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Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

Reading parents: Parody and paradox in *Go the Fuck to Sleep*

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 9 February 2021

Keywords:

APPRAISAL
Multimodality
Visual analysis
Imagined community
Picture book
Parody

ABSTRACT

Aimed at frustrated parents whose young children refuse to go to bed, *Go the Fuck to Sleep* was a bestseller before it hit the shelves in 2011. Much of the book's humour lies in its juxtaposition of profanity-laden poetry with illustrations of children and nature that would not be out of place in a typical children's picture book – the books that parents read repeatedly to satisfy their restless children. Although the writer is a father speaking from his experience, creating this in-joke nurtures an imagined community of any caregivers who suffer the same fate night after night. A combination of APPRAISAL analyses, both verbal (cf. Martin and White 2005) and visual (cf. Painter et al. 2013), provides evidence for the ways in which the book shows how the child takes the power role in the bedtime routine of middle-class households. Visual choices follow the typical format of children's bedtime stories, with the child increasingly at the centre of the images. Verbal evaluations show that, at first, parents deny their children the items or activities that they want but later concede to their demands. As the narrator becomes more frustrated and desperate, the evaluations move from the idea of a secure sleep for the child, to questioning the child's honesty, to denouncing his parenting skills. This paradoxical role-reversal in the book allows parents some relief from the guilt that they might be bad parents because of their nightly loss of authority over the child. However, it also foregrounds the ideological issues at stake at bedtime.

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1. Introduction

In May 2011, we came across an online link to a book that became incredibly popular very quickly as a result of many internet users sharing it. At first glance, it looked like a typical children's picture book, filled with full-colour illustrations of children with various animals. The book's poetry, however, was full of profanities, unlike any picture book we had ever seen, and it was called *Go the Fuck to Sleep*. Written by a father in the United States of America, the book tells the story of a parent's struggle to get his child to fall asleep. It was a resounding success with parents around the world. This parody of the children's picture book genre inspired us to consider the relationship between the words in a book and the images that accompany them and how the effect of changing the prototypicality of one of these components (in this case, the words) could make the book into something with which parents could identify and create a community of shared values.

According to [Moya \(2011: 2982\)](#):

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“Good picture books are a richer experience than the simple sum of their independent components. For this reason, their full significance can only be obtained if both verbal and visual modalities are read in combination and as interdependent components of the same multimodal production.”

Following this, we have analysed the interpersonal meaning in *Go the Fuck to Sleep* with a multimodal systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approach, combining the APPRAISAL framework (cf. [Martin and White, 2005](#)) with the framework for visual analysis proposed by [Painter et al. \(2013\)](#). This allowed us to account for both the words and the illustrations (as Moya declares to be crucial in the statement above). Our analysis aimed to answer the following questions:

- 1 How do the verbal (APPRAISAL) and visual (cf. [Painter et al. 2013](#)) strategies combine¹ to construe meaning in the bedtime ‘event’?
- 2 How does the parody emerge through contrasts in the visual and verbal texts?
- 3 How is the imagined community of parents construed and supported in the book, and what does this reveal about the ideologies of the bedtime ritual?

Throughout the analysis, we abbreviate ‘double page spread’ to ‘dps’. Following [Matthiessen et al. \(2010\)](#), we also differentiate between system names and the terms within the systems by using capitals for the system name (e.g. AFFECT) and lowercase for terms (e.g. satisfaction). To ensure that lowercase technical terms are not confused with their non-technical counterparts, they are enclosed in square brackets, also showing that they are choices from a system. Where resources within systems are assigned a polarity (e.g. the presence of a quality gets a plus, the absence of it a minus), this also appears in the square brackets, for example [-capacity]. Often, it is necessary to have subsystems within systems, and the choice from the subsystems follow the main system resource, preceded by a colon (e.g. [succession: within a sequence], where “within a sequence” is a choice made from a subsystem of options within “succession”).

We also refer to ‘typical picture books’: these are books typical of the genre (such as *Possum Magic* and *Grandpa*, which appear in [Painter et al. 2013](#)), as opposed to parodies of the genre (such as the one we report on here). In the next sections, we provide more context to the research, with an exploration of the response to *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, followed by explanations of the theories that informed our approach and analysis, and a discussion of our findings.

2. *Go the Fuck to Sleep*

After struggling to get his daughter, Vivien, to go to sleep, writer Adam Mansbach jokingly announced on social media: “Look out for my forthcoming book, *Go the Fuck to Sleep*” ([Pols, 2011](#): n.p). A positive response inspired him to write the book, which was then illustrated with images of young children, animals, and landscapes by Ricardo Cortés. The 28-page hardcover book comprises 14 double page spreads (dps) which are illustrated in full colour, with one stanza (quatrain) per dps. Each stanza combines lines that could have come out of any bedtime story for children, with profanity-laden lines that are aimed at parents, depicting the narrator’s growing frustration at the child’s never-ending wakeful state. While the full text of the book appears in the appendix to this article, an example of a typical stanza of four lines follows ([Mansbach and Cortés, 2011](#): 4). This stanza appears above an illustration of a smiling, sleeping child lying beside a sleeping cat, kitten, and lamb, surrounded by cushions:

The cats nestle close to their kittens now.
The lambs have laid down with the sheep.
You’re cozy and warm in your bed, my dear.
Please go the fuck to sleep.

The book topped Amazon’s bestseller chart and the Barnes & Noble Top 20 – a month before it was published. The publisher, Akashic Books, brought the publication date forward from October to June when the pre-orders on amazon.com reached unprecedented heights after a pdf (portable document format) copy of the book was leaked online ([Halford, 2011](#)). *Go the Fuck to Sleep* has also been recorded as an audiobook, narrated by film star Samuel L. Jackson. Film actress Jennifer Garner gave a “chipper-but-frazzled delivery of a mother on the verge” in a video three years later for *Vanity Fair* ([Robinson, 2016](#): n.p).

Despite the overwhelmingly positive reception that *Go the Fuck to Sleep* received, some have criticised its adult language. [Zacharias \(2011](#): n.p) wrote that the “violent” language of the book “is not the least bit funny, when one considers how many neglected children fall asleep each night praying for a parent who’d care enough to hold them, nurture them and read to

¹ The focus of this article is the interpersonal aspect of the story, i.e. the relationship between the child and the parent in the bedtime ritual and how the evaluations expressed by the narrator create the community of parents who feel similarly. This is why only the APPRAISAL framework (which is specifically interpersonal) has been applied to the words of the book. However, as [Painter et al. \(2013\)](#) visual analysis framework is a relatively recent development, relevant resources of the ideational and textual systems have been included in this research purely to expand the range of empirical examples of how this visual framework can contribute to understanding the meaning construed by an atypical picture book: the ‘arrangement’ of the pictures (textual choices) can contribute to the reader’s perception of the relationship between the child and parent, and the ‘reality’ or scene that the illustration depicts (ideational choices) is important in construing the ‘truth’ of the parent and providing a picture that he or she can identify with. Couplings in meaning that are identified in this article are therefore limited to verbal interpersonal meaning coupled with ideational, interpersonal, or textual meaning.

them”. Mansbach (2012: n.p.) mentioned this piece in a later interview, saying “There was also an up-in-arms essay on CNN.com that asked ‘what if this book was about blacks, or Muslims, or Jews?’ – which, of course, it was – and low-key accused us of causing child abuse. But the author got shouted down immediately”.

Author Eric Metaxas accused Mansbach and Cortés of parodying his book *Go to Sleep My Love* without admitting it, but also expressed his distaste for the language in *Go the Fuck to Sleep* (Metaxas, 2011). Mansbach (2012: n.p.) also spoke out on this:

“This other guy claimed the book was a parody of his book, based on the fact that we both rhymed ‘sleep’ with ‘deep’ and had a picture of a tiger. Besides being incorrect, he seemed to fundamentally misunderstand about the nature of parody, which relies on familiarity with the original text – you don’t parody something and then deny it.”

Family First New Zealand, a Christian group, urged booksellers not to stock *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, with the director saying that, “we have grave concerns about its effect on aggressive and dysfunctional parents, and also on children who are attracted to the book ... the offensive language and the tone of the conversation is also concerning” (Flood, 2011: n.p.). The author told salon.com that:

“[The director] managed to get on TV to talk about the book. Which is when Noni Hazlehurst, our Australian audiobook reader, stepped in. Noni is a beloved children’s television presenter ... She represents the childhood of every Aussie and Kiwi under the age of 40. You’d be crazy to mess with her. On national television, she told Family First New Zealand that the book was providing real relief and catharsis to thousands of parents who felt isolated and exhausted and bad about themselves – just like she had as a young mother – and that they should shut the fuck up. So they did” (Mansbach, 2012: n.p.).

Mansbach published two sequels to *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, each describing a different aspect of parenthood. *You Have to Fucking Eat* (2014) addresses the struggles of breakfast time, while *Fuck, Now There Are Two of You* (2019) is for parents who have recently welcomed a second child. Both sequels are illustrated by Owen Brozman. Mansbach and Samuel L. Jackson worked together again to raise awareness of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic with Jackson reading Mansbach’s poem *Stay the Fuck at Home* (Zemler, 2020: n.p.).

3. The community of frustrated parents

In defining a nation, Anderson (1983: 15) used the term “imagined political community”. The community is called ‘imagined’ because none of the members know all of the other members, but they know in their minds that there are many other people similar to them in that they are also members of the imagined community. The collective of a nation’s people is called a ‘community’ because its members feel that they are comrades who share an experience, even if there is inequality amongst them in reality (Anderson, 1983). Adopting this term, a community of parents can be called imagined, as there is no way that all parents across the world will physically meet all of the other parents that make up their ‘community’, which is sharing, simultaneously, the experience of parenthood.

Most online reviews or articles that mention *Go the Fuck to Sleep* allude to the imagined community of parents – the feeling that the reader can identify with the narrator parent in the book and that parents feel that they are not alone in their frustration. In Neill (2011: n.p.), Canongate, the company that bought the rights for the UK and Commonwealth versions of the book, states that it “perfectly captures the familiar and unspoken tribulations of putting your child down for the night. In the process, it opens up a conversation about parenting, charming and enraging as it can be, and chimes a note of solidarity with tired parents everywhere”. Dawson (2019: n.p.) called the book “the perfect gift for the sleep-deprived mom or dad in need of a Been There laugh”. The unnamed creator of the now-defunct parenting site named after the book, gothefucktosleep.org, summarised parents’ bedtime angst (and the book’s effect on it) with this story in 2013:

“I have a two-year-old son and I know that the thought ‘Please, go the f to sleep’ has crossed my mind at some of my less than finer parenting moments. We love our children but it’s nice to know that other parents are thinking exactly the same thing sometimes.”

Halford (2011: n.p.) agrees, adding that:

“when faced with a kid who refuses to go to sleep, we get annoyed, like all parents before us, but, rather than just abandoning the child to the dark ... we sit there with it, reading to it and singing to it and distracting it with swirling night lights until it decides it feels like going to sleep, all the while thinking to ourselves, Go the fuck to sleep, kid ... The rage! So repressed it has to be sublimated into a children’s book!”

The author acknowledged this kind of response in an interview, even referring to the idea of a community. “The main kind of feedback I am getting is this incredible weird gratitude,” he said, “because I think it makes people feel a little less alone. It is a sort of cathartic experience for people to read it, and it [creates] a weird sense of community, as if it’s given people permission to laugh at something that is difficult” (Pols, 2011: n.p.). This quote from Mansbach gives the impression that his book has revealed the imagined community to parents – the imagined community that has so far been unrecognised; one that consists of parents who feel guilty about being angry with their children when they will not go to sleep (and think they are alone in feeling this way). In SFL terms, this corresponds to the imagined community bonding around parents’ interpersonal evaluations of ideational meaning, that is, their experience of interaction with their child (ren).

4. Multimodal analysis of picture books

In his exploration of reconciliation in a picture book, [Martin \(2008: 136\)](#) noted that “Verbal and visual meanings are not realizations of an underlying meaning; rather they cooperate, bi-modally, in the instantiation of a genre ... Complementarity is a relatively under-theorised notion in social semiotics, and in the systemic functional linguistic theory inspiring [his] research”. [Moya and Pinar \(2008\)](#) found that verbal text in the children's picture book they studied (*Guess How Much I Love You*) offered little interaction with the reader other than offering information, as their mood analysis revealed a reliance on declarative constructions. However, an analysis of visual text in the same book showed that the child and adult readers could identify with the main characters, because of the use of a medium angle, in which the reader is ‘at eye level’ or front-on with the characters. This is in comparison with a low angle, where the character looks ‘down’ on the reader (giving the character power over the reader) and the high angle, where the character looks ‘up’ to the reader (giving the reader power over the character). The long shots used in the illustrations also showed that, despite this identification with the characters, the long shots indicated social distance, not intimacy, and “perhaps in an attempt to show the young child that they do not belong to his/her world but to the world of magic and imagination” ([Moya and Pinar, 2008: 1614](#)). The authors concluded that this added layer of interpersonal meaning could not be inferred from the verbal text alone.

In a later intersemiotic analysis of interpersonal meaning the picture book *Gorilla*, [Moya \(2011: 2982\)](#) confirmed that “images and language have their own specific potentials, that is, their own affordances to make meaning”. Moya also acknowledged that few researchers have studied how words and images work together to construct interpersonal meaning, and stated that systemic functional linguistics has proved to be a valuable tool to describe patterns of meaning realized in the verbal text. As was the case with *Guess How Much I Love You*, [Moya \(2011\)](#) found that images in *Gorilla* seemed to make more of a contribution than words to engagement between the reader and the book characters. The combined visual and verbal text analysis approaches, said [Moya \(2011\)](#), allows the exploration and comparison of both modes, and to see how they complement each other. In summary, [Moya \(2011: 2990\)](#) states that:

“A multimodal analysis in which both images and words are considered as interdependent components is therefore necessary if we want to delve into the potential of combining words and images in picture books. As has been demonstrated, in *Gorilla* the combination of verbal and visual modalities enriches the meaning of both and leads to conclusions which go beyond the interpersonal implications expressed by each modality in isolation.”

4.1. APPRAISAL

According to [Martin \(2000\)](#), the APPRAISAL framework's resources evaluate the emotions that are negotiated in a text, the intensity of these feelings expressed, and how readers are positioned according to these views. Three main systems fulfil these functions – ATTITUDE, GRADUATION, and ENGAGEMENT. Each system also consists of further resources available to the author; for example, attitude has three subsystems: AFFECT (positive or negative personal emotions expressed), JUDGEMENT (evaluations of behaviour and ethics), and APPRECIATION (evaluations of things and their aesthetics). For brevity's sake, we will describe only the resources that appear in *Go the Fuck to Sleep*. In the book, there are seven main varieties of ATTITUDE expressed. According to [Martin and White \(2005: 49\)](#), the first of these, [security], is concerned with feelings of physical and emotional safety; the second, [satisfaction], deals with feelings that include displeasure, curiosity, and respect. The next three, [veracity] (honesty), [propriety] (morality) and [tenacity] (perseverance in pursuit of goals) are based on a society's moral and ethical standards ([Martin and White, 2005](#)). Finally, [composition] refers to how balanced and logical something is, and [valuation] refers to how significant something is valued to be ([Martin, 2000](#)). As mentioned in the introduction, each of these resources is judged with a plus or minus sign that shows the presence or absence of the quality. For example, evaluating someone as *dishonest* implies the lack of honesty (veracity), thus the coding would read [-veracity].

Resources of GRADUATION construe the modification of meaning – it can be upscaled or downscaled according to intensity or amount. When something is intensified in *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, it is an upscaling of a quality of someone, such as a personality trait. Continuing with the example given above, if someone was called *extremely dishonest*, *extremely* would be an upscaling of the quality of [-veracity]. It is also possible to upscale a quantity such as [number] (e.g. *millions of excuses* would be upscaled number). The book also features upscaling of [extent: distribution: time], which is drawing out a length of time, for example *They will always be hungry* upscales the length of time of the hunger.

Engagement comprises resources to increase or decrease the ‘space’ for an addressee to hold an alternate viewpoint. Interpersonally speaking, the desired addressee of the book itself is the parent reader, but the poetry of *Go the Fuck to Sleep* is addressed to the child (hypothetically, because one hopes that the parent does not vocalise such thoughts to the child). The strategy of [denial] (shown by words such as *no*, *not*, etc.) decreases or contracts the dialogic space for the (child) addressee to argue an alternate viewpoint. A [denial] can be paired with [counter], which is often the use of *but* to introduce the preferred opinion (e.g. “You *can't* have ice cream for breakfast *but* I will make pancakes.”). [Concessions] are strategies which acknowledge propositions, but they are often also paired with [counters] of these propositions. This initially seems to concede to the addressee's potential viewpoint, but replaces it with the speaker's preferred stance. For example: “Yes, ice cream is made from milk, *but* you should rather have milk with your cereal”, where the *Yes* and *is* initially concede to the addressee's viewpoint. Although it is the words of this picture book that provide the biggest contrast to a typical picture book, it is the

pictures' similarity to the typical book that help the words stand out. The visual analysis framework by Painter et al. (2013) provides resources for an investigation into the extent to which these images aid the purpose of the verbal text.

4.2. Analysing visual texts

The visual analysis framework by Painter et al. (2013) draws on APPRAISAL theory and the grammar of images (cf. Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006) to provide empirical evidence for evaluation in visual texts. As the framework is comprehensive and complex, again we will only outline those resources that are activated in *Go the Fuck to Sleep*. The emotions of the characters such as happiness, sadness, anger, and so on, are captured under AFFECT in the visual analysis framework. According to Painter et al. (2013: 108–109), AMBIENCE is “a significant semiotic system within the interpersonal metafunction, borrowing the term from analysis of three-dimensional spaces. It comprises a set of options for creating an emotional mood or atmosphere realized through various choices related to colour ... an absence of the ambient setting, where only a splash of ambience is available, foregrounds interpersonal meaning by emphasizing character affect and/or inviting reader attitude”. When an image is in colour, Ambience is [activated], and then vibrancy (saturation), warmth (hue), and familiarity (differentiation between colours) come into play simultaneously. Three resources which allow the reader to ‘connect’ with the character are PATHOS, FOCALISATION, and INVOLVEMENT. PATHOS refers to the level of detail and realism of the illustration, especially the face, where emotion is shown: [appreciative] is minimalist, with the least detail possible (such as circles or ovals for a head and dots for eyes); [empathic] is a more generic style where the character has more detail (where the eyes and mouth can be more expressive); and [personalising], where the character is naturalistic and almost photo-realistic. As characters become more detailed, the more ‘real’ they seem to readers; minimalistically-drawn characters are not as easy for the reader to identify with. FOCALISATION is a resource that allows the reader to ‘connect’ with the characters (or not): the reader can make [contact] with the character in the book (where the character looks out at the reader, for example) or the reader can [observe] the character. Another resource, INVOLVEMENT, describes the meaning construed by the characters’ bodies in relation to the reader. Characters are [involved] when they face the reader and [detached] when they are turned from the reader. The visual analysis resource of POWER refers to the perspective of the characters – if a character is looking up at a reader, the reader has the position of power and vice versa. The same applies between characters – the character who can look down on another has the position of power.

Painter et al. (2013) resources of CHARACTER APPEARANCE and CHARACTER MANIFESTATION are about the frequency and extent to which the characters appear throughout the story so that the child reader can follow the content of the story. According to Painter et al. (2013), CHARACTER APPEARANCE refers to whether it is the first depiction of a character or a reappearance (immediate or later, after an absence). CHARACTER MANIFESTATION describes how much of the character is in the frame (is it the complete picture of the character, or is it metonymic – a body part or a shadow?). Once the characters are in the scene, the development of actions and circumstances in successive images is also important as they advance the narrative. INTER-EVENT relations refer to [simultaneity] or [succession] in time: simultaneity is when different characters are visible at the same time (whether on two facing pages or two panels on the same page, implying that their actions are done simultaneously). Activating succession means that an event unfolds as the same character appears in successive images. The reader then must infer a temporal succession between images, note Painter et al. (2013). As the event is pictured, the successive images set up a sequence where the reader can see whether the event was [fulfilled] or [-fulfilled] (unfulfilled). If causality can be inferred for the result, [+cause] is activated. For example, if one image shows a dog opening its mouth as a postman is about to deliver a letter to a mailbox, and the next image shows the postman yelling while the dog’s teeth are clamped on to his foot, the reader can infer that the letter delivery activity was [-fulfilled]. We can also infer [+cause] because we saw the dog disrupt the letter delivery. INTER-CIRCUMSTANCE relations refer to whether the background of the character changes (or not) in successive images. Given that it is a common place for children to be, [home: in] or [home: out] are two options in the visual analysis framework by Painter et al. (2013).

A final important resource for this study is the FOCUS, or composition, of the images. In the book, many images are [centred] in that they are focused on one object in the centre of the image. In [centred: simple] images, the centre of the image is filled. When there is more than one visual element, the central focus is [extended] to include these. Their arrangement means that the image will either be called [centred: extended: circular], where the other visual elements are arranged around the centre, or [centred: extended: triptych], where there are two outer elements around a centred element.

The next section presents the findings of our analysis of *Go the Fuck to Sleep* using the APPRAISAL and visual analysis resources outlined above to investigate how the bedtime event is portrayed in the words and images and how both work together to show the child’s role. The images and verbal evaluations contribute to the desperation that the parent reader can identify with – which will ultimately sell the book as a humorous gift to ‘help’ new parents feel a sense of relief as they are part of an imagined community of frustrated parents.

5. Construing evaluative meaning in *Go the Fuck to Sleep*

[+security] dominates the first four paragraphs of the story (see Appendix), both as endearments to the child (*my dear, my darling*), and to construe the feelings of the animals described in the story (kittens *nestle*, lambs *lay down*, whales *huddle*, eagles are *at rest*), in an attempt to convince the child that he or she should also be settling in for the night. More scenes of nature are described as [+composition], showing the child that all is calm and ready for a peaceful sleep (the wind *whispers*

soft, the field mice make *not a peep*, the sparrow has *silenced her cheep*). The illustrations also construe mostly positive emotions in the first half of the book, where the child is lost in fantasies about the animals in the story (AFFECT on dps 1, 7, and 8 shows the child being content – see Fig. 1 below).



Fig. 1. Double page spread 8, left page (Mansbach and Cortés, 2011).

In the second half, where the parent's level of frustration ([–satisfaction]) increases quickly (*what the fuck? Go to sleep; shut the fuck up and sleep; Fuck your stuffed bear; Cut the crap*), the child's AFFECT becomes more tentative and distressed, as the parent wants the fun with the animals to be over. It is the child's [+tenacity] to stay awake (*It's been 38 min already; You're not gonna sleep; You win*), combined with the parent's lack thereof ([–tenacity]: *This interview's over; I'm not getting you shit; fine, whatever; You run down the hall/As I nod the fuck off, and sleep*) that leads to this frustration. [+tenacity] would often be regarded as a desirable attribute (bravery, for example), but here the parent is unhappy with the child's persistence. The parent also evaluates the child's behaviour negatively (*Stop fucking with me – [–propriety]; Stop lying – [–veracity]*) as well as his own parenting skills (*My life is a failure, I'm a shitty-ass parent – both [–valuation]*). In terms of AMBIENCE, there is an equal number of muted and vibrant double-page spreads in *Go the Fuck to Sleep*. Three of the vibrant spreads are warm, but where the cool ones contain the child, often the child is the only splash of warmth. The final three spreads are muted, which could symbolise both the waning hope of the parent that the child will sleep and the child's disappointment that the parent wants the animal stories, and the bedtime ritual, to end.

GRADUATION is used in the verbal text, rather than the illustrations. This is not surprising, as the visual text needs to remain similar to the realistic depictions of children and animals in the typical picture book in order for the parodied verbal text to be so effective in that it is so starkly different to a typical picture book. The visual text does not rely on GRADUATION strategies to construe meaning. In the verbal text, however, the writer has used this system to great effect. He upscales the quality of his [–satisfaction] twice in line 16 (*Jesus Christ, what the fuck?*) and in line 23 (*A hot crimson rage fills my heart*), which shows extreme frustration. [number] and [extent: distribution: time] are upscaled in line 15 with *It's been 38 min already* (which indicates that the parent is not enjoying himself, as he tracks how time is passing). In line 53, [extent: distribution: time] is upscaled again with *finally* in *We're finally watching our movie*, to emphasise how long it has taken for the child to sleep. The parent's relief is then interrupted by the child waking up again, and the parent's upscaled [–satisfaction] flares up again in line 55: *Oh shit. Goddamn it.*

ENGAGEMENT in the verbal text mainly shows the parent's battle to control the bedtime routine. In line 11, the parent [denies] that the child needs a drink (*you're not thirsty*), as the child must have asserted this. The child must also have held the opinion that a trip to the bathroom was necessary, because the parent also [denies] this twice in line 19 (*Hell no, you can't go to the bathroom*). A stuffed bear is a third diversionary tactic from the child, and the parent shuts this down with another [denial] (*Fuck your stuffed bear, I'm not getting you shit*). In line 43, however, the parent [concedes] three times out of frustration (*Sure, fine, whatever*), transferring the power to the child, who now holds the dominant stance (see the next section for more on power relations). ENGAGEMENT in the visual text focuses on making contact with the reader. On dps 1 (where the child is smiling and asleep) and 11 (where the child is standing up in a cot and has a slightly downturned mouth), the PATHOS is [personalising], as the children's faces are drawn with realistic eyes, shadows on their faces, and detailed mouths. These realistic images are important to the progression of the parent's frustration, as the first one depicts the parent's goal (a happy, sleeping child), and the second is the more accurate reality (the anxious, awake child asking for something from

the parent). Such realistic images are easy for the parent reader to identify with, and the other images are coded as [empathic], as they are less detailed (possibly because they are not so close-up). However, Painter et al. (2013: 34) state that [empathic] images enable the “recognition of common humanity”, and this is true of this story. Parents will still be able to recognise their children in the level of realism in the [empathic] images. FOCALISATION involves the reader [observing] the child interacting with nature, and later the father putting the child to bed. [observing] the child allows the reader to identify with the writer/parent, who also [observes] the child. On four occasions, however, there is [contact] between the child and the reader, which, according to Painter et al. (2013: 20), overtly invites the reader “to participate in the story world”. The INVOLVEMENT between the characters is almost alternately [involved] and [detached]. On dps 3, 8 (see Fig. 2 below), and 10, where the child is very active, the reader is [detached] from the child (the parent reader that is sympathetic to the writer’s plight would probably not want to engage with these images).

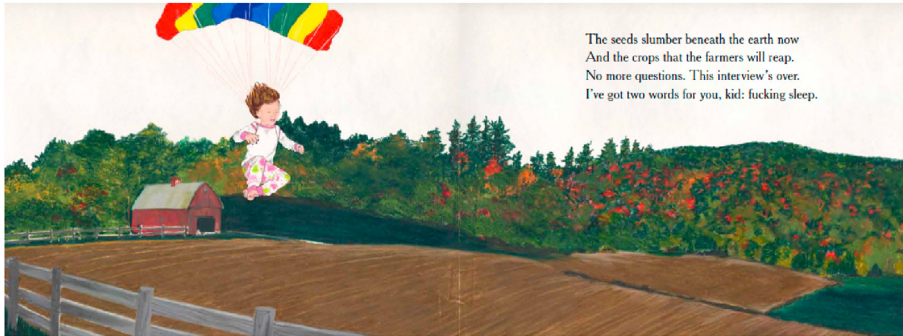


Fig. 2. Double page spread 8 (Mansbach and Cortés, 2011).

The [involved] images allow the reader to engage with the rest of the bedtime ritual, which should be familiar to them. As with many typical children’s picture books, *Go the Fuck to Sleep* helps the child to identify with the scenery and young characters in the book by means of [familiar] choices of AMBIENCE, i.e. more colour differentiation, which is much like the real world that they occupy.

6. The child’s power

A clash between the verbal and visual text is evident when considering the parent-child power relations. In the visual text, the reader is initially on the same plane as the child, so the POWER relationship is one of equality. In dps 11 (Fig. 3 below), 13, and 14, however, the child is seen as less powerful than the parent, because the parent looks down on the child.

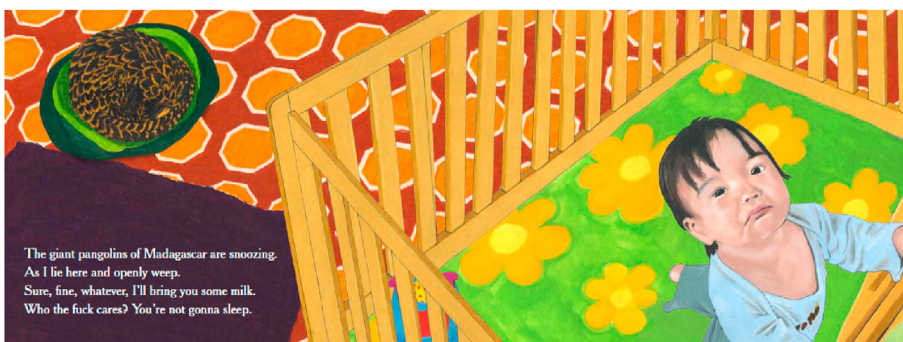


Fig. 3. Double page spread 11 (Mansbach and Cortés 2011).

This depiction in the illustrations would be what one would expect of a parent-child relationship, but the value of this parody for the parent reader is that the words reveal that the child has the true power in this bedtime ritual. The ATTITUDE choices by the writer reflect the child’s power over the parent: the parent’s [-tenacity] to control the situation (*No more questions. This interview’s over* – line 31) versus the child’s [+tenacity] in staying awake (*You’re not gonna sleep* – line 44; *You win. You escape* – line 47). Although the parent should have more power in this interaction (or at least, the parent expects to wield power with *No more questions.*), we see later it is not the parent who ‘wins’ in this interaction. In terms of ENGAGEMENT, the parent in the book gives in to the child’s demands with [concessions] (for example, in line 43: *Sure, fine, whatever, I’ll bring you some milk*), after trying in vain to keep the upper hand with [denials] (*Fuck your stuffed bear, I’m not getting you shit* – line 35; see Appendix). This strategy shows that the parent is allowing the child’s stance (wanting to stay awake) to

become the dominant one. As Amrute (2016: 143–144) notes, the book “captures *one* sense of parenting in the modern age, where the pull of child care takes place in the textured everyday of work, presenting baby sleep as a battle between the life of the children and the life of the parents” – and this is a battle that the child wins.

7. “Reading” parents

Go the Fuck to Sleep is different from many children’s books in that the pictures do not depict the same set of characters throughout. In terms of CHARACTER APPEARANCE, this means that new characters [appear] in each double-page spread. Although this is the case, the reappearance of a child figure is symbolic of all children. It could be anybody’s child that refuses to sleep; the problem is universal. At the same time, the generic way in which the characters are drawn ([empathic] PATHOS) allows each parent to recognise themselves in the images of the parents in the book. The empathically drawn faces and the [complete] CHARACTER MANIFESTATION also let the child identify him- or herself with the children in the images, which is fitting, as it is the child ‘reader’ that is keeping the parent reader awake. Parents will be able to ‘see’ their own child in the images. The illustrations in the parody, if seen by children who cannot read, would not convey the parent’s frustration – this is carried wholly by the verbal text (with [-tenacity] and [-satisfaction], for example). This serves as a metaphor for the parent’s feelings: the child can see their parent, but should not be able to ‘read’ their parent’s true feelings. This reinforces the contrast between the visual and verbal text. Like the parent, at face value the book appeals to children as if it was a typical bedtime situation (‘typical’ being a calm parent and a children’s book that is not expletive-filled), but when read, the book is clearly not the usual child-friendly fare, and the parent suggested in the book is clearly not happy with the child’s continued attempts to resist bedtime. The terms of endearment that the parent uses – *my love, darling, hon* – that provide feelings of [+security] for children, construing that they are loved, cared for, and safe in their parents’ homes, are scattered in the opening lines of some paragraphs of visual text. This is the façade parents put up (a calm, tolerant one that the child can see), but their true feelings of [-satisfaction] are construed in the last couplet of each paragraph. These are a jarring contrast to the endearments, in the same way that the explicit verbal text is in strong contrast with the colourful ([familiar], in terms of AMBIENCE) images that are similar to those in children’s picture books typical of the genre.

8. Bedtime: fulfilling the event

Although the INTER-EVENT relations in *Go the Fuck to Sleep* seem to show [simultaneity], the reader could also infer [succession] towards the end of the story (dps 11 onwards). [simultaneity] references the fact that no child ever reappears in the book, representing that, at any given time, children across the world are refusing to sleep. This provides emotional support for the intended readers (parents) by showing them that they are not alone in their frustration. Instead, they are part of a ‘community’ of parents who struggle to get their children to sleep and are experiencing this problem at the same time, together, even though they cannot see, or do not know, each other. [succession: within a sequence] refers to the bedtime ritual of child and parent – reading a bedtime story, getting the child something to drink, making sure the favourite toy is with the child – that is only fulfilled by the child going to sleep (and staying asleep). Once we are inside the house ([home: in] under INTER-CIRCUMSTANCE in dps 11), we can see that the child is not asleep, so the sequence has not been fulfilled (the bedtime event is always [-fulfilled], and this is the root of the parent’s frustration). The verbal text conveys the non-fulfilment of the event from the beginning of the book, however, as the parent routinely pleads with the child to sleep at the end of each paragraph. In summary, showing different children and parents throughout the book construes [simultaneity], because many parents are engaged in the bedtime event simultaneously every night, but the images of the (awake) children throughout the book reinforce the sense that the child is *still* not asleep; the sequence of events that makes up ‘bedtime’ remains [-fulfilled]. The reader infers that the child is the cause of this, hence [+cause]. This is reinforced by the dominance of the child in many of the illustrations. For example, on the right page of dps 5, and left page of dps 8, the child is in the centre of the [centred: simple] FOCUS groups. In the [centred: extended: triptych] and [centred: extended: circular] groups on dps 13 and the left page of dps 14 (see Fig. 4 below), the child is also in the centre, emphasizing that the bedtime event’s success relies on the child.

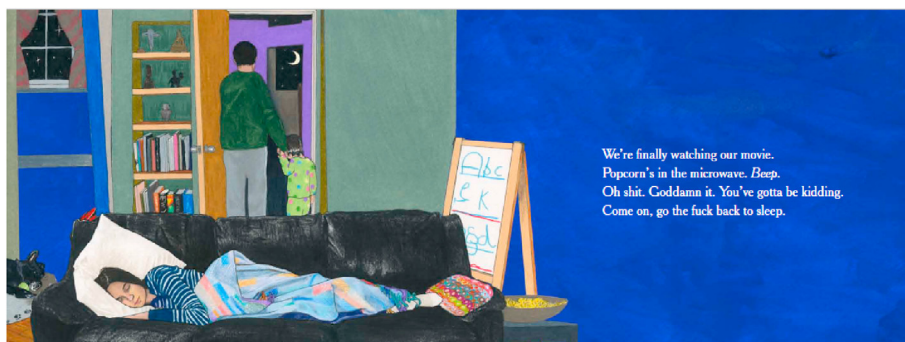


Fig. 4. Double page spread 14 (Mansbach and Cortés, 2011).

The FOCUS groups in dps 2, 4 (right – see Fig. 5 below), 6 (right), and 9, where attention is drawn to landscapes and sleeping animals, show what the child ‘should’ be doing, i.e. settling down to sleep.

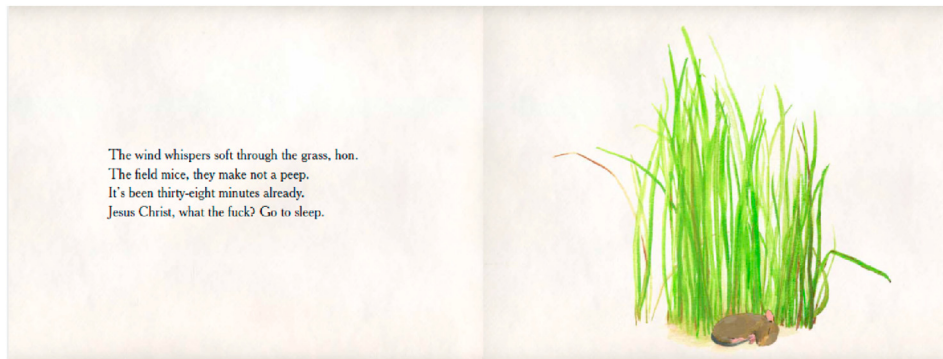


Fig. 5. Double page spread 4 (Mansbach and Cortés, 2011).

This is what the parent is trying to advocate, but the Action Processes that the child is involved in (parachuting, jumping on a bed, crouching on a lily pad) contradict this desire, justifying the parent's frustration.

9. Conclusion

In this research, we set out to investigate the ability of *Go the Fuck to Sleep* to create a community of readership using its particular choices of visual and verbal evaluation. This provided an opportunity to employ the verbal APPRAISAL framework from Martin and White (2005) in combination with the visual analysis framework from Painter et al. (2013). Research Question 1 asks how visual and verbal strategies combine to construe meaning throughout the story. At the beginning of *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, the ‘scene’ is set for the bedtime ritual: a feeling of [+security] for the child, and the animals settling down for the night, as well as [+composition] in nature. This is complemented by the contentment (AFFECT) visible on the child's face in the illustrations, working with the pictures to create a sense of calm. However, this is shattered in the second half of the story, where the parent's [-satisfaction] at the child's [+tenacity] to stay awake becomes evident, calling the child's behaviour [-propriety]. These evaluations are emphasised by verbal GRADUATION strategies (mostly upscaling, intensifying, the evaluations). The writer negatively evaluates himself as a parent ([-valuation]) as his tenacity wanes ([-tenacity]), a process symbolised by the muted final three double-page spreads. Verbal ENGAGEMENT strategies also change at this point, from [denials] that the child needs something (a toy, a drink) to [concessions] as [-tenacity] sets in. [familiar] choices of AMBIENCE encourage the parent reader to identify with the scenario in the story.

Research Question 2 asks how the parody emerges from the contrast between the visual and verbal texts of *Go the Fuck to Sleep*. The text is a parody of the bedtime story, at the heart of which text is a paradox: that the middle class egalitarianism and solidarity that bedtime stories ostensibly socialise children into is actually a time of contestation and struggle. *Go the Fuck to Sleep* lifts the veil on the seeming ‘snuggliness’ of a middle-class parent and young child ending a day characterised, probably, by immense material and other sacrifices and accommodations on the parent's part, apparently made willingly, and a child, construed as a sweet, deserving recipient of everything. To capture what is really going on requires a disjunctive, convention-breaking (and therefore marked) hybrid genre: one that mixes allegory, analogy and lullaby (all solidarity-seeking tropes) with the discourse of rough-tongued invective, confrontation, posturing, threat and conflict i.e. a discourse that is status-marked. At the linguistic heart of the hybrid genre is the coupling of elements from two different semiotic systems. In *Go the Fuck to Sleep* this takes the form of verbal APPRAISAL choices on the one hand, and visual design choices on the other: the former largely the carrier, in the closing couplets of each stanza, of tumult and resistance – the negotiation of moral issues; the latter, supportive of the preceding, benign, lines in each stanza.

Most noteworthy is the coupling of verbal and visual evaluations of power relations between the parent and the child. In the verbal text, the parent loses his resolve to get the child to sleep, [conceding] to the child's demands, and this [-tenacity] indicates the child's control ([+tenacity]) over the interaction. Although the parent is frustrated, the child has the upper hand, or power, in this situation. However, the verbal power struggle that the parent ‘loses’ to the child is coupled with a visual POWER relationship in the images on dps 11, 13 and 14 where the parent looks down on the child: the ‘typical’ parent-child relationship where the parent has power to direct the process.

The images and the structure of the text (as a poem) bear most resemblance to the typical children's picture book, but it is the contrasting words, especially the expletives used to express and upscale the parent's growing [-satisfaction], that show it to be a parody. A child that could not read words would not be able to tell that this is no ordinary picture book, the same way that they should not be able to see past their parents' (crumbling) mask of calm in the face of the child's restlessness.

As regards Research Question 3 (how the imagined community of parents is construed and supported), the [simultaneity] that dominates the book shows that the bedtime ritual occurs in multiple houses, implying that the parent reading the book is not

alone, that there are others – near or far – who are also engaged in the same activity at the same time. The community of parents is characterised by the coupling of ideational meaning (the child not going to sleep) with interpersonal feelings of [-satisfaction] (anger) and [-tenacity] (not being able to control or fulfil the bedtime activity as a parent). The unmediated FOCALISATION also gives the reader a real-life perspective – that of observing a child – inviting the parent reader to further identify with the writer. Once parent readers are ‘in the same shoes’ as the writer visually, they can more naturally align with the verbal text.

The visual text does not deliver the meaning that the imagined community can affiliate around: that there are many parents simultaneously feeling [-satisfaction] and [-tenacity] while engaged in the bedtime ritual. It is the job of the verbal text to create this coupling with APPRAISAL strategies. However, the visual text complements it by allowing the parent to take the same perspective as the writer. The visual text also plays an important role in being similar to that of typical picture books, as it emphasises how different the aggressive text is, when compared with the calm, reassuring text of typical picture books read at bedtime, and this is where the strength of the parody lies. It is symbolic in that parents are also (typically) supposed to be calm and reassuring during this ritual, but instead, like the verbal text, they are angry. The fact that this anger is clearly visible through the verbal text shows parents that they are not alone in these ‘taboo’ feelings, and this book hence provides catharsis at being able to read, and identify with, these feelings.

Go the Fuck to Sleep asks important questions. Who is the envisaged reader and what does such a reader's credentials need to be, to be considered such a reader? How well do the combined analytical apparatuses (APPRAISAL analysis and visual analysis) stand up to the task that the text sets? They certainly provide a finer pin-pointing of the multimodal textual mechanisms at work than does the language of literary criticism (cf. the online reviews) so allowing a finer tracking of the meaning sources and flows in the text. Profanity, expletives, etc. are profoundly interpersonal resources, yet are not yet incorporated in the [Martin and White \(2005\)](#) model or revisions thereof. Our analysis suggests important initial pointers for the incorporation of such. [Bednarek \(2019\)](#) moves towards finding their place in SFL, using a corpus of TV dialogue to understand their functions: these include the creation of realism and humour, conveying ideologies, controlling viewer emotion, and the establishment of settings and characters. Our findings are related in that the use of *fuck* in the picture book environment has served to create the reality of the parent readers' feelings (which they usually cannot admit to the world) and create humour. We also argue that the popularity of this book shows how cathartic it is for parents to admit to their frustration towards the child, which goes against the ideology and power structure of the harmonious bedtime ideal, a routine controlled by the parent which ends with a sleeping child. In a similar way, the book does relate to the readers' emotions, not controlling them in a malicious way, but allowing the readers to identify with this situation and therefore create a community of shared feeling. The establishment of character that the word *fuck* helps to create is therefore the ‘real’ tired parent. These functions could be explored further on different texts. Allied to this, another question might be: what *explanatory power* do APPRAISAL analysis and visual analysis actually have in combination?

Go the Fuck to Sleep also asks questions about the downside of middle-class morality. Further research might investigate how much disingenuity lies behind the rituals (like bedtime story-reading) that are perpetuated in parent-child interaction, or how power is exercised in the middle class. *Go the Fuck to Sleep* suggests that there is a double paradox, perhaps because it is, overall, a parody. Not only is bedtime story-telling a time of contestation, though believed to be otherwise, it is also a time when the stronger party, the one which gets its way, is the child's. And yet, it is not for nothing that the author wrote *Go the Fuck to Sleep* in conventional bedtime story form. This, in part, must be because doing so taps into the financial appeal of the conventional bedtime story genre and, like most stories in this genre, it endorses middle-class values and obedient child-parent relations in the imagined community of parent readers who find relief in knowing that they are not alone in the bedtime struggle.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to author Adam Mansbach, illustrator Ricardo Cortés, and publisher Akashic Books for permission to reprint images and the full text from *Go the Fuck to Sleep*.

Appendix

Go the Fuck to Sleep
Adam Mansbach

The cats nestle close to their kittens.
The lambs have laid down with the sheep.
You're cozy and warm in your bed, my dear.
Please go the fuck to sleep.

The windows are dark in the town, child.
The whales huddle down in the deep.

I'll read you one very last book if you swear
You'll go the fuck to sleep.

The eagles who soar through the sky are at rest
And the creatures who crawl, run, and creep.
I know you're not thirsty. That's bullshit. Stop lying.
Lie the fuck down, my darling, and sleep.

The wind whispers soft through the grass, hon.
The field mice, they make not a peep.
It's been thirty-eight minutes already.
Jesus Christ, what the fuck? Go to sleep.

All the kids from day care are in dreamland.
The froggie has made his last leap.
Hell no, you can't go to the bathroom.
You know where you can go? The fuck to sleep.

The owls fly forth from the treetops.
Through the air, they soar and they sweep.
The hot crimson rage fills my heart, love.
For real, shut the fuck up and sleep.

The cubs and the lions are snoring,
Wrapped in a big snuggly heap.
How is it you can do all this other great shit
But you can't lie the fuck down and sleep?

The seeds slumber beneath the earth now
And the crops that the farmers will reap.
No more questions. This interview's over.
I've got two words for you, kid: fucking sleep.

The tiger reclines in the simmering jungle.
The sparrow has silenced her cheep.
Fuck your stuffed bear, I'm not getting you shit.
Close your eyes. Cut the crap. Sleep.

The flowers doze low in the meadows
And high on the mountains so steep.
My life is a failure, I'm a shitty-ass parent.
Stop fucking with me, please, and sleep.

The giant pangolins of Madagascar are snoozing.
As I lie here and openly weep.
Sure, fine, whatever, I'll bring you some milk.
Who the fuck cares? You're not gonna sleep.

This room is all I can remember.
The furniture crappy and cheap.
You win. You escape. You run down the hall.
As I nod the fuck off and sleep.

Bleary and dazed I awaken
To find your eyes shut, so I keep
My fingers crossed tight as I tiptoe away
And pray that you're fucking asleep.

We're finally watching our movie.
Popcorn's in the microwave. *Beep*.
Oh shit. Goddamn it. You've gotta be kidding.
Come on, go the fuck back to sleep.

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