5. The (re)presentation of knowledge about gender in children's picture dictionaries

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Abstract This chapter argues that picture dictionaries offer a more complex relationship between visual and verbal elements that goes beyond a simple representation of linguistic facts. Comparing the interplay between the visual and verbal across dictionaries, the chapter investigates the presentation of knowledge about gender in monolingual British picture dictionaries from the last 30 years, focusing on prototypes and stereotypes in the context of occupational roles.

Keywords picture dictionaries, gender, stereotypes, occupational roles

INTRODUCTION

Picture dictionaries for children have been regarded as texts in which the relationship between the visual and verbal is fairly straightforward, unlike in narrative picturebooks (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Moreover, dictionaries are typically expected to present objective "facts" about a language (Benson, 2001, p. 4). However, compiling picture dictionaries involves choices regarding the selection of entry-words, choice of illustrations, and wording of definitions. Such choices are influenced by the time and culture in which the text was created. Picture dictionaries go beyond simple representations of facts and offer more complex relationships between visual and verbal elements in that they present, organize, and construct knowledge about language and the world, including people and gender.

There is abundant research on gender in children's literature and in children's picturebooks, but much of it has focused on fiction (Crisp & Hiller, 2011; DeWitt et al., 2013). As Thomas Crisp (2015) argues, the importance for children to be able to see reflections of themselves in fiction has been argued for decades. However,

it is also vital for nonfiction literature to "provide young readers with opportunities to see multiple, nuanced representations that depict accurately the people they love, the people they can become, and the people they are already" (p. 253). The present chapter considers gendered representation of occupations in children's picture dictionaries in a historical perspective, concentrating on dictionaries published in the last few decades and on depictions of occupational roles, as these show young readers "the people they can become" (Crisp, 2015, p. 253).

Gender roles and gender stereotypes are closely rooted in their cultural and temporal context. Moreover, publishers of children's word books will typically adapt editions of their books for different markets. For the purposes of this investigation, I have therefore chosen to focus only on British picture dictionaries. From a wider corpus of British picture dictionaries ranging from Wilby's (1844) *Infant school spelling-book, and Pictorial dictionary*, the following dictionaries from the last 30 years have been examined in more detail: Apsley and Mosley (1989) *Picture dictionary*, Yates's (2005) *Collins ABC dictionary*, Brooks et al.'s (2006) *The Usborne picture dictionary*, Kirtley and Birkett's (2012) *Oxford very first dictionary*, and Grearson's (2018) *My first ABC dictionary*. These texts were selected in order to represent a range of different publishing houses and to show examples of picture dictionaries of different complexity, from those including only a word and a picture (Apsley & Mosley, 1989) to those including pictures, verbal definitions, and illustrative sentences (Brooks et al., 2006). Moreover, these dictionaries are all alphabetically organized picture dictionaries where entry-words are accompanied by isolated illustrations.

I will start by giving a brief historical overview, starting with a discussion of Wilby's (1844) dictionary before moving on to the 20th and 21st century dictionaries.

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN AN EARLY BRITISH PICTURE DICTIONARY

One of the earliest examples of a British picture dictionary is Francis Wilby's (1844) *Infant school spelling-book and pictorial dictionary*. This book, in which single-syllable entry-words are organized by rhyme (rather than alphabetically) and accompanied by engravings, was aimed at young children in infant schools for the poor (Iversen, 2014). In this dictionary, men dominate the public world of work, both in the visual and in the verbal text. A few illustrations portray female servants carrying milk pails and performing menial tasks. However, the entry for *men* suggests that building, digging, and carrying heavy loads are examples of work which "men do", but "wo-men can-not do" (Wilby, 1844, p. 26).

The dictionary has many illustrations of boys and men, but few illustrations of women, and hardly any of girls. The prototypical child in Wilby's dictionary is clearly a boy, as the entry for *man* demonstrates: "I am a *Child* (…) When I am more than twenty years of age, I shall be a Young Man" (Wilby, 1844, p. 20). Indeed, the dictionary has no corresponding entries for *woman* or *girl*: "Man" becomes synonymous with "human". It is hardly remarkable that in a nineteenth-century picture dictionary women and girls were underrepresented and women depicted in domestic contexts while men dominated the public sphere. Similarly, one may be unsurprised to find that in the entry for the word *copy* in *Cassell's picture dictionary* (1952), "Pam copies Mother", who is shown in the kitchen, cooking, whereas "Tony copies Daddy", who is depicted in the workshop with a hammer and nails (Waddington & Buckland, 1952, u.p.). It may be more surprising to learn that in the 1965 *Dr Seuss: Cat in the Hat beginner book dictionary*, "Aunt Ada" is "pushing her car" up a hill (Eastman, 1965, p. 86), "skating on the roof" (p. 93), and petting a lion (p. 61). The subversion of age and gender stereotypes creates humour in these entries.

Since the 1970s, there has been a raft of studies on gender representation and gender stereotypes in children's picturebooks (Sunderland, 2011). Alleen Pace Nilsen's (1971) study uncovered what she referred to as "a cult of the apron" (p. 918) in children's picturebooks: women were overwhelmingly presented in domestic contexts. The topic is still relevant: almost 50 years later, *The Observer* reports on a study that has found "huge gender bias" in the 100 most popular picture books for children (Ferguson, 2018). Large-scale Content Analysis studies is another example. It shows that males are typically represented twice as often in titles and as main characters in children's picturebooks over time (McCabe et al., 2011). McCabe et al. (2011) note that while books published in the 1990s came close to gender parity when it came to representation for human characters, a significant disparity remained for male and female animal characters.

In this context, it can be noted that anthropomorphized animals, found in several picture dictionaries, may also be members of Pace Nilsen's "cult of the apron", as the entry for *love* in *Dr Seuss: Cat in the Hat dictionary* suggests. The illustrative example "She loves her baby" is accompanied by a drawing of a bear in a blue apron, cradling a perturbed cub in her arms (Eastman, 1965, p. 63). This "Mother Bear" is a recurring character in the dictionary, depicted as either interacting with her children or doing housework. Similarly, Richard Scarry's famous *Best word book ever*, published in the US in 1963 and in the UK in 1964, is populated by several anthropomorphized animal mothers in aprons, including rabbits and bears. Scarry's popular book has since been criticized for

perpetuating cultural stereotypes and the 1980 edition was extensively revised, in part to remove gender stereotypes (Segal, 1981).

Despite critical revision of word books for children, some stereotypes are pervasive. The much more recent Yates' (2005) *Collins ABC dictionary* has an equivalent character, referred to as "Mummy bear", who behaves like the animal mothers in Scarry (1963) and Eastman (1965), but without the apron. Unlike the animals in Dr Seuss's *Cat in the Hat dictionary* and in Scarry's *Best word book ever*, the animal characters in Yates' *Collins ABC dictionary* are not always gendered in the verbal text and do not wear clothes. As such, they could be considered gender-neutral. However, as Karen Coats (2018) points out, studies show that when an animal character is ungendered in a picturebook, most parents and children gender it male in their reading.

REPRESENTATION MATTERS

The animals in Scarry (1963), Eastman (1965), and Yates (2005) are in line with studies showing that female characters in children's picturebooks are depicted as more nurturing than male characters and are more often shown as caregivers. Moreover, despite female characters being underrepresented in children's picturebooks overall, mothers are still represented more often than fathers (Adams, 2011). Still, the fathers that did appear were as likely as mothers to be depicted as caregivers in Adam's (2011) corpus. In an investigation of 300 picturebooks published 1902–2000, DeWitt et al. (2013) found that the traditional "male breadwinner" and "female homemaker" model was consistently portrayed over time. Diekman and Murnen (2004) found that "even books praised as non-sexist portrayed at best a narrow vision of gender equality, in which women adopt male-stereotypic attributes and roles" (p. 381).

Research also shows that occupational roles are generally gender stereotyped in children's picturebooks (Hamilton et al., 2006; Hendricks et al., 2010). For instance, in their study of 200 popular picturebooks Hamilton et al. (2006) found that males were more likely than women to be depicted as having a paid occupation. Women were also generally shown in stereotypically "female" occupations, while men were given a wider range of different occupational roles.

Investigating visual and verbal representation of gender in children's picturebooks in general and in children's picture dictionaries specifically is important because studies show that young children's perception of gender and of appropriate roles and activities for males and females are influenced by the text and illustrations

they encounter in picturebooks (Frawley, 2009; Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009). Coats (2018) discusses the power of images in picturebooks to evoke cognitive gender schemas, which may aid children's acquisition of gender stereotypes at a very early age.

PROTOTYPES AND STEREOTYPES

The entry-words in picture dictionaries are typically organized alphabetically, thematically, or both. In alphabetically organized picture dictionaries, isolated illustrations normally accompany entry-words. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) argue that the absence of a setting or background in a picture lowers its truth value. Such decontextualized objects then become generic, typical examples. Similarly, Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer (2018) note that authors of children's concept books look for the most prototypical representations of the concepts being illustrated. For a more extensive discussion of the typology of children's picture dictionaries, see Iversen (2020).

Eleanor Rosch's (1975) research on prototype effects found that participants saw certain members of a category as "better" or more "typical" than others. Such typical category members sometimes came to represent the entire category. They become prototypes; mental pictures automatically conjured up when thinking about a category. For instance, robins and sparrows are seen as more typical birds than penguins and peacocks. This prototype effect can be exploited in language learning, including in children's dictionaries. The entry for *bird* in Apsley and Mostyn's (1989) *Picture dictionary*, for example depicts a prototypical bird, the robin.

Prototypes are relevant to the visual and verbal representation of gender in picture dictionaries. Part of the reason why, for instance, doctors and scientists have traditionally been represented as male, whereas nurses have been depicted as female, is that people have a prototypical image of doctors and scientists as men and nurses as women. To an extent, this also reflects the realities of a gender-divided society. However, as Cameron (1995, p. 136) points out, research suggests that even neutral terms such as *adult* and *citizen* conjure male associations, so that "male" becomes the prototype of the human category. The fact that "male" is considered the normative category is also the reason ungendered animal characters are usually interpreted as male.

Although the prototype serves as a representative of the category and makes it easier to represent that category in linguistically or visually, privileging the prototype involves a loss of the complexities within the category. While a degree of

simplification is necessary in order to make sense of the world, especially in a text for young children, social stereotyping is a reductive process, in that a set of pre-made characteristics are applied to an entire group of people.

A central question raised in this chapter is when a prototype becomes a cultural stereotype. In *My first ABC dictionary* (Grearson ed., 2018), the entry for *nurse* is accompanied by an illustration of a girl wearing a nurse's hat (see Fig. 5.2). That is, this is not a garment worn by today's nurses, but rather a fancy-dress accessory based on old-fashioned uniforms. The prototypical nurse's cap, though no longer a reflection of reality, instantly distinguishes someone as a "nurse", in the same way that a pith helmet distinguishes someone as an "explorer". In a picture dictionary, this is an example of exploiting the prototype effect for pedagogical purposes.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Depending on the research aims and the scale of the study, an investigation of the visual and verbal representation of gender in picture dictionaries could 1) consider all images of people in the corpus, 2) look up only specific entry-words in each dictionary, or 3) examine selected semantic fields. Option 2 can pose methodological challenges since children's picture dictionaries vary in scope according to the age of their intended readers, which means that the same entries cannot necessarily be found in each dictionary. Moreover, while some dictionaries, such as Apsley and Mosley's (1989) *Picture dictionary* contain only entry-words and images, other picture dictionaries, such as *My first ABC dictionary* include entry-words, illustrations, and verbal definitions or illustrative sentences. Another disadvantage of only looking up preselected entry-words is that relevant concepts (e.g. "doctors and nurses") may be visually and verbally represented in entries other than those specifically denoting these words. For example, the entry for *ill* in *My first ABC dictionary* shows an illustration of a girl playing dress-up as a nurse.

There are many visual depictions of humans and anthropomorphized animals in picture dictionaries where the verbal text does not specify gender. In these cases, visual gender markers, including clothes and accessories, may be used to gender those depicted. An obvious weakness of this approach is that researchers bring their own gender schema to the material and risk reinforcing gender stereotypes and restrictive gender binaries.

For the purposes of this chapter, which specifically investigates prototypes and the construction of gender stereotypes as part of an ongoing study, I have examined

selected semantic fields, both by looking up specific entries, and by considering each dictionary as a whole. This approach is only possible when the selection of example text is limited. Although several semantic fields have been considered, the focus of the present chapter is limited to the semantic category "jobs and occupations", with the specific example of doctors and nurses. The example texts discussed in this chapter are all alphabetically organized picture dictionaries where entry-words are accompanied by isolated illustrations. Thematic picture dictionaries, in which concepts are visually presented in the context of scenes or "scripts" (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2018), such as Scarry (1963), are also rich sources of knowledge about culture and gender. However, picture dictionaries with isolated entries contain illustrations that can be considered prototypical representations of concepts and may therefore be revealing in terms of cultural stereotyping. In order to further investigate the question of prototypes versus stereotypes, the discussion first turns to the treatment of the semantic field "jobs and occupation" and then to the specific example of doctors and nurses.

OCCUPATION WORDS IN PICTURE DICTIONARIES

There are relatively few entry-words specifically denoting occupational roles in the dictionaries examined. The words *king* and *queen* are included in all six dictionaries, though these are arguably not occupational words. The most frequently included occupational entry-words apart from these are *nurse* (included in five of six dictionaries), *doctor* (included in four of six dictionaries) and *dentist* (included in three dictionaries). The dictionaries range in size from 147 entry-words (Apsley & Mosley, 1989) to 1025 entry-words (Brooks et al., 2006), with the remaining dictionaries comprising an average of 253 entries each. *Nurse* is included in the smallest dictionaries with wordlists ranging from 147–282 entry-words, suggesting that this word is considered a part of the core vocabulary for young children.

In Apsley and Mosley's *Picture dictionary* only 2% of the entries are occupation words, in Yates's *Collins ABC dictionary*, 2.1% of entries denote occupational roles, while in Brooks et al.'s *The Usborne picture dictionary* 2.3% of the entry-words are occupation words. In both Kirtley and Birkett's *Oxford very first dictionary* and Grearson's *My first ABC dictionary* 3.5% percent of entry-words denote occupations.

However, occupational roles are also visually and verbally depicted in semantically related entries other than the ones specifically denoting the occupation.

For instance, the entry for *work* in *Usborne picture dictionary* states that "Mick works as a builder" (Brooks et al., 2006, p. 86), accompanied by an image of a man with a cement-mixer. Another example is the occupational role firefighter, which is visually and verbally represented under the entries for *climb* ("the firefighter is climbing the ladder") and *reach* ("the firefighter is reaching out to rescue the cat"). Occupational roles are also represented in more unexpected contexts. For example, the entry for *never* in the same dictionary is represented by an image of a sullen man in a postal uniform, with the illustrative sentence "The grumpy postman never smiles" (Brooks et al., 2006, p. 50). This entry uses humour and a concentre example to explain an abstract concept. In *My ABC dictionary*, the occupation postman is visually and verbally represented in the entry for *hand*: "The postman has a parcel in his **hand**" (p. 17). In both cases, the occupational role is gendered by the choice of term (*postman*) as well as in the visual and verbal text.

Doctors and nurses

The only picture dictionary in the wider corpus of this ongoing study to feature a male nurse (alongside a female nurse) is Goodacre and Nockles's (1969) *Picture dictionary*. In all the other dictionaries, published before and since, nurses are visually depicted as female, even if the verbal definitions are gender-neutral, e.g. "someone who looks after people who are ill or hurt" (Fig. 5.1, *nurse*). By contrast, the divide is 50/50 between male and female doctors in the picture dictionaries published after the year 2000. This recalls Diekman & Murnen (2004) who found that while girls and women in children's books could adopt (stereo)typical male roles, boys and men were typically not depicted in (stereo(typically) female roles. As Kokkola & Österlund (2011) point out, "A girl-child adopting stereotypically male behaviours does not challenge the status quo as much as a boy-child engaging in stereotypically female forms of play and wearing female clothing" (p. 81). This is also related to the loss of status involved in adopting traditionally female roles, such as in the case of doctors and nurses. In the *Usborne picture dictionary* (Brooks et al., 2006) the doctor is depicted as a bespectacled man consulting his young patient's journal, whereas the nurse is a woman pushing a girl in a wheelchair. The verbal definitions are also subtly different: a doctor is defined as "someone who helps sick people get better", whereas a nurse is "someone who looks after people who are ill or hurt". In other words, the (male) doctor has the power to make someone better, whereas the (female) nurse is a caregiver.

Rather than the oversized, gender-neutral scrubs that many nurses wear today, nurses' uniforms in British children's picture dictionaries are typically presented
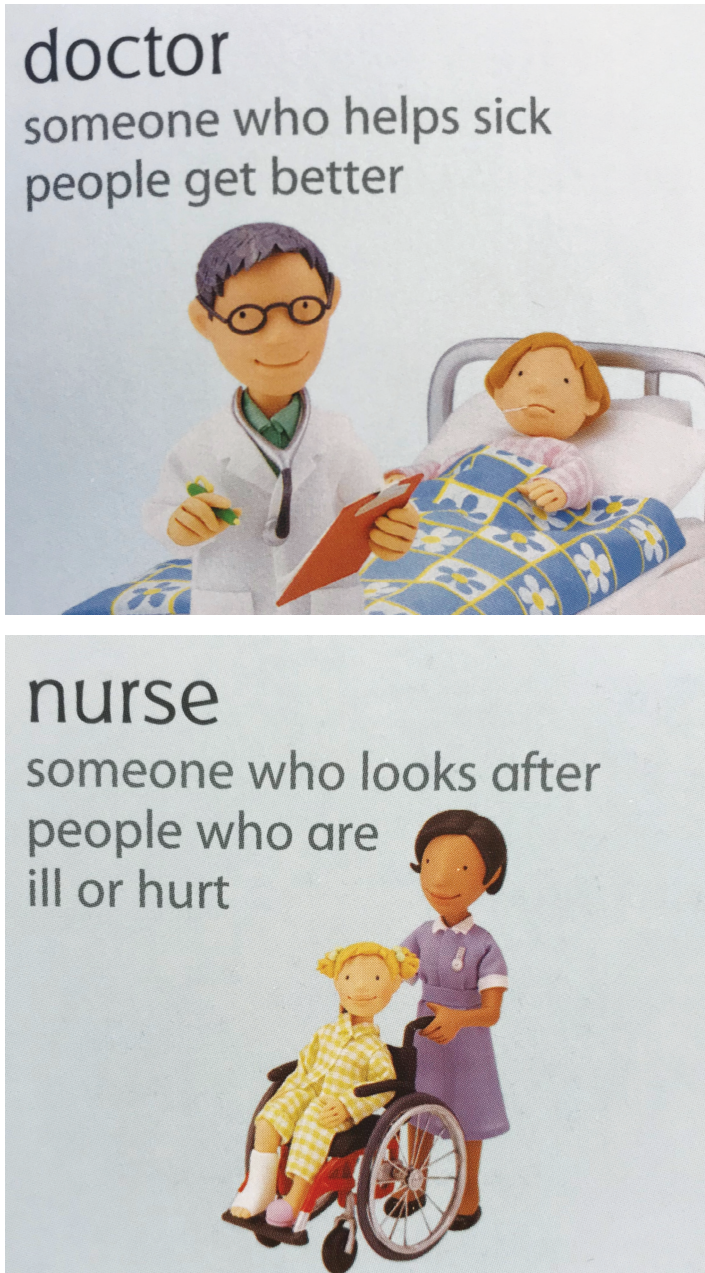
Figure 5.1 *The Usborne picture dictionary* (2006), by Felicity Brooks & Jo Litchfield, Usborne Publishing.
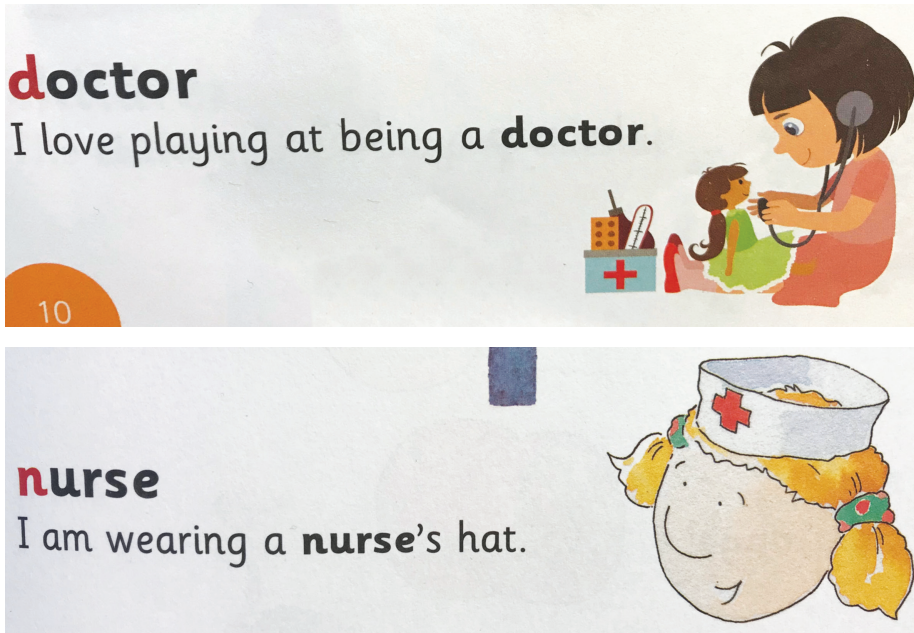
Reproduced with permission.

Figure 5.2 *My first ABC dictionary* (2018), by Penny Grearson, Mimi Everett, Sue King and Beverly Spiro, The Gresham Publishing Company Limited.
Reproduced with permission.

as the more traditional feminine dresses with belted waists, with or without the historical pinafore aprons and caps. These prototypical uniforms, as we have seen, also recall children's ideas of fancy-dress, especially when the "nurse" depicted is a child playing dress-up (Fig. 5.2). The emphasis on depicting children at play in entries such as *doctor* and *nurse* may be a conscious attempt to make the dictionaries more child-centred by referring to the child's world of play, rather than the (adult) world of professional healthcare.

Still, the element of play in these dictionaries is characterized by gender division. For example, in the *Oxford first dictionary* (2011), the entry for *nurse* is illustrated by an image of a girl playing with her doll, whereas the entry for *doctor* is illustrated by an image of a boy dressed up as a doctor with no dolls in sight. By contrast, in *My first ABC dictionary*, both *nurse* and *doctor* (Fig. 5.2) are illustrated by images of girls playing dress-up (Fig. 5.2). The image of the girl playing doctor shows her sitting on the floor, wearing a pink dress, with a toy stethoscope around her neck and a female doll "patient" on her lap. As such, this image is reminiscent of the girl playing nurse with her doll in the entry for *nurse* in *Oxford*

first dictionary (2011). In addition to making the dictionaries more child-centred, such depictions of children's make-believe play may also be a way of utilizing Rosch's (1975) prototype effect, without depicting "real" nurses and doctors in a stereotypical or inaccurate way.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

British picture dictionaries may have evolved since Wilby's 1844 picture dictionary, but present-day picture dictionaries do not exist in a temporal vacuum. Rather, they are cultural artefacts reflecting both the past and the present. Moreover, the pedagogical desire to exploit prototype effects may in some cases result in gender stereotyping. While children's picturebooks have progressed in certain areas, such as depictions of fathers (Adams, 2011), some gender stereotypes are persistent, for example those related to occupational roles. This has been confirmed by the present investigation, though a large-scale quantitative and qualitative study with a more rigorous methodological approach would be needed to say something more definite about the development in children's picture dictionaries over time.

Kerry Mallan (2002) reminds us that picturebooks "provide children with the frames in which to see the world in certain ways" (p. 35). This does not mean that children uncritically receive images, but underscores "the ways in which images have the capacity to perpetuate stereotypes as well as to promote nonconformity, resistance, and alternatives" (Mallan, 2002, p. 35). Picture dictionaries visually and verbally define the world, selecting, organizing and presenting knowledge for children. These texts too, have the capacity to perpetuate stereotypes, as well as to promote nonconformity.

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