

Stylistic Features as Meaning-Making Resources in Selected Children's Storybooks by Julia Donaldson

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ABSTRACT

Children's storybooks employ carefully crafted linguistic patterns that not only entertain young readers but also function as important resources for meaning-making, engagement, and early language development. This study investigates stylistic features as meaning-making resources in selected children's storybooks written by Julia Donaldson, namely *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, and *The Snail and the Whale*. The study aims to examine the dominant stylistic features used in the selected texts and explore how these features function in constructing meaning for young readers. Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytic design, this research applies the stylistic framework of Leech and Short alongside Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The analysis focuses on five stylistic categories: lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, and figurative features. The findings reveal that phonological features, particularly rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and sound repetition, are the most dominant stylistic resources across the selected storybooks. These features function simultaneously as ideational resources that foreground semantic relationships, interpersonal resources that establish expressive and interactional dimensions within the narratives, and textual resources that organize narrative flow and coherence. Viewed through Halliday's meta-functional framework, these stylistic patterns contribute to multiple layers of meaning construction within the selected storybooks. The study further demonstrates that stylistic choices in children's storybooks are purposefully adapted to the cognitive and linguistic capacities of young readers, making narratives more accessible, memorable, and emotionally engaging. This study contributes to stylistics and children's literature studies by highlighting how linguistic features function not merely as aesthetic devices, but as meaningful resources that support narrative construction and early literacy development.

Keywords : Children's literature, Meaning-making resources, Phonological features, Stylistic features, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

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INTRODUCTION

Children's literature plays a crucial role in supporting children's linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and literacy development. Unlike literature intended for adults, children's storybooks are specifically designed to align with the developmental capacities of young readers through simplified vocabulary, repetitive structures, rhythmic language, and imaginative narratives (Nikolajeva, 2019). Language in children's literature therefore functions not only as a medium of storytelling but also as an important linguistic resource that facilitates comprehension, memory retention, engagement, and early literacy

acquisition (Bakri et al., 2025; Hasbi & Bakri, 2024). The linguistic patterns embedded in children's storybooks are intentionally constructed to help children process meaning more effectively while simultaneously creating enjoyable reading experiences (Halim & Halim, 2025; Lindfors, 2019).

The relationship between language and cognitive development in children has been widely discussed in developmental psychology. According to Jean Piaget's cognitive development theory (1972), children aged approximately 2–11 years' experience different stages of cognitive processing that influence how they understand language and narratives. During the preoperational stage (2–7 years), children rely heavily on concrete language, repetitive patterns, visual support, and sensory experiences to construct meaning. At this stage, abstract concepts and complex sentence structures remain difficult to process, making simple vocabulary, rhythmic language, and repetition highly effective for comprehension and engagement (Huitt & Hummel, 2003). Meanwhile, children in the concrete operational stage (7–11 years) begin to develop more logical thinking and can understand more complex linguistic structures, although their understanding still largely depends on concrete experiences and familiar contexts. These developmental characteristics explain why children's storybooks frequently employ repetitive structures, rhyme, direct descriptions, and predictable narrative patterns (Brown, 2014; Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022).

In addition to supporting cognitive development, children's storybooks significantly contribute to vocabulary acquisition, syntactic awareness, narrative comprehension, and socio-emotional growth. Shared reading experiences expose children to diverse linguistic structures and expressive forms that are often absent from everyday communication (Grolig, 2020; Nation et al., 2022). Rhythmic and repetitive language patterns such as rhyme, alliteration, and sound repetition (Jose, 2025) have also been shown to strengthen phonological awareness and memory retention, both of which are essential foundations for literacy development (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al., 2022). Furthermore, storybooks encourage emotional engagement by enabling children to interact imaginatively with characters, conflicts, and resolutions, thereby fostering empathy, creativity, and reflective thinking (Calafato & Hunstadbråten, 2025; Nikolajeva, 2019). These characteristics demonstrate that children's literature is not merely educational material but also a linguistically and aesthetically sophisticated literary genre.

Despite the recognized importance of children's literature in literacy and language development, much of the previous research has primarily focused on educational outcomes rather than on the internal linguistic construction of the texts themselves. Existing studies commonly emphasize the benefits children gain from storybooks, such as vocabulary growth, classroom engagement, and reading fluency (Liu, 2024; Nation et al., 2022). Although these studies provide valuable pedagogical insights, they tend to approach storybooks mainly as instructional tools rather than as linguistically crafted literary texts. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to examining how stylistic features systematically function as meaning-making resources within children's narratives. Research investigating how linguistic choices shape narrative accessibility, emotional resonance, and reader engagement in children's literature remains relatively underexplored, particularly from the perspectives of stylistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL).

Stylistics offers an important framework for analysing how linguistic choices contribute to literary meaning and reader response. According to Mohsin, et al (2023), stylistics examines how lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, and figurative features are deliberately employed to produce aesthetic and communicative effects (G. N. Leech & Short, 2007). In children's literature, stylistic features are particularly important because they help create predictability, musicality, emotional engagement, and narrative clarity for young readers. Among these features, phonological

patterns such as rhyme, rhythm, repetition, and alliteration are especially prominent due to their close relationship with children's auditory processing and memory development. To further understand how stylistic features operate within texts, this study integrates Halliday's (2013) Systemic Functional Linguistics, which conceptualizes language as a meaning-making resource functioning through ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions. Through this perspective, stylistic features can be analysed not only as formal linguistic patterns but also as functional resources that organize experience, establish reader interaction, and construct coherent narratives (Nørgaard et al., 2010).

This study focuses on selected children's storybooks written by Julia Donaldson, namely *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, and *The Snail and the Whale*. These storybooks are internationally recognized for their rhythmic language, repetitive structures, imaginative storytelling, and rich use of stylistic devices. Donaldson's works are particularly relevant for stylistic analysis because they demonstrate how linguistic creativity can simultaneously support readability, emotional engagement, and meaning construction for young readers. Furthermore, the selected texts are specifically designed for children aged approximately 2–7 years, making them suitable for examining how stylistic features are adapted to children's developmental and linguistic capacities.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to investigate stylistic features as meaning-making resources in Julia Donaldson's children's storybooks. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the dominant stylistic features employed in the selected texts and examine how these features function in constructing meaning through ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions. By focusing on the internal linguistic mechanisms of children's literature, this study contributes to stylistics, children's literature studies, and applied linguistics by highlighting how stylistic features function not merely as aesthetic ornaments but as meaningful linguistic resources that support narrative accessibility, reader engagement, and early literacy development.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive-analytic design (Ayton et al., 2023) to investigate stylistic features (Lugea & Walker, 2023; Simpson, 2025) as meaning-making resources in selected children's storybooks written by Julia Donaldson. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining how linguistic features operate within literary texts because it enables in-depth interpretation of language patterns and their communicative functions (Tisdell et al., 2025). The descriptive-analytic approach was used to systematically identify stylistic features and interpret their contribution to meaning construction within the narratives.

The primary data sources consisted of three children's storybooks by Julia Donaldson: *The Gruffalo* (1999), *Room on the Broom* (2001), and *The Snail and the Whale* (2003). These texts were selected based on four criteria: (1) their suitability for children aged 2–7 years, (2) their extensive use of stylistic features such as rhyme, repetition, figurative language, and sound patterning, (3) their international popularity and accessibility, and (4) their relevance to the objectives of the study. The storybooks were examined as literary texts in which linguistic choices contribute to narrative construction and reader engagement.

The unit of analysis was the linguistic excerpt, defined as a word, phrase, clause, sentence, or line of text containing a stylistic feature relevant to the study. Narrative segments were examined systematically, and excerpts were selected when they demonstrated lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, or figurative characteristics as outlined in Leech and Short's (G. Leech, 2014) stylistic framework. A total of 48 stylistically significant excerpts were identified across the three

storybooks, comprising 16 excerpts from *Room on the Broom*, 18 excerpts from *The Gruffalo*, and 14 excerpts from *The Snail and the Whale*.

The analytical framework combined Leech and Short's stylistic categories (2007) with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Gebhard & Accurso, 2022). Leech and Short's model was used to identify and classify stylistic features into five categories: lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, and figurative features. Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions were subsequently employed to interpret how these stylistic resources contributed to meaning construction within the narratives (2013).

Data collection was conducted through repeated close reading of the three storybooks. During the initial reading, all potential stylistic features were highlighted and recorded. After that, stylistically significant excerpts were extracted and organized into a coding sheet. The coding process consisted of two stages. First, open coding was conducted to identify recurring stylistic patterns within the storybooks. Second, the coded excerpts were grouped into five predetermined stylistic categories: lexical (LX), grammatical (GR), phonological (PH), graphological (GP), and figurative (FG) features. Each excerpt was assigned a code indicating the storybook source, excerpt number, stylistic category, and page location. For example, RTB-PH-12 referred to the twelfth phonological feature identified in *Room on the Broom*. This procedure facilitated systematic documentation, categorization, and comparison of stylistic patterns across the three texts.

Following categorization, the frequency of each stylistic category was calculated and compared across the three texts. Dominance was determined based on the relative frequency and distribution of stylistic features identified during the coding process. Phonological features, including rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, repetition, and onomatopoeia, showed the highest frequency and the broadest distribution across the corpus. Consequently, they were classified as the most prominent stylistic category and selected for further meta-functional analysis.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2023). Following categorization, the excerpts were interpreted qualitatively through Halliday's meta-functional framework. The analysis examined how stylistic features represented experience (ideational function), established relationships between text and reader (interpersonal function), and organized narrative coherence (textual function). The findings were subsequently synthesized to explain how stylistic choices function as meaning-making resources within the selected children's storybooks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The coding process identified five stylistic categories across the selected storybooks, namely lexical (LX), grammatical (GR), phonological (PH), graphological (GP), and figurative (FG) features. A total of 48 stylistically significant excerpts were extracted and coded from *Room on the Broom* (16 excerpts), *The Gruffalo* (18 excerpts), and *The Snail and the Whale* (14 excerpts). The identified excerpts were subsequently categorized according to Leech and Short's (2014) stylistic framework before being interpreted through Halliday's meta-functional perspective.

Across the corpus, all five stylistic categories were represented in varying forms and functions. Lexical features were primarily realized through repetition, descriptive vocabulary, and sound-symbolic expressions. Grammatical features appeared through simple clause structures, direct speech, interrogative patterns, and occasional inversion. Graphological features were reflected in capitalization and punctuation for emphasis, while figurative features were realized through anthropomorphism, personification, and hyperbole. Among these categories, phonological features

occurred most frequently and appeared consistently across the three storybooks, indicating their prominent role in the stylistic construction of the narratives.

1. Lexical Features

Lexical features were identified throughout the three storybooks and were characterized by repetition, descriptive vocabulary, and expressive lexical choices.

RTB-LX-01 : *"The witch tapped the broomstick and WHOOSH! they were gone."* (p. 10)

RTB-LX-02 : *"They searched for the hat, but no hat could be found."* (p. 9)

GRF-LX-17 : *"Where are you going to, little brown mouse?"* (p. 2)

SNW-LX-35 : *"This is the tale of a tiny snail and a great big, gray-blue humpback whale."* (p. 3)

SNW-LX-38 : *"She gazed and gazed, amazed by it all."* (p. 18)

The lexical choices across the corpus demonstrate a tendency toward repetition and descriptive language. Repeated lexical items establish recurring narrative patterns, while descriptive vocabulary contributes to characterization, setting, and thematic emphasis. Expressive lexical items such as *WHOOSH!* further provide auditory representation of movement and action.

2. Grammatical Features

Grammatical features were realized through simple declarative clauses, direct speech, interrogative structures, and occasional inversion.

RTB-GR-03 : *"There bounded a dog with the hat in his jaws."* (p. 9)

RTB-GR-04 : *"There flapped a green bird with the bow in her beak."* (p. 13)

GRF-GR-20 : *"A Gruffalo? What's a Gruffalo?"* (p. 2)

GRF-GR-21 : *"Come and have lunch in my underground house."* (p. 2)

The inverted structures in *Room on the Broom* foreground the arrival of new characters and draw attention to important narrative events. Meanwhile, direct speech and interrogative exchanges in *The Gruffalo* contribute to narrative progression by structuring interactions between characters. Overall, grammatical features support the organization and development of the narrative sequence.

3. Graphological Features

Graphological features were represented through capitalization, punctuation, and visual emphasis.

RTB-GP-09 : *"THE BROOM SNAPPED IN TWO!"* (p. 20)

RTB-GP-10 : *"Iggety, ziggety, zaggety, ZOOM!"* (p. 28)

SNW-GP-48 : *"SAVE THE WHALE!"* (p. 24)

The use of capitalization visually foregrounds significant moments within the narrative. Similarly, exclamation marks intensify the perceived urgency and dramatic effect of particular scenes. These graphological choices contribute to textual prominence and guide readers' attention toward key narrative events.

4. Figurative Features

Figurative features occurred across the three storybooks and primarily consisted of anthropomorphism, personification, and hyperbole.

RTB-FG-06 : *"He dropped it politely, then eagerly said."* (p. 10)

RTB-FG-07 : *"She dropped it politely and bent her head low."* (p. 13)

GRF-FG-24 : “It’s terribly kind of you, Owl, but no – I’m going to have tea with a Gruffalo.” (p. 4)

GRF-FG-26 : “My favourite food is Gruffalo crumble!” (p. 12)

The figurative representations allow animals and fictional creatures to display human-like emotions, intentions, and behaviours. Hyperbolic descriptions further intensify characterization and contribute to the imaginative quality of the narratives.

5. Phonological Features

Among the five stylistic categories, phonological features appeared most consistently throughout the corpus. The coding process identified four recurring phonological patterns: rhyme, alliteration, repetition, and onomatopoeia.

Table 1. Distribution of Phonological Features Across the Three Storybooks

Feature	The Gruffalo	Room on the Broom	The Snail and the Whale	Total
Rhyme	38	42	47	127
Alliteration	15	18	21	54
Repetition	22	17	19	58
Onomatopoeia	6	8	5	19
Total	81	85	92	258

The coding results indicate that rhyme was the most frequently occurring phonological pattern, accounting for 127 instances across the corpus. Repetition appeared 58 times, followed by alliteration (54 instances) and onomatopoeia (19 instances). The Snail and the Whale contained the highest number of phonological occurrences (92), followed by Room on the Broom (85) and The Gruffalo (81). Examples of phonological patterning include:

RTB-PH-11 : “The witch had a cat and a hat that was black.” (p. 8)

RTB-PH-15 : “There flapped a green bird with the bow in her beak.” (p. 13)

RTB-PH-16 : “Down they went tumbling into a bog.” (p. 20)

GRF-PH-19 : “He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws, and terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.” (p. 3)

SNW-PH-43 : “And as she gazed, she sniffed and sighed.” (p. 3)

SNW-PH-45 : “That foamed and frolicked and sprayed and SPLASHED.” (p. 13)

These examples illustrate recurring sound structures created through rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. Such patterns appear repeatedly across different narrative contexts and constitute a distinctive stylistic characteristic of the selected storybooks.

Although the three storybooks differ in plot and thematic focus, they display comparable stylistic tendencies. *Room on the Broom* relies heavily on repetitive narrative sequences and sound effects associated with magical actions and character encounters. *The Gruffalo* combines repetitive dialogue structures with recurring rhyme schemes that reinforce characterization and narrative tension. In contrast, *The Snail and the Whale* employs a more lyrical style characterized by descriptive language and extended rhythmic patterning.

Across the corpus, phonological features exhibited the broadest distribution and highest frequency of occurrence. The coding process identified 258 phonological instances, consisting of rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. These recurring sound structures appeared consistently across the three storybooks and therefore became the focus of further functional interpretation.

At the ideational level, phonological features contribute to the representation of experience by creating associations between concepts and foregrounding important narrative information. For

example, the rhyme between *claws* and *jaws* in GRF-PH-19 links related physical attributes of the Gruffalo and reinforces their significance within the character description.

At the interpersonal level, phonological features contribute to reader engagement through recurring sound patterns and rhythmic sequencing. Examples such as *sniffed and sighed* (SNW-PH-43) and *deep dark wood* create auditory patterning that contributes to the emotional tone of the narratives. At the textual level, phonological features contribute to coherence and narrative organization. Recurring rhyme schemes establish connections between adjacent lines, while repeated sound structures create recognizable patterns across narrative episodes. Through these functions, phonological features contribute to the organization of meaning within the selected storybooks.

Overall, the findings indicate that phonological features operate simultaneously across ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions. Rather than functioning solely as decorative sound devices, rhyme, alliteration, repetition, rhythm, and onomatopoeia contribute to the construction and organization of meaning within the selected storybooks.

Discussion

The present study examined how stylistic features function as meaning-making resources in Julia Donaldson's *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, and *The Snail and the Whale*. The analysis identified lexical, grammatical, graphological, figurative, and phonological features across the selected storybooks, with phonological features emerging as the most dominant category. This finding extends previous research on children's literature by shifting attention from the educational outcomes of storybook reading to the internal linguistic mechanisms through which meaning is constructed within the texts themselves.

Previous studies have primarily emphasized the pedagogical value of children's literature, particularly its contribution to literacy development, vocabulary growth, reading engagement, and classroom learning (Nation et al., 2022; Nikolajeva, 2019). For example, Nation et al. (2022) highlighted the role of storybooks in supporting vocabulary acquisition and literacy learning, while Nikolajeva (2019) emphasized emotional engagement and imaginative participation as central functions of children's literature. Similarly, Mulei et al. (2023b) discussed stylistic elements largely in relation to their educational and communicative functions. While these studies have generated valuable insights into the educational significance of children's literature, relatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how stylistic resources operate systematically as linguistic mechanisms of meaning construction within the texts themselves. The novelty of the present study lies in its integration of stylistics and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Unlike previous studies that primarily catalogue stylistic devices or discuss their pedagogical implications, this study examines how stylistic features operate simultaneously across Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions. This integrated approach enables a more comprehensive explanation of how lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, and figurative features contribute not only to the aesthetic qualities of the narratives but also to the construction, organization, and communication of meaning. By linking stylistic description with meta-functional interpretation, the study extends existing research on children's literature beyond the identification of literary techniques toward a deeper understanding of their functional role within the texts.

Unlike previous stylistic studies that primarily identify and describe literary devices, the present study examines how stylistic features function simultaneously across Halliday's ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions (Halliday, 2006). Rather than focusing solely on the presence of rhyme, repetition, alliteration, or figurative language, the analysis investigates how these features

contribute to the representation of experience, the construction of reader–text relationships, and the organization of narrative meaning. This integration of stylistics and SFL enables a more comprehensive explanation of how linguistic patterns operate as meaning-making resources in children’s literary texts.

A particularly noteworthy finding concerns the prominence of phonological features. Rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, repetition, and onomatopoeia occurred consistently across the three storybooks and functioned as more than decorative sound patterns. Rhyming pairs such as *ground/found*, *wood/good*, and *snail/whale* strengthened narrative cohesion and memorability, while alliterative expressions such as *deep dark wood* and *foamed and frolicked* enhanced auditory and sensory engagement. These findings support Leech and Short’s argument that stylistic choices are functional resources that shape literary meaning and reader response. Although previous stylistic studies have identified the presence of rhyme and repetition in children’s literature (Mulei et al., 2023a), the present study demonstrates more explicitly that phonological patterns function as central mechanisms through which narrative meaning is organized and reinforced.

The findings may also be interpreted in relation to Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. Storybooks intended for young readers frequently employ repetitive structures, predictable patterns, and concrete linguistic expressions that correspond to characteristics commonly associated with the preoperational stage of development (Guijarro & Zamorano, 2009; Yadi, 2020). Repeated expressions such as “*Where are you going to, little brown mouse?*” create predictability and continuity, while rhythmic sound patterns facilitate textual progression. However, it is important to note that the present study is based solely on textual analysis and does not investigate children’s actual cognitive processing or reading responses. Therefore, any discussion of cognitive relevance should be understood as a theoretical interpretation of textual characteristics (Jose, 2025) rather than empirical evidence regarding children’s comprehension or literacy outcomes.

Beyond phonological patterns, lexical and grammatical features also contributed significantly to narrative accessibility. Repetition, simple vocabulary, direct speech, and relatively uncomplicated sentence structures created coherent and predictable narrative sequences. Figurative features such as anthropomorphism, simile, and hyperbole further enriched the imaginative quality of the texts by presenting animals and natural phenomena through human-like emotions and behaviours. These stylistic choices illustrate how children’s literature can achieve literary sophistication while remaining accessible to its intended audience. These findings support Nikolajeva’s (2019) argument that children’s literature promotes emotional engagement and imaginative participation through accessible and emotionally resonant language.

From the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, the findings demonstrate that stylistic features operate simultaneously across ideational, interpersonal, and textual meta-functions. Almurashi (2016) mentioned rhyme and repetition ideationally help foreground important narrative concepts and relationships. Interpersonally, rhythmic and repetitive patterns establish emotional closeness and encourage reader involvement. Textually, recurring sound structures organize narrative progression and reinforce coherence. This multifunctional operation reveals what may be described as the functional density of stylistic features, whereby a single linguistic pattern simultaneously contributes to multiple layers of meaning construction (Schleppegrell & Oteíza, 2023).

Overall, this study contributes to three areas of scholarship. First, for stylistics, it extends existing work by demonstrating that phonological features in children’s literature perform significant meaning-making functions beyond aesthetic ornamentation. Second, for Systemic Functional Linguistics, it illustrates how meta-functional analysis can be productively applied to literary texts written for young readers. Third, for children’s literature studies, it provides a text-centred explanation of how linguistic

resources are strategically deployed to construct engagement, coherence, and narrative meaning. By integrating stylistic analysis with SFL, this study offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding how language functions within contemporary children's storybooks.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined stylistic features as meaning-making resources in three children's storybooks by Julia Donaldson: *The Gruffalo*, *Room on the Broom*, and *The Snail and the Whale*. Drawing on Leech and Short's stylistic framework and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, the analysis identified lexical, grammatical, phonological, graphological, and figurative features that contribute to meaning construction and reader engagement within the selected texts.

The findings indicate that phonological features, particularly rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and sound repetition, are the most prominent stylistic resources across the storybooks. These features function simultaneously across ideational, interpersonal, and textual dimensions by reinforcing narrative coherence, enhancing expressive effects, and organizing meaning within the narratives. The study contributes to stylistics and children's literature research by demonstrating how stylistic features can be understood not merely as aesthetic devices but as functional linguistic resources that support meaning-making in children's literary texts.

However, the findings are based exclusively on textual analysis of three selected storybooks and do not include empirical evidence from child readers. Consequently, any implications for children's comprehension, engagement, or literacy-related outcomes should be interpreted with caution. Future research may extend this work by examining a broader range of children's literature and by incorporating reader-response, psycholinguistic, or classroom-based approaches to explore how young readers actually interact with stylistic patterns in literary texts.

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