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# An Analysis of Metaphor as a Figurative Language Element in Children's Literature: A Case Study of The Little Prince

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## Abstract

This study aims to classify the types of metaphors found in the children's literature, *The Little Prince*, and to examine whether these metaphors are appropriate for presentation as children's literature. The framework of figurative language proposed by Leech (1969) was employed to categorize the metaphors, while the literary elements of children's literature were analyzed based on the framework of Short, Lynch-Brown, and Tomlinson (2014). The findings reveal that the metaphors in *The Little Prince* can be classified into three categories: (1) Concretive Metaphors 79.17%, (2) Humanizing Metaphors 12.50%, and (3) Animistic Metaphors 8.33%, with frequencies appearing in descending order. Moreover, the analysis indicates that the metaphors in this text are complex and require interpretative engagement, suggesting that *The Little Prince* does not fully conform to the characteristics of children's literature. Instead, it represents philosophical literary work that encourages deeper interpretation, making it more suitable for adult readers than for young readers in its original form.

**Keywords:** Metaphor, Children's Literature, The Little Prince

## 1. Introduction

Figurative language is the presentation of expressions through the creative manipulation of ordinary language (Jackson, 2025). It involves making comparisons that create vivid imagery, and among its various forms, metaphors are frequently found in children's literature. A metaphor is a shift in meaning from the literal level to a deeper, more abstract one (Leech, 1969). The study of metaphor in children's literature, therefore, reflects the process of understanding on the part of readers. Children's literature refers to books written specifically for children, with content that is appropriate for and engaging to readers of different age groups. Such works are highly valuable for the development of thought and imagination. A world-renowned and widely recognized children's literary work is *The Little Prince*. It tells the story of a pilot whose plane crashes in the desert and who meets a mysterious boy from the asteroid B-612, who travels to various planets. After reading and interpreting the story, the researcher found that this work serves as an interesting case study for examining metaphors in children's literature. While *The Little Prince* has attracted attention and been classified as children's literature by many libraries, its simple narrative accessible to young readers also contains extensive use of figurative language, symbolism, and especially metaphor, which requires complex interpretation. For example:

“You understand. It's too far away. I can't take this body with me. It's too heavy.” I said nothing. “But it will be like an old abandoned husk. There's nothing sad about old husks... I said nothing.” (Saint-Exupéry, 2019)

The Little Prince explains that his body is merely an “old husk,” which reflects the character’s conceptual depth and philosophical understanding.

For these reasons, the researcher considers *The Little Prince*, translated by Gregory Norminton, to be an appropriate source for the study of metaphor. The work possesses literary and philosophical values that are intricately conveyed through metaphor to offer moral and reflective insights. From another perspective, *The Little Prince* may not be solely a work for children but rather a literary piece that invites deeper study in other dimensions of literature.

### 1.1 Research Objective

1. To categorize the types of metaphors that appear in the children’s literature, *The Little Prince*.
2. To analyze the appropriateness of metaphors from *The Little Prince* for presentation as children’s literature.

## 2. Literature review

Previous studies have shown that children’s literature generally employs metaphors that are simple and easy to understand, enabling young readers to grasp meaning without complexity. Such metaphors often rely on familiar comparisons and vivid imagery (Zhu et al., 2023). In contrast, *The Little Prince* demonstrates the use of metaphors that are more complex and philosophically suggestive (Masharipova, 2023), requiring interpretation and engagement with readers’ personal experiences. And the challenge in interpreting such metaphorical and culturally embedded expressions lies in the inherent differences between languages and conceptual systems, which may create barriers to understanding for readers from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Kunnu & Damsawasdi, 2023). This highlights the importance of examining how figurative language functions across linguistic and cultural contexts, particularly in literary works that blend simplicity of expression with philosophical depth such as *The Little Prince*. A review of related documents and studies indicates that most prior research on metaphors in children’s literature tends to focus on philosophical interpretation, particularly on how abstract ideas are made more comprehensible through comparison (Setiawati, 2016). However, these studies primarily emphasize semantic and conceptual interpretation rather than the structural and categorical classification of metaphors. Given that *The Little Prince* stands out for both its distinctive language and its dual function as children’s literature, the present study aims to analyze the use of metaphors in *The Little Prince* by classifying them according to Leech (1969). Furthermore, the study examines the characteristics and appropriateness of these metaphors in the context of children’s literature, following the perspectives of Short et al. (2014) as well as Tehseem and Khan (2015), to determine whether the use of metaphors in this work is suitable only for presentation as children’s literature.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design based on content analysis, focusing on the children's literary work *The Little Prince* (English version translated by Gregory Norminton). The purpose of this methodology is to identify, classify, and interpret metaphors in the text and to examine their appropriateness for children's literature.

#### 3.1 Data Collection

The primary data for this study consist of the entire English translation of *The Little Prince* by Gregory Norminton, which includes 27 chapters. The analysis is confined exclusively to metaphors appearing in this English version; no comparison with other language translations is included.

The research employed three instruments to facilitate systematic data recording and analysis:

1. Metaphor Logging Table – used to record all sentences or phrases containing metaphors, with clear references to page, chapter, and contextual information.
2. Metaphor Classification Table – used to categorize each metaphor according to Leech's (1969) four types: concrete, animistic, humanizing (personification), and synaesthetic metaphors.
3. Comparative Components Table – used to compare metaphorical expressions and related literary elements found in *The Little Prince* with those typically appearing in other works of children's literature.

The data collection process was carried out through the following stages:

1. Skimming: An initial reading was conducted to obtain an overall understanding of the text and to identify potential metaphor-rich sections.
2. Close Reading and Marking: Each chapter was carefully read, and sentences or phrases containing metaphors were marked and recorded.
3. Data Entry: Identified metaphors were entered into the logging table, with details regarding context, meaning, and specific location (page, chapter, line).
4. Verification and Recompilation: The compiled data were reviewed and refined through at least two to three additional readings to ensure accuracy and completeness.

To ensure data credibility, expert validation was conducted. Sample analyses of metaphors were reviewed by a linguistics expert to confirm the accuracy of metaphor identification and interpretation before finalizing the dataset.

#### 3.2 Data Analysis

The analysis of the collected data was guided by Leech's (1969) framework for figurative language, particularly the categorization of metaphors. The analysis proceeded in two main stages:

1. Metaphor Classification: Each identified metaphor was analyzed and categorized according to Leech's four types—concrete, animistic, humanizing/personification, and synaesthetic.

2. Appropriateness Analysis: The classified metaphors were then compared with general features of children's literature to determine whether their linguistic and conceptual nature aligns with the characteristics and readability suitable for young readers.

Through this analytical approach, the study aims to reveal both the artistic and pedagogical dimensions of metaphorical expression in *The Little Prince* as a representative work of children's literature.

## 4. Results

In this study, the researcher classified the metaphors found in the children's literary work, *The Little Prince*, according to the defined criteria to answer both research objectives as follows:

### 4.1 Classification of Metaphors

The researcher employed Leech's (1969) theory of metaphor classification as the analytical framework. According to this theory, metaphors are divided into four main types: Concretive metaphor, Humanizing metaphor, Animistic metaphor, and Synaesthetic metaphor. The researcher constructed a summary table showing the frequency of occurrence and classification of metaphors by type and calculated their corresponding percentages. The findings are discussed as follows.

**Table 1: Classification of Metaphor Types Found in *The Little Prince***

No.	Type of Metaphor	Number	Percentage
1	Concretive Metaphor	19	79.17
2	Humanizing Metaphor	3	12.50
3	Animistic Metaphor	2	8.33
4	Synaesthetic metaphor	-	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>100</b>

From the data collection, a total of 24 metaphors were found in *The Little Prince*. The findings revealed that three types of metaphors appeared, ranked from the most to the least frequent as follows: Concretive metaphors (19 metaphors), Humanizing metaphors (3 metaphors), and Animistic metaphors (2 metaphors). In contrast, Synaesthetic metaphors were not found in the text. This result indicates that the use of metaphor in *The Little Prince* is both complex and diverse in terms of appearance and function in meaning transfer. Each type carries underlying philosophical implications, emphasizing interpretive depth rather than straightforward expression. The work allows readers to construct their own understanding through interpretative engagement rather than through explicit explanation.

To provide a clearer understanding of each metaphor type identified in the analysis, the following examples illustrate their characteristics:

#### 1. Concretive Metaphor

This metaphor transforms an abstract emotion or ideas into a concrete image. For example,

"I'm glad," he said, "that you agree with my fox." As the little prince was falling asleep, I took him in my arms and set off again. I was moved. I felt I was carrying a fragile treasure.

Indeed, I felt there was nothing more fragile on Earth. By the light of the moon, I looked at that pale forehead, those closed eyes, those locks of hair that trembled in the wind, and I said to myself: "What I'm looking at is only a husk. What matters most is invisible..." (Saint-Exupéry, 2019)

A comparison between The Little Prince and a "fragile treasure" reflects the pilot's feeling when he is holding the sleeping prince in his arms. At that moment, he perceives The Little Prince as a precious and delicate possession. The ground of this metaphor lies in the shared notion of something valuable and deeply cherished.

## 2. Humanizing Metaphor

This metaphor personifies inanimate celestial objects, attributing human behavior to non-human entities.

"You'll look at the stars at night. My place is too small to show you mine. It's better this way. For you, my star will be one of the stars. And so you will love to look at all the stars... They will all be your friends. And then I'm going to give you this gift..." He laughed again. "Ah! Little man, little man, I love to hear that laugh!" "Precisely, that will be my gift..." (Saint-Exupéry, 2019)

A comparison between the stars in the sky and friends is explained by The Little Prince to the pilot. He tells the pilot that after his departure, all the stars in the sky will become the pilot's friends, companions who will always be by his side, even when they are far apart or in different places. The ground of this metaphor lies in the shared idea that both remain ever-present companions who stay close and offer comfort despite physical distance.

## 3. Animistic Metaphor

Here, natural elements are given life-like qualities,

"I will have to put up with a caterpillar or two if I want to experience butterflies. I hear they're so beautiful. Who else will pay me a visit? You will be so far away. As for bigger animals, I have nothing to fear. I have my claws." And ingenuously she displayed her four thorns. (Saint-Exupéry, 2019)

A comparison between the rose's thorns and claws appears when the rose tells The Little Prince that she does not need to cover herself with a glass globe to protect against the wind or animals, because her thorns are enough to take care of and defend herself. The ground of this metaphor lies in the shared idea of a defensive weapon used for self-protection from external danger.

## 4. Synaesthetic Metaphor

Not found in this study. No instance of sensory transfer was identified in the text, indicating that The Little Prince primarily focuses on conceptual and emotional metaphor rather than sensory imagery.

### **4.2 Analysis of the Appropriateness of The Little Prince as Children's Literature Based on the Occurrence of Metaphors**

Based on the literary elements commonly found in children's literature as proposed by Short, Lynch-Brown, and Tomlinson (2014), and the theoretical perspectives of Tehseem and Khan (2015), together with the literary characteristics of The Little Prince discussed by

Setiawati (2016) and other related studies, the researcher constructed a comparative summary table showing the occurrence and functions of metaphors in general children’s literature versus in *The Little Prince*, as follows:

**Table 2: Comparative Summary of Metaphor Occurrence in General Children’s Literature and in *The Little Prince***

No.	Comparison	Found in children’s literature	Found in <i>The Little Prince</i>
1	The use of metaphors that make clear comparisons which readers can easily see or understand (X is Y).	✓	—
2	The use of metaphors that help readers understand the meaning clearly.	✓	—
3	The use of metaphors to create understanding about life or the world in a simple way that everyone can relate to.	✓	—
4	The use of metaphors that show moral or philosophical ideas through the story.	✓	—
5	The use of metaphors that show moral or philosophical ideas through the story.	—	✓

The study demonstrates a clear distinction between the use of metaphors in general children’s literature and in *The Little Prince*. In general children’s literature, metaphors typically exhibit a straightforward comparative structure that is easy to understand and conveys meaning directly, allowing readers to instantly perceive the connection between the compared elements. However, in the case of *The Little Prince*, as revealed in the findings of section 4.1, the author employs metaphors of a more complex and philosophically suggestive nature, emphasizing open interpretation that invites readers to construct meaning on their own. Consequently, the literary value of the work operates on two levels: it is accessible and comprehensible to children, yet it also offers interpretive depth for adult readers. Therefore, it can be concluded that while general children’s literature emphasizes simplicity and clarity, *The Little Prince* integrates both simplicity and complexity in its use of metaphor. This duality reflects that *The Little Prince* may not be appropriate to be regarded solely as a work of children’s literature, but rather as a literary piece suitable for readers of all ages, one that serves as a reflective medium for philosophical and emotional contemplation among adults as well.

## 5. Conclusion

The research findings reveal that the metaphors appearing in *The Little Prince* differ from those commonly found in general children’s literature. Most children’s literature tends to employ metaphors with simple and clearly structured comparisons (Tehseem & Khan, 2015), often referring to familiar elements in a child’s world, such as animals, flowers, or nature, so that young readers can understand them immediately without requiring abstract interpretation. In contrast, the metaphors in *The Little Prince* exhibit greater complexity and diversity in meaning transfer. Readers must engage in interpretation to grasp the deeper relationships between the compared elements.

The figurative language in *The Little Prince* thus not only provides surface-level comprehension but also creates a space for readers to use imagination and personal experience in interpreting the philosophical ideas embedded in the story. For example, the comparison of

“stars” to friends or guides of travelers symbolizes relationships, hope, and the search for life’s meaning, while the “desert” serves as a metaphor for loneliness and self-discovery. These examples illustrate the linguistic style that harmoniously blends simplicity with depth. Such analysis reflects the view of Short et al. (2014), who argue that quality literature should not be limited to simple language alone but should also encourage critical thinking and personal interpretation. This perspective aligns with the nature of *The Little Prince*, which possesses multiple layers of meaning and value, being understandable to young readers while simultaneously offering profound interpretive dimensions for adults.

Therefore, it may be concluded that *The Little Prince* holds literary value beyond the category of children’s literature. It is a work of deeper dimensions that, apart from promoting understanding through metaphor, also nurtures emotional and philosophical reflection among readers of all ages. Ultimately, *The Little Prince* stands not merely as a children’s story but as a universal literary masterpiece that mirrors the truths of life and the essence of humanity across generations.

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