



Personification in Nursery Rhymes: A Semantic Study

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Abstract

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The transformation of digital media consumption in early childhood has significantly changed patterns of language exposure and early literacy practices. In the midst of increasing children's access to global digital content, children's songs (nursery rhymes) in English that are disseminated through platforms such as YouTube and the *Cocomelon Nursery Rhymes* channel have become pedagogical artifacts that have a wide influence. This research aims to (1) identify types of personification and (2) analyze their communicative purpose in English children's songs circulating digitally. The research used a qualitative descriptive design with an interpretive semantic analysis approach. The data is in the form of lyrics from 20 children's songs in English which were selected purposively based on the criteria of an early age audience and potential figurative language content. The unit of analysis is the clause or lyric line that attributes human traits to non-human entities. The classification of personification types refers to Dodson's (2008) typology: general, representative, and casual personification. The research results showed that there were 52 occurrences of personification, with the dominance of general personification at 40 data (77%) and representative personification at 12 data (23%), with no casual personification found. These findings confirm that personification in digital nursery rhymes is not just a stylistic ornament, but rather a systematic semantic strategy to support cognitive accessibility and pedagogical orientation in early childhood discourse. This research contributes to strengthening the theoretical framework of figurative language analysis in the children's digital media ecosystem.

INTRODUCTION

Empirical transformations in children's media consumption have substantially reshaped early language exposure and literacy practices. Around the world kids are learning from digital platforms. UNESCO said in 2023 that than 70% of children who are 3 to 6 years old in countries that are not too rich or too poor use digital media to learn new things (Griffiths, 2006; Harper, 2011; Maria, 2015; Saldiraner & Cinkara, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023). UNICEF said in 2022 that when kids use media too much without anyone supervising them it can affect how they learn to talk think and get along with others. At the time OECD said in 2023 that there are still big differences in how well kids can read and write and that we need to make sure kids are learning to talk and read when they are little (Bshara et al., 2021; Busse et al., 2021; Hamilton & Murphy, 2024; Tilwani et al., 2022).

English nursery rhymes are great for helping kids learn about sounds and words and stories. They are really good, for kids. They also help kids understand things that're not real like when we say that the sun is smiling (Burke & Coats, 2022; Colston, 2020; Dadvand & Bhattacharjee, 2022). This is called personification. It helps kids learn about big ideas by comparing them to things they already know. From 2020 to 2025 many studies looked at how

kids learn from stories and media that use personification. Some of these studies found that personification helps kids get excited about learning and understand what they are reading. Other studies said that if there is too much personification it can be hard for kids to understand what is really going on especially if they are learning more than one language (Coyle & Gomez Gracia, 2014; Dunst et al., 2011; Malatesta & Sambanis, 2025; Wang & Liu, 2025). Even though most studies say that personification is a teaching tool we are not sure how it works best. Is it helping kids think, feel or just understand what is being said. Not many studies have looked at nursery rhymes that are shared on the internet and watched by kids all around the world (Atta-Alla, 2012; Vuuren & Van Wyk, 2021).

Most of the time researchers have looked at personification in two ways. What it means and how it is used. Without trying to understand how they work together. Nursery rhymes and personification in nursery rhymes are very important because they are teaching kids things every day. Personification, in nursery rhymes helps kids learn. We should try to understand how it works. By looking at how personifications used in nursery rhymes we can learn more about how kids are learning from digital platforms and how we can make sure they are learning the best way possible. Contextual limitations are also evident: many studies analyze printed children's books rather than multimedia song lyrics, and few employ systematic qualitative categorization grounded in a single theoretical typology. Consequently, there is a clear gap in understanding how specific types of personification function rhetorically within contemporary nursery rhymes consumed in digital ecosystems.

This study addresses that gap by examining two principal variables: (1) types of personification and (2) their communicative purposes. Personification types are operationally defined according to (Dodson's, 2008) classification general, representative, and casual personification identified through explicit attribution of human qualities to non-human referents in lyric lines. When we want to communicate, we use words for a main reason: to show how we feel, to help people understand or to control what people are talking about. The idea, behind this is based on a theory that says words can have meanings and these meanings come from how we use them in different ways.

The main goals are to look at all the personification examples and sort them out and then figure out what they are mostly used for. We want to understand what personification does in these nursery rhymes and what it helps us to do when we use personification. Personification is a part of this and we want to see how personification works in these English nursery rhymes. It is hypothesized that general personification will be the most frequent type and that facilitating understanding will constitute its primary communicative purpose. Through a qualitative semantic analysis, this study aims to contribute a theoretically grounded and empirically rigorous account of figurative language in digitally mediated early childhood texts.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This research used a qualitative descriptive design with a theory-oriented interpretive semantic analysis approach. This design was chosen because the aim of the research was not to test causal relationships statistically, but rather to identify, classify, and interpret figurative meaning patterns in depth in authentic textual contexts. The analytical framework is based on cognitive semantic theory which views figurative meaning as the result of a systematic

mapping between literal and non-literal conceptual domains, with (Dodson's, 2008) typology of personification as the main classification instrument. This approach allows exploration of the linguistic structure as well as the rhetorical function of personification in children's song texts that circulate digitally.

We looked at each line of the lyrics to see if it gave characteristics to non-human things. This is called personification. We counted each instance of personification separately even if it happened times in the same song. To collect the data, we first wrote down all the lyrics. Put them together in one document. Then we read through them carefully to find examples of personification. We made a list of these examples. Looked at them again to make sure they were correct. We used a set of rules to decide what counted as personification. If a line of lyrics gave actions or feelings to something that is not human and it could not be taken literally then we counted it as personification. If we were not sure we read it again to make sure. We analysed the data by looking at the types of personification and what they were used for. We used a framework developed by Dodson to categorize the personification. We then looked at how each type of personification was used and what it was used for. We did this in four stages. First, we categorized each instance of personification. Then we looked at what it was used for. Next, we looked at how each type of personification was used. Finally, we interpreted the results to see what they meant. We made sure our study was trustworthy by using established theories and getting feedback from experts. We also kept a record of our decisions. Re-examined any cases that were not clear. We did not need to get permission for this study because we only used available texts and did not involve any people. We only used the lyrics for purposes and did not reproduce any copyrighted material. Our study is transparent and rigorous. It follows the standards of high-quality research (Creswell, 2014).

Data Source and Corpus Selection

The research data is in the form of lyrics from 20 English children's songs published through the official *Cocomelon Nursery Rhymes* channel on the YouTube platform. Channel selection is based on three main considerations:

- Global visibility and circulation rates are high, indicating broad pedagogical influence on early childhood audiences.
- Educational thematic consistency, especially in daily routine content, social interactions, animals and natural phenomena.
- Availability of official lyric transcripts, to ensure textual reliability and avoid interpretive distortion.

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling with inclusion criteria: Songs are aimed at children aged 2–6 years, English lyrics, contains narrative or descriptive elements that have the potential to contain figurative language. The final corpus reflects variations on themes to ensure representation of diverse semantic patterns within the constraints of the digital nursery rhymes genre.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is a clause or line of lyrics that contains explicit or implicit attributions of human characteristics (actions, emotions, intentions, or cognitive states) to non-human entities. One occurrence of personification counts as one data unit. If within a song there were repetitions with different rhetorical functions, each occurrence was coded

separately. Operational criteria for personification identification include: The attribution of human traits or actions to non-human referents and These expressions cannot be interpreted literally in the same semantic context.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out through systematic textual documentation with the following stages:

1. Corpus Compilation – All official lyrics are transcribed and compiled into one unified corpus document.
2. Initial Close Reading – Repeated reading is carried out to identify candidates for figurative expressions.
3. Data Extraction – Expressions that meet operational criteria are moved to the initial coding table.
4. Iterative Verification – Ambiguous cases are reanalysed through contextual reading to ensure semantic validity. The entire process is documented in an audit trail to ensure analytical transparency.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out through the following systematic steps: Transcribe and verify the lyrics of each selected nursery rhyme. Initial identification of all expressions that indicate potential personification based on semantic indicators (feature attribution [+human]). Data filtering to ensure that the expression meets the theoretical criteria for personification according to (Dodson, 2008). To increase data validity, the identification process was carried out through iterative reading and systematic recording in a categorization sheet.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is carried out through several structured stages:

1. Classification of Personification Types: Each data is categorized into general personification or representative personification according to the operational definition of (Dodson, 2008).
2. Identify Rhetorical Goals: The data is then analyzed to determine its semantic function, namely: Showing intense emotions (to express passionate emotions), Facilitate understanding of concepts (to understand things), Controlling questions or implicit desires (to control questions).
3. Analysis of Form and Function Relations: A mapping of the relationship between the type of personification and its rhetorical purpose was carried out to test the functional assumption that variations in form have implications for variations in the function of meaning.
4. Tabulation and Interpretation: Even though this research is qualitative, the frequency of occurrence of each category is calculated descriptively to show dominance patterns and trends in data distribution. This calculation is not intended as an inferential statistical test, but rather as a reinforcement of thematic interpretation.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this research implemented several strategies:

1. Theoretical triangulation, by combining Dodson's (2008) typology of personification and a lexical semantic approach.

2. Audit trail, namely systematic documentation of the entire process of identification, classification and interpretation of data.
3. Peer debriefing, through academic discussions to test the consistency of categorization.
4. Operational consistency, using clear categorical definitions and explicit linguistic indicators in each stage of analysis.

Analytical Framework

This research relies on Dodson's (2008) rhetorical personification theory as the main conceptual basis. In this framework, personification is understood as a strategy of attribution of human qualities to non-human entities with specific communicative purposes. Semantically, the analysis is carried out by identifying the transfer of lexical features and meaning relations that occur in the construction. The analytical model of this research assumes that: Independent variable: Type of personification, Dependent variable: Rhetorical purpose of personification, Conceptual mediators: Construction of semantic meaning in lyric context. With this model, the research examines the functional relationship between linguistic form and communicative purpose in the nursery rhymes corpus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This research analyzed 20 nursery rhymes taken from the *Cocomelon* channel with a total of 52 personification data systematically identified. The analysis was carried out based on Dodson's (2008) classification, namely general personification and representative personification, and categorized according to rhetorical goals: (1) expressing intense emotions (to express passionate emotions), (2) facilitating understanding of concepts (to understand things), and (3) controlling questions or implicit desires (to control questions). Quantitatively-descriptively, the data distribution shows the following pattern:

1. General Personification (40 data; 77%)
 - To express intense emotions: 15 data (29%)
 - To facilitate understanding of concepts: 23 data (44%)
 - To control questions/desires: 4 data (7.7%)
2. Representative Personification (12 data; 23%)
 - To express intense emotions: 1 data (1.9%)
 - To facilitate understanding of concepts: 7 data (13.4%)
 - To control questions/desires: 2 data (3.8%)

No significant form of casual personification was found in the analyzed corpus. This finding shows the dominance of general personification with the main function of facilitating understanding of concepts.

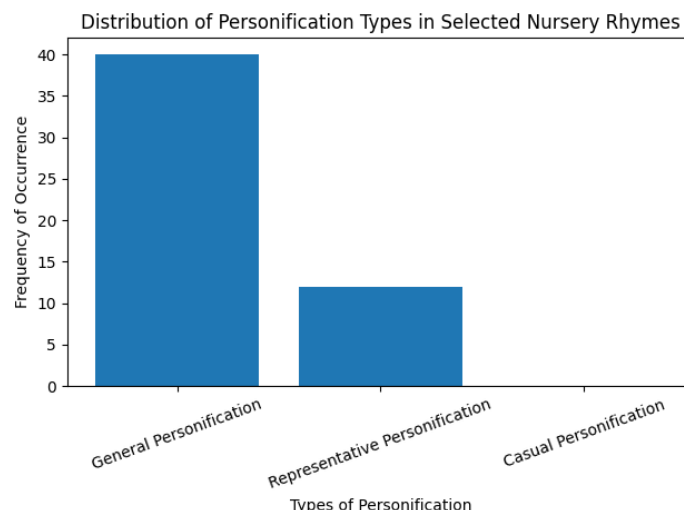


Figure 1. Distribution of Personification Types in Selected Nursery Rhymes

The chart showed how often different types of personification appear in the corpus. The common type is general personification, which we found 40 times. This type is the popular. Representative personification appears a lot less we only found 12 examples. Casual personification does not appear all we did not find any. When we look at this chart, we can see that nursery rhymes mostly use personification in a clear way. This is because nursery rhymes are meant to teach and help children learn, not to sound nice. Personification, in nursery rhymes is used to help children understand it is not just used to make the rhymes sound better.

Domination of General Personification as a Cognitive Strategy

The findings show that general personification is the most dominant form (77%). In a semantic context, this form is characterized by the direct attribution of human traits or actions to non-human entities without complex allegorical representation. Examples such as “Rain, rain, go away” or “The ants go marching” show the transfer of attributes of human will and action to natural phenomena and animals.

Theoretically, in Dodson's (2008) framework, general personification functions as a rhetorical mechanism that simplifies concepts through anthropomorphism. The dominance of this form indicates that nursery rhymes operate in a pedagogical realm that emphasizes concrete understandability. Personification is used to concretize abstract concepts (eg weather, time, growth) so that they can be processed in the child's cognitive scheme.

These results are consistent with cognitive linguistics research (2020–2024) which shows that personification facilitates conceptual mapping between human and non-human domains, thereby strengthening initial semantic understanding. However, in contrast to several studies which place the affective function as dominant, this research found that the cognitive function ("to understand things") is the most prominent (44% in general personification). This confirms that in the context of children's songs, the educational dimension is more dominant than emotional expression.

Rhetorical Function: Understanding Concepts as the Main Goal

Data distribution shows that the most dominant goal is to understand things (a total of 30 data or 57.4% of the total). Personifications such as “Carrots hide under the ground” or

“Potatoes sleep under the ground” illustrate conceptual strategies for explaining biological processes (plant growth) through analogies to human behavior (hiding, sleeping).

In terms of lexical semantics, there is an expansion of meaning (semantic extension) through the attribution of [+human] features to [-human] entities. This feature transfer is not just a stylistic ornament, but rather a cognitive strategy to bridge the limitations of early childhood abstraction. Thus, personification functions as a cognitive scaffold in the construction of meaning.

These findings expand previous studies that focused more on adult literary texts or classical poetry, by showing that in children's genres, personification has a systematic epistemic function. The literature gap that previously separated form and function analysis was successfully bridged through the simultaneous mapping of type and purpose in this research.

Emotional Expression and Question Control: Affective and Pragmatic Dimensions

Although not dominant, the function "to express passionate emotions" (16 data) shows that personification is also used to build emotional involvement. For example, rain that is “asked to go away” represents discomfort or hope for a change in the situation. In this context, personification acts as a means of symbolic externalization of emotions.

Meanwhile, the function "to control questions" (6 data) shows the pragmatic dimension. Examples like "Daddy finger, where are you?" illustrates the attribution of speech ability to fingers to facilitate learning of family structure and body vocabulary. Here, personification acts as a pedagogical device to direct the child's attention and control the implicit flow of questions and answers in the text.

This function confirms that personification in nursery rhymes is not only aesthetic, but also has pragmatic and instructional implications.

Representative Personification and Allegorical Representation

The proportion of representative personification (23%) indicates a more limited but conceptual use. In this form, non-human entities act as symbolic representations of humans, such as “Three little pigs built a house.” Here, animals are not simply given human attributes, but serve as allegorical representations of human behavior (hard work, planning, responsibility).

In contrast to general personification which is direct and literal, representative personification operates at a more complex symbolic level. The low frequency of this form indicates that nursery rhymes prioritize semantic simplicity over complex allegory.

Theoretical Synthesis

Overall, the research results confirm the theoretical assumption that there is a functional relationship between the type of personification and its rhetorical purpose. General personification tends to correlate with the function of conceptual understanding, while representative personification is more often related to the representation of moral values or narratives.

The research hypothesis which states that general personification with the aim of facilitating understanding of concepts is the dominant form is empirically proven. Thus, this research contributes to the development of figurative semantic studies by showing that in the context of children's literacy, personification functions as an integrated cognitive, rhetorical, and pedagogical mechanism.

These findings strengthen the argument that semantic analysis of children's texts needs to be carried out systematically and theory-based, considering its implications for early literacy development and the construction of conceptual meaning in early childhood.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that personification in nursery rhymes functions as a semantically rich and rhetorically purposeful device that plays a fundamental role in early childhood language development, cognitive growth, and emotional formation. Through the analysis of 52 personification instances drawn from 20 nursery rhymes and examined using Dodson's (2008) rhetorical framework, the findings confirm that general personification is the dominant form, primarily employed to simplify abstract concepts and facilitate understanding, while representative personification serves more symbolic and narrative functions. The functional hierarchy identified with concept facilitation (*to understand things*) as the most prominent rhetorical goal, followed by the expression of intense emotions and the management of implicit questions or desires underscores the intentional interplay between figurative form and communicative purpose in children's textual material. Theoretically, the integration of formal and functional analysis within a single conceptual framework advances the field of figurative semantics by positioning nursery rhymes as a legitimate and analytically productive corpus for linguistic inquiry, particularly within the context of digital media-based children's content. From a practical standpoint, these findings highlight the critical importance of selecting children's songs that are not only engaging but also semantically substantive, reinforcing the role of educators, content creators, and curriculum designers in making deliberate and informed choices about children's literary material. For future research, it is recommended that studies adopt a multimodal analytical approach that integrates the linguistic, visual, and musical dimensions of nursery rhymes simultaneously, given that the present study is limited to textual analysis and does not account for the ways in which accompanying imagery and musical elements may mediate, reinforce, or reframe the meanings conveyed through personification an expanded framework that would yield a more holistic understanding of how young children process, interpret, and internalize figurative language across multiple semiotic channels.

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