

Beyond Words: Multimodal Text Analysis

За межами слова: аналіз мультимодальних текстів

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Rethinking Ageing in the Children's Picturebooks: A Multimodal Analysis of Age Representation in *The Frank Show* by David Mackintosh

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У статті проаналізовано дискурсивне конструювання образу літньої людини у дитячій літературі на матеріалі книжки-картинки Девіда Макінтоша *The Frank Show* (2012). Перебуваючи на перетині дискурс-лінгвістики, студій дитячої літератури і вікових досліджень, стаття спрямована на теоретичне обґрунтування ролі мультимодального дискурсу у формуванні та трансформації культурних уявлень про старість. *Метою роботи* є виявлення механізмів дискурсивного конструювання та трансформації образу старості через взаємодію вербальних та візуальних семіотичних ресурсів.

Дослідження здійснено із застосуванням лінгвістично обґрунтованого підходу мультимодального дискурс-аналізу, що дає змогу розглядати текст і зображення як взаємопов'язані механізми смислотворення та ідеологічного впливу. Особливу увагу приділено виявленню того, чи відтворює текст усталені ейджистські моделі, легітимізуючи домінуючі культурні уявлення про старість, чи, навпаки, ініціює їх критичне переосмислення та пропонує альтернативні інтерпретаційні рамки.

Для реалізації поставленої мети передбачено виконання таких *завдань*: 1) з'ясувати, яким чином оцінна лексика, за допомогою якої конструюється образ дідуся Франка, впливає на формування й трансформацію наративного змісту; 2) визначити наративні стратегії, використані у творі; 3) проаналізувати візуальні елементи (композицію, колір, проксеміку, а також зображення дідуся та дітей) як активні чинники зміни уявлень оповідача; 4) з'ясувати, як взаємодія тексту та зображення формує цілісний дискурс старіння.

У роботі застосовано поєднання *методів* критичного дискурс-аналізу та наративного аналізу з мультимодальним аналізом візуальних компонентів як семіотичних засобів смислотворення. Такий комплексний підхід дає змогу розглядати книжку-картинку як цілісну семіотичну систему, у межах якої вербальний і візуальний складники перебувають у тісній взаємодії і спільно формують значення.

Результати дослідження засвідчують, що на початку наративу мовні та візуальні ресурси відтворюють стереотипи старості як пасивного, одноманітного й соціально дистанційованого періоду життя. У подальшому зміни фокалізації, розвиток оповідної історії та посилення динаміки візуального

ряду реконструюють дідуся Франка як енергійного, сміливого й творчого героя. Така трансформація демонструє, що мультимодальний дискурс здатний не лише відображати, а й деконструювати ейджистські уявлення, формуючи альтернативні культурні моделі старіння. Отримані результати підтверджують, що дитяча література функціонує як важливий соціокультурний інструмент раннього формування вікових уявлень, сприяє подоланню стереотипів і розвитку міжпоколінневого розуміння.

Ключові слова: старість, ейджизм, дитяча література, міжпоколінневі взаємини, дискурс-аналіз, мультимодальний дискурс.

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Introduction

As life expectancy rises worldwide, children's early encounters with narratives play a formative role in shaping their perceptions of ageing and later life [Mc Guire, 2016, p. 2604]. Picturebooks, as inherently multimodal texts, combine verbal and visual resources to communicate cultural understandings of age, making them particularly relevant for examining how meanings of ageing are constructed and transmitted to young readers. From a linguistic and discourse-analytical perspective, it is therefore crucial to explore how both verbal and visual modes interact to represent older characters, social relations, and life-course norms.

Pratt [1992, p. 102] emphasises that the central question is not merely what children learn, but how they learn about the lifelong process of growing up and growing older. This concern is reinforced by the research indicating that ageism emerges early, with negative attitudes affecting both today's older adults and children themselves as future older persons [Bellintier et al., 2024, p. 774]. Linguistically, such early-formed attitudes are sustained through recurring narrative patterns and evaluative language. Studies show that older characters in children's literature are frequently portrayed in biased, stereotypical, or one-dimensional ways, often limited to grandparent roles, overlooking the diversity of ageing and contributing to the reproduction of ageist discourse [McGuire, 2016, pp. 2607–2608; Bellintier et al., 2024, p. 775].

In response, the concept of positive aging has emerged as a counter-discursive framework, highlighting lifestyles, attitudes, and activities that enhance well-being and quality of life in later years. Mc Guire [2016, p. 2606] believes that promoting positive perceptions of ageing from early childhood is therefore crucial, as children should be encouraged to understand that every life stage offers opportunities for health, fulfilment, happiness, and creativity. Thus, examining linguistic and multimodal strategies in children's texts allows us to identify whether ageing is framed through deficit-oriented discourses or empowering representations.

Children's literature, and picturebooks in particular, plays a central role in this process, as it actively shapes young readers' conceptualisations of ageing. As Jackson [2023, p. 56] observes, these texts provide a discursive space where social biases and stereotypes can be addressed, negotiated, or reinforced. Representations of older characters, including their roles, attributes, and the values they embody, function as semiotic resources that can either perpetuate stereotypes or foster inclusive and nuanced understandings of later life [Avci, Erhan, 2022, p. 145; Jossen, 2024, p. 269].

Kümmerling-Meibauer [2017, p. 4] highlights that picturebooks are especially suitable for multimodal analysis due to their complex interplay of text and images, while Li and Boonmoh [2025, p. 4] emphasise that images can be as important as the text, or even more influential, in shaping meaning. Designed for young readers, picturebooks integrate verbal and visual modes in a structured semiotic system, where symbolic, conventional, and iconic signs work together. Bishop's [1990] metaphors of books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors further underscore their discursive power, enabling children to understand themselves, others, and new perspectives.

Unlike illustrated books, where images accompany verbal narration, picturebooks construct meaning through the interaction of visual and verbal elements in a multimodal discourse structure [Crawford et al., 2024, p. 1273]. This interaction aligns with children's cognitive abilities and supports meaning-making processes that rely on both linguistic and visual cues [Li, Boonmoh,

2025, p. 5]. Sipe [2011, p. 232] describes this as an “intricate dance” of words and images, where visual elements are not decorative but, as Potysch and Wilde assume [2017], central semiotic resources shaping narrative framing, character evaluation, and ideological positioning.

Despite these insights, systematic analysis of how ageing and older characters are represented in contemporary picturebooks remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining how ageing is discursively constructed through linguistic and visual modes, exploring character roles, traits, evaluative patterns, and the interplay between text and images in shaping cultural understandings of later life. As one of the first structured narrative environments encountered by children, picturebooks play a formative role in shaping social categories, including age. Investigating how verbal and visual resources construct older adulthood is therefore essential for understanding how age ideologies become naturalised from an early age.

The relevance of this study lies in its intersection of multimodal discourse analysis, children’s literature scholarship, and ageing studies. By analysing linguistic and visual resources, it demonstrates how early childhood texts function as powerful sites of discursive socialisation, capable of reproducing ageist ideologies or fostering more inclusive and life-affirming perspectives on the life course. Furthermore, this research contributes to broader theoretical discussions regarding the operation of ideology across semiotic modes and the potential of narrative recontextualisation to destabilise dominant cultural models.

Theoretical background and literature overview

As Joosen [2019, p. 1] notes, children’s literature comprises texts produced by adults for a dual audience of children and adult readers. While encompassing diverse genres and formats, its meanings are shaped by assumptions about children’s cognitive, emotional, and interpretive capacities. From a discourse-analytical perspective, such assumptions are not neutral, what is more, they structure how social categories, including age, are represented and evaluated.

Researchers observe that the study of children’s literature has increasingly shifted from viewing texts as instruments of adult authority toward conceptualising childhood and the child as socially constructed categories embedded in cultural norms and ideological frameworks [Deszcz-Tryhubczak, García-González, 2023, p. 2]. Within this paradigm, age operates as a key axis of power, with children’s literature functioning as a site where age-related meanings are produced, negotiated, and naturalised, as emphasised by Duthoy [2023, p. 106]. Similarly, Jossen [2024, p. 260] argues that such texts act as mechanisms of socialisation, shaping how readers interpret identity, social roles, and the life course.

This perspective foregrounds the ideological work performed by discourse, particularly in relation to age norms and representations of ageing. Gullette [2017, p. 57] emphasises that early exposure to such representations plays a formative role in shaping perceptions of ageing, while Geybels [2023, p. 2] highlights that children’s literature both reflects and reproduces societal values associated with older adulthood. Painter [2017] and Unsworth [2014] highlight that young readers develop multimodal literacy while engaging with these texts. Consequently, children’s literature is commonly understood as a discursive site in which age is actively constructed, evaluated, and circulated [Joosen, 2018, p. 9].

From a multimodal perspective, picturebooks constitute a form of material and semiotic practice in which meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple modes. According to Nikolajeva and Scott [2001], this literature demonstrates the synergy between verbal and visual modes within the narrative, when the mode is understood as a “socially shaped and culturally given resource for meaning making” [Kress, 2010, p. 54]. Extending this view, multimodal discourse analysis treats picturebooks as complex semiotic artefacts in which linguistic, visual, and spatial resources jointly construct meaning. These resources do not merely illustrate content but actively shape interpretive frameworks, including those related to age and intergenerational relations.

The interplay of different semiotic modes in conveying meaning in children’s picturebooks has been extensively examined over recent decades [Lewis, 2006; Guijarro, Sanz, 2009; Martínez Lirola, 2022; Tsapiv, 2022; Li, Boonmoh, 2025]. Thus, Martínez Lirola [2022, p. 40], drawing on Nikolajeva and Scott [2001], views picturebooks as iconotexts, i.e., integrated semiotic constructs in which verbal and visual elements form an inseparable whole, working together to communicate meaning. Similarly, Tsapiv [2022, p. 80] assumes that narratives for young readers are multimodal

constructions in which words and images work synergistically to create meaning, with richly illustrated and engaging stories guiding children's understanding of the world around them.

A number of studies have examined the interaction between verbal and visual elements in picturebooks [e.g., Moya, Ruiz, 2016; Willging, 2026], noting that text and image are mutually dependent and collaboratively shape meaning for the reader. These studies emphasise that picturebooks convey stories through a combination of words and illustrations in ways that align with children's cognitive understanding and stimulate imagination [Li, Boonmoh, 2025, p. 5]. Willging [2026] further observes that this multimodal reading experience fosters creativity and shapes how both students and teachers engage with the multiple layers of meaning within a story.

A valuable framework for analysing multimodality is a social semiotic model developed by Kress and van Leeuwen [2021] which identifies three key dimensions of visual meaning-making: representational, interpersonal, and compositional. In this approach, they apply Halliday's theory of social semiotics and his three metafunctions of language [Halliday, 1978; Halliday, Matthiessen, 2004], which focus on ideational meanings (the representation of reality and construction of ideas), interpersonal meanings (the relationships between characters and with readers), and textual meanings (the organisation and structuring of the text).

Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's [2021] visual grammar, Painter, Martin, and Unsworth [2013] put forward a refined framework for analysing multimodal meanings in picturebooks, where these three metafunctions are reconceptualised as representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings.

The representational metafunction examines participants (who or what is depicted), processes (actions or relations), and circumstances (contextual details such as where, when, and how). Such vectors create a sense of action and dynamism between participants, while characters' physical appearance provides cues about age and their social roles. Accordingly, intersemiotic analysis proves useful in examining how verbal and visual modes jointly represent participants, their activities, and the circumstances framing them [Unsworth, 2008].

Interpersonal meaning considers the interaction between characters and readers. Kress and van Leeuwen [2021] identify three systems: image act and gaze, social distance and intimacy, and involvement and power. Painter, Martin, and Unsworth [2013] complement this by highlighting social distance, attitude, contact, and modality, offering a more nuanced understanding of how relationships and engagement are conveyed.

Compositional meaning addresses the organisation and emphasis of elements through information value, salience, and framing [Kress, van Leeuwen, 2021]. Information value relates to placement: elements on the left typically represent given information, while those on the right convey new information; upper elements suggest the "ideal," and lower ones the "real." Salience refers to the prominence of certain elements, emphasised by size, colour, or focus, which highlights key units of information in visual texts [Painter, Martin, Unsworth, 2013, p. 91].

Recent studies examine the key representational, interpersonal, and compositional elements used by illustrators in picturebooks, analysing how these elements contribute to meaning-making on the multimodal page and support children's interpretation of the text [Martínez Lirola, 2022, p.42]. They emphasise that exploring these three metafunctions is crucial for understanding the depicted reality, the interactions among characters and with readers, and the organisation of meaning into coherent units of information. This approach is particularly effective for interpreting picturebooks, which are inherently polyphonic, with meaning emerging from the interplay of multiple semiotic resources. It is widely recognised that the close interconnection between images and text requires attention to both visual and verbal modes to fully grasp how the writer and illustrator collaboratively shape the final work [Guijarro, Sanz, 2009, p.108].

Within this framework, representations of older adults are understood as multimodally constructed. Empirical studies demonstrate that older characters are both underrepresented and frequently stereotyped in children's literature [Bellintier et al., 2024, p. 775; McGuire, 2006, p. 2606]. When they do appear, they are frequently assigned secondary roles and depicted through conventional visual and linguistic cues that signal dependency, passivity, or decline [McGuire, 2016]. These patterns are reinforced not only through text but also through visual elements: composition, salience, colour, and spatial positioning work together to present older adulthood as marginal or peripheral.

From a discourse-analytical standpoint, such representations can be interpreted as instantiations of broader cultural narratives of ageing. Researchers agree that decline-oriented discourses dominate, framing older adults as a homogeneous group characterised by physical deterioration, loss, and dependency [Jossen, 2019, p. 2; Bellingtier, 2024, p. 774]. As Rose [1979, p. 64] observes, the concept of ageing itself is historically associated with negative semantic prosodies, including weakness and diminished vitality. These meanings are reinforced through both lexical choices and visual encoding, demonstrating how multimodal resources collaborate in the production of ageist ideologies.

Multimodal analysis also illuminates how intergenerational relations are discursively constructed. Parallels between childhood and old age often rely on the “second childhood” trope [Jossen, 2024, p. 267], which frames older adults as dependent and childlike. Linguistic strategies, such as diminutives, and visual strategies, such as reduced size or marginal positioning, reinforce what Jossen [2022, p. 6] calls asymmetries in agency and social power. At the same time, these parallels may enable alternative readings that foreground relationality, empathy, and shared vulnerability.

Furthermore, picturebooks are particularly suitable for such analysis due to their inherently multimodal nature. Unlike illustrated books, where images support verbal narration, picturebooks operate as integrated semiotic systems in which meaning arises through the interaction of visual and verbal modes [Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017, p. 3; Serafini, 2014, p. 12]. This interaction constitutes a “complex multimodal entity” [Cheng et al., 2025], where intersemiotic relations are central to meaning-making. Potysch and Wilde [2017] describe picturebooks as “bisemiotic” texts, while Nørgaard [2010, p. 42] emphasises that meaning emerges through multimodal semiosis rather than through isolated modes. In the picturebooks, two main layout types can be distinguished: integrated, where image and text are combined within the same space, and complementary, where verbal and visual elements are spatially separated, suggesting distinct roles in meaning-making [Painter, Martin, Unsworth, 2013, pp. 93–98].

Visual elements such as colour, composition, framing, gaze, and spatial organisation function as semiotic resources that encode interpersonal, ideational, and textual meanings [Kress, Van Leeuwen, 2021]. For instance, spatial proximity may signal relational closeness, while salience and foregrounding indicate social importance. Similarly, perspective and focalisation shape reader alignment and interpretive stance [Painter, Martin, Unsworth, 2013]. These features are not merely aesthetic but ideological, as they guide the reader’s perception of characters, including older adults.

The relationships between verbal and visual elements can vary from simple, where images merely illustrate or echo the text, to more complex interactions. The most sophisticated interplay arises when verbal and visual components are not directly complementary, or when they convey different, or even contradictory narratives [Guijarro, Sanz, 2009, p. 107].

Multimodal texts engage readers cognitively and affectively by requiring the integration of visual and verbal information. As Yang [2024, pp. 69–72] demonstrates, the interaction of modes contributes to the construction of interpersonal meaning and supports the development of empathy. Through such mechanisms, picturebooks function as sites where social meanings, including those related to ageing, are not only represented but also experienced and internalised.

At the same time, multimodal discourse allows for the possibility of ideological transformation. While many texts reproduce dominant ageist narratives, others challenge them by reconfiguring visual and linguistic patterns. The interplay of modes can foreground agency, relationality, and diversity in later life, thereby offering alternative conceptualisations of ageing that move beyond decline-based models.

Thus, adopting a multimodal discourse-analytical framework enables a systematic examination of how age is constructed across semiotic modes. By analysing the interaction of linguistic and visual resources, it becomes possible to uncover both the reproduction and transformation of age-related ideologies in children’s picturebooks, positioning them as influential sites of cultural meaning-making in the context of ageing societies.

Methodology

This study adopts a discourse-analytical approach to examine how older people and intergenerational relations are represented in the children’s picturebook *The Frank Show* by David

Mackintosh [2012]. Situated at the intersection of linguistics, children's literature studies, and age studies, the research examines how language, narrative structure, and visual design jointly construct images of old age and intergenerational interaction.

Following Gullette's [1997, p. 18] definition of age studies as "the interdisciplinary movement that wants to disrupt the current age system in theory and practice", this research treats age as a socially and culturally constructed category, rather than a biological fact. Moreover, Gullette's [2004, p. 12] claim that "human beings are aged by culture" further situates ageing as a discursive process shaped by norms and representational practices. Within this framework, the concepts of "ageism" and "childism," as Jossen [2022, p. 3] observes, provide a lens for examining how children's literature constructs dependency, authority, and agency across generations, and how these ideological systems may either reinforce or question age hierarchies.

Given the multimodal nature of picturebooks, meaning emerges from the interplay of verbal and visual modes. Following Kress [2009, p. 54] and Jewitt [2009], these modes are understood as socially and culturally shaped resources, with their selection reflecting ideological choices. Picturebooks are thus treated as cultural artefacts in which visual and textual elements collaborate to convey attitudes towards ageing, authority, and intergenerational relations.

Methodologically, the study employs a combination of critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and multimodal discourse analysis. As observed by McCallum and Stephens [2011, p. 359], no book is ideologically neutral, since ideology is embedded in the very language and images from which it is constructed. Critical discourse analysis [Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2015] is thus used to examine how linguistic choices, evaluative expressions, and narrative structures reproduce or challenge age-related stereotypes.

Narrative analysis [De Fina, Georgakopoulou, 2011] focuses on the organisation of the story over time and the transformation of meaning across the plot. It examines narrative perspective and focalisation, tracing how the child-narrator's evaluative stance evolves throughout the text. This analysis identifies key turning points, shifts in character portrayals, and changes in Grandpa Frank's representation.

Multimodal discourse analysis is applied to visual components, including framing, colour, posture, and spatial composition, which function as semiotic resources contributing to meaning-making [Kress, Van Leeuwen, 2021; Painter, Martin, Unsworth, 2013; Jewitt, 2009]. Integrating these approaches allows for a systematic analysis of how verbal and visual elements interact to construct, reinforce, or disrupt cultural narratives of ageing.

The empirical material consists of the text and illustrations of *The Frank Show*, selected for its explicit focus on intergenerational relations and its portrayal of an older protagonist. This picturebook is widely used in classrooms and heavily relies on multimodal storytelling, making it an appropriate text for examining how children's literature can perpetuate or subvert ageist assumptions. Purposeful sampling was used to identify narrative and visual segments that highlight moments of ideological tension or transformation, particularly where Grandpa Frank's depiction shifts from passive or stereotypical to active, agentic, and socially engaged.

The analysis is conducted in two stages. First, linguistic features, including lexical patterns, evaluative language, and narrative perspective are examined to reveal how ageing is characterised and how the child narrator's perception develops across the story. Second, the illustrations are analysed as semiotic resources that reinforce or challenge textual meanings, focusing on posture, gestures, clothes, visual prominence, and activity. Special attention is paid to the interaction between verbal and visual elements and the ways in which they produce a coherent discourse about age and intergenerational relations.

This qualitative, case-based approach demonstrates how *The Frank Show* employs narrative strategies, linguistic choices, and multimodal resources to construct representations of an older adult and to foster empathy, respect, and critical reflection on ageing among young readers.

Results and discussion

David Mackintosh's *The Frank Show* [2012] provides a compelling example of how age-related meanings are constructed through the interaction of linguistic, visual, and narrative modes. Grandpa Frank is initially portrayed through ageist stereotypes, which the narrative gradually reconstructs. The illustrations encode visual semiotic cues whose ideological meanings emerge

through their interaction with evaluative language and narrative perspective. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and multimodal discourse analysis, the analysis focuses on age-related lexicalisation, evaluative lexis, narrative focalisation, visual marginalisation, and intersemiotic shifts. The story revolves around a young boy who is tasked to present a family member to his class. His reluctant choice, Grandpa Frank, becomes the narrative vehicle through which age stereotypes are articulated. Early lexical choices emphasise Frank's supposed ordinariness. The narrative initially constructs old age through negative evaluative lexis and comparison structures. The boy's concern that his presentation will fail, "*because everyone has someone interesting to talk about*" [Mackintosh, 2012], introduces an evaluative hierarchy grounded in interest, activity, and social prestige. This hierarchy is reinforced through comparisons with peers' relatives: Tom's uncle Marlon (a drummer), Hannah's mum (a company car driver), Paolo's mum (Italian-speaking), Kristian's dad (a comedian), and Hugo's stepbrother (a sports car owner). Through this accumulative listing strategy and juxtaposition, the story constructs a social hierarchy in which youth and professional dynamism are normative, while old age is positioned as lacking value. The narrator's statement, "*and that's it, I've run out of things I can tell about Frank*" [Mackintosh, 2012], functions as a discursive closure, linguistically encoding older adulthood as narratively unproductive.

Narrative focalisation through the child narrator is central to the construction and transformation of meaning. The boy's evaluative stance, "*and today I have to talk about him for a full minute*" [Mackintosh, 2012], indexes reluctance and embarrassment, reflecting internalised cultural hierarchies.

The narrative employs contrastive structuring and temporal sequencing to establish a binary opposition between past and present. Early episodes depict Frank as static and disengaged, while later segments introduce a disruptive re-evaluation through storytelling. The expressions such as "*just sits in his chair*" and "*is always around*" [Mackintosh, 2012] linguistically construct passivity. The past is represented as authentic and valuable, while the modern world appears chaotic or superficial, reasserting a temporal divide between past and present. Frank's preference for "*doing things the old-fashioned way*" [Mackintosh, 2012] and "*liking everything*" "*plain and simple*" [Mackintosh, 2012], along with nostalgic utterances like "*They don't make 'em like that anymore*" [Mackintosh, 2012], reinforces a temporal opposition between a valued past and a devalued present.

Through the child narrator, the narrative reflects a form of everyday ageism, the assumption that "*older people are boring*" [Mackintosh, 2012]. Frank is introduced through a list of dislikes ("*noise,*" "*today's music,*" "*gadgets and gizmos,*" "*any sort of ice cream that isn't vanilla*") [Mackintosh, 2012], which frames him as resistant to novelty and change. These patterns collectively instantiate deficit-oriented discourses and align with the conceptual metaphor OLD AGE IS PASSIVITY/DECLINE.

Furthermore, Frank's speech, e.g., "*Doctors speak a lot of mumbo-jumbo*" [Mackintosh, 2012], reinforces the cultural trope of a grumpy older adult, who is distrustful of authority and progress, a strategy that is visually reinforced in Figure 6 below. The child narrator reads this attitude as a further proof of irrelevance, positioning his grandfather outside the domain of the modern, rational, and productive. At the same time, humour and bodily references, e.g., "*my grandad's arm hurts when it's about to rain*" [Mackintosh, 2012], activate the metaphor OLD AGE IS DISEASE, linking ageing with physical decline.

A key narrative shift occurs when Frank recounts his wartime experiences. When Grandpa Frank "*rolls up his sleeve*" [Mackintosh, 2012], he reveals a green tattoo and tells an extraordinary story behind it. This moment functions as a turning point, where the narrative perspective and evaluative alignment shift from dismissal to admiration. Frank's accounts of wartime bravery, e.g., "*how he led an army in a charge*" and "*how he gave his last drop of water to a thirsty horse*" [Mackintosh, 2012], are shaped through lexical choices and positive evaluation, which reframe his identity. These narrative details guide the boy's changing perception, illustrating how storytelling functions as a mechanism of re-evaluation. In discourse terms, the progression of the narrative actively reconstructs age-related meaning, destabilising earlier negative assumptions and repositioning Grandpa Frank as a figure of respect and moral authority.

Visual analysis reveals how representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings contribute to the construction of age.



Fig. 1. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

At the beginning of the book, visual semiotics amplifies narrative ageist constructions. Frank appears in the background, wearing old-fashioned clothes, glasses, and hearing aids. In the opening street scene (Fig. 1), Grandpa Frank and the boy are depicted as small, backgrounded figures, visually marginalised within a vibrant, fast-paced contemporary environment. The use of muted colour palettes for Frank contrasts with the saturated colours of the surroundings, reinforcing his separation from contemporary life. This compositional arrangement encodes low salience and peripheral status. The spatial proximity between Frank and the boy indicates a personal connection, yet their marginal positioning suggests shared exclusion from the dominant social space.

Interpersonal meaning, as analysed through Kress and van Leeuwen's [2021] visual grammar, is also evident when proxemics and posture signal relational meanings.



Fig. 2. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

The child narrator's lowered gaze and grey-toned depiction during his presentation (Fig. 2) index embarrassment and affective distancing, reinforcing internalised ageist norms. Multimodal resources such as posture, gaze, and spatial positioning visualise the child's evaluative stance, complementing the textual construction of Frank as "*just my granddad*" [Mackintosh, 2012], and signalling social insignificance. This configuration aligns with Painter, Martin, and Unsworth's [2013] notion of attitude and social distance, where visual cues function as markers of affective stance and relational positioning.

The spatial and temporal juxtaposition of Frank against historical and modern settings (Fig.3), amplifies his perceived separation from the contemporary world and reinforces the generational divide, depicting older adulthood as set apart from contemporary life.

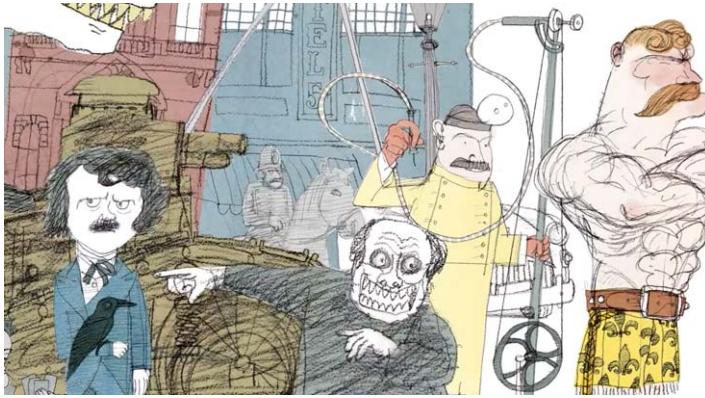


Fig. 3. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

In addition, visual representations of Frank engaging with outdated technologies, such as typewriters, gramophones, old cameras (Figs. 4–6), reinforce this discourse of temporal dislocation. These artefacts operate as semiotic signs of the past, visually anchoring Frank outside the modern world and supporting the linguistic construction of old age as outdated.



Fig. 4. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].



Fig. 5. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

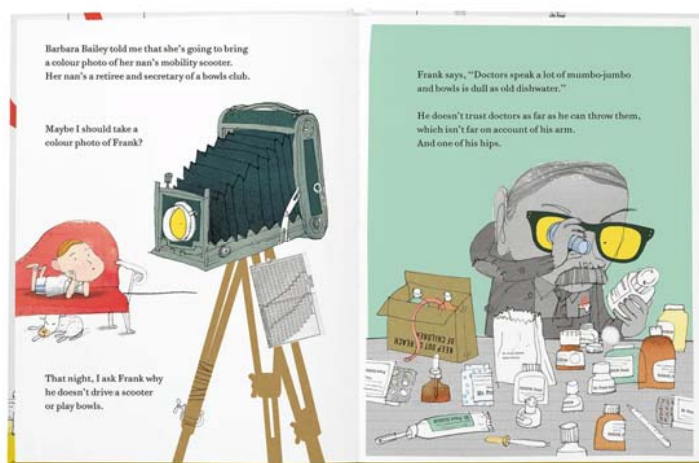


Fig. 6. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

The interaction between verbal and visual modes produces a coherent multimodal discourse of ageing. Early in the narrative, lexical minimisation and passive constructions are reinforced by visual marginalisation and reduced salience, creating a unified representation of old age as peripheral and inactive. For example, Frank's diminished visual prominence aligns with narrative strategies, as descriptions of inactivity correspond to static visual positioning. This demonstrates intersemiotic reinforcement, where both modes produce the same ideological meaning.

A significant intersemiotic shift occurs during the wartime storytelling episode. Lexical choices such as "*led an army in a charge across a muddy battlefield, with bullets whistling all around like African bees,*" "*gave his last drop of water to his thirsty horse,*" and "*captured one hundred enemy soldiers*" [Mackintosh, 2012] construct Frank as agentive and heroic. These are reinforced visually through dynamic posture, establishing interpersonal engagement and emphasising his elevated social role.

In Figure 7, Frank is placed centrally in commanding stances, in close-up, amplifying his salience and social presence. Proxemic cues, such as foreground positioning, invite admiration and empathy, reframing older adulthood as active and relevant. In this scene, verbal and visual modes work complementarily, producing a reconfigured representation of older adulthood as active, competent, and socially meaningful.



Fig. 7. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

Linguistic strategies in this episode operate on multiple, mutually reinforcing levels. Most salient is the use of hyperbole in the clause “*captured one hundred enemy with nothing but his wit*” [Mackintosh, 2012], which constructs a cognitively superior, almost mythic agent whose success is grounded in intellect rather than physical force. From a discourse-analytic perspective, this portrayal activates a heroic or legendary narrative frame, foregrounding individual agency and exceptionalism in the characterisation of Grandpa Frank. The simile “*like African bees*” [Mackintosh, 2012] intensifies the representation of danger by drawing on culturally loaded associations of aggression and uncontrollability, thereby amplifying the perceived threat of the battlefield. This is complemented by evaluative lexis, such as “*brute force*,” which establishes an implicit contrast between physical violence and intellectual skill. In addition, the use of the dynamic verb and auditory imagery in “*bullets whistling all around*” [Mackintosh, 2012] contributes to a vivid kinetic and acoustic scene, evoking a multidirectional movement and a sense of encirclement and chaos. These stylistic features not only enhance experiential immersion but also position the protagonist within a high-risk environment, thereby magnifying the scale of his achievement.

Taken together, these linguistic resources work in synergy with the visual mode to construct an agentive and valorised representation of Frank, consolidating his portrayal as a heroic figure within the narrative.

The final scene completes this transformation through the multimodal reframing. In Figure 8, Frank is depicted seated at a round table with children, centrally positioned and surrounded by others, signalling inclusion and relational proximity. Warm colours and balanced composition encode interpersonal closeness and social integration. The boy’s concluding statement, “*And everybody cheered for my granddad Frank and me*” [Mackintosh, 2012], marks a shift in evaluative stance from minimisation to collective recognition.



Fig. 8. Illustration from *The Frank Show* [Mackintosh, 2012].

The exchange “*Sheldon Rob asks if getting a blurry tattoo hurts and Frank winks and says ‘You bet it did, hombre’*” [Mackintosh, 2012] illustrates the interplay of linguistic and multimodal strategies in meaning-making. Discursively, this interaction establishes an asymmetrical relationship, positioning Sheldon Rob as a naïve inquirer and Frank as the experienced, authoritative figure. The response “*You bet it did*” conveys confidence and personal experience in an informal tone, while the vocative “*hombre*” adds a stylised touch of masculinity and reinforces Frank’s performative persona.

The wink functions as a key multimodal cue, signalling humour and mild irony. It softens the seriousness of pain and reframes the statement as playful rather than strictly literal, contributing to a light, engaging conversational tone. Together, the use of colloquial language and gesture construct Frank as confident, experienced, and heroic.

At the same time, the use of the coordination “*Frank and me*” [Mackintosh, 2012] signals their shared status and relational alignment, linguistically reinforcing the visual representation of equality and inclusion.

Overall, across the narrative, the boy’s emotional trajectory is consistently supported through multimodal cues. The child narrator moves from embarrassment to admiration, reflecting both lexical and visual shifts that recast Frank’s identity. Early representations of discomfort and marginalisation give way to images of confidence and happiness, culminating in the final depiction of the boy smiling and walking with his friend Tom. This interaction highlights the semiotic synergy that underpins meaning-making in picturebooks: the text does not merely describe Frank’s actions but interacts with the illustrations to produce an integrated evaluative stance.

Conclusions

This study examined how older adulthood is constructed and reinterpreted in *The Frank Show* through the interaction of linguistic and visual semiotic resources. The findings demonstrate that age-related meanings are dynamically produced through evaluative lexis, narrative strategies, and visual semiotic semiotics.

At the linguistic level, early evaluative choices, such as minimisers and negative descriptors, construct older adulthood as passive, marginal, and socially insignificant, reproducing dominant ageist discourses. However, shifts in evaluative language, particularly in the wartime episodes, reframe the older character as agentive and socially relevant. Narratively, focalisation and temporal structuring guide this transformation, as the child narrator’s perspective evolves from embarrassment to admiration.

Multimodal analysis shows that visual elements, for instance, salience, colour, spatial positioning, and proxemics, reinforce this progression, moving from marginalisation to inclusion and relational closeness. Intersemiotic relations initially reproduce ageist meanings but later support their reconfiguration.

The picturebook thus exemplifies how multimodal discourse can both reproduce and disrupt age ideologies, positioning children’s literature as a key site for the early construction and potential transformation of cultural meanings of ageing.

By focusing on a single, richly illustrated text, this study underscores the capacity of children’s picturebooks as sites of discursive socialisation, where multimodal resources work to both reproduce and challenge age-related ideologies. While the findings cannot be generalised across all the children’s literature, they offer a methodological template for multimodal discourse analysis of age representations. Future studies can extend this approach to larger corpora and cross-cultural contexts, further illuminating how linguistic and visual strategies shape societal understandings of older adulthood.

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Rethinking Ageing in the Children's Picturebooks: A Multimodal Analysis of Age Representation in *The Frank Show* by David Mackintosh

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Key words: *old age, ageism, children's literature, intergenerational relations, discourse analysis, multimodal discourse.*

This study examines how older adults are discursively represented in children's literature through a case study of David Mackintosh's *The Frank Show* (2012), adopting a linguistically grounded multimodal discourse-analytical perspective. Positioned at the intersection of discourse linguistics, children's literature studies, and age studies, the paper aims to theoretically substantiate the role of multimodal discourse in shaping and transforming cultural perceptions of old age.

The aim of the study is to identify the mechanisms through which older adulthood is constructed and reinterpreted, focusing on how verbal and visual semiotic resources interact in a contemporary English-language picturebook and determine how multimodal discourse in children's literature participates in the early construction of age-related ideologies and how these discursive formations contribute to either the reproduction or transformation of ageist beliefs.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following *research objectives*: 1) to examine how evaluative language used to portray Grandpa Frank shapes and transforms the narrative meaning; 2) to identify the narrative strategies employed; 3) to analyse visual elements and the depiction of an older adult and children as interactive participants as factors influencing the narrator's perception of Grandpa Frank and older adults more broadly; 4) to explore how the interaction between text and image constructs a coherent discourse of ageing.

The research *methods* include qualitative critical discourse analysis, narrative analysis, and multimodal analysis of visual components, such as framing, colour, posture, and spatial composition as semiotic resources that contribute to meaning-making. An interpretative analytical framework is applied to examine how verbal and visual modes function together within the cohesive semiotic structure of the picturebook.

The findings of the study demonstrate that the perception of Grandpa Frank undergoes a significant transformation within the child narrator's evaluative framework. In the opening sections of the narrative, lexical choices, evaluative expressions, and focalisation patterns position Grandpa Frank within culturally familiar stereotypes of decline, passivity, and generational distance. The repeated labelling of the character as "boring" discursively constructs old age as predictable, uneventful, and disconnected from the child's contemporary social world. Visually, these meanings are reinforced through relatively static composition, subdued colour pallets, highlighting old age as predictable, uneventful, and disconnected from the child's contemporary social world. These semiotic configurations align with dominant cultural ideologies that frame later life as a stage of stagnation and reduced social relevance.

However, as the narrative progresses, a discursive reconfiguration of the character takes place. Through shifts in focalisation, the unfolding of adventurous storytelling, and increasingly dynamic visual transformations, Grandpa Frank is reconstructed as active, courageous, imaginative, and agentive. Simultaneously, the visual mode shifts towards more dynamic compositions, exaggerated perspectives, and vividly coloured illustrations that symbolically encode movement, risk, and adventure. This coordinated transformation across modes reconstructs old age as a life stage characterised by vitality, courage, and lived experience. A central mechanism in this discursive shift is the change in the child narrator's evaluative stance, from embarrassment and distancing to admiration and pride.

Thus, this picturebook demonstrates a gradual deconstruction of ageist assumptions and constructs an alternative discourse of ageing as a stage of vitality, creativity, experience, and intergenerational connection. The results confirm that multimodal discourse analysis provides an effective methodological framework for uncovering implicit ideological meanings in children's literature and for highlighting its potential to challenge ageism and foster more positive attitudes towards ageing from early childhood.

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