Parodies in Popular Non-fiction Texts

1. Introduction

Popular non-fiction Texts abound in our society and the need for lifelong learning will lead to the production of even more of them. In order to reach their addressees and to stand out in a highly competitive market, these books must cater to the reader’s needs (at least to the needs the producers think the reader has). In contrast to scientific texts, which will always find their readers because they are of paramount importance in a given scientific community, non-fiction texts are subject to a large number of risks (too much competition, bad marketing, topic not popular) and may not reach their prospective readers at all. Partly due to that situation and partly due to pedagogical considerations, conventions which mark the difference between scientific texts and popular non-fiction texts have developed over the years.

One of these conventions is the use of a narrative as an attention-getting and attention-keeping device. It is not common in scientific texts but plays an important role in popular non-fiction. As Kubli states in his book about narratives in physics lessons, no one enjoys a 90-minute report whereas most normal feature films are ninety minutes long as well and do not bore the audience. He concludes that narratives are easier to follow than other kinds of text (Kubli 1998: 116). Most of us would agree from experience, and the use of a narrative, of human interest and of other “motivating extras” (as Langer, Schulz von Thun and Tausch call them) in popular scientific texts (including TV documentaries) has become extremely common. We find funny pictures or cartoons, jokes, characters who invite for identification and suspense. This is not only true of books for children, but also of books for an adult audience (a typical example would be the ... for Dummies book series).

These findings must not be overgeneralised. We also find extremely serious-looking non-fiction books, for children as well as for adults, and we must bear in mind that not every reader, including very young readers, thinks that a non-fiction book meant to be funny is funny and meaningful.

Although we do find many genres of non-fiction books (a commonly used classification is that by Heeks which names “the fact bank”, “the information giver”, “shaper of attitudes”, “communicator of experience” and the “practical guide”; Heeks 1996: 434-436), most of them are hybrids in some way or other. Practical guides may very well refer to the author’s experience, books which primarily communicate experience may also function as shapers of attitudes. Genre hybrids are typical of many kinds of texts, and they abound in popular non-fiction. Non-fiction books may contain mini genres such as experimental instructions, or they may include complete chapters that belong to different genres, for example one chapter written by an eye-witness or researcher from his or her own perspective.

Readers choose to read these books either because they are genuinely interested in the topic, or because they have to prepare a presentation for school or help the children with their homework, or because the book looks in some way tempting. The reader is looking for new information, for knowledge, and very often he is looking for knowledge that will give him new competence and

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not draw too much on the competences he already has. Of course children would not phrase this consciously, but books that are too demanding are boring. And we must bear in mind that the reader is looking for entertainment, not in the sense of cheap thrills but in the sense of a captivating and interesting story or of facts which have a meaning in his life.

2. **Parodies and Genre Competence**

Everyone who is part of a human community has genre competence. We recognize written and oral genres and have specific genre-related expectations. Children, too, have genre competence—a fact which is often underestimated. Even young schoolchildren, early reading age, expect something different from a fairy tale book than from a maths book. This competence seems very obvious, but in fact it is quite an achievement.

Genre competence does not only enable us to recognize and reproduce genres—it also enables us to realize when genres are used out of the normal. Our genre competence includes the knowledge of scenes, of situations where the genre is normally used. A menu is a genre we find in a restaurant; if a child writes a menu for the dinner at home, she is playing restaurant. She is pretending that we are in a different scene, will behave accordingly and uses the appropriate genre. Outside pretend play, this use of genre would seem strange.

If the content does not fit the form of the genre, we normally speak of a travesty, but the difference between parody and travesty is sometimes fuzzy. Therefore I use the more common term parody. In order to enjoy a parody, the reader must have genre competence. This means that, if chosen appropriately, a parody is not only fun but also gives the reader the chance to derive pleasure from his genre competence. It may also serve as a mnemonic if the reader can associate it with a particular piece of information.

3. **Examples**

The examples which will be discussed here come from two books for children and a science comic for adults.

The first book is from the *Horrible Geography* series; *Violent Volcanoes*. The series title, as well as the alliteration in the title of the book, prepare the audience for fun as well as informative reading. Pages 112-113 contain information about what a volcano looks and behaves like shortly before an outbreak. This section of the book is called “Dr Vic’s guide to a healthy volcano”. It comes in the shape of notes on a clipboard, drawn in black and white (the style used throughout the book). The actions the scientists take when monitoring a volcano are likened to the examination of a human patient by a doctor. This example is relatively simple but it serves its purpose. The clipboard illustration gives the author a chance to use a page layout that differs from the rest of the book and works as an eye-catcher and to include some elements of humour.

This book is from a series of books which is very strong on parody, *Horrible Geography, Horrible Histories* and *Horrible Science*. In *Horrible Science, Chemical Chaos*, we find still more examples. The uses of silver are listed in a page made up of classified ads (256), gases compete for the most horrible smell and are awarded cups (249); in *Blood, Bones and Body Bits*, we find mug shots of bacteria (137-138) and the blood circle is described in the style of a Highway Code for drivers (117). In each case, style and layout match the genre parodied. The drawings are all by the same artist, which provides continuity where style is concerned.

The next example I wish to discuss, *Le géometricon* by Jean-Pierre Petit, is a science comic for adults. The topic is non-Euclidean geometry, a topic which is not of interest to many people I know. However, this comic succeeds extremely well in making this seemingly boring topic fas-
cinating. It does so partly by letting the hero Anselm Lanturlu2 and the reader follow the thoughts of mathematicians step by step. Besides, it contains jokes, humour and parodies.

As comics are artistic imitations of spoken language, most genres parodied in this comic are oral genres. In one example, the hero Anselm is placing an order with a company, Euclide Inc., and we witness the phone call. Anselm has bought some triangles but has experienced trouble with them on uneven surfaces. The representative of Euclide Inc. offers him some circles instead and assures him that all the clients are very happy with them. Page 34 shows the sales rep from Euclide calling at Anselm’s apartment in order to demonstrate how the products he ordered should work.

Another parody we find is that of a product description with instruction (10). Again, the text represents the ideas of Euclidean geometry which will be overthrown in the book and also serves to ridicule them. The parodies thus serve a double purpose.

Probably this kind of parody is more acceptable within a format which is already considered entertaining rather than intellectual, the comic. The genres used are typical of an adult’s world. Their origin is not particularly intellectual, but they are suddenly filled with a complex mathematical-philosophical content.

In both cases discussed so far (volcanoes as well as non-Euclidean geometry), the parodies were carefully chosen for the target group in question. The parodies in Anselm are parodies of genres grown-ups are familiar with. The parodies in the Horrible Books are genres older children will probably know, if only from TV series as in the case of a fever chart. However, the purposes differ slightly. The idea of ridicule which plays an important part in Anselm is absent from the Horrible Science books.

The third book I wish to refer to, Dinosaurium, is a children’s non-fiction book about dinosaurs which virtually abounds with parodies. The cover promises “one big book with ten great books inside”3. These small books contain for the most part parodies of genres we would not normally associate with non-fiction, information transfer – or dinosaurs.

One small booklet is called “Dino Dinners” and comes in the shape of a menu. It gives information about the eating habits of some dinosaur species. The texts read, for example: “More meaty treats: Sun-warmed lizard lasagne – Dragonfly delight with an insect garnish – Mixed mammal casserole”. The young readers recognize the genre, as it is a genre which has a very clear structure and shape and as they will have seen it in some form or another, if only at a hamburger restaurant. The genre recognition adds an extra feeling of achievement to the pursuit of knowledge. And of course it is simply funny. Not only that the scene of genres habitually used in science books has been violated. The mere idea that this menu could have been used by the dinosaurs themselves is a source of fun to the target group.

However, the information sought for is also there. Menus are about food, and here we get information about what certain dinosaurs used to feed on. The topic “food” is a kind of tertium comparationis which makes the idea of presenting the information in the shape of a menu acceptable. As with the volcano, whose mounting temperatures provide a link with a fever curve, the fact that we are talking about the dinosaurs’ diet provides the link to the menu. A company which sells mathematical laws as in Anselm is rather more adventurous in terms of parody.

Parodies can be attention-keepers and sources of fun and achievement, but they have their limits. Trouble can arise if the genre chosen is unfamiliar to the target group. This would only leave the feeling that something was genuinely wrong with the text; confusion would set in where a sense of extra achievement should have been felt.

This might happen with one genre used in Dinosaurium in order to inform the reader about the dinosaurs’ skin structures. The book offers a small cardboard fan which shows a pattern of skin on

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2 Anselm’s name has been rendered as Archibald Higgins in the English versions, Anselm Wüsstegern in the German versions, etc.
3 Due to this structure, reference to page numbers cannot be made.
each blade. These fans are commonly used in DIY stores, where they show e.g. patterns for bathroom tiles, but many children will never have seen them before. They might enjoy the playful side of the fan but will very probably not get the extra push which comes from recognizing a parody.

This kind of problem might also arise if the book in question was translated and the genre chosen was unknown (or not acceptable) in the target culture. Problems connected with that would provide severe publication problems. Some of the parody genres are lovingly designed to look like the originals, particularly in the dinosaur book where the layout and the fact that they are separate booklets is part of the parody. Translation contracts for children’s non-fiction normally specify that the shape of the book must remain the same. In the case of the present publisher, Dorling Kindersley, pictures are never replaced and the space for texts is exactly the same in every language. I will exemplify this problem further with reference to English and German genre use. In fact, these are two cultures which are rather close, at least seen from outside Europe. But even here, differences in genres and genre use exist.

If we have another look at the menus, we realise that they are very much like English menus. The alliteration or the descriptive attributes from the example above would not be used in German menus – they would seem decidedly out of place. This means that if the authors design their books for a large and possibly international target group, they should be very careful with parodies. Genres, and moreover the scenes associated with these genres, differ considerably from country to country. They may even differ between social groups in one country.

The same is true of another example in this book, namely obituaries. The obituaries mourning the extinction of certain dinosaur species come as part of a small newspaper. The obituary page is very British. German newspapers place obituaries of famous people wherever these people belonged – politicians in the political section, artists in the culture pages. Also, the text structures differ slightly. The German texts tend to be dominated by the author’s style more than the British variety which follows a strict genre pattern.

The newspaper parody itself seems less problematic in that respect. Many countries that offer a variety of newspapers have “those with big letters and those with small letters”, to say it in a non-academic way. Children may not read any newspapers, but will know what they look like from home or from newsstands. Here, the yellow press newspaper chosen in order to announce arriving doom is fully appropriate. And moreover, most of the mini-genres it contains are successful (apart from the aforementioned obituary page). A good example is the weather forecasts. They are easy to recognize, fairly universal (visuals included) and work as a nicely ironic kind of parody as they predict the end of the dinosaurs’ world.

4. Conclusion
Parodies in non-fiction books are basically useful attention-grabbing and attention-keeping devices. They may also boost the reader’s confidence by giving an extra sense of achievement, namely that of being able to recognize and decipher the parody in question.

However, if there are too many parodies and if genres repeat themselves, they become boring and the mnemonic function which comes with the association of a certain parody with a certain content is lost.

Moreover, as genres and parody habits are highly culture-specific, they may present a real obstacle to translation, particularly if pictures are included as part of the parody.

All this means that authors should be very careful with the decision whether to use or not to use parodies. However, a successful parody will make an excellent mnemonic and will make reading more pleasant – the ultimate purpose of the popular non-fiction book.
Literature Used

Primary Sources

Buller, Laura/Scott, Carey 2008: Dinosaurium. London etc.: Dorling Kindersley.


Secondary Sources


Non-fictional texts and essays help readers develop analytical and persuasive capabilities. However, the major function of genre is to establish a code of behavior between the writers and audience, and keep the readers informed about the topics discussed or the themes presented.

Non-fiction texts come in many types, and have many different purposes. They surround us in everyday life but can also come in more sophisticated forms. Non-fiction texts come in a huge variety of types. You find them everywhere in life, from the back of the cereal packet at breakfast, to a textbook at the library. They can range from a newspaper article to a review of a new computer game. They are written for many different purposes, and are aimed at many different people or audiences. Non-fiction texts include When students read nonfiction texts, they will need to make inferences using text features and quotes as evidence. Support your students using short texts as practice before diving into more complex materials like textbooks. There are many devices in the Learning Library to teach kids how to draw conclusions from nonfiction texts. Many teachers find the step-by-step lesson plans are both timely and historical. As technology makes life more convenient, people are more distracted. A highly-rated lesson plan, Close Reading: Introduction offers students practice in paying attention to detail, not only in nonfiction texts but also in their physical surroundings.