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Early-concept books

Acquiring nominal and verbal concepts

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This article focuses on picturebooks for young children aged 12 to 24 months. This type of picturebook has been largely neglected in picturebook research, albeit it provides fascinating insights into the literary and cognitive development of young children. Two types of picturebooks will be analyzed: First, those that show single objects from the child's surroundings which are denoted by nouns, second those that show actions that are usually denoted by verbs. Both book types serve to support the child's acquisition of early concepts, i.e. mental devices the child needs when referring to objects (*ball, apple*), persons (*mummy, baby*), or actions (*to hit the ball*). These early-concept books, as we call them (see Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer 2005), have important properties from the point of view of cognitive and literary development. Not only do they reflect the child's order of lexical acquisition, they also serve as an introduction in elementary picture-text relations and text structures. Hence this article is a plea for a developmental approach to picturebooks. Such an approach should integrate insights from a number of disciplines, such as psycholinguistics and developmental psychology, picture theory, and narratology.

Introduction

Picturebooks for children aged 12 to 18 months typically show pictures of everyday objects such as apples, balls, teddy bears, dolls, chairs, or shoes. These books are made from cardboard, cloth, wood, or plastic and they have a handy format. Their titles often refer to implied users (*For Our Child, Baby's First Book*), depicted objects (*First Things, What is that?*), or the book's pictures (*First Pictures, Pictures for the Little Ones*). Sometimes the title stresses the act of seeing (*Come and See! Look!*), or the child's ownership (*My First Picturebook, That Is Mine*). Most of these picturebooks have less than ten pictures. These picturebooks do not contain text; sometimes one may find a single word denoting the depicted object. The pictures are either color drawings, or photographs in color or black and white.

The most common term for this book type is "baby book" (Nodelman 1988). But this term is far too general, since it refers to most books for young children, ranging from simple board books to complex I-Spy books. More adequate terms would be "object book" (cf. Japanese "mono ehon" (object book)), Swedish "sak-bok" (thing book) and "pekbok" (pointing book), or the Dutch notion "anwijs-boek" (instruction book)), because they all focus on a characteristic property of this book type.

In our article published in 2005, we proposed the more specific label "early-concept book", because the basic function of these books has to do with early concepts (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer 2005). A concept comprises the verbal knowledge that the child needs to be able to refer to a given entity. For instance, the concept BALL enables the child to refer to balls, and the picture of a ball is intended to support the child's acquisition of early concepts. Early concepts belong to the young child's early lexicon and are acquired between 12 and 18 months of age. These early concepts are not only related to nouns, but also to verbs, such as *to have*, *to make*, or *to hit*, and adjectives, such as *hot* or *big* (cf. Clark 1993; Barrett 1995; Meibauer 1995).

To possess just one word is a major step in lexical acquisition. For example, if the child is able to refer to her mother using the word *mama* while her mother is not co-present, she might be said to have acquired the word *mama*. But the ultimate goal is to realize speech acts and texts, and these units are typically composed out of sentences. So picturebooks should exist that path the child's way towards this goal. And indeed, there are picturebooks which focus on actions which are usually denoted by verbs, thus supporting the acquisition of verbal concepts. Nouns and verbs typically make up the semantic core of a sentence, its proposition. Moreover, they are related by argument structure, that is, the linguistic fact that a verb takes subjects and objects as its complements. Although verbal concepts are acquired at a very young age, it appears that they usually follow the nominal concepts. The respective book type may be more marginal than the nominal one, but nevertheless it exists, and moreover, is of great interest for a more systematic approach to the relationship between picturebooks and the cognitive development of the child.

Considering the assumption that most children in Western countries, but even in other continents as well, are familiar with one or more books of this type when they are about twelve to eighteen months old, one wonders why so little research has been devoted to the topic (see Tucker 1990).

The outline of our article is as follows: First, the essential features of early-concept books focussing on nominal concepts will be pointed out. Second, a thorough analysis of early-concept books concentrating on the acquisition of verbal concepts will show to what extent this book type is connected to the first book

type, and in which regard it might be considered a further step in the acquisition of early concepts. Finally, it will be shown how these picturebooks are related to similar book types that display conceptual classes. Thus, we will attempt to develop a typology of picturebooks targeted at young children that is closely related to recent findings in children's cognitive and linguistic development.

Early-concept books: Nominal concepts

This section shortly summarizes the main findings of our previous research into early-concept books focusing on nominal concepts (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer 2005). The early-concept book has prominent precursors, such as Johann Amos Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (1658) and Friedrich Johann Bertuch's *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (Picturebook for Children, 1792–1830), since they also display pictures of everyday objects (Fassbind-Eigenheer & Fassbind-Eigenheer 2002). However, those books were meant for school children and conveyed an encyclopedic knowledge of the world. In contrast, early-concept books that focus on young children originated in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Typical examples are the Swiss Picturebook *Mim Chindli. E neus Bilderbuech für die ganz Chline* (To My Child: A New Picturebook for the Little Ones, c. 1910) by an unknown illustrator, Edward Steichen's and Mary Steichen Calderone's photobook *The First Picture Book* (1930), and the widespread cloth books from the British publishing house Dean's Rag Book since the beginning of the twentieth century, such as *Baby's Object Book* (1905) and *What Is It?* (c. 1910).

When looking at a modern picturebook of this type, for example the seminal picturebooks about *Miffy* (1964) by Dick Bruna, some visual features are striking. One object is usually shown on each page, but sometimes two to five objects constitute a scene. The objects are depicted as a whole object, never in their parts. A black line usually frames the object, so that it stands out distinctly from the background and is shown either from the front or from one angle. In general, the viewer is at eye level with the object. The objects are characterized by bright and rich colors with a dominance of primary colors (cf. Bornstein 1975; Bornstein, Kessen & Weitkopf 1976; Koerber 2007; Werner, this volume). The hue is consistent and modulations of colors are lacking. The depicted objects are usually presented as clean and intact, as if they were brand-new.

Surrounded by empty uncolored or single-colored backgrounds, the objects seem to float in a negative space. Movement is not shown, so that the objects are always static. Moreover, they are often depicted without shadows or a source of light, so that the objects' three-dimensionality is reduced. The proportions are striking: objects seem to be of the same size, even though they may have different

actual sizes. A concise description reveals that the objects in these books are not shown naturally. Actual objects apparently are not outlined in black, nor are they presented in bright colors without modulations. Because of this stylized representation, most of these picturebooks can be characterized as showing a certain degree of abstraction.

Hence, the supposed simplicity of the illustrations in these picturebooks turns out to be problematic since they demonstrate, on closer inspection, a remarkable complexity. Young children certainly have to acquire some basic skills of perception in order to understand these images. These skills concern (i) the differentiation between figure and background, (ii) the recognition of lines, points, and colors as inseparable parts of the depicted object, (iii) the insight that two-dimensional pictures stand for three-dimensional objects, and finally, (iv) the knowledge of learned visual schemata (DeLoache, Strauss & Meynard 1979: 77–89; Nodelman 1988: 35; Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer 2005: 332–333; for examples, see Kümmerling-Meibauer & Linsmann 2009).

These four essential skills show that images comprise visual codes which must be learned (Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996: 22–23). Therefore, children must acquire these visual codes in order to make sense of pictures. By joint looking at these picturebooks, children are stimulated to acquire these conventions that constitute a sort of "visual grammar" (cf. Kress & Van Leeuwen 1996: 18). The authors claim that "language and visual communication both realize the same more fundamental and far-reaching systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, but that each does so by means of its specific forms" (17). Moreover, psychological research in picture perception emphasizes that at an early age, children develop a surprising ability to acknowledge elements of visual grammar which is described as visual literacy, i.e. the competence to understand visual signs and codes (Goldsmith 1984: 111). Visual literacy is not innate, but is acquired by a long-lasting and permanent process of learning.

Now, we argue that the presentation of pictures is not only important for the acquisition of visual literacy, but also for lexical acquisition. Obviously, in the process of language acquisition, the acquisition of words plays a significant role. A child's first words are learned when she is about one year old. By eighteen months, most children have a repertoire of fifty words which constitutes the "early lexicon". From about age two, the lexicon seems to explode; children acquire new words on a daily basis. Some researchers estimate that by age six, children possess a vocabulary of about 14.000 words (Bloom 2000: 26–35).

It is not a mere coincidence that the objects depicted in early-concept books are labelled through nouns, because it is the linguistic function of nouns to denote objects. Nouns play an important role in the early lexicon; approximately 44 % of the first 50 words learned by children are nouns (Bloom 2000). According to

research by Kauschke & Hofmeister (2002) on early lexicons in German, there is a continuous increase of nouns during early lexical acquisition (see Meibauer & Rothweiler 1999).

The acquisition of the meaning of words is not quite as simple and automatic as it seems to be at first glance. Of the numerous and sophisticated theories that are on the market (see Bloom 2000; Bowerman & Levinson 2001; Murphy 2002; Rakison & Oakes 2003), prototype theory is of particular interest with respect to early-concept books. Children have to learn the prototypical features that constitute a category or concept on the one hand, and to avoid overextension and underextension on the other hand. Research in prototype semantics has shown that prototypes, the best examples of a category, are crucial for categorization (Gelman 2006; Markman 1989). A chair appears to belong to the category furniture rather than a bench, and robins are in the category birds rather than penguins (Taylor 1995: 38–55). In language acquisition, prototypes seem relevant for conceptual development and lexical acquisition. It is tempting to argue that the illustrators make proposals as to what should constitute a prototype for the child. An apple may be a prototypical fruit even for an adult, but a crib is certainly prototypical furniture only for a child. Hence, there is some evidence that adults try to give conceptual information that is interesting from a child's point of view (Snow & Goldfield 1983). Of primary interest are therefore things in the child's immediate surroundings: food, toys, and animals, among others.

In the course of language acquisition, children also have problems with context-bound references, overextension, and underextension. Children overextend a word's meaning, if, for instance, they use the word *cat* to refer not only to cats, but also to dogs, rabbits, and guinea pigs. They underextend a word's meaning, when, for example, they use the word *doll* to refer just to a specific doll (Barrett 1995: 372).

Children typically learn words by listening to people's talk. This learning process is not guided, because there is no systematic and explicit instruction through parents or peers. However, when an adult looks at a picturebook together with a child, the learning situation is different. Since these picturebooks usually do not contain any text or story, the situation is dominated by a pointing and naming game, as is demonstrated in the following dialogue between a father and his daughter Katrin who is seventeen months old:

> Daddy: "Oh, what kind of animal is that?"
> Katrin: "Kind of animal"
> Daddy [points to the picture]: "What is that?"
> Katrin: "Crocodile."
> Daddy: "A crocodile."
>
> (Wagner & Wiese 1996: 14; translated from German)

This example demonstrates that joint reading of an early-concept book usually consists of a pointing and naming game. The adult points to the respective image and simultaneously asks the child what the picture shows; the child has to answer correctly. If the child gives the wrong answer, the adult might correct her. Thus, joint looking at these picturebooks supports the young child's vocabulary acquisition. This is in line with case studies on language learning and emergent literacy suggested by scholars such as Moerk (1985), Ninio (1983), Snow & Goldfield (1983), Jones (1996), and others.

In the above discourse, Katrin knows that the depicted object is called a crocodile. What is unclear is whether she is already able to learn from this particular picture and to generalize about all crocodiles, and whether she already has some knowledge about crocodiles.

The process of grasping the picture-word relationship is quite complex. In order to show this in more detail, we take *apple* as an example, because pictures of apples seem to be standard pictures in early-concept books. In a more systematic and elaborate fashion, the relevant aspects of the word *apple* may be illustrated in Figure 1:
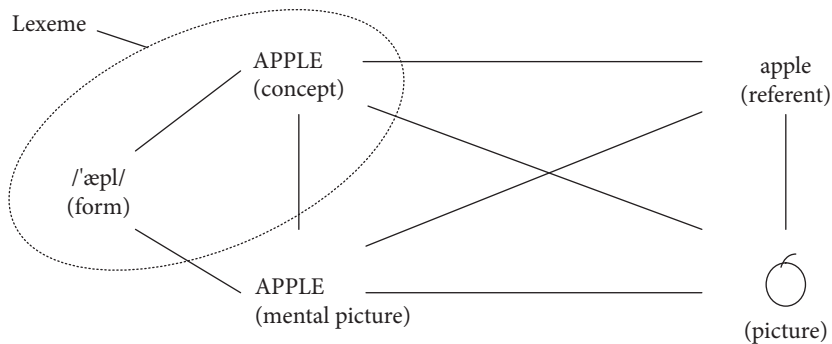

Figure 1. Relevant dimensions of the lexeme *apple*

We assume that children know a word when they have acquired a consistent mapping between form and concept. A form-concept mapping is called a lexeme, i.e. an element that is permanently stored in the child's mental lexicon (there are other elements in the lexicon besides words, e.g. idioms). A concept is the set of properties of a lexeme that makes reference to a referent possible. The referent is the entity that a speaker refers to, while uttering a certain lexeme. Thus, when saying *This is an apple*, the speaker refers to a specific apple. Part of the concept APPLE is that an apple can be eaten, is a fruit, round, has a stem, grows on trees and is red, yellow or green. In general, conceptual knowledge allows us to categorize things, e.g., to decide whether a given object is correctly referred to with the

lexeme *apple* or not. It is important to note that conceptual knowledge gradually develops, as several studies on conceptual development have shown (Clark 1995; Murphy 2002).

Pictures are two-dimensional visual representations of referents. Photographs depict a concrete referent, while drawings depict a prototypical referent. Moreover, one has to distinguish between a picture and a mental picture (or image), the latter being a mental pictorial representation. For example, a picture displays a red apple, but an individual may mentally imagine a yellow apple. Knowledge of a concept and knowledge of a mental picture are independent of each other. On the one hand, there is conceptual knowledge without pictorial knowledge, for example in pictureless cultures, or, when children have not yet come into contact with pictures of referents they already know. On the other hand, it is possible to have a mental picture without the knowledge of a referent. This is true for many entities exclusively represented through pictures, for example the unicorn. Hence pictorial knowledge has an impact upon conceptual knowledge, and early literacy involves bringing together acquisitional processes in both domains.

It is worth emphasizing that the child may learn something from looking at early-concept books. With regard to the relation between the referent and the picture, the following four learning situations may be distinguished: First, the child already knows the referent, and is able to recognize the referent in its visual representation. The referent-picture relation is thus strengthened. Second, the child already knows the referent, but is *not* able to recognize the referent in its visual representation. This may happen when the picture is highly abstract, or when untypical colors are used. Thus the child learns that pictures need not to depict referents in a unique way and that there may be an opaque relation between the referent and its depiction. Third, the child knows the picture (or the pictorially mediated mental picture) before seeing the fitting referent. This is the typical case with exotic animals, such as crocodiles, elephants, giraffes, etc. In this case, the picture guides the child into the exploration of the world. Fourth, the child only knows the picture (or the pictorially mediated mental picture), but, on the basis of this knowledge, is *not* able to recognize a certain item. Even in this case the child experiences that not all pictures have a simple and easy-to-detect correlate in her surrounding world.

Moreover, early-concept books tell children that there is a conventional, adult usage of words and pictures that they should adopt (for instance, *telephone*, not *phone*). This observation is supported by the fact that we find early-concept books where a single word denoting the depicted object is given in addition to the picture. Similarly, most illustrators strive at prototypical pictures (but there is, of course, a great deal of artistic variation). Nodelman (1988: 27) observes that stereotypical pictures "operate somewhat like dictionary definitions of objects –

they express the essence of the type of object represented rather than the specific nature of any given one such object". If this is correct, there is a correspondence between the prototypicality of the depicted object and the prototypicality of the way the object is depicted.

Early-concept books focusing on verbal concepts: An overview

In contrast to the many early-concept books focusing on nominal concepts, early-concept books that display actions appear to be rare. Our study is based on the analysis of 16 early-concept books from different countries (Denmark, Germany, Israel, Sweden, UK, US), published between 1931 and 2010. In a broad sense, two different categories are discernible. The first category concerns the appearance of text, since the corpus contains 4 early-concept books focusing on verbal concepts without text and 12 books with text. The second category refers to the presentation of characters. Surprisingly, eight picturebooks show a young child which does something with objects, such as eating porridge or pulling a pull-toy, while the other picturebooks do not show characters at all. In this case, the reference to verbal concepts is only expressed in the accompanying text which either uses a first-person narrator ("I like …") or a third-person narrator ("Baby likes…").

Nevertheless, in order to facilitate the understanding of the pictures, a young child is always depicted on the book cover, thus indicating that this child obviously is the character/subject referred to in the text.[1] By contrast, all those early concept-books without text invariably show on each page a young child that handles an object.

Let us first turn to examples for the first category. We suspect that the first early-concept book focusing on verbal concepts is Mary Steichen Martin's and Edward Steichen's *The Second Picture Book* (1931). Steichen was influential in the development of photographic books for young children and stimulated similar books. The photographs reflect the purity of style typical of New Realism, which dominated photography at that time. Moreover, *The Second Picture Book* is exceptional, because it constitutes a pendant to Steichen's *The First Picture Book*, published in 1930. Whereas *The First Picture Book* is conceived as an early-concept book presenting objects from the young child's surroundings, *The Second Picture Book* demonstrates what could be done with these objects. In a series of twenty-four black-and-white photographs young children are shown in action: a boy standing before a washing basin brushes his teeth with the toothbrush shown in

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1.   An exception to this rule is Nash's *My First Picturebook* (1959) which shows a pull-toy on the book cover.

The First Picture Book, another boy is sitting at a table, eating a slice of bread and butter, a girl looks at a picturebook, and so forth. The photographs are shown on the right pages, the left pages are empty. The situations are arranged artistically, often the children are shown from behind or from different perspectives. Sometimes the viewer is at eye level with the child; sometimes the children are presented from a bird's eye view or a worm's eye view.

Besides the preface written by Mary Steichen Martin, this photographic book has no text. One might assume that the correct choice of the verb describing the presented situation is left to the adult who is supposed to stimulate the young child in the production of short sentences by asking questions like "What is the child doing with the toothbrush/bread/picturebook?" (presupposing prior knowledge of *The First Picture Book*), or "What is the child doing?" (eliciting full descriptions of the photographs). Although it is possible to use this picturebook on its own, only the juxtaposition of *The First Picture Book* and *The Second Picture Book* reveals the well-considered concept of these works.[2]

Helen Oxenbury's *Working* (1981) and *Playing* (1981) present further examples of early-concept books without text. These picturebooks contain fourteen double spreads with watercolor illustrations. The simplicity of the objects is stressed by Oxenbury's reduced cartoon-like style, which becomes most obvious in the simplified representation of the young child's face with two dots for the eyes, a small circle for the nose, and a bigger circle for the mouth. In order to draw the viewer's attention to the objects and the young child, the artist frames the objects and the figure with a subtle black outline, and places them almost in the middle of the page and against a white background, thus representing a negative space.

In contrast to Steichen's work, Oxenbury's picturebook is characterized by showing on each double spread an object on the left side, and an activity that could be done with the object on the right side, as for example a teddy bear on the left side, and a young child hugging this teddy bear on the right side (see Figure 2). By this arrangement a certain sequence of actions is demanded: first, the viewers shall focus their attention on the object depicted on the left page, then, they should turn to the right page that presents a situation where the respective object is used by a child. In this case viewers have to identify the object before they are stimulated to acknowledge the action done with the object. The pointing and naming game moves on from noun concepts (presented by the depicted object) to verbal concepts (describing the action).

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2. Comparable to *The Second Picture Book* is the Danish photobook *Se hvad vi kan* (Look What We Can, 1964) with photographs by Bernt Klyvare, where young children are shown in different actions, such as bathing, painting, drinking, and playing.
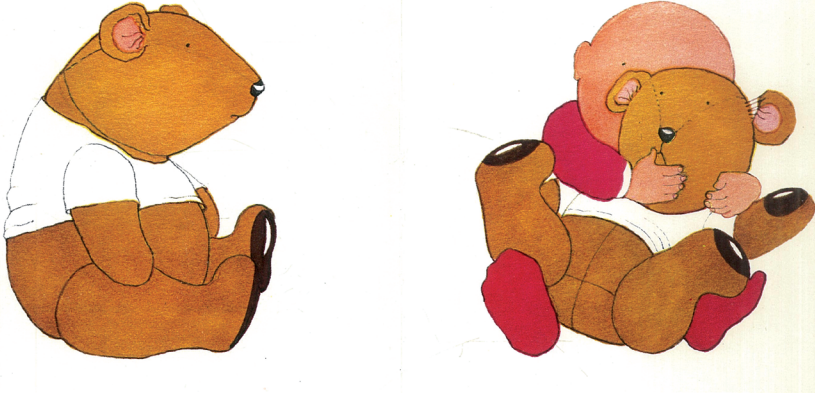
Figure 2. Image from *Playing* (1981) by Helen Oxenbury

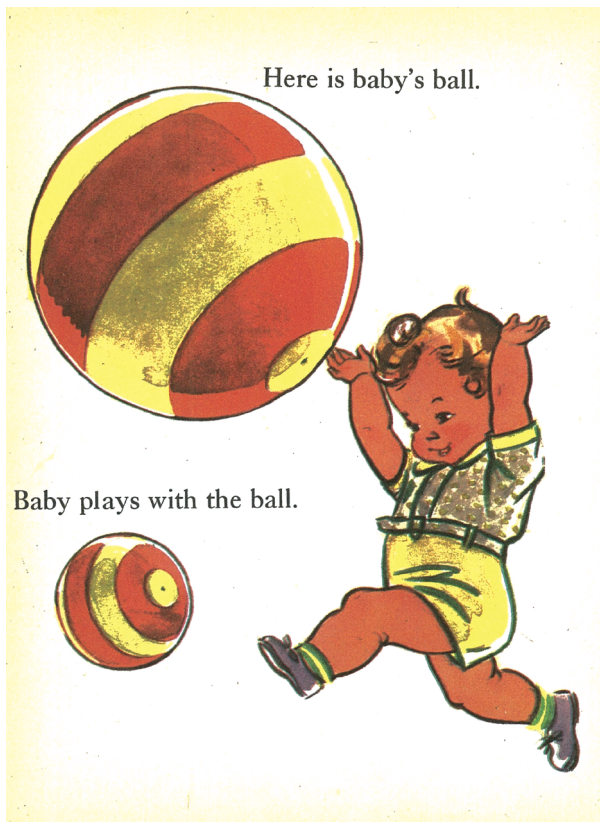**Figure 3.** Image from *Baby's First Book* (1953) by Annette Edwards and Helen Schad

The second category, early-concept books with text, is characterized by the combination of pictures and text, as well as the complexity of the latter. The simplest type is represented by the German picturebook *Antons ganze Welt* (Anton's Whole World, 2010) with pictures by Judith Drews. On the right pages the protagonist Anton, a little rabbit, is shown, brushing his teeth, bathing in a tub, hiding behind a curtain, building a snowman, and so forth. On the left pages the text refers to the depicted action, always starting with the protagonist's name, followed by a verb and sometimes an adverbial supplement or an object.

However, it is noticeable that in most cases, the left-right-succession of pictures has been changed to a top-bottom-sequence of pictures and text, as for example in Annette Edwards' and Helen Schad's *Baby's First Book* (1953). On the top half of the page, an object, such as a ball, is depicted, while on the bottom, a young child is shown that handles the respective object. While the sentence referring to the object always starts with the deictic particle "here", followed by the naming of the object and the object's owner ("Here is baby's ball"), the text on the bottom describes the action done with the object ("Baby plays with the ball"). This structure is strictly kept throughout the whole book that consists of 18 pages. Striking are the empty white background and the objects' proportions. On the top picture, the object is depicted quite larger than in the bottom picture, thus stressing the shifting focus of attention that shall pass from the object to the young child in action (see Figure 3).

F. R. Schaare's *First Picturebook* (1945) represents another example. In this cardboard book, up to three common objects are shown on each page, such as a potato, an egg, and an apple, arranged from top to bottom. These objects are connected by a text printed on the top of the page, starting with the name of the owner (baby) and a verbal construction, such as *Baby likes*. This text should be completed by the notions of the objects printed next to respective illustrations, so that up to three sentences can be constructed ("Baby likes potato"; "Baby likes egg"; "Baby likes apple"). In this picturebook, in comparison to the aforementioned early-concept book, the baby is never depicted.

Still another variant is E. M. Dawson's *The Picture Book for Baby* (1955) that depicts a scene on the right page and an arrangement of objects related to this specific situation on the left page. On one double spread a young child sitting in her high chair is depicted that is going to eat breakfast. The first sentence printed on the top of the left page describes the situation: "I eat my breakfast". Further short sentences referring to the depicted single items are printed beneath the illustration: "Here is my plate", "Here is my egg", and so forth. On some double spreads the accompanying sentences use another verbal construction, replacing *here is* by *I see.*

Rachel Isadora's *I See* (1985) already indicates the sentence structure with the book title. On each double spread a little girl is shown that is occupied with

different actions, such as stroking a cat, drinking milk from a bottle, watching a bird in the tree, and throwing a ball. The text always starts with the phrase "I see" followed by the object presented in the illustration. However, the subsequent sentence either consists of a verbal description of the action displayed in the illustration ("I drink", "I throw") or by an onomatopoetic expression, such as "tickle", "whee", "meow").

Another strategy is used in Mirik Snir's and Zofia Langer's Hebrew picturebook *In My House* (1984)[3]. The first half of the picturebook consists in a sequence of objects. On each double spread a couple of common objects are depicted, such as a spoon and a chair. The accompanying text consists of a long sentence starting with the phrase "In my house I have" and followed by an enumeration of the objects. In the second half a child is seen that is handling the objects. The assigned text begins with the phrase "And I use everything I have", followed by short sentences describing the depicted action, such as "I eat with a spoon, I sit on the chair", etc.

Finally, the combination of *wh*-questions and answers dominates Leonard Weisgard's *My First Picture Book* (1953) and the Danish photobook *Trine kan …* (Trine can …, 1964). While in *My First Picture Book* a *wh*-question is followed by approximately 5–6 answers that repeats the sentence pattern and the verb, but always changes the object referred to, the text in *Trine kan …* firstly describes actions performed by the protagonist Trine, supplemented by a question directed at the child viewer, asking her what she can do with her mouth, nose, hands, and feet.

As this overview already indicates, noun-focused early-concept books have some properties in common with verb-focused early-concept books. The most eye-catching aspect is the depiction of objects themselves which dominate even early-concept books focusing on verbal concepts. Eight picturebooks just show objects. The visual features, such as black outline, neatness, eye-level, wholeness, negative space, and so forth, are the same as in early-concept books focusing on nominal concepts. The main difference consists in the accompanying text that emphasizes the action that can be done with the depicted object. Although these specific picturebooks do not show a deviation from the noun-focused early-concept book type at first sight, they reveal some minor distinctions on closer consideration. While in noun-focussed early-concept books usually one single item is presented, the verb-focused early-concept books show two to five objects per page, either grouped together as scenery or presented as single objects in a top-bottom-sequence. Another point in case is the depiction of the background. While some verb-focussed early-concept books still have a negative space, others depict the objects in a clearly distinctive location, such as a room, meadow, or beach.

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3.   We would like to thank Mirik Snir for the translation of the Hebrew text.

Oxenbury's *Playing* and *Working* may be analyzed as an intermediate type of early-concept book, because in these cases we see the child as an agent who is handling the respective objects while the object is shown on the verso and the child handling the object on the recto. However, all the early-concept books displaying a young child as an agent either employ a negative space or a reduced background with just some details, such as a carpet, table, sofa, sink, or doorsteps, in order not to distract the young child's attention from the depicted characters. In this regard early-concept books focussing on verbal concepts are clearly connected to early-concept books focussing on nominal concepts and should be regarded as a further development of the latter.

Moreover, as these early-concept books with text have demonstrated, not only the text-picture-relationship is varying, but also the grammatical structure of the text, ranging from simple sentences to a combination of two sentences and rather complex sentences. This calls for a closer analysis of the linguistic aspects of this book type.

Linguistic aspects of early-concept books focusing on verbal concepts

To begin with, let us point out some differences between nouns and verbs and show how they are connected. The main connection, of course, is that sentences, as basic units of language, are built up from nouns and verbs. This is shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Some properties of nouns and verbs

Properties	Nouns	Verbs
Syntax	• nouns/noun phrases (NP) are the arguments of verbs	• verbs take nouns/noun phrases as their arguments, e.g. *Baby <u>pull+s</u> the toy*.
	Agreement between the subject NP and the finite verb in the full sentence.	
Semantics	• common nouns (*apple, child*), proper nouns (*Max, mummy*), abstract nouns (*love, dream*)	• action verbs (*to pull*), event verbs (*to sleep*), state verbs (*to lie*), 'light verbs' (*to make*), modals (*can*), …
Acquisition	• Nouns and verbs coexist already in the early lexicon. • Generally, nouns are acquired before verbs ('noun bias').	
	Composition of types in early (German) lexicon according to Kauschke (2000)	
	13 months: 10% 15 months: 15% 21 months: 27% 36 months: 16%	13 months: Ø 15 months: 3% 21 months: 12% 36 months: 23%
	• preference for basic level nouns: *animal – <u>dog</u> – poodle*	• preference for hyperonyms: <u>*to speak*</u> *– to murmur*

Note that this table gives only a first impression of the acquisitional relation between noun and verbs. Numerous studies have been undertaken in order to explore this relation, as the recent review by Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek (2008) impressively shows. According to them, "relational terms (verbs, prepositions and adjectives) often lag behind nouns in both studies of natural vocabulary acquisition (…) and in laboratory research on verb comprehension (…)" (p. 397). The order of acquisition in the nominal domain appears to be Proper Nouns (*Sue*) > Concrete Nouns (*ball*) > Relational Nouns (*uncle*) > Abstract Nouns (*hope*), while in the verbal domain the order of acquisition appears to be Instrument Verbs (*eat*) > Action Verbs (*jump*) > Path Verbs (*exit*)> Intention Verbs (*pour*), Mental Verbs (*think*) (Golinkoff & Hirsh-Pasek 2008: 400). These processes overlap, i.e. some verbs appear before some nouns.

Our hypothesis is that early-concept books by and large should reflect these properties and tendencies. (This presupposes that authors and illustrators are not totally naïve with respect to the general picture of language development, although it is clear that they impose *their* idea of how language acquisition works upon their child readers.) The first question then is what kinds of verbs we find. The most frequent verbs – based on an analysis of 12 picturebooks (the other 4 from our corpus being textless) – are: *to be* (39*), to see* (17), *to play* (12), *to look* (9), *to eat* (8), *to drink* (7), *to put* (6), *to sit* (5), *to like* (4), *to have* (4), *to pull* (4), *to push* (4), *to ride* (4), *to go* (3), *to hug* (3), *to love* (3), *to open* (3), and *to sleep* (3). The majority of these verbs belongs to the child's early lexicon and can therefore be classified as denoting early concepts. It is interesting to note that almost every early-concept book that displays verbal concepts contains complete sentences with the syntactic form: subject (noun or pronoun) – verb – object (noun), sometimes complemented by possessive pronouns ("my") or deictic references ("here"). The only case of an adjective-noun combination we have found is "new shoes". Just one early-concept book, *Sommar* (Summer, 2010) by the Swedish artist Sara Lundberg, contains infinite verb forms, such as "hoppa högt" (to jump high), "sitta stilla" (to sit still) or "bygga slott" (to build a castle).

The copula *to be* is a verb that shows up early in the child's lexicon. Here is one example where it is used in the context of an enumeration of things being salient in the bathing scenery (Dawson, *The Picture Book for Baby*, 1955):

(1)   I have my bath.
     Here is my duck.
     Here is my sponge.
     Here is my comb.

Verbs of vision like *to see* and *to look at* are also quite prominent. Obviously, this has to do with the situation of joint looking at the pictures, where the sentences refer simultaneously to an imaginary child as well as the individual child that looks at the pictures (Isadora, *I See*, 1985).

(2) I see my spoon. I eat.
     I see my book. I read.

Note that in (2), the child is invited to construct sentences like *I eat with my spoon* and *I read my book*. Hence, what is left out in the second, intransitive occurrences of the verb may be taken from the first sentences to form a full sentence.

   Moreover, the texts in our corpus show sensitivity to the acquisition task. One strategy to focus on syntactic objects as arguments of the verb is substitution of the objects (Schaare, *First Picturebook*, 1945):

(3) Baby has new shoes/socks.
     Baby loves the Teddy bear/rabbit.

Interestingly, there is one book in our corpus that displays in a number of sentences firstly the syntactic objects of the verb *to have*, before going on to present complete verbal phrases that contain an already introduced noun as a syntactic object (Snir & Langer, *In My House,* 1984):

(4) In my house I have a spoon and a chair / a pillow and a toilet
     And I use everything I have: eat with a spoon / sleep on the pillow

Sensitivity to the acquisition task can also be perceived in (5) (Weisgard, *My First Picture Book*, 1953):

(5) All around the kitchen, what do you see?
     I see something big made of wood.
     I see some little furry animals (…).

Here, a *wh*-question is posed, followed by the answers. In these answers, a full sentence is given that repeats the sentence pattern. Note that in adult language, an elliptical answer like *something big made of wood* would suffice. Thus, the child learns not only to understand and actively participate in a question-answer-sequence, but is also trained in detecting the relation between the question words and the nominal phrases that are related to them.

   Children are not satisfied with isolated words or simple sentences, they strive for complexity, as demonstrated in the following examples taken from two different early-concept books (a. and b. taken from Nash, *My First Picture Book*, 1959; c. taken from Dawson, *Picture Book for Baby*, 1955):

(6) a.   Teddy tries to ride my trike, <u>but</u> he is too small to pedal.
  b.   My doll's house has four rooms <u>and</u> is full of furniture.
  c.   Here are the baby lambs, I give one of them a drink.

In (6a), the conjuncts are connected by the adversative conjunction *but*, in (6b) by the coordinative conjunction *and*, and in (6c), we find a juxtaposition. Complex sentences such as these are quite demanding for the young child. It is telling, however, that subordinated sentences (e.g., with *that, whether,* or *because*) lack in our corpus altogether.

Typically, narrative texts consist of sentences which display cohesion (syntactic connectedness) and coherence (semantic connectedness). One important means to create connectedness certainly is the use of anaphors. In (7), we have some examples for anaphoric relations; for instance, the anaphor *she* in the second sentence refers back to the noun phrase *my dolly* (Nash, *My First Picture Book*, 1959):

(7) a.   Every night I bathe my dolly$_i$. **She$_i$** has her own towel and soap.
  b.   This is my lorry$_i$. I load **it$_i$** with bricks right to the top.
  c.   The bag$_i$ belongs to my sister$_j$. I call **it$_i$** her$_j$ dog bag.

These books contain certain schemata or constructional elements that can also be found in narratives for older children. Compare the following sentences (Nash, *My First Picture Book*, 1959):

(8) Teddy tries to ride my bike, but he is too small to pedal.
  These sweets are Mummy's, but she lets me eat some.

These two complex sentences show no cohesion. But in (9), all sentences contribute to a single description, namely to the description of the things a child does in the morning (Williams, *Baby's First Book*, 1955).

(9) "Get up, sleepy-head!" says Teddy Bear.
  "Tick tock, get up!" says the clock.
  I hang up my pyjamas. I help make my bed.
  I take a bath. I brush my teeth, I brush my hair.

While this text is descriptive in nature, it is quite obvious that by introduction of a complication the text could turn into a proper narrative. This should have consequences for the accompanying sequence of pictures.

Of the many other intriguing properties of these short texts, at least deixis (indexicality) and the concept of possession should be mentioned. For instance, the sentences in (6) have two deictic expressions: the personal pronoun *I* referring to the speaker, and the local adverb *here*, referring to the place of the speaker. Note that it is not clear for the child at first sight to whom *I* really refers. In general,

children, as long as they do not properly master the deictical system, refer to themselves with their proper names or just with *baby* (Gressnich & Meibauer 2010).

In (10), two devices that express possession are discernible, namely a noun with a prenominal genitive, and a noun phrase containing the possessive pronoun *his* (*Baby's Things. A Real Cloth Book*, 1955)

(10)   Baby's wagon. Baby pulls his wagon.

Obviously, this will help the child in learning that these two expressions of possession are related. The focus on possession within that picturebook is nicely summarized in the final sentence "Baby has many things!".

In sum, then, it is evident that in these early-concept books pictures representing actions and text containing sentences with verbal construction go hand in hand. Furthermore, these little texts – with a focus on actions that refer to the experience of children – are sensitive to the developmental stage and needs of young children, thereby preparing them for the understanding of the concept of story (see Nachtigäller & Rohlfing, this volume).

Paratexts in early-concept books

It is interesting to note that those early-concept books focusing on verbal concepts without text have a preface or epilogue instead. One might assume that especially this book type needs some explanation from the part of the author-illustrator in order to give a sort of guidance for the adult viewer. Adults might suspect that these early-concept books only have the function of grammatical teaching, thus stimulating the young child both to apply the appropriate words and to build grammatically correct sentences. However, while this book type indeed contributes to the young child's language acquisition by enlarging her early lexicon and her grammatical knowledge, it also contributes to visual literacy and literary competence as well.

This approach is strongly stressed in the preface to Steichen's *The Second Picture Book*, written by Mary Steichen Martin, and the epilogue to the Danish *Se hvad vi kan* (Look What We Can) by Bernt Klyvare. Both photographic books have a similar structure. The right page shows various activities of young children, whereas the left page is empty. These books have no text and the artists obviously felt obliged to explain the intention and concept of their work. Mary Steichen Martin draws on the physical, cognitive and linguistic development of young children. According to her, when young children are still not able to walk around, but are intensively observing their surrounding, picturebooks focusing on the depiction of static objects like *The First Picture Book* appear to be adequate.

Later in their development, when they are able to walk and begin to explore their environment, their interest in pictures depicting actions grows:

> In just the same way his interest in pictures becomes more and more dynamic, until his desire to have something happen will cause him to go beyond the simple but passive recognition of objects, and demand a story. First, "Cup!" Later, "What is the cup for?" (Steichen, *The Second Picture Book*, 1931)

The physical ability to walk and run around is thus connected to the cognitive interest in the function of objects, i.e. how to move and handle them. Moreover, while *The First Picture Book* urges the young child to at least pronounce a single word, such as *Cup*, at a further stage of development, when looking at the photos in *The Second Picture Book*, the child has learned to produce simple sentences, such as the question "What is the cup for?", thus urging the adult to give an adequate answer. But Mary Steichen Martin goes a step further, insofar as she claims that children at this age are not acquainted to listen to a volume-length story. For this reason the pictures do not form a connected story, they should be looked at separately. Nevertheless, the author indicates that the pictures stimulate a question-answer game as a step to a preliminary concept of story.

In addition, Mary Steichen Martin gives an explanation for the lack of text. She claims that reading aloud a story to young children will reduce, even destroy, their creative ability to provide their own story to pictures. While she rejects the passive situation of listening to a story, she strongly insists on the importance of imagination and interactive exchange between adult and child.

Similar ideas are expressed in the epilogue to the Danish *Se hvad vi kan*. In contrast to Steichen, the author draws a clear distinction between different age groups. When thoroughly reading Mary Steichen Martin's preface, one might assume that she is speaking about children aged approximately 2 to 3 years. Klyvare, instead, differentiates between two age groups: young children who are 12 to 24 months old and children in their third year of age. The first group is characterized by an interest in pictures that show everyday objects. The second group is characterized by an increasing interest in simple picturebook stories, this developmental stage going together with the child's acquisition of the concept of "action". Furthermore, the young child learns to control her bodily functions and is gradually able to pursue actions like eating, washing, or putting on clothes autonomously. When children have acquired these abilities, they are, according to the author, deeply interested in pictures that depict children of the same age. The contemplation of these images is supposed to stimulate the child to compare herself with the children on the photos and to describe the presented situation.

By contrast, the early-concept books focusing on verbal concepts with text do not have a paratext (preface or epilogue). An exception to the rule is the Danish

photobook *Trine kan…,* where the photographer and the author explain their intention on the last page. This paratext emphasizes the young child's interest in the depiction of everyday situations which stimulate her recognition of already known cognitive schemata. By joint picturebook reading, the adult shall trigger the child viewer to retell the situations presented in the images, thus challenging her to demonstrate her ability both to decode the picture's meaning and to verbally express her impressions. Although this epilogue stresses the learning situation stimulated by this book type, the authors additionally claim that the book's narrative and aesthetic quality is able to satisfy the demands of young children and adults as well.

In sum, these paratexts acknowledge the child's growing physical, cognitive, and linguistic abilities, and stress the importance of picturebooks for even very young children. While some views may appear too simplistic from today's point of view (thus Katharina Rohlfing, p.c., reminds us that early concepts are not acquired by simple observation but through interaction), they nevertheless show a modern, anti-romantic approach to child development and the role of picturebooks therein. The purpose of early-concept books, whether focusing on nominal or verbal concepts, is therefore not restricted to grammatical teaching or the enlargement of the early lexicon. Also they largely support the child's developing visual and literary literacy, thus taking her changing cognitive and aesthetic interests seriously. Although these paratexts are not written by academics, we do not only agree with their main points, but we would like to additionally stress that these are quite modern insights, albeit from an intuitive point of view.

Early-concept books and related picturebooks for young children

Nouns and verbs surely play an important role in the early lexicon, but children aged 12 to 18 months already know other word categories as well; for example adjectives (*hot, high*), personal-social words (*yes, hello, thanks*), relational words (*there, again*), pronouns (*you, my*) and onomatopoetic words (*bow-wow*) (Barrett 1995; Dromi 1987; Kauschke 2000; Kauschke & Hofmeister 2002: 737–740). However, these word categories as well as abstract concepts connected with nouns (such as LOVE) are not easily depictable. Nevertheless, since the 1970s, early-concept books focusing on adjectives and onomatopoetic words come to the fore. In Tana Hoban's *push/pull – empty/full* (1973), the properties are arranged according the contrast principle (big – little; dark – light) and illustrated by objects that prototypically present the respective properties, such as a stone for "heaviness" or a feather for "lightness". Onomatopoetic words expressed by noises turn up in the French *Le livre des bruits* (The Book of Noises, 2004) by Soledad Bravi.

The common feature of these book types consists in the visual presentation of adjectives and onomatopoetic words. Interestingly, in order to depict these word types, the presence of objects is essential. You play with a ball, the telephone is red, the cat meows; activities, properties and noises are usually depicted with respect to objects, since it is hard if not impossible to depict them as such.

Since many words depicted in these picturebooks still belong to the child's early lexicon, these books present a transition from the early-concept book to another book type that might be called "concept book". In contrast to early-concept books displaying common objects from different conceptual classes, concept books go a step further in that they depict objects that belong to conceptual classes or conceptual domains, such as toys, animals, vehicles, food, or clothes. Typical examples for this book type are Elena Eleska's *I eat* (1945), Paul Stickland's *Trucks* (1986), and Chez Picthall's *farm animals* (2008). Picturebooks displaying abstract concepts, for example colors, shapes, numbers, or letters, can also be assigned to this book category. Prominent examples are Tana Hoban's *Red, Blue, Yellow Shoe* (1986), Keith Haring's *Ten* (1998), and Bruno Munari's *ABC* (2006). Although these picturebooks also depict objects that refer to nominal concepts, the words expressing the respective concept for the most part do not occur in the child's early lexicon, but are acquired later, when children are about 24 to 36 months old, and perhaps even older.

This short overview is not complete; however, it should at least illustrate that early-concept books are not an isolated phenomenon, but that they are related to other picturebook types targeted at young children (see Kümmerling-Meibauer 2006). In this way, young children might be gradually introduced to more complex book types and narrative structures that correspond to their cognitive and aesthetic interests.

Early-concept books and emergent literacy

How does joint looking at an early-concept book support literary competence? This book type has neither plot nor dialogue, and usually a complex text-picture-relationship is missing. Moreover, the sequence of pictures does not necessarily tell a story, which is typical for wordless picturebooks. Therefore the joint reading of early-concept books does not represent a typical reading-aloud situation, but a situation that is determined by intensively looking at the pictures, thus encouraging a pointing and naming game. While the impact of early-concept books on language acquisition and the development of visual literacy is obvious, the importance of this book type for the acquisition of emergent literacy has been put in question (Apseloff 1987; Nodelman 1988). This evaluation should be revised.

Generally, the engagement with early-concept books supports the young child's acquisition of at least three basic abilities which are relevant for literary literacy.

First, by turning pages and by attentively looking at the pictures on a double spread, children are introduced to the principle of sequentiality. This aspect is essential for an understanding of literature, because texts must be read successively. During the process of pageturning and viewing children learn that each book has a beginning and an ending, often emphasized by the adult's interjection "the end" or "the book is finished". These are just some important aspects that constitute the basic "rules of book behaviour" (Lewis 2001: 135), including sitting still, turning the pages, looking and pointing at the picture.

Second, the idea that pictures and sentences in picturebooks are connected is covertly conveyed as well. It is striking that the objects presented on a double spread are not chosen haphazardly, but arranged thematically. Usually the objects are arranged according to a pattern of similarity, i.e. the objects belong to the same conceptual class, such as spoon and mug, banana and roll, comb and brush, or spade and bucket. Children are introduced to an understanding of conceptual classes, preparing them for more complex books.

Furthermore, other patterns of object arrangements emerge through contrast and relation. The contrast pattern offers pictures from opposite conceptual classes, such as dog and car, ball and shoes, stimulating the viewer's imagination to find out the reasons for the particular combination. For example, there is a contrast between animate and inanimate. The relation pattern comes into play when related objects, for example doll and pram, or tree and apple are shown. In this case, children have to figure out how the objects belong to each other. This procedure surpasses a typical naming situation insofar as a relationship is established between the depicted objects which might stimulate a specific sort of communication (such as a question-answer sequence) or a short narrative.

These three organizing patterns – similarity, contrast, and relation – confirm a sequential structure of early-concept books. Sticking to one pattern evokes a sense of anticipation in the viewer. By turning the page, the young child expects to look at a double spread that follows the same pattern established in the book's beginning. However, many early-concept books change from one pattern to another, for instance from the similarity pattern to the contrast pattern. In some early-concept books the pattern of similarity determines more or less the whole book until the last double spread, where the relation pattern is used, thus creating a sort of climax. Through oral storytelling that hints at the relation between an image and a real object or builds up a connection between pictures, young children will be introduced to a form of narrative.

Third, young children learn that words and images represent objects, in the case of early-concept books objects from their immediate surroundings. When naming

depicted objects such as *apple*, *ball*, or *teddy*, young children gradually comprehend that both real objects and images of these objects can be denoted by these words. This process is accompanied by a growing ability to produce mental images of the objects, an ability that appears to be essential to a full appreciation of literature. People who have not acquired this ability or have difficulties in this respect probably also have difficulties to understand fictional texts, since the latter require the possibility to mentally imagine the relevant characters, actions, and locations.

The findings of this article, then, would indicate that early-concept books convey basic skills which play an important role in the acquisition of literary competence, contributing to visual literacy, language acquisition, and emergent literacy (Goswami 1998; Jones 1996: 25–27; Lancaster 2003; Nikolajeva 2003). Consequently, we propose to systematically correlate a child's growing abilities with further properties of early-concept books as well as related books types for children up to three years old. Although picturebooks intended for this age group reveal an astonishing variety in topics, styles and themes, a systematic overview related to the young child's developing cognitive abilities is still lacking.

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