The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books

¹Aprilia Duwi Suryati, ²Qanitah Masykuroh
Department of English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta,
Jl. A. Yani, Mendungan, Pabelan, Kec. Kartasura, Kabupaten Sukoharjo, Jawa Tengah 57162
a320180032@student.ums.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of positive and negative adjectives in shaping the portrayal of protagonists and antagonists in children's books. Adjectives play a crucial role in character development, influencing readers' perceptions and emotional connections with the characters. This research analyses how authors use positive adjectives to construct heroic and admirable protagonists, while negative adjectives are employed to depict villains and antagonistic figures. Through a qualitative analysis of selected children's literature, this study examines patterns of adjective usage and their impact on characterization. The findings reveal that positive adjectives contribute to creating relatable, moral, and inspiring protagonists, whereas negative adjectives reinforce the contrast between good and evil by establishing antagonists as undesirable or threatening. Understanding these linguistic choices enhances our comprehension of how language influences young readers' moral and emotional development. This study provides insights for educators, writers, and scholars interested in the intersection of linguistics and children's literature.

Keywords: adjectives, characterization, protagonist, antagonist, children's books

INTRODUCTION

Children's literature plays a vital role in shaping young readers' moral frameworks (Nikolajeva, 2010), and one key linguistic element in character development is the use of adjectives. Adjectives are commonly associated with the story characters either protagonists or antagonists. Positive adjectives often depict protagonists as moral guides, while negative ones reinforce

antagonists as threats or moral opposites. This study focuses on how such linguistic tools contribute to character construction and moral differentiation in children's books considering that the use of adjectives influences the interpretation of the meaning in texts (Koshkinbaeva & Naimova, 2025).

Adjectives are an essential part of speech that describe or modify nouns by providing additional information about their qualities, states, or characteristics (Quirk et al., 1985). They can express various attributes such as color, size, shape, emotion, and evaluation. According Hunt (2015), adjectives play a crucial role in constructing meaning within discourse and are often used to create vivid imagery, especially in literary works, including children's books.

Cheng & Davis (2025) emphasize the role of multimodality in the themed children's books. They found that the meaning of adjectives does not stand alone but is enriched by visual elements such as facial expressions, color, and movement. Stylistically, Leech and Short (2007) explain that adjectives serve to shape narrative style and readers' evaluations of characters. In fiction, adjectives such as "loyal," "evil," or "miserable" not only provide information but also trigger readers' emotional responses to characters. This is important in children's literature, where readers learn to recognize values through their responses to characters.

Dawson et.al., (2021) studied lexical richness in children's books Another relevant study is that by Puspita et.al., (2018) which investigate language features used in describing main characters in short stories. Moreover, Nation et. al., (2022) reported Language used in children's books and its implications for children's language development, while Noor, Siddique & Latif (2025) demonstrated the reinforcement of creative thinking and imagination through adjectives in children's literature.

Overall, previous studies have indicated that language in children's literature is strategically employed to influence young readers' understanding of virtue and vice. The frequent use of evaluative adjectives supports the development of moral schemas, guiding readers' emotional engagement and interpretation of character roles. This research seeks to explore this phenomenon in more detail by analysing linguistic choices across several children's stories. Accordingly, the repetition of Adjectives patterns helps children internalize moral values through schema development.

This study analyzes the adjectives used to construct character identities and moral roles. By focusing on six children's books, this research seeks to identify patterns in adjective use and explore their narrative and ideological functions. The findings aim to contribute to

The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books
Aprilia Duwi Suryati, Qonitah Masykuroh
DOI

705

the understanding of how linguistic structures shape character perception and influence moral development in young readers.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to analyze the use of positive and negative adjectives in shaping protagonists and antagonists in children's literature. The qualitative method is appropriate for this study because it emphasizes the interpretation of linguistic data within a literary context, allowing for deeper insight into how adjectives contribute to character construction (Creswell, 2014). This research employs content analysis which enables us to systematically identify, categorize, and interpret the usage of adjectives. The data were drawn from six selected children's folktales books that feature clear portrayals of protagonists and antagonists. The criteria for book selection included:

a. Bilingual books in English and Bahasa Indonesia.
b. Intended for readers aged 9–12,
c. Featuring distinct protagonist–antagonist dynamics.

The data were then analyzed by grouping them into positive or negative, using connotative meaning, context, and dictionary references (Jackson & Amvela, 2007; Quirk et al., 1985). Correspondingly, frequency patterns were calculated to determine the most common adjectives per character role and interpreted on how adjectives contribute to readers' emotional responses and moral alignment with characters. Further, to ensure the validity of the research, triangulation was conducted through:

a. Cross-referencing adjective classifications with established lexical sources,
b. Consulting expert linguists to validate the categorization and interpretation of adjectives

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Categorization of Adjectives

The adjectives found in the six selected children's books were categorized based on their semantic connotations—positive for protagonists and negative for antagonists. Table 1 and Table 2 show the frequency of these adjectives in the selected texts.

As shown in the tables, the most frequently used adjectives for protagonists include *brave*, *kind*, and *intelligent*, while *cruel*, *spiteful*, and *rude* dominate the descriptions of antagonists. These linguistic choices are not merely coincidental but reflect a systematic effort by authors to assign clear moral characteristics to characters, aiding readers in identifying virtue and vice.

The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books
Aprilia Duwi Suryati, Qonitah Masykuroh
DOI

706

Table 1.
Positive Adjectives for Protagonists

No	Adjective	Sample Context
1	Brave	"The brave prince stood before the giant without fear."
2	Kind	"She was known in the village as a kind and gentle girl."
3	Patient	"You must have great patience and wait for my return..."
4	Faithful	"He remained faithful to his promise, despite the danger."
5	Intelligent	"The intelligent child quickly devised a clever solution."
6	Persistent	"Her persistent spirit led her to complete the journey."

Table 2.
Negative Adjectives for Antagonists

No	Adjective	Sample Context
1	Cruel	"The cruel witch cast a spell on everyone in the kingdom."
2	Rude	"He gave a rude sneer as the boy tried to speak."
3	Spiteful	"Her spiteful nature made her hated by all."
4	Lazy	"The lazy brother never helped with any chores."
5	Liar	"Everyone knew he was a liar and couldn't be trusted."
6	Evil	"The evil sorcerer planned to conquer the peaceful land."
7	Cynical	"His cynical remarks made others uncomfortable."
8	Envious	"The sisters were so envious they plotted to ruin her joy."

The use of positive adjectives consistently enhances the protagonist's image as virtuous and relatable, while negative adjectives portray antagonists as threats or moral obstacles. Since this study analyses multiple children's books, the distribution of adjectives is examined across different sources. Each book presents unique patterns in adjective usage based on narrative style, themes, and character

The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books
Aprilia Duwi Suryati, Qonitah Masykuroh
DOI

707

development. To reflect these variations, adjectives are analyzed per book to determine commonalities and distinctions in characterization.

For protagonists, positive adjectives are used consistently to establish their moral standing and relatability. While some books emphasize bravery and kindness, others focus on intelligence and perseverance. Similarly, for antagonists, negative adjectives vary based on the level of conflict and opposition presented in the story. The following tables and examples provide an overview of how adjectives are distributed across different books, illustrating the consistency and variation in character descriptions.

The analysis showed that authors consistently use positive adjectives to emphasize the admirable qualities of protagonists. These adjectives contribute to making protagonists relatable and likable. Conversely, antagonists are described using negative adjectives, reinforcing their opposition to the protagonist.

Examples:

Protagonist**:**

> "Dear wife, I must travel again. I going for land. Perhaps I can change my appearance. You must have great patient and wait for my return as before ". (Bunanta, *Tattadu,* 2009).

> "All right, Mother, I am ready to go home now to meet the father who will kill me ". (Bunanta, *Ni Terong Kuning*, 2010)

Antagonist:

> … The sisters were so envious. They ordered their own husbands to go at once to that far away land and get themselves remoldedinto a handsomer form! …
> (Bunanta, *Tattadu,* 2009).

> … A furious giant. Gergasi, come every day to destroy houses in the village. Cattle, humans, childrens, were all devoured. Trees and plants were knocked down …
> (Bunanta, *Si Kelingking*, 2009).

B. Adjectives Distribution Across Texts

The analysis shows that different books reveal varied patterns in adjective usage, shaped by the authors' thematic goals and narrative

complexity. For instance:

a. In Si Kelingking (Bunanta, 2009), the protagonist—a physically small but intellectually sharp boy—is described using adjectives such as clever, brave, and persistent. These traits contrast starkly with the antagonist, a giant labeled as furious, destructive, and ruthless. The physical size difference is metaphorically enhanced by the adjectives, suggesting that mental strength can overcome physical dominance.

b. In Ni Terong Kuning (Bunanta, 2010), the contrast is more emotionally and morally charged. The protagonist is portrayed as loyal, honest, and patient, while the antagonistic stepsisters are called envious, cruel, and manipulative. These choices clearly guide young readers toward moral identification with the protagonist and moral rejection of the antagonists.

Such examples demonstrate that adjectives do not operate in isolation; they interact with plot structure and character function to shape reader alignment and emotional resonance. Further, the strategic use of adjectives reveals a consistent pattern in how characters are constructed. Protagonists are framed using language that highlights qualities socially perceived as virtues, while antagonists are described with negative moral implications. This aligns with schema theory, which posits that repeated exposure to these patterns shapes mental models and expectations in young readers.

The frequency of *brave* and *kind* across texts indicates a universal appeal for these traits in heroic characters. Similarly, the repeated use of *cruel* for villains indicates a persistent association of antagonists with physical or emotional harm.

C. Implications for Young Readers

Language, particularly adjectives, significantly influences how children construct social and moral identities. Positive adjectives promote empathy and admiration; Children are likely to model behavior after *brave* or *generous* characters. In addition, it also the adjectives shape the qualities children may wish to embody.

Meanwhile, negative adjectives help develop ethical boundaries: They offer contrast, helping children recognize harmful behaviors. Also, the adjectives could foster critical thinking, especially when antagonists display mixed traits, children learn to interpret characters more deeply.

The consistent pairing of moral attributes with specific adjectives contributes to children's early moral education since

The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books
Aprilia Duwi Suryati, Qonitah Masykuroh
DOI

709

linguistic framing significantly influences emotional response and moral alignment.

CONCLUSION

This study explored that positive and negative adjectives play a significant role in shaping the identity and moral alignment of characters in children's literature. Through qualitative linguistic analysis, it was found that authors systematically use positively connoted adjectives to frame protagonists as admirable and virtuous figures, while negatively connoted adjectives serve to mark antagonists as undesirable and oppositional forces. These linguistic patterns are not merely descriptive but function ideologically, reinforcing moral frameworks and shaping readers' cognitive and emotional engagement. The findings affirm the close relationship between language and moral development, particularly in texts aimed at young readers. The adjectives selected by authors become tools of persuasion that guide children in constructing moral binaries and understanding social values. For future research, expanding this study to include visual elements or multimodal texts may also offer broader perspectives on how characterization is constructed through both words and image.

REFERENCES

Amvela, E. J. D. (2007). *Words, meaning, and vocabulary: An introduction to modern English lexicology*. Continuum.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Pearson Education.

Bunanta, M. (2009). Tattadu. Kelompok Pecinta Bacaan Anak.

Bunanta, M. (2009). Si Kelingking. Kelompok Pecinta Bacaan Anak.

Bunanta, M. (2010). Bilingual Children Folklore: Ni Terong Kuning. Kelompok Pecinta Bacaan Anak.

Bunanta, M. (2001). Suwidak Loro. Kelompok Pecinta Bacaan Anak.

Bunanta, M. (2012). Putri Kemang. Grasindo, Kelompok Pecinta Bacaan Anak.

Bunanta, M. (2001). Putri Bung Melur. Kelompok Pecinta Bacaan Anak.

Carter, R., & Nash, W. (2022). *Language and style in children's literature: A cross-cultural perspective*. Global Publishing.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Dawson, N., Hsiao, Y., Tan, A.W.M., Banerji, N., & Nation, K. (2021). Features of lexical richness in children's books: Comparisons

The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books
Aprilia Duwi Suryati, Qonitah Masykuroh
DOI

710

with child-directed speech. *Language Development Research*, 1(1), p 9-53. https://doi.org/10.34842/5we1-yk94

Hunt, P. (2015). *Language and moral development in children's fiction*. Literacy and Education Journal, 9(2), 33–50.

Cheng, L.M.Y., Powell, S.J. & Davis, B. (2025). Critical Multimodal Literacy: An Analysis of Young Children's Picture Books About Refugees. *IJEC*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-025-00423-7

Koshkinbaeva N., & Naimova N. (2025). The impact of adjectives on meaning and interpretation. *Innovations in Modern Linguistics and Language Teaching*, *1* (1), 69–71. https://doi.org/10.47689/ZTTCTOI-vol1-iss1-pp69-71

Leech, G. N., & Short, M. H. (2007). *Style in fiction: A linguistic introduction to English fictional prose* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.

Lukens, R. J. (2007). *A critical handbook of children's literature* (8th ed.). Pearson.

Nation, K., Dawson, N. J., & Hsiao, Y. (2022). Book Language and Its Implications for Children's Language, Literacy, and Development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *31*(4), 375-380. https://doi.org/10.1177/09637214221103264

Nikolajeva, M. (2010). *Power, voice and subjectivity in literature for young readers*. Routledge.

Noor, N., Siddique, A. R., & Latif, T. (2025). Reinforcing creative thinking and imagination through adjectives: A corpus-based study of children's literature. *Journal of applied linguistics and tesol* (JALT), 8 (1), 38-56.

Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, J. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. Longman.

The Use of Positive and Negative Adjectives in Shaping Protagonists and Antagonists in Children's Books
Aprilia Duwi Suryati, Qonitah Masykuroh
DOI

711