differ from that in Text B, which advises the parent to guide the child's behaviour, like

a ball being gently nudged by the bumpers of a bowling alley.

However, both are offering a similar suggestion in terms of ways to correct 'bad behaviour' – albeit differing markedly in degrees of severity – in the sense that both are advocating boundaries for the child. And, although quite typical of their time in terms of mode and register, there are some interesting overlaps, and even surprises, in the way they attempt to engage readers in how to discipline a child. Keeping this tension in mind, between the differences and the similarities in the texts, is helpful as we get underway with analysis.

If we now start to apply the linguistic frameworks, retaining that sense of curiosity, interesting comparisons emerge.

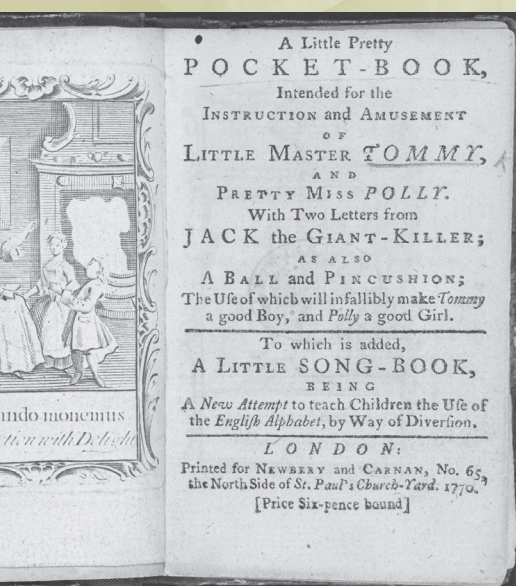
Word Level Differences

Certainly, looking at the texts at word level, more differences than similarities seem to appear. In Text A, the terms used to describe the child's lack of compliance say a lot about the attitudes and values of their era. It is described as an 'Offence' and a 'Crime'. These nouns may have narrowed semantically over time, and are now restricted to law and order, but even in the 1744 context, using them to refer to bad behaviour in children still implies serious wrong-doing. Newbery suggests that the child's 'Fault' is likely to have come from 'the Evils that attend passionate Men' and that only after the punishment of being 'shut up' is administered, will the child get a 'Pardon'. The nouns 'Evils' and 'Pardon' both have religious connotations, suggesting that children are born morally rotten, and that it's the duty of the parent to bring them onto a righteous path.

By contrast, *Lucyathome* is often vague about the naming of childish misdemeanours: children are described as

I doubt not but every Parent, every Father and Mother, would gladly contribute what they could towards the Happiness of their Children; and yet it is surprising to see how blind they are, and how wide they mistake the Mark. What the indulgent Parent generally proposes for the Happiness of his Child, is a good Fortune to bear him up under the Calamities of Life; but daily Experience tells us, this is insufficient. Happiness and Misery have their Source from the Passions: If in the Midst of the greatest Affluence, we are always repining, and think ourselves poor and miserable, we are so; and the Beggar in the Straw, who is content, and thinks he has sufficient, is rich and happy. The whole Matter subsists in the Mind, and the

Fault, asking Pardon for his Offence, and promising Amendment for the future I would forgive him. This Method, regularly pursued, would soon break his Passion of Resentment, and subdue it to Reason. The next prudent Step to be taken, is to check his inordinate craving and desiring almost every Thing he sees; and this, I think, might be as easily effected as the other; for, in the first Place, I would lay down this as a Maxim with him, that he should never have any Thing he cried for; and therefore, if he was willing to obtain any Favour, he must come with some reasonable Request, and withdraw without the Appearance of any Uneasiness in Case of a Disappointment.



Constitution: Subdue therefore your Children's Passions; curb their Tempers, and make them subservient to the Rules of Reason. And this is not to be done by chiding, whipping, or severe Treatment, but by Reasoning and mild Discipline. Were I to see my Son too much ruffled and discomposed, I should take him aside, and point out to him the Evils that attend passionate Men; tell him, that my Love for him would make me overlook many Faults, but that this was of so heinous a Nature, that I could not bear the Sight of him while he continued so wicked; that he should not see his Mother, nor any of his Playmates, until he had sufficiently repented of that Crime: Upon which, I would immediately order him (in a very calm Manner) to be shut up from any Company for five or six Hours, and then, upon his Confession of the

Text 1 is an extract from *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* by John Newbery, published in 1744, partly aimed at children, helping them to learn good behaviour. This extract is part of the introduction, aimed at parents.

doing 'something they shouldn't have' (my italics), or 'being rough'. The only specific example she uses is of 'draw[ing] on a wall'. There is no sense of moral outrage here, just the notion that this behaviour is inappropriate. When it comes to discipline, the use of the collocation 'time out', has much more positive connotations: of rest, and of something temporary; more of a release than a restriction. Newbery, meanwhile, advises the child's parent to 'break his passion' (note the generic male, 'his', unsurprising for the period). The polysemic verb 'break' here has violent connotations, especially looked at with a modern gaze.

Comparing Grammar and Syntax

This lexical and semantic approach, then, appears to describe contrasting attitudes in these two texts. Initially this also seems true in syntactic, or grammatical analysis, but differences soon begin to emerge.

Certainly, the register of the texts would appear to fit common expectations, with the more formal syntax appearing in the earlier text. Take the opening sentences: Newbery begins with a multi-clausal, complex sentence as he declares his opinion. After admitting, with the archaically ordered and definite-sounding 'I doubt not', that parents try to do their best to make their children happy, he goes on, in three more clauses, to say 'how blind they are'. This complicated syntax, and this use of antithesis, makes this text seem similar to a formal speech. It is typical of 18th-century 'men of letters', showing off their rhetorical abilities with a clear ring of certainty about their message: in this case, that parents should not be 'indulgent' with their children.

By contrast, *Lucyathome* does not start with a declaration in the first person, choosing instead a generalisation about

'more and more parents'. It is seemingly less opinionated and the use of the present progressive 'are moving away from' pragmatically merely nudges, rather than directs parents to leave behind punishments like 'smacking'. In contrast to Newbery's convoluted opening, *Lucyathome's* is expressed in a simple sentence. She then writes: 'And the 'time out' is a common substitute'. This conversational feature, a coordinate clause and therefore minor sentence, fits with the notion that published written texts are becoming more informal over time (see Fairclough and others). It also, and perhaps more importantly, places emphasis on the 'time out' solution that is central to this blog post.

So far, so different. If we look more closely at the two texts, however, still using a grammatical lens, and keeping our sense of curiosity, we can find a number of similarities, contrary, perhaps, to expectation.

Surprising Similarities

Look back again at the opening sentences: are they really so different? You could say that the use of contrast is actually quite similar. Newbery sets up positive

parental intentions, before knocking them down with criticism of how blind many parents are, while *Lucyathome* sets up an opposition of her own: traditional discipline on the one hand and her solution of ‘the time out’ on the other. Likewise, whilst it is true that Newbery expresses his own views, in the first person, from the outset, only two sentences on from the opening, *Lucyathome* begins a paragraph with ‘Personally, I think...’; it is clearly an opinion, with the adverb ‘Personally’ simultaneously softening the statement and yet also reinforcing that it belongs to her.

And then there’s the use of the minor sentence. *Lucyathome* is not breaking new ground with ‘And the ‘time out’ is a common substitute’. Newbery uses the same technique hundreds of years earlier when he, like his modern counterpart, is rejecting corporal punishment:

And this is not to be done by chiding, whipping or severe Treatment, but by Reasoning and mild Discipline.

He’s breaking a rule that is still enforced during SPAG lessons at primary school today – never begin a sentence with ‘And’ or ‘But’ – for the same reason as Lucy, to make a point.

Other Frameworks

There are other frameworks you can use to explore the texts, of course, which we don’t have room to discuss fully here. You might consider the overall discourse structure of the texts, which show a clear development in this form of advisory writing. This is perhaps driven partly by technology: one is a block of text in which every inch of print costs time and money, the other a bullet-pointed online post where strings of icons make sense and there are no financial or spatial constraints on the writer. The orthographical changes are interesting, too. In Text A, we have the common 18th-century practice of using an initial capital letter for nouns and a more intriguing use of a capital on the conjunction ‘If’, after a colon, all of which have been superseded by a new standard form of orthography in Text B.

Contexts and Curiosity

Whatever your linguistic framework, level or method, however, the route to good comparative analysis seems clear: being systematic is a helpful way to approach texts from different times, but we can never disconnect it from context. The driver of

your analysis should be curiosity, rather than expectation, as this is surely the best route to interesting and original writing on language change.

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Note – Lucyathome
The complete ‘Lucyathome’ blog is available here:
https://lucyathome.co.uk/gentle-parenting/time-out-discipline-guide-parents/

emag Archive

- Alice in Wonderland and Peter Pan, emagplus for emagazine 56, April 2012
- Tom Brown’s Schooldays and Harry Potter – Moral Values in Children’s Fiction, emagazine 28 April 2005
- Losing the Magic of Literature – Harry Potter, emagazine 54, December 2011
- Bosses and Babydolls – Language, Power and Gender in a Good Housekeeping Article from the 1950s, emagazine 77, September 2017
- A Linguistic Analysis of Magazine Problem Pages, emagazine 50, December 2010
- Investigating Language – Fashion, emagazine 35, February 2007
- Picture Books – We’re Going on a Bear Hunt, emagazine 31, December 2005
- A Girl Called Alice, emagazine 54, December 2011
- Children’s Reading – Gender and Language, emagazine 58, December 2012



Respectful discipline

When I talk about respectful discipline, I am thinking about how to train and develop my children into competent, wise, kind adults.

I don't want to dictate to them, but I do need to keep them on the straight and narrow (a bit like a ball being gently nudged by the bumpers of a bowling alley).

And it all comes down to motive.

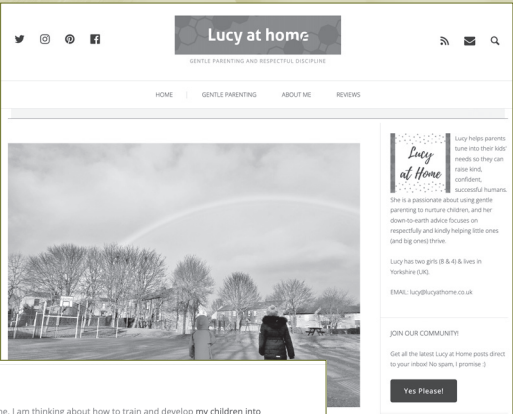
If you are trying to take your revenge for bad behaviour, or pay your child back for doing something wrong, you are being unkind. But if your aim is to develop your child and help them to mature, then you are on the right track.

And a great way to tell what your motives are is to think about how you're feeling.

- Do I feel calm?
- Would I react this way if I was dealing with an adult?
- Will I see my behaviour as an overreaction in 3 hours' time?
- Is my child's future and mental well-being at the centre of this, or my own anger?

If you feel angry, you're probably going to be shouting and acting in anger - it's about making you feel better rather than what is in the best interests of the child. But if you are discussing respectfully, you feel calm. You are able to think objectively and deal kindly (but firmly) with your child.

The warmth you feel for them is still evident even while the discipline is taking place.



Text 2 is from 2019 and is a blog post which appeared on the website ‘Lucy at Home’ (lucyathome.co.uk), offering its readers methods of ‘Gentle Parenting and Discipline.

So how does a time out fit into this?

A time out is when a child is told to sit out because they've done something they shouldn't have.

Of course this can be done in many different ways. If you scream, 'Get out of my sight! Sit on that chair, you naughty boy!' then you're doing it wrong! We'll talk more about the proper way to do it in a minute, but first let's talk a bit about the purpose of a time out.

Logical Consequence

A logical consequence is a consequence that is linked to the behaviour that happened.

For example, if a toddler draws on the wall, a logical consequence would be to ask them to clean it up. Or if they keep running away from you, a logical consequence would be that they have to hold your hand.

A time out can be a great logical consequence as it moves your child away from the situation. For example, if they are being rough with their friends, it would be overkill to send the friends home. But instead, you could move your child away from the friends for a few minutes.

It gives our kids a chance to reset. They can reflect on what's happened, and once it's over, they have a fresh start.